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# How climate change fuels conflicts in West Africa

The crisis in the Sahel shows that wars fuelled by climate change could make earth a place unfit for life earlier than rising temperatures

With the recent spate of coups in West Africa, the Sahel has once again become the focus of global attention. Since 2020, at least six coups have taken place in Mali, Guinea, Sudan, Chad, and Burkina Faso. The Sahel, regarded as the most vulnerable area to climate change, is a semi-arid region comprising some of the world's poorest and most fragile states (e.g. Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad, and Mauritania). Due to the effects of global warming, the Sahelian belt has long been known as a hotspot for conflict over land and water resources. For quite the same reason, the region is also a reference point for climate change discourse. The first 'climate change conflict' took place here in 2003, when the war in Darfur laid bare how the convergence of environmental and political factors can lead to conflict. Since then, the region has continued to influence climate change discourse and climate-security.

## Climate change and its effects on peace

Not all scholars agree, however, on the role that climate change plays in a conflict. Some argue that climate change is not a driver of conflicts, and that historical and political factors are the only framework through which conflicts can be understood. According to this school of thought, the Sahel is not as vulnerable to climate change as previously stated - with rainfall patterns improving, and the region becoming greener and recovering from the droughts of the 1980s. Interestingly, these arguments go against the beliefs of a world where the impacts of climate change are increasingly shaping global peace and security. Today there is a consensus that effective peacebuilding requires the incorporation of climate sensitivity into its efforts in order to anticipate the challenges and respond to them in a timely way.

At the same time, findings of metrological studies do not support the conclusion that the Sahel is greener again. In fact, the prevailing picture

in the Sahel, over the past decades, is one of rainfall deficits and severe droughts in combination with periods of heavy rains (violent thunderstorms, above-normal rainfall) which the land is too dry to absorb and results in devastating floods. In addition, droughts are becoming more intense with temperatures rising 1.5 times faster than in the rest of the world. Likewise, Lake Chad, the region's main freshwater lake responsible for the sustenance of humans and animals, has shrunk by over 90 per cent since the 80s.

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This together with the advancement of the Sahara by well over a mile every year has exacerbated tensions between farmers, and herders over disappearing pasture and evaporating water holes. In addition to the farmers-herders crisis, Al-Qaeda and ISIS-linked Jihadist groups are taking advantage of the conflict and the weakness of the central governments and were able to spread their roots in the region becoming both benefactors and a constant nightmare to villagers. As Hammadoun Cisse, a Malian herder, who heads a reconciliation committee involved in conflict mediation between communities, put it 'They come in as protectors of communities and then try to impose their way of living on us'.

As a result of the ensuing conflict, the United Nations estimates that more than 13 million people in the region need humanitarian assistance. Also, the number of people facing acute hunger has tripled over the past year to reach 7.4 million while some 1.5 million people are internally displaced - a twentyfold increase over two years. As the conflict worsens with millions displaced and forced to migrate, the violence spreads, stretching the State and the army to their limit – the result is either state failure or coups as sovereignty comes under threat.

In Mali, for instance, the decade-long conflict has weakened the central government while in Burkina Faso, soldiers' mutiny over the lack of support of the Roch Kabore regime for the counter-insurgency campaign as well as citizens' unrest heralded the coup. It is yet to be seen what the soldiers who took over would do differently but the ravages of climate change and its destabilisation of livelihood in the Sahel continue unchecked.

## The role of governmental and institutional failures

In one sense, however, those who deny the role of climate change in conflict analysis do have a point that the climate change narrative can be used to excuse the role of weak governance structure and failures of African leaders. As Oludare Ogunlana, a Professor of National Security at Collin College, I spoke to, in the course of my research, angrily retorted: 'No continent is immune to climate change so why does it have such tragic ramification in the Sahel?' While acknowledging the nexus between climate change and political instability in the Sahel, he argued 'it plays an important role no doubt but the key role is played by a lack of planning, governance failure, and meddlesomeness of foreign powers'. His logic is hard to dispute. Most of the countries in the Sahel are ruled by undemocratic, inept, and corrupt regimes propped up by either French, Russian or American imperialism. Some examples of this are Ibrahim Boubakar Keita and Roch Kabore, deposed presidents of Mali and Burkina Faso respectively, ousted due to their failure to satisfy their people's needs and their inability to deal with jihadist violence.

In the same vein, the failure of the Lake Chad Basin governments and the international community to demonstrate political commitment towards the stabilisation of Lake Chad is as much a factor as climate change in explaining the rise of terrorist groups like Boko Haram and others in the region. Furthermore the 2011 US-led NATO invasion of Libya and the killing of Muammar Gaddafi is also an important factor responsible for the flow of small arms into the Sahel thereby bolstering local conflicts and accelerating instability in the region. Therefore, not acknowledging the role of governmental and institutional failures and their influence on the environmental crisis in the Sahel would lead to a one-sided analysis, that could hamper the process of restoring peace and prosperity in the region.

*As the Sahel shows, causes and effects are constantly trading places in a dialectical continuum with climate change playing the role of a root cause here, an effect there, and, at times, an amplifier.*

Going forward, the key to understanding the relevance of climate change to conflict is in analysing how climate change interacts with other historical, social, or political factors. In this sense, acknowledging the role of climate change in conflicts does not mean the dismissal of other factors; rather that it is a mix-bag of multiple factors. This provides a more accurate framework for analysing contemporary conflicts which are multidimensional in nature. As the Sahel shows, causes and effects are constantly trading places in a dialectical continuum with

climate change playing the role of a root cause here, an effect there, and, at times, an amplifier.

The crisis in the Sahel is an eerie warning to the world. It shows that perhaps much before global temperature rises high enough to turn the earth into a simmering boiling cauldron, conflicts and wars fuelled by climate change could make the earth a place unfit for life. For this reason, the government and civil society must begin to take the urgent steps needed to revitalise the ecosystem of the Sahel, defeat jihadism and establish democratic justice mechanisms to ensure peaceful resolutions of grievances for a sustainable livelihood, security, and development.

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