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International Policies in the Face of Climate and Human Impacts Occurring in the Sahel

Carlos Junquera Rubio *

Department of Prehistory and Ethnology, Complutense University, 28040 Madrid, Spain

* Corresponding author. E-mail: junrub@telefonica.net (C.J.R.)

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ABSTRACT: The Sahel is a strip of land that begins in Mauritania and ends in Eritrea. It is approximately 5400 km long and varies in width from 100 to 1000 km. Based on different historical perspectives, the Sahel can be considered to encompass a total of five countries. Subsequently, other countries have been added that, due to their geographical and climatic characteristics, can be considered Sahelian. The Sahelian countries emerged after 1960, the year in which decolonization began, but also the instability that was initially triggered by military coups aimed at destabilizing power. Later, climatic instability, famine, political instability, terrorism, and other factors have also played a role. This essay focuses on analyzing the actions and current activities of certain actors in the Sahel.

Keywords: Sahel; Drought; Famine; Instability; Terrorism

1. Introduction

The various Sahelian societies began to experience natural impacts from the moment the map of Africa was formed. Their diverse geographies and ecological niches were occupied as humanity began its migration in all directions. Significant external human impacts began in the 7th century with the arrival of Islam in North Africa and its immediate expansion southward, across the Sahara Desert, until reaching the Sahel¹ regions inhabited by societies whose economies were based on livestock farming [1].

The Sahel remained largely unknown to Europeans until the 19th century. France and the United Kingdom, along with German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, organized the Berlin Conference. This international meeting served to divide Africa among the European powers, with France and the United Kingdom standing out at that time, taking the largest share of African territory. This conference was held in the German capital between 15 November 1884, and 26 February 1885 [2].

With this agreement, negotiated among the major European powers, traditional African life began to feel several impacts: the presence of European military forces, each with its own flag; and animist religions and Islam began to decline in the face of various Christian denominations (Catholicism, Anglicanism, Lutheranism, *etc.*). The colonial situation lasted until the early 1960s, and in a decade, all the internal borders of the African continent were radically altered.

Traditional conflicts and confrontations increased with the European presence, and these do not appear likely to disappear anytime soon. The Sahel, in general, is currently a hotbed of numerous military and terrorist clashes. The countries known as the Heart of the Sahel (Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger) are

governed by military juntas, which have expelled the European military personnel (French, British, German, and Spanish) stationed in these countries to contain Boko Haram terrorists in their various forms. These three military juntas have facilitated the entry of Russian mercenaries, first as the Wagner Group and now as the Afrika Korps. This presence has not prevented Islamic terrorists from continuing their activities; moreover, they are demonstrating their strength and capabilities, as evidenced by their coordinated attack on all the major cities of the Republic of Mali on 24 April 2026, including the capital, Bamako [3].

Europeans have primarily attempted to explain the conflicts observed after 1885 by resorting to numerous categories: tribal hatreds, acceptance or rejection of Christianity, failures in local governance, high population density, scarcity of economic resources, and so on. Confrontations, even violent ones, are inevitable when economies lack the capacity to eradicate poverty, especially during periods of adverse weather conditions. A current characteristic, present throughout the Sahel, from Mauritania to Somalia, is political, economic, and social instability with numerous dimensions and ramifications. Emigration to the European Union is yet another consequence of this historical instability [4].

The European colonization of the late 19th century imposed novel relations of production on the various African societies. When decolonization arrived after 1960, a reconfiguration of social relations occurred, influencing ethnic and community aspects, as traditional pastoralism had practically disappeared. Now, postcolonial governments had to dedicate political efforts to lands designated for grazing, agriculture imposed by colonialism, and a wide range of new social possibilities, including the settlement of citizens in cities, since colonialism had a great impact by applying European urbanism [5].

The war in Darfur cannot be understood without considering the colonial reorganization of the land. It is true that ethnic identity also played a role, especially when some tribes achieved legal recognition of their territories while neighboring tribes were excluded. Although officially denied on numerous occasions, the Sudanese government from 2003 onward supported the Janjaweed pastoralists, who raised camels² and needed pastureland. They received assistance primarily because they were adherents of Islam, while the Fur, Zaghawa, and Masali peoples were farmers and practiced traditional animism or one of the Christian denominations imposed by colonization [6].

This situation, coupled with desertification and a lack of economic resources, culminated in violence, and the only winners were the arms suppliers, who lived far from the conflict zones but profited from the situation. The traditional animosity between animists and Muslims was observed in South Sudan by the British anthropologist Evans-Pritchard during his fieldwork in the 1930s [7,8].

On the other hand, camels were introduced to Africa by the Persians, who brought them through Egypt. This occurred during the reign of King Cambyses II, around 525 BC, when he decided to conquer the Nile Delta and other nearby territories. This king defeated Pharaoh Psammetichus III at the Battle of Pelusium and proclaimed himself pharaoh, thus establishing the 27th Dynasty [9].

The success of camels is due to their unique characteristics, which make them well suited to the Sahara Desert and the Sahelian region. As drought-resistant animals, they have been used for the last two centuries by colonial armies and by national armies after decolonization. A clear example is the Mauritanian city of Achemime, where a brigade uses camels to patrol the territory up to the border with Burkina Faso. This military unit was established by the French in 1912 and is maintained because it benefits the current government in controlling and monitoring the vast province of Hodh Ech Chargui, which covers approximately 180,000 km² [10].

The camel has been very well received by residents of the Sahel because it is an animal that withstands drought very well. During droughts in the Sahel, people and animals often die of thirst, but the camel demonstrates resilience and is therefore valued for providing food (milk, meat, and hides) and for long-distance transport of people and goods [1].

For the Sahel in general, the first quarter of the 21st century has been very negative, as it has had to confront numerous conflicts, many of which remain unresolved. While climate change is a natural agent

that influences social transformations in any region, it is equally true that it is politically exploited to establish a discourse that masks many vested interests, where local and national solidarity is absent, since aid, when it arrives, comes from far away. What must be understood is that extreme poverty is a cause of violence and instability throughout the region.

In 2010, the United Nations proposed a project to mitigate certain problems through its environmental program: the Livelihood Security: Climate Change, Migration and Conflict in the Sahel initiative. This project identified desertification as a “threat multiplier” that fueled conflict between farmers and herders. Interestingly, in 2018, the UN Security Council, when considering security risks related to climate change, stated that any conflict should be neutralized through military action. This contrasts sharply with the two dates mentioned [11,12].

Some events external to the region, such as the 2008 global economic crisis, impacted the Sahel because resources could not be diverted. Similarly, the phenomenon known as the Arab Spring, especially the disintegration of Libya, also led to an overabundance of weapons in the Sahel and a significant presence of European and American military forces, which have thus far resolved nothing except to constantly increase instability. Let’s examine this in more detail.

2. The Desertification of the Sahel: A Natural Phenomenon with Political Consequences

Sahara is an Arabic word meaning desert, which, in turn, translates to an arid zone with scarce rainfall. This current reality may have a maximum history of about 15,000 years, but it is more likely to be around 6000 years old. In contrast to this arid reality, the region has experienced periods of lush vegetation, with abundant forests, water resources, and so on. Geology, geography, and biology, for example, testify that, at two times, in the so-called Last Ice Age and in the Early Holocene; that is, between 14,800 and 5500 years ago, both the Sahara and the Sahel offered rivers, lakes, wetlands, tropical forests, grasslands, and dense vegetation [13]. In this context, other scholars can be added, who are current and propose interesting ideas [1,14].

The various pastoral societies of that era were established and operated with herds of animals, on which their economy depended. They practiced nomadism and shared communal ownership of the animals. No conflicts over access to water were detected in those times, possibly because water was available everywhere. Climatic conditions shifted towards aridity, and conflicts arose. We have even witnessed how, in the Ethiopian regions of the Omo River, when watercourses dry up, herders dig to extract water from the water table. Even if the person who decides to dig this temporary well owns it, it is not considered private property but rather communal, since all the animals will come to drink from it [15].

Water resources were not privatized throughout millennia of history. It has been observed that between the 16th and 18th centuries, there was a certain recovery of humidity in the southern Sahara and the northern Sahel, which can be understood as a contrast to the deadly dryness and aridity seen in the second half of the 20th century [16].

From the mid-20th century to the present, we observe that climate change is occurring at shorter intervals and, when it does occur, tends to cause greater damage to landscapes and human societies. This phenomenon is not exclusive to Africa but is observed wherever it is detected [17]. Natural disasters cause temporary damage of considerable severity, and dealing with them is not easy. These events have attracted the attention of authorities and relevant organizations. According to the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), a United Nations agency, the Sahel has shifted between 50 and 200 km southward over the past 30 years, causing significant damage to biodiversity and arable land [18]. This phenomenon is expected to soon impact nearby tropical forests as well.

In the Sahel, environmental warming has also been exacerbated by human activity. This impact shares the same history as the Sahel itself, but certain historical events have accelerated the process. European colonialism, the exodus of people from rural areas to rapidly growing cities, the consumption of many

imported products, and other factors have contributed to environmental changes. To these actions, we must add drought and lack of rainfall [19].

There is yet another factor that has a negative impact: global warming. Recent studies and analyses clearly show that the Sahel's temperature has risen almost 1.5 times, and curiously, the Sahelian countries lack the polluting industries found in industrialized nations. In fact, the United States currently emits 25% of the world's CO₂ emissions [20]. Unfortunately, every current report warns of the extreme gravity of the situation, both regarding rising temperatures and the negative impact of human activity.

Extreme drought affected the entire Sahel between 1960 and 1980, largely coinciding with decolonization. Interestingly, the period from 1980 to 2000 was marked by abundant rainfall, allowing for significant vegetation recovery and providing pastureland for livestock, such as cattle, which had previously been decimated. Although many suggestions and proposals have been made, many of them with good intentions, the drought in the Sahel is not only caused by deforestation and, without denying this possibility, what is more scientifically clear is that we are in a time of global warming and that the marine waters of the Atlantic, the Mediterranean and especially those of the Gulf of Guinea impact continental regions; moreover, some years ago it was suggested that the Arctic ice would disappear by the year 2050 and now it is indicated that we will see that phenomenon in 2035 [21].

Currently, pollution from so-called greenhouse gases is generated by industries located in the Northern Hemisphere (the United States, European Union, Russia, China, India, South Korea, and Japan). These countries are largely responsible for pollution and its adverse effects on human societies and landscapes, and without internal and external measures, these impacts can affect geographically distant areas, such as the Sahel.

When there is a lack of rain, the water table suffers, and when water becomes scarce, conflicts arise among different dependent societies. One of the major problems that must be addressed in the coming years is precisely the availability of drinking water. Periods of drought are interspersed with periods of heavy rainfall; that is, rain can occur even torrentially and sweep away any obstacle in its path, but this does not mean that the water table can be replenished, except temporarily, and the social, political, and economic problems will persist. Moreover, it is quite possible that, in addition to the terrorist actions of Boko Haram, now widespread throughout the Sahel, there will be further violence stemming from conflicts over the use of pastureland for livestock and the establishment of agricultural areas. The war in South Sudan has its roots in this type of inter-societal conflict; indeed, inter-tribal hatred is deeply ingrained in society and is unlikely to disappear in the short term [15].

3. Social Crises: Conflicts Between Pastors and Farmers and Their Economic Repercussions

Because of global warming and the fact that temperatures in the Sahel are accelerating and increasing 1.5 times above the average, agriculture and livestock farming are crossing critical lines, generating conflicts between farmers and pastoralists [1,22]. Extensive research has documented a strong connection between rainfall in the Sahel and the benefits provided by dryland crops, which are essential throughout the region. Millet and sorghum are particularly noteworthy in this regard.

On the other hand, we also know there is clear evidence that Sahel pastoralists are reporting reduced grazing areas due to warming and reduced rainfall. In this context, they are forced to migrate longer distances with their flocks, venturing into unfamiliar territories whose ownership is unknown. Recent research indicates that rising temperatures, lack of rainfall, and soil degradation are sufficient reasons to move with their flocks; however, if pastures also disappear and traditional livestock farming must be abandoned, the only option is for these shepherds to migrate to Western Europe [1].

A 2025 publication, linking climate and traditional pastoralism, points out that the reduction of pastures and the lack of rainfall force shepherds to travel greater distances. This situation necessitates a reconfiguration of their schedules, especially those dedicated to grazing, as they must find new routes to continue practicing traditional transhumance [23]. Much earlier, the United Nations, through its Food and

Agriculture Organization (FAO), similarly observed that the reduction of grazing areas necessitates an increase in grazing time because new pastures must be sought [24].

Given that the arrival of Islam in the Sahel after the 7th century had a considerable impact [3], the impacts of more recent times, coinciding with the end of the 19th century when European colonization was established, were even more significant, affecting land ownership and, subsequently, land management [25]. Decolonization after 1960 never sought to return to the pre-1884 era; on the contrary, post-colonial regimes have supported agriculture and its use of water.

Settlers and post-settlers have influenced anti-pastoral policies by cutting off or modifying traditional livestock routes [1]. In this context, the instability caused by adverse weather puts the most disadvantaged shepherds at risk, forcing them to approach areas fenced off by farmers. And, given the lack of pasture, conflicts often arise, sometimes even with extreme violence, as farmers arrive armed with Kalashnikov machine guns, of Russian and Ukrainian origin, to protect their flocks—an image that bears no resemblance to the traditional one [15].

Violent actions affect young people more than adults. However, this impact also occurs when extreme droughts happen, such as the one that impacted between 1968 and 1974, which produced famines and food crises requiring the intervention of the United Nations, whose charitable actions could not prevent the death of more than one hundred thousand people; moreover, in times of adversity, it may even be the case that food is available, but there are no possibilities for its consumption due to religious beliefs, which can act against it [26]. The droughts that plagued the Sahel from the late 1960s to the 1980s, along with the climatic and environmental impacts that caused them, led to major food crises and famines, resulting not only in the number of people recorded but also in the death of a third of the livestock [27,28].

In recent years, several studies have emerged linking climate to food security. These studies concur in presenting their findings, arguing that even when harvests recover due to rainfall, the impacts remain, particularly on human and children's health, which often manifests in dramatic conditions. It appears, and this is the argument presented, that rising temperatures lead to reduced rainfall, a situation that disrupts any ecosystem and generates anxiety and insecurity among people. In areas where subsistence or small-scale agriculture predominates, losses directly impact food security, and food shortages lead to disease (Action Against Hunger, 2024).

In these situations, international institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) try to aid; however, these organizations have also had negative impacts on the Sahel, as they advised, at specific times, the elimination of grain reserves, subsidized inputs, and traditional services. This decision was highly detrimental, as several affected countries had stored reserves for use when needed, but these international institutions advised national governments to export these foodstuffs, thus depleting local markets [3]. In fragile regions, decisions must be made with extreme care, as international aid may then be required.

As climate change intensifies and becomes more severe, conflicts directly related to hunger converge on health issues, producing a political and humanitarian crisis throughout the region. When the food crisis intensifies, a wide variety of epidemics also emerge, and in recent times, as if the Sahel didn't have enough problems, Islamist terrorism, operating under different guises throughout the region, has been added to the existing ones [2,25]. To the usual social and political tensions between pastoralists and farmers must be added food insecurity, disease, terrorist violence, migration to the European Union, and a long list of other issues [1].

4. The Political Situation

Natural phenomena such as drought, water scarcity due to insufficient rainfall, and soil degradation are manifestations of nature at certain historical moments; however, these conditions affect different human societies, including farmers and herders. Furthermore, they subsequently force a reconfiguration of any decision that affects the environment. In this sense, social problems become political, and any proposed

decision must be carefully considered, since failure guarantees conflict. When pastures diminish, water sources decrease or disappear, and agricultural plots are left without seeds, famine follows, and with it, violent confrontations are inevitable.

Generally, and considering historical data, herders traveled with their flocks along known routes and knew in advance where water was available for their livestock to drink. If this possibility were to disappear due to some natural cause, they would then seek alternative routes, since their economies depend directly on the available herds. In this sense, livestock had to be introduced into agricultural areas, but this decision, in turn, forced farmers to reduce the area of their crops and cope with smaller harvests.

In this context, the latter group proposed prohibiting the passage of the former's herds. Two different ways of life also clashed: farmers were sedentary, while herders were nomadic; and, in the event of a conflict, it was not easy to resolve, even with external mediators who arrived with good intentions, but who often failed in their mediation because state governments acted according to criteria inherited from European colonization and favored agriculture more because its products were exported. The key point to consider is that climate patterns are changing and impacting vital resources, thus diminishing them. Consequently, postcolonial policies also suffer, as governments are unable to meet their export targets and must rely on international aid to address their internal problems [29].

Local conflicts typically escalate into national conflicts in a short time. A significant reason for this is that the governments of Sahelian countries lack many of the necessary capacities for effective governance. It is evident, given the rise of various Jihadist groups operating in the region, that these countries have not achieved the necessary strength to overcome postcolonial influences. Issues such as marginalization, unequal development, and the functioning of the economy are highlighted from the outside. The Sahelian countries have many internal areas where the state lacks influence, as in certain regions of Mali, the Tuareg people possess sufficient power to challenge the current government. This situation operates similarly in Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, Mauritania, and the northern half of Nigeria, among others. In these same areas, adverse weather events further weaken the state.

The state's incapacity is evident when it is unable to guarantee access to water, manage pastures, and protect the population from violence during times of calamity that call its legitimacy into question. Moreover, in times of crisis, hatred intensifies, and political division accelerates, as local, religious, and ethnic identity is exalted [1]. The absence of authority creates a power vacuum; moreover, it forces the state to withdraw its institutions, which insurgents immediately occupy, taking advantage of the situation to consolidate their power in areas where the state no longer has a presence. That said, it must be acknowledged that local or regional governance operates independently of, if not in direct conflict with, state governance.

The terrorist movements present in the Sahel operate under various acronyms, and Boko Haram is possibly the most violent group. Furthermore, in the diverse Sahelian contexts, jihadists have consistently exploited social insecurity, coupled with ecological vulnerability, to first increase their political influence and then consolidate their power. The pursuit of a nonexistent Caliphate is not trivial; the terrorists know that if they succeed, they can erase almost all colonial borders and ethnically unite the societies divided by the borders imposed since 1960.

When families lose the livestock on which they depend economically, or suffer crop failures due to lack of water, *etc.*, they become more socially vulnerable and therefore easier to recruit to the terrorist cause. In this sense, recruitment occurs not because a specific ideology becomes irresistible, regardless of whether it is accepted or not, but because terrorists promise protection and a possible solution to conflicts by ideologically manipulating the means of subsistence.

Studies conducted in some Sahel countries, such as Mali and northern Nigeria, show that food shortages due to drought increase the likelihood that young men will decide to join terrorist groups. This finding has been observed more in Nigeria than anywhere else [30]. The so-called "climate crisis" (caused by nature)

has the capacity to reshape political decisions, which are driven by ideological and social impulses. Terrorists act swiftly, and wherever state forces withdraw, they appear as the new occupiers; moreover, they promise solutions such as access to water and act as mediators in local conflicts. In short, they operate from a position of governance, without considering whether it is good or bad at the time of implementation.

On the other hand, the collapse of traditional adaptation mechanisms³ is not merely institutional, as it involves cultural heritage and modes of political action. Sahel societies have long refined complex scientific models to understand ecological cycles, the reasons for early or late rainfall, the organization of herd movements, the allocation of grazing lands, and so on. These practices are not mere customs, but rather forms of governance rooted in rituals, social obligations, and interethnic agreements [31].

Climate adversity has disrupted these traditional philosophies, whose practices stemmed from easily discernible ecological balances. Unpredictable rainfall has rendered traditional agricultural calendars unreliable. This situation has led to disruptions in traditional grazing cycles, forcing herders to abandon their traditional migration routes [32]. As cultural practices disappear due to various factors, traditional communities lose their ability to self-regulate resource use. This situation generates more conflict and, currently, undermines the legitimacy of both traditional tribal authorities and postcolonial state institutions.

Women do not own their homes or shelters, but they are responsible for their upkeep. Maintaining a cooking fire requires firewood, and women are responsible for collecting the necessary amount. This task is more convenient if it can be done close to home, but if they must travel a considerable distance, the food will not be ready for the family. This task can be classified as social, but also as political. As water and firewood dwindle, wives must travel longer distances each day, reducing the time available for other activities such as housework, and leaving them less time to discuss matters with other women [33].

Adverse weather also affects families, and in extreme situations, girls are taken out of school to perform domestic chores. However, it can also happen that, due to survival needs, they are forced into early marriages because cows are required, for example. In the Sahel, marriages have almost always been arranged in exchange for a few cows agreed upon by the heads of each of the families involved. In these regions, it is not easy for certain social events to develop democratically; rather, the opposite is true. To what has been said, I would add that drought drives and increases family arguments, even domestic violence [34].

Climate change has the capacity to reshape landscapes, but it also influences the political decision-making of populations; that is, it can reorganize power, especially at the local level, and, in turn, play a role in conflicts over land, the movement of herds, and who can attain the position of chief. This statement does not imply that it develops uniformly across the Sahel, since understanding how climate adversity translates into politics requires examining each case in its specific context. In a region more than 5400 km long and between 100 and 1000 km wide, there are too many ecosystems for them to be entirely consistent.

5. Other External Impacts That Have Left Their Mark

Many years before 1884, when Europeans decided to divide Africa, the societies settled in the Sahel had already developed governance models for managing land, making decisions about water, and agreeing on the movement of pastoralists. Countries that are on the map today were not at the end of the 19th century; in fact, they only began to appear after 1960. A similar situation can be applied to cities, since Niamey, the current capital of Niger, was founded in the 18th century and began to gain importance when the French army built a fort there in 1890. By 1930, the total population was around 3000, and in 1960, when it gained independence from France, the number of residents was around 30,000. Currently, officially, as the capital, it has almost 800,000 inhabitants. These human impacts have influenced urban development not only in this city but also in all the major Sahelian cities [5].

The oldest available written documentation consists of the so-called Timbuktu Manuscripts, produced between the 15th and 19th centuries. They are written in Arabic, and their content offers texts intended to establish what should be understood as political legitimacy, what should be done to protect the means of

subsistence, and how to act—even applying laws if necessary—to teach the method of linking astronomical observation with seasonal rainfall patterns, preventing floods, and so on [35]. All of them demonstrate belonging to a society organized as a state, since they have institutions and specialists dedicated to their work full-time.

In the Sahelian regions, there have been political and social forms that we can call pre-colonial kingdoms and empires. I will briefly mention some of those considered the most important, all of which predate the European presence of the late 19th century. I will apply the corresponding chronology.

The first state to consider in the Sahel is the so-called Ghana Empire. Based on what is known, we can consider it a kingdom. Its geographical location did not correspond to the country of the same name, but rather it occupied an area between Senegal and Mauritania. Its economic power was achieved thanks to the arrival of caravans managed by Arab traders, and this meant that domestic animals, camels and dromedaries in this case, contributed to economic growth because their products were unknown and had commercial appeal [36]. The Kingdom of Ghana dominated the region between 100 and 900 AD.

As with most historical empires, the Kingdom of Ghana came to an end when it suffered the invasion of the Almoravids [37–39], and with this external presence arose a series of smaller kingdoms that eventually also disappeared.

Another kingdom that emerged in West Africa was Mali, which arose after 1235. It was located along the Niger River, in the areas that today correspond to Mali and Niger. Its peak power occurred around 1350, and by 1400, it had lost control over numerous vassals [38]. One of these, the Songhai, can be considered its successor [40].

Around 1460, during the reign of King Domni Ali, the Songhai kingdom expanded, and by 1500 it occupied an area stretching from Cameroon to the Maghreb. This territory was the largest in West Africa under the control of one person, but it ended in 1591 when troops of Moroccan origin arrived with firearms, with muskets to be more exact [40,41].

In the Lake Chad region, the Kanem-Bornu kingdom emerged in the 19th century and established itself in the central part of what is now the Sahel. The Hausa were its most notable allies, especially those who controlled the western settlements. Internal conflicts have been documented [42]. However, political and social stability prevailed until the arrival of European settlers, primarily French, although the region had previously been conquered by the Fulani, who had been gaining strength and becoming dominant after 1810, as they imposed greater centralization [43].

The French and British used the Hausa and Fulani as a necessary means to initiate and consolidate the colonization of the interior of the Sahel [44]. On the other hand, local elites were exploited by Europeans (Portuguese, French, British, Dutch, and Spanish) from the time slavery was instituted, as slaves were brought to coastal ports by the subjects of local leaders, who were directly responsible for this human trafficking, which lasted from the 16th to the 19th centuries [45]. However, large-scale slavery was initiated by Muslims much earlier, as they supplied the markets with African slaves and with Europeans, primarily of Slavic origin [46–48].

Going back in time, we must also consider the so-called Macina Empire, which existed between 1818 and 1862. Social scientists should consider this kingdom because it promulgated a code called the *dina*. This set of rules aimed to regulate the use of the extensive Niger River floodplain and its Inner Delta among Fulani herders, Dogon and Bambara farmers, and Bozo fishermen [49,50]. The application of this system was controlled by the relevant authorities: herd leaders, known as *jowros*, whose role was to decide on the movement of livestock along the various cattle trails to grazing areas and, at the same time, to mediate any conflicts that arose with farmers [1].

These historical and traditional documents embody governance models and indicate that resource and environmental management in the Sahel was linked to political legitimacy, social obligation, and productive

labor; that is, we cannot consider the dina a coercive code, but rather that it was promulgated so that, by complying with it, everyone would consider it legal and grant security and stability.

French colonialism dismantled the legal capacity of existing institutions in Sahelian societies. For example, in Mali, land law deprived pastoral leaders of their legal status, but this did not prevent them from being used by colonialism to control access to pastures and to collect taxes. In this way, the French created a double illegitimacy, as both traditional and customary social authority and legal authority were diluted. Colonial capitalism recognized individual land titles, but French land legislation subordinated customary and pastoral land rights, granting settled agriculture rights that it had never previously possessed. This led to a prolonged crisis for nomadic pastoralism.

Mali's first post-colonial president, Modibo Keita, who was in power from 1960 to 1968, had already demonstrated his anti-colonialism since the late 1930s, which did not prevent him from holding positions of responsibility in the French administration. From the outset, he embraced African socialism, and his government withdrew from the French Community, renounced the French-sponsored monetary system known as the CFA franc zone⁴, nationalized French industries based in Mali, and promoted state-supervised development aimed at returning land to its traditional owners. This entailed a transfer of resources and, at the same time, attempted to limit the power of the cattle-ranching elites [51].

His anti-French stance included rejecting French-backed plans to maintain control over resources in the various regions of the Sahel, not only in Mali. He particularly demonstrated this repudiation of the *Organisation commune des régions sahariennes*, a French post-colonial program whose objective was to maintain control over the territory and resources of what was known as French Sudan, disregarding the opinions of the different ethnic groups.

Modibo Keita was overthrown in a coup led by the military officer Moussa Traoré, who ruled dictatorially from 1968 to 1991. All indications point to France being behind this coup, as the new government reinstated excessive favoritism toward French companies and the economy. This restoration included a return to the CFA franc zone, meaning that decisions made in Paris would benefit the former colonies.

During Moussa Traoré's rule, pastoral leaders were rehabilitated, but within a legal and administrative framework that had squandered their coordinating role precisely when environmental instability was rapidly increasing. Land titles were granted only to those who could prove their authenticity as individuals, ignoring collective ownership. This situation directly impacted on customary rights, reducing pastoral leaders to mere administrators. But, moreover, with limitations.

As rainfall became more irregular, especially after the droughts of the late 1960s, which lasted until the 1980s, with minimal recovery in the 1990s that was interrupted at the end of that decade, access to grazing routes and floodplain pastures became more contested, allowing policies to redefine livestock entry as a source of income. Although pastoral leaders remained responsible for managing these routes, they lacked legal authority over them and were forced to submit to local government officials who controlled access and collected taxes [52].

The increased taxes levied on access to plains pastures, along with the money spent to bribe local officials, fell disproportionately on the herds that roamed the arid lands with their sparse vegetation. Unlike agricultural herders, nomadic herders lacked farmland to rely on, and their livestock depended on seasonal access to the floodplains of the delta.

Furthermore, certain state agencies, such as the *Office Riz Mopti*⁵, confiscated nutrient-rich pastures but offered no compensation for the losses suffered by the herds, which were decimated by the constant deaths of livestock due to the lack of grazing land. And if the herders sought help in the courts, the rulings were issued in ambiguous language to facilitate bribery, but they did not address any underlying conflict [4]. The proposed solution in these cases was mass migration, first to the cities and then abroad [1]. Although the institutions of pastoral governance persisted, their capacity to organize land, water, and nomadism in the context of persistent drought facilitated the systematic dismantling of the entire system.

This led to a profound economic and political crisis, and the solution to overcome this impasse was to seek international aid.

Between 1980 and 2000, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund proposed the so-called Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), which were created to address crises such as the one the Sahel was experiencing. Ironically, instead of resolving the crisis, it worsened. State officials in each of the Sahelian countries, rather than providing support to overcome problems, exacerbated the difficulties by dismantling what little state authority there was to manage land use, control water resources, and regulate nomadic lifestyles. Moreover, they only acted when the drought was at its most severe.

Consequently, the conditions imposed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, far from solving a serious problem, worsened it by reducing the number of specialized veterinary and agricultural technicians. The problem became even more acute when subsidies for agricultural inputs were eliminated, causing fertilizer prices to rise. And if these problems weren't enough, the two international institutions advised state and local authorities to privatize the maintenance of water sources and implement a 50% currency devaluation in 1994. The result of all this was to create ruin in rural areas, since the objectives were geared towards export and not local improvement [53].

In this negative context, governance lost its capacity to mediate between farmers and herders. The first result was an increase in the struggle for land, with nomadic pastoralism being punished. This, in turn, led to increased taxes on livestock economies, which, understandably, suffered. Lower-class Fulani herders, those with few head of livestock, were systematically dispossessed of their flocks; but, at the same time, state officials and large-scale ranchers accumulated greater wealth. Traditional pastoral governance was altered and became a negative tool, as drought exacerbated these harmful actions by reducing usable pastureland; that is, access control and the ability to move greater distances in search of unfamiliar lands were called into question [1,15].

On the other hand, and as a parallel action, to the same extent that the state withdrew from its governance functions, armed groups—not those embedded in liberation movements, but actors exploiting the power vacuum left by institutional failure—began to act to address grievances, since the context was that no political authority was willing to resolve anything. From 2015 onward, armed jihadist groups emerged, increasing their ranks by recruiting herders from Fulani society, especially among the marginalized, and who soon appeared operating as a group calling itself Jama'at Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims, better known in international media as JNIM).

These terrorists are part of one of the many existing branches affiliated with al-Qaeda. This insurgency has garnered popular support because its leaders abolished taxes [54]. These taxes had been imposed by pastoral leaders so that the less affluent could access the nutrient-rich pastures of the floodplain, thereby depleting a substantial portion of the herders' cash income. The elimination of the taxes also freed up more cash, as it alleviated an economic burden; moreover, the support of the terrorists improved access to pastures for small herders, who were marginalized by the larger ones [1,54].

In this context, the division within traditional communities, whether pastoral or agricultural, facilitated armed mobilization. Among the Fulani, pastoral leaders—those with money and large herds—clashed with the poorer, smaller herders settled on arid lands with few opportunities. Farming communities were similarly stratified between landowners linked to state doctrines and landless farmers living in constant insecurity. State policies are aware of these situations and use them as a weapon. The Mopti Rice Office rerouted livestock trails and access to pastures in ways that benefited wealthy farmers but offered no compensation to herders.

As state forces withdrew from rural areas after 2015, authorities in Mali, for example, entrusted local security to Dozo⁶ hunter-gatherer militias, providing them with training, weapons, and financial support. The most organized militia, the Dan Na Ambassagou, recruited its members from the Dogon youth, a very impoverished society, who were easily led to believe that pastoralists were the enemy. The consequences

were disastrous, as in the Ogossagou massacre of March 2019, Dan Na Ambassagou fighters killed some 160 Fulani civilians⁷, a deeply reprehensible act that forced the prime minister to resign, but he was never held accountable [55].

Climate crises are natural phenomena and do not have the capacity to create divisions between people and societies, but they do ensure that their effects are remembered. The lack of rain leads to a scarcity of pasture, which is necessary for livestock and dependent economies. In this sense, going to the pastures of the delta becomes a necessity, but if along the way they encounter an insurmountable barrier, what awaits those herds is death and their disappearance. This situation is what prompted the ranchers to become rebels and decide to support the armed struggle, or at least to consider a fight to the bitter end.

Despite applying coercive social norms, including prohibitions on women's freedom of movement and extreme violence against those who did not accept this situation, Katiba Macina⁸ managed to resolve land disputes, moderate access to grazing lands, and enforce compensation for crop damage caused by ranchers, thus exercising governance functions that the neocolonial state had abandoned [56].

The economic impact established by the abolition of taxes helps explain why pastoralists in arid lands supported Katiba Macina first and JNIM later. Its success lies in the fact that this organization addressed grievances that no other political force had confronted. Following Katiba Macina's reinstatement of taxes for small-scale herders in 2018, under pressure from the jowros (a derogatory term for the indigenous population), many aridland herders pledged their allegiance to Dawlat il Islamia (the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, EIGS), a new faction aligned with the Islamic State formed in late 2019. This organization advocated land collectivization, which could mean the end of grazing rights payments for those affected, a benefit that greatly favors lower-class Fulani herders [57].

The split between JNIM and EIGS was not due to differing interpretations of religious doctrine, nor to maneuvers required to adapt to the climate crisis, but rather to the question of whether the Fulani elite could continue to collect taxes from poor herders, who were generally of Fulani ethnicity. The EIGS's proposal for land collectivization directly challenged the class power of pastoral leaders, garnering support among the dispossessed Fulani, who faced two very negative impacts: (1) the climate crisis on the one hand, and (2) the systematic exploitation they had been suffering at the hands of powerful groups [58,59].

It is within this context that we must consider the emergence of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), formed in September 2023 by Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, and formalized as a confederation in July 2024. This alliance represents an effort to dismantle neocolonial dependency and regain control over resources, creating a space for comprehensive climate adaptation. Mali's planning documents, the National Strategy for Emergency and Sustainable Development 2024–2033, explicitly propose sovereignty as a prerequisite for environmental restoration and promote policies such as public investment in irrigation infrastructure and aid to pastoralists, the restoration of traditional livestock routes, and the prioritization of food sovereignty by reducing or eliminating production destined for export in order to give it to the needy at home.

On the other hand, it is important to consider that the Sahel faces significant challenges, such as inherited external debt, a lack of industry, the presence of armed conflict, and pressure from France and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), an organization from which these three countries withdrew on 29 January 2025. The Sahel's dependence on foreign investment raises crucial questions about whether the Sahel will be able to achieve genuine sovereignty or will succumb to the interests of traditional Western imperialism or of French imperialism, represented by China, which is now exerting influence throughout Africa. Russia has mercenary soldiers deployed across almost the entire Sahel, especially in the core countries, where the Wagner Group troops operated first, and now the so-called Afrika Korps. In any case, the Russian military has experienced more failures than successes, although the media remains almost silent on this matter [2].

Conflicts usually have an origin and then, as they develop, take different directions. A few years ago, a conflict in Sudan, known as the Darfur conflict, became famous. It was considered the first conflict in Africa caused by climate change, and it was labeled as such by civil society organizations created to provide aid wherever needed. The then Secretary-General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-moon of South Korea, asserted that “the Darfur conflict began as an ecological crisis, arising at least in part from climate change”.

We can consider this statement true, but it falls short, since what is truly important to understand is the causes of how a drought transforms what happens in a landscape into a genocide. This is no laughing matter, nor is it something we can dismiss in human relations when individuals and societies become genocidal. We know that right now, the drought in the Sahara Desert is constantly progressing, rendering a territory barren at a rate of one and a half kilometers per year, while rainfall decreases by between 15 and 25 percent [60].

On the other hand, even when British specialists began arriving in what would later become the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, persistent animosity was evident between Arab herders and Black farmers. The former were of the Islamic faith, and the latter were animists [7,8]. At that time, both groups competed for resources, and the same continues to occur today. This competition facilitates the constant rekindling of traditional tribal hatreds, and in the case of the Darfur crisis, the adverse climate became an ideal catalyst for accelerating this traditional animosity.

The violence that erupted in Darfur in 2003 and later spread to central Sudan, even reaching the Blue Nile, did not arise spontaneously or from tribal hatreds. It arose because of a structural convergence in which adverse climate actions converged with a poorly managed economy, one that failed to implement neoliberalism effectively and was further supported by massive state abuses. The confrontation was a war in which various understandings of ecology also clashed. The state had dismantled traditional livelihoods, privatizing communal resources and creating a dispossessed society dependent on a militarized economy. The result surpassed what we usually understand as a humanitarian crisis; that is, everything was geared toward ensuring that when the violence erupted, it would be as deadly as possible.

The example of Darfur could be repeated in many places in the Sahel. Environmental degradation is severe everywhere and increases as soon as it is neglected. To the unstoppable desertification [61], we must add that social, political, and economic relations have been mismanaged for many years, more than enough that it is too late when opposing viewpoints are finally considered. In the Sahel, the increase in anthropogenic warming acts as a fierce amplifier of the fragilities present in the environment.

On the other hand, an ecological crisis like those that often occur in the Sahel becomes inherently bloody; and should it happen, the causes must be sought in postcolonial political models that prioritize the profit of leaders over the well-being of the citizens they are meant to serve. Even when international aid is requested and delivered, its management is often carried out by officials who seek their own personal gain rather than the communities, and those who are supposed to receive assistance end up not being helped.

Although it has already been pointed out, it bears repeating: the neoliberal actions of Structural Adjustment Programs, imposed by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, require the elimination of agricultural subsidies, the privatization of communal lands, and the dismantling of state support services [62]. These actions destroy ancestral customs in many Sahelian communities. Moreover, communal lands are sold to those who can afford them, usually agrarian elites loyal to the government, who are rewarded. Since they typically have the means, they mechanize the new plots to supply exports, not to alleviate the hunger of their fellow citizens.

The new situation eliminates livestock routes and, if possible, also eliminates small farmers who cannot compete with large producers [63]. If those affected decide to protest, or even resort to conflict—as in Sudan, for example—to suppress such protests, the state subcontracts pastoralist militias, the Janjaweed (horse demons), giving them *carte blanche* to seize livestock, crops, and land [64]. In this context, assets were forcibly transferred from communal to private hands, creating a new class of militarized accumulators.

The “Arabs versus Black Africans” rhetoric is an effective tool for Third World policies, as governments use it to neutralize any conflict. This strategy has also been employed since the conflict arose due to land tenure or water scarcity. Regardless of the course of action, the poor and dispossessed of the Sahel have only one dignified option: emigration to Europe or the Gulf States; meanwhile, they often become cannon fodder for the groups that recruit new terrorists [1].

Young men, displaced from traditional agricultural or pastoral livelihoods by the same environmental and economic impacts, readily recognize that their labor is being commodified in the least desirable way: they are transformed into armed combatants. Therefore, the RSF is not simply militias, as they operate like a business that pays salaries, resolves disputes, and provides protection in areas where the state is absent. Joining them becomes a rational strategy for survival in an economy that offers little or nothing.

In this context, international actors are integral mechanisms of the system that generate and exploit the crisis. However, they are not true saviors, since those who decide to intervene do so to maximize their profits by appropriating mineral, agricultural, and livestock resources. Given the lack of government initiatives, emigration can be a short- and long-term solution, provided one arrives alive at the chosen destination.

6. Borders, Security, and Insecurity in the Sahel

The fifteen years from 1945 to 1960 would dominate the impact of decolonization. Present-day India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh gained their independence from Great Britain in 1947, thanks to Gandhi’s pacifist policies. This success served as a catalyst for the decolonization of African territories colonized by France, Great Britain, Belgium, Italy, Portugal, and Spain. While colonial divisions disappeared, new ones emerged, and managing these became a central challenge for the new African governments.

Generally, conflicts between neighboring nations occur in border regions, as these areas present the following difficulties: fraudulent businesses associated with smuggling; refuge for criminals who have fled justice; and terrorists who attack in one country and hide in the neighboring one [65]. Depending on the circumstances, border interactions are either cordial or violent; moreover, these areas are either easy to manage or highly conflictive. Generally, border regions provide two general and rather opposing types of relationships: (1) social, political, economic, and violent concerns, permanent enmity, *etc.*; (2) commercial and linguistic exchange, cooperation, *etc.*

On the other hand, affinity does not preclude the presence of different elements and the emergence of conflicts, as disagreements have arisen in the Lake Chad region and in maritime areas, forcing both countries to seek diplomatic agreements, which are more beneficial for their populations than armed conflict. Consequently, because it belongs to different subregional communities, the border acquires powerful significance, as it is not merely a line on the map separating two states. While retaining this characteristic, it can also become a zone of friendly encounter if both countries are willing to collaborate as needed to ensure the well-being of their citizens [66].

Therefore, in this section, we attempt to clarify the geostrategic importance of the border between two or more countries as an area requiring diplomatic intervention. It is important to consider that various actors are involved in transboundary zones, as their strategic nature can either facilitate or hinder progress. On the other hand, it is worth noting that current border studies propose approaches originating from the Copenhagen School for application to security.

Transborder Weakness

A conventional border is a delineation that separates two or more state identities. This reality can be natural or artificial, but in any case, it is identifiable. In the case of the Sahel, it is evident that the border limits do not correspond to any historical project of each of these nations, but rather are the consequence of circumstances shaped by decolonization.

First, the colonization of Africa has left persistent remnants in the creation of the states of this continent after 1960. This experience shaped political structures and established new paradigms that would lay the foundations for the young nations we know today. The Sahel countries share a colonial history that is both recent and distant; moreover, it was with this unique characteristic that the new states were born, each with its own political life. Following the Berlin Conference (1884–1885), the European powers established borders based on agreements to divide the continent. The partitioning of African territories was already inappropriate by the end of the 19th century, especially because it excluded local populations and traditional ethnic groups settled in the landscape. This coercion led to the disintegration of kingdoms, regions, societies, villages, and so on. The traditional life of indigenous societies was not significantly altered during this period, as people resisted by moving from place to place, since the current borders did not yet exist.

The colonial powers, responsible for organizing the sociopolitical life of these territories, administered the people and territories through governors, generally from the metropolises. These figures introduced customs and ways of life that bore no resemblance to traditional African ones, resulting in numerous negative impacts.

Following the struggles for independence, the colonies began their journey toward emancipation from the 1960s onward, guided by the United Nations and the renowned principle of self-determination. These sovereignties had profound impacts on the newly emerging states, shaping the origins of political governance in each nation.

From 1960 onward, all African countries felt the impact of colonial liberation, a phenomenon that occurred almost universally during that decade. The new political order and status brought greater autonomy for the state governance of each of the new states, which, practically speaking, began their journey under the banner of democracy. Moreover, with the withdrawal of the colonial powers, the time had come for the newly formed states to expand their economies and achieve social prosperity. But dreaming of something is one thing, and achieving it is quite another; after all, dreams are just dreams.

Colonial times also reveal errors, and among these, the borders imposed on Africa stand out. Today's cross-border areas carry many problems from those times when Europeans of various nationalities decided to carve up Africa simply because they felt like it. In all these examples, neighboring countries have cross-border areas that have divided the same society, imposing different identity politics on each group. If a group is attacked in one country, relatives on the other side of the border, with a different nationality, come to their aid.

Lake Chad belongs to four countries: Chad, Cameroon, Niger, and Nigeria. A purely natural issue influences the political decisions made about the entire territory. Depending on the time of year, water resources are abundant, which affects shoreline areas. In the case of Nigeria, during the rainy season, its territory surrounds the lake in many areas, except for the sector immediately adjacent to Cameroon. Meanwhile, during the dry season, its jurisdiction expands by about 20 km.

The central Sahel region has been the subject of study for the last fifteen years due to the establishment of numerous armed groups that do not recognize any of the states, as their objective is to eliminate post-colonial borders and create a Caliphate. These groups operate independently but are subject to al-Qaeda, though they use different names across regions. According to the Global Terrorism Index (2024), Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger are three of the ten countries most affected by terrorism worldwide.

These three states suffered military coups between 2020 and 2023. Three military juntas govern these three territories, and all three decided to leave ECLAC precisely because it did not provide the expected security. The reality is that all three leaders have declared themselves against the colonial powers in the region, yet they have fallen into the arms of Russia militarily and China economically.

Some of the military officers who rose to power may have been motivated, at least in part, by a desire to improve the security situation, but others may have been attracted by the power and the economic and social privileges that come with it. The military officers exploited the widespread frustration of the civilian

population due to the deteriorating security situation, as well as the lack of an economy capable of meeting even the most basic needs. Furthermore, the elected politicians in each of the countries have demonstrated a significant inability to resolve the chronic food crises plaguing the Sahel.

It cannot be said that the Sahel has been in a deep crisis for a decade; the reality is that it has been unable to emerge from it, and for children, the biggest problem is education, as schools have become unsafe places. Today's young people have acquired little knowledge or skill to qualify for decent work. In the contexts in which they live, the easiest option is to join jihadist terrorism, which guarantees them a meal. The appalling living conditions can only prolong the political and security crises throughout the region.

One point to consider is that the majority believe that the various problems affecting the region stem from French colonization and that changing masters will bring more and better opportunities for life.

The Sahel countries share the common characteristic of being relatively new as independent states within their current borders. The task of proposing political institutions that inspire confidence in the populations of nations with great ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity has little history, and the results achieved are highly uneven. On the other hand, the economic and financial crises of the late 1980s and 1990s, followed by a period of macroeconomic stabilization and structural adjustment in the region, proved to be very harsh blows, significantly reducing their capacity for action and making them dependent on international institutions. In this respect, both the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund bear direct responsibility, unfortunately, more negative than positive. From a political standpoint, democratization is fragile, and coups d'état are commonplace.

Democracy in the Sahel has not been able to overcome clientelism. The modus operandi is as follows: "Whoever comes to power must satisfy the demands of numerous interest groups. The president-elect allocates ministries to the parties that helped elect him; the ministers, in turn, must distribute positions among activists; and these activists, in turn, will also find small rewards for other activists in the form of service contracts or small supply agreements" [67].

Businesspeople who participated in the previous campaign now seek to recoup their investments by proposing policies to obtain tax breaks, placing their employees in key administrative positions to secure contracts, and so on. What we have is widespread corruption, which is directly linked to the rising cost of election campaigns in the context of widespread poverty.

De Herdt and Olivier de Sardan also explain how international experts and the international aid system are embedded in this political economy, which has fueled ineffective public policies and disappointing economic outcomes. "The aid system, whether project aid, sectoral aid, or budgetary aid (all three are interrelated), induces an unhealthy and paralyzing dependency" [67].

The links between political practices, state functions, public services, and living conditions are not unique to the Sahel, as they are present in most West African countries and other regions, although the scale and sophistication of the capture of institutions and economic opportunities by interest groups vary. Security crises, which are partly a result of modest achievements in institution-building and economic development, add a further layer of complexity.

To stop the hijacking of the state by a few groups that abuse those in political power because they owe them past favors, it is necessary to improve the functioning of governmental and local institutions and to propose moral improvements in their actions. We are still far from addressing this issue, as widespread corruption is the prevailing problem. A positive step, if achieved, would be to strengthen the institutions that govern the use of public resources and place sensible officials in charge with the capacity to neutralize corruption. Curiously, when international organizations arrive in the Sahel laden with humanitarian aid, they seem unconcerned about whether there is good governance. It appears that their consciences are eased once the aid reaches the intended recipient, but no one worries about how that aid is distributed or whether it reaches everyone or only a few who then sell it.

Supporting the stability of Sahel countries is an urgent necessity to consolidate sustainable economic development in this vast region of the African continent. Despite all the existing difficulties, some states considered Sahelian, at least in their northern areas (Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, and Senegal), have achieved remarkable economic progress. However, for continued growth, security for citizens is essential, as subsequent development depends on this.

The World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and other financial institutions must take local governance and the adverse effects of externally stimulated interventions more seriously. The issue is not just acting but acting effectively to succeed. The first impetus that the United Nations should provide for the Sahel, for example, is to implement educational programs for these underdeveloped societies and help establish vocational training programs that educate across the broad spectrum of trades, as this is the only way to stimulate local economies and improve governance.

Throughout West Africa, especially in what was colonially understood as French Sudan, sustainable economic and social progress—which we must not confuse with short-term economic progress—depends on refocusing efforts on building institutions and investing in people. I do not wish my views to be interpreted as criticisms of international actions, but I believe that when international aid is planned for a particular place, those affected must first be asked how they wish to receive that aid. Some years ago, I witnessed in Sierra Leone how international aid was rejected by potential recipients for the simple reason that the food unloaded from ships and planes was made with products forbidden by the local religion. The aid arrived, but it did not alleviate the famine, which was, moreover, enormous.

7. Conclusions

When deciding to study the Sahel, numerous difficulties arise. The first difficulty is presented by conventional borders and how they emerged with decolonization, since it is a multifaceted reality that includes at least three concepts: (1) Sahel means border or boundary in Arabic, and this term already alerts us to a geographical and ecological reality; (2) the Sahel is a strip approximately 5400 km long that extends from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea and with a width that varies between 100 and 1000 km; (3) it is the southern border of the Sahara Desert.

These borders lack cultural, historical, or economic meaning. They encompass around 12 countries with very different realities, such as Mauritania, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, South Sudan, and Senegal.

The Sahel brings together countries with common historical, economic, cultural, and social characteristics that have decided to unite to face challenges in the areas of security and development. From a historical perspective, these areas were part of the great Sahelian empires based on trans-Saharan trade. Later, they were colonized by France, which left a political and cultural legacy, including French as the common language. This legacy coexists with Islam as the majority religion throughout the region.

These countries also face common challenges stemming from the vastness of their territories. This poses challenges related to state presence and consolidation, exacerbated by significant weaknesses in terms of economy and governance. However, there are other states that are partially Sahelian geographically, such as Senegal, Algeria, and Nigeria, which, despite their different historical experiences and current situations, exert a decisive influence on the unfolding events in the Sahel.

Furthermore, the Sahel has been making headlines in various media outlets for many years. During the Libyan crisis, the armed insurrection in northern Mali was exploited by jihadist elements to seize control of half the country. The decisive French intervention through Operations *Serval* and *Barkhane* succeeded in halting the Islamist advance. However, the region continues to face a whole host of structural weaknesses.

The greatest danger posed by the Sahel lies in its economy, as it comprises some of the poorest countries in Africa. The average GDP per capita of the five countries that make up the G5 Sahel, at current prices, was \$642 in 2016. This figure represents barely 43% of the GDP per capita of Sub-Saharan Africa, which is already the poorest continent on the planet. This structural economic weakness is compounded by

a cyclical economic slowdown affecting certain countries due to the fall in commodity prices. For example, the Chadian economy contracted by 7% in 2016.

This economic situation has traditionally been offset by relative political stability and a more positive human rights situation than in other regions of Africa. In contrast, the region has been shaken by significant political changes, such as the 2012 coup in Mali—where the situation was resolved after democratic elections—and the 2014 overthrow of Burkinabe President Blaise Compaoré, after 27 years in power.

This political crisis is closely linked to the deteriorating stability in the region, where a triangle of insecurity has formed, centered on three terrorist hotspots: a northern one in Libya, where the self-proclaimed Islamic State operates; a southern one in the Lake Chad Basin, where Boko Haram continues to carry out attacks; and a third central hotspot in Mali, where armed organizations with links to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb are proliferating, fueled by the country's ethnic and tribal rivalries.

It is therefore not surprising that the social situation in the Sahel is extremely precarious. Three of the four countries with the lowest Human Development Index in 2016 are Sahelian. The country in the region with the best score on this index is Mauritania, ranking 157th.

These structural challenges, from a social perspective, have been exacerbated by the increase in insecurity. For example, Niger has had to reduce the budget of its flagship food security program, *Les Nigériens nourrissent les Nigériens* (Nigerians Feed Nigerians), by 30% to finance the rising cost of security services.

The precarious social situation is also aggravated by the high number of refugees and internally displaced persons: more than one and a half million people in the Lake Chad Basin, fleeing the consequences of the conflicts plaguing the region. To the daily triple crisis—political, economic, and social—we must add the environmental crisis, which has affected the Sahel for years. The Sahelian countries have some of the highest fertility rates in the world; in Niger, for example, each woman gives birth to an average of 7.5 children. The United Nations projects that the Sahel's population will triple by 2050, rising from 75 million to 198 million inhabitants.

This rapid population increase amidst multiple crises poses a major threat to the region's stability. Those under 24 years of age currently make up between 60% and 70% of the population in the five Sahelian countries mentioned, and these figures are expected to remain high in the coming decades. If alternatives are not provided for this youth population, it will fuel two very different phenomena with profound impacts on Europe: migration and Islamic radicalization.

The European Union has planned various initiatives for the Sahel. The first strategy we will consider here has its roots in 2011 and is based on the security-development nexus. It identifies four types of problems in the Sahel related to governance, development, and conflict resolution, regional political coordination, security and the rule of law, and the prevention of and fight against violent extremism and radicalization. The strategy was revised in 2014 to include Burkina Faso and Chad, thus covering the five traditional Sahel countries.

Subsequently, the European Union developed a Regional Action Plan in 2015, which provides the necessary framework for implementing the strategy and adapting it to the new situation in the Sahel. This Plan focuses on four priority lines of action: (1) prevention of and fight against radicalization; (2) youth; (3) migration, mobility, and border control; and (4) combating illicit trafficking and transnational organized crime.

To implement this strategy, the European Union has a range of financial, institutional, and Common Security and Defence Policy instruments at its disposal. Regarding financial instruments, the EU is the leading donor of external aid, with approximately €5 billion allocated to the five traditional Sahel countries for the period 2014–2020. If the contributions of Member States are included, this figure rises to €8 billion. This amount represents around one-fifth of the region's GDP, demonstrating the crucial role of financial instruments in the Sahel.

Among these instruments, in addition to the European Development Fund, the EU Trust Fund for Africa, established at the 2015 Valletta Summit on Migration, stands out. This tool has supported more than eighty projects in West Africa worth approximately €1.5 billion.

Or should we forget the use of the African Peace Facility in the Sahel. This instrument was created in 2004 at the request of African heads of state and plays an increasingly important role in the region's security. The African Peace Facility will provide €100 million in support to the Joint Military Force. This Force was announced at the Sahel Summit in N'Djamena in 2015 and was launched in 2017 with a fourfold objective: (1) to combat terrorism and the trafficking of drugs and people; (2) to contribute to the restoration of state authority and the return of refugees and displaced persons; (3) to facilitate humanitarian operations and the distribution of aid to affected populations; and (4) to contribute to the implementation of actions that promote development in the Sahel. The Force has been sanctioned by the African Union Peace and Security Council (Communiqué of its 679th meeting) and welcomed by the United Nations Security Council (Resolution 2391).

Alongside financial instruments, there are also institutional ones. Among them is the office of the European Union's Special Representative for the Sahel. This post was created in 2013, pursuant to Article 33 of the Treaty on European Union. The Special Representative's role, working closely with the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the Commission, is to develop, implement, and coordinate all European Union efforts in the region, with particular emphasis on the Mali Peace Process.

Finally, the Common Security and Defence Policy missions in the region—two civilian and one military—play a fundamental role. These missions are currently being regionalized to adapt to the new reality. The first mission was EUCAP Sahel Niger⁹, launched in 2012. Its objective is to support and strengthen the capacity of Nigerien security forces to fight terrorism, organized crime, and irregular migration.

Modeled on this mission, another, EUCAP Sahel Mali¹⁰, was created in 2015 to support Malian security forces in safeguarding the constitutional and democratic order, thereby laying the foundations for lasting peace and extending state authority throughout Mali.

Both civilian missions coexist with a military mission, EUTM Mali¹¹. This mission, established in 2013, supports the rebuilding of the Malian armed forces without engaging in combat operations. It also contributes to the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of armed groups.

The European Union is one of the main actors in the Sahel, but not the only one. EU action complements that of its Member States. There are significant synergies between Brussels' actions and those of other capitals, as demonstrated by the GAR-SI Sahel project, which replicates the successful counterterrorism model of the Spanish Civil Guard in African countries.

The European Union coordinates its actions with other actors in the region through various institutional and non-institutional forums. Among the institutional forums, the United Nations stands out, with its Security Council having examined the issue on several occasions. Among the non-institutional forums is the Alliance for the Sahel, launched at the Franco-German Council on 13 July 2017, in which, along with the EU, France, and Germany, the UNDP, the World Bank, the African Development Bank, Spain, Italy, and the United Kingdom participate.

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Informed Consent Statement

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Not applicable.

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Footnotes

1. The consensus is that the countries comprising the Sahel are Mauritania, Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad. Subsequently, the ecoregion has expanded to include other areas such as northern Nigeria, Togo, Dahomey, the Central African Republic, Ivory Coast, and Ghana. Additionally, Sudan, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia are also included.
2. The importance of using camels and dromedaries in long-distance trade in Asia is a topic that can be explored in more detail in one of my books (Junquera Rubio, 2017: 427-510).
3. European colonization had a significant negative impact on local governments, but they managed to survive. Similarly, post-colonial national governments operated in the same direction and have not succeeded in eradicating traditional cultural elements.
4. By French Community we must understand a short-lived constitutional framework, which was created by France in 1958 to resolve the process of decolonization.
5. Office Riz Mopti is an official Malian agency whose task is to develop rice-growing areas in the Mopti region. It reports to the Ministry of Agriculture.
6. The Dozo militias are traditional fraternities transformed into paramilitary armed forces.
7. The figures are not the same in the media. The death toll of 160 civilians may be the most accurate.
8. Katiba Macina is a jihadist group that operates mainly in Mali.
9. EUCAP Sahel Niger (European Union Capacity Building Mission in Sahel Niger). These projects have been limited, since in the last year the three countries in the heart of the Sahel—Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger—have left ECOWAS.
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