

Local governance of crises in the Sahel : Security and displaced persons

Report by Ciara Hamilton and Emily Diomat

Introduction:

As part of the Journée d'étude internationale, organised by the Institut d'études du développement de la Sorbonne (IEDES) and the European Association of Development Research and Training Institutes (EADI), the roundtable *Local governance of crises in the Sahel : Security and displaced persons* was held at the Agence Française de développement (AFD) and remotely via Zoom. It was chaired by Sylvie Capitant, Assistant professor and assistant director of IEDES of the Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne. The roundtable included three interventions of **Sten Hagberg**, **Sadio Soukouna** and **Zakaria Soré** and was organized in partnership with the Chaire UNESCO Défis partagés du développement : *savoir, comprendre, agir*.

The roundtable brought together experts of the Sahel region to shed light on the consequences of security strategies, the rationales of military engagement of both state and non-state actors and the implications of rising threats from extremist militants and other armed conflict actors leading to many internally displaced persons and refugees. The Sahel region also hosts many international aid and humanitarian actors. Sten Hagberg is based at Uppsala University, Sweden and is a professor of cultural anthropology and the director of the Forum for Africa Studies. His areas of expertise are democracy, popular resistance, local development and security in Mali, Burkina Faso and most recently Niger. Sadio Soukouna is an assistant professor at the *Université des sciences juridiques et politiques* of Bamako (USJPB) in Mali and is an associate Researcher at the UMR *Développement et sociétés* of the *Université Paris 1* and the *Institut de recherche pour le développement* (IRD). Zakaria Soré works as an assistant professor at the Université Joseph Ki-Zerbo in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso.

The following report is intended to discuss two principal themes touched on by each of the speakers and is thus a summary of the most significant elements of the roundtable. The first theme which was mentioned by the speakers is the *absence / presence of the state* and the second is *perception, language and the power to define*.

Part 1: Absence and presence of the state

Sten Hagberg's intervention was centred on the notion of security. He questioned the obsession that States have with security and noted that it is often noticed when it is absent. For example, during his field research, one of his informants saw security as the forces that protect

civilians, such as the government or army. Yet, he later contrasted that national and international armed forces have weak reactivity and although they might be within close proximity of an attack, they take an extremely long time to arrive. This in turn undermines their legitimacy in contributing to local security, as was the case in Burkina Faso. However, if civilians collaborate with armed forces, they become targeted by extremist groups. In consequence the situation is quite complex. The absence of the state is expressed through a feeling of abandonment by local populations leading to a rise in coup d'états and anti-imperialism which is focused toward French policy and the role of Françafrique.

The implications of the absence and presence of the state was also reciprocated in the intervention of Sadio Soukouna, as she focused on the movement of refugees and internally displaced persons. Particularly, Burkina Faso was faced with a massive influx of migrants following the 2012 crisis in Mali which saw an insurgence of extremist groups and armed intervention from France. There are various state, international and humanitarian actors that assist in receiving and managing these populations. However, although they are present on the ground, much of the responsibility falls on local actors. International actors, such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNCHR) only organise a temporary solution by building refugee camps to host these populations. The state also influences the location where the refugees are maintained, usually far from city centres. For many, the mechanisms developed by the state and humanitarian actors are not enough.

Despite the assistance, (or lack thereof), from the UNHCR, other humanitarian actors and the state, an emergence of community and local channels of mutual aid and solidarity for displaced populations has arisen. She outlined an example of a diasporic network of refugees which existed since the 1960s. They assisted in providing accommodation and financial support for refugees who move to the urban centres. This form of local community solidarity makes it possible for refugees to evade the dependence on humanitarian actors, the state and confinement systems surrounding camps. In the absence of the state and actions of humanitarian actors, communities manage on their own.

The final intervention from Zakaria Soré also tied heavily into the theme of the absence and presence of the state, particularly in the case of Burkina Faso. He contended that the state is absent in places where it is expected to be. This leads to a rise of vigilante groups. This situation, however, tends to alter the power dynamics that instigate the phenomenon of vigilante groups. Nonetheless their presence is necessary. Authority figures from the state, such as the gendarme, are scarcely present and do not assure local security. Indeed, these community-based policing groups are imperative to local security. Zakaria Soré detailed that

even the state tries to capitalise from these groups, since civilian participation is essential in the protection and security of the population. Yet, there is still an absence of the state to support these vigilante groups, as many do not have sufficient arms, leading to threats in their own security.

Part 2: Perception, Language and the Power to Define

One central theme of the round table was that of the question of differing perceptions of the same phenomenon by institutional actors and “ordinary citizens” (which Sten Hagberg defined as those who are situated far from national public debate and dominant discourses). Each of the speakers touched on the question of perception, discussing the different definitions which can be given to a concept such as “security”, as well as paying special attention to the different words which can be used to describe the same actor or situation. For example, armed groups in the Sahel region may be qualified as either bandits or terrorists depending on one’s interlocuter.

In the case of security, Sten Hagberg discussed its varying definitions, noting as mentioned above that it is often defined in terms of its absence. Hagberg noted that security and insecurity in themselves are questions of perception, using the red zones in the map of Burkina Faso as an example. In fact, France, the United Kingdom and the United States each have different security maps with different red zones, indicating a certain degree of arbitrariness to their designation, which begs the question of insecure for whom? Regarding the definition of the term, Hagberg also mentioned that ordinary citizens often translated security as “protection”, associating this with the police and therefore the state, or as an “interior peace” which is destroyed when one has experienced an attack.

Both Hagberg and Soré also contrasted descendant with ascendant definitions of armed groups. Soré particularly illustrated the wide disparity between these two visions, noting that according to the State these people are mere bandits who promote an aggressive form of Islam and who seek to avenge past losses. By contrast, civilians perceive their actions as far more political, a new form of colonisation which is focused primarily on the reclaiming of lands which they have lost in the past, while also annihilating the culture of those whose lands they have claimed. This is the context in which the vigilante groups emerged.

The speakers also touched on various points on the varying ability of different actors to impose their own definition of a particular concept. This power to name, categorise and define is well illustrated by the example given by Soré of the legal recognition and legitimation of the actions of vigilante groups. With the introduction of a law in January 2020, these groups ceased

to be informal actors and became “volunteers for the defence of the homeland”. Similarly, as mentioned above, the naming of red zones in the Sahel region is somewhat arbitrary and reflects the power of those categorising, a practice which has very concrete economic and social implications for those living in these zones. However, state actors are not the only ones who may possess this power. Due to their role in the reception of displaced persons, certain civilians can gain influence in the application of systems for managing these displaced persons. Soukouna gave the example of civil society leaders who emerged from the already present Malien diaspora in Burkina Faso, who are the first interface between the state and newly arrived displaced persons. The positioning of these actors as intermediaries gives them a certain degree of power, in deciding who is and is not a refugee, but also to bend rules to their own benefit. For example, Soukouna reported cases of Malien refugees benefiting from economic grants which are intended to fund voluntary return, but who never left Burkina Faso. This setup creates unbalanced power dynamics within the Malien diaspora, leading to tension and a feeling of inequality.

Soukouna closed her intervention by raising the epistemological question of categorisation. What is the impact of categorisation on research? How does research reinforce institutional, legal and political categories? And how can a given situation pass from one category to another? She stated that as a researcher there is a certain responsibility to distance oneself from and interrogate these categories.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the speakers touched on a number of topics during this round-table on the subject of “Local governance of crisis in the Sahel, PDI and security”, such as international actors active in the Sahel region, local solidarities in response to the influx of displaced persons and civilian community responses to insecurity. Two overarching themes of the round-table were those of the paradox of simultaneous absence and presence of the State and questions of language and perception. Regarding the former, the absence of the state in matters related to security, leads to overlapping challenges. This can relate to fear of an attack or armed conflict. It can also be presented in regard to human security and the accessibility to basic needs. In turn, a local response is often needed. On the topic of language and perception, the speakers reminded us of the necessity of paying close attention to the language used by actors to describe a given situation, in order to understand their perception and understanding of a given phenomenon, while also bearing in mind that the capacity to name and categorise is a power which should not be underestimated.

We wish to finish on the concluding remarks of Sadio Soukouna which remind us that the study of the current dynamic of insecurity and movement of people in the Sahel requires an overarching vision, which historicizes the current situation, tracing it to its origins. Although the situation remains complex, there is still space for optimism. As suggested by Sylvie Capitant, organiser of the round table, the current fragmentation of the state could have the positive effect of rekindling civilian demand for stronger state services which conform better with their expectations of the State.