



Pastoralism in West Africa

From a vector of conflict to a tool for peace and sustainability?

Editorial

Pastoralism in West Africa: From a vector of conflict to a tool for peace and sustainability?

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Livestock market in Tchaourou (Benin)

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Abstract

West Africa is currently facing pressing regional challenges, among them the expansion of insecurity and instability brought on by jihadist armed groups and the increasing effects of climate change. The response to these challenges requires collaboration between the states. However, the present-day increased focus on national sovereignty and security, rather than regional stability through cooperation and integration, has divided the region.

Combining literature review with primary data collected from Nigerien civil society organisations active in pastoralism and agriculture, and from current and former transhumant pastoralists from Benin, this Insight explores the potential of pastoralism, a customary practice common to all Western African countries, in contributing to peace, stability and the sustainable mitigation of climate-related challenges in the region.

This paper delves into core issues involving and affecting present-day pastoralism in the Sahel. It suggests that States' failure to address the marginalisation of pastoralism has contributed to the spread of Jihadist armed groups in West Africa, which has further marginalised (Fulani) transhumant pastoralists, exacerbated local tensions (including

those between herders and farmers), and profoundly affected pastoral practices and the nature of transhumance. Through heightened resource scarcity, climate change is further challenging pastoralist practices and resilience, threatening food security and aggravating instability.

In contrast to their label as a vector for violence and conflict, this Insight argues that pastoralism could be part of solutions for peace and sustainability in West Africa, by creating socio-economic benefits and connection in rural and remote areas, by occupying remote land otherwise left uncontrolled to illegal and criminal activity and by contributing to food production in a way that is considered as most sustainable and most adaptable to the realities of the demographically and environmentally changing (semi-) arid West African context.

The paper ends with recommendations to address both the pastoralist and security crises in the region, through the (re-)investment in rural and pastoralist infrastructures and renewed regional collaboration. In addition, pastoralism should receive equal consideration to agriculture in governance and decision-making at the local, national, and regional levels.

Acronyms

AES	Alliance of Sahel States	MUJAO	Movement of the Unity of the Jihad in West Africa
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States	ISGS	Islamic State in the Greater Sahara
CSO	Civil Society Organisation	JNIM	Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin
CNPC	China National Petroleum Corporation	CRIET	Court for the Repression of Economic Offences and Terrorism
AQIM	Al-Qaeda Islamic Maghreb		
MNLA	National Movement for Liberalisation of the Azawad		

Introduction

Since 2020, West Africa has been experiencing political turmoil characterised by a succession of coups d'état in Guinea (September 2021), Mali (March 2012, August 2020, and May 2021), Burkina Faso (January 2022, September 2022), and Niger (July 2023).¹ This led to the split of West Africa into two blocs: the coastal countries, which are still members of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, who founded the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) in 2023 and withdrew from ECOWAS in January 2025.²

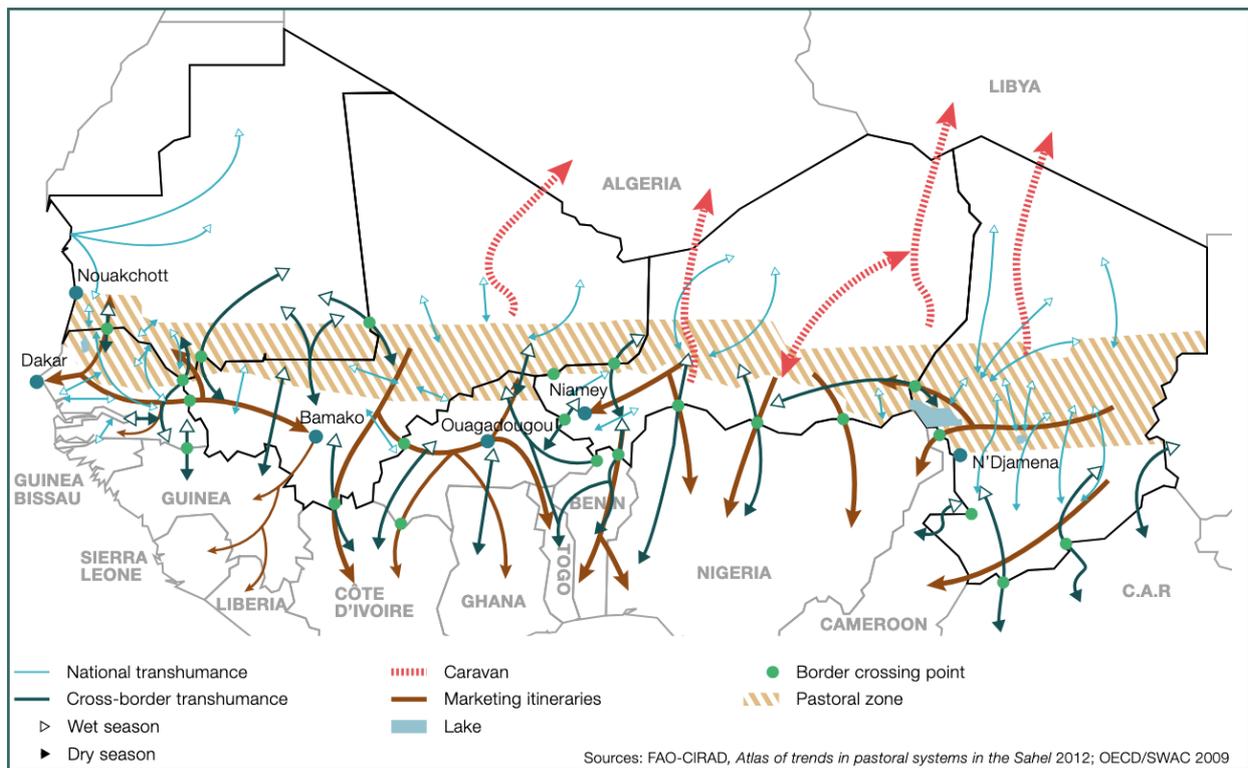
Since the military junta took power in the AES countries, relations between West African nations have deteriorated significantly³ and this at a time when common challenges urge increased collaboration. Two of those challenges, climate change and the expansion of jihadist activity, profoundly impact one of the most common customary practices in all Western African countries: pastoralism.

In this Insight, pastoralism is defined as a herding system based on the displacement of cattle following the rainy and dry seasons. Pastoralism is hence an extensive herding system, which means that cattle move in search of natural resources (water, pastureland), as opposed to an intensive herding system, where cattle remain in the same place and are fed with inputs. Transhumance is the activity of

displacing cattle in search of water and pastureland. Transhumance can happen on short distances, within (sub-)national zones, or longer ones, including transboundary movements. Finally, agro-pastoralists refer to people who farm fields and also own cattle which they take on transhumance. Agro-pastoralists make up for a large part the population in rural areas of West Africa.⁴

As Figure 1 shows, the transhumant movement of cattle involves all West African countries. Since the 1970s, transhumant Sahelians have moved with their herds to coastal countries during the dry season, in search of pasture and water, resources that their arid regions can only offer during the rainy season.⁵ In rural regions of the Sahel, 69 % of the income comes from pastoralist activities.⁶ Pastoralism contributes to 15 % of the national gross domestic product (GDP) of Sahelian countries.⁷ In Mali, the export of livestock to neighbouring coastal countries is the third-largest export commodity after gold and cotton.⁸ Yet the contribution of pastoralism to national economies and stability seems undervalued. On the contrary, pastoralism has been increasingly seen as part of the problem (see the section: The spread of jihadist armed groups in Africa: Fulani pastoralists between a rock and a hard place), rather than a tool for solutions.

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- 1 Reuters (30 August 2023), Recents coups in West and Central Africa.
 - 2 TV5 Monde (25 January 2025), Le Mali, le Burkina et le Niger quittent officiellement la CEDEAO. Voir aussi Art.4 of the Traité portant création de la Confédération du Sahel (AES), Niamey, 6 July 2024.
 - 3 Afrobarometer (31 January 2024), Le retrait de la CEDAO, le dernier chapitre de la relation autrefois considérée comme positive.
 - 4 Vétérinaires Sans Frontières (November 2020), Mitigating the ongoing crisis in the Sahel- the key role of pastoralists, Policy Brief, n°8, Brussels, p. 3.
 - 5 Thébaut, B. (November 2016), Rapport sur l'atelier de la microassurance pour le bétail en Afrique de l'Ouest, Dakar, 2-3 novembre 2016.
 - 6 APSS (2014), Elements de bilan au soutien public à l'élevage au Burkina Faso, au Mali et au Niger depuis Maputo, cited in : Inter-réseaux (n.d), L'élevage pastoral au Sahel et en Afrique de l'Ouest, 5 idées reçues à l'épreuve des faits, p. 11.
 - 7 BAD et OCDE (2009), Perspectives économiques en Afrique, cited in : Inter-réseaux (n.d), L'élevage pastoral au Sahel et en Afrique de l'Ouest, 5 idées reçues à l'épreuve des faits, p. 9.
 - 8 Benjaminsen, T.A. (2024), Climate Security and Climate Justice: Recognizing context in Sahel, Edward Elgar Publishing, UK and USA, p. 44.



▲ **Figure 1: Transhumance and nomadism in Sahelian countries.** Extracted from OECD/SWAC (2014), *An Atlas of the Sahara-Sahel: Geography, Economics and Security, West African Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris.* p143.

To assess the relevance of pastoralism as a factor in regional stability, the Insight first evaluates changes in transhumance practices since the recent expansion of jihadist activity in the region and the ban on foreign livestock in coastal countries. The analysis links the pastoralist crisis with the current regional security crisis and discusses the consequences for transhumant herders and local populations' perceptions of transhumance. Next, the paper asks what role pastoralism can play in contributing to regional peace as well as sustainable solutions to address threads posed by climate change, where natural resources are becoming scarce and populations are growing rapidly. Finally, the Insight offers recommendations for making pastoralism a more effective tool for regional stability and the fight against climate change.

This paper is based on a literature review of academic research, media articles, reports of civil society organisations (CSOs) and research institutes, and legal documents. Secondary data are complemented by phone calls⁹ with members of Nigerien CSOs active in pastoralism and agriculture, and face-to-face and focus group interviews conducted in Cotonou and the department of Borgou (both in Benin), with current and former transhumant pastoralists (male, female and youth), and CSOs active in pastoralism. These interviews were held in January 2024 and January 2025. Pastoralists and pastoralist organisations in Niger and Benin were interviewed to capture the lived experiences of the current challenges to pastoralism, as seen from the context of a Sahelian and a coastal West African context. All respondents and their contributions have been anonymised in this report.

⁹ Research visits to Niger were cancelled twice due to ongoing security issues.

1. New realities in West Africa

1.1. Fragmented West Africa and isolated Sahel

Despite state borders drawn in the second half of the 20th century, West Africa has largely remained one integrated region. The social integration is the fruit of age-old migrations resulting in the presence of several ethnic and linguistic groups living in different West African countries, such as the Hausa, present in Niger, Nigeria, Togo and Benin,¹⁰ the Touareg, stretching from far southwestern Libya to southern Algeria, Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso or the nomadic Fulani communities-also called Peul or Fulbe- stretching across the African continent from Senegal to Sudan including, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, and Cameroon.¹¹ The population of West African countries reflects the regional exchange, with, for instance, 8 million Burkinabé, half a million of Malian and 112 000 Guineans living in Ivory Coast.¹² The Economic Community of the West African States (ECOWAS), created in 1974 to promote regional economic cooperation and trade liberalisation, has recognised this diversity and translated it politically and economically by adopting the Free Movement of Persons and establishing a common market and free trade between its member states.¹³

Yet, ECOWAS is currently facing an existential crisis. In the last five years, four of its member states have experienced (repeated) military-led coups d'état: Guinea (September 2021), Mali (March 2012, August 2020, and May 2021), Burkina Faso (January 2022, September 2022), and Niger (July 2023). While Guinea is trying to reintegrate ECOWAS,¹⁴ Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, however, have announced their withdrawal from the regional organisation.¹⁵ Instead, they created the Alliance of Sahel States (*Alliance des États du Sahel*, in French, or AES), which will be competent for the defence and security, diplomacy, and development of each state of the confederation.¹⁶

The AES member states reshuffled the cards of the regional order, breaking ties with their traditional security allies and economic partners (the European Union, and especially France, and the United States),¹⁷ while intensifying security collaboration with Russia.¹⁸ Furthermore, the AES members have isolated themselves from their neighbours. Mali accused Algeria of “*hostility and interference in domestic affairs*”¹⁹ and of being a haven for Jihadist armed groups,²⁰ whereas Algerians are frustrated to observe the Malian army, accompanied by Russian fighters, manoeuvring at their border.²¹ Burkina Faso and Ivory Coast have also accused each other of destabilisation

10 Ososanya, T. (2020), Hausa tribe is Africa's largest ethnic group with 78 million people.

11 Velturo, M. (2020), Religious tensions and Fulani communities in West and Central Africa, Fact Sheet: Fulani Communities, United States Commission on International Religious Freedom.

12 Williams, W. (2025), Tendances migratoires à surveiller en 2025, Centre d'Études Stratégiques de l'Afrique.

13 ECOWAS website, visited 19 April 2025.

14 Africa Intelligence (9 July 2025), Mamadi Doumbouya joue les bons payeurs auprès de la CEDEAO.

15 The withdrawal announcement was made in January 2024 and became effective a year later, in January 2025. TV5 Monde (29 January 2025), Le Mali, le Burkina et le Niger quittent officiellement la CEDEAO.

16 Art. 4 of the Traité portant création de la Confédération des États du Sahel (AES), Niamey, 6 July 2024.

17 Although the United States has reopened the dialogue with the AES under the Trump administration, in Le Monde (1st August 2025), Les Etas-Unis se réengagent auprès des juntes du Sahel.

18 Wilen, N. and Aning, K. (2025), Countering extremism in West Africa: what options are left? Counter extremism project, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung.

19 Le Monde Afrique (24 January 2024), Au Mali, la junte donne le coup de grâce à l'accord de Paix d'Alger.

20 Le Monde (8 April 2025), Entre l'Algérie et les juntes sahéniennes, une crise diplomatique sans précédent.

21 In addition, Algeria blames Bamako for the breakdown of the Algier peace agreement between Mali and the Touareg movement under its mediation, Le Monde Afrique (8 April 2025), Entre l'Algérie et les juntes sahéniennes, une crise diplomatique sans précédent.

attempts since the coup in Ouagadougou.²² Finally, since the 2023 coup in Niger, relations between once natural allies Benin and Niger have significantly soured. Since the coup, both countries have taken the initiative to close their common border, and Niamey accused Cotonou from harbouring French military bases that aim to destabilise Niger.²³ Worse, the current tensions between Cotonou and Niamey

jeopardise cooperation in facing the threats of Jihadist armed groups as well as win-win economic projects, like the Niger-Benin export pipeline (see box 1). Overall, the West African region seems more fractured than it has ever been in the last 50 years. Yet, both present-day and future challenges are demanding a regional approach.

The Niger-Benin oil pipeline: a tool for political bargaining rather than cooperation?

In September 2019, investor PetroChina, an arm of the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), signed a contract with the governments of Niger and Benin to construct a 2000 km pipeline between Agadem in Niger and the port of Sèmè-Kpodji in Benin.²⁴ The economic stakes are substantial, amounting to around USD 13 billion (or €11 billion) for Niger, or 25% of the country's GDP,²⁵ and €460 million in transit fees over the first 20 years for Benin.²⁶ As they are mutually dependent for production and exports, the two countries appear compelled to collaborate for economic benefit. However, both nations have been using the pipeline as a lever in their ongoing political disputes. In 2024, Benin initially blocked the first shipment of Nigerien crude oil, refusing to transport oil across its territory until Niger reopened their shared border.²⁷ A month later, Niger suspended oil production for three months following the arrest of Nigerien workers at the pipeline's loading facility in Sèmè-Kpodji.²⁸ Niger has been losing €1.6 million daily due to the halt in production.²⁹ Since late 2024, oil transit via the Niger-Benin pipeline has restarted, despite continuing tensions between the two countries.³⁰

22 Le Monde Afrique (27 September 2024), Entre la Côte d'Ivoire et le Burkina Faso, des accusations permanentes de complot.

23 Le Monde Afrique (12 June 2025), Les relations entre le Niger et le Bénin dans l'impasse.

24 Reuters (31 July 2023), China's oil and uranium business in Niger.

25 TV5 Monde (21 May 2024), Niger-Bénin: le pipeline de l'espoir pour le pouvoir militaire de Niamey ?

26 Sovon, J. and Wu, V. (3 April 2025). Who exactly is benefiting from China's oil pipeline projects in Niger and Benin?

27 Africa Intelligence (3 July 2024), Niger junta cashes in CNPC millions but Benin oil exports at standstill.

28 Reuters (14 June 2024), Niger halts oil pipeline exports to China over Benin spat.

29 Le Monde Afrique (22 August 2024), Crise du pétrole entre le Niger et le Bénin : l'amorce d'un dégel.

30 Le Monde Afrique (12 June 2025), Les relations entre le Niger et le Bénin dans l'impasse.



◀ Sign marking the route of the Niger-Benin Export Pipeline.

1.2. The common threat of climate change

Long-term global challenges like climate change will severely impact West Africa, and Sahelian countries in particular,³¹ and will aggravate competition for natural resources. Over the last 30 years, the region has experienced a significant warming, recurrent droughts and floods, and less predictable seasonality.³² This has had a severe impact in the Sahel, where 80% of the population lives from agriculture and pastoralism.³³ Soil degradation, water stress, rapid population growth and increasing population density exert pressure on land. A diminution of the soil productivity and a more intense use of land contribute to the

depletion of natural resources,³⁴ and put the fragile livelihoods and people's capacity to feed themselves in the region at risk.³⁵ Moreover, competition over natural resources has amplified tensions between groups depending on land-based resources, such as farmers and herders. While competition for natural resources between transhumant pastoralists and sedentary farmers has always existed,³⁶ most disputes used to be peacefully resolved.³⁷ With the depletion of available natural resources, the number of incidents and violence has increased.³⁸ With local economies and food security increasingly affected by climate change, existing tensions and grievances are amplified and transcend national contexts.

31 Tesfaye, B. (2022), Climate change and conflict in the Sahel, Council on Foreign Relations, Discussion paper series on Managing Global Disorder, n°11, p. 8.

32 Caretta, M.A., Pepa, M., Totin, E. (2025), Climate change, water insecurity and irrigation in Sahel in Paese, A. et al., (2025), Water and land in the Sahel, Mapping the flow, Routledge Studies in African Geography, Oxford and New York. Also see, Kosmowski, F. and al. (2015), Observations et perceptions des changements climatiques, in Les sociétés rurales face au changement climatiques et environnementaux en Afrique de l'Ouest, Marseille.

33 Caretta, M.A., Pepa, M., Totin, E. (2025), Climate change, water insecurity and irrigation in Sahel in Paese, A. et al., (2025), Water and land in the Sahel, Mapping the flow, Routledge Studies in African Geography, Oxford and New Yorkp. 136.

34 Ibidem.

35 World Food Programme (2021), West Africa: the 2021 Rainy Season in review, Regional Bureau, Dakar, p. 3.

36 Nicolas, G. (1960), Un village haoussa de la République du Niger : Tassao Haoussa, Les cahiers d'Outre-Mer, Bordeaux, p. 443.

37 See HDC (2021), Gestion des ressources naturelles au Sahel: les us et coutumes au services de la résolution des conflits : Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritanie, Niger et Tchad.

38 IPIS (18 February 2025), Phone interview a Nigerien CSO representing pastoralists, concorded with interviews in Benin, IPIS (18 January 2024), Interview with Beninese CSO representing pastoralists, Parakou, Benin.

Moreover, as we will argue next, Jihadist armed groups, who now control vast territories of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso and have made incursions into Benin, Togo and the Ivory Coast, have managed to capitalise on latent tensions (see box 2). As a result, they now challenge local, national and regional

security strategies, and add to overall violence, instability, farmer-herder conflicts and to the stigmatisation of certain groups. This is particularly the case for transhumant pastoralists, who have been increasingly conflated with the Fulani ethnic group.³⁹

Origin and spread of jihadist groups in the Sahel region

The current jihadist invasion of the Sahel that started in northern Mali in January 2012⁴⁰ is the result of a fortuitous alliance of the National Movement for Liberalisation of the Azawad (MNLA) and the jihadist group Ansar al-Dine. The MNLA claims to fight the Malian authority to defend their culture and way of life, of which nomadic pastoralism is a pillar, and eventually the independence of the Azawad region.⁴¹ Ansar al-Dine was created by Iyad Ag Ghali, who left the MNLA for not obtaining its leadership,⁴² and wants to impose Sharia in Mali.⁴³ After fighting successfully together the Malian army, Ansar al-Dine quickly sidelined the MNLA and joined forces with Movement of the Unity of the Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) and pledged allegiance to Al-Qaeda Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). The failures of the Malian army to stop the rebellion were attributed to the lack of support from the government, and more broadly to its corrupt and nepotist governance, which led to a military coup, in March 2012.⁴⁴ Despite a successful intervention of France, Operation Serval, to counter the advancement of jihadists on Bamako, they managed to maintain their presence in the Malian desert and threatened Burkina Faso and Niger. By August 2015, jihadists crossed the borders of Burkina Faso⁴⁵. Facing the same accusations of incapacity to defend its national territory from the jihadists as its Malian counterpart, the Burkinabe government is overthrown a first time in January 2022 by the army, which placed Lieutenant-Colonel Damiba as President ad interim.⁴⁶ Eight months later, in September 2015, the army ousted him for his incompetence to stop the jihadists, and gave the power to Captain Ibrahim Traoré.⁴⁷ Whereas all jihadist groups had their own agenda, they shared common origins in the network of Al-Qaeda Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). However, in 2015, a branch of Al-Mourabitoun, under the leadership of Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi pledged allegiance to the Islamic State and funded the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). In 2017, several other jihadist groups defected from the allegiance with AQIM and merged

39 DW (24 June 2022), Comment endiguer la stigmatisation des Peuls dans le Sahel ; Djihadists groups have managed to lead attacks in Benin, Ivory Coast and Togo, Pellerin, M. (2022), Les pays côtiers d'Afrique de l'Ouest, nouvelles terres d'expansion des groupes djihadistes sahéliens ? IFRI, Policy Center for the New South, p. 2.

40 Roetman, T.J, Migeon, M., Dudouet, V. (2020), Les groupes armés salafi-djihadistes et la (dés)escalade des conflits : le cas d'Ansar Dine au Mali, Berghof Foundation, p. 1.

41 Maliweb (2012), La rébellion touareg au Mali au-delà des clichés and RTBF (2012), Cinq questions pour comprendre la rébellion touareg au Mali. It is important to note that the MNLA is a secular movement and allied with Ansar al-Dine to beat their common enemy, the Malian state. Yet, the alliance did not last, and the former allies are now fighting each other. The MNLA even proposed its help to France to combat the Jihadists. See France 24 (2013), Les Touareg du MNLA prêts à aider l'armée française à lutter contre les djihadistes.

42 d'Evry, A. (2015), L'Opération Serval à l'épreuve du doute : vrais succès et fausses leçons, IFRI, p. 14.

43 Atlas Info (18 March 2012), Mali: un mouvement islamiste appelle à appliquer la charia par les armes.

44 Le Courrier International (20 November 2015) : Mali le pouvoir des armes.

45 Le Pays (24 August 2015), Attaque de la gendarmerie de Oursi, un acte terroriste ou un simple fait de bandits ?

46 France 24 (25 January 2022), Le colonel Paul-Henry Sandaogo Damiba, nouvel homme fort du Burkina Faso.

47 Le Monde (1 October 2022), Au Burkina Faso, le lieutenant-colonel Damiba renversé par un nouveau coup d'état.

to form the Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM).⁴⁸ The emergence of ISGS and JNIM have intensified violence in the Sahel. Both JNIM and ISGS have been threatening the security of West Africa's relatively stable coastal states. JNIM has more recently gained control over territory in northern and central Mali, while ISGS has been confined to northern Burkina Faso and western Niger due to clashes with JNIM that began in 2020.⁴⁹

1.3. The spread of jihadist armed groups in West Africa: Fulani pastoralists between a rock and a hard place

The spread of jihadism in the Sahel region highlights national and regional failures in both military and governance terms. From a military point of view, one could have expected that increased insecurity would have spurred regional cooperation, as jihadist armed groups represent a common enemy for all the West African countries.⁵⁰ However, previous collaboration efforts revealed obstacles for effective regional military operations⁵¹ that might be more difficult to overcome in the current context of nationalism and fragmentation. That being said, new regional anti-terrorism collaborations seem to be upcoming.⁵²

In terms of governance, the capacity of jihadist armed groups to attract new recruits underlines the incapacity of the State to sufficiently create economic opportunities, counter the political underrepresentation and marginalisation of certain groups, and, hence, provide a desirable future for youth, in rural areas especially. Instead of unemployment, a paid job as a transporter for a

jihadist group, for example, can be attractive and can lead to recruitment.⁵³ In doing so, jihadists manage to portray themselves as an employer and a valuable replacement of the State. This recruitment strategy seems particularly effective in marginalised communities such as (Fulani) pastoralists.⁵⁴

Where jihadist armed groups control the area, they are often found to favour pastoralists over the farmer population in local disputes over, for instance, access to land and natural resources. This is also the case in the W Park, located in the border area of Niger, Burkina Faso and Benin, where jihadist armed groups give pastoralists access to pasture and water in protected areas where herd presence is normally forbidden.⁵⁵ In doing so, jihadist armed groups offer a solution to the very real problems faced by pastoralists, which are not sufficiently addressed by state actors.

To keep their livestock healthy, pastoralists need access to sufficient grazing lands and water sources. In most West African countries, state policies over the last decades have increased the marginalisation of pastoralists⁵⁶ to the benefit of farmers, notably with the expansion of agricultural fields at the expense

48 Center for Preventive Action (4 September 2025), Violent extremism in Sahel.

49 Ibidem.

50 de Brier, G. (2025), Réconcilier le Sahel et les pays côtiers : le besoin d'une intégration régionale pour combattre les groupes djihadistes, *Diplomatie*, n°131, p. 7.

51 The first collaborative answers to jihadist armed groups were the creation of the G5 in 2014 by Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Mauritania and establishment of the Joint Force G5 Sahel (JFG5S) in 2017. However, the alliance experienced rapid concerns over territorial sovereignty relating to cross-border operations and the (un)willingness of states to provide contingents on a regular basis. This dissolved the structure after the departures of Mali (in 2022), followed by Burkina Faso and Niger in 2023. Wilen, N. and Aning, K. (2025), Countering extremism in West Africa: what options are left? Counter extremism project, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung. p. 10.

52 In June 2025, ECOWAS announced that it had reached an agreement with the AES to fight terrorism together, which still needs to be implemented on the ground. See DW (24 June 2025), ECOWAS gets a new leader at pivotal time for West Africa.

53 Timbuktu Institute (2024), Au-delà de la criminalité : Perceptions juvéniles de la radicalisation et de l'extrémisme violent au Nord du Bénin. Boko-Haram has recruited many young Tchadians around the Lake province, solely on the promise of the monthly salary. Also see *Le Monde* (8 August 2025), Sur les rives du Lac Tchad, Boko Haram continue d'attirer une jeunesse sans perspective.

54 France 24 (23 October 2024), Al-Qaïda, ONG, communautés peuples...le point sur la situation au Sahel.

55 International Crisis Group (2023), Containir l'insurrection jihadiste dans le Parc W en Afrique de l'Ouest.

56 Benjaminsen, T.A. (2024), *Climate Security and Climate Justice: Recognizing context in Sahel*, Edward Elgar Publishing, UK and USA, p. 49.

of grazing land for livestock,⁵⁷ and by supporting facilities that mainly seem to complement and favour agricultural activities.⁵⁸ One example of this marginalisation is the budget invested by governments in the two activities. Only 10% of the public investments in the agriculture sector is dedicated to herding, of which most is spent on sedentary or semi-intensive herding.⁵⁹ A representative of a Nigerien association of pastoralists claimed that “*the State considers pastoralists as citizens of second-class*”.⁶⁰

Governments tend to view pastoral practices as messy and illegible, since migrations do not conform to a modern form of governmental organisation. In this view, pastoralists are perceived as complicated to tax and control, while it is also difficult to adapt services such as schools and health care to their mobility.⁶¹ As a result, public pastoral land has been gradually shrinking to give space to farmed lands, housing and mining activities (see Figure 2). The disappearance of land for cattle is damaging the health of livestock, reducing the size of herds and impacting the quality and quantity of milk, thereby impoverishing pastoralists. In this way, pastoral cultures, way of life, and land use have been under pressure from an expanding, sedentary form of modernity for many decades.

The inability of pastoralists to have their interests defended demonstrates their marginalisation within society. At the local level, pastoralists have been reduced to their ethnicity, most of them being Fulani or from a sub-branch of it, which they share with many jihadists. This catches Fulani pastoralists between a rock and a hard place. It taints the security crisis in West Africa with a religious and/or ethnic identity layer,⁶² because in return of favouring Fulani pastoralists and addressing their marginalisation, jihadists hope to recruit them and convince them to fight the State. The conflation of Fulani pastoralists with jihadists, however, has further aggravated the marginalisation and insecurity of pastoralists. In conflict zones and areas still controlled by the State, Fulani pastoralists have been facing increasing violence. In Burkina Faso, the Volunteers for the Defence of the Nation (*Volontaires de la Défense de la Patrie*, VDP), a self-defence militia created by the government, are accused of several massacres of Fulani civilians, including women and children.⁶³

In Benin, several people from the Fulani community have been arrested and sent to the Court for the Repression of Economic Offences and Terrorism (CRIET) based on mere suspicions, sometimes motivated by antecedents or personal disputes.⁶⁴

57 In Inter-Réseaux (2020), Réglementer la mobilité du bétail en Afrique de l'Ouest : pourquoi et comment ? Synthèse n°34, p. 2.

58 Bonnet, B. and Guibert, B. (2014), *Stratégies d'adaptation aux vulnérabilités du pastoralisme, trajectoires de familles pasteurs (1972-2010)*, Afrique contemporaine, n°249, p. 42.

59 In Inter-Réseaux (2020), Réglementer la mobilité du bétail en Afrique de l'Ouest : pourquoi et comment ? Synthèse n°34.

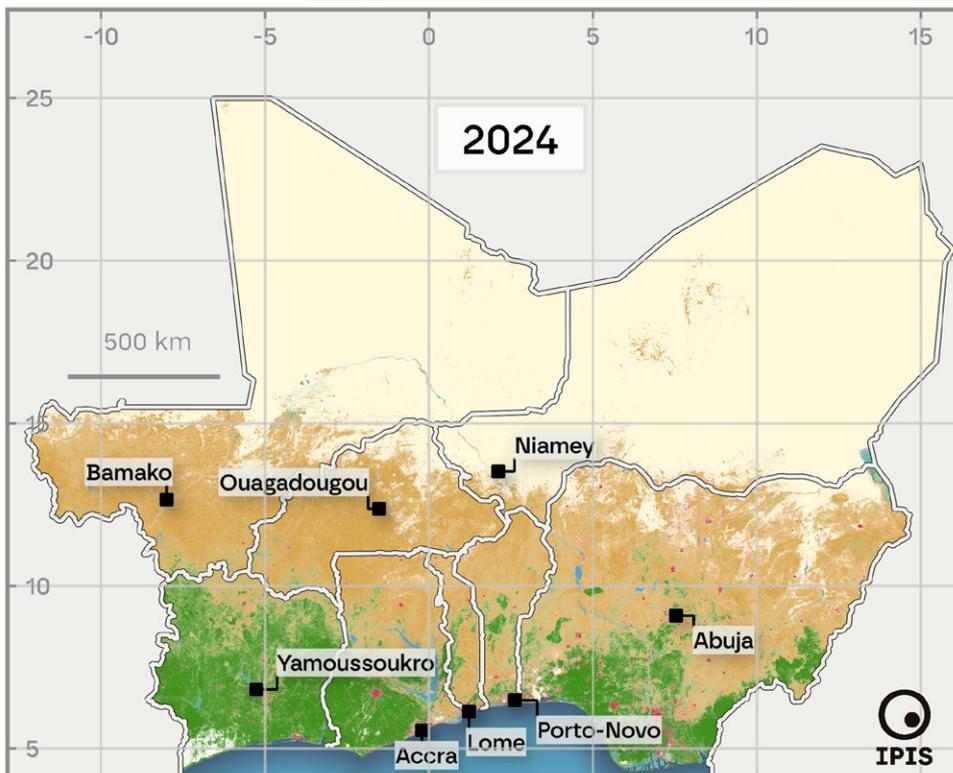
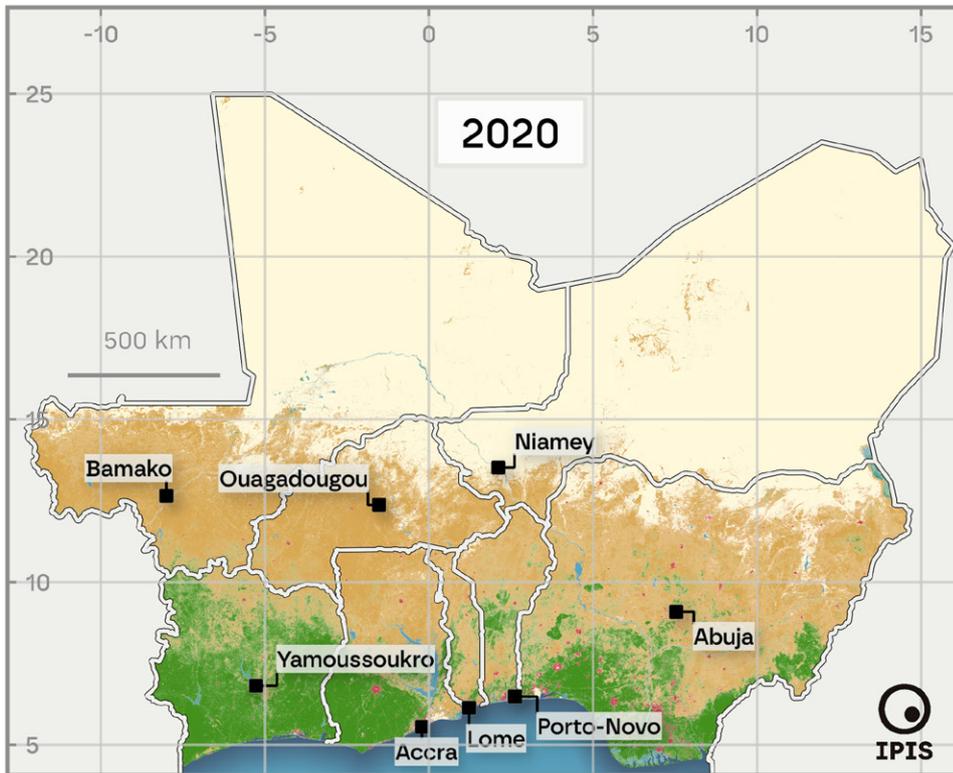
60 IPIS (18 February 2025), Interview with a representative of Nigerien association of pastoralists.

61 Benjaminsen, T.A. (2024), *Climate Security and Climate Justice: Recognizing context in Sahel*, Edward Elgar Publishing, UK and USA, p. 44.

62 For Benin, see, De Bruijne, K., (2021) *Laws of attraction: Northern Benin and risk of violent extremist spillover*, Clingendael. For the Sahel, see Benjaminsen, T.A. (2024), *Climate Security and Climate Justice: Recognizing context in Sahel*, Edward Elgar Publishing, UK and USA.

63 UNDP (2023), *Dynamique de l'extrémisme violent en Afrique : Ecosystèmes conflictuels, écologie politique et propagation du proto-état*, Document de recherche, p. 21. In August 2025, Niger has announced the launch of the « Garkuwar Kassa », a programme, similar to the VDP in Burkina-Faso, that aims to recruit of young people to support the army. See Le Monde (8 August 2025), *Le Niger crée une milice patriotique pour combattre les groupes djihadistes*.

64 Timbuktu Institute (2024), *Au-delà de la criminalité : Perceptions juvéniles de la radicalisation et de l'extrémisme violent au Nord du Bénin*, p. 20.



◀ Figure 2: Land cover evolutions in the Sahel between 2020 and 2024.

2. Transhumance: adaptation to new realities in a changing context

While root causes of the pastoralist crisis have played into West Africa's security crisis, as argued above, increased regional insecurity and jihadist activity have also profoundly affected pastoral practices and way of life, not in the least impacting the nature of transhumance.

2.1. A smaller, shorter, and more insecure transhumance

The first noticeable evolution is that transhumance changed from being a family activity to one by men only. Traditionally, the entire family travels with the cattle in search of pasture and water, but with the multiplication of violent incidents, Fulani transhumant families prefer to keep the children and wives safe in their anchor village, where they stay during the rainy season.⁶⁵ In the focus group with young Fulani now studying at the University of Parakou, all of them said that the violence they

faced was determining factor to not bring children in transhumance: “*in my last transhumance, I was 14 years old, and someone beat me really hard with a stick*” testified one young student. Another one added “*in my last transhumance, I was 13 years old. A group of farmers chased us away; I got really scared.*”⁶⁶ Recent research in the Central African Republic has shown that the switch of transhumance from a family to a men-only activity has aggravated the tensions between the pastoralists and the sedentary population.⁶⁷ A group travelling with wives and children is perceived as non-violent, likely accustomed with local traditions and searching for social interactions, which is reassuring for the local sedentary population. A group of only men, on the contrary, is perceived as potentially armed and ignorant of the rules in place.⁶⁸ With the increase of insecurity, however, pastoralist associations have advised their members not to travel with their family, but to move in caravans with the support of scouts to check the itinerary.⁶⁹



◀
Pastoralist family in their camp in Parakou (Benin).

65 IPIS (21 January 2024). Focus Group with young Fulani, Parakou, Benin, January 2024.

66 Ibidem.

67 IPIS et Concordis (2020), Promoting peaceful and safe seasonal migration in Central African Republic: Results of consultations with transboundary herders, semi-settled herders, settled communities in Ouham-Pendé and Western Ouham, Antwerp, pp. 22-23.

68 Ibidem.

69 IPIS (17 February 2025), Phone interview with a Nigerian CSO representing pastoralists.

Checking the itinerary means changing pastoralist routes to avoid armed groups. Normally, pastoralists must follow ‘transhumance corridors’, a sort of motorway specifically dedicated to the moving of cattle, which are put in place in each country. Due to growing insecurity, many pastoralists no longer use these established corridors for fear of being attacked by an armed group. Instead, pastoralists create new routes, including through farms and fields,⁷⁰ and tend to stay for shorter periods at the same place (one or two days) to avoid confrontation with the local population or the armed group.⁷¹ Traditionally, minor damage is normally forgiven, and significant damage requires compensation according to mutually agreed-upon norms.⁷² However, out of fear of a violent interaction, more pastoralists leave the place

without reporting an incident that involves them. Yet, unsolved incidents raise the risk of violent conflicts.⁷³ Combining the growing number of conflict zones, the extensive areas of land dedicated to agriculture and the recent restrictions on transhumance in coastal countries (see below), the cattle mobility has been dramatically reducing.⁷⁴

A smaller, shorter and more insecure transhumance has very tangible consequences for pastoralists. While there is no comparative data, “*we can assure you that the size of the herds and the health of the animals have dramatically decreased with the on-going insecurity*”, testified one representative of a pastoralist association in Niger in February 2025.⁷⁵



◀ Sign indicating a pastoral corridor.

2.2. The ban on transboundary transhumance

So far, Sahelian countries have failed to stop the expansion of the jihadist armed groups despite military putschists’ promises to eradicate terrorism, assert their

sovereignty, and defend their territory against foreign threats.⁷⁶ Jihadist armed groups even arrived at the borders of West African coastal countries, starting from small incursions in 2019 in northern Togo and Benin to direct attacks against these countries’

70 IPIS (18 February 2025), Phone interview a Nigerien CSO representing pastoralists.

71 IPIS (18 February 2025), Phone interview a Nigerien CSO representing pastoralists.

72 Brottem, L. and Turner, M.D (2024), Violent farmer-herder conflicts in West Africa: landscape-livelihood interactions and the political ecology of customary dispute resolution, *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, p. 3.

73 Ibidem.

74 For the case of Nigerien pastoralists IPIS (17 February 2025), Phone interview with Nigerien CSO representing pastoralists. For Beninese pastoralists: IPIS (21 January 2025), Focus group with (agro-)pastoralists, Tchaourou (Benin).

75 IPIS (18 February 2025), Phone interview with Nigerien CSO representing pastoralists.

76 International Crisis Group (December 2024), *A splinter in the Sahel: can the divorce with ECOWAS be averted?*

national armies more recently.⁷⁷ As part of anti-terrorist measures, coastal countries are increasingly restricting transhumance in their territory: Benin forbade transboundary transhumance and is currently implementing the sedentarisation of the pastoralists;⁷⁸ Togo suspended transhumance⁷⁹, Côte d'Ivoire banned the cattle escort on foot,⁸⁰ and Guinea banned Malian cattle from crossing the border.⁸¹

These restrictions have significantly impacted pastoralists' practises and economy. One representative of a Nigerien CSO active in promoting pastoralism explained that "*pastoralists now have to buy alimentary complements for their livestock instead of relying on pasture*", pasture they otherwise found in the more humid, coastal countries they used to migrate to.⁸² "*Many pastoralists build up what they call a strategic stock of alimentary complements. These food complements are imported from Benin and Nigeria*".⁸³ The same CSO representative suspects that the President of Benin is producing and trading these food complements, and therefore, "*to force pastoralists to buy his products, he banned transhumance*".⁸⁴ While this seems unlikely, this testimony demonstrates the resentment of Nigerien transhumant pastoralists towards the Beninese ban on foreign cattle.

To survive in this new context, some Nigerien pastoralists, for instance, cross the border with

neighbouring coastal countries clandestinely. The illegal crossing of the border was confirmed by a representative of a CSO in Benin: "*Our border is porous. We, pastoralists, sometimes denounce foreign transhumant pastoralists to the police, because they destroy fields for which we are going to be blamed for*".⁸⁵ For those who had already crossed, many decided to settle in Benin or Togo, where they have established social ties such as family or friends, thanks to years of transhumance.⁸⁶ Others, desperate because of the ever-degrading conditions of the transhumance, simply abandon their pastoralist activity, sell their cattle, and settle down.⁸⁷ As a result, "*there are markets with more traders than cows as the size of the herds keeps reducing*", testified a representative of a pastoralist association in Niger.⁸⁸

According to a Nigerien association representing pastoralists, restricting transboundary transhumance demonstrates "*the disconnection between authorities sitting in the capital city and the reality of remote transboundary regions*".⁸⁹ There, communities and practices have always extended across international borders. However, these realities are increasingly contradictory to notions of a modern state, where borders represent a state's integrity and sovereignty, especially in the context of increased insecurity. Transborder transhumance is thereby seen as a threat to the modern state, rather than a contributor to stability and peace.

77 Le Monde (9 January 2025), Au Bénin, 28 soldats tués dans une attaque à la frontière avec le Niger et le Burkina Faso and Le Monde (24 July 2024) , Au Togo, une attaque d'ampleur rappelle la menace djihadiste.

78 Interministerial Decree of the Republic of Benin (2019), 2019/ N°200/MISP/MAEP/MAEC/MCVDD/MDGL/MDN/DC/SGM/ DAIC/SA/113GG19 en date du 26 décembre 2019.

79 République du Togo (2024), Transhumance : Vers une régulation plus stricte pour éviter les conflits.

80 APESS (2019), Loi sur la transhumance en Côte d'Ivoire : ces dispositions qui fragilisent la mobilité transfrontalière du bétail.

81 Studio Tamani (10 April 2025), La transhumance des animaux du Mali vers la Guinée bientôt interdite.

82 IPIS (17 February 2025), Phone interview with Nigerien CSO representing pastoralists.

83 Ibidem.

84 Idem.

85 IPIS (17 January 2024), Interview with Beninese CSO active in pastoralism, Parakou, Benin.

86 IPIS (17 February 2025), Phone interview with Nigerien CSO representing pastoralists.; confirmed by agro-pastoralists from Tchaourou in Benin. IPIS (17 January 2024), Focus-group with agro-pastoralists in Tchaourou, Benin.

87 IPIS (17 February 2025), Phone interview with Nigerien CSO representing pastoralists.

88 IPIS (18 February 2025), Phone interview with Nigerien CSO representing pastoralists.

89 Ibidem.



◀
Livestock
market in
Tourou (Benin).

3. Transhumance: a tool for regional solutions?

3.1. How can transhumance contribute to peace in the Sahel?

The Sahel region has always been a region of mobility, crossed by caravans of Touareg nomads transporting cereals or dates from one oasis to another. In this way, networks of places were created, connected by mobile groups.⁹⁰ After their independence, Sahelian States progressively withdrew and became estranged from large parts of their territory, and especially the regions predominantly occupied by nomadic Sahelian populations, and by Touareg especially. This created empty spaces that enabled new routes for drugs in the mid-2000s, for human trafficking and illegal migration in the mid-2010s,⁹¹ and for the expansion of jihadist activity. As a result, mobility in remote

areas increasingly got perceived as a threat to security and sovereignty.

Yet, as captured in the 2013 N'djamena declaration, member states of the Sahel region acknowledge that transhumance is a remarkable vector for structuring territories. Mobility ensures a regular presence in areas with no resident population and limits the tendency to create uncontrolled areas of 'no man's land'.⁹² By temporarily occupying and travelling through empty lands, pastoralists impede illegal activities and trafficking from mushrooming outside the sight of the national security forces (see Figure 3).⁹³

A good example of addressing both the pastoralist and security crises in Sahelian countries can be found in Mauritania. From 2005, Mauritania was targeted

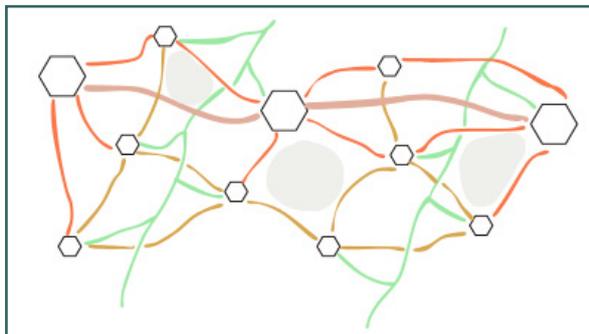
90 Grégoire, E. and Pellerin, M. (2019), Les échanges transsahariens au fil du temps et des aléas politique, in *Hérodote*, n°172, p.153.

91 Global Initiative against Transactional Organized Crime (2024), La fermeture de la frontière entre le Bénin et le Niger augmente les profits du trafic de migrants, *Bulletin de Risques*, n°11.

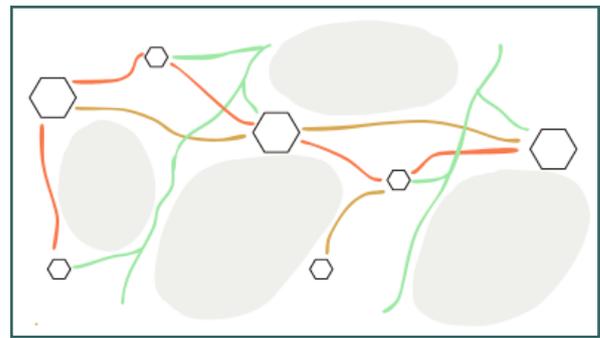
92 Déclaration de N'djamena (2013), *Élevage pastoral. Une contribution durable au développement et à la sécurité des espaces saharo-sahéliens*, p. 2

93 Banderdouche, A. et al. (2019), *L'agropastoralisme, un rempart au terrorisme: l'exemple de la Mauritanie*, Projet RIMRAP.

by jihadist armed groups linked to al-Qaeda, but the last attack dates back to December 2011,⁹⁴ despite 2200 km of border with Mali and the influx of 272 000 Malian refugees.⁹⁵ The success of Mauritania lies in a military response combined with the State's reinvestment in rural areas through the development of infrastructure for sedentary populations (such as water points and schools) and for transhumant pastoralists (such as cattle markets, vaccination parcs and veterinary centres).⁹⁶ The preservation of villages in isolated areas strengthens the country's security because it avoids the creation of 'no man's land' filled with illegal activities. The support for transhumant pastoralists to move with their cattle further for longer periods further ensures a presence in unoccupied spaces (see Figure 3a). By reinvesting in infrastructure in isolated areas, the State has also strengthened the trust of the local population. Doing so, it is more difficult for jihadist groups to obtain local support by stigmatising the government. On the contrary, transhumant pastoralists and local populations in isolated areas have become a critical source for intelligence in the fight against terrorism.



▲ **Figure 3a:** Graphic extracted from Banderdouche, A. et al., 2019. Hexagons represent anchorage points (isolated villages). Pink, orange, and yellow lines are traditional or normal flows. The grey zones are empty spaces, and the green lines are potential routes for transhumant pastoralists.



▲ **Figure 3b:** Graphic extracted from Banderdouche, A. et al., 2019. With fewer anchorage points (villages), the flows and the transhumance routes have decreased, while the empty zones (in grey) have increased.

Reinvesting in pastoralist infrastructure and support systems is not only beneficial as part of a strategy to combat jihadist or criminal insecurity. It is equally essential in promoting the peaceful and sustainable coexistence of different population groups (such as herders and farmers) within and across West African countries, as the impacts of insecurity, rural underdevelopment and resource competition (amongst others) amplify tensions.

When properly supported, pastoralists can support the economic activity in rural areas and sustain social and trade networks over extended areas, which is vital for addressing rural marginalisation and deprivation, development and stability. In border areas, where the north of coastal countries touches the south of landlocked Sahelian ones, the arrival of pastoralists in (rural) villages boosts the local economy, creating jobs for butchers, tanners, and shopkeepers, amongst others. In more dynamic communities, local authorities establish a cattle market to boost trade exchanges. Trading activities generate taxes, which contribute to local development.⁹⁷ This source of revenue is particularly valuable in regions that fail to attract private investments or other sources of economic development. Moreover, these regular, seasonal exchanges enhance social ties of transhumant pastoralists with local communities along their routes.⁹⁸

94 The Arab Weekly (14 May 2025), Mauritania's strategy keeps terrorists at bay while they ravage Sahel countries.

95 Estimated number of refugees in September 2024. International Federation of the Red Cross (2024), Mauritania: Movement population, Emergency appeal.

96 CILSS (2024), PRAPS-2 Mauritanie: des acquis enregistrés dans le renforcement de la résilience des communautés pastorales et agropastorales.

97 SIPRI, LASDEL, CGD (2023), La transhumance transfrontalière à l'épreuve de l'insécurité, pp. 19-20.

98 Thébaut, B. (2016), Rapport sur l'atelier de la microassurance pour le bétail en Afrique de l'Ouest, Dakar, 2-3 novembre 2016, p. 4.

In this way, addressing issues of pastoralist marginalisation and rural development can contribute to finding sustainable solutions for peace in the Sahel.

3.2. How can pastoralism offer sustainable solutions to counter the impact of climate change?

Climate change, through its impact on the availability and distribution of natural resources, is a known conflict amplifier, aggravating existing tensions and competition while creating significant additional challenges to a region that is particularly vulnerable, but seemingly unprepared to face these challenges.⁹⁹ By 2050, demand for meat and dairy products in sub-

Saharan Africa is expected to increase by 327% and 270%, respectively (relative to 2012), compared to a 190% increase expected for cereals.¹⁰⁰ These estimates reflect the significant population growth anticipated in West Africa. Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso have a fertility rate per woman that, in 2024, ranked first (6.64 children per woman), fourth (5.35), and 21st (4.02) highest in the world, respectively.¹⁰¹ With annual population growth estimated at 2.5%, the population of sub-Saharan Africa is set to more than double to 1.5 - 2 billion by 2050.¹⁰² In the context of increasing natural resource depletion, this expected increase in food demand heightens the challenges of food security that West African nations face.



◀ Livestock market in Tourou (Benin).

While resource competition and heightened conflicts with farmers and herders - especially while on transhumance - challenge pastoralist activities, pastoralism could be part of solutions to mitigate the impacts of climate change and sustainable food production in West Africa.

By constantly adapting to the political, ecological, social and economic realities of their surroundings, pastoralism plays a significant yet underestimated role in the food security of West Africa.¹⁰³ Mobile herding systems in both West and East Africa perform better than sedentary systems under the same conditions.¹⁰⁴ In Niger, for instance, pastoralism was found to

99 The Notre Dame Global Adaptation Index (2023) ranks Mali 151st, Guinea 148th, Burkina Faso 143rd, Niger and Togo 123rd, and Benin 116th of 192 countries for their resilience towards climate change, based economic, social and governance readiness. <https://gain.nd.edu/our-work/country-index/rankings/>. Website ranking visited the 15 September 2025.

100 Plante, C. (2020), Ne faisons pas fausse route pour nourrir les plus de 700 millions d'habitants que comptera l'Afrique de l'Ouest en 2050, Blog of the World Bank.

101 Ibidem.

102 Nugteren, H. and Le Côte, C. (2016), Libérer le potentiel du pastoralisme pour développer l'Afrique de l'Ouest, SNV and KIT, p.12.

103 Ibidem.

104 Idem.

increase productivity by 27% compared with sedentary livestock systems.¹⁰⁵ In 2012, before the invasion of jihadist armed groups, Mali's transhumant system produced twice as much protein per hectare as ranches in the United States and Australia.¹⁰⁶ In Burkina-Faso, the cost to produce 1 kg of meat in an intensive herding system is more than triple of that in an extensive herding system.¹⁰⁷ As such, the contribution of pastoralism to food security is worth to be considered in light of the challenges.

Unlike other systems such as industrial herding and ranching, pastoralism is a dynamic and resilient food production system in West Africa, capable of adapting to changing environmental, climatic, social, political, and economic conditions, both at local and regional levels.¹⁰⁸ Changing environments are and have been shaping pastoralist practices. The droughts of 1973 and 1983-84 greatly impacted pastoralists, forcing many of them to diversify their food and economic supplies by starting farming activities.¹⁰⁹ Conversely, many farmers invested in cattle to survive the bad harvests. As a result, in Niger, 87 % of the population owns livestock, which created a new socioeconomic category: the agro-pastoralist.¹¹⁰ In the face of scattered, unpredictable, and unbalanced grazing resources from one season or year to the next, the mobility of the agro-pastoralist's cattle is still an absolute necessity.¹¹¹ This can be seen in the increasing diversity of directions taken by pastoralists on transhumance across West Africa, using routes from south to north or between east and west (see figure 1).¹¹²

Moreover, livestock mobility is an important element of agro-pastoral resilience and food production, which also reduces pressure on ecosystems that are increasingly under pressure.¹¹³ In fact, pastoralism is a low-impact system that makes use of highly variable rangeland environments where often no other production can take place. Pastoralist grazing practices enrich rather than deplete the environment,¹¹⁴ because they promote the development of more diverse grasslands (through the deposition of manure and the dispersal of seeds),¹¹⁵ without intensively using them. In this way, pastoral production converts grasslands into high-quality protein essential to people's diets,¹¹⁶ and resilient to the unpredictability and variability of agro-ecological conditions in (semi-)arid zones.

However, as argued in this Insight, both environmental and political factors are increasingly pushing the pastoralist resilience to new limits. Measures to support pastoralism will be essential to ensure its place as a contributor to food security, rural economic development and stability. Supporting mobility will have to be translated in national policies that ensure sufficient infrastructure for pastoralists and an equitable distribution of natural resources between sedentary and transhumant populations. Supporting pastoralism will also require reopening borders to the cattle, to allow mobility as needed. Consequently, it will require stability, which can only be achieved through military cooperation to fight jihadist armed groups and a response to the development needs of the populations living in rural and isolated areas.

105 Krätli, S., Huelsebuch, C., Brooks, S., Kaufmann, B. (2012), Pastoralism: a critical asset for food security under global climate change, *Animal frontiers*, p. 42.

106 Krummel, J. and Dritschilo, W. (1977), Resources costs of animal protein production, *Science and public policy*, volume 4, Issue 3. It is noted that the data is nearly 50 years old. However, this paper has been quoted in several recent studies, such as Nugteren, H. and Le Côme, C. (2016), *Libérer le potentiel du pastoralisme pour développer l'Afrique de l'Ouest*, SNV and KIT, p.16.

107 FAO (2014), *Capitalisation des appuis au développement du pastoralisme au Burkina Faso*, quoted in *Acting For Life* (no date), *Les dangers d'une ethnicisation des conflits agriculture- élevage*, Note technique.

108 ARED-IIED, (2004). *Module d'animation et de formation sur le pastoralisme au Sahel*. Dakar.

109 IPIS (18 February 2025), Phone interview with Nigerien CSO representing pastoralists.

110 IPIS (18 February 2025), Phone interview with Nigerien CSO representing pastoralists.

111 Thebaud, B. (2017), *La microassurance bétail pour les éleveurs mobiles en Afrique de l'Ouest : Compte rendu de l'atelier*, Dakar, 2-3 Novembre 2016, p. 6.

112 Ibidem.

113 Luizza, M. and Brottem, L. (2023), *Aires protégées et éleveurs transhumants en Afrique de l'Ouest en Afrique Centrale : Défis et opportunités au XXIe siècle*, p. 2.

114 PASTRES (September 2022), *The benefits of pastoralism for biodiversity and the climate*, Brief 1/6, p. 2.

115 *Geographical* (3 January 2023), *Pastoralism under threat*.

116 PASTRES (September 2022), *The benefits of pastoralism for biodiversity and the climate*, Brief 1/6, p. 2.

Conclusion

The 2025 defection of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger from ECOWAS, and their union in the AES has deepened the political instability of West Africa. In the absence of a united front, jihadist armed groups have invaded large parts of the Malian, Burkinabé and Nigerien territories and increasingly threaten coastal West African countries like Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, and Ghana. In doing so, expanding jihadist activity and insecurity have also profoundly impacted one of the customary practices common to all West African countries: pastoralism.

Jihadist armed groups have exacerbated local tensions, not in the least those between herders and farmers. They successfully capitalise on latent grievances, which are a consequence of decades of national policies that have marginalised pastoralism and stigmatised the Fulani ethnic group, who make up the majority of transhumant pastoralists in the region. While some (Fulani) pastoralists welcome jihadist initiatives to address their marginalisation, increased insecurity and the thread of jihadism have also profoundly affected pastoral practices and the nature of transhumance.

Due to insecurity, herders are more restricted in their movement. Policies to limit transboundary transhumance, currently implemented in coastal countries to curb the spread of jihadist violence, have further restricted their regional mobility. Together, this has led to a smaller, shorter and more insecure transhumance, which has an impact on the health of the cattle, the size of the herds and, hence, on pastoralists' livelihoods. Climate change, amplifying competition and tensions over access to natural resources, is further demanding adaptations from pastoralists. Moreover, the depletion of natural resources, both man-made and due to climate change, threatens the food security of West Africa, especially in the context of the rapid demographic growth in the region.

While the overall challenges are extensive, the current regional fragmentation and instability impedes, or distracts, governments to find common ground for

collaboration on peace and stability, as well as address West African food security in a sustainable way. In this Insight, we argue that pastoralism can be part of constructive, common solutions.

Pastoralism represents a traditional, common African activity that can contribute to countering the abandonment and marginalisation of rural areas and socio-cultural groups and hence respond to some of the root causes of jihadist armed group recruitment and expansion in the region. By supporting and connecting rural economies, transhumant pastoralists develop significant albeit undervalued socio-economic benefits, including job creation, (tax) revenue, local trade and social networks, in areas that, for a long time, have been in need of investment and opportunities for development. Building on the example of Mauritania, the paper suggests that long transhumance also contributes to the regional stability, by occupying empty lands and preventing the emergence of uncontrolled zones of illegal and criminal activity. In addition, pastoralism can contribute positively and sustainably to food security, as a dynamic and resilient food production system in (semi-) arid West Africa, capable of adapting to changing environmental, climatic, social, political, and economic conditions.

Yet, environmental and political factors are increasingly challenging pastoralist practises and resilience. The current trend of national governments is to consider transhumance as vector of violence and conflict, an outdated economic sector and a traditional activity complicated to manage within modern-day visions of state governance. However, this is reducing the potential of pastoralism as a tool for socio-economic regional integration, peace and stability.

To maximise the potential of pastoralism as an activity contributing to peace and sustainable development, instead of conflict, the next section proposes a series of recommendations to foster a pacified transhumance across West Africa.

Recommendations

To national governments

- 1. Reinstate regional military cooperation:** National armies must collaborate on intelligence sharing and conducting cross-border operations. Jihadist armed groups present a common concern that transcends national borders and sovereignty discourse. On the contrary, permeable borderlands are used strategically by jihadist and criminal groups.
- 2. Protect pastoralists and ethnic groups associated with pastoralism from discrimination and violations of their rights:** States have the duty to protect pastoralists and Fulani from violent attacks, arbitrary arrests and all other infringements of their political, economic, social and cultural rights. Perpetrators of harm against pastoralists and/or Fulani should be brought to justice.
- 3. Invest in infrastructures in rural areas, including Infrastructures for pastoralism:** By developing infrastructures such as cattle markets, veterinary and vaccination services, or small enterprises to process milk, essential pastoralist needs are supported, which further supports local economies, sustainable food security and livelihoods.
- 4. Ensure access to pastureland and livestock corridors:** Appropriate and enforceable measures should ensure that sufficient parts of land are dedicated to pastoralism. Furthermore, transhumance corridors should be (re-)established and managed to facilitate the movement of cattle while reducing causes for conflict between pastoralists and other land users.
- 5. In addition, pastoralism should receive equal consideration** to agriculture in governance and decision-making at the local, national, and regional levels.

To international technical and financial partners

- 1. Invest in local development projects in the cross-border areas of all Sahel and coastal countries:** Prioritise the support of projects, investments and local civil society organisations in all Sahel and coastal countries with a focus on supporting social cohesion, conflict-sensitive programmes, youth and rural development. Addressing issues of rural marginalisation is essential for reducing the potential for new recruitments into armed groups, and for local tensions and conflict.
- 2. Support financially and technically the implementation of transhumance routes and pastoralist activities** while giving the leadership of this implementation to the host country. This support should also help the region increase its resilience to climate change impacts and sustainably manage its natural resources.
- 3. Demonstrate sensitivity to sovereignty:** African nations have expressed their will to find their own solutions and their sensitivity to external interference. This should be respected to make international activities more efficient and legitimate. This can be achieved by financially or technically supporting mediation and collaboration between ECOWAS and the AES but leaving the lead to a respected African mediator.



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