Land, violent conflicts and migration: Identifying regimes of dispossession in the Sahel

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Abstract

This article questions dominant narratives that attribute conflicts and migration in the Sahel primarily to factors such as ethnicity, climate change, or poverty. Instead, we highlight land dispossession as a central, yet insufficiently examined, driver of both phenomena. Drawing on peasant studies and political ecology, the article analyses twelve case studies from Mali, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Cameroon, and Chad. The authors of the various studies adopted a qualitative approach, alternating between direct observation, individual and focus group interviews. Based on these empirical studies, we identified five distinct regimes of dispossession: peri-urban, large-scale agricultural, pastoral, community, and licensed dispossessions. These different regimes of dispossession may overlap and are not mutually exclusive. They are influenced by state policies, elite capture, social differentiation and global economic pressures, resulting in coercive land redistribution and the marginalization of rural populations. We contend that dispossession exacerbates both migration and recruitment to armed groups, including jihadist movements, as reactions to perceived injustices. By reevaluating concepts such as moral economy and primitive accumulation, the article offers a new understanding of the crises in the Sahel, based on an analysis of the political ecology of land and migration. As a consequence, we emphasize the need for historically and politically informed analyses rather than reductionist explanations.

Key words: land dispossession, regimes of dispossession, Sahel, political ecology, moral economy, primitive accumulation

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Résumé

Cet article interroge les discours dominants qui attribuent les conflits et les migrations au Sahel à des facteurs tels que l'ethnicité, le changement climatique ou la pauvreté. Nous mettons plutôt en avant la dépossession foncière, un facteur central mais peu étudié, à l'origine de ces deux phénomènes. S'appuyant sur les études paysannes et la political ecology, il analyse douze études de cas menées au Mali, au Burkina Faso, au Ghana, au Cameroun et au Tchad. Les auteurs de ces études ont adopté une approche qualitative, alternant entre l'observation directe, les entretiens individuels et les groupes de discussion. Sur la base de ces études empiriques, nous avons identifié cinq régimes distincts de dépossession : dépossessions périurbaines, agricoles à grande échelle, pastorales, communautaires et sous licence. Ces différents régimes de dépossession peuvent se chevaucher et ne s'excluent pas mutuellement. Ils sont influencés par les politiques de l'État, la capture par les élites, la différenciation sociale et les pressions économiques mondiales, ce qui entraîne une redistribution coercitive des terres et la marginalisation des populations rurales. Nous soutenons que la dépossession exacerbe à la fois la migration et le recrutement au sein des groupes armés, y compris des mouvements djihadistes, en réaction à des injustices perçues. En réévaluant des concepts tels que l'économie morale et l'accumulation primitive, cet article propose une nouvelle compréhension des crises au Sahel, fondée sur une analyse adoptant l'approche de la political ecology de la terre et de la migration. Nous soulignons ainsi la nécessité d'analyses historiques et politiques approfondies plutôt que d'explications réductionnistes.

Key words: dépossession des terres, régimes de dépossession, Sahel, political ecology, économie morale, accumulation primitive

Resumen

Este artículo cuestiona las narrativas dominantes que atribuyen los conflictos y la migración en el Sahel principalmente a factores como la etnicidad, el cambio climático o la pobreza. En su lugar, destacamos la desposesión de tierras como un factor central de ambos fenómenos, aunque todavía insuficientemente estudiado. Basándose en estudios sobre campesinos y la ecología política, el artículo analiza doce casos prácticos de Malí, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Camerún y Chad. Los autores de los distintos estudios adoptaron un enfoque cualitativo, combinando observación directa con entrevistas individuales y grupales. A partir de estos estudios empíricos, identificamos cinco regímenes distintos de despojo: periurbano, agrícola a gran escala, pastoral, comunitario y mediante concesiones. Estos regímenes pueden superponerse y no son mutuamente excluyentes. Están influenciados por las políticas estatales, la captura por parte de las élites, la diferenciación social y las presiones económicas globales, lo que conduce a una redistribución coercitiva de la tierra y a la marginación de las poblaciones rurales. Sostenemos que el despojo exacerba tanto la migración como el reclutamiento en grupos armados, incluidos los movimientos yihadistas, en reacción a las injusticias percibidas. Al reevaluar conceptos como la economía moral y la acumulación primitiva, el artículo ofrece una nueva comprensión de las crisis en el Sahel, basada en un análisis de la ecología política de la tierra y de la migración. En consecuencia, subrayamos la necesidad de realizar análisis histórica y políticamente contextualizados, en lugar de recurrir a explicaciones reduccionistas.

Palabras Clave: despojo de tierras, regímenes de despojo, Sahel, ecología política, economía moral, acumulación primitiva

1. Introduction

Why are armed groups in the Sahel gaining in support and power? Why has migration within and out of the region increased in recent decades? In this article, we look beyond what we believe are simplistic answers to these questions such as privileging attention to ethnicity, climate change or

population growth combined with resource scarcity, or simply pointing at poverty and unemployment as crucial causes.

Instead of these mainstream explanations, we draw attention to the need to understand the context of processes producing migration and conflict by returning to some of the classic literature within peasant studies that have been largely neglected in the Africanist scholarship on migration and conflict. We combine this focus with the contextual approach of political ecology with attention to the micro-politics and power relations of land and environmental governance at the local level. In fact, Marxist peasant studies were one of the key sources of inspiration when political ecology emerged as an approach in the 1980s (Watts, 1983). In this article, we propose to go back to this original, and some may say "hardcore" materialist form of political ecology to explain migration and conflict in the Sahel.

The analysis is based on a series of case studies from Mali, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Cameroon and Chad showing that studies of land dispossession can help explain both involvement in armed groups and migration paths. This means that we use a broad definition of the Sahel, including, for practical purposes, geographical areas that are not part of more formal definitions of this geographical region. While our main attention is on the drylands south of the Sahara desert, both conflict and migration are wider processes involving areas further south in West Africa.

The Sahel crisis remains first and foremost a political and governance crisis that has led to armed "jihadist' insurgencies, with major consequences for security, the economy and devastating effects on people's livelihoods. The term 'jihadist,' however, is not without its problems. Traditionally, *jihad* can refer to a moral or spiritual struggle rather than a violent one (Sedwick 2015). Although armed groups in the Sahel are labelled 'jihadist', many of their members may be motivated by material needs and daily struggles over land and resources, more than violent interpretations of Islam, which the case studies in this article also demonstrate.

Violent jihadist insurgencies in the Sahel first emerged in northern Nigeria (in 2009) and northern Mali (in 2012) and then spread to neighboring countries and regions. Additionally, migration from the Sahel to the Mediterranean region increased, culminating in the 2015 refugee crisis in Europe.

Since then, the measures taken by the European Union in the Sahel and North Africa have considerably reduced the flow of migrants. However, arrivals in Europe from West and Central Africa were estimated at 76,620 by International Organization of Migration for the period January-September 2023 (IOM 2023). The organization also estimates that these irregular arrivals account for 39% of all arrivals in Europe in 2023, compared to 17% in 2022.

One of the main migration routes passes through Agadez in Niger to reach Libya, and more than half of the migrants who reached the Italian island of Lampedusa in 2014 passed through this route (Raineri & Rossi 2017). However, only around 10% of migrants who passed through Agadez attempted to reach Europe. The vast majority headed for Algeria and Libya (Hochleithner & Exner 2018). In the last ten to fifteen years, due to increased security measures by the EU and individual European countries, the migration flow has shifted westwards, via Algeria and Morocco, with Spain replacing Greece and Italy as the gateway to Europe.

It should be pointed out, however, that contrary to popular belief, African migration takes place mainly within the continent (Eyebiyi & Mendy 2019; Dicko 2021). The last two decades have been unique in that the crises in the Sahel have amplified mobility in the region and beyond, mainly in the form of forced or coerced movements. These are largely fueled by the context of violence and

insecurity caused by the activities of armed groups, governance problems, and the intervention of foreign state and non-state actors with specific strategic interests.

The Sahel has a priori one of the most mobile populations in the world, with several different factors contributing to the various forms of migration (Neumann & Hermans 2017). A highly variable resource base across seasons and years is at the root of this high level of migration. To keep up with environmental variations, pastoralists migrate several hundred kilometers each year. Many rural residents also move to urban areas for seasonal work.

At the heart of the factors of instability is the inevitable question of land, the loss of which leads populations to develop new survival strategies, with migration becoming a more forced rather than a voluntary option.

The academic literature often cites general causes, such as poverty and unemployment, to explain migration and conflict (Steinberg & Weber, 2016; Antúnez, 2022; Sartori & Fattibene, 2019; Potts *et al*., 2013). In addition, climate change and population growth are sometimes cited as causes, particularly in the more policy-oriented literature and the media (we give examples below). Even in political ecology, there is a dearth of studies of causes of migration and armed conflict, in particular when it comes to the recent security situation in the Sahel (but see Ribot *et al*., 2020; Turner *et al*., 2023, and Turner *et al*., 2025 for notable exceptions).

Hence, in this article, we propose to go back to the peasant studies literature of the 1970s to look for the 'forgotten' causes of peasant migration and revolt, and to study the extent to which these factors are influenced by land dispossession and elite capture in the Sahel. This literature draws, in particular, on the notions of primitive accumulation and moral economy.

2. Methodology

This article is based on three categories of empirical case studies. The first consists of six commissioned studies, four in Mali and two in Chad, carried out by researchers based at universities and research institutes in these two countries. These commissioned studies were structured around terms of reference based on a common theoretical, conceptual and methodological approach, enabling them to be compared with one another. Such an approach aimed to identify the shared patterns of the cases. It also allowed us to identify the singularities that would facilitate a comparison of the practices of dispossession of natural resources and land as well as the responses of individuals and communities according to the socio-historical and political contexts within individual cases.

In addition to these six cases, there is a second category of three case studies, two of which were conducted by young African scholars as part of the Land Deals Politics Initiative (one in Burkina Faso and one in Cameroon), and one case study, which our project sponsored with additional funding for fieldwork in Mali. Finally, the third category of case studies consists of three studies conducted by ourselves, the authors of this article.[2]

[2] The various cases are also published as individual chapters in the forthcoming book. Benjaminsen, T. A., Eyebiyi, E., Poudiougou, I. (eds.) (2026). *Dépossession des terres, conflits violents et migrations au Sahel*. Éditions Peter Lang.

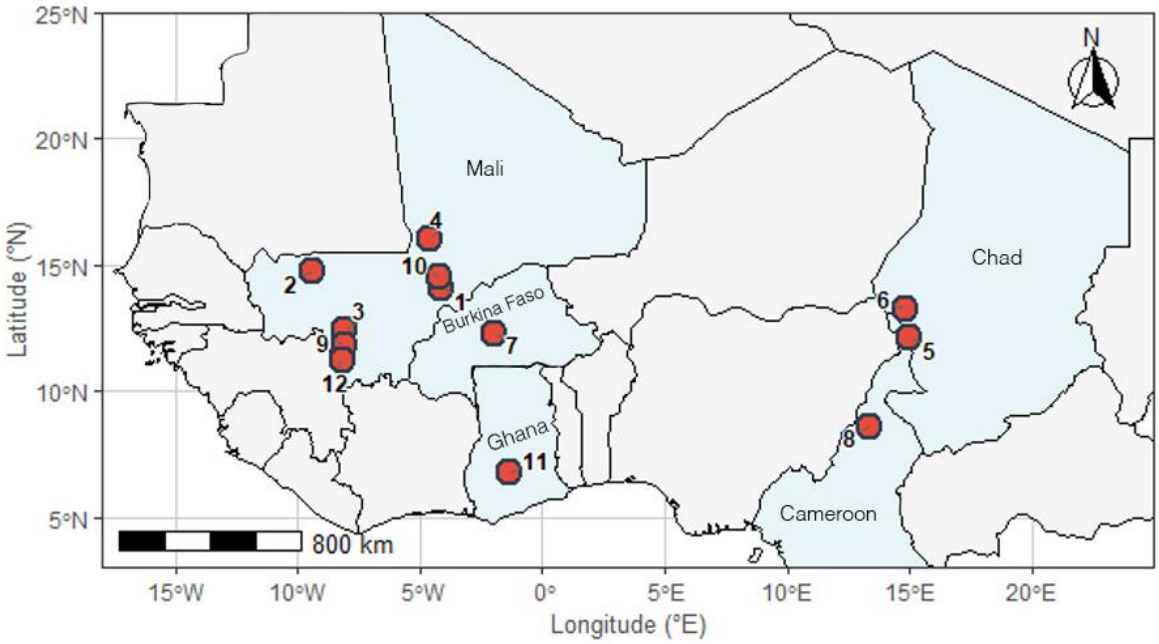

Figure 1: Research locations

In all the 12 cases, the authors adopted a qualitative approach, alternating between direct observation, individual and/or focus group interviews, except the case study conducted in Burkina Faso (Maiga *et al*. 2026), which combined qualitative (interviews, observations) and quantitative (surveys, descriptive statistics, and geolocation) approaches. We also mobilize open quantitative data on land deals produced by the Land Matrix.[3] These techniques were employed in various ways, depending on the relevance of one tool over another to the local context and the methodological and epistemological choices of the individual researchers.

As the land issues examined in these different studies were located in either rural or peri-urban areas, the case study authors interacted with a wide range of stakeholders involved in land issues. These actors included, but were not limited to smallholders (farmers and pastoralists); land buyers and their intermediaries/brokers; customary and community leaders (village chiefs, land chiefs, imams, priests, etc.); leaders of civil society organizations (associations, women's and youth interest groups, etc.); local elected representatives; administrative and technical service providers (land agents, natural resource managers, district administrative services); and judges.

Most of the individual and focus groups interviews were conducted in Sahelian languages, including Bamanankan, Fulfulde, Tamashek, Dogon, Soninké, Moré, local Chadian Arabic dialects, Buduma, Kanembu, and Twi, with a few exceptions in English and French. This allowed us to collect data as close to the people as possible, with their consent, thereby reducing the distortions that can arise from the use of interpreters or translators during field interviews.

[3] https://landmatrix.org/

Case studies[4]	Geographical locations	Authors
1. Dispossession of resources, migration and conflict in the Office du Niger	Macina, Kolongo and Kokry, Mopti region (Mali)	Boureima Touré
2. Dispossession and forced migration in the western Sahel in Mali. The case of Diéma and Nioro du Sahel	Diema and Nioro du Sahel, Kayes region (Mali)	Fodié Tandjigora
3. Land dispossession of smallholders by urban elites in Bamako : the case of Dialakoroba and Sanankoroba municipalities, (1991-2018)	Dialakoroba and Sanankoroba, peri-urban areas outside Bamako, (Mali)	Oumar Traoré and Alassane Niaré
4. Conflict dynamics around Lake Faguibine in the Timbuktu region	Goundam District, Timbuktu region (Mali)	Mohamed El Moctar Ag Mohamedoun
5. Land, conflict and migration in the lower Chari region	Outskirts of N'Djamena, Chad	Ladiba Gondeu, Yacoub Malloum Izo and Albassar Tiguetna Esaïe
6. Land dispossession, migration and recruitment into non-state armed groups around Lake Chad	Bol and Bagasola, Province du Lac (Chad)	Allah-Kauis Neneck
7. Rural land tenure in Burkina Faso under threat of dispossession: the case of the rural commune of Sourgou in the Centre region	Boulkiemdé Province (Burkina Faso)	Yaya Maiga, Yameogo Joseph and Tiamiyu Kasimou
8. Study of the socio-land impacts of large-scale land acquisitions on local populations (North Cameroon)	Kalackasay, Yaago and Waré, Poli province (Cameroon)	Nestor Sohbe Djidim
9. Beyond traditional land dispossession: how urban elite investments in peri-urban agriculture influence gender dynamics and access to land in Mali	Baguineda in peri-urban Bamako and Selingué in Sikasso region (Mali)	Asmao Diallo
10. Fulani-Dogon Killings in Mali: conflicts between farmers and herders as insurgency and counter-insurgency	Mopti region (Mali)	Tor A. Benjaminsen and Boubacar Ba
11. Land dispossession and its effects on urban migration in Ghana	Agogo, Kumasi and Ashanti region (Ghana)	Elieth Eyebiyi and Jefferson Olarbi
12. Dogon migration in the Yanfolila district (1967-1985)	Yanfolila in Sikasso region and Bamako (Mali)	Ibrahima Poudiougou

Figure 2: The case studies.

[4] The authors have translated the titles from French to English. In the reference list, all cases are listed as chapters in the forthcoming book.

2. The rise of jihadist violence

Currently, the scholarly literature on the rise of jihadist and other armed groups in the Sahel has generally focused on how global political and economic developments, Islamist thought, and organizations relate to national and international dynamics. This literature has addressed largely overlapping topics, namely international jihadism and its tributaries in the region (Huckabey 2013; de Castelli 2014; Harmon 2014; Lounnas 2014; Walther & Christopoulos 2015), drug trafficking and hostage-taking as sources of funding for armed groups (Lacher 2013; Detzi & Winkleman 2016), national political dynamics and the history of Tuareg rebellions (Cline 2013; Bøås 2015), the current crisis of national democratic systems and the weakening of the state (Gonin *et al*. 2013, Baudais 2015; Bayart 2022; Bencherif 2023), the complex and changing Islamic national landscape (Soares 2013), and the Sahelian crisis as a spillover from the Libyan conflict (Shaw 2013, Solomon 2013).

While these studies have made important contributions to understanding the crisis in the Sahel, land dispossession and elite capture as part of the causes of the current Sahelian crisis are largely neglected and remain understudied in the academic literature on this crisis.

The current academic debate on jihadist groups in the Sahel focuses on whether external influences of global processes or local factors and the individual agency of actors best explain the origins and violent rise of these groups (Zenn 2017; Thurston 2017; Higazi *et al*. 2018; Hansen 2019; Pérouse de Monclos 2022, 2023; Chebli 2019; Bencherif & Campana 2016). Land dispossession generally falls outside the scope and focus of these debates on the rise of jihadist groups in the Sahel.

On the other hand, policy analyses and media presentations tend to focus on ethnicity, climate change and population growth as drivers of conflict and the rise of jihadism in the Sahel, or simply on poverty and unemployment. For example, the UN Security Council has repeatedly discussed climate change as a cause of conflict in the Sahel. Similarly, in March 2021, the African Union Peace and Security Council issued a communiqué focusing on the effects of climate change on peace, security and stability in Africa (African Union Peace and Security Council 2021).

Among the many media publications on this subject, for example, Radio France Internationale (RFI, 2023) mentions the exacerbation of conflicts between livestock herders and farmers, as well as migration (with 86 million sub-Saharan climate migrants, according to the World Bank quoted by RFI) in the Sahel region as a consequence of climate change. According to RFI, climate change will lead to "the gradual drying up of the River Niger (...) soil degradation and the loss of plant cover." leading to more confrontations between livestock herders, farmers and fishermen.

On the other hand, climate change is said to be responsible for so-called "ethnic and ancestral" tensions, which lead to a situation of "land tensions over the use and sharing of land (...) exploited by terrorist groups such as Boko Haram, or authoritarian states such as Russia with the Wagner group", according to a researcher at a French observatory attached to the Ministry of the Armed Forces (Jourde *et al*., 2025). In an article published in *Jeune Afrique* (26/1/2024), a UNDP programme manager for Regional Fragility and Stabilisation estimated that in the Sahel "…50 million inhabitants (are) threatened by climate and insecurity" (Cela, 2024).

We argue, however, that the root causes of conflict and crisis in the Sahel are largely historical and political, with climate change and demographic pressure playing minor roles. This means that while climate change and population growth are relevant in explaining struggles over land and natural resources, political factors provide deeper historical explanations for violent conflict (Benjaminsen 2024).

Following Hirschman (1970), we propose that the various strategies pursued by rural populations who are dispossessed of their land in the Sahel can be seen as potentially following 'exit,

voice and loyalty' options. Hirschman wondered how, for example, a customer or citizen would react to a decline in quality of a product or in the governance of the state. In addition to 'loyalty' (compliance with the rules), there are basically two choices, in his view: 'exit' or 'voice.' In the cases examined in this article, 'exit' would imply migration, while 'voice' would mean contestation, including through violent resistance.

The forms of land governance facing African rural populations are in many ways the result of the confluence of several global trends that have occurred over the last couple of decades. These include

(1) the rise in food prices from 2007-2008, which led international investors to 'rediscover' the agricultural sector in Africa and catalyzed increasing pressure on smallholder land in some places through increased investment resulting in large-scale land grabs in many parts of the continent (Borras *et al*. 2011; Zoomers 2010);
(2) the rise in energy prices leading to the conversion of smallholder land for biofuel and alternative energy production (Borras *et al*. 2010);
(3) increasing demand for minerals, particularly for the electronics and alternative energy industries (Kramarz *et al*. 2021, Sovacool 2021);
(4) projects to mitigate climate change through forest conservation (Asiyanbi & Lund 2020) and large-scale tree plantations (Benjaminsen 2024; Turner *et al*. 2021; Turner *et al*. 2023);
(5) growing initiatives to conserve biodiversity in remote 'wildernesses' (Corson & MacDonald 2012).

In the Sahel, and across Africa in general, pastoralists tend to be losing access to key pastures and livestock corridors. They are, however, usually not interested in obtaining exclusive rights to the land. They only need access at crucial times of the year (Barrière & Barrière 2002; Benjaminsen 1997; Cissé 1989; Berge 2001; Scoones 2021).

Because pastoralists are flexible in the way they use their resources, they can adapt more easily to climate variability than many other groups (Mirzabaev *et al*. 2022). But at the same time, state policies that favor sedentary agriculture at the expense of mobile and flexible livestock farming compromise not only pastoralists' access to land, but also livestock-keeping as an economic activity in general. Pastoral marginalization through government policies was in fact one of the main drivers of the Tuareg rebellion that triggered Mali's civil war in the 1990s, and which is at the roots of the current crisis (Benjaminsen 2008; Grémont 2021; Bourgeot 1995; Lecocq & Klute 2013). Many Tuareg and pastoral Fulani have for a long time felt marginalized by state modernization policies.

3. Moral economy

The concept of moral economy is, in particular, relevant to explain the recent jihadist uprising in the Sahel (Benjaminsen & Ba 2024; Benjaminsen 2024). Thompson first used this term in his studies of peasant rebellions in England in the 18th century (Thompson 1971). His starting point was a critique of what he saw as a dominant historical approach that did not take the agency of common people seriously. In his view, common people were generally not seen as historical agents, and their actions were often presented as mere responses to external stimuli. He wrote "It is sufficient to mention a bad harvest or a down-turn in trade, and all requirements of historical explanation are satisfied" (p.76).

Today, we could add 'drought' or 'rising temperatures' as examples of external stimuli used to explain human behavior, with climate change often interpreted as a factor in migration and conflict in the Sahel. This recent climate reductionism has certain similarities with the climate determinism of the colonial period, when the actions of colonial subjects were reduced to a product of African climates (Hulme 2011). Current climate reductionism also focuses on Africa, and particularly the Sahel. From this point of view, old habits die hard: thinking has not progressed particularly far.

One might ask why climate is becoming an issue in relation to violent conflicts in Africa, when, for example, in the war in Ukraine and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, climate change is largely considered irrelevant. It is generally accepted that in understanding these conflicts, the historical and political contexts are inescapable aspects. This observation does not imply a structural equivalence between these complex conflicts. Rather, it draws attention to the tendency to offer climate-based explanations in African contexts, despite the contenent's conflicts being deeply political and historical.

In some policy-oriented and public debates on African conflicts, contextual and historically grounded analyses are still overshadowed by simplified narratives emphasising ethnicity, poverty, climate change, population growth or resource scarcity. Furthermore, Thompson believed that 'rebellions of the belly' – the idea that peasant rebellions are caused by high food prices or simply by unemployment – are paternalistic. People are more likely to protest when they are hungry, but to focus the analysis on this aspect is reductive and reflects a narrow vision of 'homo economicus.'

This article stands at the opposite end of the spectrum from such context-free Eurocentrism. It refutes this clichéd approach, which does not require in-depth fieldwork to understand the causes and, above all, the ways in which the Sahel is changing. Indeed, far from being frozen in time, even if conflicts and migrations are not new to this region of the world, the links between land, conflicts and migrations have never been so significant. The dynamics of the Sahel operate within an extended regional framework that includes West Africa along an axis stretching from Dakar to Lake Chad, and beyond. This is why we take a broad perspective, looking at the Sahel in its strategic and geographical breadth.

Following the relatively recent *coups d'état* in the Sahel (Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad, Niger) and in Guinea Conakry, some ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) sanctions consisted of closing the borders around Mali and later Niger. This sometimes prevents any basic necessities from entering the regions affected by the *coups d'état*. Time has, however, shown that resulting hunger has not been enough to launch protests against the incumbent regimes. Nationalist sentiment, or sentiment presented as such and sometimes mobilized within the broader framework of 'pan-Africanism', has been enough to consolidate opposition to ECOWAS and its goals. It has been perceived as nothing more and nothing less than an instrument in the hands of Western (colonialist) forces.

These current geostrategic conditions are not in fact disconnected from the issues raised by Thompson (1971) on how custom, culture and reason modify social behavior. As mentioned, for him, social behavior cannot be reduced to simple reactions to external stimuli without context. To understand rebellion – contrary to reductionist views – we also need to understand people's motivations and their sense of justice within the framework of a moral economy. In European history, since at least the 15th century, threats to this moral economy have led to numerous local or more widespread peasant revolts, usually driven by the privatization of communally-used land and resources (Thompson 1971; Federici 2004; Angus 2023; Le Roy Ladurie 2006, 2009; Bloch 1999; Stanziani 2021).

James Scott (1976) further developed the idea of moral economy in his study of peasant rebellions in Southeast Asia, seeing moral economy primarily as an ethic of subsistence, meaning that it involves a perceived right to basic sustenance. A threat to this right creates a moral indignation or anger that can lead to rebellion, although this anger is not enough in itself for rebellion to take place.

4. Primitive accumulation and regimes of dispossession

The central process of primitive accumulation is the privatization of common property leading to the combined effect of capital accumulation for some, and dispossession for others. In Marx's example from the enclosure of the commons in northern England in the 18th and 19th centuries, many of the dispossessed were subsequently employed in the region's emerging textile industry. Today, however, the dispossessed in the countries of the Global South tend to be 'surplus populations.' They are just in the way, and there are no jobs waiting for them (Li 2009).

Contemporary primitive accumulation caused by geographical or sectoral capital movements was famously renamed 'accumulation by dispossession' by Harvey (2003), emphasizing that privatization of the commons and dispossession are products of capitalism. Levien (2022), however, criticizes Harvey for assuming that all land dispossession is the work of private capital. As an alternative, he advances the concept of 'regimes of dispossession,' defining dispossession "as a social relation of coercive redistribution mediated by those who control the means of violence in a particular territory" (Levien 2022: 43-44). His argument is that state-led dispossession is also important, but has different drivers and politics to market-led land loss. While the latter tends to be a fragmented and individual process, the former can lead to events that bring large social groups into direct confrontation with the state. Therefore, while primitive accumulation and accumulation by dispossession may be useful concepts and processes to study, this approach does not place sufficient emphasis on state-induced dispossession, which according to Levien is also common in the Global South. This means there are also state policies and land dispossessions associated with elite capture that occur independently of the penetration of capitalism, as was the case with the pre-capitalist privatization of commons in Europe (Federici 2004, Angus 2023).

In peasant studies, more recently renamed critical agrarian studies, there is a substantial literature linking rebellion to land issues in Latin America and Asia, but for some reason such a focus is given much less attention in the study of rebellion in sub-Saharan Africa. More specifically, land dispossession is not generally part of the scope and focus of scholarly debates on the rise of armed groups in the Sahel.

There is, however, a wider West African literature on recruitment factors in rebel (rather than jihadist) groups that points to agrarian and land-related causes (Richards 2004; Chauveau & Richards 2008; Chauveau *et al.* 2020; Chauveau 2000; Colin *et al.* 2022; Zanoletti, 2023; Grajales, 2018; Cavanagh 2018). Today those who make these linkages are surpassing simplistic single-factor explanations (*sensu* Olivier de Sardan 2021) because of the complexity of military coups, shifting alliances and popular anti-colonial protests across the Sahel.

Some studies do indicate that land dispossession is a driver of migration resulting from large-scale resource extraction or land encroachment, often associated with elite capture and the marginalization of smallholders (Cross 2013; Glick-Schiller 2015; Obeng-Odoom 2017; Nyantakyi-Frimpong & Bezner Kerr 2017). For example, Cross (2013) argues that a fisheries crisis in Senegal was ' accumulation by dispossession,' as small-scale fishermen were crowded out by foreign trawlers. This led to migration to Europe.

In addition, recent research has highlighted links between rent-seeking and the rise of jihadism in Mali, and suggested that grievances rather than religious beliefs motivate Malian herders to join these 'jihadist' groups (De Bruijn & Both 2017; Benjaminsen & Ba 2019, 2024; Jourde *et al*. 2019). Similar links have been suggested by Thurston (2017) studying Boko Haram in Nigeria and Pérouse de Montclos (2018) for the Sahel in general. However, linking land dispossession directly to conflict and migration is still unexplored territory in Sahelian research, including in political ecology.

5. Regimes of dispossession in the Greater Sahel

This section presents the results based on the analysis of the empirical data from the 12 case studies. Inspired by Hall *et al.* (2011) and Levien (2023), we identify five different regimes of dispossession at work in the Greater Sahel: peri-urban land dispossessions, dispossessions through large-scale investments, pastoral dispossessions, community dispossessions, and licensed dispossessions. This analytical framework aims to account for the various forms and manifestations of land dispossession practices, i.e. the political mechanisms of coercive land redistribution, as defined by Levien (2023: 44).

A system of land dispossession is generally set up and controlled by the state through institutions that are part of a specific political economy that has economic objectives, desired trajectories, and spaces in which capitalist and modernizing development policies are deployed. In this way, the practices of land dispossession are situated in a distinct political economy, with historical trajectories and states or other actors implementing them. The purposes of the political and economic groups and classes, and the people they serve, are revealed. When implemented by the state, land dispossession is often justified as a necessary step in economic development.

The comparative approach used in this article draws on the various contributions to highlight the singularities of each situation of land dispossession. To this end, the case studies are based on *shared questions* to grasp the synchronic and diachronic implications of the 'respective specificities' (Bayart 2022) of each situation. This comparative approach underlines the differences between the actors who dispossess (states, economic and political elites, foreign capital investors, customary leaders, lineages, etc.) and highlights the forms of reaction that the dispossessed populations adopt in return. These reactions take the form of violent resistance, migration or compliance (by becoming farm workers, for example). We present and discuss the five types of dispossessions that we found in the case studies.

Peri-urban land dispossessions

Peri-urban land dispossession is a process in which land grabbing in the peripheries of cities is carried out by the elites who hold political and economic power, including urban businessmen and women as new actors (Hilhorst & Nelen 2013). These elites dispossess small landowners in the peri-urban areas for various reasons. This may be because the formalization process is costly and favors those who have access to information about urban planning and connections within bureaucracies (Benjaminsen & Sjaastad 2002; Neimark *et al*. 2012). In their study, Traoré and Niaré (2026) explore the various forms of pressure coming from the urban elites of Bamako who appropriate agricultural land from farmers. Investigations carried out in Dialakoroba and Sanankoroba, two rural communes in the cercle of Kati, on the south-eastern outskirts of Bamako, show that these elites, consisting of military officers, ministers, senior civil servants and various businessmen and women, collude with local authorities by means of bribes to monopolize the land that local peasants have farmed for

generations. Those who resist are often forcibly evicted or harassed by the local courts, which are often on the payroll of these elites.

The case study by Diallo (2026) of the commune of Baguinéda, on the north-eastern outskirts of Bamako sheds light on how elite urban women in Bamako are participating in the dispossession of peri-urban land users through agricultural investments. Despite the restrictive traditional and state land tenure norms concerning women's control of land rights, they gain access to land in the OPIB irrigated perimeters (*Office de périmètre irrigué de Baguinéda*) by mobilizing social and economic capital. While these investments are redefining the boundaries of gender norms and power relations, these elite women, like the men, are monopolizing land that previously served to improve the living conditions of local people.

These practices of capturing local elites who dispossess farmers in peri-urban areas can also be observed on the outskirts of the city of Ndjamena in Chad. In the Chadian context, the case study by Ladiba *et al*. (2026) note that it is mainly military officers, high-ranking civil servants, wealthy merchants and their allies who are grabbing land, made possible by speculation. Acquisitions are often carried out in a non-transparent manner, leading to abusive expropriations and the displacement of farmers. The vast areas thus freed up near N'Djamena are then used to create irrigated vegetable gardens and residential properties or are simply kept vacant as speculative assets (see also Mugelé 2023), often marked by informal boundary indicators and reserved for future subdivision or resale as urban land values increase.

Based on a survey conducted in the peri-urban areas of Bol and Bagasola in Chad, Neneck *et al*. (2026) analyse the consequences of land dispossession for people living on the fringes of these medium-sized towns. In the Province du Lac, urban elites engage in land grabbing and utilise their political influence to acquire land from small-scale farmers. According to Neneck *et al*. (2026), this process leads to increased recruitment to Boko Haram and to more migration within or outside the Province du Lac.

Dispossessions through large-scale investments

Dispossessions through large-scale investment is a major and well-known form of land grabbing, also outside Africa as shown by Rotz *et al*. (2025) and Biesel & Mendonça (2025). Large-scale agricultural investments depend above all on the availability of agricultural land. In the countries of the Global South, these projects are prolonging colonial-style land grabbing. Based on specific land regulations, dispossession practices under this regime are generally facilitated by governments in rural areas.

In Mali, the colonial *Office du Niger* is an example of this type of mass land dispossession, which has continued to affect dozens of villages and thousands of pastoralists. The latter have been forced to leave their ancestral lands, with the project justified by a quest for food self-sufficiency and economic development. In his case study, Touré (2026) describes and analyses how the *Office du Niger* was a vast colonial undertaking to dispossess people of their natural resources (farmland, grazing land and water). When it was created in 1932, the ambition was to develop 1,850,000 hectares, and dozens of villages were dispossessed to build irrigation canals and develop perimeters of irrigated cotton. Currently, the size of the irrigated area amounts to 130,826 ha according to a recent Malian media source.[5]

[5] See: https://www.maliweb.net/economie/office-du-niger/pour-faire-du-mali-une-puissance-agricole-loffice-du-niger-promeut-les-opportunites-dinvestissements-3037280.html

Focusing on its historical trajectory, Touré (2026) examines the normative changes brought about by successive agricultural policies in independent Mali. These have disenfranchised smallholders in favor of private national investors and foreign capital. Between 2006 and 2012, Malibya (financed by a Libyan fund) and the Tomota group, owned by a Malian private individual, each gained access to 100,000 hectares and benefited from easier access to water as well as tax exemptions.

Such policies benefit the wealthiest at the expense of smallholders, exposing them to the constant menace of dispossession if they fail to pay water fees to the *Office du Niger*. Those dispossessed for non-payment are forced to settle outside the developed areas or abandon the region altogether. Furthermore, Toure's fieldwork has revealed that armed engagement in jihadist groups is a consequence of the continued expansion of developed land and encroachment on pastoral corridors used by nomadic pastoralists for at least two centuries.

On a smaller scale, Diallo (2026) examines how elite women from Bamako invest in the irrigated areas of the *Office de développement rural de Sélingué* (ODRS). The desire to become 'Sunday farmers' has driven many elite women (as well as men) to take over so-called vacant land at the expense of local people who have difficulties paying water charges. According to Diallo, this type of dispossession impacts the power dynamics between rural men who have become farm laborers and elite women. Relations are strained between women investors and rural women, whose labor is exploited at low cost to maintain the rice fields.

In their study, Eyebiyi and Olarbi (2026) use qualitative fieldwork conducted in central Ghana to show how land grabbing has become widespread in the country in recent years. Land dispossession through large-scale investment has affected at least 403,907 hectares in Ghana over the last twenty years. While this represents 1.69 % of the country's territory, the significance of the phenomenon in the medium and long term lies in the fact that the rural areas affected are generally fertile farmland, as well as forest reserves.

The study by Eyebiyi and Olarbi (2026) examines the causes, effects and impacts of this land loss on the livelihoods of landowners in the heart of the rural areas of the Ashanti region. Dispossession in rural areas and urban growth have been extensive. The mobilization of these fertile farmlands and biosphere reserves by various national and international financial interests is throwing local populations into disarray, after having brutally reduced their immediate income. Families affected by these mechanisms are responding by migrating to urban and peri-urban areas, where economic pressure is increasing. They resettle in the capital Accra, but also around the medium-sized towns of central Ghana, particularly Kumasi and its surrounding urban areas. Able-bodied people move because they are forced to leave the countryside as a result of losing access to and ownership of their traditional lands. Foreign companies and local elites justify their actions as contributing to food security, productivity, and modernizing agriculture. But they also produce woody biomass, logs, poles and other timber products for export and local consumption.

Pastoral dispossessions

Pastoral land grabbing is a common form of dispossession in most Sahelian countries where rural development is based on agricultural investment that takes little account of pastoral activities. The arrival of private capital and the focus on irrigated crops – the main objective of the *Office du Niger* in Mali, for example – have led to the gradual marginalization of mobile livestock-herding. Agriculture has gradually encroached on key pastures. This reorganization has taken place either

through the direct intervention of the *Office du Niger* through its developments, or through the withdrawal of farmers dispossessed by the Office onto land formerly used for pastoral activities.

Inherited from the historical social and political organization of the Macina Caliphate (1818-1864), the rules governing pastoral, agricultural and fishing activities aimed at preserving the socio-ecological balance included an organized sharing of resources. The blocking of established livestock corridors and grazing land that is encouraged by agricultural policies, marginalize pastoralists and violate customary norms of pasture management.

Touré (2026) shows how more conflicts are generated, and thee are exacerbated by armed groups seeking legitimacy (since 2015). Jihadists and local groups clash, claiming to defend the interests of pastoralists on the one hand and farmers on the other, in an environment devoid of any administrative, police or judicial control by the state. These armed actors are adding a new layer to the dynamics of land dispossession in Mali: their hold on villages is resulting in the introduction of new land access rules. Pastoralists and farmers living in regions controlled by armed groups are required to pay various types of fees (dues, levies on livestock and harvests, fees for access to grazing land, crossing fees, etc.).

Benjaminsen and Ba (2026) explore the dynamics of violence based on a study of conflicts between Dogon and Fulani in the Mopti region of central Mali. They place these conflicts in their political, economic and historical contexts to understand how conflicts over access to and control of land and natural resources partly explain the emergence of violence in rural societies in central Mali. Benjaminsen and Ba thus take issue with approaches that see jihadism as the result of resource scarcity, population growth or climate change.

Community dispossessions

Dispossessions within communities may correspond to what Hall *et al.* (2011) call 'intimate exclusions.' These are forms of land dispossession that take place at village or even lineage level. In a rural context, elders who control rights over natural resources can exclude others (women, young people, foreigners) from these resources in various ways. They operate within local socio-political hierarchies. Rasmussen and Lund (2025) argue that such dispossession of local communities is facilitated by the scalar disjuncture between the physical resource and forms of institutional control.

In his case study, Sohbe (2026) explains how the implementation of the 'second generation agriculture' program in northern Cameroon, largely a program to modernize agriculture, has encouraged local elites to invest in farmland. He notes that traditional Lamido chiefs are dispossessing local smallholders of the land they use for food crops, to the benefit of the elites. Whether they are natives, as in the commune of Poli, or migrant farmers in the department of Bénoué, these smallholders are dispossessed by urban elites who are encouraged by the political authorities to invest in agriculture. In contrast to the cases studied in Mali's peri-urban areas, Sohbe (2026) points out that it is the local traditional chiefs who join forces with the rich, to the detriment of the rural communities whose interests they are supposed to defend.

In their case study, Maiga *et al*. (2026) examine how urban elites monopolize rural land in the rural commune of Sourgou (Burkina Faso). In this commune, the land acquired is located near roads, in low-lying areas or near water bodies. The authors show that infrastructure such as roads and dams are attractive features that can fuel the 'land appetite' of a variety of dispossessing actors. The latter seize land exploited by smallholders ('non-indigenous' farmers who have lived in the region for several decades) who lack the political and social resources to resist.

From a different angle, Tandjigora (2026) investigates, in the communes of Diema and Nioro du Sahel in Mali, how the questioning of relations of domination (master-slave) leads to demands for the restitution of land exploited by people of servile descent. This study explains how access to agricultural land by social *cadets* (people of servile descent) perpetuates historical inequalities.

The social fractures created by dispossession are also visible among migrants from these regions living in France. Tandjigora shows how the dispossession of land in this region can be the source of departures to neighboring countries, and even to Europe for some. Some migrants reinforce the control mechanisms of subalterns who want to emancipate themselves, while others raise funds to participate in local election campaigns to gain social emancipation.

Licensed dispossessions

According to Hall *et al*., (2011), licensed exclusions refer to cases of land dispossession in which smallholders lose their land through specific politico-administrative measures. We define licensed dispossessions in a similar way, as dispossessions caused by legal and policy measures. These cases differ from large-scale agricultural investments in that they do not involve a change in land tenure norms as such, but rather politico-administrative actions that are applied at small scales (a region, a district, a community, etc.) and that aim to take punitive action against designated populations. Licensed dispossession practices in our case studies have a clear coercive dimension.

In his case study on the Lake Faguibine region in northern Mali, Ag Mohamedoun (2026) examines the changes in local land tenure resulting from political objectives, such as agrarian reforms, state-led aims to prioritize previously disadvantaged social groups, and punishing other groups for their participation in the Tuareg rebellion.

This agrarian reform had a programmatic dimension for Modibo Keita's socialist regime, which elevated it to the rank of an indispensable condition for development. From 1973 onwards, this policy was reinforced by the regime of President Moussa Traoré, often based on localized and distorted administrative provisions. Ag Mohamedoun (2026) describes the dispossession of land from the former Kel Antesar (a Tuareg clan) landowners and their Songhay allies to their sharecroppers (Bellas and Banias, who are former slave groups) in the Lake Faguibine region. The latter went from being subordinates to landowners. According to Ag Mohamedoun (2026), the main purpose of this action was to punish the Kel Antesar for having taken part in the 1963 Tuareg rebellion. In 1973, the local administration resumed this coercive measure of dispossessing former landowners by allocating plots to civil servants and selling others to wealthy traders.

Taking advantage of the drought of the 1980s, President Moussa Traoré instructed the governor of Sikasso to organize the departure of almost 400 Dogon families from the Koutiala area to Yanfolila. In his case study, Poudiougou (2026) explores how the rural-to-rural migration of the Dogon in 1985 was more political than climatic. The 'president's migrants' were given land, tools and food rations for the first year of their settlement in Yanfolila. The investigations emphasize that Moussa Traoré aimed to "inculcate the virtue of work" in the people of Wassolon, whom he considered to be little involved in farming despite the abundance of fertile land. The installation of the Dogon, who were seen as hard workers, was intended to boost agricultural production.

Ag Mohamedoun (2026) questions the idea that migration is caused by drought and famine and shows that it was the result of a punitive political will that led to migration to Libya, and later to some people joining rebel movements in the 1990s and more recently jihadist groups.

These two case studies by Ag Mohamedoun (2026) and Poudiougou (2026) highlight a particular form of dispossession. Such dispossession relies on the rhetoric of social justice (putting

an end to feudalism in northern Mali) and food security (increasing agricultural productivity in a post-drought period) to justify the coercive processes of the political regimes in power. In both cases, licensed dispossession is presented as a means of redressing social inequalities and promoting general well-being.

6. Conclusion

The article has examined the extent to which land dispossessions stimulate a Sahelian context of increasing jihadist violence and migration. Returning to the fundamentals of peasant studies at the origine of political ecology to interrogate the forgotten or lost causes of migration and peasant revolts in the light of the concepts of moral economy and primitive accumulation, the article identifies, based on a series of 12 case studies, five different and sometimes overlapping regimes of dispossession: dispossessions of peri-urban land, dispossessions through large-scale investments, pastoral dispossessions, community dispossessions, and licensed dispossessions. In most of these forms, international and national financial actors, combined with local national political and economic elites, manage to grab land from villages and communities. This form of elite capture continues to forment an inherent anger and feeling of injustice among local populations who are dispossessed of their land. However some forms of dispossession are more rooted in local and national political economies and state-mediated land governance mechanisms. This concerns peri-urban dispossession and community dispossession in particular, which tend to be driven by the urban middle class, including women.

How local actors respond to this injustice is variable across the cases. Some stay and try to survive by hoping to get jobs through investments, others leave for urban areas or foreign countries, while the current security situation in the Sahel also provides the opportunity to join armed groups as a response to dispossession. However, internal and external migration are not new to the region, and land dispossession may not be the main cause. Nonetheless, it is a contributing factor that is often forgotten or understudied, not only in the media and in policy debates, but also in the scholarly Africanist literature, including in contemporary political ecology.

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