GREEN TRANSITION AND SUSTAINABILITY

Climate emergency in the Sahel: desertification and more migration?

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Photography: "Moving Shadows II", Girma Berta

The Sahel is the transitional strip between the Sahara desert and the African savannah, a semi-arid region among the poorest in the world, unfortunately known today for political instability, communal conflicts and jihadist violence. In recent years, it has become crucial for European interests in containing migratory flows and fighting terrorism, which has essentially made it the EU's outpost in Africa.

The area is already suffering, and will continue suffering in the future, under the effects of the climate crisis [1], given its weather-dependent economy and its vulnerability within the global order. The most usual discourse establishes a more or less direct link between climate change, insecurity and migration. The rationale is clear: the Sahara desert is expanding, which means more poverty and hunger, leading to more conflicts and, ultimately, more displacement of people, also towards Europe.

Although this reasoning seems sound and plausible, it requires some nuances. First, with regard to climate impacts in the area, which are not linked exclusively to desertification. Second, regarding the link between climate change and migration, where socio-economic and political factors also play a role, as well as the fact that internal migrations clearly outweigh those that have Europe as their final destination. Finally, on the effects of migration containment policies on adaptation to the climate crisis.

The considerations compiled in this paper emerge from research in the framework of the CASCADES European project, based on a survey of more than 200 experts in the area, interviews with local and international actors and previous fieldwork [2].

Climate impacts

According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the Sahel is and will remain one of the regions of the planet bound to suffer the most under the effects of the climate crisis. Although it includes as much as 11 countries from the Atlantic Ocean to the Dead Sea, the concept is often confined to the world's poorest countries, such as Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso, the focus of our study. These are vulnerable states, whose economies depend mainly on the primary sector, agriculture, pastoralism and fishing, and are dependant on rainfall and international aid.

Since the great droughts of the 1970s and 1980s, it has become customary to look at the whole region in the context of growing desertification as a result of low rainfall. Indeed, there are specific territories that are experiencing desertification, such as Nigeria and Sudan. However, an overall expansion of the Sahara desert is not fully accredited. In fact, purely climatic indicators point to a return of vegetation. Earth observation studies show a positive trend in increased rainfall and greening over the last three decades [3]. Hence, some experts even speak of the "myth of desertification", derived from colonial and neo-colonial perspectives of development that would benefit the world powers [4].

> Land degradation is not only brought about by droughts, but also by human factors such as land use and conservation, different forms of human settlement and population growth, among others

Scientific debates on desertification in the Sahel are still ongoing and climate projections are not conclusive, since they differ according to the models, periods and areas analysed. It is therefore difficult to predict what will happen in the future, because mitigation, adaptation and resilience measures to cope with the emergency will have to be taken into account. Land degradation is not only brought about by droughts, but also by human factors such as land use and conservation, different forms of human settlement and population growth, among others. All in all, the only current academic consensus on climate impacts in the area is: 1) the increase in the frequency and severity of extreme weather

events – droughts and torrential rains; 2) the increase in temperature 1.5 times faster than the global average and, finally, 3) the greater variability of rainfall in time and space.

The Sahel: between mobility and borders

While migration, in some way, can always be seen as a human response to climatic circumstances, a direct link between the effects of global warming and human mobility cannot be clearly established. In the Sahel, migration, especially in its circular and seasonal modalities, has been a way of life for generations in order to cope with weather inclemencies and environmental threats, but also a means of economic diversification. Some have spoken of “cultures of mobility” [5], based on different types of displacement, including nomadism, transhumance or migration to neighbouring countries. In recent times, the region has experienced forced displacement, mainly due to conflict, violence and, of course, the influence of climatic shocks, which is hard to quantify. The number of internally displaced people is estimated at over 2 million, mainly in Burkina Faso, as well as 850,000 refugees spread across the area, mostly from Mali.

Mobility in the Sahel, in its different modalities, is thus mainly internal and remains within Africa, where it historically reaches the countries of the Gulf of Guinea such as Ivory Coast, Nigeria or Ghana, and of North Africa, mainly Algeria and Libya [6]. Only a small portion of Sahelian migrants go to Europe, which contrasts with the attention that migration through the region has received in EU policy circles in recent years. After the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ in Europe and the 2015 Valletta Summit, EU institutions have been determined to stop the transit of thousands of people through the area. It has therefore deployed a security strategy of border reinforcement and development cooperation, with the aim of sedentarising people or blocking them in case they decide to move.

Although the mechanism is being applied throughout the whole territory, it has been particularly focused on Niger, the country with the lowest human development indices on Earth, which has been forced to act as a gendarme for the EU as the main crossing point in the central Mediterranean corridor. The EU has spared no effort to contain movement on this route and, according to official discourse, flows have decreased. However, new, more clandestine routes have opened up, where migrants are exposed to more human rights violations [7].

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The strengthening of borders has clashed directly with specific regional protocols that seek to guarantee mobility as a modus vivendi within the framework of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). A 1979 protocol protects the free movement of people,

and a specific 1998 protocol guarantees transhumance. Although pastoral movements continue, communities face increasing challenges in crossing state borders. Migration containment policies have led to more controls and have thus contributed to breaches of existing agreements.

Effects of the climate emergency on mobility

Although climate impacts are expected to affect the various forms of human mobility in the Sahel, according to our research, we do not expect a significant increase in displacement towards Europe, but rather a continuity of inter- and intra-regional migration patterns, at least in the short to medium term. This partially contradicts the alarmist discourse about the possibility of “migratory avalanches” from Africa to Europe as a result of the climate crisis. At the same time, it confirms some of the postulates of the most expert sources in the study of mobility, that warn against oversimplifying and inaccurate approaches that see a cause-effect relationship between climate change and transcontinental migration [8].

There are multiple reasons for this. First, the fact that the majority of people affected by environmental disasters, whether of rapid onset, like earthquakes, floods, hurricanes, etc. or of slow onset, like droughts, rising sea levels, etc., usually move over short distances. Second, the fact that mobility is more frequent among the better-off than among the vulnerable, as it depends on the means available. Some pastoralist communities, for example, even reduce their movements during extreme droughts due to lack of resources, which confirms that some people may be “trapped” as a consequence of climate change, rather than being induced to move [9]. Finally, the superficial link that is established between climate change and mobility runs the risk of being instrumentalised by conservative positions to legitimise increasingly restrictive policies.

> Contrary to the alarmist discourse, no “migratory avalanches” from Africa to Europe are foreseen as a result of the climate crisis

Leaving aside any debates on the legal conceptualisation of the term “climate or environmental migrant”, it seems clear that certain discourses on the likely increase in migratory movements towards Europe from the Sahel as a result of climate change need to be toned down. It would be advisable to address instead the specific effects of the emergency on internal mobilities, both regarding the modification of transhumant corridors for access to water and fodder and the increase in rural-to-urban movements, with all the challenges that this entails. The impact of the policy of externalisation of European borders to the area should also be carefully analysed, as that can also contribute to displacement by weakening local livelihoods.

Respecting mobility as a climate change adaptation strategy

Increased border control penalises vulnerable rural communities that either have limited access to identity documents or are unfamiliar with administrative procedures. Niger's law 036/2015 against human trafficking is a clear example of a violation of regional free movement protocols. It has been used to intercept people in Agadez, in northern Niger, more than 800km away from the regional borders of Algeria and Libya. Moreover, these measures create a number of additional problems for local economies and affect social cohesion and integration. They reinforce national sentiments and exacerbate inter-group tensions. Blocking thousands of people in cities such as Agadez, Niamey or Bamako, with their own vulnerabilities, also puts strains on local services and exacerbates mistrust between communities and migrants.

In addition, the containment devices applied, far from stopping the movements, redirect them towards more costly, longer and more dangerous routes, where the violations of human rights escape any control. This increases informal human smuggling and trafficking networks, as the denial of formal, legal and safe migration channels pushes people underground. European control funds also create new hierarchies that perpetuate and expand predatory and clientelistic structures, and can increase the level of distrust between communities within the same state due to the monopolisation of funds.

The measures are also inconsistent with some of EU's own goals. EU institutions fund multilateral projects to foster mobility inside ECOWAS, while at the same time contributing to undermining them. They claim to be willing to work to enhance adaptation and resilience to climate change, while at the same time hindering mobility, which is one of the key strategies for tackling the climate crisis. They also claim to promote regionalism in West Africa, but prioritise bilateral agreements with countries such as Niger for the sake of curbing migration, which weakens common African action.

Ultimately, Europe's obsession with building walls in the middle of the Sahara desert has counterproductive effects, not only for migrants and local populations, but also for the goals that are being pursued. Policymakers need to heed the evidence provided by much of the academic world on the importance of greater flexibility of internal and external borders and, in this regard, have the courage to soften the restrictive migration policies implemented so far, respecting and allowing mobility as a way of life in the Sahel and an adaptation strategy to the climate emergency. They must do so not only in the name of human rights, but also in order to build a strong, coherent and effective foreign policy that is in their own interests regarding development and security. It is imperative to do so sooner rather than later, incorporating new migration-focused narratives within Africa, revisiting the links between climate change and (in)mobility, and delving deeper into the negative impacts that containment measures themselves produce at all levels.

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