

Let me join others in thanking the Government of Mauritania for hosting the fourth General Assembly of the Sahel Alliance. I would also like to echo colleagues in paying tribute for the outgoing Spanish Presidency for a job well done, as well as welcoming the incoming German Presidency.

The current Norwegian Sahel Strategy adopted two years ago has three main objectives on 1) good governance, democracy, and respect of human rights, 2) prevention and resolution of conflicts, and 3) respond to humanitarian needs and contribute to an inclusive sustainable development. The Strategy has a holistic approach, and it is a living document. It may be modified, but we remain convinced that the three key objectives will remain relevant.

Despite its potentials, the Sahel faces grave challenges. Norway remains deeply concerned about the prospects for the Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation in Mali, the discontinuation of MINUSMA, and well-documented reports of severe human rights violations. Norway continues to encourage the countries in political transition to maintain the established timetable for a return to civilian democratic governance. Norway is alarmed by the growing terrorist threat and that vast geographical spaces are under control of such terrorist groupings. Furthermore, we share the widespread concern of ongoing proliferation of insecurity to the coastal states. The Sahelian countries and their populations are paying a high price for climate changes. We are deeply worried about a deteriorating food security. Humanitarian response is becoming a growing part of international assistance to the region, while humanitarian access is increasingly challenged. At the same time, we recognize that the situation among the Sahelian countries differ significantly.

If we are to succeed in breaking the current vicious cycle and prevent further spill-over to the coastal states, we need renewed partnerships. For this reason, we look forward to recommendations of the High-Level Panel on Security and Development in the broader Sahel. Norway has made significant economic contributions to this Panel.

Pending the Panel's report, we can already draw certain preliminary observations. We need to do more on resilience so that local communities are better equipped to manage external shocks. It is vital to restore regional food security. We must foster conditions which can give hope for the youth in the region through education, vocational training, and job creation. National and local authorities must be able to deliver necessary services. All these factors require good governance and striving to reach the Sustainable Development Goals.

These concerns are, in our view, captured by the priorities on thematic areas set forward by the incoming German Presidency of the Sahel Alliance. We are glad that gender and youth are maintained as cross-cutting priorities.

The Sahel Alliance has been in existence for six years. A recent independent review concludes that the Sahel Alliance has provided a clear added operational value. The Integrated Territorial Approach (ATI) is a clear example of that. The Alliance has played an important role raising awareness of the Sahel and facilitated coordination. The Alliance must continue its efforts in these areas and create synergies, while being mindful where it can make a difference. We hope the proposals on working methods and institutional aspects will lead consensus on the way forward.

Norway welcomes the efforts by Mauritania to revitalize the G5 Sahel through its road map. We cannot succeed unless there is full and active involvement of the countries in the region. They must be in the lead. A strengthened regional cooperation will lead to more revitalized partnerships, where the Sahel Alliance plays an indispensable role.