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# Societies and nature in the Sahel: ecological diversity and social dynamics

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#### Abstract

This paper, based on the results of a comprehensive interdisciplinary research programme focused on five countries of the Western Sahel, suggests a framework for analysing the complex and constantly changing dynamics of the relations that Sahelian societies maintain with their environment. Firstly, tools for understanding local variability are required. Demographic variables and the diversity of the modes of land use are combined to show that the type and intensity of exploitation of natural resources varies dramatically from one locality to another. There are significant differences between Sahelian social systems and cultures, and these influence their relations with the 'nature' they exploit and transform. Secondly, understanding social, economical and technical changes in the Sahel requires that we recognise that powerful and conflicting processes of transformation are taking place (in contrast to the image of "tradition" widely associated with Sahelian societies). These changes are found to be the result of an interaction between the state, rural producers, urban speculators, international development agencies, and other actors. Practical lessons emerge from the analysis. Access and negotiation over natural resources must be facilitated between many actors who compete for them, and local social and environmental problems must be seen in the context of broader patterns of influence and change. The State will retain its importance in the region. "Participation" in development must not only involve local "populations", but also the "developers" of all types, in contributing to and understanding the human dimensions of environmental change in the Sahel. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Agriculture; Demography; Environment; Herding, Nature, Sahel; Social dynamics

#### 1. Introduction

The horrifying famine of 1974 and the accompanying death of several hundred thousand cattle confronted world public opinion, as well as specialists in development and natural scientists, with the first evidence of a huge ecological crisis in the Sahel; a crisis that has lasted until the present day. It precipitated an unprecedented mobilisation of resources, local and international goodwill, and a major scientific debate. From the beginning, this became not so much a confrontation of scientific hypotheses, as a sharp division between competing perspectives. Natural and social scientists each thought that they alone held the ultimate explanation.

As the drought continued in the mid-1970s, and even intensified, it became obvious that the crisis was longlived, and that it was not confined to one part of the Sahelian zone. Despite this, in-depth geographical and anthropological studies, as well as the knowledge accumulated through development interventions, highlighted the diversity of its impacts. There were wide variations in the driving forces of famine at the local scale; social, demographic and economic situations were extremely variable. This variability shows that it does not make sense to pretend that there is a general, unique or readymade description and explanation of the Sahelian crisis. My aim in this short paper is to present some elements which can help to make a more concrete and detailed vision of Sahelian diversity, and of the nature of the dynamics that are at play behind it. My arguments are taken from a recent book, where they are substantiated and referenced in detail (Raymaut, 1997).

#### 2. The heterogeneity of the demographic situation

Of the social phenomena invoked to explain the environmental problems occurring in Africa — and the Sahel

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# **Societies And Nature In The Sahel Rethinking Environmental Degradation**

Tom Slaymaker, R. Blench

#### **Societies And Nature In The Sahel Rethinking Environmental Degradation:**

The End of Desertification? Roy H. Behnke, Michael Mortimore, 2016-04-12 The question in the title of this book draws attention to the shortcomings of a concept that has become a political tool of global importance even as the scientific basis for its use grows weaker The concept of desertification it can be argued has ceased to be analytically useful and distorts our understanding of social environmental systems and their resiliency particularly in poor countries with variable rainfall and persistent poverty For better policy and governance we need to reconsider the scientific justification for international attempts to combat desertification Our exploration of these issues begins in the Sahel of West Africa where a series of severe droughts at the end of the 20th century led to the global institutionalization of the idea of desertification It now seems incontrovertible that these droughts were not caused primarily by local land use mismanagement effectively terminating a long standing policy and scientific debate There is now an opportunity to treat this episode as an object lesson in the relationship between science the formation of public opinion and international policy making Looking beyond the Sahel the chapters in this book provide case studies from around the world that examine the use and relevance of the desertification concept Despite an increasingly sophisticated understanding of dryland environments and societies the uses now being made of the desertification concept in parts of Asia exhibit many of the shortcomings of earlier work done in Africa It took scientists more than three decades to transform a perceived desertification crisis in the Sahel into a non event This book is an effort to critically examine that experience and accelerate the learning process in other parts of the world

Globalization and New Geographies of Conservation Karl S. Zimmerer, 2006-09-15 Examining the geographical dimensions of environmental management and conservation activities implemented on landscapes worldwide Globalization and New Geographies of Conservation creates a new framework and collects original case studies to explore recent developments in the interaction of humans and their environment Globalization and New Geographies of Conservation makes four important arguments about the recent coupling of conservation and globalization that is reshaping the place of nature in human environmental change First it has led to an unprecedented number of spatial arrangements whose environmental management goals and prescribed activities vary along a spectrum from strict biodiversity protection to sustainable utilization involving agriculture food production and extractive activities Conservation and globalization are also leading by necessity to new scales of management in these activities that rely on environmental science thus shifting the spatial patterning of humans and the environment This interaction results as well in the unprecedented importance of boundaries and borders transnational border issues pose both opportunities and threats to global conservation proposed by organizations and institutions that are themselves international Lastly Globalization and New Geographies of Conservation argues that the local level has been integral to globalization while the regional level is often eclipsed at the peril of the successful implementation of conservation and management programs Bridging the gap between geography and life science

Globalization and New Geographies of Conservation will appeal to a broad range of students of the environment conservation planning biodiversity management and development and globalization studies Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature William Cronon, 1996-10 This collection of essays historicizes the divorce of the natural from the human and shows that nature is a human construction arguing that what we have constructed we can reconstruct Resources and Migration Dietrich Werner, 2004-06-09 Migration of humans and animals plants and even microbes is a ubiquitous global phenomenon This book covers all forms of migration plant microbial animal or human and their mutual impact in detail The contributions in this book are the result of an innovative International Conference and OECD Workshop aimed at triggering off the interdisciplinary dialogue between natural scientists and socioeconomists Rethinking Natural Resource Degradation in Sub-Saharan Africa: Country overviews Tom Slaymaker, R. Blench, 2002 Inside Poverty and Development in Africa Marcel Rutten, André Leliveld, Dick Foeken, 2008-10-15 When discussing development issues in Africa it is not sufficient to simply stress the ubiquity of failure malnutrition disease predatory states and war one also has to recognize that important aspects in the lives of millions of ordinary people have been transformed over the last five decades The contributions in this book are rooted in extensive empirical research at local regional and or national level in different African countries Chad Ethiopia Kenya Lesotho South Africa and Uganda while some take a pan African view All however offer insight from different analytical perspectives into the heterogeneity of poverty and development processes in Sub Saharan Africa and confront the ideas concepts and assumptions that lie behind pro poor policies The volume also encourages policy makers to choose realistic policy prescriptions in an attempt to move people out of poverty Parks and **People in Postcolonial Societies** M. Ramutsindela,2004-09-24 Against the background of colonial and postcolonial experiences this volume shows that power relations and stereotypes embedded in the original Western idea of a national park are a continuing reality of contemporary national and transnational parks The volume seeks to dispel the myth that colonial beliefs and practices in protected areas have ended with the introduction of new nature conservation policies and practices It explores this continuity against the backdrop of the development of the national park idea in the West and its trajectories in colonial and postcolonial societies particularly southern Africa This volume analyses the dynamic relations between people and national parks and assesses these in southern Africa against broader experiences in postcolonial societies It draws examples from a broad range of situations and places It reinserts issues of prejudices into contemporary national park systems and accounts for continuities and interruptions in national parks ideals in different contexts Its interpretation of material transcends the North South divide This volume is accessible to readers from different academic backgrounds It is of special interest to academics policymakers and Non Governmental Organisations This book can also be used as prescribed or reference material in courses taught at university Rethinking Soil and Water Conservation in a Changing Society Valentina Mazzucato, David Niemeijer, 2000 Land-Use and Land-Cover Change Eric F. Lambin, Helmut J. Geist, 2008-01-08

This book presents recent estimates on the rate of change of major land classes Aggregated globally multiple impacts of local land changes are shown to significantly affect central aspects of Earth System functioning The book offers innovative developments and applications in the fields of modeling and scenario construction Conclusions are also drawn about the most pressing implications for the design of appropriate intervention policies Green Development Bill Adams, 2019-12-05 The concept of sustainability lies at the core of the challenge of environment and development and the way governments business and environmental groups respond to it Green Development provides a clear and coherent analysis of sustainable development in both theory and practice Green Development explores the origins and evolution of mainstream thinking about sustainable development and offers a critique of the ideas behind them It draws a link between theory and practice by discussing the nature of the environmental degradation and the impacts of development It argues that ultimately green development has to be about political economy about the distribution of power and not about environmental quality Its focus is strongly on the developing world The fourth edition retains the broad structure of previous editions but has been updated to reflect advances in ideas and changes in international policy Greater attention has been given to the political ecology of development market based and neoliberal environmentalism and degrowth This fully revised edition discusses the origins of thinking about sustainability and sustainable development and its evolution to the present day the ideas that dominate mainstream sustainable development including natural capital the green economy market environmentalism and ecological modernisation critiques of mainstream ideas and of neoliberal framings of sustainability and alternative ideas about sustainability that challenge business as usual thinking such as arguments about limits to growth and calls for degrowth the dilemmas of sustainability in the context of forests desertification food and farming biodiversity conservation and dam construction the challenge of policy choices about sustainability particularly between reformist and radical responses to the contemporary global dilemmas Green Development offers clear insights into the challenges of environmental sustainability and social and economic development It is unique in offering a synthesis of theoretical ideas on sustainability and in its coverage of the extensive literature on environment and development around the world The book has proved its value to generations of students as an authoritative thought provoking and readable guide to the field of sustainable development

Forthcoming Books Rose Arny,1997-04 Towards Rethinking Politics, Policy and Polity in the Anthropocene Hans Günter Brauch,2025-02-24 Humankind faces two anthropogenic threats to its survival that are closely linked The first is the end of the Holocene and the start of the Anthropocene which was marked by the test of a nuclear bomb on 16 July 1945 In the prevailing peace and security narrative nuclear weapons and the other country bloc or alliance pose a perceived threat to humankind s survival In the Anthropocene narrative we are the threat through our way of life and the burning of fossil fuels The start of the Anthropocene coincides with a change in the international order with the setting up of the UN and the Bretton Woods Institutions Three stages of this order are distinguished the Cold War bipolarity the post Cold War era

unipolarity and the end of the rule based global liberal order multipolarity on 24 February 2022 In this book ten multidisciplinary perspectives discuss complexity Anthropocene geopolitics peace and security discourses and the debate on the Anthropocene planetary boundaries complex crises and integrative geography in the Anthropocene governance and politics and the Patriacene and gender Both existential threats for humankind are illustrated by cover photos of the first nuclear weapons test on 16 July 1945 and by Category 5 Hurricane Otis an extreme weather event impacting on Acapulco in Mexico on 25 October 2023 The Anthropocene as a new epoch of Earth history coincides in 1945 with a change in the international order In the security and peace narrative the other and nuclear weapons pose an existential threat in the Anthropocene narrative This dual existential change requires a rethinking of politics policy and polity In the social sciences the Anthropocene is being discussed from multidisciplinary perspectives geography political science and peace security and gender studies This is an open access publication \*\*Rethinking Development Challenges for Public Policy\*\* K. Hanson, G. Kararach, T. Shaw, 2012-04-05 Covers topical issues for Africa's development economics and politics of climate change water management public service delivery and delivering aid The authors argue that these issues should be included in the post MDG paradigm and add an important voice to recent moves by academics and practitioners to engage with each other

West African Worlds Reginald Cline-Cole, Elsbeth Robson, 2016-02-17 West African Worlds provides a critical assessment of social economic and political change in Africa's most populous and arguably most externally focused region With an emphasis on globalisation and modernisation case studies and commentary are integrated throughout to highlight the concerns and issues of the region Enriched by an impressive mix of West African voices this text combines theory and application with policy and practice to address socio economic change the pursuit of livelihoods and development within West Africa Rethinking Climate Change, Conflict and Security Jan Selby, Clemens Hoffmann, 2017-10-02 Is global climate change likely to become a significant source of violent conflict and should it therefore be seen as a national security challenge Most Northern governments militaries think tanks and NGOs believe so as do many academic researchers on the grounds that increased temperatures changing precipitation patterns and rising sea levels will worsen existing social stresses especially within poor societies and marginal communities across Africa and Asia This book argues otherwise The first collection of its kind it brings together leading scholars of Anthropology Geography Development Studies and International Relations to provide a series of critical analyses of mainstream thinking on the climate security nexus It shows how policy discourse on climate conflict consistently misrepresents the causes of violence especially by obscuring its core political dimensions It demonstrates that quantitative research provides a flawed basis for understanding climate conflict linkages It argues that climate security discourse is in hoc with a range of questionable military authoritarian and developmental agendas And it reveals that the greening of global capitalism is already having violent consequences across the global South Climate change the book argues does indeed have serious conflict and security implications but these are

quite different from how they are usually imagined This book was published as a special issue of Geopolitics Earth at Risk in the 21st Century: Rethinking Peace, Environment, Gender, and Human, Water, Health, Food, Energy Security, and Migration Úrsula Oswald Spring, 2020-04-03 Earth at Risk in the 21st Century offers critical interdisciplinary reflections on peace security gender relations migration and the environment all of which are threatened by climate change with women and children affected most Deep rooted gender discrimination is also a result of the destructive exploitation of natural resources and the pollution of soils water biota and air In the Anthropocene the management of human society and global resources has become unsustainable and has created multiple conflicts by increasing survival threats primarily for poor people in the Global South Alternative approaches to peace and security focusing from bottom up on an engendered peace with sustainability may help society and the environment to be managed in the highly fragile natural conditions of a hothouse Earth Thus the book explores systemic alternatives based on indigenous wisdom gift economy and the economy of solidarity in which an alternative cosmovision fosters mutual care between humankind and nature Special analysis of risks to the survival of humankind in the 21st century Interdisciplinary studies on peace security gender and environment related to global environmental and climate change Critical reflections on gender relations peace security migration and the environment Systematic analysis of food water health energy security and its nexus Alternative proposals from the Global South with indigenous wisdom for saving Mother Earth **Reconsidering the Limits to Growth** Viktor Sadovnichy, Askar Akaev, Ilya Ilyin, Sergey Malkov, Leonid Grinin, Andrey Korotayev, 2023-09-25 Echoing the famous The Limits to Growth report from 1972 this edited volume analyses the changes that the World System has undergone to the present on the fiftieth anniversary of the original report During the past fifty years both the concept and understanding of these limits have significantly changed This book highlights that the evolution of the World System has approached a new critical milestone moving into a fundamentally new phase of historical development when the old economic and social technologies no longer work as efficiently as before or even begin to function counterproductively which leads the World System into a systemic crisis The book discusses the transition of human society to a new phase state the shape of which has not yet been determined New approaches are needed for both for the analysis of the global situation and for forecasts The book is based on an integrated approach including the world systems historical and evolutionary perspectives as well as a systematic view of society in which changes in one subsystem cause transformations in others Through mathematical modeling it defines the main vectors of transformations of the World System makes a detailed forecast of the development of all the main subsystems of the society and the World System while presenting horizons of changes from short term to ultra long term and presents different development scenarios as well as recommendations on how to achieve a transition to the most favorable scenario The book will appeal to members and followers of the Club of Rome policy makers as well as to scholars from various disciplines interested in a better understanding of the World System evolution global futures development studies climate

change and future societies Rethinking Development, 1994 Climate Migration Calum Nicholson, Benoit Mayer, 2023-09-21 This book investigates the epistemological and ethical challenges faced by studies exploring the relations between climate change and human migration At the heart of the contemporary preoccupation with climate change is a concern for its societal impacts Among these its presumed effect on human migration is perhaps the most politically resonant regardless of whether that politics is oriented towards human or national security There is however a problem research on the causal link between climate change and migration has shown it to be a highly equivocal one By extension it remains unclear what if any response is required from law and policy Carefully structured to guide the reader through the issue of climate migration in a logical and rigorous manner this book is the first to bring together key critiques caveats and cautions in order to systematically examine the challenges facing law policy and research on the topic At a time in which both the effects of climate change and the causes of migration are of great public and political interest and in which these interests are often fraught with sentiment and freighted with politics the book brings dispassionately critical perspectives to bear on a topic that desperately needs it Rethinking Water Management Caroline Figueres, Johan Rockstrom, Cecilia Tortajada, 2012 If water resources are to be distributed efficiently equitably and cost effectively in this rapidly changing world then it is clear that current water management practices are no longer feasible Innovative approaches are required to meet the increasing water demands of a growing world population and economy and the needs of the ecosystems supporting them New approaches have to be employed at global national and local levels In Rethinking Water Management a new generation of water experts from around the world examine the critical challenges confronting the water profession including rainwater and groundwater management recycling and reuse water rights transboundary access to water and financing of water They offer important new perspectives on the use management and conservation of fresh water in terms of both quantity and quality for the domestic agricultural and industrial sectors and show how a new set of paradigms can be applied to successfully manage water for the future Caroline Figueres is Head of the Urban Infrastructure Department at UNESCO IHE Water Education Institute in The Netherlands Cecilia Tortajada is Vice President of the Third World Centre for Water Management in Mexico and Vice President elect of the International Water Resources Association Johan Rockstr m is Water Resources Expert at UNESCO IHE

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