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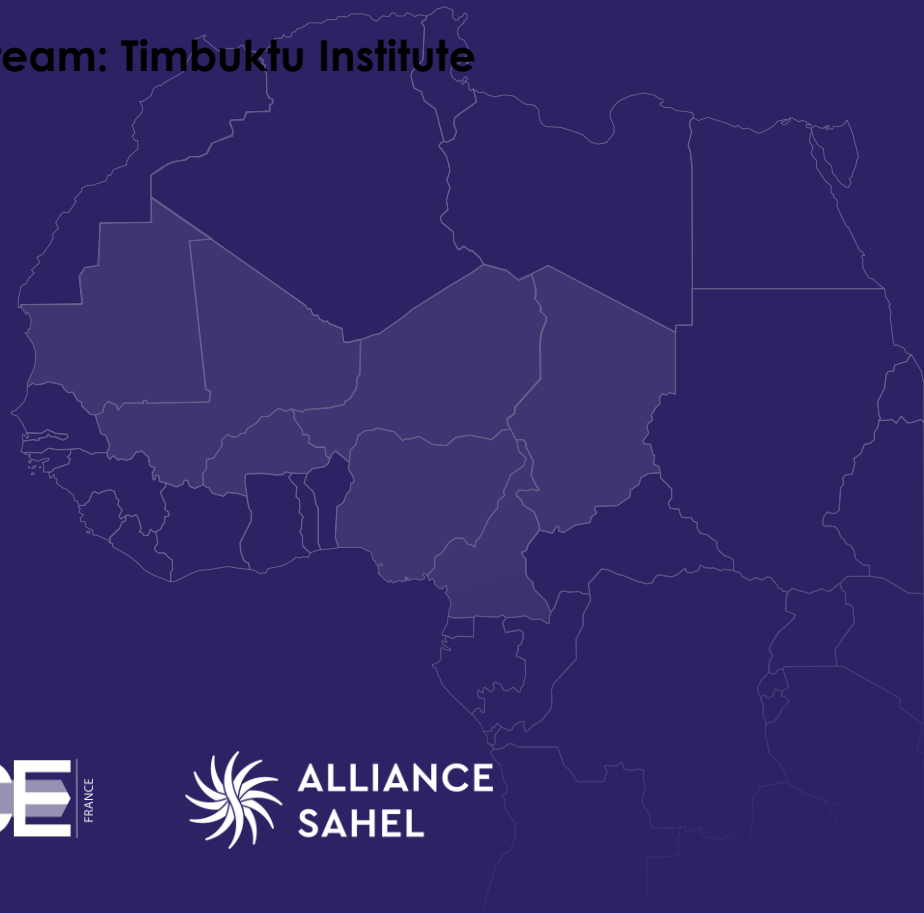
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The challenges of disinformation for international and national players in the Sahel and Gulf of Guinea countries

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Sommaire

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3

1 - INTRODUCTION

Political fragility in the Sahel and West Africa, combined with the security situation, has accentuated socio-economic and climatic vulnerabilities and widened the gap between political elites, the international community and local perceptions. In this context fraught with the risk of instability and multidimensional crises, governments and their international partners appear to young people and certain civil society activists to be out of touch with the imaginations and narratives of societies that are strongly impacted by the unregulated development of social networks. This disconnect between traditional governance and emerging realities, in a context marked by the irruption or return in force of regional and international players who do not share democratic ideals and the values that underpin them, ushers in a new era that is becoming increasingly difficult to apprehend with the paradigms and conceptual tools of yesteryear.

At a time when social networks, propaganda, disinformation, misinformation, fake news and conspiracy theories based on foreign interference are on the rise, what room for manoeuvre is left for states and organizations to fully play their regulatory or mediation role? On what types of legitimacy should the new type of partnership be based, at a time when international partners and the cooperation instruments and tools they have co-constructed with the region's states are being re-examined, if not rejected outright? This raises the crucial question of redefining the balance of power, with a reversal of alliances in an Africa at the heart of the globalization of both economies and cultural models, at a time when conventional analytical models are running out of steam and struggling to fathom increasingly complex, even hybrid, African realities.

Meanwhile, the democratization of Internet access and the widespread use of social networks raise both the problem of disinformation and the possibility of more fluid communication between citizens and their representatives. This global trend has not spared the African continent, and has been accentuated in contexts presenting a variety of deep-rooted fragilities, exposing them to both transnational threats and the consequences of widespread information warfare. In such a situation, the digital tool

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and its various uses in communication spaces that are difficult to regulate constitute a major challenge, the control of which becomes inseparable from that of public opinion, which has become a consumer and transmitter of information. In this unprecedented context of instantaneous reactivity and a profusion of uncontrolled information, it is crucial to better understand the complexity of the digital ecosystem in the central Sahel and in the countries of the Gulf of Guinea. This increasingly complex digital ecosystem is becoming a playground of interactions, offering the players who control it the opportunity to use it both as a means of bringing people together, and as a platform for disseminating hate speech and circulating false information[1].

African digital platforms are invaded by actors manipulating information to influence citizens' opinions and public decisions. This includes communication campaigns, for example, in favor or against military and economic cooperation with foreign powers. Similar procedures are also used in political strategies and communication to legitimize coups d'état. The same applies to the supporters of military transitions, who develop intense communication campaigns in which the fight against terrorism and the securing of the regimes in place are given priority over the advancement of the timetable leading to the return of constitutional order. With this in mind, a communication strategy is being developed - particularly in ESA member countries - which pays little heed to fact-checking, but makes leaving ECOWAS an objective on the road to "sovereignty". What's more, the political and security context in the states of the central Sahel and the Gulf of Guinea seems to favor disinformation campaigns, at a time when online space constitutes an arena where various actors with divergent interests clash.

Indeed, the Sahelian and West African space is increasingly perceived as the new "playground" for competition between Western powers such as France and Russia. In such a context, it is becoming difficult for international cooperation structures (agencies, NGOs), particularly European ones, to deploy without being associated - if only in perceptions - with the image of the countries to which local populations systematically attach them. Today, this trend is affecting the image of non-governmental organizations, financial partners such as the World Bank and the United Nations. This phenomenon, which no longer affects regional economic communities, partners such as the European Union, or countries such as France and the United States, is exacerbating the difficulties faced by international aid operators, making it harder for local populations to take ownership of projects.

The challenges posed by misinformation to international and national players in the central Sahel and Gulf of Guinea therefore have to do with the credibility of those involved in development and security cooperation. In other words, by disseminating false or manipulated information, those involved in disinformation and the ever-in-

[1] Habibou Bako, Réseaux sociaux et désinformation au Sahel, Nouvelles et annonces, Bulle-tin franco paix, Vol. 7, no. 10 - Dec. 2022.

creasing number of people relaying it are able, through a narrative that is often conspiratorial, to cast doubt on the sincerity of cooperation policies and actions. In other words, the idea that development aid responds more to the imperatives of influence and interference than to strictly "humanitarian" or "development" objectives has become widespread among the region's populations. What's more, the failure of military cooperation to guarantee security has had the effect - amplified by communication campaigns - of casting doubt on any real desire to combat terrorism. Indeed, the latter has come to be interpreted - including by a certain elite - as a strategy for the return of political "imperialism" through the "security window". In addition to development cooperation and security, international aid is also perceived - sometimes subject to certain conditions - as a means of promoting values and principles, or even of interfering in the affairs of recipient countries. This is particularly the case when it comes to issues such as gender equality and women's rights.

2 - IMPACT OF MISINFORMATION, RESTRICTIVE MEASURES AND FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION IN THE CENTRAL SAHEL AND GULF OF GUINEA COUNTRIES

The effects of misinformation can be felt in all areas of life: health, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, sport, governance, poli-tics, cooperation, diplomacy, and so on. However, it is still difficult to quantitatively measure the impact of misinformation. The extent of the damage they cause to their targets and victims does not yet seem to have been thoroughly investigated, even though their effects can be felt over the long term. **As a result, "reliable information on the real impact of such campaigns remains relatively scarce. Measuring the social impact of misinformation is a methodological challenge"[2],** its real audience has yet to be determined. On the other hand, under the pretext of preventing and combating misinformation or unreasonable use of social networks, some states restrict their citizens' freedom of expression, and some people find themselves imprisoned on cybercrime-related charges. However, the fight against cybercrime can sometimes become an alibi for restricting freedom of expression on social networks, especially when it's a question of expressing simple criticism of regimes in power. Senegalese politics are a perfect illustration of this, with mobile data often cut off during demonstrations, making Internet access impossible. The same situation is encountered in Guinea, where access to the Internet and especially to social networks has been restricted for several months. More in-depth research into misinformation will enable us to measure the real threats it poses, and initiate balanced responses

[2] Stiftung Wissenschaft et Politik, Atelier politique IV : Post-vérité. Quelle influence la désinformation a-t-elle en Afrique ? décembre 2022, URL : https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/mta-spotlight-19-policy-workshop-iv-1

without going overboard or resorting to restrictions that are damaging to the right of access to information. **"Influencing operations can have measurable effects on people's beliefs and behavior, but epirical research still doesn't adequately answer the most pressing questions facing policy-makers."** [3]. Nevertheless, there has been a remarkable evolution in the literature on the impact of misinformation since the report by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, which highlighted this deficit.

3 - THE URGENT NEED TO RE-ESTABLISH COMMUNITY TRUST FOR BETTER CONFLICT RESOLUTION (MALI, BURKINA FASO, NIGER)

In recent years, efforts to resolve conflicts in the central Sahel and the Gulf of Guinea have multiplied, particularly in the fight against terrorism and organized crime. However, the expected results have not been achieved. Violence has intensified and conflicts persist, at a time when the crisis of confidence between actors is worsening, particularly between rulers and ruled. Misinformation, for example, has contributed significantly to the deterioration of diplomatic relations between France and Mali. Indeed, "by sowing mistrust and encouraging conspiracy theories, misinformation can undermine the credibility of peace processes, hinder reconciliation efforts and perpetuate cycles of violence"[4].

One of the major challenges posed to national and international partners in the central Sahel and Gulf of Guinea by misinformation is certainly the need for transparency in the face of a profound crisis of confidence between them, the political authorities and the impressionable public. "In the Sahel, the lack of transparency feeds speculation, fear and tension", said the former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, at the end of a tour of Burki-na Faso and Niger, two countries currently in political transition. The challenge for those involved in cooperation is to re-establish relations of trust with the actors and beneficiaries of their actions, by eliminating any grey areas through awareness-raising on misinformation and a communication strategy targeting the local population. In Equatorial Guinea, the rumor that the country would leave the Franc zone was the talk of the town during September 2018. At the time, a post entitled "The CFA

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[3] Fondation Carnegie pour la paix internationale, Mesurer les effets des opérations d'influence : principales conclusions et lacunes de la recherche empirique, Jon Bateman, Elonnai Hickok, Laura Courchesne, Isra Thange, Jacob N. Shapiro, juin 2021. URL: https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/06/28/measuring-effects-of-influence-operations-key-findings-and-gaps-from-empirical-research-pub-84824

[4] Le Grand Continent, Comprendre la désinformation en Afrique, Guillaume Soto-Mayor, Admire Mare, Valdez Onanina, Octobre 2023.

franc no longer exists in Equatorial Guinea" was shared more than 18,000 times on Facebook and X (ex-Twitter) before being officially denied by the Government. Elsewhere, in northern Togo, armed groups are using social networks such as WhatsApp and Tik Tok to influence the population, particularly young people. Amnesty International had deplored the development of hate speech and the dissemination of false information on social networks, which "is taking on a palpable dimension and directly affecting local communities".[5]

Preventing community conflict in an environment where false information about groups stigmatized on account of their religious, denominational, ethnic or geographical affiliation continues to spread incessantly, remains a major challenge for those involved in cooperation. The 1994 Rwandan genocide is a sad reminder of the seriousness of disinformation campaigns against a community.

The challenge for the international community of preserving peace and preventing conflict is becoming increasingly difficult to meet, given the use of information as a weapon for destabilizing or controlling public opinion, which is not necessarily sensitive to the need for discernment and restraint.

How to "build peace through the fight against misinformation" is the main question, the answer to which would be a way of resolving conflicts of all kinds. With this in mind, the MINUSMA regional office was involved in training a number of media players in the fight against disinformation, for example during a session in Mopti, Mali. Indeed, the UN mission in the Sahel had become a favorite target of those involved in disinformation. Its withdrawal from Mali can largely be explained by the targeting of the mission by the Malian authorities, relayed and amplified by social networks, particularly after the second coup d'état, which made the issue of sovereignty the focal point of the new authorities' political legitimization. Blue Helmets have often been accused of sexual abuse, but investigations carried out by contributing countries have refuted the allegations. Added to this, reports implicating the Malian Armed Forces in abuses against civilians generated counter-offensives on the networks, reflecting the mistrust of the self-righteous towards the Minusma. These accusations, whose potential "plotters" were the "terrorists" and their "supporters", aimed to break the good relations between the UN forces and the populations they were supposed to watch over. The ultimate aim of this strategy was to precipitate and provoke the withdrawal of this mission from Malian territory. Not surprisingly, the military junta demanded this withdrawal as soon as possible. This did not prevent the Malian army from accusing the UN of "having compromised security in the Aguelhok locality by "precipitately" leaving its camp without waiting to transfer it to the authorities". Even if it may seem simplistic to explain this situation by disinformation alone, the weight of a public opinion subjected to all kinds

⁵ République du Togo, Rompre la chaine de la désinformation et de l'extrémisme, 2024. En ligne, consulté le URL : https://www.republicoftogo.com/toutes-les-rubriques/politique/rompre-la-chaine-de-la-desinformation-et-de-l-extremisme

of propaganda aimed at explaining all Mali's ills by the action of "foreigners" may not be foreign to the political instrumentalization of this episode. It is also noteworthy that "certain military actors are using digital weapons for disinformation purposes", as in the Democratic Republic of Congo. In both these countries (Mali and DRC), the deployment of Russian mercenaries from the Wagner group was accompanied by accusations from the UN, which, according to the authorities, produced reports deemed defamatory on the question of the abuses carried out in central Mali, notably in Moura.[6]. In this respect, the death of Yevgeny Prigozhin - Wagner's former figurehead - caused the organization to lose momentum, and was accompanied by the emergence of a new paramilitary organization: Africa Corps. Unlike Wagner, Africa Corps immediately assumed its proximity to the Kremlin, presenting itself as "part of a special structure of the Ministry of Defense".[7] Likewise, the new "African Initiative" structure, created in September 2023. Its stated orientation: a "Russian news agency on events on the African continent", in particular about "the neo-colonial legacy against which African countries have been fighting for decades."[8]

In order to prevent such manipulation of information on the Internet, MINUSMA had stressed the need to pay attention to "ethical issues concerning the verification of sources and the responsibility to provide the public with verified facts".[9]. In the same vein, at a Sahel Coalition workshop on "Improving collective management of the Sahel's challenges: avenues and proposals", it was reiterated that **"all actors present on the ground should be subject to an obligation of transparency with regard to the number of personnel involved, the legal status and the mode of financing of the security tools they implement"**[10].

4 - SAFEGUARDING CIVIL PEACE AND GUARANTEEING A FREE AND TRANSPARENT ELECTORAL PROCESS

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[6] Africa defense forum, Développer la confiance : le succès de la contre insurrection commence avec les civils, Contre-insurrection Volume 16, p.20, 2ème trimestre.

[7] Le Monde, Africa Corps, le nouveau label de la présence russe au Sahel, décembre 2023. URL : https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2023/12/15/africa-corps-le-nouveau-label-de-la-presence-russe-au-sahel_6205937_3212.html

[8] Le Monde, African Initiative, le nouveau réseau de propagande russe en Afrique après le démantèlement de Wagner, URL : https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2024/03/07/african-initiative-la-nouvelle-tete-de-pont-de-la-propagande-russe-en-afrique_6220609_3212.html

[9] MINUSMA, Bâtir la paix à travers la lutte contre la désinformation, décembre 2022. URL: https://minusma.unmissions.org/b%C3%A2tir-la-paix-%C3%A0-travers-la-lutte-contre-la-d%C3%A9sinformation

[10]https://www.coalition-sahel.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/FR-2022.12.30-Synthe%CC%80se-des-recommandations-1.pdf

(KENYA, NIGERIA, SIERRA LEONE, IVORY COAST, CAM-EROON)

Disinformation campaigns are all the more harmful as they can cause serious disruption to electoral processes. Indeed, "misinformation can mislead citizens when they make crucial decisions, such as voting in elections, contributing to unwise political choices".[11]. These manipulations of information threaten virtually all democracies, including those thought to be fairly consolidated. "They have interfered in several major democratic processes, including the presidential elections of the world's leading powers"[12]. These include the 2016 US and 2017 French elections. In Africa, electoral processes are also increasingly affected by disinformation campaigns.

In Nigeria, during the 2018 elections, a man close to the president was arrested for "smear campaigns against the opposition leader".[13]. In 2023, several campaign teams had financed de-information campaigns on the reliability of the presidential elections. Influencers were paid to support the hypothesis of electoral fraud.[14]. In the same year, in Sierra Leone, the incumbent president and the opposition leader declared victory in the elections, while the vote count was still in progress. This manipulation, widely relayed on several platforms, nearly weakened "Sierra Leone's democracy, carefully rebuilt over the past 21 years since the civil war"[15] . And in Côte d'Ivoire, several cases

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[11] Cyber sécurity mag Africa, Désinformation active en Afrique : Acteurs, objectifs et conséquences sur la stabilité du continent ! À qui profite le crime ? octobre 2023, URL : https://cybersecuritymag.africa/desinformation-active-en-afrique-acteurs-objectifs-et-consequences-sur-la-stabilite-du-continent

[12] J.-B. Jeangène Vilmer, A. Escorcia, M. Guillaume, J. Herrera, Les Manipulations de l'information : un défi pour nos démocraties, rapport du Centre d'analyse, de prévision et de stratégie (CAPS) du ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères et de l'Institut de recherche stratégique de l'École militaire (IRSEM) du ministère des Armées, p.23, Paris, août 2018.

[13]   J.-B. Jeangène Vilmer, A. Escorcia, M. Guillaume, J. Herrera, Les Manipulations de l'information : un défi pour nos démocraties, rapport du Centre d'analyse, de prévision et de stratégie (CAPS) du ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères et de l'Institut de recherche stratégique de l'École militaire (IRSEM) du ministère des Armées, p.7, Paris, août 2018.

[14] Ijnet, Comment la désinformation a menacé l'élection présidentielle au Nigeria, avril 2023. En ligne, consulté le 04 mars 2024. URL : https://ijnet.org/fr/story/comment-la-d%C3%A9sinformation-menac%C3%A9-l%E2%80%99%C3%A9lection-pr%C3%A9siden-tielle-au-nigeria

[15] Democracy in Africa, La fiction est-elle pire que la réalité ? Comment lutter contre les fausses informations est un élément essentiel pour garantir la démocratie en Sierra Leone, aout 2023. En ligne, consulté le 05 mars 2024/ URL : https://democracyinafrica.org/is-fiction-worse-than-fact-how-countering-false-information-is-an-essential-part-of-securing-sierra-leones-democracy/

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of misinformation have been noted during the 2020 presidential elections[16], contributing to a series of verbal and physical acts of violence. Although de-information and the manipulation of information have always been instruments of influence, the extent of the phenomenon is partly due to the arrival on the information market of new players taking advantage of the democratization of information production, access and dissemination: ''. Today, everyone is both a sender and a consumer of information. This is why we need to return to more democratic ethics in the use of the media, without forgetting the role of governments, because it is sometimes the absence of democracy that fertilizes the breeding ground for disinformation''. In this context, we need to take note of the amplifying role played by the various relayers, who may be influencers or other players who simply benefit from a large number of followers, and sometimes without the slightest culture of ethics as might be required in classic journalism.

Playing on tensions and anxiety-provoking moments, this massive misinformation is particularly prevalent at times of tension, such as during electoral periods in Côte d'Ivoire. Indeed, ''some thirty people died in pre-electoral violence and inter-community clashes''.[17] In the same vein, in 2018 in Cameroon, the post-electoral period of the presidential elections was marked by violent disinformation campaigns pitting the outgoing president against his opponent, who questioned the election results. ''The nauseating propaganda of both camps is based on publicity illustrated by videos and photos of unprecedented violence''[18], of an ethnic nature.

From now on, the challenge for cooperation actors will be to support credible electoral processes and prevent pre- and post-electoral violence by stepping up the fight against misinformation through awareness-raising among public opinion, media professionals, political players and members of civil society. They will only be able to do this effectively with the support of local partners who can claim the legitimacy essential to the ownership of actions and initiatives. In this sense, the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie recommends ''independent regulation, electoral integrity, media and information education and user protection''[19]. In the face of the continuous

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[16] TV5, Présidentielle en Côte d'Ivoire : la désinformation pullule sur les réseaux sociaux, 2020. En ligne, consulté le 05 mars 2024/ URL : https://information.tv5monde.com/afrique/presidentielle-en-cote-divoire-la-desinformation-pullule-sur-les-reseaux-sociaux-36810

[17] Idem

[18] Jeune Afrique, Quand les réseaux sociaux ravivent les conflits ethniques, 2018. En ligne, consulté, le 05 mars 2024. URL: https://www.jeuneafrique.com/594068/societe/tribune-quand-les-reseaux-sociaux-ravivent-les-conflits-ethniques/

[19] L'Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie, Table-ronde francophone sur la régulation des plateformes pour l'information comme bien public, Paris, 21 février 2023.

and widespread production of false information, it is essential to regulate online presence in order to clean up the political arena and enable the expression of free opinions. This requires genuine education in the use of social networks, which are extremely difficult to regulate despite legal arsenals that remain ineffective in the face of the extraterritoriality of a virtual space that ignores borders. To this prerequisite must be added the electoral integrity that ensures credibility. Nevertheless, in order to have a greater impact in the fight against de-information, media and information literacy programs will reduce the rate of digital illiteracy and the risk of abuse by users of social networks and the Internet. More generally, the role of education as a means of developing critical thinking is becoming crucial, provided that governments have the means and the will to do so.

5 - WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN THE AGE OF MISINFORMATION (NIGER, BUR-KINA FASO)

Because of the vulnerability of women in traditional societies, generally due to patriarchy and socio-cultural or even religious frameworks, they remain the biggest victims of misinformation. The use of social networks and access to the Internet have increased the "spread of harmful sexist stereotypes"[20]. Thus, gender-based violence and discrimination have multiplied in the digital space and represent major challenges. When it comes to sexual and reproductive health, girls and women have long been reluctant to use contraceptive products, based on the idea that the contraceptive methods promoted by Westerners to limit births would cause sterility. Disease prevention and family planning have also suffered from these misinformation campaigns. In Niger in 2000, schoolgirls fled out of windows to avoid vaccination against polio. And in 2020, in Burkina Faso, the death of the Hon. Rose Marie Com-paoré, second vice-president of the National Assembly, fueled rumors and inaccurate information, resulting in the family's rejection of the official discourse on the death of the vice-president during Covid 19.[21] Moreover, in countries that have experienced military regimes, a decline in women's political participation has been observed. Indeed, women's rights promoters are perceived as propagators of Western values rejected by the transitional authorities, who no longer hesitate to display their collaboration with Russia. Furthermore, at the end of a workshop on combating gender-based misinformation in the

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[20] Organisation internationale de la Francophonie (Habmo BIRWE), La désinformation basée sur le genre en contexte de crises : Quels mécanismes de prévention et dispositifs de lutte pour les pays du Sahel ? p.1, décembre 2023. URL: https://odil.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/La-desinformation-basee-sur-le-genre-en-contexte-de-crises-ok-1.pdf,

[21] Le Faso.net, Décès de la députée Marie Rose Compaoré : Retour sur la crise dans la crise du COVID-19, mai 2020 URL : https://lefaso.net/spip.php?article96634

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political arena, organized as part of the Senegal: Mitigating Misinformation program by the Alliance for Migration, Leadership and Development (AMLD), a memorandum stated that "gender-based misinformation is also a means of orienting the debate of women politicians by reducing their space for expression", weakening democracies and making it difficult for women's voices to be heard. The challenge for national and international partners is therefore to limit or even prevent obstructions to women's free and effective political participation, by investing more in the enactment and implementation of laws and initiatives to this end. With a growing demand for cooperation to match the needs of states and local populations, the region's governments will also have to play their part in this process.

6 - COMBATING MISINFORMATION THROUGH MEDIA EDUCATION AND AWARENESS-RAISING (CAMEROON, GABON, TOGO, DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO)

Faced with the disastrous consequences of disinformation on international cooperation, security, stability and democracy, the states of the central Sahel and the Gulf of Guinea are organizing themselves to initiate programs to prevent and combat these coordinated influence campaigns. To this end, "a regional strategy and action plan for the prevention and fight against hate speech »[22] in Central Africa was adopted in 2022, with the support of the UN, at a fo-rum in Kinshasa (DRC). The document stresses the importance of states complying with international human rights standards, and the need to promote civic space as a means of combating hate speech. For the United Nations Stabilization Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO), this strategy is an "important initiative for living together in Central African countries".[23]

In Cameroon, the "defy hate now" network has initiated the Africa Fact check-ing Felloship program to strengthen the skills of media professionals in online fact checking and hate speech detection.[24] In 2023, in Gabon, the National Mechanism for Dialogue and Exchange (MNDE), in close collaboration with several UN agencies, including OHCHR and UNESCO, launched the "Gabon against hate" awareness campaign[25],

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[22] MONUSCO, l'Afrique centrale dispose désormais d'un projet de stratégie régionale et d'un plan d'action contre les discours de haine,2022. En ligne, consulté le 05 mars 2024. URL : https://monusco.unmissions.org/l%E2%80%99afrique-centrale-dispose-d%C3%A9sormais-d%E2%80%99un-projet-de-strat%C3%A9gie-r%C3%A9gionale-et-d%E2%80%99un-plan-d%E2%80%99action-contre

[23] Idem

[24] Dr Roméo SAA NGOUANA, Sociologue Chargé de Recherches au Think tank CEIDES (Centre africain d'études internationales diplomatiques économiques et stratégiques), Comprendre et combattre la désinformation en Afrique, page 5, décembre 2022.

[25] Gabon news, Lancement de la Campagne "Gabon contre la haine" : Un engagement commun des Nations Unies et du Gabon contre le discours de haine et les fakes

PASAS

which embodies "a joint commitment by the United Nations and the Government against hate speech and fake news".[26]. The aim of this campaign was to promote tolerance, mutual understanding and the verification of information, through the education of citizens, particularly young people. In Togo, in 2021, members of parliament have been trained to contribute to the fight against disinformation and fake news.[27]. In 2020, the US State Department launched two projects in Togo to combat extremism and fake news[28].

7 - Conclusion and outlook

Disinformation represents a major, multidimensional challenge for the region's states and their international partners. From the countries of the Central Sahel undergoing political transition to those of the Gulf of Guinea, the whole of West Africa is undergoing changes and mutations linked in part to a globalization of the crisis of trust between rulers and ruled. In this context, international cooperation in relation to the aggravating phenomenon of misinformation faces two specific challenges. Firstly, there is the challenge of ownership of policies and initiatives by both local populations and governments, taking advantage of unprecedented opportunities to diversify partnerships, **not without implications for good governance and respect for values such as democracy and human rights (freedom of expression).** Secondly, with the accelerating democratization of access to information and the enormous possibilities of manipulating it in the digital age and in a cyberspace that is not prepared to be regulated in any way, both States and international partners are faced with the **challenge of credibility**. They suffer from an environment where the high-speed circulation of fake news and conspiracy theories is spreading **a culture of mistrust and suspicion of "hidden"** agendas with regard to public policy and international cooperation. At the same time as the question of trust in governments themselves and in their partners is being raised, there are major risks to democracy and freedoms, as **the illusion of a communication space that has never been so open in reality conceals major authoritarian excesses**. Disinformation is becoming not only a procedure used by "ordinary" actors, but also **an instrument for controlling and orienting opinions**, to the point of compromising the integrity of electoral processes. Thus, in addition to the vulnerabilities of certain population categories such as women and young people, and to the classic horizontal inequalities, there are those linked to the capacity of some and others to interact with a large flow of information that can be manipulated or instru-mented for a variety of

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news, 2023. En ligne, consulté le 05 mars 2024. URL: https://en.gabonews.com/fr/actus/societe/article/lancement-de-la-campagne-gabon-contre-la-haine-un

[26] Idem

[27] Cio mag, Fake news : les députés togolais formés pour participer à la lutte, 2021. En ligne, consulté le 06 mars 2024. URL: https://cio-mag.com/fake-news-les-deputes-togolais-formes-pour-participer-a-la-lutte/

[28] République de Togo, Infox et extrémisme, 2020. En ligne, consulté le 06 mars 2024. URL: https://www.republicoftogo.com/toutes-les-rubriques/cooperation/infox-et-extremisme

purposes. In this configuration, with its impact on opi-nions and perceptions, misinfor-mation cannot be without effect on the conduct and orientation of cooperation pol-icies.

In this context, it would be important for governments, their partners and civil society to consider both preventive and proactive solutions against such a phenomenon, such as :

- Better documentation, through research, of the phenomenon of misinformation, its causes, manifestations and processes in Sahelian and West African societies, beyond generalities and global visions that do not always reflect local realities.

- Perception studies on how misinformation impacts development policies and their appropriation, the actors involved, channels and strategies, in order to identify effec-tive preventive solutions adapted to West African societies and realities marked by a high degree of privatization of political relations.

- A strategy built around media and digital literacy. This strategy should be part of a holistic approach involving researchers, governments, civil society and social network users, with the aim of engaging the various platforms to better identify local contexts.

- Engage local partnerships to support initiatives to combat and research misinfor-mation, not only through the promotion of fact-checking in school curricula, but also through awareness-raising campaigns in local languages.

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