



**USAID**  
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

---

# CLIMATE CHANGE AND CONFLICT IN THE SAHEL

## THE POTENTIAL FOR INCREASED CONFLICT IN NIGER AND BURKINA FASO

### CONTEXT

Given its arid climate, recurrent droughts, and humanitarian crises, the Sahel is closely linked to the threat of climate change in the mind of the public. The recent violence in Mali and news reports about Islamic extremists and transnational crime networks in the Sahelian regions of Africa have raised fears that the Sahel might become a zone in which terrorism could take root and grow. However, despite attention-grabbing headlines that suggest a clear, causal connection between climate and conflict, most recent research indicates that the links between climate change and conflict are complex and indirect.

Conflict remains a complex phenomenon that emerges from the interplay of context-specific institutional, economic, social, and historical factors, with which climate change impacts can also intersect. It's important to lean if these intersections produce consequences that increase the likelihood of conflict over the use of limited natural resources, intensify existing conflicts, and trigger outbreaks of new conflict. And if so, how does this occur, and how can these effects be mitigated?

As in much of the Sahel, Niger and Burkina Faso have histories of droughts and food insecurity. Both countries are also marked by three factors that, according to analysts, are strongly correlated with instability and conflict: they are landlocked; very low-income; and their governments rely on mineral exports for a sizable portion of their revenues. Rapid population growth produces further stresses on rural livelihoods. All of these factors add to the complexity of the challenges these countries face in building resilience to climate change and ensuring security for their citizens.

### FINDINGS

Few direct linkages were identified between climate change and large-scale conflict in either Niger or Burkina Faso. However, in both countries, there are a number of underlying sources of conflict that could potentially be triggered or exacerbated by future climate stress. For example, continuing periods of drought have led more people to diversify their livelihoods; the resulting convergence toward agro-pastoralism has created circumstances ripe for competition and conflict over limited natural resources. Further, incomplete institutionalization of the Rural Code in Niger and the newer Regime Foncier in Burkina Faso have allowed many natural resource conflicts to continue unabated; in some cases, this absence of clear, commonly accepted rules has even added to the confusion over who owns and has access to these limited, but essential, natural resources.

The complex nature of conflict in Niger and Burkina Faso makes it clear that the role of climate change as a contributor to violence can only be understood in relation to other factors. Many of these factors are specific to local and national contexts, and the emergence of any particular conflict can only be understood within these contexts. For example, in Niger, demographic and climatic pressures are pushing the frontier of cultivation progressively northward, where it increasingly encroaches on the pastoralist zone and traditional transit routes. Pastoralists and their animals, who are also affected by changes in climate, then have to travel through these areas of cultivation, damaging crops and possibly triggering conflict. In Burkina Faso, climate-linked internal migration has flowed from the central plateau to the more economically dynamic south-southwest and the more land-abundant east. It is probable that conflicts will continue to develop in these areas over scarce natural resources, especially those involving access to water and arable land. In both countries, these frequent, low-intensity, localized conflicts among farmers, herders, and others who depend on natural resources for their livelihood result in few fatalities but are persistent enough to hamper sustainable development and economic growth. Further, in northern Niger, the effects of climate change, combined with unresolved grievances of the pastoralist Tuareg population, have the potential to produce more intense violence.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

In order to build climate resilience in a conflict-adverse manner, it is essential to strengthen institutions, both formal and informal, that can prevent or mitigate conflict over climate-affected natural resources. This could be done by establishing and mapping clear, verifiable pastoral territories, promoting and enforcing existing laws, strengthening local land commissions in Niger and reconciliation committees in Burkina Faso, and supporting efforts to develop the northern areas. The full report provides a number of other, more specific, recommendations relevant to the specific circumstance within each country.

## **ADDITIONAL INFORMATION**

This brief highlights key conclusions from Snorek, J., Stark, J., and Terasawa, K. 2014. *Climate Change and Conflict in the Sahel: A Policy Brief on Findings from Niger and Burkina Faso*. USAID. Interested readers are invited to review the full paper at <http://community.eldis.org/ARCC/>.