

## POPULATION AND SECURITY CHALLENGES IN THE SAHEL

# DEMOGRAPHY PEACE SECURITY IN THE SAHEL

Increasing security challenges across the Sahel region, including armed conflicts and terrorism, have led scholars and policy makers to address connections between the region's young demography and peace, stability and security. As the current demographic trends continue, low socio-economic opportunities and a lack of political inclusion for the youth remain major concerns. Consequently, the region's future stability will depend not only on the ability to nurture sustainable demographic dynamics, including reducing fertility rates, but also on the successful investment in inclusive policies responding to social and political demands.

- **In Sahel, large youth populations combined with other unfavourable socio-economic and political developments represent a major regional security challenge.**
- **Large youth cohorts offer an opportunity for a demographic dividend. However, governments will only benefit from a young demography if they improve governance, reduce poverty rates, and create more decent jobs.**
- **Strong urbanization is not a major source of social disturbance and violence, but an engine for development. Fighting urbanization can be counterproductive.**

## DEMOGRAPHY AND VIOLENCE

In the Sahel region, peace and development have come under increasing threat in recent years from internal and cross-border security challenges, including armed conflicts, organized crime, banditry, juvenile delinquency, and extreme terrorist attacks (by jihadist groups such as Boko Haram, Al Qaeda, and IS-affiliated groups, and the separatist Tuareg rebels). According to the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS), the region has observed a devastating surge in terrorist attacks. It is important to note that while the causes of these crises may be sought in a complex interaction of poverty, unemployment, patterns of natural resource access and distribution, social inequalities and poor governance, demographic factors must be considered as well.

In order to better understand this dynamic, this policy brief specifically addresses the relationship between demographic change and violent conflicts in the context of the Sahel region. Understanding how population growth and other socio-demographic factors, such as youth, poverty, unemployment and urbanization, may play a role in the emergence of complex security challenges is of great importance for the region's as well as sub-Saharan Africa's search for peace and economic development.

## THE DETERMINANT FACTORS

Results from a multidimensional analysis for the Sahel countries Commissioned by the UNFPA WCARO show that while the level of peace and security is positively correlated with factors such as secondary school enrolment and urbanization, it is on the other hand negatively correlated with demographic dependency ratio, economic inequality and youth unemployment rate (especially among young men).

The security implications of large youthful populations – so-called 'youth bulges' – have been the subject of extensive scientific study. Indeed, recent PRIO research finds that the

statistical risk of violent conflict is increased in countries with large youthful populations, especially in the context of low education, high unemployment and high fertility. Other studies including (Sciubba, 2011) highlight that countries with large youthful age structures are both less democratic and economically and socially underdevelopment. While various economic and socio-demographic strategies have been pursued over the past decades by the Sahelian states facing large youth bulges, the challenges of addressing great levels of regional poverty and inequality such as through the expansion of educational opportunities to facilitate youth access to the labour market still remain. An inability to effectively respond to these structural and demographic challenges will not only hamper the region's effort to improve its human capital and realize a demographic dividend, but also potentially undermine the Sahel's long-term political and economic stability.

## YOUTH AND UNEMPLOYMENT

The Sahelian region is characterized not only by its high population growth, but by its large youth population. The Sahel region has one of the largest relative youth populations in the world by far. For example, as of 2019, the median age in Niger was at barely above 15. This young section of the population faces a labour market that is relatively undynamic and is unable to create the massive numbers of decent and sustainable jobs needed. Across the whole region, unemployment rates remain relatively high, and young people and women continue to be those most affected. In Niger, the number of new job seekers increased significantly from 520,000 in 2012 to more than a million in 2020.<sup>4</sup> In Burkina Faso, the unemployment rate for people aged 15 or older rose from 2.5% in 2000 to 6.4% in 2020. In addition, the region's low schooling for girls and women not only has negative implications for the socio-political rights of these women, but also negatively affects economic mobilization, which is inhibited by lack of access to the labour market.

Meanwhile, the failure of the labour market to create sufficient

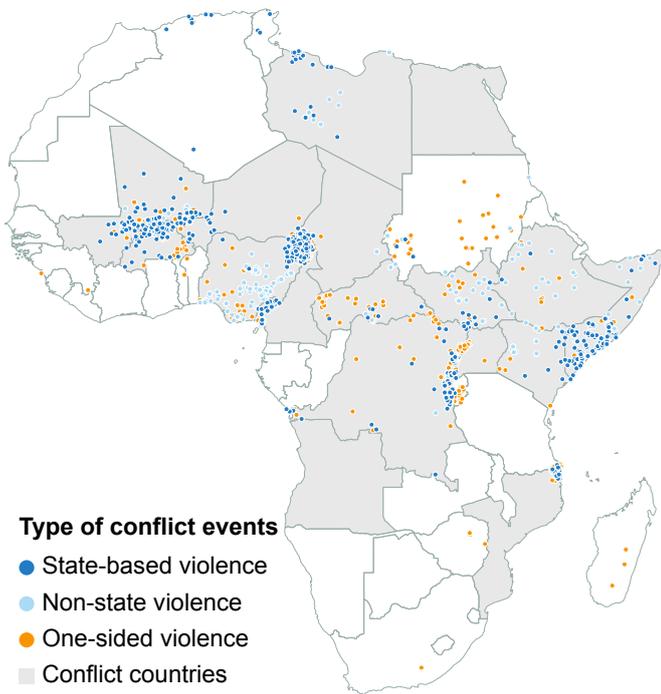


Figure 1: Conflict trends in Africa, 2019. Source: Palik and Rustad (2020). Data: UCDP dataset

jobs in a context of high population growth has resulted in a rapid expansion of informal activities. The urban informal sector, along with agricultural and livestock activities outside the modern sector, accounts for an estimated 70–90% of the workforce in Sahelian countries. The low remuneration of the working population and lack of opportunities for young people who are neither employed nor in education or training pose a major threat to the region’s stability. Thus, if the enormous needs for youth employment and other areas such as human capital (e.g. education with appropriate skills, and health) are not met through strong and effective measures, this will inevitably lead to a higher risk of violent conflicts, both at local and national levels.

## POVERTY

The region’s high youth unemployment has exacerbated the extreme poverty level within many Sahelian countries, where the average standard of living among the majority of

the populations remains low. Despite the progress recorded in recent years, the latest available national data indicate that between 40% and 50% of people live below the World Bank’s extreme poverty line of \$1.90 (in constant 2011 dollars) per person per day, in most Sahelian countries. A multidimensional poverty index calculated by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) showed that poverty affects more than half of the population in all Sahelian countries. In Burkina Faso, the 2014 national income poverty rate was 40.1%. In Niger, even though the poverty rate decreased from 48.2% in 2011 to 45.4% in 2014, the absolute number of poor people increased by about half a million during this three-year period. However, extreme poverty is not only monetary; it also applies to poor access to health, education, sanitation, and decent housing. In Niger, food insecurity affects more than one million people every year. A 2016 survey indicated that 2 million people, or nearly 12% of the total population, are affected by food and nutrition crises.

Another persistent challenge is the inequalities between urban and rural areas. In many contexts, extreme poverty remains essentially a rural phenomenon. In Burkina Faso, the incidence of poverty in rural areas in 2014 was 54.7% compared to 20.8% in urban areas. Rural poverty accounts for 93% of the national poverty rate in Burkina Faso. Similar spatial inequalities have been found in access to education and health.

## URBANIZATION

The very rapid population growth in the Sahel has been accompanied by an even faster growth in the number of people living in cities, transforming the overwhelmingly rural communities of the 1960s into more urbanized societies. In 2020, more than 50% of the populations in Mauritania and Nigeria were living in urban areas. Similarly, all the other Sahelian states, short of Niger and Chad, are expected to be predominantly urban by 2050. In Burkina Faso, the urban population grew from 110,000 in 1960 to 6.2 million in

2019. Moreover, the country's urbanization rate will pass the 50% mark by 2050.

The strong urbanization in the region is set to continue. This puts significant strains on states' ability to provide public services such as adequate education, healthcare, good housing, electricity and water supply. Additionally, as population growth is not necessarily synonymous with economic growth and good city governance, many Sahelian urban dwellers are thus forced to survive in deplorable conditions in shanty towns around the major cities. This in turn can lead some, especially the youth, to become involved in organized violent groups in order to provide for their needs.

While decelerating the rise in urban population growth could be seen as politically desirable by some governments in the region, curbing urbanization rarely – if ever – works, and could indeed be highly counterproductive. Urban populations generally enjoy a higher income, better education, more healthy lives and more pluralistic values. By designing policies to make it less attractive to move to cities, governments not only produce despair that can feed unrest and violence, they forego opportunities to support sustainable urban development that can spur economic, social and political dividends.

Research generally shows that urban population growth is not a significant threat to peace and stability.<sup>13</sup> If anything, high urban growth rates are associated with less instability, and if well managed, increased urbanization in Sahel can have a significant positive impact on economic and social development, and hence stability. In order to maintain social cohesion and peace, urgently developing proper urban policies and investing in basic social services to meet the needs of growing and demanding young urban populations in a sustainable and coherent manner will be crucial. However, if these challenges go unaddressed, or are even further undermined, social cohesion may become one of the key challenges faced by most of the cities within the region.

## TERRORISM

Poor, unemployed, and driven by the necessity to survive, young people are primary targets for being recruited into armed gangs. Crime, political instability, and migration flows are fuelled by the availability of large numbers of young people without prospects. Since 2015, extreme violent events involving militant jihadist groups in the Sahel have doubled, causing many lost lives. In a recent report, the UNOWAS flagged that in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, the number of terrorist events has since 2016, caused more than 4,000 deaths in 2019 compared to about 770 three years earlier.

According to the results of a survey conducted in 2017 by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in the Zinder region of Niger, 86% of the young people surveyed cited unemployment and social precariousness as the main causes of violent extremism. This scourge is driven by economic difficulties according to 88.1% of the young people questioned in 2016 by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue in a survey covering a panel of people from eight Sahelian countries, while only 1.9% of these young Sahelians mentioned religious radicalism.

The continued escalation of extremist violent behaviour has undermined various development efforts in areas such as human capital and healthcare by the respective governments. In order to tackle the rise of extremist violence, governments of Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali have in recent years doubled their national budgets aimed for enforcement of security forces from an average 5.4 per cent of government spending, to 10,6 per cent.

Peace and security strategies must therefore focus on concrete responses to social demand. Creating educational, employment and political opportunities for the growing youth populations provides for greater stability in the region and for a reaping of demographic dividends, economically, socially and politically.

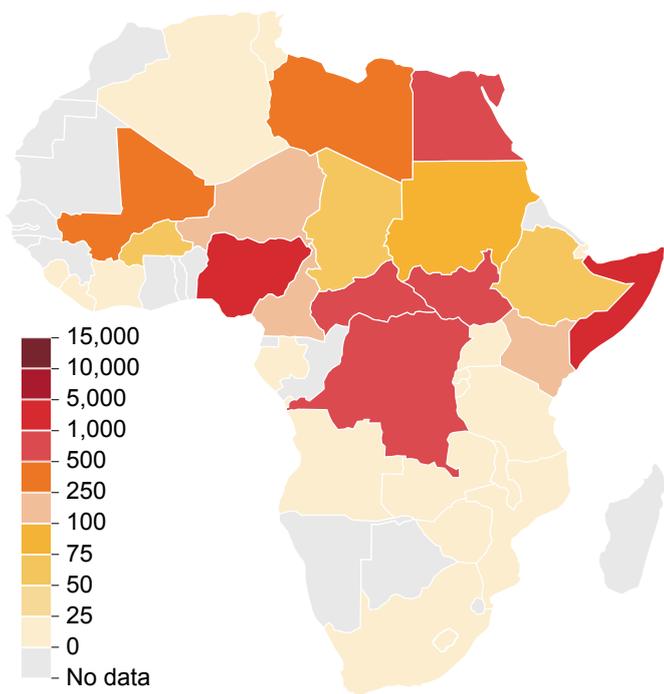


Figure 2: Death from terrorism in Africa, 2017.  
Source: Global Terrorism Database (2018)

### DEMOGRAPHY, PEACE AND INSTABILITY IN MALI

Similar to other countries in the Sahel and West Africa, Mali has since 2012 been experiencing an increasingly complex and demanding security situation. With its population of 20 million, expected to increase to 44 million by 2050, the landlocked country has been plagued by insecurity and attacks carried out by non-state armed groups present in the region, including several jihadist groups. The security situation in the Central and Northern parts of the country, which has been occupied by armed groups, continues to deteriorate. The continued violence has had detrimental impacts on the country’s economic and social development. For example, the instability has resulted in thousands of casualties and hundreds of thousands of displaced persons. Between 2012 and 2019, a total of 2,514 civilian’s deaths were due to the violent events carried out by terrorist groups.

In the Malian case, the root causes of the increased radicalization and violent extremism observed across the country

in recent years has often been linked to the inability of the Malian governments to effectively respond to the various political and economic grievances experienced in particular by their large youth populations. The unemployment rate stood at 16.5% for young people aged 15–24 in 2018, and 40.3% in 2016 for those aged 15–19. For many of the youth living in the rural and urban cities, acquiring education does not result in accessing job opportunities in the labour market. This is a consequence of the mismatch between the qualifications gained in the initial vocational training system and the skills need in the labour market.

The deteriorating security situation has prompted the Malian authorities to significantly increase its defence and security spending. Figure 3 shows change in the budget allocated to military spending in Mali since 1980. To finance additional security spending, the state makes budgetary trade-offs between security spending and spending that seeks to eradicate socio-economic issues and improve human capital.

### DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS ON FUTURE STABILITY

As studies have pointed out, the challenges associated with demographic transition in the Sahelian countries are becoming more acute and appear to be far reaching. As population projections for most of the countries show a steady increase, this prospect clearly has substantial social and security implications. In other words, if the current demographic trends and challenges persist, these countries will continue to face a risk of great levels of violence and instability, including extreme terrorism. As the demographic explosion of young working people appears to be inevitable, the need for actionable measures and investment in employment and poverty reduction in both urban and rural destinations, together with strengthening human capital through extended health and education investments, is crucial for sustaining peace.

Achieving sustainable development and ending the vicious cycle of violent crises will depend on not only controlling

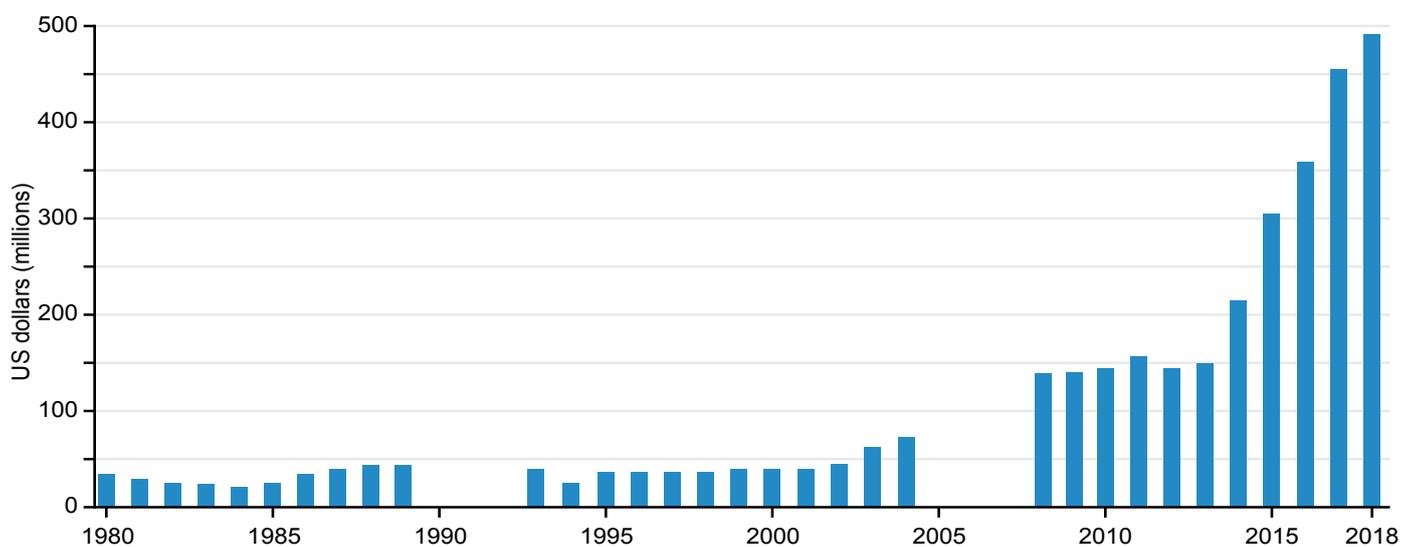


Figure 3: Changes in Mali's military expenditure. Source: UNFPA WCARO (2020d)

population growth through achieving the 3 UNFPA transformative results (zero preventable maternal death; zero unmet need for family planning and zero gender based violence), but also improving governance of public management, strengthening human capital and creating jobs for young people on a massive scale. If effective policies are not implemented to empower young people and women economically and politically, this will leave many youths vulnerable to recruitment to terrorist groups and other violent organizations. Negligence of the challenges pertaining to strong population growth, resulting in large youth bulges, may thus constitute a breeding ground for insecurity in the region. . On the other hand, provided sound investments skills appropriate for the job markets, youth could provide economic prosperity, social inclusion, and political stability.

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