



Article

Climate Change and National Security in Africa: Insights from the Lake Chad Region

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Lawal Ibrahim ISMAIL
Department of Political Science
Nigerian Defence Academy

Abstract

Climate change has increasingly emerged as a critical factor influencing national and regional security, particularly in fragile contexts across Africa. This article examines the intersection of climate change and security through a focused case study of the Lake Chad Basin, a region severely impacted by environmental degradation and socio-political instability. Drawing on historical, geographical, and contemporary security dynamics, the study explores how climate-induced resource scarcity, forced migration, and livelihood collapse have contributed to the rise of violent conflict and insurgency, notably the Boko Haram crisis. The article argues that climate change functions as a threat multiplier, exacerbating pre-existing vulnerabilities such as poverty, weak governance, and intercommunal tensions. It also investigates the role of environmental degradation in driving regional conflict and proposes actionable policy recommendations for African governments. These include integrating climate-security concerns into national frameworks, investing in climate-resilient livelihoods, strengthening regional cooperation, and leveraging international support.

Introduction

Climate change, defined as long-term alterations in temperature, precipitation patterns, and other atmospheric conditions caused by natural processes and human activities, has emerged as one of the most pressing global challenges of the 21st century, with profound implications that extend beyond environmental degradation to affect economic stability, social cohesion, and national security (IPCC, 2023). In Africa, the impacts of climate change are particularly acute due to the continent's high vulnerability, limited adaptive capacity, and heavy reliance on natural resources for livelihoods, making food and water systems especially sensitive to rising temperatures and erratic weather patterns; this

Corresponding Author:

Lawal Ibrahim ISMAIL, Department of Political Science, Nigerian Defence Academy.

Email: ibrahim.lawalismail@nda.edu.ng

vulnerability is evident in regions such as the Lake Chad Basin, which exemplifies the intricate relationship between environmental change and emerging security threats (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2022). This region, spanning parts of Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, has experienced severe environmental degradation as a result of climate change, leading to a drastic reduction in the lake's size over the past several decades.

The Lake Chad Basin's ecological decline has exacerbated pre-existing socio-economic challenges, including high levels of poverty, widespread food insecurity, and water scarcity, with millions already in need of humanitarian assistance before recent environmental pressures. An estimated 11.2 million people in the basin required humanitarian assistance as of late 2023, of whom about 4 million were affected by food insecurity, reflecting pervasive vulnerability across northeastern Nigeria, western Chad, Cameroon, and southeastern Niger (Plan International, 2024). These challenges have, in turn, contributed to the proliferation of security threats, such as armed conflicts, terrorism, and intercommunal violence. The rise of insurgent groups like Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) in the region is intrinsically linked to the degradation of natural resources, as dwindling livelihood opportunities push individuals and communities toward desperation and, in some cases, radicalization (Wilson Center, 2018). Furthermore, the displacement of millions of people due to climate-induced environmental stress has intensified competition for resources, leading to conflicts between farmers and herders, as well as cross-border tensions among the affected countries.

The intersection of climate change and national security in the Lake Chad region underscores the need for a multidimensional approach to understanding and addressing these challenges. Climate change acts as a "threat multiplier," exacerbating existing vulnerabilities and creating new pressures on governance, economic development, and social stability. For governments in the region, the deteriorating security situation poses a significant obstacle to achieving sustainable development and maintaining state sovereignty. Moreover, the implications of these challenges extend beyond the immediate region, with the potential to disrupt international peace and security. This article seeks to examine the impact of climate change on national security in the Lake Chad region, exploring how environmental degradation drives insecurity and analyzing the broader implications for Africa as a whole. The study highlights the key ways in which climate change contributes to instability, including its role in resource conflicts, forced migration, and the proliferation of extremist groups. It also considers the efforts undertaken by regional governments, international organizations, and local communities to mitigate the impacts of climate change and strengthen resilience against security threats. By focusing on the Lake Chad Basin as a case study, this article provides valuable insights into the broader dynamics of climate change and national security in Africa. It argues that addressing the security implications of climate change requires coordinated and comprehensive strategies that integrate environmental management, conflict resolution, and sustainable development. Furthermore, the article emphasizes the importance of international collaboration and the adoption of adaptive policies that prioritize resilience-building and proactive responses to climate-related challenges. Ultimately, the study contributes to the growing body of literature on the nexus between climate change and security, offering practical recommendations for policymakers and stakeholders in Africa and beyond.

Research Questions

1. How has climate change contributed to security challenges in the Lake Chad region?
2. How does loss of livelihood result from environmental degradation impact regional security in the Lake Chad Basin?
3. How can African governments address the security implications of climate change?

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in the Human Security Framework and the Environmental Security/Threat Multiplier Theory, both of which provide useful lenses for understanding the nexus between climate change and insecurity in the Lake Chad region.

The Human Security Framework, popularized by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 1994), emphasizes that security should extend beyond the protection of state sovereignty to include the safeguarding of individuals from threats such as poverty, disease, and environmental degradation. In the context of the Lake Chad Basin, human security is threatened by livelihood collapse, forced migration, and loss of access to natural resources caused by climate change. These insecurities, in turn, contribute to conditions of vulnerability that insurgent groups can exploit. By applying this framework, the study highlights the multidimensional impacts of climate change on people's safety and well-being, beyond traditional notions of military defense.

The Environmental Security/Threat Multiplier Theory further deepens the analysis. Scholars such as Homer-Dixon (1999) and more recently Rüttinger et al. (2015) argue that environmental stress does not automatically cause conflict but acts as a threat multiplier by exacerbating pre-existing social, political, and economic tensions. This perspective is particularly relevant to the Lake Chad Basin, where climate-induced scarcity has intensified farmer–herder clashes, undermined governance capacity, and facilitated the recruitment of extremist movements. The theory therefore helps to explain why climate change contributes to insecurity in fragile regions with weak institutions and socio-economic inequalities.

Methodology

This article adopts a qualitative, desk-based research design that relies on the analysis of secondary data sources. Given the complex and transboundary nature of the Lake Chad crisis, secondary data was considered appropriate for synthesizing diverse perspectives and drawing insights across multiple disciplines, including political science, security studies, environmental science, and development studies. The study makes use of peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, books, and publications from reputable international organizations such as the United Nations, African Union, International Crisis Group, UNHCR, and the Food and Agriculture Organization. Official communiqués, strategy documents, and reports from regional institutions such as the Lake Chad Basin Commission and the Multinational Joint Task Force were also reviewed. These sources provided empirical evidence, historical context, and contemporary analyses on climate change, environmental degradation, and security challenges in the Lake Chad Basin.

The analysis employed a thematic approach, identifying and synthesizing key themes such as resource scarcity, migration, radicalization, governance fragility, and regional cooperation. Data was reviewed, compared, and categorized according to these themes to draw out patterns and causal linkages.

between climate change and security challenges. The theoretical framework guided interpretation, particularly in identifying how climate change functions as a threat multiplier within fragile socio-political contexts. As a secondary data-based study, the article is constrained by the availability and reliability of existing sources. Certain areas, such as local community perceptions or micro-level dynamics, may not be fully captured due to reliance on published materials rather than fieldwork. However, by triangulating information from multiple reputable sources, the study mitigates this limitation and provides a comprehensive analysis of the climate–security nexus in the Lake Chad Basin.

Geographical Overview of the Lake Chad Region

The Lake Chad Basin, located in the heart of the Sahel, is a transboundary region that spans parts of Nigeria, Chad, Niger, Cameroon, and the Central African Republic. Geographically, Lake Chad sits at the intersection of West and Central Africa, encompassing a drainage area of approximately 2.5 million square kilometers. Historically, it served as a critical source of water and sustenance for pastoralists, fishermen, and farmers across the region (Lemoalle & Magrin, 2014). In the past, Lake Chad was one of the largest freshwater lakes in Africa, covering about 25,000 square kilometers in the 1960s. However, a combination of climate variability, prolonged droughts, increased water withdrawal for irrigation, and population growth has caused the lake to shrink dramatically, leaving less than 2,500 square kilometers of open water in some years (Coe & Foley, 2001; UNEP, 2011). This drastic reduction transformed the region from a hub of economic and social integration into an epicenter of ecological and humanitarian crisis.

Historical Overview of the Lake Chad Region

Historically, the region also hosted ancient trans-Saharan trade routes and Islamic empires, such as the Kanem-Bornu Empire, which thrived for centuries. These legacies reflect the region's long-standing strategic and cultural importance, as well as its complex ethnic and political dynamics that continue to shape contemporary conflicts (Magrin, 2016).

The ongoing environmental degradation of Lake Chad has significantly affected regional stability. The shrinking lake has disrupted traditional livelihoods based on fishing, agriculture, and pastoralism, leading to economic marginalization and social tension. Resource scarcity has intensified competition among ethnic and occupational groups, often culminating in violent confrontations over water and grazing lands (Okpara et al., 2015). Climate change acts as a threat multiplier in this context. Increasing temperatures, erratic rainfall patterns, and desert encroachment have worsened food insecurity and displacement, especially among vulnerable communities. The loss of livelihoods has facilitated the radicalization and recruitment efforts of armed groups such as Boko Haram, who exploit socio-economic grievances to expand their influence in the region (Rüttinger et al., 2015; ICG, 2017).

The emergence of Boko Haram and other insurgent groups in the Lake Chad Basin underscores the security implications of ecological collapse. The insurgency, which began in northeastern Nigeria, has spilled over into neighboring countries, displacing over 3 million people and killing tens of thousands since 2009 (UNHCR, 2022). The porous borders of the Lake Chad region have facilitated arms smuggling, human trafficking, and cross-border attacks, weakening state authority and undermining regional security cooperation. The humanitarian crisis has further strained fragile states. Camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees are overcrowded and under-resourced, while local host

communities grapple with rising tensions and shrinking resources. Efforts by the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) and the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) have aimed to restore stability, but progress remains hampered by inadequate funding, weak infrastructure, and ongoing insecurity (UN Security Council, 2018).

The Lake Chad Basin vividly illustrates how climate change can intersect with historical, geographical, and socio-political dynamics to generate insecurity. Its case highlights the urgent need for integrated policies that link climate adaptation, conflict prevention, and regional development. Addressing the crisis requires coordinated investment in ecological restoration, livelihood diversification, and regional peacebuilding initiatives.

Climate Change and Security Challenges in the Lake Chad Region

Climate change has significantly contributed to the multidimensional security crisis in the Lake Chad region. This crisis is not solely the result of environmental change, but rather a complex interaction of ecological degradation, socio-economic vulnerability, weak governance, and conflict dynamics. Nevertheless, climate change has acted as a key threat multiplier, exacerbating existing fragilities and intensifying insecurity across the region.

i. Shrinking Natural Resources and Livelihood Collapse

One of the most direct consequences of climate change in the Lake Chad Basin is the dramatic shrinking of Lake Chad itself. From an estimated 25,000 square kilometers in the 1960s, the lake's surface area has shrunk by over 90 percent due to prolonged droughts, reduced rainfall, and increasing water withdrawals for irrigation (UNEP, 2011; Coe & Foley, 2001). This ecological collapse has led to the degradation of arable land, desertification, and the disruption of traditional livelihoods such as fishing, farming, and herding. As local economies falter, competition over scarce resources has triggered conflicts between communities, particularly between farmers and pastoralists.

ii. Forced Migration and Inter-Communal Tensions

The loss of productive land and water has forced thousands of people to migrate within and across national borders in search of better living conditions. These movements have increased pressure on host communities, often resulting in social tension and violent clashes over land and water rights (Okpara et al., 2015). The weakening of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms and state authority in rural areas has further aggravated communal violence.

iii. Radicalization and the Rise of Insurgency

Climate-induced economic hardship and displacement have created fertile ground for the recruitment efforts of extremist groups. Boko Haram and its splinter factions have capitalized on the desperation of unemployed youth and disillusioned communities by offering financial incentives, protection, and a sense of purpose (ICG, 2017). The insurgency has spread across northeastern Nigeria into parts of Chad, Cameroon, and Niger, exploiting the porous borders and governance gaps exacerbated by environmental stress.

iv. Governance Challenges and Institutional Fragility

The ability of states in the Lake Chad Basin to respond effectively to climate-security challenges has been limited by poor governance, under-resourced institutions, and overlapping crises. Governments

often lack the capacity to deliver basic services, enforce environmental regulations, or manage land disputes, making populations more vulnerable to both environmental shocks and insurgent propaganda (Rüttinger et al., 2015). Climate change, therefore, has not only intensified direct competition for resources but has also undermined state legitimacy and public trust.

Loss of Livelihood from Environmental Degradation and Its Impact on Regional Security in the Lake Chad Basin

Loss of livelihood arising from environmental degradation in the Lake Chad Basin has emerged as a critical pathway through which ecological stress exacerbates regional insecurity. The most dramatic ecological change in the region has been the decline of Lake Chad itself. Over the past six decades, the lake has shrunk by more than 90 percent due to climate variability, over-extraction of water and demographic pressures, severely undermining traditional livelihood systems that depend on fishing, pastoralism and agriculture (Owonikoko & Momodu, 2020). This contraction of natural resources has disrupted the economic foundations of millions of households, worsened food insecurity and driven population displacement (Training for Peace, 2024; Oxfam International, 2018).

Communities around Lake Chad have historically relied on the lake's water for irrigation, livestock rearing, fishing and other livelihood activities. As water levels fell and rainfall became more erratic, crop yields declined, fisheries diminished and grazing lands became scarcer, leaving many households without viable sources of income (MDPI, 2021). Food insecurity and unemployment increased as basic means of survival disappeared, heightening competition for the remaining scarce resources and intensifying socio-economic stress (Training for Peace, 2024; Oxfam International, 2018).

These livelihood losses fuel regional insecurity in several interrelated ways. First, economic desperation and loss of traditional livelihood opportunities increase vulnerability to recruitment by non-state armed groups. Groups such as Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) have exploited economic grievances by offering alternative income, material incentives or protection, making them attractive to young people and displaced persons with few legitimate economic options (Training for Peace, 2024). Second, competition over limited resources, such as land, water and pasture, has aggravated inter-communal tensions, particularly between farmers and herders, contributing to localized violence and undermining social cohesion (Owonikoko & Momodu, 2020). Third, disrupted livelihoods and displacement have weakened the legitimacy of state institutions, eroded trust in governance and increased dependence on informal power structures, further complicating peacebuilding and conflict mitigation efforts (Training for Peace, 2024).

In sum, the loss of livelihood due to environmental degradation acts as a *threat multiplier* in the Lake Chad Basin by deepening poverty, reinforcing food insecurity, exacerbating competition over scarce resources and creating conditions that insurgent groups can exploit. Addressing these complex linkages requires integrated strategies that build resilience, diversify livelihood options and strengthen governance capacities across national and local actors in the basin.

Addressing the Security Implications of Climate Change: Policy Options for African Governments

Climate change poses a significant and growing threat to national and regional security in Africa. It acts as a threat multiplier by intensifying existing vulnerabilities such as food insecurity, water scarcity, forced migration, and violent conflict. In regions like the Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin, climate-induced stress has contributed to armed insurgencies, communal violence, and large-scale displacement. For African governments, an effective response requires a multidimensional and coordinated policy approach that combines environmental governance with national security planning.

1. Mainstreaming Climate-Security into National Policy Frameworks

African governments need to incorporate climate-security considerations into their national development plans, security strategies, and climate adaptation frameworks. This requires integrating environmental risk assessments into national security strategies, defense planning, and early warning systems. The African Union has acknowledged the link between climate change and security in its Peace and Security Council communiqués (African Union, 2021), but implementation at the national level remains limited. By adopting climate-sensitive conflict analysis tools, governments can enhance their capacity to anticipate and respond to potential conflict hotspots.

2. Investing in Climate-Resilient Livelihoods

A key strategy for reducing the security risks associated with climate change is investing in climate-resilient livelihoods. Many of the communities affected by droughts, flooding, and desertification are also vulnerable to radicalization and armed group recruitment. Climate-smart agriculture, renewable energy projects, and improved water management can reduce ecological stress and create economic opportunities, particularly for unemployed youth (FAO, 2016). Government-supported green public works programs and social protection schemes can further strengthen resilience in fragile regions.

3. Strengthening Regional Cooperation and Governance

Because both climate change and insecurity often transcend borders, regional cooperation is essential. Transboundary basins like the Niger, Nile, and Lake Chad require joint governance mechanisms to manage shared resources and reduce the risk of cross-border conflict. Regional organizations such as the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC), the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), and ECOWAS should be empowered to integrate climate adaptation, conflict prevention, and migration management into their mandates (Boas et al., 2019). Joint early warning systems and regional security platforms are necessary to address threats that are environmental and transnational in nature.

4. Enhancing Military and Civil Capacity for Environmental Security

Security institutions in Africa, including the military, should build their capacity to address environmental threats. Training in disaster response, humanitarian relief, and environmental risk analysis can help security forces play a more proactive role in national resilience efforts. Militaries can support infrastructure development, emergency evacuations, and the protection of key ecosystems (Brown et al., 2007). In addition, civil protection agencies should be equipped with tools to manage the secondary effects of climate change, including displacement, food insecurity, and disease outbreaks.

5. Promoting Inclusive Governance and Conflict-Sensitive Adaptation

Inclusive governance plays a central role in preventing climate-related conflicts. Communities most affected by environmental change, particularly pastoralists, farmers, and women, must have a voice in decisions related to land use, natural resource management, and climate adaptation. Participatory approaches help to reduce tension between groups and ensure equitable distribution of resources (Okpara et al., 2016). Conflict-sensitive adaptation planning, which considers local power dynamics and historical grievances, is essential for building sustainable peace.

6. Leveraging International Partnerships and Climate Finance

African governments should engage more actively with international institutions and donors to access climate finance that supports both adaptation and peacebuilding. Mechanisms such as the UN Climate Security Mechanism, the African Development Bank's Climate Action Plan, and the Green Climate Fund provide opportunities to fund projects that address both environmental and security objectives (UNDP, 2020). To benefit from these mechanisms, governments must improve transparency, build institutional capacity, and align national development strategies with global climate goals.

Conclusion

The Lake Chad Basin illustrates the complex and multi-layered ways in which climate change contributes to national and regional insecurity in Africa. The dramatic environmental decline witnessed in the region has not only eroded livelihoods and displaced millions but has also provided fertile ground for radicalisation, armed insurgency, and intercommunal conflict. As this article has shown, climate change acts as a threat multiplier that intensifies existing social, economic, and political fragilities.

Addressing the security implications of climate change in Africa requires a shift from reactive crisis management to proactive and integrated policy responses. African governments must mainstream climate-security linkages into national strategies, promote inclusive governance, and strengthen regional and international cooperation. Investments in climate-resilient infrastructure and livelihoods, coupled with effective environmental governance, are essential to reducing vulnerability and enhancing stability. Furthermore, security institutions must be equipped to engage in environmental risk management and support adaptation efforts.

The Lake Chad case serves as both a warning and a call to action. It demonstrates the urgent need for policies that link climate adaptation with peacebuilding and sustainable development. Only through coordinated, inclusive, and forward-looking strategies can African states mitigate the security threats posed by climate change and foster resilient and peaceful societies.

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BIO

Lawal Ibrahim Ismail works at the Nigerian Defence Academy and holds a BSc in Political Science and an MSc in Defence and Strategic Studies. He specializes in governance, security, and strategic studies. He is currently pursuing a PhD in Political Science.