



Does Climate Change Cause Conflicts in the Sahel?

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Droughts can potentially help escalate conflicts, but empirical evidence from the Sahel suggests that the root causes of land disputes are more historical and political than climate driven.

The climate-conflict narrative

The Sahel is often highlighted as a hotspot of violent conflicts, typically occurring between farmers and pastoralists or between the state and armed groups. More recently, jihadist violence, in particular by groups associated with ISIL and Al Qaeda in Mali, Boko Haram in Nigeria and Al-Shabab in Somalia, has also added to this image of the Sahel as a conflict-ridden part of the world.

With climate change becoming a leading global political issue, a powerful policy narrative has emerged which uses global warming to explain conflicts. In contrast to this narrative, most empirical research points to the role of political and historical factors as the root causes of conflicts in the Sahel.

Many politicians, international civil servants and climate activists seem attracted to the idea of climate-driven conflicts. For instance, in a newspaper article in 2007 UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon [made a connection](#) between global warming and the Darfur conflict. In the same year, the idea was also at the crux of the decision to award the Nobel Peace Prize to former US Vice President Al Gore and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). According to [the Norwegian Nobel Committee](#), human-induced climate change is one of the main causes of violent conflict and war in the world today, and violence between farmers and herders in the Sahel are the most typical examples of what the committee calls 'climate wars'. Also many climate

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activists champion the idea of climate-driven conflicts – for instance the idea has been repeatedly promoted by former executive director of [Greenpeace Kumi Naidoo](#).

This narrative about the climate-conflict link in the Sahel consists of **two elements**. First, it assumes that global climate change leads to drought and desertification, which in turn result in resource scarcity. Secondly, this resource scarcity is believed to cause migration and the emergence of new conflicts, or to trigger existing ones.

The re-greening of the Sahel

The claim that rainfall in the Sahel is decreasing is problematic, because the rains have increased again after the drought of the 1980s. Since it is largely rainfall that drives the Sahelian ecosystem, global warming might obviously in the long run produce desertification and resource scarcity – if it reduces rainfall. However, there is currently considerable uncertainty about current rainfall trends and projections in the Sahel. This uncertainty is generally stressed by climate scientists who model how global warming will affect the climate in the Sahel. While some models support the theory that this region will become drier, **a majority of models** actually suggest not only more abundant, but also possibly more delayed and concentrated rainfall in the future in the Sahel. This might lead to more vegetation over all, and more runoff and floods.

In fact, because of increased rainfall since the 1980s, instead of desertification, the Sahel became greener again over this period. The re-greening of the Sahel has actually **been observed** for more than a decade. More **recent research** by French scientists has also confirmed this trend. Based on long-term research in northern Mali, this French team observed not

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only strong resilience and recuperation of the vegetation on sandy soils, but also detected a transformation and thinning of the vegetation on shallow soils. This latter process is linked to stronger and more concentrated run-off resulting in increasing water levels in temporary streams and lakes that in some places have become permanent (see [here](#)).

Hence, while there is a general re-greening of the Sahel caused by stronger rainfall trends since the droughts of the 1980s, there has also been the opposite, a thinning of vegetation on shallow soils, which again leads to more run-off and increased water bodies. In a similar vein and in parallel to the myth of the marching desert, the drying of Lake Chad, the largest lake in the Sahel, is also a myth according to [recent research](#).

Both these observed and opposing trends are in fact contrary to received wisdom and the dominating policy narrative on the Sahel represented, for instance, by the Great Green Wall Initiative, which aims to make the Sahel green and thereby to fight desertification. This initiative is funded by the Global Environment Facility at the tune of over [100 million USD](#).

Political causes of conflicts

The narrative of climate-driven conflicts first assumes desertification to be a widespread process in the Sahel, and second it postulates such resource scarcity increases conflict levels. This second link cannot be dismissed theoretically, even if empirical results from international research question the validity of this correlation. Most quantitative research undermines the existence of such a general link between climate and conflict, while [case studies](#) in central parts of the Sahel indicate that the conflicts have other causes such as

rent seeking among government officials as well as policies and legislation that are marginalizing pastoralists.

In the dry parts of Africa where pastoralism and farming overlap as the main forms of land use, there are continuous conflicts of varying scale. These conflicts have historical and political causes. For instance, farmer-herder conflicts in Mali are associated with the state's pastoral and land tenure policies and legislation, which generally are to the disadvantage of pastoralists and tend to lead to their marginalization. Three structural factors can be seen as the main drivers behind these conflicts: agricultural encroachment that has obstructed the mobility of herders and livestock, opportunistic behavior of rural actors as a consequence of an increasing political vacuum following decentralization and the disintegration and withdrawal of state services, and corruption and rent seeking among government officials (see [here](#) and [here](#)).

Pastoral marginalization is also at the root of the Tuareg rebellion in Mali. The droughts of the 1970s and 1980s did, however, play an indirect role in the rebellion, because they led to the migration of young men to Algeria and Libya, where they were exposed to revolutionary discourses. There was already a strong feeling among nomads and Tuareg in Mali of being marginalized by state policies of modernization and sedentarization. Embezzlement of drought relief funds by government officials in Bamako added further to the anger felt by young Tuareg in Algeria and Libya who took up arms against the Malian state in 1990. The droughts of the 1970s and 1980s were probably [not a necessary condition](#) for the rebellion to take place. The first Tuareg rebellion in Mali took place in 1963 following an unusually humid period.

Pastoralists are probably the group best adapted to climate variability through their opportunistic and flexible resource use strategies. But at the same time,

pastoralists are suffering from state policies favoring settled agriculture in many countries in the Sahel. Even though pastoralists are losing access to land, livestock-keeping remains one of the economically most important activities throughout the Sahel and the large export of live animals to neighboring countries, especially on the West African coast, continues.

Conclusion

Even though droughts or flooding may potentially help escalate conflicts, empirical evidence from the Sahel, as well as from other parts of Africa, demonstrates a lack of correlation between climate and conflicts, and suggests that the root causes of land disputes are historical and political in character.

While climate change remains a dangerous global challenge, over-stretching its causal responsibility may not only undermine long-term public engagement, but also depoliticize and thereby gloss over the real causes of conflicts, which could hinder the process of finding effective solutions to disputes.

Image by Oxfam International via [Flickr](#).

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