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GREEN POLICIES AS A TOOL FOR PEACE IN THE SAHEL REGION



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ABSTRACT

Diversos medios, estudios o incluso personalidades han apuntado al cambio climático como un factor decisivo en la aparición de conflictos. Un casus belli que puede ser el principal causante de nuestras futuras guerras, y que incluso ahora –aún con un impacto inferior al que podría llegar a tener, pero aún así causando miles de muertes- podría ser el culpable de la inestabilidad en algunas regiones, especialmente en el Sahel. Pese a que exista evidencia corroborando tal tesis, hay detractores que aseguran que esta no es suficiente. Por tanto, este ensayo tratará de comprender los diferentes argumentos en la cuestión y valorará la evidencia soportando la tesis expuesta; mediante dos casos de estudio concretos, cuya información será tratada a través de un método de análisis y síntesis de investigaciones anteriores y noticias sobre el terreno. Por último, una vez probada la tesis, el ensayo concluirá con una reflexión sobre el papel que las políticas medioambientales pueden tener en la protección de la paz y seguridad; afirmando su legitimidad y necesidad pero también destacando los retos a los que se exponen. El fin de este ensayo es fomentar la seguridad fuera del marco de la común hostilidad militar y asegurar la obtención de la paz, algo imposible sin identificar las causas subyacentes de su deterioro.

Various media, studies or even personalities have pointed to climate change as a decisive factor in the emergence of conflicts. A casus belli that may be the main cause of future wars, and which even now -though with a lesser impact than what it could have, but still causing thousands of deaths- could be the culprit of instability in some regions, especially in the Sahel. In spite of existing evidence supporting this thesis, there are detractors who claim that it is not sufficient. Therefore, this essay will try to understand the different arguments on the issue and will evaluate the evidence supporting the thesis exposed; through two concrete case studies, whose information will be treated following a method of analysis and synthesis of previous research and news in the field. Finally, once the thesis has been proven, the essay will conclude with a reflection on the role that environmental policies can have in the protection of peace and security; affirming their legitimacy and necessity but also highlighting the challenges to which they are exposed. The aim of this essay is to promote security outside the framework of common military hostility and ensure that peace is attained, something impossible without identifying the underlying causes of its deterioration.

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between the increase in temperatures, the change in the environmental scenario towards more extreme climates, with constant droughts, devastating rains, rising sea levels or worsening air quality; and the exponential increase in social tension, causing unrest, protests, and even wars; is one of the most controversial debates of the last decade.

"Climate change is directly related to the rise of terrorism. And, if we don't start acting together and listening to what scientists are saying, there won't be enough water, nor enough land to grow crops. Then you will see migrations of people fighting for land that can feed them, which will lead to international conflicts of all kinds" said U.S. Democratic party candidate Bernie Sanders five years ago in one of the debates leading up to the primary's vote. Broadcasted live on CBS News, Sanders faced not only the skepticism that flooded the set, with comments even from the host himself -John Dickerson-, who sarcastically asked, *"How is a drought going to have any relation to Islamic State attacks in the middle of Paris?"*. The American public, accustomed to constant glorifications of the U.S. Army military strength - *"the most powerful in the world"* - also looked at the Democratic candidate with incredulity and a bit of humor. How could he be implying that combating climate change was a matter of national security?

However, not only Bernie Sanders has come to this conclusion; African voices have likewise affirmed the assumption that gives rise to this essay. Wangari Maathai -Nobel Peace Prize winner, environmental activist and founder of the Green Belt Movement- was one of the great forerunners of the environmental movement, and one of the pioneers in establishing a clear link between environmental conservation and the protection of democracy, peace, security and human rights. Maathai said that *"if resources were valuable, if they were scarce, if they were degraded; there was going to be competition"* and that *"sustainable management of our natural resources would promote peace"*.

In her words we see the exposition of a clear link between green policies and those related to the promotion of peace and security, which, coming from Wangari Maathai, would be related to the growing tensions on the African continent.

Nonetheless, there are also detractors to this theory, of which we can distinguish three types.

Firstly, there is the reactionary opinion that denies the existence of a possible climate threat, and therefore considers the intention to address conflict resolution by emphasizing the importance of sustainable environmental management as nonsense -a reasoning that is directly

or indirectly positioned in favor of the arms lobby.

Next, we find the legitimate analysis supporting that conflicts derive from the interposition and collision of multiple factors, concluding that no single one is entirely responsible. Therefore, finding a single solution would not be possible, and instead, it advocates for a variety of initiatives that address all the different causes.

In this line, a third opinion goes even further. This one, whether or not it recognizes the relationship between climate change and the rise of social instability, condemns the mainstream discourse associating these two concepts because of the existence of a hidden interest. An interest in simplifying the gravity and complexity of social unrest, and on wanting to battle with green policies something that requires much more involvement and work: a change in the social, political and economic structure -the deepest roots of any violent episode-.

This essay will try to address and resolve the possible existence of the relationship between the increasing deterioration of climate and the emergence of conflicts. However, to be more precise, we will focus on how this relationship might be manifesting themselves in one of the regions most affected by temperature changes, the Sahel. From the analysis of two conflicts in the region - the war in Mali and the conflict in Darfur, Sudan - we will be able to determine the role of climate and its alterations in the increase of tensions in both cases; thus

being able to clarify previous controversies on the issue. Subsequently, the role of green policies in conflict resolution and in the protection of peace and security will be discussed.

THE SAHEL

The Sahel is a region of the African continent, defined mainly by its geography and climate. Separating the Sahara desert and the African savannah, it goes from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea, and is composed of Mauritania, Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, Sudan, Eritrea and Ethiopia. The area is characterized by its desertic climate, which has become more pronounced in recent years.

According to a report by the United States Agency for International Development, the Sahel is one of the areas most affected by the climate crisis, and it will hold temperature changes 1.5 times higher than the rest of the world. Among its various environmental challenges, we find the impact of occasional and devastating rains -which cause heavy flooding and the destruction of crops- combined with long and extreme droughts. The latter, which contributes to soil erosion, generates an infertile terrain both for the cultivation of local rainfed crops and grazing; as most animals are unable to withstand the harsh conditions of the region.

Although some may say that the features exposed above were always present in the region, and categorize the latest episodes as coincidences or climatic anomalies, the truth is that studies and reports such as the one mentioned above clearly attribute this alterations to anthropogenic intervention and the climate change that this has triggered.

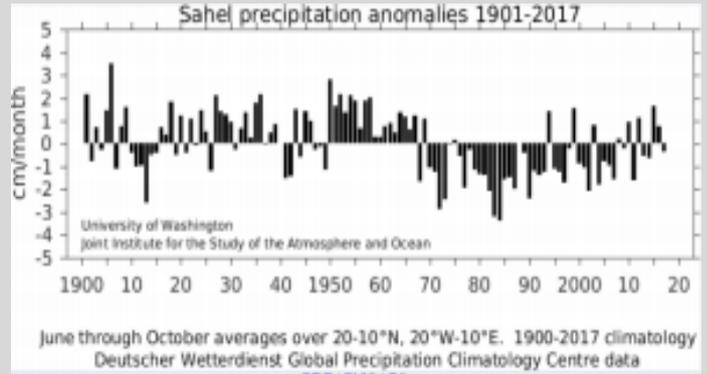


Figure 1: Precipitation anomalies in the Sahel (1901-2017). Joint Institute for the Study of the Atmosphere and Ocean (10.6069/H5MW2F2Q).

As a matter of fact, the first environmental phenomena that the Sahel experienced more forcefully occurred during the decades from 1970 to 1990 -leaving the figures of the most dramatic droughts that the region has ever suffered-. As USAID states, the territory has been recovering, and statistics have increased slightly. However, the climate has been hard hit, and the graphs show that the situation is tending to stabilize and remain static with very low rainfall levels. As we can see in Figure 1, the rate of precipitation -although not as low as in the 70s, 80s and 90s- is far from coming back to previous levels. As in the rest of the world, we see less frequent and more powerful rainfalls, and a worrying increase in desertification.

Action Against Hunger condemns that these environmental conditions, in addition to the fact that the Sahara desert is advancing by 5 meters every year -extending the arid and infertile Sahel zone, leaving less and less land available-, are causing crops to become

increasingly difficult to grow, leading to huge food shortages and severe famine throughout the region.

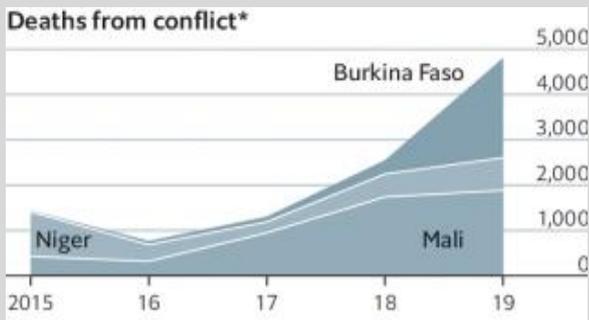


Figure 2: Graph of conflict fatalities in 3 regions of the Sahel. The Economist

All these facts make linking climate change to instability in the region seem like a truism. And even more so when we can observe that the exponential growth of desertification is occurring at the same time that conflicts are growing in the region, as shown in Figure 2.

Food shortages and harsh weather conditions, which jeopardize the already fragile economy of countries that practically depend on agriculture and the extraction of raw materials, generate high rates of poverty and desperation, making the population vulnerable and susceptible to radicalization -as they see no other way out of their situation-, armed conflict -to compete against their own countrymen for limited resources-, and terrorism -since jihadist groups, with their hate speech disguised as hope, capture the few remaining expectations of a future-.

The rise of terrorist groups in the region, at the same time as the worsening of living conditions, could

be a clear indicator that the issue of radicalization is closely related to climate change. It is true that jihadism is a much more complex phenomenon, whose roots cannot be analyzed merely from an ecological point of view, but it is also true that the proliferation of the movement has taken place with more strength in the Sahel region more than in any other African regions -where, among other social problems, the common factor of all the nations that compose it is the direct exposure to environmental alterations.

If so, we could say that climate change is not only a major risk to the internal security of the region, but also a risk to security on a global scale. Tobias Ide and Kathleen Hermans, in their article on climate change, conflict and migration -which we will return to in later pages- determine that the alteration in temperatures and the increase in natural disasters are beginning to cause, and will do so with much greater intensity, large migratory flows. In this line, we recall the words of Bernie Sanders, who, in the Democratic primaries cited in the introduction to this essay, stated forcefully: *"When there is a drought, we will have to face the consequences. When there is drought, when people cannot farm, they will migrate to the cities; and when people migrate to the cities and have no jobs, there is going to be much more instability, much more unemployment, and people will be subjected to the kind of propaganda that al Qaeda and ISIS are using"*.

Nonetheless, it is time to talk about specific cases, specific examples that will give us the precise guidelines to analyze with much more legitimacy and objectivity these relationships. As it has been explained, the Sahel is a vast region, and it would be unprofessional and simplistic to analyze it as a whole. That is why the conflicts in Mali and Darfur will serve us as case studies, and will help us to resolve the unknowns in the matter.

MALI

The tensions currently experienced in Mali are the accumulation of many factors. This particular case study is not purely caused by climate change - something that rarely happens- but it serves -like the later case of Darfur- to explain how existing problems are intensely multiplied by the environmental element.

To understand the situation, we must situate Mali, and know its main characteristics. In West Africa, far from the sea, Mali is a vast territory comprising two clearly differentiated areas. The Niger River separates these two opposite poles: the northeast region, marked by the desert -which permeates everything- and the southwest region, where the savannah begins and the natural flora resides.

However, these two sides are also differentiated by their inhabitants. In the north, less populated because of the harsh living conditions, live the nomadic Tuaregs, a people with their own characteristics that spread

throughout North Africa. While in the south, the majority of the ethnically diverse Malian population resides.

The main problem we will analyze from the instability scenario in Mali is the one that, occurring in the center of the country -between the two areas previously mentioned- is causing the death of thousands of people, destroying entire villages, and feeding a climate of radicalization that is growing by the minute: we are talking about the conflict between the Dogons and the Fulani.

The Dogon and Fulani are two of the predominant ethnic groups in Mali. Although they have differences that often lead to hostilities -the Dogon being mainly farmers and the Fulani being herders- they have always lived in considerable harmony. As Mahmoud Dicko, one of the leaders of the Malian and Fulani opposition, confessed to Al Jazeera, "*[...] the tribes of the Sahel have lived together for thousands of years, and we have our mechanisms to settle things among ourselves. If you leave us alone, we will find a solution.*" Even if he goes into another topic, that of foreign intervention, he clarifies that the tension -although always present- has never been so strong.

"There have always been small clashes between herders and farmers, but water levels are decreasing, and this is creating a lot of tension," Hammadoun Cisse, a Malian pastor involved in a reconciliation committee, told BBC News. And if cultural differences were already a problem,

with rising temperatures and desertification -reducing harvestable land- competition for the little land that remains capable of supplying the population's basic needs is violently contested.

Furthermore, the situation was aggravated by the Tuareg rebellion in 2012 for the liberation of Azawad, which, with the help of Gaddafi's weapons and the entry of allied jihadist groups, has unleashed chaos in the region. Terrorist groups that managed to enter the territory due to the political instability triggered by Azawad's proclamation of independence have gained presence in Mali. These, already controlling much of the north of the country, are trying to spread across the territory by capturing vulnerable targets; and central Mali, already unstable due to recent land tensions between Dogon and Fulani, was the perfect place for that.

"There was no rain, and nothing to feed the animals. They were dying, one after another. To survive I had no choice but to join an armed group," said the 17-year-old Younoussa, in an interview with BBC News. *"I don't want to belong to an armed group. I want to go back to my family and find a job."*

But Younoussa is not alone, many young people -and not so young- are victims of the recruitment by armed groups and jihadists. Taking advantage of the situation of extreme poverty and desperation that climatic conditions establish, terrorists get hold of

vulnerable prey -as explained above-; who perhaps would not fall into such places if their environmental situation was different.

With this we can conclude that no, climate change is not the root cause of the conflict in Mali, in fact we can see that there is no such thing as a root cause, but the overlapping of many causes. However, through this brief analysis we can state that climate change is the underlying driver of the tension, without which it is possible that the problem would not have proliferated to the lethal point it is now at. But before jumping to hasty conclusions, this essay proceeds to analyze whether the Darfur conflict presents the same patterns.

DARFUR

According to the European office of the Red Cross, Sudan is one of the countries most vulnerable to climate change, and one that will see the rate of its tensions and conflicts increase as temperatures rise. Its population, like Mali's, is composed mainly of farmers and herders; individuals who will see their modus vivendi terribly affected by climate anomalies. Although this has already begun.

In this case, we also cannot deny that other factors have contributed to generate such social tension in the country, particularly in Darfur; which since 2003 has taken the lives of about 500,000 people -an estimated figure still under debate- not only through injuries, but also through starvation or

dehydration. But why? And how does it relate to climate change?

To understand the conflict in Darfur we have to contextualize the situation in Sudan. On the one hand, we have the ethnic differences that characterize the country: an Arab-majority north, which controls the territory; and a non-Arab west and south, from sub-Saharan tribes, who claim to be despised and discriminated against by the Arab elites in charge of the government. This inconsiderate governance led by ethnic privileges, coupled with corruption fuelled by the oil business, exploded into a civil war that eventually resulted in the independence of the south: South Sudan was born after the 2005 peace agreement.

In the previous negotiations that engendered South Sudan's independence, Darfur -the western region of Sudan, which also wanted independence- was totally ignored; which meant that their desire for a state of their own where they would not suffer institutional discrimination from the Arab government in Khartoum, and where the development of their public services was a priority - schooling, hospitalization or urbanization; areas to which the government had not devoted sufficient effort-, was destined to be buried.

The independence demanded by Darfur was not a whim, it was a cry for help to the international community, a cry of agony provoked by the harsh living conditions that were making the region uninhabitable -and which the

Sudanese government was not fighting. That's why the insurgency erupted in 2003, citizens of Darfur proclaiming that they could no longer sustain such a situation. And this is where the climate change comes back again.

The rebels in Darfur were not attacked by the Sudanese military, but by Arab militias from the same region - nomadic herders- who violently decided to put an end to the daring of the non-Arab majority in the territory. We are talking about the Janjaweed. Although we could attribute this internal tension to ethnic motives - which we have already said are present-, the truth is that we can say that the issue goes beyond that. Renowned journalist Stephan Faris explains for The Atlantic that the racial distinctions in Darfur between Arabs and sub-Saharan Africans are attributed to differences in their lifestyles primarily -Arabs being herders and sub-Saharan Africans being farmers.

Moreover, Faris also goes on to say that until relatively recently, these two groups -as in Mali- lived in considerable peace: *"The farmers shared their wells, and the herders fed their livestock with the leftovers from the harvest. But with the drought, the farmers began to put up fences around their land, fearing that it would be destroyed by grazing cattle. [...] the conflict was more rooted in land envy than in ethnic hatred."*

This new hatred generated by the lack of habitable land led the Janjaweed

tribe to turn against the farmers -the majority- in Darfur, and to act in accordance with the Khartoum government's desire to wipe the non-Arab tribes of the territory off the map. Indeed, the assumption that the Sudanese government was behind the Darfur massacres -in which the Janjaweed burned villages, smashed wells, killed men and raped women- is commonly accepted. Evidence supporting this claim are, for example, the fact that Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo -a former Janjaweed commander- is now occupying a high position in the Sudanese executive, among others.

It is true that climate change may not have caused the existence of such deadly government malpractices, but it is also true that the Janjaweed would not have cooperated in them if they were not in a situation of climatic desperation for basic resources. *"Interestingly, most of the Arab tribes who had their own land rights did not join the government's fight,"* David Mozersky, the director of the International Crisis Group for the Horn of Africa, told The Atlantic; demonstrating that those whose grazing land was not at risk did not participate in the genocide, and that climatic factors influenced the intensity of the conflict in Darfur.

As Ban Ki Moon, former UN Secretary General expressed in his controversial article *"A Climate Culprit in Darfur"*, political and social conditions are undoubtedly elemental to the conflict but *"If you look at its roots, you discover a much more complex*

dynamic. Amidst diverse political and social causes, the conflict in Darfur began as an ecological crisis, augmented at least in part by climate change" and so *"Any peace in Darfur must be built on solutions that go to the rooted causes of the conflict."*

Notwithstanding, since this declaration of intent from the United Nations in 2007, attempts to improve the situation have not borne fruit - totally ignoring climate warnings- and the conflict is still alive today. Jean-Michel Dumond, ambassador and head of the European delegation in Sudan, told the Red Cross that *"Climate change is one of the main concerns for the region and it's a trigger for conflicts. Building the resilience of the population is vital for its future"*.

We have been able to analyze that the climate factor within the conflicts at the Sahel region is very important. In both Mali and Darfur (Sudan), radicalization and massacre have been facilitated by a vulnerability caused by the harsh living conditions of the territory -which are getting worse and worse. Having established this relationship, we will proceed to conclude with an analysis of the role of environmental or green policies in the protection of peace and security.

FINAL REMARKS

Numerous studies suggest that climate change, in spite of not being the sole cause, favours the proliferation of conflicts. So, can we combat the environmental and conflict crises at the same time?

If we do it from a local perspective, with environmental policies in the territory where the conflict occurs, we can obtain positive results. In fact, a decrease in deaths by fighting in Darfur was experienced during the 2010 decade, when UN missions such as UNAMID (the United Nations-African Union Mission in Darfur) - thanks to which more than 330,000 trees were planted, water storage infrastructures of up to 5.3 million litres per year were built and 122 wastewater treatment plants were installed- or such as the Wadi El Ku Catchment Management Project - which, starting by building small dams in 2018, managed to ensure that on a land from which only 150 farmers could live, around 4,000 farmers could do so in 2019 according to The Guardian, considerably reducing disputes-

However, these environmental initiatives are not a big part of these missions. Colonel Jesús Díez Alcalde, advisor to the Spanish Department of National Security and participant in numerous European Union military missions in Africa, explains that these missions *"do not manage or participate in the implementation of policies in this regard, since the main task is to attend to the reform of the*

security sector: armed forces, security forces and justice". Although the Colonel states that *"he is absolutely right when he says that climate change has become a factor of conflict in the Sahel region"*, he also states that *"it is, at present, frankly difficult"*.

In Mali, for example, MINUSMA -the United Nations Multidimensional Stabilization and Integration Mission in Mali- only mentions the environment in reference to its attempts to reduce the ecological footprint of its military actions, but not with specific plans as such.

Nevertheless, the impact that climate measures may have on the ground is limited, as droughts and drastic rainfall changes will only get worse if Western overproduction does not adopt sustainable practices as well. In this regard, Michael Byers, a political scientist at Columbia University, tells The Atlantic that Western countries *"unwittingly and without malice, created the conditions that led to these crises"*.

That is why the conclusion of this essay is that yes, we need environmental measures to combat a crucial aspect of conflict -climatic conditions- but we need these (I) to be done hand in hand with measures that address other causes of conflict (weak institutions, social inequalities, economic conditions, weapons, etc.) and (II) to be done on a global scale, the only way to ensure lasting solutions to today's and tomorrow's conflicts.

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