

Sustainable development in fragile contexts: a complex quest

In the 21st century, humanity has embarked on a colossal and ambitious project: to make our planet into a more equitable, sustainable, and prosperous place for everyone. This initiative, embodied in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), represents a glimmer of hope in the face of the crucial issues that challenge all our societies. The 17 SDGs embrace economic, social, and environmental dimensions, bringing together nations, international organizations, and NGOs such as the Swisscontact Foundation in a common quest to improve living conditions, reduce disparities, and strengthen social cohesion.

Nevertheless, the stark reality reminds us that the road to sustainable development is bumpy and strewn with obstacles. Vast regions of the world grapple with formidable challenges that hinder the attainment of these objectives. Fragile contexts, marked by persistent political instability, recurring armed conflicts, frequent natural disasters, and widespread poverty, represent a category of developmental challenges, both arduous and complex. These are contexts where needs are most pressing, and resources are limited. In such situations, the urgency of development to increase resilience is greater than ever.

In this article, we take a deep dive into the quest for sustainable development in these fragile contexts. We will explore the unique challenges posed by these difficult environments, while seeking answers to a crucial question: How can we implement development projects effectively in these increasingly fragile contexts?

Our major challenges: accessibility and security

Swisscontact has been active in the Sahel region since the 1990s, focusing its efforts on vocational education and training in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and Chad. Today, in close collaboration with local partners, Swisscontact runs no fewer than 13 projects in these countries. However, it is important to note that implementation of these initiatives is becoming progressively more complicated.

The major challenges we face are mainly related to the accessibility and security of the areas where we operate. Since the early 2010s, the increasing fragility of these environments has forced governments to redirect their resources towards military and security priorities, leaving some regions deprived of vital infrastructure and essential public services. This reality is particularly worrying in the vocational training sector, where it is common to intervene in areas with no local training centres. In such cases, specific logistics and project planning are required to ensure accessibility to these regions. To cite just one example, in one of Swisscontact's projects, participants from remote areas far from training centres had to be lodged by host families for the duration of their training. Elsewhere, the deteriorating security situation has led to the displacement of populations, with inevitable and significant repercussions on the achievement of program objectives. The operation of training centres can be severely disrupted by threats to the population in general, and to the young people

and trainers at these centres in particular. In this context, Swisscontact favours the implementation of short, mobile training courses, enabling young people to be grouped together and rapidly equipped with skills for employment in areas presenting a lower security risk.

The population in these areas is undergoing constant change, with the frequent arrival of young, displaced people who also need training and professional opportunities, but who do not necessarily meet the selection criteria of donors. This is why Swisscontact works closely with humanitarian organizations in many of its projects: to better meet the needs of the market and, above all, of local populations.

Another major challenge is access to communication networks. The sabotage and destruction of cell phone masts and antennae in many of the Sahel's fragile zones is severely hampering our ability to communicate with our implementing partners. In addition to telephone calls, which are often interrupted, communication via channels such as e-mail and WhatsApp is rendered excessively difficult by the poor quality of the connection, if it exists at all. Sending a simple document can sometimes take a whole day. Fortunately, we can count on highly motivated partners who are full of initiative and work actively to ensure that everything runs smoothly.

Our essential approaches

Faced with these complex challenges, Swisscontact has adopted the "*do no harm*" approach. This approach is based on a deep understanding of local realities, fragile contexts, and the potential consequences of our actions. Fundamentally, this approach requires that all our interventions, projects or policies are designed and implemented in such a way as to minimize adverse effects on populations, communities, and environments. Each intervention is meticulously analysed, considering the dynamics and conflicting factors at different levels of the system. We also examine the multiple possible linkages to understand the context and roles of stakeholders, partners, beneficiaries, and others; this influences the very design of our projects. The "*do no harm*" approach is thus integrated into our strategic framework, guiding our interventions towards sustainable solutions that reach a wide audience. We are committed to ensuring that our development initiatives truly and sustainably benefit communities.

Our "*make-do*" approach also contributes to our local anchoring and the sustainability of our activities. It is based on the principle of non-intervention or the minimization of intervention, favouring the autonomy and initiative of individuals and groups. By adopting this approach, we recognize the ability of local players to make their own decisions and drive their own change. In so doing, we encourage trust in our implementing partners, stimulating creativity and autonomous learning, which in turn fosters the development of skills and ownership of our interventions.

In addition, Swisscontact favours partnerships with public and private actors in all its interventions. These partners are often deeply rooted in the communities we support, know the local context inside out and, have their own resources. This in turn reinforces the sustainability of our activities. They can quickly take over the implementation and follow-up

of training and integration initiatives. They become *de facto* indirect beneficiaries of our interventions. For example, a municipality will gain in reputation by offering services catered to the needs of young people, while members of a craftsmen's organization will be trained in active pedagogy and obtain service contracts to train young people in their community. In this way, even when security deteriorates, these local players remain with their communities, ensuring traceability for our beneficiaries.

Swisscontact's experience in fragile areas has shown that choosing local public and private partners is more appropriate than using local NGOs or associations, and moreover offers several advantages:

- **Relevance** – The local players we target are at the heart of our areas of intervention and have the best understanding of their community's needs and of the particularities of their territory.
- **Efficiency** – Working directly with local players reduces project costs, which can be covered in whole or in part by the local government, or by players with their own funds, thus avoiding structural costs.
- **Sustainability** – unlike NGOs or associations that withdraw once the project is over, the public and private players with whom we collaborate remain committed over the long term.

The global approach we have adopted enables us to maximize the impact of our interventions while guaranteeing their sustainability and local relevance.

Our lessons learned

Through our experiences in Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and even Chad, we have acquired essential knowledge for the effective implementation of our projects in these fragile contexts.

When we ask our colleagues working in these fragile environments about the lessons they have learned, they are unanimous about the fundamental importance of proximity, not only with our implementing partners, but also with our beneficiaries. This is a decisive factor in the success of our interventions, based on the ownership and sustainability of our actions. This proximity, whether geographical, cultural, or social, facilitates our understanding of the real needs of the communities concerned. It enables us to establish close ties with our beneficiaries, to listen to their concerns and understand their values and aspirations. It also fosters more effective communication, along with more informed decision-making and implementation better adapted to local realities. Moreover, it strengthens community ownership of the project, a key factor in ensuring its long-term sustainability.

This proximity must be accompanied by the involvement of all stakeholders in project implementation. As our national coordinator in Mali, Takimady Keita, points out, "*it's essential to involve traditional chiefs, especially in areas where the state is no longer present, because the population trusts them and their word.*" For Yaya Mariko, coordinator in Mali's Mopti region, "*Whenever possible, it is essential to collaborate with the state and local authorities, because if they feel concerned, they will give us their support.*" In some of our projects, municipalities make their premises available to us for the implementation of our

activities, such as our 'orientation programs' for young people. At the end of the project, the municipalities take over management of these facilities and are able to keep them running autonomously. As Aliou Sanoussi, our coordinator in Timbuktu, points out, "*A demand-driven approach, with the involvement of all stakeholders in identifying needs and validating the actions to be undertaken, is the main guarantee of the project's feasibility and success.*"

The question remains: how do we create this proximity? Once again, our colleagues are very clear: the keys to establishing this proximity are communication, awareness, and transparency. Communication is the first essential step. It creates a solid link between project stakeholders and the communities concerned. By establishing open channels of communication, projects can gain an accurate understanding of people's real needs, challenges, and aspirations. This understanding is not only essential, but also indispensable for designing interventions that are relevant and adapted to local realities. In addition, constant and ongoing communication helps to manage stakeholder expectations. In fragile contexts, projects often face delays, unforeseen obstacles, or budgetary constraints. By keeping stakeholders transparently informed about progress and challenges, a climate of trust is established that helps secure their long-term commitment. Raising awareness is also an important lever for promoting acceptance and understanding of projects within fragile communities. This involves informing and educating community members about the project's mission, its potential benefits, and the impact on their daily lives. In many of our projects, for example, effective awareness-raising has resulted in the creation of so-called "champions" – individuals within the community who become committed spokespeople for the project. These champions reinforce acceptance of the project and play a key role in its long-term success.

Finally, transparency is the pillar of trust already mentioned. It involves providing clear, accurate, and honest information on all aspects of the project, including its objectives, funding, and results. Transparency strengthens the trust of stakeholders, be they community members, implementing partners, or funding agencies. This trust encourages the ongoing commitment of the various players, promotes collaboration, and helps overcome unforeseen obstacles that may arise.

Conclusion

As we have seen, achieving sustainable development in fragile contexts is complex. Despite obstacles related to accessibility and security, appropriate approaches can optimize the impact of projects while minimizing their negative repercussions. In the Sahel, maintaining close ties with local communities, backed by transparent communication and effective awareness-raising, remains crucial to the success and sustainability of our interventions.

However, it is imperative to bear in mind that our quest for sustainable development in these fragile contexts raises new questions and is fraught with evolving challenges. How can we continuously adapt our strategies to changes in these unstable environments and the emerging challenges that characterize them? How can we mobilize more resources to support these crucial initiatives? As one of our colleagues in Timbuktu puts it: "*Humanitarian aid alone doesn't foster community development: the real need remains development.*"

These questions urge us to continue our reflection and action, to seek innovative solutions and strengthen our commitment to sustainable development. They remind us of the arduous road ahead, but that every step counts in the quest for a better future for everyone. Ultimately, it is together that we will forge a more equitable, resilient and prosperous world for future generations.

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