On Current Armed Insurgencies in the Sahel and the Role of Climate Change: Merging Political Ecology and Environmental Security

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ABSTRACT	The Sahel region currently faces various social, political, security, and environmental issues. However, the scientific and media discourse tends to oversimplify the underlying causes of these issues. While some authors attribute them to the heavy impact of climate change-induced scarcity, others focus on political factors such as bad governance. This article aims to merge the perspectives of Environmental Security and Political Ecology into one framework to provide a more holistic explanation of the problems in the Sahel. It shows how local political inequalities, marginalization, economic problems, military coups, corruption, and climate change mutually intersect in a mechanism that creates conflicts and insecurity. This is exacerbated by the geographical character of the Sahel states and their type of governance, which provides an operational space for many armed groups. By understanding the intersection of these conditions, the article contributes to the empirical understanding of the mechanism of conflicts in the Sahel and better conceptualizes the relationship between scarcity, climate change, and conflict.

KEYWORDS	climate change, Sahel, conflicts, security, marginalization
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INTRODUCTION

The topic of climate change and its related resource scarcity and security implications are well established in the environmental literature but also in conflict and security studies. One of the most discussed regions that are influenced by climate change is Africa, particularly the Sahel.[1] Currently, the topic is becoming even more influential as arguments about the impacts of climate change spread through the media landscape. It is indisputable that extensive human-induced climate and environmental change is taking place all over the world. On the other hand, the support for the thesis that climate and environmental change directly causes conflicts is not strong in the current empirical literature. Indeed, it was not easy to find agreement between work such as that of the team around Marshall Burke (BURKE ET AL. 2009), which heavily supports the idea of climate change-induced conflicts, and other scholars that understand climate change and its influence on conflicts differently and focus on arguments around institutions, marginalization or infrastructure (CF. RALEIGH 2010; DETGES 2016; FJELDE – VON UEXKULL 2012; VON UEXKULL 2014; BUHAUG 2010; BENJAMINSEN ET AL. 2012).

However, quite recently, some of those scholars agreed that *"the role of climate is judged to be small compared to other drivers of conflict, and the mechanisms by which climate affects conflict are uncertain"* (MACH ET AL. 2019: 196). The goal of this article is to bring different sectors of the conflict vulnerabilities into one framework and take a closer look at the mechanism of climate influence. With the focus on the Sahel after 2012, the paper uses diverse data on conflicts, politics, economics and climate change, and weather extremes derived from reports of non-governmental organizations, newspaper reports, and various databases, such as Varieties of Democracy (COPPEDGE ET AL. 2022; PEMSTEIN ET AL. 2022), EM-DAT (2022) or Worldwide Governance Indicators (KAUFMANN – KRAAY – MASTRUZZI 2010). In the quest to answer the question of in what way political, social, economic, and climatic variables relate to and influence each other, the article makes two contributions. The first is a contribution to the theoretical understanding of the position of climate change as a source of conflict through the mutual complementarity of Environmental Security and Political Ecology. The second targets the empirical complexity of G5 Sahel's security, where all the factors under study create a vicious spiral which connects local and regional but also international conditions. I argue that while Environmental Security and resource

scarcity perspectives (CF. HOMER-DIXON 1999; KAHL 2006) are heavily criticised from the positions of Political Ecology (CF. PELUSO – WATTS 2001; TURNER 2004; THEISEN 2008; RALEIGH 2010) they can find much in common. The two perspectives are, hence, complementary in the explanation of the current situation of the climate-conflict nexus in the Sahel. The article proceeds with a section on a review of the theoretical relations between climate and environmental change and security and some empirical findings of previous studies. After this section, the framework is briefly discussed and this is followed by a discussion of the diverse climate, environmental, political, social, and economic conditions of the Sahel.

CLIMATE CHANGE, ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE AND CONFLICTS: A THEORETICAL REVIEW

The literature on the climate change-conflict nexus is heavily influenced by the *Environmental Security* perspective, the resource scarcity[2] thesis, and the works of Thomas Homer-Dixon (1999), who, in his famous book *Environment, Scarcity, and Violence*, shows how resource scarcity causes conflicts and violence. Although it is often argued that the primary variables are changes in the physical environment followed by scarcities as the source of tension (RALEIGH 2010: 71–72; THEISEN 2008: 803–804), it is important to note that Homer-Dixon (1999: 16) aptly notes that *"scarcity is never a sole or sufficient cause."* In his view, the mutual relationship between violence and eco-scarcity is influenced by various intervening factors, and it is heavily contextual and not deterministic (HOMER-DIXON – BLITT 1998: 224; HOMER-DIXON 1999: 16–18). Even though he clearly highlights the mutual influence of politics, history, and economy (HOMER-DIXON 1999: 178) his work attracted heavy criticism. This criticism was provided mainly by Nancy Peluso and Michael Watts (2001) in book *Violent Environments*. The criticism resulted in a mutual exchange between Homer-Dixon and Peluso and Watts in the *Environmental Change & Security Project Report* over misinterpretations and their criticism (HOMER-DIXON 2003; PELUSO – WATTS 2003). Peluso and Watts (2001: 18–19) criticised Homer-Dixon on several levels. However, they criticised him mainly for his overly Malthusian and simplistic focus on environmental scarcity and his rather atheoretical approach to "structural scarcity". This criticism from the position of Political Ecology was later more generalised so as to be aimed towards the whole field of Environmental Security, which point of view was reduced to a *"resource-related conflict (violent or*

nonviolent)[that] stems from a physical or socially-produced scarcity of natural resources" (TURNER 2004: 865).

Political Ecology could be seen as a broad range of theoretical positions or an epistemological position that is *"an explicit alternative to* '*apolitical*' *ecology"* (ROBBINS 2012: 14). As such, it brings politics back to the research of this phenomenon (LE BILLON 2001: 563). It focusses on *"the importance of hierarchical relationships, local land/water access issues, relative resource use, and ethnic group membership"*, which are rather marginalized in the Environmental Security literature, according to Raleigh (2010: 72). Therefore, it highlights pre-existing structural problems that cause conflictual situations. These variables make some societies more vulnerable and consequently worsen the influence of climate and environmental change and resource scarcity (IBID.: 73). In this regard, Political Ecology prioritises socio-political variables and it dismisses the influence of scarcity (THEISEN 2008: 803–804). Both positions provide important insights into the climate change-conflict nexus. Although the two positions could be seen as opponents, the opposite is true. We can agree with Simon Dalby (2010) that the *Political Ecology* position could actually find a common ground with some *Environmental Security* works in the study of the influence of environmental change on conflicts.[3] This mutual complementarity could also provide more contextual understandings of the climate-conflict nexus.

In recent years, there has been a growing amount of research focussing on the influence of climate change on conflicts and security (FOR REVIEW, E.G., THEISEN ET AL. 2013; KOUBI 2019). This led to various different perspectives and study fields of environment/climate relations pertaining to conflict, which, however, have a huge possible space for mutual benefit (IDE ET AL. 2023). Today, we can argue that there is a *"consensus that it [climate change] is a 'threat multiplier'"* (BARNETT 2018: 190). Indeed, in the case of the current research, it is clear that the climate change, climate variability and scarcity argument works (if it works) only in the context of specific political conditions. Some authors point to the important roles of political exclusion (FJELDE – VON UEXKULL 2012), infrastructure (DETGES 2016) and "state presence" (DÖRING 2020). Others rather highlight political marginalization and structural factors instead of resource scarcities (BENJAMINSEN 2008; BENJAMINSEN ET AL. 2012). Some authors even argue that in hard times people rather cooperate with each other (WITSENBURG – ADANO 2009).

Therefore, the relations between climate change and conflicts have to be understood contextually. Despite the above-mentioned debates between *Environmental Security* and *Political Ecology* perspectives this article prioritizes neither position while arguing that they are rather complementary and have a common ground in their analyses. Furthermore, this article is not arguing that climate change does not have any linkage to conflicts now or in the future. However, here it is important to use a rather complex view that combines different factors into a mechanism of the influence.

FRAMEWORK

It is clear that climate change has a strong impact on various sectors of human livelihood in Africa (NIANG – RUPPEL 2014). However, the mechanism of influence is often very problematic. Violent conflicts themselves have to be seen through *"local histories and social relations yet connected to larger processes of material transformation and power relations"*, as Peluso and Watts (2001: 5) aptly note. Therefore, the influence of climate change on conflicts has to be analysed in a similar manner. I agree with Barnett (2018) and Scheffran, Ide and Schilling (2014) that climate change further enhances pre-existing problems that come from the history of the given country or bad governance. As aptly noted by Scheffran, Ide and Schilling (2014: 373), *"[c]limate risks could multiply other societal problems that together could overwhelm the problem-solving capacity of societies, disrupt governments and trigger societal instability events, including a smaller number of large-scale events (such as civil wars) and a larger number of small-scale events (protests, riots, intergroup and individual violence)."*

This makes instability and conflicts heavily contextual. In this framework, the article builds on the argument that the vulnerability to conflicts is, therefore, a product of exposure to climate change impacts, social pressures, economic problems, bad governance, a prior conflict and the history of the community or state (BUSBY ET AL. 2014: 718–720; SCHEFFRAN – IDE – SCHILLING 2014: 372).

Keeping this in mind, the article follows the logic of the case study and discusses the above-mentioned conditions and mechanisms in the case of the conflicts in the Sahel. The studied case is the region of the Sahel between 2012 (the start of the conflict in Mali) and 2022. Under

the term the Sahel, the article means the so-called G5 Sahel countries Mali, Mauritania, Chad, Niger and Burkina Faso, all of which are covered here. Even though each of these countries could serve as a single case, the conflicts and physical character of the region allow us to analyse them together. In the quest to show the role of the mechanism of climate change in the conflict dynamics, the analytical part is divided into four sections. The first part focuses rather on physical changes in the Sahel and climate change. In the next section, this is further connected to the economy, which is heavily influenced by the impacts of climate change and creates insecurity through poverty and food insecurity. In the third section, this is even more highlighted by the corruption and marginalization that creates distrust in the society, which is later more vulnerable to an armed mobilization. Finally, in the last section, it is explained that the history of conflicts or coups that by itself prevents governments from solving problems, both environmental-economic and political ones, causes another kind of insecurity. The example of the Sahel countries shows that while social, political, and other problems solely serve to ignite conflicts, climate change exacerbates the situation even more. The data in this study are derived from quantitative databases like Varieties of Democracy (COPPEDGE ET AL. 2022; PEMSTEIN ET AL. 2022) or Worldwide Governance Indicators (KAUFMANN – KRAAY – MASTRUZZI 2010; WORLDWIDE GOVERNANCE INDICATORS PROJECT 2022) and supported by rather qualitative testimonies by local people or members of self-defence groups that are drawn from newspapers or NGO reports.

CLIMATE CHANGE, EXTREME WEATHER AND THE SAHEL

Africa is suffering from heavy climate change, albeit with rather different outcomes across the continent. This is confirmed by various authors who show that there are visible changes in temperature or precipitation in Africa (NIANG – RUPPEL 2014: 1206–1211). The Sahel is a prime example of this phenomenon, and it has been widely discussed. In the case of temperature, we can clearly see how it historically (1901–2020) rose throughout the entire Sahel according to data from the Climate Change Knowledge Portal (WORLD BANK GROUP 2022A, 2022B, 2022C, 2022D, 2022E). Most of the future projections do not look any better. The projections depend on future approaches of governments and different scenarios (CCKP 2021). However, even in the most favourable scenario, we observe heavy changes in temperatures. For example, the Mopti region in Mali, in case of the most favourable scenario

(SSP1-1.19), will experience a change of 0.71°C by 2040–2059 in comparison with the 1995–2014 period (WORLD BANK GROUP 2022F). Similarly, the Tahoua region in Niger will experience a change of 0.69°C (WORLD BANK GROUP 2022H), Centre-Nord in Burkina Faso will go through a change of 0.66°C (WORLD BANK GROUP 2022J), Kanem in Chad will experience a rise by 0.74°C (WORLD BANK GROUP 2022I) and Trarza in Mauritania will experience an increase of 0.72°C (WORLD BANK GROUP 2022G). This situations around the whole Sahel are roughly the same in this respect.

In the case of precipitation, it is hard to reach a clear conclusion as we have to look at changing patterns or the absolute amount of precipitation. According to the Climate Change Knowledge Portal (WORLD BANK GROUP 2022F, 2022G, 2022H, 2022I, 2022J), the precipitation projections show a greater amount of inter-regional variability, and some regions in the Sahel can even experience positive changes in precipitation. For example, in the case of Mali, we can clearly see that the south should have a higher annual precipitation in 2040–2059 than in 1995–2014, while the north should be drier (WORLD BANK GROUP 2022F). However, the IPCC report, with a rather reserved conclusion, finds that the Sahel will be drier (NIANG – RUPPEL 2014: 1209). This is partially supported by some recent studies (GAETANI ET AL. 2020; KENDON ET AL. 2019).

TABLE 1: DROUGHTS AND FLOODS IN THE SAHEL 2012–2022

Country	Total number of people affected by droughts and floods 2012–2022	Drought occurrence 2012–2022	Flood occurrence 2012–2022
Mali	6,880,831	1	8
Mauritania	5,733,412	3	5
Niger	14,583,826	4	16
Chad	7,508,968	3	7
Burkina Faso	7,127,548	2	8

Sources: EM-DAT, CRED / UCLOUVAIN 2022.

Climate change is also observed through often repeated occurrences of or exposure to extreme weather disasters like droughts and floods. As we can see in Table 1, each Sahelian country suffered from droughts and floods in the last 10 years. This had a substantial economic impact as both floods and droughts affected the lives of more than 41 million people in the region (EM-DAT, CRED / UCLOUVAIN 2022). Such events had a great impact on agriculture, the livelihood of people, and the whole economy of the region.

Some impacts of climate change took years to be visible. However, it is Lake Chad that is an important spot where we can clearly witness the impacts of climate change. Even though the fluctuation of the water level is normal, nowadays, it does not reach its past greatness by any means (HANSEN 2017).

There is a clear and visible climate change in the Sahel. However, it is important to acknowledge that there are ways through which countries can overcome and mitigate immediate catastrophes or slow down the impacts of climate change. Resilience is essential. A stable and well-governed country with enough money will overcome a catastrophe with ease. Simply said, one drought is a smaller problem for a country like Germany, which has a great budget and resources to provide aid, than for rather poor countries like Niger or conflictual countries like Mali. This is even worse in the event that climatic catastrophes, and changes in precipitation and temperature will be more frequent and far stronger in the future.

Therefore, we could easily argue that even though the influence of, for example, Lake Chad's shrinkage is important, the actions of governments of surrounding states to mitigate its influence on agriculture, livelihoods, and the economy is what makes it important from the point of view of vulnerability to conflicts.

ECONOMY AND FOOD PRODUCTION

The countries in the Sahel are among the poorest and most fragile in the world in terms of almost all macroeconomic indicators. This is important since poverty is often considered as one of the main factors leading to violence (COLLIER – HOEFFLER 2009; HEGRE – SAMBANIS 2006), while it is also important from the point of view of mitigation of climate change. However, in the case of Africa, and the Sahel is not different from the rest of the continent; its economy is also heavily influenced by long-time but also immediate impacts of climate change (BROWN ET AL. 2011; BAARSCH ET AL. 2020). This is the case mainly because of the heavy dependence of sub-Saharan Africa on rainfed agriculture and herding. This is aptly noted in a study of the team around Casey Brown (2011: 635): *"Rural populations dependent on rainfed agriculture, who make up 93% of the population of SSA, remain immensely vulnerable to*

drought. The cumulative negative effects of drought and other traps lead to a poverty trap of highly vulnerable, low productivity subsistence level agriculture."

In another recent study, it was also proven that *"the majority of African countries has average annual losses, induced by climate variability, ranging on average from –15 to –10 percent in GDP per capita growth over the 1986–2015 period"* (BAARSCH ET AL. 2020: 7). For obvious reasons, this is also true for the countries of the Sahel. In the case of the impacts of climate change on the economy, it is clear that each change in rainfall and temperature worsens an already bad situation as we know that the G5 Sahel countries are already ranked among the poorest in the world. This is confirmed also by the Human Development Index, which, in its multidimensional understanding of poverty and development, proves that the G5 Sahel countries are ranked among the most underdeveloped globally (UNDP 2022A).

However, it is not only the macro-economy of the states which is influenced by climate change. It is mainly the system of livelihood and food production – fishing, farming, herding – that is affected by climate change in all stages of production (POTSDAM INSTITUTE FOR CLIMATE IMPACT RESEARCH AND CLIMATE ANALYTICS 2016: 22–23, 37–45). Desertification, even though in the last years it was targeted by the campaign Great Green Wall, is problematic from the point of view of the expansion of the Sahara and land degradation, which endangers traditional places and all ways of livelihood in the area. This is well-documented in the story of Sidi Fadoua from Mauritania in the report by BBC News *Life at 50°C – Mauritania: Shifting Sands*. According to his story, climate change pushed him to look for a different line of work: *"Working in the mine is getting worse year after year; because of climate change sometimes the weather is hot. Other times it's windy or rainy.[…] I have no choice but to look for work elsewhere"* (BBC NEWS 2021).

Similarly, people engaged in farming and herding practices are struggling today. The majority of the Sahel population fights irregularities, climatic catastrophes, or extreme weather. In the case of the Sahel, farming or herding provides livelihood for the majority of the population, depending on the state (IFRC 2012). Both farmers and herders have to face problems with floods, droughts, and shrinking water levels (DOUCET 2019; PRENTICE 2020). Historically, such extreme weather events as droughts have already proven to be a great burden for food production and the economy

– for example, in Mali in the 1970s (DERRICK 1977: 537). Recently, we spoke not only about droughts but also floods, as unexpected heavy rains and subsequent floods in Mali are also problematic as they similarly destroy crops. As one respondent highlighted in an interview by the BBC, *"[f]irst, armed groups attacked nearby.[...] Then the rains came and did the rest"* (DOUCET 2019). This example aptly depicts how climate change could be an added stressor and helps to sustain the cycle of poverty and suffering. Extreme weather in this respect further deepens problems with livelihood.

In this hardship, desperate people sometimes look for help in the arms of armed groups. Even though terrorist groups often attack civilians, it seems to be clear that for some people the provision of money and help in an uneasy situation is a motivation to join them (INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP 2021: 6–7). This strategy is not in any way unique. A similar situation was reported in northern Mali before the disruption in 2012, when radical groups first gained people's trust through diverse forms of social and economic help before inviting them to join them (BØÅS – TORHEIM 2013: 419–420). A similar situation is happening today as food crises and malnutrition are often reported in the Sahel and placed in connection with conflicts. For example, according to Action Against Hunger (2022A; 2022B), food security is an issue for numerous groups of people in Niger and Mali. Radical and terrorist groups could easily take advantage of this situation. Offers to help individuals out of poverty and the provision of food security serve as a motivational factor for recruiting people as fighters or gaining support. Therefore, gifts and help are a way in which these groups get closer to people. Similarly, the armed and terrorist groups take advantage of the situation in the Lake Chad basin, where the shrinking water surface drives poverty and food insecurity, and armed groups promise a better life or *"business support"* (MERCY CORPS 2016: 13). As aptly noted by one interviewee (refugee) in Burkina Faso in an interview by UNDP (2022B), *"the problem we are confronted with in our population is that the majority are youths and they have no work. If youth have nothing to do, it is easy to disorient them and recruit them."* The uneasy situation in the region prepares the ground for radical groups.

The uneasy situation of agriculture and more general livelihood is even more underlined by the social and political structure, which will be discussed in the following section. To conclude this section, the impacts

of climate change and poverty easily mutually strengthen each other and further facilitate conflicts. This leads to a shortage of crops and therefore also to food insecurity. Furthermore all this diminishes economic effectiveness even more, again fuels conflicts through potential recruitment to radical groups and is the key ingredient of a spiral of conflicts.

SOCIETY AND MARGINALIZATION

Marginalization is one of the most important contextual conditions, if not the most important, in the understanding of the influence of climate change on conflicts. This part discusses the problems of communal and group inequality and the different levels of access to power and sources that the various groups living in the states have.

Ethnicity and marginalization are always a topic of conflict and security studies, particularly when dealing with Africa. That is the reason why the studies often focus on ethnicity in conflicts. However, it seems that the political inequality of groups is what makes it influential (WIMMER – CEDERMAN – MIN 2009). From the point of view of climate change, this is even more highlighted by *Political Ecology*. In recent years, the problematic relations between the Fulani pastoralists and other communities, and further inter-communal conflict escalation have received a lot of attention from scholars (NSAIBIA – DUHAMEL 2021; BENJAMINSEN – BA 2021) and media (SANDNER 2018; BBC NEWS 2019). This problem is aptly noted also by Héni Nsaibia and Jules Duhamel (2021) in the case of Burkina Faso: *"[…]after the launch of the VDP program, the fear of many observers that arming civilians would escalate the conflict and deepen cleavages along ethnic fault lines – between mainly Fulani pastoralists and sedentary communities such as the Mossi, Foulse, and Gourmantche – has become a self-fulfilling prophecy."*

Inter-communal conflicts are a great burden in the Sahel countries, and are often allegedly connected with ethnicity. However, the problem is not ethnicity *per se* in this case, but it is rather, first, the framing of conflicts and, second, power relations and access to resources. The first problem is connected to the media discourse that sometimes misinterprets the stories, as it was heavily criticised in this regard by Mirjam de Bruijn, Boukary Sangare and Han van Dijk (2019) and Mark Moritz and Mamediarra Mbacke

(2022). Similarly, Benjaminsen and Ba (2021: 21) criticise the labelling of *"the enemy as 'terrorists' or 'jihadists'."*

The second problem is based on the monopolization of power which is often present in the Sahel. While we can say, with the use of data from Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem), that Burkina Faso is the most equal society in the region, in recent years the other states have been rather unequal in terms of access to power, with Niger and Mali deteriorating in this respect in recent years and Chad having the most monopolized power (COPPEDGE ET AL. 2022; PEMSTEIN ET AL. 2022).

The problem is reflected also in the case of access to resources, which is also strikingly unequal in the Sahel countries, according to V-Dem data. After the eruption of the conflict in Mali in 2012, the situation in each of the G5 Sahel countries even further deteriorated and the inequality of access to resources further grew (IBID.; SIGMAN – LINDBERG 2015).

This is a considerable problem for all the countries in the Sahel, and it is further complicated by problematic land tenure systems (COTTULA – SYLLA 2006: 18–19; THÉBAUD – VOGT – VOGT 2016: 32–35). It is, hence, far from surprising that various groups across the Sahel claim that they are marginalized, forgotten, or neglected. Indeed, different governments historically preferred different groups or different ways of development due to political or economic reasons or simply due to patrimonial patterns of governance. Marginalization was historically the root cause of the Tuareg rebellions in Mali, as the Tuareg found themselves in an unpreferred position in the Malian quest for *"modernization and development"* (BENJAMINSEN 2008: 828–833). The Tuareg were heavily marginalized and placed in a position where a *"nomadic way of life"* was seen as *"backward and undesirable"* (LECOCQ 2004: 89). Furthermore, Baz Lecocq (2004: 89–90) aptly highlights the following: *"a generation of Tuareg, born in the 1950s, grew up with forced sedentarization and education, social economic destruction by drought and state agents, and social economic marginality in the nation-states ruling their land. This led to strong resentment."*

Such dissatisfaction and resentments breed conflicts. In this regard, the marginalization and unequal approach of the government were problematic from the economic but also the cultural point of view. However, not

only the Tuareg found themselves in a position where a different style of livelihood was preferred. We can find similar patterns of exclusion and feelings of marginalization today among the Fulani across the Sahel. Similarly to the above-mentioned policy towards the Tuareg, the policy which was in favour of the sedentary Dogon led to the economic marginalization of Fulani pastoralists in Mali, who in the end lost space to move and pastures to the growing demand for farmlands, as documented by Benjaminsen and Ba (2021: 10–12, 14). Clearly, such an unequal solution again led to grievances that were even more strengthened by a situation in which one side was supported by a state institution – in the case of Mali, the army (IBID.). This problem became even worse because of the usage of simplified and one-sided stories that labelled and still label the Fulani as the main cause of the insecurity (MORITZ – MBACKE 2022). Such a discourse places the Fulani in a very unfavourable position, which very often leads to a situation in which they are attacked by self-defence groups, and further builds up the mutual hostility, as will be shown below.

To sum up, we can see power relations shape the ground on which some parts of society are much more easily affected by climate change than others. With the already existing environmental pressure on pastures and farmlands, the disputes are further strengthened. However, the main issue is structural inequality and marginalization. In case the state accepts an unequal approach and prefers one group, or one way of livelihood over another, or some segments of society are excluded from power, this will lead to other grievances and disputes. This is further accentuated by problems in governance and corruption.

GOVERNANCE, CORRUPTION, VIOLENCE AND THE INTERNATIONAL ARENA

Effective governance is the cornerstone of resilience and mitigation of environmental and climate change but also of development and security since a good institutional framework can solve inter- and intra-communal disputes and other problems. However, the countries of the Sahel belong to the weakest and the most non-effective countries in terms of governance from the state-centric point of view. Additionally, they suffer from the presence of terrorist groups, the recent occurrences of military coups, and heavy international interest. This further strengthens the damage climate

change could directly or indirectly cause to them. The Sahel is also a specific region mainly due to its physical environment and specific forms of political orders. This phenomenon was recently studied by authors like Georg Klute (2013) or Morten Bøås and Francesco Strazzari (2020). These authors look at how the Sahel and the Sahara form specific areas from the point of view of politics, particularly security.

Mismanagement and bad governance on the part of the central governments in the Sahel are evident from the Worldwide Governance Indicators. The Sahel countries are steadily on the negative side of the index, which corresponds to their heavily ineffective governments (KAUFMANN – KRAAY – MASTRUZZI 2010). This means that the governments fail in providing public goods and services and are not able to effectively implement good policies. Beyond this, the above-mentioned spatial features of the Sahel states and other actors operating inside them even further problematize the situation. The central governments are not able to control some parts of their respective countries. However, this does not mean that these regions are "ungoverned". As Bøås and Strazzari (2020: 3) point out, states have *"functions of a state-like character, along with different types of patrimonial and 'Big Man' politics"*, which leads to their *"hybrid character."* Therefore, many other actors parallel to the state operate inside it and could possibly challenge it. Indeed, to some extent, in such environments *"armed insurgencies are but one articulation of emerging and competing systems of governance"* (BØÅS – DUNN 2017: 5).[4] As we will see below, various insurgent groups or self-defence groups even provide security, for example.

Due to the existence of those actors and the character of borders, this means that a conflict in one state is hardly separable from others (SCHMIEDL 2019; BØÅS – STRAZZARI 2020: 3). This is clearly visible in the current situation in the Sahel as the chain of spill-overs could be traced back to the conflict in Libya, which spilled-over to northern Mali through the Sahara in 2012 (HÜSKEN – KLUTE 2015). In this regard, it is clear how the conflict in Mali later influenced the whole region as this instability provided an opportunity that destabilized its neighbours. For that reason, the situation in Mali was, from the beginning, impatiently observed by Niger, which had to think about a possible spill-over of the Tuareg rebellion (SCHMIEDL 2019). However, as Bøås and Strazzari (2020: 7) show, the actors in the Sahara-Sahel region are not the result of this space; rather it is a battlefield for them. Indeed,

its peripheral areas and artificial borders are not under the control of central governments. The vast space offered by the Sahara-Sahel region grants possibilities for mobility. It is, hence, no surprise that motorbikes became the main vehicle for armed groups. This kind of mobility is hard to control, and permeable borders make it very easy for these groups to move around the desert while being hard to catch. In case some insurgent group challenges a central government it is very easy to manoeuvre from one country to another. Therefore, while some would consider borders as obstacles, the opposite is true (HÜSKEN – KLUTE 2015; SCHEELE – MCDOUGALL 2012).

High mobility and a vast space are two of the many reasons why armies are unsuccessful in their quest to defeat insurgents and terrorist groups in the region. It is often claimed that states and armies absolutely fail in providing protection in the region. This is noted, for example, by a respondent from Gao in a *Vice News* report: *"Our soldiers can't protect us well"* (VICE NEWS 2021). This is very often the reason why people form self-defence groups. *"As the state has resigned, we've organized to defend ourselves"*, as was highlighted by the leader of one of the many self-defence groups in Mali in the same report by *Vice News* (IBID.). The proliferation of weapons in the Sahel is enormous. And even if groups claim that they only want to protect themselves against terrorists, it rather escalates conflicts and leads to inter-communal violence because weapons are used against other communities. This is typical in the case of the Fulani, Dogon, and Bambara in Mali, as the Dogon and Bambara often accuse the Fulani of being supporters of terrorist groups (HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH 2018). The problem is that the self-defence groups further fuel violence and one revenge follows another. For some Fulani people, it is even the reason why they join terrorist groups as, interestingly, some point to these groups' provision of security and protection from other self-defence groups (IBID.: 16).[5] We can see how grievances and insecurities fuel each other as some people join self-defence groups in fear of terrorism and other self-defence groups while others join terrorist groups due to the existence of self-defence groups. This signals a problematic negligence on the part of the government, the army, and local authorities.

This negligence is used by the terrorist groups, which include the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and Jama'at Nusrat Al Islam Wal Muslimin (JNIM), which are active along the tri-borders of Niger, Mali

and Burkina Faso, and Boko Haram, which operates around Lake Chad. All these terrorist groups and their factions pose a significant challenge to governments and international forces that operate in the Sahel. However, the local armies which form the G5 Sahel forces are far from effective and this is also used by these groups to get support. Apart from the already mentioned redistribution of money and economic help that is provided by JNIM in some areas in Mali, JNIM also tries to replace state authorities as it offers *"protection from crime"* (INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP 2021: 6–7). An important part of the mobilization is the framing these groups use. This is aptly noted by Akali Omeni (2022: 188), who, regarding Boko Haram, shows how it *"carefully framed and approximates lies and half-truths"* to gain support.

National armies are rather unsuccessful in the fight with the groups mentioned above. The reason is that they are heavily corrupt. The prime example is the Malian army. According to some interviews for a documentary in the BBC's *Africa Eye*, it is clear that corruption in the army is a substantial problem which even impedes the military in fighting terrorist insurgencies. In the same documentary, the opposition leader in Mali, Clément Dembélé, highlights the acquisition of *"bulletproof vests"* filled with *"cardboard boxes."* This is further confirmed by a soldier who talks about the ill-equipment of the army (BBC NEWS AFRICA 2021). According to the *Political Corruption Index* published by V-Dem, the G5 Sahel are far from being without corruption (COPPEDGE ET AL. 2022; PEMSTEIN ET AL. 2022; MCMANN ET AL. 2016). It is important to say that the dissatisfaction with the general corruption is also one of the reasons that pull the Fulani into the arms of terrorist groups in Mali, according to HRW interviews (HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH 2018: 16).

The corruption and inability to defeat terrorist groups are also often claimed to be the reasons for many military coups in the region (WING 2021). In the last two years, each of the countries in the Sahel faced an attempted, successful military coup or military takeover. Mali itself faced two successful coups in 2020 and 2021. The military junta also reported another attempt in May 2022, which they even called *"western-backed"* (DIALLO – CHRISTENSEN 2022). The Sahel countries, like many other African countries, have a strong history of military coups and several of their presidents have been ousted by coups – for example, Sangoulé Lamizana in 1980 and Thomas Sankara in 1987 in Burkina Faso, Modibo Keita in 1968 and Moussa Traore in 1991 in Mali, Moktar Daddah in 1978 in Mauritania, Hamani

Diori in 1974 in Niger and Hissène Habré in Chad. It is far from surprising that in recent years there were several successful and unsuccessful coup attempts that claimed to aim to solve the problems of the regimes.

However, the coups have never been able to solve the problems, as the corruption and inefficiency of the armies apparently prevail, as is clear from the examples mentioned above. With the high level of corruption and military coups, it is far from surprising that the G5 military alliance is not functional and effective in the stabilization of the region. This was especially made clear when Chad decided to withdraw a part of its soldiers to solve its home problems that were further highlighted after the death of Idriss Déby (MELLY 2021). Furthermore, France originally decided to reduce its military mission in Mali, but after some disagreements with the military junta there, it, unsurprisingly, even decided to withdraw from the country. However, France is not the only state which left Mali (KÖPP – HAIRSINE 2022). One of the reasons is that the regime in Mali now prefers the Russian Wagner Group, which is, however, a perpetrator of massacres of civilians and causes further insecurity in the region (HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH 2022). The preference for Russia is heavily connected with the Russian support for the military junta, which, through the Wagner Group, secures its survival even though it sacrifices the security of the population. However, the junta gained the support of the general public by a discourse that aimed at the French unsuccessful strategy and neo-colonialism.[6] As *The New York Times* reported, Malian Prime Minister Choguel Maiga even claimed that *"[t]hey [France] want to humiliate us"* (MACLEAN 2022). In return for the Russian engagement, Mali often shows support for Russian interests in the UN General Assembly, as we have seen recently.

Currently, the Sahel countries suffer from a high intensity of violent events. The whole region now suffers from the long-standing instability which started roughly in 2012 in Mali with the Tuareg rebellion. In this regard, it seems that the permeable borders are clearly important. Areas that are not controlled by the central government are the reason why the countries in the Sahel always must take care of what is happening in their neighbourhoods and suffer from trans-border violence. Currently, most of the political violence is concentrated in the border areas of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger (NSAIBIA – DUHAMEL 2021). In this respect, the conflicts in all the countries are heavily connected and influence each other, as the states

cannot be viewed as divided by borders. The stabilization of such a vast region requires a cooperation between the G5 Sahel, which is, however, hardly functional, and the international forces. The conflicts fuel poverty, food insecurity, and military coups that in the end lead to other conflicts or their prolongation. This is a fertile ground for corruption, which again fuels discontent and impedes armies in providing security. All the conditions mentioned in this part put stress on societies and states, which makes it harder for them to cope with the impacts of climate change or poverty.

AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE FOR THE SAHEL?

The goal of this article is to show the complexity of the conflict vulnerability in the Sahel and the role climate change plays in it. As is clear from the previous parts, the vulnerability of the region is the result of various regional and local conditions but also geopolitical plays of great powers. Even though some might argue that the main cause is the climate change impact and the following resource scarcity, it has become clear that it is not the only cause of the insecurity in the Sahel; however, it is part of the problem. The political, social, and economic problems of the G5 Sahel together with the region's history of coups and conflicts, led to a self-sustaining spiral of economic hardship, inequality, and conflicts that gave rise to insurgent groups. This devil's spiral is further strengthened by environmental problems caused by climate change.

Due to bad governance, poverty, and the impacts of climate change, the societies in the Sahel are under constant insecurity. This is further highlighted by marginalization and the public discourse. The vast space in the Sahel that is not controlled by central governments then offers an operational space for the involvement of various armed groups.

Currently, the situation is even more uncertain with the French withdrawal from Mali and the announced change of the French policy towards Africa, the Malian departure from the G5 Sahel Forces, the involvement of the Russian Wagner Group in the region, and the recent withdrawal of several countries from MINUSMA.[7] It is mainly the operation of the Wagner Group and the weakening of the UN mission that will have an immense influence on the security of the whole region. While the conflicts in the region will continue, it will be hard to solve any consequences of climate

change and help people in hardships caused by changes in climate, which will even further strengthen the conflicts. However, framing the Sahel conflicts with only resource scarcity and climate change would be misleading. The problem lies in institutional and structural problems. The inequality, corruption, problematic land management, and ineffectiveness of governments together with the existing underdevelopment are by themselves strong enough to cause conflicts and insecurity.

The ground is set for various groups to exploit this situation. On these bases, since such groups offer money, social provisions and security, being recruited to join such a group could seem like an easy way out for many people in the region whose livelihoods are endangered or destroyed. Government malfunction is very problematic in this regard as malfunctioning governments hardly mitigate any damage caused by conflicts or climate change. It is clear that while the resource scarcity caused by climate change is a problem, the mechanism of conflict dynamics is heavily influenced by political, social, and international conditions, while none of them are separable from the rest. Therefore, it is clearly important to use the theoretical standpoints of both Political Ecology and Environmental Security to understand what place climate change has in conflict dynamics.

The conflicts in the Sahel already cause immense human suffering. In 2022, the UNHCR reported about 2.6 million IDPs and 930,000 refugees in the Sahel (UNHCR 2022B). Most of the refugees left for Chad and Niger while the UNHCR reports the absolute majority of IDPs in the region are in Burkina Faso (as of 30 April 2022 it was more than 1.8 million) (UNHCR 2022A). However, without a joint approach of effective and non-corrupt governments and armies and the inclusion of all social groups in such efforts, it will be hard to stop the conflicts and the activity of terrorist groups.

ENDNOTES

1 By the Sahel author means the G5 Sahel, namely Niger, Mali, Mauritania, Burkina Faso and Chad.

2 Theisen (2008) uses also term eco-scarcity.

3 Dalby (2010) mentions, for example, the research of Colin Kahl (2006) in this regard.

4 This is what Georg Klute (2013) conceptualizes as a "heterarchy".

5 HRW (2018) mention also profiting from fighting, corruption, etc. as another reason.

6 According to Nathaniel Powell (2017) the French interventionist politics towards Africa was unsuccessful due to its contradictory pattern. He aptly notes that the French strategy was based on *"cooperation with those African states whose elites have helped generate regional instability and, consequently, threats to French and European security"* (Powell 2017: 66–67). In sum, France very often undermined its own efforts.

7 Just in the last year several countries announced that they would withdraw their soldiers, or already did so – for example, Germany, the UK, Ireland, Sweden, and Ivory Coast (Köpp – Hairsine 2022).

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