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The Nexus Between Democracy, Security and Climate Change in West Africa: Advocating for Inclusive and Holistic Approaches

DR. NDEYE AMY NDIAYE

November 2023

BACKGROUND

Elections are a fundamental institution for any state, and holding regular elections is vital for the establishment of a democratic culture. The ECOWAS Supplementary Protocol of 2001, whose main focus is on the development of the rule of law, the consolidation of democracy and the adoption of common principles of good governance within the ECOWAS space, categorically rejects any form of undemocratic access to the supreme office in any of its states. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that democratic governance in West African countries is in a sorry state, and the upheavals caused by the recent series of coups d'état have only served to aggravate the situation and jeopardize the gains achieved so far.

Added to this are the violent conflicts raging in the region, which continue to intensify. Armed groups are active in the central Sahel as well as in the Lake Chad Basin. Violent attacks continue in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, particularly in the tri-border region of Liptako

Gourma. In the north of certain coastal countries such as Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, and Togo, violence is increasingly frequent and deadly.

In addition, climate data reveals that West Africa and the Sahel are experiencing regional temperature rises at faster rates than the global average, and that rainfall in these regions is increasingly unpredictable. The regions are also expected to experience unprecedented variations in temperature and rainfall in the late 2030s and early 2040s. Climate change has an impact on the vegetation cover, the availability of natural resources, agricultural yields, and biodiversity. These changes exacerbate human suffering, heighten political instability, complicate humanitarian responses, and threaten human security.

Economic stress, competition for resources in fragile or conflict-affected areas, forced displacements and existing disparities between men and women are among the key factors of the poverty affecting the countries of West



Africa. In a context of rising poverty rates and political democracy under constant threat, where fundamental human rights barely are enforced and violent conflicts are intensifying and spreading, there is an urgent need to review our political agendas and propose holistic and inclusive responses.

West Africa is facing a complex, virtually inextricable situation that poses a threat to sustainable development. The importance of adopting a holistic approach and the folly of taking an isolated or fragmented view of the security challenges besetting the region are now self-evident. There is an urgent need for in-depth reflection on the 'Democracy-Security-Climate Change' triptych, with a view to finding concrete solutions capable of bringing about lasting peace and collective security.

This paper presents an analysis of the Democracy-Security-Climate Change Nexus in West Africa while seeking to outline remedial recommendations aimed at addressing the challenges associated with the issue.

WHY IS THERE A NEXUS BETWEEN DEMOCRACY, SECURITY AND CLIMATE CHANGE?

'Nexus approach' is an increasingly common expression in the world of international organizations, NGOs, and sometimes even in academic circles. It refers to an integrated approach aimed at better linking emergency relief and responses with longer-term solutions to increase the resilience of crisis-affected communities and enable them to live in peace. According to some in the field of environmental protection, the *nexus approach* represents a new direction that is in line with sustainability research and promotes an eco-friendly, multi-actor approach.

The context of prolonged crises in West Africa is conducive to the implementation of the nexus approach. In addition to the coups d'état and the failure to comply with electoral timetables, which represent serious threats to democratic governance, security tensions and virulent climate shocks mean that states need to show resilience and adopt concerted governance approaches.

In this paper, the concept of the *Democracy-Security-Climate Change Nexus* is more than just an approach; it is first and foremost a meeting point, or even a con-



nection, between these issues. The term ‘nexus’, which is taken from the Latin *nexus*, means link or sequence. At a time when pessimism is sweeping across West Africa, as crises and multifaceted challenges take hold and worsen, it is important to examine effective, pragmatic, and inclusive responses. From this perspective, reflecting on the link between democratic, security, and climate crises is an urgent priority.

There is no doubt that democracy is currently in decline in West Africa. The proliferation of coups d’état and the increasingly frequent silencing of political opponents are clear indicators of this unfortunate situation, which provides fertile ground for the adverse effects of climate change to fester and aggravate security tensions. The interactions between the two cannot be denied.

The concept of climate security can be understood in terms of how climate change can directly or indirectly exacerbate or compound risks of violence, conflict, and other vulnerabilities and threats at individual, community, and even state levels.

Climate security has become one of the most important concerns on the global political agenda and in the field of peacebuilding. But does climate change have an impact on peace and security? There is no definitive answer. The causal link between climate change, democracy, and security tensions is often debated.

Climate change has always been perceived as a catalyst for security tensions, in conjunction with a range of other variables, including political factors such as the exclusion of specific groups, the dynamics of armed groups, discrimination or inequalities in governance, levels of inequality or poverty, and more. Half of all UN peacekeeping operations take place in the countries most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.

Climate change does not inherently create violent conflict, but its negative effects are amplified in fragile and conflict-affected settings. Furthermore, policies promoting climate protection can only succeed in a context of peace and democracy. During conflict, climate issues take a back seat to more immediate or more visible challenges.

The recent coups d’état in West Africa, the threats to democratic gains, the latent conflicts within the

ECOWAS community and the various crises raging within the organization have been detrimental to both democracy and climate security. They have threatened peace and eroded the resilience of the global institutions that facilitate cooperation on these issues.

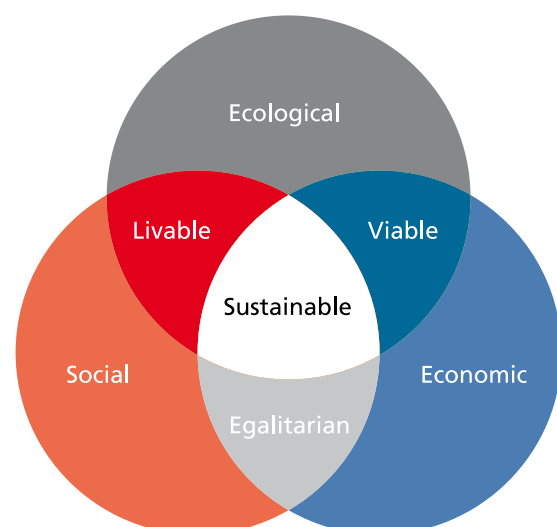
KEY ACTION LEVERS FOR DECISIONMAKERS

The systematization of the Democracy-Security-Climate Change Nexus raises three key points that constitute powerful levers of action for decisionmakers::

- Incorporating Sustainability into Public Policy
- Applying the Principles of Good Governance
- Adopting Green Citizenship or Eco-citizenship

Incorporating Sustainability into Public Policy

‘Sustainability means development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.’ Government authorities need to mainstream sustainable development in their strategic actions across all three key areas, namely: economic, social, and environmental development. This will entail the adaptation of sustainable development to the unique socio-economic realities of West Africa. To achieve that goal, public policy must draw on traditional African mechanisms for peace, security, and democracy. By taking traditional governance systems into account,





political governance on climate and security issues can be strengthened and revitalized. Taking endogenous mechanisms into account will also help to develop cultural awareness of the urgent need to invest in sustainability.

Sustainable development places the relationship between democracy, security, and climate change in a forward-looking perspective, highlighting its social and economic dimensions. However, to be effective, policies on sustainable development and even climate security must first be supported by a wealth of scientific studies and backed up by concrete recommendations. As a recent study by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) concluded, much of the literature on climate security focuses on 'causes' and 'does not produce relevant recommendations for addressing climate-related security risks on an operational level'. Scientific insight should underpin all political decision-making, and it has to be acknowledged that there is a critical lack of studies on the degree of vulnerability of men and women to climate change and political instability, which has been detrimental to the formulation and implementation of suitable strategies.

Recommendations

- **Take into account systems of governance based on endogenous sustainable development:** an integrated approach to sustainable development should be adopted, taking traditional mechanisms into account. To achieve this, it is important to revitalize cultural practices, particularly those based on mysticism and the myth of the sacred. It is also important to resacralize the connection between African culture and the environment (the sacred forest, the sacred tree, etc.) in keeping with the concept.
- **Finance sustainable development projects:** technical and financial partners could also earmark a significant and ambitious contribution for projects relating to environmental issues, such as Green Climate Funds and other climate finance tools.
- **Support scientific research with concrete recommendations** on the impact of climate change on democracy and security in general, with specific reference to women and young people.

Applying the Principles of Good Governance

From a political perspective, the key to understanding the trilogy of democracy, security and climate change is governance. Democracy lies at the heart of political governance and fosters the involvement of each and every one of us in the response to climate change and security challenges. The democratic arena is ideally suited to finding appropriate responses to climate and security challenges, because these challenges are not purely environmental in nature, but rather embrace both a political and a security dimension.

To reduce the risks of geopolitical instability in a context of climate change, it is therefore vital to pursue collective efforts to consolidate sound democratic governance. Effective democratic governance brings a normative or evaluative dimension to the process of government. From a human rights perspective, democratic governance refers primarily to the process by which public institutions conduct public affairs, manage public resources, and ensure the implementation of human rights. This means taking account of environmental considerations in the day-to-day work of civil servants, including the defence and security forces, both in terms of strategy and their deployment on the ground.

Good governance also implies transparency and the inclusion of all stakeholders, including women and youth. Given that climate change can result in a lack of means of subsistence and exacerbate the poverty that is a 'breeding ground for insecurity', it is crucial to consider the concerns of women and young people, who are often more severely affected by such phenomena.

Recommendations

- **Adopt an inclusive and gender-sensitive governance strategy:** using a bottom-up approach, this naturally translates into community involvement, public participation in the climate debate (which is not the sole preserve of the experts), and cultivating a sense of ownership of these issues within local communities (climate change is everyone's business, not just the decision-makers'). From this perspective, the involvement of women and young people in political governance relating to climate change and security is a fundamental pillar.



- **Take traditional governance systems into account:** it is important to breathe new life into ancestral socio-political practices in keeping with the ‘palaver tree’ philosophy, which can lay the foundation for a community-based and participatory approach to governance. Taking traditional governance bodies into account can strengthen and revitalize political governance on climate and security issues.
- **Pay serious attention to the political dimension of environmental protection issues:** at this level, it is important to place the environmental dimension at the heart of governance and democratic policies and not view it in isolation. The environment, like climate change, must be included in governance charters as well as in policy documents and instruments.
- **Promote inclusion and transparency in climate change projects and programmes:** A number of projects and programmes seem to have been carried out in the climate field, but concrete results have been slow to materialize, hence the urgent need for better monitoring. Enhanced inclusion of local communities would promote increased ownership and

better control on the ground. Adapting highly technical ecological jargon by introducing more straightforward methods would make it easier for communities to access information.

- **Mainstream the environmental and/or climate dimension in all relevant legal and political instruments at international and regional levels, but especially at West African level:** the right to a healthy environment must be expressly recognized in all the fundamental charters and relevant regional legal instruments of African countries, in accordance with the provisions of Article 24 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights.

Adopting Green Citizenship or Eco-citizenship

From a conceptual point of view, green citizenship refers to the ecological awareness of belonging to an environment that allows us to exist, which implies that every individual has rights and duties in relation to the environment. Public awareness of the urgency of climate change and the challenges it poses to security





and democracy should lead to greater community participation, inclusion, and leadership in the search for appropriate, holistic responses.

Climate change is not something that can be decreed, it can only be observed. Increased awareness on the part of governments has led to the emergence of a solidarity-based approach to human rights. This has led to the constitutionalization of environmental law, endowing it with a timeless dimension in relation to other fundamental rights. By way of example:

It is now apparent that the freedom of 'present generations' ends where that of 'future generations' begins. The right to health encompasses not only physical, mental, and social health (as per the WHO definition of health), but also environmental health (protection against environmental damage).

The right to life goes beyond the right not to be condemned to death, embracing transgenerational connections through the requirement to protect biodiversity and the environmental balance.

This policy stance has led to an approach marked by institutional solidarity on three levels: inter-state solidarity, intra-state solidarity and state and non-state solidarity.

Constitutional recognition of a right to the environment strengthens its legitimacy and is a powerful advocacy tool with respect to governments, international organizations, and whole communities. Public awareness of the urgency of climate change issues and the challenges they pose to security and democracy should lead to greater community participation, inclusion, and leadership in the search for appropriate, holistic responses.

Recommendations

- **Develop environmental justice and social justice:** in this respect, it is important to build the capacity of national and international justice actors in relation to these concepts and to develop strategies for integrating them into the day-to-day work of the justice system. This could also contribute to the development of strategic litigation and improve the quality of public debate on climate issues.

It is also recommended to make the 'right to a healthy environment' a constitutional right by clearly enshrining it in the fundamental law of each West African country. It is also important to explicitly include the right to a healthy environment in the African Charter on Human Rights as well as in key texts on democracy and security.



- **Raise awareness among community actors:** there is a need to tap into community relays (religious and traditional authorities, badienou gokh, local authorities, sports and cultural associations, defence and security forces, etc.) to cultivate climate awareness in the population with a view to empowering people to take ownership of and protect their environment.
- **Develop a bottom-up approach to governance:** the principle of public participation, particularly by young people and women, is fundamental for developing environmental awareness among citizens. The closest level of governance should be utilized, especially the local authorities, and women's and youth organizations should also be involved in formulating local responses in the short, medium, and long term.
- **Introduce an eco-pass,** similar to the health pass, upstream, during, and downstream of every development project. All measures **taken should be made public in environmental impact studies** (Senegal-Mauritania gas project: contracts and impact studies, etc.).
- **Introduce 'environmental offences/crimes',** according to the seriousness of the offence, into each country's criminal code and Take steps to set up an international environmental court with all the appropriate legal resources and tools.
- **Definitively establish green citizenship at all levels:** To achieve this, women and young people should be more closely involved in the fight against climate change, and the tools of green citizenship should be promoted by training community leaders, young people, women, and the political authorities on the nexus between democracy, security, and climate change. Action on green citizenship should be taken at the level of the major regional blocs.



About the author

Dr Ndeye Amy Ndiaye is a lecturer and researcher in international law. Formerly a jurist at the Extraordinary African Chamber, Dr Ndiaye has also been tasked with drawing up a gender policy for the Senegalese gendarmerie, as well as updating the gender strategies of the Senegalese armed forces and several non-governmental organizations. As a member of civil society, Dr Ndiaye works closely with the United Nations system, embassies, ministerial departments, and international organizations on issues relating to gender equality, peace and security, migration and women's leadership. She also coordinates several research programmes on gender-peace-security-migration and leadership issues.

Imprint

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Peace and Security
Competence Centre Sub-Saharan Africa
Point E, Rue de Fatick x Blvd. de l'Est
Residence Bity Lokho, 6th floor
P.O. Box 15 416 Dakar-Fann, Senegal

Tel.: +221 33 859 20 02 | Fax: +221 33 864 49 31
Email: info@fes-pscc.org | www.fes-pscc.org
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Design: Green Eyez Design SARL
www.greeneyezdesign.com

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