

**Minutes from meeting in the Council for Development Policy**  
**on 10 April 2025**

- Members: Professor Anne Mette Kjær, University of Aarhus (Chair)  
Deputy CEO and International Director Jarl Krausing, CONCITO (Deputy Chair)  
Director for Nutrition Line Damsgaard, The Danish Agriculture & Food Council  
Head of Secretariat Lone Ilum Christiansen, The Danish Trade Union Development Agency (DTDA)  
Political Consultant and Project Officer of DAPP Lucas Højbjerg, The Danish Chamber of Commerce  
Senior Researcher Adam Moe Fejerskov, Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS)  
Director Charlotte Flindt Pedersen, Danish Foreign Policy Society  
Political Director Jonas Manthey Olsen, Danish Youth Council (DUF)  
Chief Advisor Mattias Söderberg, DanChurchAid  
Director for Global Development and Sustainability Marie Gad Hansen, Confederation of Danish Industries (DI) did not take part in the meeting but had shared written comments
- MFA: Under-Secretary for Development Policy Ole Thonke  
Head of Department Ketil Karlsen, Department for Africa, Policy and Development, AFRPOL  
Head of Department Tove Degnbol, Department for Evaluation, Learning and Quality, LEARNING  
Deputy Head of Department Mette Bech Pilgaard, Department for Evaluation, Learning and Quality, LEARNING  
Head of Section Lotte Blom Salmonsens, Department for Evaluation, Learning and Quality, LEARNING  
Head of Section Lea Ambra Klein Skovbjerg, Department for Evaluation, Learning and Quality, LEARNING
- Agenda item 2: Ambassador Signe Winding Albjerg, The Embassy of Denmark in Kampala (Online)  
Deputy Head of Mission Adam Sparre Spliid, The Embassy of Denmark in Kampala (Online)
- Agenda item 3: Ambassador Christian Brix Møller, The Embassy of Denmark in Dhaka  
Deputy Head of Mission Anders B. Karlsen, The Embassy of Denmark in Dhaka (Online)  
Sector Counsellor Ole Justesen, the Embassy of Denmark in Dhaka (online)

- Agenda item 4: Head of Department Tove Degnbol, The Department for Evaluation, Learning and Quality (LEARNING)  
Special Advisor Karen Høj Obling, The Department for Evaluation, Learning and Quality (LEARNING)  
Director Ulla Næsby Tawiah, Danida Fellowship Centre (DFC)  
Programme Officer Hristina Jensen, Danida Fellowship Centre (DFC)
- Agenda item 5: Head of Department Karin Poulsen, The Department for Green Diplomacy and Climate (KLIMA)  
Team Leader Henning Nøhr, The Department for Green Diplomacy and Climate (KLIMA)  
Head of Section Eva Marie Wüst Vestergaard, The Department for Green Diplomacy and Climate (KLIMA)
- Agenda item 6: Ambassador Kristian Kirkegaard Edinger, The Embassy of Denmark in Ouagadougou  
Head of Cooperation Peter Bøgh Jensen, The Embassy of Denmark in Ouagadougou (Online)
- Agenda item 7: Ambassador Kristian Kirkegaard Edinger, The Embassy of Denmark in Ouagadougou  
Head of Cooperation Peter Bøgh Jensen, The Embassy of Denmark in Ouagadougou (Online)

#### **Agenda Item No. 1: Announcements**

The Under-Secretary for Development Policy briefed the Council about the new Secretary for Development Policy and the status of preparations of the new strategy for development policy, which is slightly delayed compared to previous plans. The Under-Secretary further briefed the Council about recent events with significance for Danish development cooperation, including the humanitarian crisis in Gaza after the truce ended on 18 March, and the effects of the USAID stop-work-order, which the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) currently is mapping in partner countries.

*With reference to the Rules of Procedure for the Council for Development Policy, the Chair of the Council asked if members had any conflict of interest related to the agenda items. No member announced potential conflict of interest.*

#### **Agenda Item No. 2: Annual Stocktaking of the Denmark-Uganda Strategic Framework 2023-2028 (USF)**

*For information and discussion*

The Embassy of Denmark in Kampala

*Summary:*

*The 2024 Stocktaking report for the Denmark-Uganda Strategic Framework 2023-2028 (USF) included a contextual analysis; a status update on projects under the Uganda Bilateral Development Programme (UBDP); a thematic section on synergies between development cooperation and economic diplomacy; and a section on special priorities for 2025. The vision of the USF is to strengthen regional and national stability and prosperity by supporting Uganda in achieving a green, sustainable, and inclusive economic transformation, respecting human rights while continuing to host refugees from neighbouring countries. The initial UBDP budget was DKK 650 million. The budget of the UBDP has since increased to DKK 1020 million. In 2024, DKK 60 million was added for Denmark to join the EU-Uganda Forest Partnership, and DKK 60 million to top up the Uganda Refugee Resilience Initiative. DKK 250 million was added as part of Finance Act 2025 for local climate adaptation with a focus on water management and food systems.*

### **Key observations and recommendations from the Council:**

- The Council commended the Embassy for an interesting, clear and realistic political and contextual assessment. The Council also appreciated the focus on the intersection between development cooperation and economic diplomacy; the relevant and innovative interventions on refugees based on a self-reliance approach; the investments in value chains and EU Deforestation Regulation compliance; as well as the partnerships on e-mobility.
- The Council expressed concern about implications of the current financing environment on the refugee response in Uganda and its development more broadly, including in particular USAID cuts and increasing debt levels. Members of the Council asked what actions the Embassy was considering, in light of the funding situation as well as the increasing refugee flows from neighbouring countries affected by conflict. Did the Embassy consider a more radical approach to support the future humanitarian situation?
- The challenging political environment was highlighted by the Council and it commended the Embassy's efforts to balance its engagement with the government and support for accountability, civic space, and rights. Members of the Council observed that this balancing could become more difficult during the upcoming elections. Members noted that Uganda in many ways had remained stable despite authoritarian tendencies but also pointed to risks such as re-nationalisation and centralisation with the integration of previously semi-autonomous agencies into government departments. Members of the Council asked how the Embassy was supporting civil society as well as authorities in this challenging political and governance context. How did the Embassy support anti-corruption and labour rights?
- Members of the Council commended the focus on localisation and asked what a "highly localised approach" means in practice. Furthermore, Members requested information about the Embassy's work with its Youth Sounding Board and whether its members represented a broader segment of the youth. Questions were raised about the engagement with religious actors, and Members asked about vocational education in Uganda and how the Embassy is working on skills and framework conditions to address the challenge of unemployment and insufficient job creation for the increasing workforce.
- Finally, members of the Council observed that substantial, additional funding had been added to the Bilateral Development Programme and enquired about the capacity of the Embassy considering this additional administration responsibility.

### **The Ministry of Foreign Affairs' (MFA) response to key issues:**

- The Ambassador underlined that the changing funding landscape was a disruption that could not be overestimated; consequences for Uganda were immense, especially in relation to refugee response, health, and democracy and civil society. The Embassy was in close dialogue with all partners to mitigate the impact and had already taken several actions. The Deputy Head of Mission added that reduced development funds had made the debt situation even more serious; a substantial share of the Government budget was currently spent on debt service, hence funding for development activities was limited.
- In terms of the refugee response, the Ambassador found that consequences were particularly severe considering the increasing influx of refugees especially from Congo. This only increased the importance of Danish interventions focusing on self-reliance. Moreover, Denmark was the incoming chair of the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework Steering Committee in Uganda at a critical time for identifying solutions to the funding crisis.
- The Ambassador noted that the period leading up to the elections was likely to be unpredictable given the dynamic political and governance context. The Embassy worked with civil society partners in relation to governance, anti-corruption, and accountability. Many of the civil society partners also worked closely with government counterparts. Even if the civic space was narrowing, civil society was still active and could operate. The Embassy would intensify its engagement leading up to the elections. The Ambassador acknowledged the role of religious actors in efforts to avoid violence but noted that certain actors were strong supporters of the Anti-Homosexuality Act.
- On the ongoing re-nationalisation and centralisation, the Ambassador mentioned that there certainly were points of concern, such as the merger of the Uganda Coffee Development Authority with the Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries (MAAIF), but that there was also merit in a rationalisation of an unsustainable public sector comprising an excessive number of departments and agencies.
- On localisation, the Ambassador explained that the Embassy currently directly supported 22 local partnerships under the Partnerships for Accountability, Civic Engagement and Rights program. Many of the partners were based locally in the West Nile and Karamoja regions, while others had both national and regional presence. The Embassy had just concluded a call for applications focusing on women, youth, and persons with disabilities. Regarding the Embassy Youth Sounding Board, the Ambassador clarified that some members represented partners, and by extension the sectors, of the Embassy, whereas others were selected based on a call for application process.
- The Ambassador informed the Council that despite the increased development portfolio, the Embassy had the necessary capacity to manage it.

### **Agenda Item No. 3: Annual Stocktaking Bangladesh**

*For information and discussion*  
The Embassy of Denmark in Dhaka

*Summary:*

*The Bangladesh Strategic Framework and Bangladesh Bilateral Country Programme (DKK 300 million) focuses on two areas: 1) Green, inclusive and sustainable production; and 2) Resilience of vulnerable groups affected by climate change. Given the significant changes in the political context following the revolution in August 2024, a third objective was added to support human rights, democracy and good governance. To this end, an additional DKK 35 million was approved by the Danish Parliament in December 2024.*

**Key observations and recommendations from the Council:**

- The Council appreciated the progress and the composition of the Country Strategic Framework for Bangladesh. It applauded the addition of a third objective to the strategy to support the democratic transition in the country and the allocation of an additional DKK 35 million. At the same time, questions were raised as to whether the current window of opportunity warranted an even larger engagement. Anti-corruption was suggested as a potential area of intervention. The desperate situation regarding the Rohingya refugees was touched on, hereunder the consequences of USAID cut-backs.
- The Embassy was asked how it viewed the current political economy. What would be the likely development of the political situation in the country? Could deeper political reforms be expected?
- Members of the Council enquired about the status of the cooperation with Bangladesh and the possible continuation of the Danish engagement given the positive momentum for change in Bangladesh. Both in terms of democratisation but also regarding the sustainable transition in production and the continued need to support labour market reform. With regard to the latter, Members of the Council noted that workers seemed not yet to benefit from the reform efforts. In what ways could the Embassy enhance its support for this?
- The Council asked if it might be feasible to increase the support to the water and sanitation programme in host communities in Cox Bazar as this seemed as a particularly important undertaking.
- Finally, Members wanted to hear about the development of the Sustainable Supply Chain Advisory concept, the possibility for new Strategic Sector Cooperation, and whether Danish development engagements had a continued link to Farmer Field Schools that had been successfully supported under a previous agriculture programme.

**The Ministry of Foreign Affairs' (MFA) response to key issues:**

- The Ambassador agreed that the situation for the Rohingyas remained desperate. Luckily, a foreseen US reduction of USD 73 million had not been effectuated and support would continue at least until the end of the year, so in the medium-term food rations could continue at the same level. While the Chief Advisor of the interim government of

Bangladesh, similar to the previous government, was adamant that the Rohingyas eventually would have to return, he seemed more proactive in exploring international solutions.

- With regard to the potential for political change in Bangladesh, it was too early to determine if the uprising last year would actually result in democratic reforms. There was concern that the old opposition party, BNP, was not really interested in major reforms and there was an emerging generational conflict as the youth did not have faith in the older generation. Nevertheless, there was momentum and it was important from the Danish side to support the interim government's reform process. Anti-corruption was indeed important, because Bangladesh was trying to attract more foreign investment. In particular, since two of the largest foreign investment projects to date were Danish (Maersk in a new green container terminal and Copenhagen Infrastructure Partners/Copenhagen Offshore Partners in an offshore wind project).
- Concerning the Sustainable Supply Chain Advisory, the Ambassador shared that in 2024 more than 35 Danish companies and their suppliers in Bangladesh had been advised on working conditions and green and sustainable investments, drawing on insights from the Embassy's development cooperation, the sector cooperation and the trade council.
- In terms of future Danish engagement in Bangladesh, the Ambassador was hoping for interest from the Danish Ministry of Environment and the Danish Ministry of Employment to engage in a new Strategic Sector Cooperation (SSC) on sustainable production with focus on the textile sector where Denmark is the largest importer per capita in the EU from Bangladesh. It was also the Ambassador's assessment that to the extent Denmark was able to remain engaged in Bangladesh after 2028, the focus areas of the existing portfolio were well suited for further cooperation, i.e. climate, sustainable value chains, Human Rights Democracy and Good Governance, SSC, and Danida Business Instruments.

#### **Agenda Item No. 4: Knowledge and Innovation Programme**

*For discussion and recommendation to the Minister*

DKK 430 million

Department for Evaluation, Learning, and Quality

##### *Summary:*

*Through partnerships between African and Danish universities and scholarships for African students who study in Denmark, the programme will foster shared learning, greater mutual understanding and joint solutions to shared global challenges. Based on annual calls for applications, partnerships between Danish and African universities (in countries with a Danish embassy) will apply for funding, and a Selection Committee supported by Danida Fellowship Centre will assess and decide on which applications to grant. The programme also includes top-ups for ERASMUS+ scholarships and seed funding for Capacity Building in Higher Education programmes and for Danish universities who want to enter International Credit Mobility agreements with African higher education institutions.*

*The Council for Development Policy recommended the Knowledge and Innovation Programme for approval by the Minister for Foreign Affairs.*

**Key observations and recommendations from the Council:**

- The Council found the programme interesting and emphasised the effort to establish equal partnerships between North and South partners, the exchange with African students, including in the form of top-up grants for ERASMUS+ scholarships, and the attention paid to the wellbeing of students on short or longer stays in Denmark.
- Concern was expressed about the risk of ‘brain drain’ from African countries. Members found, however, that the partnership model might be able to mitigate this risk, and it was recommended that solid partnerships were established before scholarships could be applied for. At the moment, Council members found the description of the nature of the partnerships somewhat unclear in the PD.
- Members stressed the importance of ensuring that partnerships would actually be equal and not mainly driven by the Danish partners. African universities should have a key role, and it was underlined that exchange of experience should go both ways: Danish participants and universities should be ready to learn from African partners, including both universities and relevant higher education authorities in partner countries. It was suggested that also the Selection Committee should have a balance of Danish and African representatives.
- Some Members of the Council challenged the decision not to have a thematic focus of the programme. It was argued that ‘global challenges’ was too broad to ensure that the programme would address relevant challenges such as e.g. climate change and economic growth. Other Members found it important not to instrumentalise the programme and argued that partnerships should be allowed to define the activities they would like to jointly work on. The Council stressed the importance of making the results framework more specific after the first call, on an ongoing basis collecting experience and lessons learned, and adapting the programme accordingly.
- Members asked about incentives for both Danish and African partners to participate. Why would African universities encourage talented young students to leave for Master studies in Denmark? Would Danish researchers be ready to engage or was it mainly at management level in Danish universities the support was found? Were Danish students ready to study in African universities despite the fact that the programme cannot pay for their travel and stay?
- The Council foresaw a wide range of issues which could slow down or hinder the implementation of the programme, including Danish regulation on visa and study stays. The risk of criticism of the programme for occupying study space in Danish universities which Danish students could have got was also mentioned. Some of this could leave a negative impression of Denmark in African countries.

Other issues mentioned included the need for a baseline for assessing the expected increase of the number of African students in Denmark, overheads to Danish universities, the tasks of Danida Fellowship Centre (DFC), a possible link between the programme and the upcoming regional innovation centre in Nairobi, and collaboration with the private sector. Finally, the importance of communication about the results of the programme and the need to find a catchy name for the programme were mentioned.

**The Ministry of Foreign Affairs' (MFA) response to key issues:**

- The Head of Department for Evaluation, Learning and Quality (LEARNING) agreed with the Council that the link between the partnership and scholarship activities was essential. She explained that seed funding was available for interested applicants who needed time to build up a genuine partnership before they applied for a joint project. Already well-established university partnership could apply for scholarship funding without applying for partnership funding first.
- Equality of partnerships was a key priority and efforts would be made to ensure that African partners had real influence on applications and implementation of activities. It was expected that African lecturers would be visiting scholars in Danish universities, and experience from the pilot Master programme for partners in Strategic Sector Cooperation programmes showed that students from African countries have a lot to contribute in form of sharing experience with fellow students and teachers. The Head of LEARNING acknowledged that the extensive consultation with interested parties during the formulation of the programme had been mainly with Danish universities and authorities. African researchers had been decisive in suggesting possible activities under the partnership outcome, but there had been only limited consultation with African universities and authorities on the scholarship activities.
- Concerning the decision not to have a thematic focus such as e.g. climate change for the programme, the Head of LEARNING said that the programme would be challenged by so many factors out of participants' control that it was found unfeasible to add an extra constraint in the form of a specific thematic focus. In addition to the challenges related to Danish procedures for visa and study stays, the regulation of the Danish university sector was extensive and was likely to impact significantly on the programme.
- The Head of LEARNING agreed that motivation of researchers - rather than university management – would be critical to the success of the programme. Preparations had therefore concentrated on dialogue with those expected to be directly involved and the feedback received suggested that a number of faculties in Danish universities would be ready to apply for partnership projects already in the first round. Others were likely to join later, and some would probably not be interested. There were indications that a number of the more well-established African universities were interested in the partnership part of the programme, and students were believed to be interested in the scholarship part.



- The Director of Danida Fellowship Centre described the expected role of DFC in the programme, including the experience of DFC in supporting the phyco-social well-being of foreign students in Denmark.

The Chair of the Council concluded that the Council recommended the Knowledge and Innovation Programme for approval by the Minister for Foreign Affairs.

### **Agenda Item No. 5: Danish Organisation Strategy for IUCN 2025-2029**

*For discussion and recommendation to the Minister*

DKK 100 million

The Department for Green Diplomacy and Climate

#### *Summary:*

*Based on core funding, Denmark fully supports the mandate of IUCN. In addition, the Danish support aims to enhance the overall performance and impact of IUCN through four priority areas: 1) Inclusion, poverty and Indigenous Peoples, 2) Nature-based Solutions, 3) Programme/global level impact and outcome monitoring and 4) Regional/national level implementation and impact.*

*The Council for Development Policy recommended the Danish Organisation Strategy for IUCN 2025-2029 for approval by the Minister for Foreign Affairs.*

#### **Key observations and recommendations from the Council:**

- The Council welcomed the organisation strategy and that the support was provided as core funding. The choice of Danish priority areas was commended, addressing identified weaknesses of IUCN. The Council highlighted the important role for Denmark in providing strategic guidance that could help the organisation sharpen its vision and finding its niche. Moreover, support to programmatic work and strengthening of the monitoring and evaluation framework was particularly emphasized and it was proposed to make this a top priority among the priority areas in the organisation strategy.
- IUCN is both a project vehicle and a normative standard setter, and the balance between this double role was addressed. Members of the Council requested clarification on IUCN's comparative advantage and the specific strengths of the organisation, noting competition working in the biodiversity space which comes with a need for coordination and enhanced synergy. In addition, the important role IUCN is playing in evidence generation was pointed out.
- Members of the Council noted that USAID has been a partner to IUCN and asked how IUCN may be affected by the recent development.
- The interplay between people and nature was brought up, highlighting the need to further address poverty and action on the ground. The pressure on soil and wetlands was, for example, a prominent issue in East Africa. Members of the Council asked how IUCN approaches this dilemma.

- Members of the Council asked for clarification on the Danish Ministry of Environment and Gender Equality's (MLM) involvement in IUCN.
- Other issues mentioned by the Council included the new global biodiversity goals and IUCN's conferences.

**The Ministry of Foreign Affairs' (MFA) response to key issues:**

- Regarding the four Danish priorities for the partnership with IUCN, it was agreed that these can be re-organised.
- The Head of KLIMA stressed the import interplay between the normative work and concrete implementation on the ground, noting that IUCN has over 1400 members and currently is decentralising. Efforts to involve Danish embassies and an upcoming programme proposal on Transboundary Water in East Africa, which will involve IUCN among others, was mentioned as examples of how to get closer to reality in the context of Danish development assistance. The Team Leader explained that IUCN has a broad mandate with the combination of knowledge formation and programmatic work as an umbrella organisation, which includes academia. This was both a strength and challenge, but IUCN's comparative advantage lies in this, while it was still important to be realistic about their abilities and the need to prioritise.
- The Team Leader pointed out that USAID was an important partner of IUCN on a programme level. However, USAID was not a core funder. The USAID situation will therefore likely not affect the core of IUCN. IUCN has a strong national membership base in the US and will still be an important partner to IUCN.
- Having the slogan "People & Nature", IUCN has pushed for the integration of people into their nature conservation efforts. The Team Leader highlighted that healthy ecosystems were essential for the poor, as degradation of nature removes the services that ecosystems provide to poor people. The work of the regional IUCN office in East Africa was mentioned as an example of how IUCN works with "wise use of wetlands" to create pragmatic trade-offs between local livelihoods and healthy wetland ecosystems.
- Finally, it was noted that the Danish Ministry of Environment (MIM) was the Danish State Member of IUCN and part of the electoral group for IUCN in West Europe, but currently not elected to the IUCN Council (presently Belgium, France and Spain). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs was the Danish representative in the Framework Donor Group working closely with the IUCN Management on strategies and reforms.

The Chair of the Council concluded that the Council recommended the Danish Organisation Strategy for IUCN 2025-2029 for approval by the Minister for Foreign Affairs.

**Agenda Item No. 6: Annual Stocktaking Niger (2023-2027)**

*For information and discussion*

The Embassy of Denmark in Ouagadougou

### *Summary:*

*In August 2022, the Denmark–Niger Strategic Framework for 2023–2027 was approved, laying the foundation for the bilateral development programme. Following the military coup in Niger in 2023, Denmark found it necessary to revise the programme by reducing its duration from five to three years and decrease the financial envelope from DKK 920 million to DKK 310 million. Despite the difficult and fragile context, the programme has delivered tangible results through capable partners with broad outreach—particularly in areas such as migration, the promotion of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), and the strengthening of agro-food systems productivity.*

### **Key observations and recommendations from the Council:**

- The Council welcomed the opportunity to discuss developments in Niger, acknowledging the challenging context while noting encouraging programme results.
- Members of the Council expressed concerns about the withdrawal of Denmark and other Western actors, and asked whether this might create a vacuum that other actors such as Russia and China could exploit. Further, Members of the Council inquired whether the initial public support for the military junta following the coup had endured over time.
- The Council also noted the implications of USAID’s withdrawal and sought clarity on how this had affected partners operating in Niger. Members of the Council asked about Niger’s access to transport infrastructure and ports, given its landlocked status, with Morocco mentioned as a potential facilitator through access to the Mediterranean Sea.
- Several questions were raised about the future Danish engagement in Niger. Council Members asked whether Denmark’s presence could be maintained via Strategic Partners (civil society organisations), if such efforts would fall under a regional framework, and whether coordination with the EU was possible. Members of the Council questioned whether a containment strategy—rather than engagement—might be more suitable in light of the growing influence of Russia.
- Council members underlined that despite the fragile context, results had been achieved in areas such as integrated resilience, water supply, and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR). Members noted that there was a need for a broader, possibly public, dialogue on prioritisation and criteria, including learning from cases such as Niger, which offers valuable insights into what can be achieved in complex environments.

Other issues mentioned by the Council included collaboration with Morocco to create coherence and stability through a South-South perspective; and what the effects of the closing of the Embassy in Ouagadougou would have on the taxation programme.

### **The Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ (MFA) response to key issues:**

- The Ambassador shared his assessment of the current situation in Niger and neighbouring countries. Geopolitically, Niger – alongside Burkina Faso and Mali – had made a clear choice to align with Russia. The foreign ministers of the three countries had recently visited Moscow and held talks with Foreign Minister Lavrov, during which Ukraine was

referred to as a “terrorist state”. From this perspective, Western withdrawal did not create a vacuum – Russia was already present and using its influence to expand its reach in the region.

- The Ambassador emphasised that needs in the region remained immense. Poverty was increasing, and marginalisation deepening. Approximately two million people were internally displaced in Burkina Faso and close to one million in Niger. This alone, he argued, justified a continued Danish engagement. However, direct engagement with the military authorities in Niger was not currently feasible. Recent national consultations culminated in the junta leader declaring himself president, a development that raised concerns about prolonged authoritarian rule or possible further political instability.
- While it remained difficult to gauge levels of popular support in Niger, the Embassy assessed that the regime currently enjoyed broad support, particularly among youth. The government’s Pan-Africanist discourse resonated with the younger generation. Over time, this support may erode in response to increasing restrictions on freedom of expression, political participation, and civic space—but for now, the regime maintained a firm grip on power.
- Oversight of programme activities in Niger had become increasingly difficult. This was one reason why Denmark channelled support through multilateral partners, which continued to demonstrate results across a wide range of target groups – including migrants, girls and women, and communities in marginalised areas.
- With regard to civil society, the Ambassador had recently met online with Danish Strategic Partners operating in Niger. These organisations were under growing pressure. Legal frameworks needed to underpin their activities remained unsigned by the authorities, creating uncertainty. Civic space was severely limited, and advocacy efforts on issues such as freedom of expression were not currently viable. As a result, CSOs focused primarily on resilience and humanitarian-development nexus activities. Advocacy remained limited to localised issues, often linked to competition over scarce resources.
- The Embassy had been surprised to learn that, in addition to USAID’s withdrawal, the Dutch government had significantly reduced funding to civil society. The EU had also reduced its budget for Niger by 80 %. Going forward, EU Delegations in the Sahel region would no longer have country-specific programmes, but would instead draw on a regional funding pool managed from Abidjan. Despite these developments, the EU remained a key partner, and Denmark would seek to maintain cooperation and alignment wherever possible.
- Access and transport remained critical for a landlocked country like Niger. Relations with neighbouring countries were strained. Niger accused Benin of hosting French troops along the border. Togo remained more neutral, and the Port of Lomé was a potential access point – but reaching it required passage through Burkina Faso, which was a long, dangerous, and expensive route. Further, relations between Burkina Faso and Côte d’Ivoire were tense. Burkina Faso had accused Abidjan of attempting to destabilise the

country. With up to six million Burkinabè living in Côte d'Ivoire, the situation was of serious concern. While their current passports were valid, renewal might prove difficult, as the new AES bloc had introduced its own passport system.

- In response to the suggestion that containment may be more appropriate than engagement, the Ambassador argued that while containment was an option – in theory - it was the antithesis of engagement. Denmark aimed to remain engaged, with the expectation that the situation would eventually improve.

The Under-Secretary for Development Policy reiterated that the Ministry continued to strike a balance between engagement in fragile and stable states. While the closure of the Embassy in Ouagadougou was a difficult decision, it was deemed necessary. Denmark remained committed to supporting its Strategic Partners and aimed to strengthen collaboration with UN organisations. A regional programme was expected to be in place by next year.

The Chair of the Council thanked the Ambassador for his comprehensive response to the Council's questions and comments.

### **Agenda Item No. 7: Annual Stocktaking: Burkina Faso (2021-2025)**

*For information and discussion*

Embassy of Denmark in Ouagadougou

#### *Summary:*

*Since the adoption of the Strategic Framework for Burkina Faso (2021–2025), the situation in the country has deteriorated significantly. Following two military coups in 2022, political instability and a rapid decline in security have posed major challenges to the implementation of the bilateral development programme. During the Mid-Term Review (MTR) in November 2024, it was concluded that the situation had worsened to a point “beyond the most pessimistic scenario outlined in the Strategic Framework.”. The water and governance sectors have been particularly affected, while partners working in the areas of resilience and job creation have demonstrated adaptability and achieved positive results in selected niches.*

#### **Key observations and recommendations from the Council:**

- The Council welcomed the opportunity to engage in a discussion on developments in Burkina Faso and challenges currently facing Danish development cooperation in the country. Council members acknowledged the fragile and volatile context, noted the progress achieved, and expressed support for the Embassy's adaptive approach, especially within the drinking water sector.
- Council members raised questions regarding Burkina Faso's geopolitical alignments, including the cooperation with countries such as Venezuela and Nicaragua.
- Members of the Council highlighted the notable achievements within resilience, agro-food systems and employment creation and asked whether there was scope for scaling up these activities.

- Concern was also expressed about the security situation, including whether Burkina Faso risked sliding into a context similar to that of Somalia, with a central government limited to control of the capital surrounded by non-state armed groups.
- The Chair of the Council observed that, despite the turmoil, Burkina Faso had recorded modest positive economic growth, slightly above the population growth rate, and inquired how such growth was possible under such adverse circumstances. The Chair also noted challenges in the dialogue with the Ministry of Environment and Water, while recognising that tangible results were nonetheless being achieved in the drinking water sector. She questioned whether this would remain possible going forward. Lastly, the Chair requested an update on the security situation in Ouagadougou, particularly in light of recent attacks on Bamako airport.

**The Ministry of Foreign Affairs' (MFA) response to key issues:**

- The Ambassador explained that Burkina Faso's outreach to Venezuela and Nicaragua should be understood in the context of its strategic alignment with Russia and other authoritarian regimes. Notably, in a recent national address, the Prime Minister highlighted partnerships with Russia, Iran, North Korea, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, while omitting long-standing allies such as the EU and Denmark.
- On the security situation, the Ambassador reported that although the government claimed control of 70% of national territory, most sources estimated effective control to be closer to 40–50%. The situation remained fluid and unpredictable. There were approximately 40 provincial towns that were only accessible by air due to being encircled by jihadist groups. In contrast, the situation in Ouagadougou remained calm and it was possible to move around. Security had been enhanced considerably, however control was extensive, stricter and more detailed. Warnings about suicide attacks were sometimes circulated, also from official sources. The Embassy followed the situation closely, was very alert, and tried to stay ahead of events.
- Concerning the mining sector, the Ambassador noted that while a new draft law sought to increase national oversight, the regime's aggressive stance – marked by nationalisations and high security-related costs – was discouraging investments. The Ambassador clarified that economic growth was primarily driven by high gold prices. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) had just concluded a mission to Ouagadougou in order to review Burkina Faso's Extended Credit Facility. In the ensuing press release, growth was forecasted to 5 %. However, such macroeconomic indicators obscured the day-to-day challenges faced by the population, including inflation, rising food prices, unemployment, and declining purchasing power.

The Ambassador also briefed the Council on recent developments which had taken place after the submission of the stocktaking report:

- On 10–11 March, images of civilian casualties circulated on social media. It was later confirmed that these killings – 58 civilians, including women and children – occurred within the area of the Danish-supported Kouka drinking water project. The perpetrators were paramilitary self-defence groups, some of which were based in Kouka, while others were from neighbouring villages. Both Human Rights Watch and the OHCHR had reported on the incident.
- In the aftermath, the jihadist group JNIM (Jama’at Nasr al-Islam wal-Muslimin) retaliated with attacks in 12–20 locations across the country. The conflict had an ethnic dimension with the Fulani (Peul) community often accused of supporting terrorist groups.
- Following renewed military operations by government forces in the Kouka area, jihadists launched further reprisals, killing at least 166 people and damaging agricultural water infrastructure. Given the escalating violence and in accordance with the ‘do-no-harm’ principle, Danish support to the Kouka project had been temporarily suspended. The Ambassador expressed concern that self-defence groups, now integrated into the national security architecture, might be responsible for further abuses.
- While the Kouka project was suspended, drinking water projects in Noumoudara and Dédougou would continue, as would support to the integrated water resource management initiative (GIRE) and technical assistance provided by COWI.
- The governance programme had also been negatively affected. Following the Kouka massacre, several civil society actors voiced criticism of government actions. Four members of the respected organisation Servir Et Non se Servir (SENS), two of whom were affiliated with foreign missions (the US Embassy and the Government of Wallonia, Belgium), were subsequently abducted. Shortly thereafter, the President and Vice-President of the Association of Journalists in Burkina Faso (AJB) were also abducted. A couple of days after their abduction, the two journalists appeared publicly on a video dressed in military uniforms, and it was confirmed that they had been conscripted to the army against their will. In addition, a government communiqué later declared AJB’s legal status null and void and warned that engagement with the organisation could result in sanctions. Given that AJB is a founding member of the Norbert Zongo Press Centre – a partner in Denmark’s governance programme – Danish support had been temporarily suspended.
- On 1 April, in a national address, the President of Burkina Faso made troubling remarks, referring to the four SENS members as “traitors” working on behalf of embassies from imperialist countries.

In conclusion, the Chair of the Council commended the Embassy for its diligent and prudent handling of the situation.

The Under-Secretary for Development Policy stressed the gravity of the current context and reaffirmed Denmark’s commitment to engagement not only in the Sahel region but also in

neighbouring countries. Denmark's Peace and Stabilisation Programme, based in Accra, would continue its cross-regional work in the Central Sahel and Coastal States to help prevent further conflict spill-over.

**Agenda Item No. 8: Any Other Business**

No issues were raised under this agenda item.