

Policy brief

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Climate change, state fragility and non-state armed groups in the Sahel

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In the Sahel, climate change functions as a conflict multiplier, accelerating violence in contexts already marked by weak governance, poverty, and chronic insecurity. Drawing on research conducted in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and Nigeria, this policy brief examines how climate shocks, interacting with long-standing institutional failures, exacerbate pre-existing tensions and open new pathways to violent conflict across the region. The brief concludes by offering actionable, context-specific recommendations for state authorities and local, regional, and international actors operating in the Sahel.

Key findings and recommendations

- State fragility across the Sahel is a decisive factor shaping insecurity, constraining governments' ability to manage climate stress, regulate resources, and deliver basic services in conflict-affected rural areas.
- Non-state armed groups in the Sahel deliberately exploit environmental stress and governance vacuums, presenting themselves as providers of security, justice, and resource regulation in neglected communities.

- Increased investment in institutional capacity-building and sustainable climate resilience programming can help local authorities gain back the trust of communities and diversify the livelihoods available to those currently reliant on subsistence agriculture.
- Greater regional cooperation needs to be encouraged and funded. Platforms such as the Lake Chad Basin Commission use regional policy frameworks to address resource management and coordinate security efforts.
- Local adaptation strategies are widespread across the Sahel but structurally constrained, leaving communities unable to cope with environmental degradation and conflict without sustained, inclusive state and donor support.

Background

Often portrayed as one of the world's most fragile regions,¹ the Sahel is experiencing unprecedented environmental, political, and socio-economic stress.² For decades, the region has been a hotbed for the activities of non-state armed groups (NSAGs) such as the Islamic State's affiliates and Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM). Since 2017 and

1 See, for example, Alliance Sahel, "[The Sahel and the Challenges of Climate Change](#)".

2 Mbaye AA and Signé L. [Climate Change, Development, and Conflict-Fragility Nexus in the Sahel](#). Brookings Global Working Paper No. 169, March 2022. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Africa Growth Initiative.

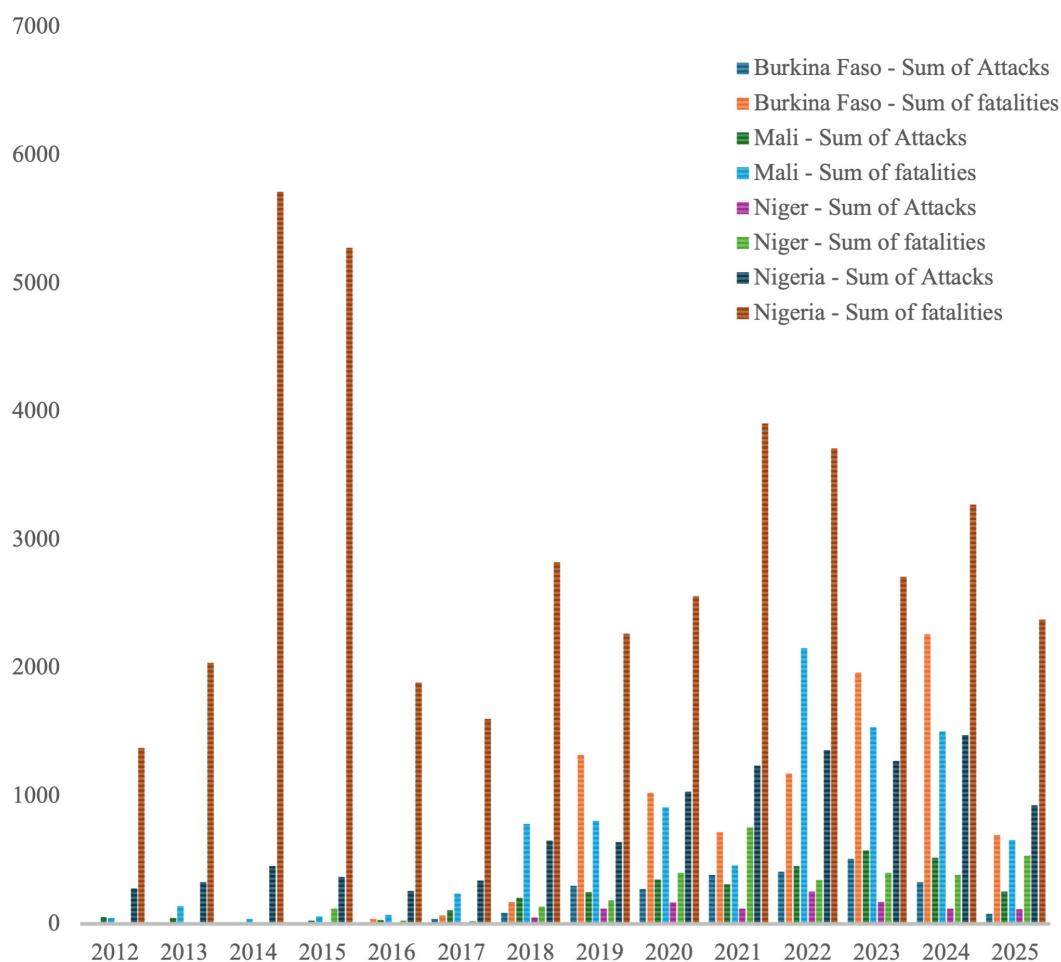


Figure 1 - Attacks and fatalities in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and Nigeria (2012-2025). Data from ACLED³

following the expansion of these groups from Mali, the conflict and instability have escalated in the tri-state (Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso) borderland area of Liptako-Gourma.⁴

The Sahel is particularly vulnerable to climate change as regional temperatures are rising at a rate that is 1.5 times higher than the global average,⁵ with extreme weather events, erratic rainfall, and prolonged droughts becoming increasingly common.⁶ These climatic trends, rather than a direct cause of violence, act as a risk multiplier that can intensify existing vulnerabilities. In particular, climate change has intensified resource scarcity, contributing to the decline of arable land, water shortages, and

increased food insecurity. In a joint effort to mitigate these risks and address pressing issues, key organizations such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Liptako-Gourma Integrated Development Authority (LGA), and the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) have continuously collaborated with government to reinforce national climate mitigation efforts across the region.⁷

However, weak governance limits the state capacity to manage these challenges. NSAGs exploit this gap by positioning themselves as alternative providers of security, access to resources, and basic services, gaining legitimacy and support among communities

³ The data obtained from the [Armed Conflict Location & Event Data \(ACLED\)](#) dataset was accessed in July 2025.

⁴ Center for Prevention Action. “Violent Extremism in the Sahel”. *Council on Foreign Relations*. 4 September 2025.

⁵ Alliance Sahel, “The Sahel and the Challenges of Climate Change”.

⁶ Mbaye AA and Signé L, 2022.

⁷ Fatimata, K. “Crisis at the crossroads: Climate, peace, and security in the Sahel”. *Bioversity International and the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT)*. 11 October 2024.

left vulnerable by both environmental stress and the absence of effective state intervention. These groups strategically target ungoverned spaces, exploiting resource scarcity and local grievances to gain a foothold and legitimacy among desperate populations.

Figure 1 provides an overview of the total number of attacks and fatalities from armed conflicts across the Sahelian states of Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Nigeria. Over the years, Nigeria has remained one of the most affected states, with Burkina Faso recently experiencing some of the most intensified attacks and an increase in fatalities.

Climate, conflict, and state fragility: core insights

Fieldwork for this study was conducted across Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Nigeria.⁸ Community members across the four countries reported significant and deeply concerning climatic shifts over the past five to ten years. The consensus is that the climate has changed significantly, with rainy seasons beginning much later and ending earlier, a change that has made farming and traditional livelihoods unpredictable and difficult. In Nigeria, a farmer lamented how this unpredictability has distorted his livelihood, recalling how a lack of rain affected crop production. In Burkina Faso, interviewees related that when rain does come, it often arrives in heavy downpours that flood farmland, destroying crops, damaging soil, and leaving communities struggling to survive. This climatic volatility, coupled with rising temperatures and prolonged dry seasons, has created immense pressure on the primary sectors of agriculture and animal husbandry.

Respondents highlighted how climate change puts pressure on limited resources, increasing resource competition which can result in violence. In Mali and Niger, disputes between farmers and herders over grazing areas and farmland have been a long-standing issue, often triggered when herders graze their animals in fields during the production season. These disputes, while often mediated by traditional authorities, can spiral into broader conflicts,

particularly in the absence of a strong, trusted state presence.

The findings also reveal that climate change mitigation efforts have often been de-prioritised. A respondent in Burkina Faso noted that because there are minimal climate mitigation efforts in his community, displacement due to insecurity and environmental stress continues unabated. A respondent in Mali acknowledged that while a tree-planting program had a positive impact on the community, the government decided to suspend the project and redirect funds to security concerns. This indicates a systemic failure in which the state, overwhelmed by immediate security threats, consistently prioritises short-term, reactive measures at the expense of sustained, long-term investments – and often leaves communities to fend for themselves.

The most direct link between mitigation and conflict is not from the harmful impacts of climate mitigation projects themselves, but in the consequences of their prolonged neglect. The interviewees consistently described how state-led mitigation efforts are absent or inconsistent, allowing armed groups to exploit the resulting conditions of vulnerability. A key finding across all interviews is the deep erosion of trust in state institutions, leading many communities to rely on traditional leaders and other non-state armed groups for dispute resolution and security. For instance, Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province, active in northeast Nigeria, often resolve community disputes, imposing Sharia law to settle water and land disputes, which also enables them to control the resources within the community.

The reliance of the community members on NSAGs does not reflect a rejection of state authority per se, but the state's failure to address basic needs, including environmental stressors. The systematic sidelining of long-term climate mitigation in favour of short-term security priorities thus serves as a clear indicator of state fragility one that armed groups leverage to portray governments across the region as weak and ineffective.

The realities in these settings suggest that the failure of states to implement consistent and effective climate mitigation measures, and the subsequent

8 158 key informant interviews (KII) and 19 Focus Group discussions (FGDs) were conducted. All the interviews were carried out in conflict-affected borderland communities with state and non-state actors including military personnel, police officers, and subnational government officials, civil society organisations (CSOs), vigilantes and local militias, traditional rulers, and civilians, including youth and women, particularly in communities affected by violence. The interviews and research illustrate the dynamics and impacts of climate change, cross border conflicts, and how climate mitigation efforts fuels insecurity in these borderland communities. In Burkina Faso, fieldwork was conducted in the Est and Sahel regions. In Mali, the study covered the Mopti, Gao, and Ségou regions. In Niger, research captured insights from Tillabéri and Tahoua, while in Nigeria, the focus was on the North East, specifically Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe States.

abandonment of communities to fend for themselves against environmental degradation, is a core factor that fuels the cycle of insecurity and provides opportunities for NSAGs.

Respondents consistently described the presence of government services as very limited and inconsistent. In Burkina Faso, military visits are seen as irregular and insufficient to provide lasting security, leaving many unprotected and vulnerable. This absence of a reliable state and the erosion of trust have created a power vacuum exploited by NSAGs. State fragility has direct implications for climate mitigation efforts. Initiatives such as reforestation, irrigation projects, or resource management programs risk exacerbating tensions when the state cannot enforce rules, ensure equitable access to mitigation projects, and protect vulnerable populations.⁹ It fuels local grievances which reinforce existing inequalities and become arenas for competition among non-state armed groups.

The voices of the community members interviewed reveal a clear call for a new, holistic approach to addressing the crisis. While communities have adapted with strategies like petty trading or seeking help from traditional leaders, these efforts are often insufficient without external support. A consistent message across all interviews is the urgent need for a stronger state presence and for communities to be involved in the design and implementation of any interventions.

Policy recommendations

Climate vulnerability and state fragility in the Sahel cannot be addressed separately. National and international actors should work collectively towards integrated policy frameworks that connect climate mitigation efforts with security considerations. This brief's findings highlight that many vulnerabilities, and the resulting opportunities for NSAGs, stem not from mitigation projects themselves, but from their absence, poor coordination, or inequitable

implementation. The following recommendations aim to guide policymakers in designing interventions that strengthen local resilience, reinforce state legitimacy, and foster regional cooperation while ensuring that climate mitigation initiatives are adequately designed and implemented.

1. Prioritise integrated, bottom-up resource management

The evidence indicates that many conflicts in the Sahel are rooted in localised disputes over land and water access. Mitigation strategies should be designed to address these ground-level tensions, rather than simply imposing top-down solutions. Governments and international partners should support and replicate successful models that use resource cooperation as a tool for peace, such as the Niger High Authority for the Consolidation of Peace,¹⁰ which has incentivised local peace agreements by focusing on shared water resources.¹¹ Rather than favouring one livelihood over another, climate-resilient projects, including regreening initiatives and soil restoration projects, solar mini-grids and renewable energy infrastructure, smart agricultural technologies and large-scale solar energy installations,¹² must promote a mosaic of sustainable and diversified livelihoods. It is essential that these projects are developed through community-led processes that respect and formalise traditional land use, including migratory corridors for pastoralists, to avoid inadvertently creating new grievances and fuelling violence.¹³

2. Strengthen institutional capacity and the rule of law

The core of the Sahel's fragility significantly lies in the failure of institutions to provide security and justice for their populations.¹⁴ Governments must reassert their primary role in protecting civilians and ensuring basic living conditions.¹⁵ This requires that international donors provide robust financial and technical support to strengthen the capacity of national and local governance systems, particularly

9 Onuoha FC. "Environmental Degradation, Livelihood and Conflicts: A Focus on the Implications of the Diminishing Water Resources of Lake Chad for North-Eastern Nigeria". *African Journal on Conflict Resolution* 8 (2). 2009.

10 "High Authority for the Consolidation of Peace". PeaceNexus.

11 "Pastoralist and Farmer-Herder Conflicts in the Sahel". *Climate Diplomacy*.

12 Alliance Sahel, "The Sahel and the Challenges of Climate Change".

13 Van Ackern P and Detges A. "Climate change, vulnerability and security in the Sahel". *Climate Diplomacy*. 30 November 2022.

14 Mbaye AA and Signé L, 2022.

15 Salzinger M and Desmidt S. "Climate change and conflict in the Central Sahel: A shared responsibility to support local resilience". European Centre for Development Policy Management. March 2023.

those responsible for addressing climate-security issues.¹⁶ A key part of this effort involves improving the transparency of public spending, especially on security, to rebuild the trust of citizens and ensure that funds are not crowding out essential services.¹⁷ The re-establishment of effective and impartial justice mechanisms for mediating resource-based disputes is also crucial for offering a peaceful alternative to violence and predation by armed groups.¹⁸

3. Implement gender and youth sensitive policies

Climate change and conflict have a disproportionately severe impact on women, girls, and youth, yet these groups are also essential for building a resilient future.¹⁹ Current interventions often fail to adequately integrate their unique challenges and perspectives.²⁰ Therefore, all climate adaptation and peacebuilding policies and programs should be designed with a gender and youth sensitive lens, as part of a “leave no one behind” and “do no harm” approach.²¹ This includes providing access to education, skills training, credit, and land ownership, thereby empowering them as agents of change and reducing their vulnerability to exploitation and recruitment by violent extremist organisations (VEOs).²²

4. Foster inclusive regional cooperation

The transnational nature of climate change and conflict means that no single country can resolve the crisis alone. The recent political fragmentation, symbolised by the Alliance of Sahel States and its strained relationship with the Economic Community of West African States, poses a significant barrier to a cohesive response. It is imperative to encourage

and fund multi-stakeholder platforms such as the Lake Chad Basin Commission saddled with the responsibility of water management, regional cooperation and countering violent extremism through its regional strategy for stabilisation, recovery, and resilience. The effectiveness of this platform can bridge this political divide and promote cooperation on shared challenges. For instance, the Senegal River Basin Development Organization serves as a powerful blueprint for how to manage transboundary resources in a way that promotes shared benefit and diplomacy.²³ A regional policy framework for managing forced displacement is also essential to ensure that humanitarian aid and long-term solutions are coordinated and effective across borders.

5. Invest in climate-resilient and diversified livelihoods

The economic backbone of the Sahel is under severe threat from climate change, leading to mass displacement and food insecurity.²⁴ A sustainable approach must move beyond promoting a single economic model and instead support diversified, climate-resilient livelihoods for both pastoralists and farmers.²⁵ This involves not only investing in resilient crop varieties, such as millet and sorghum,²⁶ but also supporting the traditional coping mechanisms of nomadic communities, like mobility.²⁷ By strengthening the production potential of both agricultural and pastoral economies, governments can reduce the competition for resources that triggers conflict.

6. Increase financial support for sustainable development

Sahelian governments face immense financial constraints, with security costs absorbing a significant portion of their fiscal revenues. This has occurred as

16 Ibid.

17 International Monetary Fund. “[The Sahel, Central African Republic Face Complex Challenges to Sustainable Development](#)”. 16 November 2023.

18 Salzinger M and Desmidt S, 2023.

19 Crawford A. “[Climate change and state fragility in the Sahel](#)”. International Institute for Sustainable Development. June 2015.

20 Ibid.

21 Salzinger M and Desmidt S, 2023.

22 María Luna Itriago MA. “[The gendered impacts of the climate crisis in the Sahel: an urgent call for climate-resilient livelihoods](#)”. *Humanitarian Practice Network*. Jan 28, 2025.

23 Crawford A, 2015.

24 “Pastoralist and Farmer-Herder Conflicts in the Sahel”. *Climate Diplomacy*.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 Sow D and Koné FR. “[Does Climate Change Fuel Terrorism in the Sahel?](#)”. *ISS Today*. March 24, 2025.

humanitarian needs have grown, and donor support has declined. Without increased financial support from international donors, preferably in the form of grants and flexible funding, governments will be unable to finance essential services and address long-term sustainable development needs. Without this sustained investment, governments will be unable to make the structural changes necessary to break the cycle of fragility and conflict.

Conclusion

The compounding crises of climate change and conflict have created a severe humanitarian emergency, with millions of people in the region requiring aid and protection. As humanitarian needs have soared, international funding has lagged significantly, leaving a substantial gap between the required funds and what has been received. This dire underfunding has forced humanitarian organisations to make difficult choices, often leaving the most vulnerable without crucial support for food and livelihoods. Our findings underscore that communities are particularly impacted by these crises, facing exacerbated vulnerabilities such as curtailed social mobility, restricted access to resources, and heightened protection risks. Additionally, it is crucial to acknowledge and address the profound social and psychological trauma caused by enduring stress and violence on local communities, as this trauma often pushes people towards criminal activities to cope with the loss of their livelihoods. A failure to address this can perpetuate a cycle of violence and instability.

Resolving this crisis requires moving beyond siloed, issue-specific interventions that focus solely on security, humanitarian aid, or climate. A truly effective response demands a cohesive strategy that recognises the fundamental interconnectedness of these challenges. It requires a shared responsibility that is led and owned by regional actors, moving away from fragmented and competing political alignments. The path to lasting peace is one that rebuilds the social contract between the state and its citizens by strengthening institutions, providing basic services, and ensuring justice. It is a path that empowers the most vulnerable women, youth, and nomadic communities to be a part of the solution. Ultimately, the future of the Sahel region lies in recognising that vital resources like water and land can be powerful drivers of both conflict and peace, and that through integrated, sustained action, the region can move from a vicious cycle of fragility to a virtuous cycle of resilience and development.

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