

Climate change and violent extremism: a threat to peace and security

by Matthew Burnett Stuart and Manuela Brunero

“How much profit do you make from fishing every day? One thing for sure, it’s not much. With us, it’s with American dollars that you’ll be paid.”

We are in Guité, a small village in Chad’s Hadjer Lamis province. Our team arrived in February 2022 to interview local communities and investigate how climate change vulnerability can affect various aspects of community life, including increased exposure to violent extremist activities and propaganda. In these words, one interviewee recounted the case of a particularly pointed appeal in which Boko Haram members explicitly linked climate change vulnerability to their recruitment efforts.

Indeed, climate change and violent extremism may appear unrelated, but evidence suggests they are inextricably

linked. Climate change can act as a “risk multiplier”, exacerbating existing tensions, poverty, and conflict. In many cases, it creates an environment conducive to the recruitment of violent extremist groups

In Chad, a country located on the banks of Lake Chad in the Sahel, this intersection of climate change and extremism is particularly acute. The country’s geography, high poverty levels, and the population’s dependence on natural resources for productive activities have made it particularly vulnerable to climate change and the growing insecurity that has rocked the Sahel in the last decades. The changing weather patterns, such as rising temperatures,



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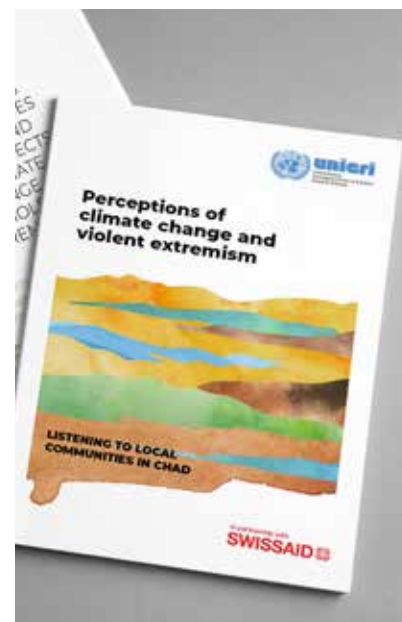


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unpredictable rainfall, and receding lakes, threaten the already unstable livelihoods and exacerbate existing vulnerabilities. At the same time, in recent years, Chad has also been greatly affected by violent extremist attacks, mainly from Boko Haram, as well as by its offshoot, the Islamic State in the West Africa Province (ISWAP). Attacks have been particularly prevalent in two provinces, Lac and Hadjer-Lamis, due to their proximity to northern Nigeria and location along Lake Chad, which - with its remote islands - allows Boko Haram militants to seek easy refuge.

tremism. Through over 100 in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted between January and February 2022 with community members and institutional representatives, the study found that community members and authorities throughout the four targeted areas widely reported having observed or directly experienced the effects of climate change in recent years. These effects were most often described in the form of variable temperatures and rainfall, including floods and longer dry seasons, as well as increasing desertification.



A recent study conducted by UNICRI in Chad's provinces of Hadjer-Lamis, Lac, Logone Occidental, and Mandoul sought to better understand the relationship between climate change and violent ex-

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This, in turn, has had clear and nearly unanimous effects on community members' economic and productive activities. Farmers reported noticing decreases in crop yields, and herders reported losing animals due to the changing weather patterns. These changes in livelihoods have led to increased competition for resources and tensions between communities, which can be easily exploited by violent extremist groups looking for recruits and territorial



control. These direct effects on the land and productive activities also notably affected social cohesion and inter-communal conflict. Every economic group interviewed - farmers, herders, and fishers - and local and traditional authorities reported higher levels of conflict and deadly violence within and between communities.

The study underscored the devastating impacts of climate change on the local economy, which have caused a rise in poverty and social displacement, creating increased economic and survival pressure in an already fragile and conflict-affected context. The erosion of social cohesion is then instrumentalized by armed

groups to aid recruitment and exacerbate destabilization, triggering a vicious cycle. As was often repeated by the respondents of this research, Boko Haram has exploited poverty to recruit fighters in Hadjer-Lamis and Lac provinces from the very beginning of their operations in Chad. Over the years, Boko Haram has adopted various recruitment techniques, including religious indoctrination, kidnapping, as well as enticing people to join voluntarily by using monetary incentives. Among these techniques, the offer of financial incentives and the promise of a better future to impoverished community members have been the most effective in attracting recruits.

In Guité village, in Hadjer-Lamis province, an interviewee recounted how Boko Haram members would meet with the parents of young people and make tempting financial offers. Additionally, inhabitants of the village recalled the case of some young fishers kidnapped by Boko Haram and then released without ransom, likely as a way to spread their message and promises of wealth throughout the community. As climate change continues to cause economic hardship, this promise of wealth can become even more alluring to people desperately trying to make ends meet.

This alarming situation is further exacerbated by the lack of state capacity and support to assist communities in adapting to the rapidly changing environment. In the targeted areas, particularly Hadjer-Lamis and Lac, public services are often severely limited, significantly increasing the potential for tensions and providing a ripe opportunity for Boko Haram to capitalize on. Similarly,

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the military operations against Boko Haram in the Lake Chad region, such as restrictions on movement and closure of fish markets, have harmed local communities' access to resources, further increasing their vulnerability.

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In conclusion, the case of the Lake Chad Basin is a stark reminder of the need to address the complex nexus between climate change and violent extremism in the Sahel. The research conducted by UNICRI has highlighted the potential for climate insecurity to create an enabling environment for the propaganda and recruitment efforts of violent extremist groups. The data suggest that the primary mechanism through which climate change and violent extremism are linked in the region is economic vulnerability and related food insecurity. These factors interact with existing poverty exploitation by Boko Haram, making communities more likely to be receptive to propaganda.

To mitigate the risk of violent conflict and extremism in the Sahel, it is therefore essential to address the environmental and security aspects.

To effectively prevent violent extremism (PVE) in the Sahel, it is essential to recognize that PVE strategies must target the underlying drivers of radicalization, including weak governance, marginalization, lack of state services, and state abuse. To achieve this, it is crucial to have a comprehensive and detailed understanding of the local context and dynamics to avoid the potential instrumentalization of climate change to justify inadequate or disproportionate responses.

Local civil society is a key partner in this process, and strengthening its capacity to implement participatory mechanisms for natural resource management could improve the re-establishment

of strong social cohesion in the region. It is also important to deconstruct the recruitment narratives used by violent extremist groups, who often exploit the scarcity of natural resources and food insecurity to boost their propaganda and recruitment, particularly among young people. Programmes to support and strengthen the capacity of government and civil society actors to design and implement counter-narrative projects and resilience-boosting approaches, specifically targeting young people and women, should be encouraged.

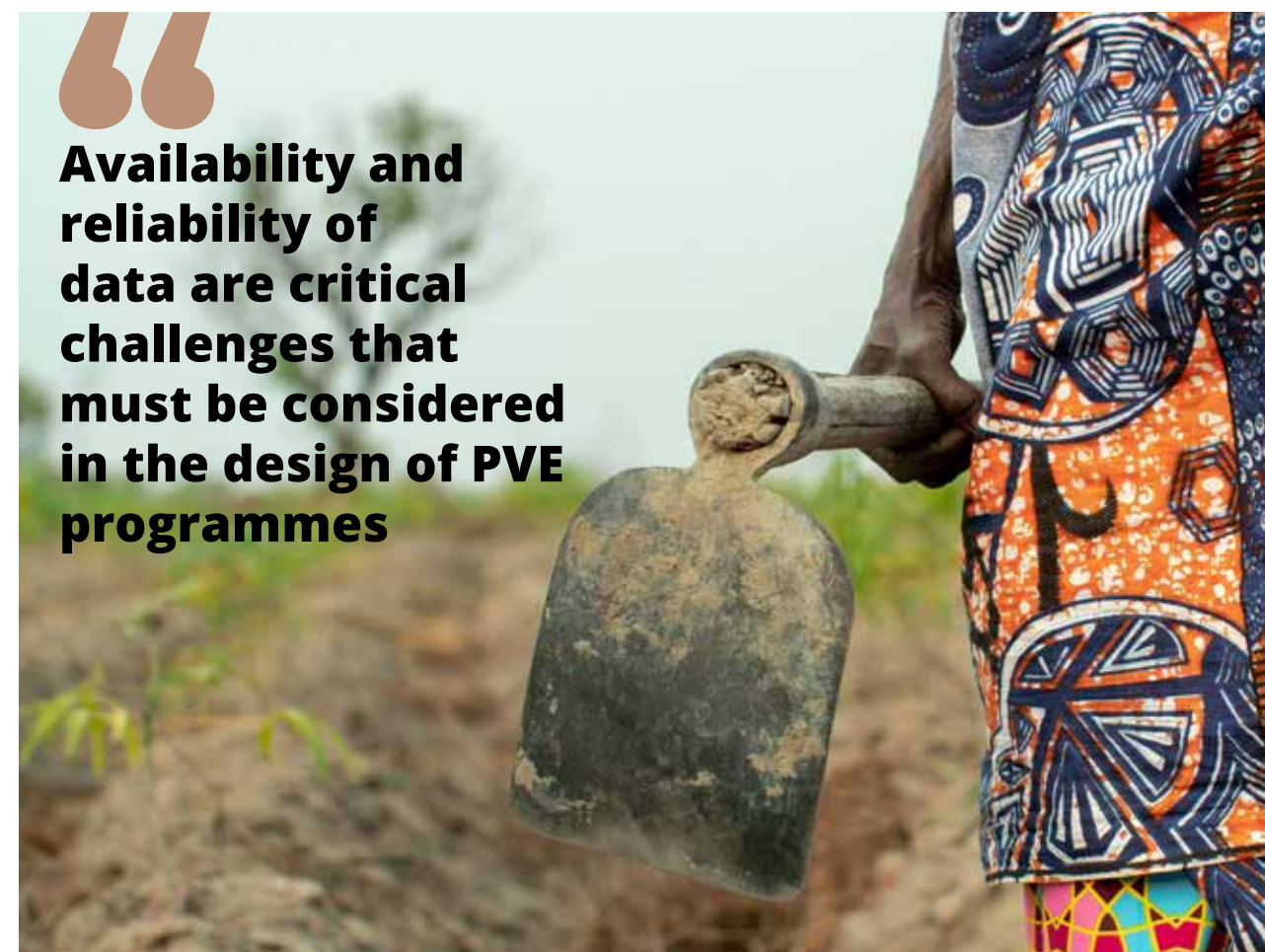
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Supporting climate-resilient alternative livelihoods for vulnerable groups, such as farmers, herders, and fishers

Supporting climate-resilient alternative livelihoods for vulnerable groups, such as farmers, herders, and fishers, can help to strengthen livelihoods and decrease the risk of violent conflicts. For instance, members of local communities interviewed by UNICRI have expressed interest in market gardening to cope with increased financial pressure and poverty. To expand these initiatives, it is important to provide technical, financial and infrastructure support and to develop strategies to ensure access to resources, particularly for vulnerable populations, women, and young people.

Finally, it is important to have more and better data to inform decisions about PVE strategies, including research on the differentiated effects of climate change and violent extremism on men and women and the efficiency and sustainability of adaptive



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mechanisms implemented by local communities. Availability and reliability of data are critical challenges that must

be considered in the design of PVE programmes. To ensure the long-term success of PVE strategies, it is essential to

invest in data collection and analysis to better understand the complex dynamics of the region.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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