

The new face of the Sahel

The people of the Sahel are forging networks and collaborations that will help them contend with the challenges of insecurity and climate change that are besetting Africa's most vulnerable regions.

By Ernest Harsch 20 Sep 2017



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The Sahel is a vast semi-arid region of Africa separating the Sahara desert to the north and tropical forests and savannas to the south, characterised by harsh weather and periodic drought. While in some geographical usages the Sahel may extend to the Red Sea, for political purposes the term most commonly refers to the countries of Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad.

At a summit in Burkina Faso in mid-June to assess strategies for grappling with climate change, the presidents of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger agreed on the need for wider cooperation among their countries.

“Above all,” said President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré of Burkina Faso, “we must ensure the participation of local populations, because they’re the ones who live every day with the torments of drought and degraded land and water.”

Just a few days before the summit, civil society and religious leaders had met in Bamako, Mali, to promote religious tolerance in Sahelian states torn by armed conflict. And a few days later some 40 women parliamentarians from across the Sahel convened in Chad to promote women’s leadership in the prevention of violent extremism.

Not just conflict

Much international attention toward the Sahel has concentrated on armed insurgency and terrorism, observes Leonardo Villalón, coordinator of the Sahel Research Group at the University of Florida in the US. But, he cautions, that focus is narrow and often superficial. The Sahel’s concerns are also environmental, political, demographic, and economic. The region’s security is itself “intricately interrelated with broader socioeconomic dynamics”.

With the collaboration of more than 40 other experts from Africa, Europe and North America, Professor Villalón is editing a book on the challenges facing the countries of the Sahel, *The Oxford Handbook of the African Sahel*, scheduled for publication by the UK’s Oxford University Press. The book will provide a comprehensive analysis of the many factors shaping the region today.

From any angle, the Sahel’s challenges appear formidable.

The region, frequently struck by drought and food insecurity, is projected to be one of the areas most severely affected by global climate change in the coming years. With up to 80% of its people living on less than \$2 a day, poverty is more widespread in the Sahel than in most other parts of Africa.

The Sahel's population growth rate also is among the world's highest. Experts project the six countries' population of approximately 90-million people to jump to 240-million by 2050 — a rapid increase that could undermine educational effort stretch already limited public services and leave more young people without job opportunities. Already unemployment afflicts half of all youths in Mali. Such circumstances, in turn, contribute to the risks of crime and violence.

Poor governance does not help. Most governments in the Sahel are formally democratic, but for many ordinary citizens, elections have not yielded tangible improvements, while bureaucratic corruption and favouritism remain common, observes Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan, who teaches in France and Niger. Those shortcomings, he says, have led to a “widening gap between the privileged class and the masses of the population”.

Re-greening of Niger

Improvements in official agricultural policies in the Sahel in recent years have contributed to an increase in farm production, especially food for growing populations. But most of these achievements depend heavily on the efforts of ordinary farmers and livestock herders.

Producer organisations are emerging across the Sahel, notes Renata Serra, a development economist at the University of Florida.

Since the mid-1980s, farmers in the country's southern regions have protected and managed at least 200-million trees, according to Chris Reij of the World Resources Institute in Washington, DC. Satellite images and aerial photos analysed by Gray Tappan and colleagues of the US Geological Survey show a visible re-greening of wide areas, with more trees and shrubs in the densely populated areas of Zinder as well as other locations.

A similar expansion of tree cover is going on in parts of Burkina Faso, Mali and Senegal but it is happening in Niger on “a spectacular scale, unique for the Sahel and probably unique for Africa”, comments Reij.

In turn, denser vegetation has boosted the yields and diversity of farm production, generating strong commitment from farmers. Donor-funded programmes have contributed to the re-greening phenomenon. But the most important factor, researchers argue, has been the emergence of village committees to protect and manage trees.

Studies of farmer-led tree management efforts indicate that women have been particularly active, in part because they are prime beneficiaries. Some tree varieties produce fruit and leaves that they can sell for extra income, while the availability of more trees overall helps reduce the time women spend collecting fuelwood.

In Keita town, central Niger, women are planting “trees for peace,” as in similar campaigns by Kenyan women environmentalists, reports professor Ousseina Alidou, a scholar from Niger teaching at Rutgers University in New Jersey, US.

She also notes that some groups in Burkina Faso, Niger and Senegal are fighting for gender equality and “pushing the boundaries” of women's status within current family laws. They are also agitating for legal adoption of refugee children and orphans, an innovation under prevailing local Islamic legal practices.

In Burkina Faso, Senegal and elsewhere in the Sahel, civil society organisations are also campaigning against practices such as female genital mutilation and child marriage.

Citizen engagement

Likewise, political life is beginning to show the impact of citizen involvement. In Burkina Faso and Senegal, civil society groups remain active, mounting campaigns against corruption, for greater transparency in mining industries, for better pu

services and around other issues.

Civil mobilisations in elsewhere in the Sahel have been more sporadic, but at times have nevertheless been notable.

In countering threats of terrorism and armed violence, all governments of the Sahel are aware that they need to strengthen their security forces and cooperate more closely with each other.

In February the presidents of the Group of Five, also known as G5 Sahel, (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger) agreed to boost joint military training, intelligence sharing, and logistical infrastructure, as well as to form a joint military force against terrorism and drug trafficking.

In some countries, including Burkina Faso and Senegal, military officers are trying to improve relations with civilians.

Civilians are also taking initiatives of their own to counter jihadist ideology. In Dori and Gorom-Gorom in Burkina Faso's far north, a Muslim-Christian civil association regularly organises interfaith dialogues.

However, for such efforts to make real headway, the region's governments must do much more to reach out to their own citizens, argues Ahmedou Ould-Abdallah, president of the Center for Strategy and Security in the Sahel-Sahara, headquartered in Mauritania.

They must heed "the popular demand for better management of African economies and political rights", says Ould-Abdallah, a former UN secretary-general's representative to Somalia, adding that, "Demanding better governance ... less corruption, more social inclusion, more professional and less tribalised security forces, and good border policies will all contribute to fighting violent extremism more effectively."

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