



The Central Sahel: Scene of New Climate Wars?

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What's new? Violence is rising in the central Sahel, linked largely to competition over natural resources in rural areas. Sahelian states and their partners fear that the effects of climate change could further exacerbate conflict.

Why does it matter? Climate change has certainly contributed to transforming the region's agro-pastoral systems. But the direct relationship sometimes posited between global warming and dwindling resources, on one hand, and growing violence, on the other, does not help policymakers formulate appropriate responses.

What should be done? It is essential to consider the impact of climate change in the Sahel. But the climate component must be linked to a broader set of causalities, notably the political choices – including those made by states – governing access to resources.

I. Overview

Since the droughts of the 1970s and 1980s, the central Sahel countries – Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger – have been considered ecologically fragile and highly impoverished. Today, in addition to these climatic and economic problems, the region is witnessing a proliferation of armed groups in rural areas, some of which claim to act in the name of jihad. One theory is that global warming is leading to a reduction in available resources and, consequently, an increase in violence. But the evidence does not seem to bear it out. The spread of conflict in the region is linked less to dwindling resources than to transformation of modes of production, resulting in poorly regulated competition over access to increasingly coveted resources – particularly land.

It is essential to fight climate change and its effects, which include increased land pressure, particularly in rural areas. But resource scarcity is neither the only nor the determining factor behind rising insecurity. In some cases, resources are plentiful, but traditional or central authorities lack the ability or the legitimacy to mediate conflicts over access to them.

If governments base development policies on the premise that resource scarcity automatically leads to a surge in violence, they will run the risk of formulating inadequate responses to the profound transformation of agro-pastoral systems. It is thus important to provide tools that can ensure a more equitable distribution of the resources created. In addition, the states' political choices play an essential role in maintaining

a balance between agricultural and pastoral production. In the central Sahel, government policies have long benefited sedentary farmers at the expense of nomadic herders. States should correct this imbalance and find new solutions that reconcile the interests of different systems of production.

II. With Global Warming, Passions Flare

In recent years, the central Sahel – Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger – has become an epicentre of insecurity, with state authorities withdrawing into cities and armed groups, some claiming to act in the name of jihad, spreading throughout rural zones. The insecurity is developing in a poor, semi-arid region perceived as vulnerable for several decades, especially since the droughts of the 1970s and 1980s. An increasing number of experts and decision-makers are not only connecting the phenomena of rising violence and changing climate but positing a direct link between the two.¹

These actors believe that higher temperatures in the Sahel are producing more droughts and floods, which in turn jeopardise agricultural production, increase poverty and fuel ethnic violence. Armed groups, particularly jihadists, are said to exploit these tensions to draw in recruits. Some observers consider this link to be self-evident and comment that for central Sahelian states, “the map of insecurity and that of hunger are superimposed”.²

For Sahel governments, linking jihadism to climate change is perhaps a way of attracting financial assistance by connecting two issues that mobilise international donors. In February 2019, seventeen Sahel countries met in Niger’s capital, Niamey, to adopt a plan investing \$400 billion (more than 350 billion euros) over the period 2019-2030 to combat the effects of climate change. At this meeting, participants deplored the impact of global warming in reducing the area of arable land, depleting resources and increasing insecurity.³ They also stressed the need for industrialised countries, the prime culprits in global warming, to financially support the Sahel states that are its first victims. For Sahelian leaders, this link also has the potential advantage of attributing the causes of violence to large-scale external factors for which they cannot be held responsible.

¹ See, for example, “Multilateral Cooperation in the Area of Climate-related Security and Development Risks in Africa”, NUPI, February 2020.

² Laurence Caramel, “Changement climatique et pression démographique, terreau de la violence au Sahel”, *Le Monde*, 11 April 2019. “Mali-Niger: Climate change and conflict make an explosive mix in the Sahel”, ICRC, 22 January 2019. In this press release, ICRC states: “the effects of climate change are exacerbating conflict between communities in both Mali and Niger, leading to a deepening of poverty, a weakening of public services and a disruption to traditional means of survival”.

³ See “Discours officiel de SEM Issoufou Mahamadou à l’ouverture officielle du Premier Sommet de la Commission Climat Sahel”. Speaking to the UN in New York in September 2019, Niger’s President Mahamadou Issoufou reaffirmed: “it has been shown that Niger’s farmers lose 100,000 hectares of arable land every year. ... the degradation of our land is ignored when it affects rural populations, young people and many women”. Earlier, Issoufou was quoted as saying: “The birth and development of Boko Haram is partly linked to the impoverishment of populations due to the decrease of Lake Chad which has had an impact on agricultural, pastoral and fishery resources”. “Sahel : un plan de plus de 350 milliards d’euros contre le réchauffement climatique”, *Le Monde Afrique*, 1 March 2019.

This plan to combat global warming is part of a broader logic of initiatives focusing on the “security-development” nexus. These combine actions aimed at halting the cycle of impoverishment in the Sahel and interventions to prevent the spread of armed groups, particularly jihadists. The plan involves both deploying troops to defeat terrorists and investing in development to guarantee residents access to resources.⁴ The goal is for the countries to escape poverty, which is believed to lie behind the rise of the most violent armed groups. Sahelian authorities, their partners and numerous experts repeat that jihadist groups thrive because they offer an alternative to rural Sahelian youth lacking access to resources.⁵

III. The Role of Climate Change in the Transformation of Agro-pastoral Systems

There is little doubt that climate change has an important influence on the conditions of agro-pastoral production. That said, its impact on resources and violence cannot be analysed in isolation without taking other factors into account, and the relationship cannot be reduced to a simple equation between global warming and dwindling resources, on one hand, and mounting violence, on the other.

Climate change has certainly helped disrupt the balance between pastoral and agricultural production systems, to the detriment of herders. The Sahelian droughts of the 1970s-1980s not only lowered the region’s production levels for several years, but they also profoundly altered relationships between farmers and herders. These years of drought decimated the herds of central Mali, impoverishing Fulani herdsman who depended on transhumance for survival.⁶ During that time, farmers experienced several bad harvests, but they continued to produce and soon generated a new surplus that many invested in livestock. These sedentary farmers then employed as herdsman a large number of Fulani who had been ruined by the droughts.⁷ This period is the origin of a crisis of marginalisation for pastoral communities, which partly explains the appeal of jihadist rhetoric to many Fulani nomads.⁸

Of course, climate change is not solely responsible for the crisis in pastoralism. Other factors, particularly the expansion of farmland which has eaten away at pasto-

⁴ See, for example, the Sahel Partnership Action Plan based on “an understanding that both long-term development measures and effective security measures are part of the solution to instability in the region”. Sahel Partnership Action Plan, September 2019.

⁵ “One of the reasons why armed groups are growing is precisely because they are the only game in town. A priority for the development community and national governments across the Sahel is to provide targeted food and income support together with livestock and crop insurance to smooth losses”. “Mali-Niger: Climate change and conflict make an explosive mix in the Sahel”, ICRC, op. cit.

⁶ This difficult period did not give rise to armed revolt among the Fulani. Rather, they developed various peaceful coping strategies such as becoming sedentary, adopting agro-pastoral production methods, turning to employed labour or to attempting migratory herding over longer distances. See, for example, M. de Bruijn and H. van Dijk, “Drought and Coping Strategies in Fulbe Society in the Haayre (Central Mali): A Historical Perspective”, *Cahiers d’études africaines*, vol. 34, no. 3 (1994).

⁷ Miriam de Bruijn, “Rapports interethniques et identité. L’exemple des pasteurs peuls et des cultivateurs hummbeebe au Mali central” in Y. Diallo and G. Schlee (eds.), *L’ethnicité peule dans des contextes nouveaux* (Paris, 2000).

⁸ See Crisis Group Africa Report N°238, *Central Mali: An Uprising in the Making?*, 6 July 2016, pp. 3-4.

ral areas, and the rise of forms of insecurity such as armed banditry, are also to blame. Furthermore, the advance of agricultural pioneers – ie, the expansion of land used for farming – is not only a demographic phenomenon. It is also linked to power relations between farmers and herders at the local level, as well as to political decisions, including those made by states. For instance, the Malian state's high priorities on food autonomy and modernisation of agriculture have generally favoured farmers over herders.⁹

In short, local conflicts affecting central Mali are less the result of dwindling resources – in reality, resource production has increased overall in central Mali – than of increasing tensions surrounding land use. The climate, in this case a prolonged drought in the 1970s and 1980s, has had a significant impact on the region, but its repercussions on conflict were indirect and can only be understood through a broader analysis of the transformations in agro-pastoral production systems.¹⁰

IV. Increased Resources, Increased Tensions

The theory that conflict in the Sahel is directly related to resource scarcity – in part caused by climate change – could lead to development policies whose primary purpose is to increase available resources. Following this logic, a response to droughts that harm relations between farmers and herders might be to support projects to dig wells, thereby increasing the volume of available water. Yet past experiences in several Sahel regions suggest that creating new resources can also provoke an increase in local tensions and sometimes violent conflict.

In central Mali, during an operation to support livestock farming in the Mopti region (Opération de développement de l'élevage dans la région de Mopti, ODEM), new wells like those of Tolodjé, an important pastoral reserve, rendered areas previously devoid of water more attractive. The wells drew in Dogon farmers from central Mali, who settled there, initially with the permission of Fulani herders whom the state often recognised as having land use rights.¹¹ Over time, the number of farmers grew and they began asserting their rights over the land surrounding the wells, which had been dug for the herders.¹² Tensions between herders and farmers worsened, as neither the state nor “traditional” local authorities seemed capable of regulating land use in a peaceful and consensual manner. In this zone, the fresh violence between jihadists

⁹ See Bénédicte Thibaud, “Enjeux spatiaux entre Peuls et Dogon dans le Mondoro (Mali)”, *Sécheresse*, vol. 16, no. 3 (2005), p. 172.

¹⁰ “A New Climate for Peace. Taking Action on Climate and Fragility Risks”, Adelphi, 2015, p. 16. The report, commissioned by the G7 members, rightly stresses the need to consider the impact of climate change in combination with local dynamics that affect the conditions of resource production and distribution. “The risk of conflict will increase if the changes in resource supply and demand intersect with other factors, including dysfunctional resource management, overreliance on a narrow resource base, a history of conflict, or marginalised populations”.

¹¹ Crisis Group interview, prominent Fulani figure from the village of Mbana, August 2019, Bamako. See also Thibaud, “Enjeux spatiaux entre Peuls et Dogon dans le Mondoro (Mali)”, op. cit.

¹² Thibaud, op. cit.

and self-defence groups is partly related to such quarrels over water reserves that became available in recent decades.¹³

Another example: in the Soum province of Burkina Faso, the “Riz Pluvial” development project helped increase rice production volumes in the municipality of Belehédé. But this project also affected the local demographic and political balance by drawing in non-native farmers, mostly from the Fulsé and Mossi ethnic groups. As a result, Fulani owners who are often nomadic herders felt pushed off the land without adequate compensation.¹⁴ The non-native populations also sought to bypass the traditional local authority, in this case the emir of Tongomayel, by appointing their own village chiefs.¹⁵ Amid these tensions, Fulani herders have approached jihadist groups, who are known for rejecting state decisions and helping people who support them gain access to land.¹⁶

In both cases, it was not the scarcity of resources that led to violence, but rather the creation of new resources that generated or exacerbated conflicts over land use and access to land.

V. Changes in Agro-pastoral Systems and Levels of Violence: The Example of Central Mali

While climate change does have an impact on production levels in the Sahel, no simple causal relationship exists between this factor and the level of violence, or between the reduction of resources and the surge of violence in particular.¹⁷ There is a stronger correlation between the proliferation of conflicts in the Sahel and the transformation of production systems, leading to poorly regulated competition for increasingly coveted resources – land in particular. Paradoxically, while arable land in Sahelian countries is shrinking each year as a result of climate change, the areas under cultivation continue to expand, along with production itself. Demographic expansion partly explains this phenomenon, as does improved land use and management.¹⁸ Climate change increases pressure on land, but it is neither the only nor the determining fac-

¹³ In 2017, the assassination of Souleymane Guindo, an important *dozo* (traditional hunter) among the Dogon, played a role in triggering the scenes of collective violence that marked the region. This hunter was involved in land use disputes between Dogon farmers and Fulani herders around the pastoral wells of Tolodjé, the area where Guindo was killed. Crisis Group interviews, Fulani and Dogon individuals from Koro *cercle*, Bamako, August and October 2019.

¹⁴ Crisis Group interview, political actor from Belehédé, Ouagadougou, July 2019.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ See Crisis Group Africa Report N°287, *Burkina Faso: Stopping the Spiral of Violence*, 24 February 2020.

¹⁷ Little evidence backs up the simple causal relationship, though it would appear to be common sense. See Tor A. Benjaminsen, “Changements climatiques et conflits au Sahel”, in Denis Gautier (ed.), *Environnement, discours et pouvoir* (Versailles, 2012), pp. 181-200.

¹⁸ In Niger, there has been a relative increase in rainfall over the past decade. The Agadez region saw its average rainfall almost double. While this increase caused flooding, it also turned previously arid zones into potential farming areas. In several places in Niger, this phenomenon is pushing farmers to take over land in arid areas formerly reserved for livestock, leading to the proliferation of conflict between farmers and herders. Crisis Group interview, expert agronomist, Niamey, February 2020.

tor.¹⁹ Land pressure is mainly related to the fact that land is becoming increasingly valuable and therefore more coveted.

In the Mopti region of central Mali – the hub of the Katiba Macina insurgency led by preacher Hamadoun Koufa – levels of agricultural production have risen sharply over the past two decades despite relatively large variations from year to year. While cereal production was 420,000 tonnes in 1999-2000, fifteen years later it had tripled, reaching a peak of 1.22 million tonnes in 2015-2016.²⁰ The increase in cereal production is largely related to the expansion of areas under cultivation, which grew from 789,120 hectares in 2001-2002 to 991,554 hectares in 2016, an increase of 26 per cent.²¹ In the south of Mopti, the scene of turbulent local conflicts, a poorly regulated rush toward farmland on the plains of Séno-Gondo led to violence between Fulani and Dogon.²²

While the high demand for land exacerbates conflict, the regulatory mechanisms – whether traditional or set up by the central state – are not always efficient or legitimate enough to settle disputes. Many conflicts result from attempts to seize new land, a source of tension between populations that authorities are unable to manage peacefully.²³ The demand for agricultural land and therefore also its value have significantly increased due to the impact of mechanised farming, irrigation and Dogon migration from the Bandiagara escarpment to the plains.²⁴ More farmers are exploiting land previously reserved for livestock and are taking over areas near water sources and pastoral wells to grow vegetables. This expansion of agricultural land makes it difficult for livestock to enter pastures and reach water sources, leading to violent incidents.

VI. Better Regulating Access to Natural Resources

The Sahelians who share coveted territory have never been more numerous, but they are also producing more resources than ever before. Poverty is a reality in the Sahel, but its rural inhabitants are not pitted against each other because they live on poorer and poorer land. Rather, the intensifying development of rural areas is generating

¹⁹ Malian Ministry of the Environment and Sanitation, “Rapport Evaluation intégrée des écosystèmes : cas de la région de Mopti au Mali, Initiative Pauvreté – Environnement”, Bamako, 2009, p. 114.

²⁰ The population of the Mopti region grew from 1.65 million inhabitants in 2001 to 2.57 million in 2016, an increase of 55 per cent. “Annuaire statistique du Mali”, Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Fisheries (1999-2000 and 2015).

²¹ This expansion of farming areas is smaller than in other regions such as Kayes and Sikasso, where the increase in farmland over the same period reached 146 and 162 per cent, respectively, despite weaker population growth than in Mopti. It is likely that a higher concentration of herders in the Mopti region, known to be the country’s richest pastoral area, is slowing down but not preventing the expansion of agricultural land. “Annuaire statistique 2001” and “Annuaire statistique 2016”, National Institute of Statistics, Bamako.

²² The Séno-Gondo is a vast area, suitable for agriculture and livestock farming, which extends northward into Mali from the foot of the Bandiagara escarpment on the Burkina Faso border.

²³ See, for example, “Analyse locale des dynamiques de conflit et de résilience dans la zone de Koro-Bankass”, Interpeace/IMRAP, June 2017.

²⁴ In Koro *cercle*, the land used for cereal farming almost doubled in area between 1996 and 2004, from 67,000 to 117,000 hectares. The land area used to cultivate rice, which most benefited from mechanisation, increased fivefold between 1996 and 2006. Statistical data from the Mopti Regional Directorate of Agriculture, consulted by Crisis Group.

unprecedented competition that authorities are unable to manage. Policy responses seeing a simple link between climate change, dwindling resources and violence are based on a faulty diagnosis and thus offer no remedy. Of course, it is urgent to respond to the effects of climate change in the Sahel, as elsewhere, given the gravity of the threat it poses.²⁵ But it would be wrong to do so based on a direct correlation between global warming and violence that the facts do not support.

Other factors may explain this surge in violence. In the central Sahel, government policies have long favoured sedentary farmers at the expense of nomadic herders, an approach that should now raise concerns.²⁶ That said, it would be dangerous to call for a simple policy reversal as a form of compensation. It is essential to provide space for pastoralists who were badly affected by the severe droughts of the 1970s and 1980s, but to do so by brutally forcing tens of thousands of farmers off pastoral land would inevitably create new tensions and conflicts. Once again, as much as it needs to produce resources for its populations, the Sahel needs legitimate mediators who can peacefully arbitrate the delicate issues of access to and distribution of resources in rural areas.

The methods of intervention must be reviewed. Development projects do not merely generate wealth; they also contribute to a profound modification of local conditions of access to resources in an already highly competitive environment. Designers of such projects should be much more cognisant of the consequences of their actions, for example by ensuring that methods are in place to guarantee an equitable and accepted distribution of the resources created. Many development sector professionals are well aware of this imperative. Tasked with urgent action by political or security leaders, however, they often have few safeguards in place to ensure that today's investments do not lead to future conflicts.

VII. Conclusion

Sahelian countries and their international partners should formulate a more accurate and nuanced definition of the relationship between climate change and violence, and more broadly between resource depletion and violence. To paraphrase Tor Benjamin-sen, a geographer specialising in the Sahel, if the wars in the Sahel are attributed to climate change, there is a risk of underestimating the weight of the political dynamics that underlie these conflicts.²⁷ Climate change and its effects are certainly of legitimate concern. Nevertheless, the actors involved in this battle would benefit from taking greater account of the impact of different political choices that play a prominent role in allocating access to resources.

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²⁵ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *Global Warming of 1.5°C*, 2019.

²⁶ André Marty, "L'élevage pastoral au Sahel : entre menaces réelles et atouts incontestables", paper presented at IFRI conference, 22 June 2012.

²⁷ Tor A. Benjamin-sen, "Is climate change causing conflict in the Sahel?", *Climate Home News*, 8 September 2016.



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