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From environmental to security 'crises': the Sahelian 'crises' as a political and social critique of development

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► To cite this version:

Sergio Dario Magnani. From environmental to security 'crises': the Sahelian 'crises' as a political and social critique of development. VI Conferenza biennale ASAI - 'Third millennium Africas in the global world. Challenges, reconfigurations, and opportunities'. Panel 23 – 'On the notion of crisis: what the Saharan-Sahelian case can teach us', Associazione per gli Studi Africani, Jul 2022, Urbino, Italy. hal-04105083

HAL Id: hal-04105083

<https://hal.science/hal-04105083v1>

Submitted on 24 May 2023

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VI Conferenza ASAI, Urbino 2022
Modulo per proposta di presentazioni

VI ASAI Conference, Urbino 2022
Form for Paper Proposal

Nome(i) e affiliazioni dei proponenti Name(s) and affiliations of proposers of paper	Sergio Magnani, Research Associate at IRD – UMR SENS, Montpellier
Dettagli di contatto (1 solo) Contact details for one proposer	Email: semagnani@gmail.com Tel: 0033667526151
Titolo presentazione proposta Title of proposed paper	<i>From environmental to security ‘crises’: the Sahelian ‘crises’ as a political and social critique of development</i>
Tema della presentazione Theme under which paper falls	Development policies and conflict dynamics
Panel nel quale si intende presentare Panel in which paper is proposed	Panel 23 <i>On the notion of crisis: what the Saharan-Sahelian case can teach us</i>
Abstract (max.300 parole/words)	<p>In the last forty years Sahel has been depicted as a region in permanent ‘crisis’, environmental in the following of the 1970-80’s droughts and security-driven with reference to the widespread insurgencies of the last decade. Within these frameworks, the notion of ‘crisis’ has been mobilized in a poorly analytical but highly performative way. Along with all-encompassing explanations like ‘farmer-herder’ conflict for scarce resources as well as religious radicalization driven by international jihadism, it has been used to justify a revival of problematic approaches and solutions. These dominant narratives depoliticise Sahelian societies and the historical and contemporary effects of development intervention on the society-environment relations.</p> <p>Building on a systemic approach (Morin), this communication proposes to consider the current situation in the light of a ‘crisis’ of development, here intended as a specific form of public action ‘under aid-regime’ (Lavigne-Delville) characterised by high levels of extraversion and complexity. ‘Crisis’ takes here the meaning of a turning-point where political and social critiques leading to multiple forms of active contestation become major trends that affect the whole system and produce significant changes. Drawing from a scientific literature review and an empirical research on vernacular perceptions of ‘security crisis’ in Burkina Faso (2019-20), the communication shall highlight through several examples how insurgencies embody contestation of agricultural and environmental development and of its effects on peasant and pastoral moral economies (i.e. long-term ill-adaptation of conceptual models and policy, extraversion and local power relationships...). The case of Burkina Faso is illustrative of the scarce visibility in public debates of heterodox analysis and political solutions based on social equality, entitlements and rebalancing of power relationships.</p> <p>In conclusion, different potentially ‘regressive’ or ‘progressive’ scenarios of change at the interplay of international, national and local scales will be discussed.</p>

Attenzione, la proposta di presentazione deve essere spedita alla email degli organizzatori del panel entro la data di scadenza del 3 marzo 2022.

Please note that paper proposals must be sent to the mail of the Panel organizer before the ~~date~~ of 3 march 2022.

Introduction

In this communication I want to question the central role that the notion of crisis plays in the **mainstream narratives** to explain the insurgencies and the political conflicts that have taken place in several Sahelian countries in the last decade.

I will build upon the work of Janet Roitman to show that common-sense definition of **crisis as exceptional, turning-point events** are ill-adapted to understand the current situation. In fact, **“continuity”** seems to be the mark of both development diagnosis and solutions, and of vernacular perceptions of the causes of conflict and of the insurgencies.

I will conclude by advancing the hypothesis that what could be possibly understood in terms of ‘crisis’ in the Sahelian rural areas are a **specific form of public action and a set of power relationships under open and widespread contestation.**

Even if this hypothesis needs to be verified in the medium term, it opens up **new possibilities to renew development narratives** and envision policy reforms at different scales, as well as to approach the notion of crisis in a more open way, as an object knowledge and an account for the emergent.

1. The Sahel, a space of “crisis”?

In the last 50 years, the Sahel has been described as a **space of crisis**:

- (i) **“Environmental crisis”** during the heavy droughts of the 70’s and the 80’s that became the first environmental problem to be managed by a global initiative within the network of the United Nations.
- (ii) As a space of **“security” crisis** since the last decade with regard the insurgencies which have progressively spread from the Sahel to the Gulf of Guinea.

In this context, the notion of crisis has been mobilized in a very **performative but poorly analytical way**. It has become an **all-encompassing notion that undermines the understanding of field dynamics** and of the social and political dimensions of insurgencies and conflicts.

2. A theoretical proposition

I took inspiration from the critical work of **Janet Roitman** on the notion of crisis, in particular from the paper *Figures of the subject in times of crisis* (1995)¹ and the book *Anti-crisis* (2013)².

In the first, the author describes the **subjectivation of crisis in Cameroon** in the context of the **structural adjustment programs** of the 80's, 90's. The author shows how economic crisis has been experienced as **an historical condition in the long term**. Therefore, in this case, how what is supposed to be an exceptional event becomes a long lasting socially and culturally constructed condition (continuity).

In the second, through the analysis of the **subprime crisis of 2008**, the author proposes to consider the notion of crisis as a form of judgement and a diagnosis. She invites to ask: what legitimizes the qualification of a given situation as crisis? What are the implications of this qualification? What questions can be asked under such a diagnosis, and what others are overlooked?

By asking these questions through the Sahelian context allow us to envision the notion of “crisis” from different perspectives:

3. Crisis narratives as narratives of power

The effects of the heavy droughts of the 70's, 80's were interpreted as a trend of linear progressive **aridification**, and attributed to the practices of local societies. What was presumed to be environmental degradation was **poorly defined and measured**, mainly through ill-adapted concepts like *capacity of charge* and *linear trends of evolution of vegetation*.

Desertification theory **misunderstood both the ecology of drylands**, its strong structural variability, and **local knowledge and socio-political institutions** allowing local systems to work with rather than against variability.

Nevertheless, desertification became a **powerful framework for development** interventions, driving to the implementation of problematic **harmful solutions** that have generated **fragmentation of space and the uproot of local institutions**: large-scale irrigation, ranching, enclosures for environmental protection.

Present narratives of “**security crisis**” build on this body of knowledge. They **associate environmental degradation, poverty with international jihad** to explain dynamics of conflicts often in terms of “farmer-herder” conflict. These narratives **ignore a large literature** both from ecological and social sciences that shows, and **produce a renewal of development intervention** in continuity with the past (Great green wall...), while also promoting counterproductive security policies (forced closure of livestock markets, declaration of forests as no-man lands and military

¹ Mbembe, A., & Roitman, J. (1995). Figures of the Subject in Times of Crisis. *Public culture*, 7(2), 323-352.

² Roitman, J. (2013). *Anti-crisis*. Duke University Press.

zones).

The ideas behind this revival are: (i) that there have been little development interventions in the Sahel, so poverty has spread; (ii) the present situation is the outcome of lack of governance.

But, to recall **the analysis of Roitman on the crisis of subprime**, what if the current situation is not the produce of lack of intervention but instead **the outcome of the execution of development models in practice?**

What if, this is not the result of a lack of governance but rather of **a specific form of governance?**

In any case, if we look at development diagnosis and solutions we can't find traces of rupture or deep changes.

Continuity also emerges from vernacular perceptions of the causes of insurgencies and conflicts.

4. “Durable crisis”? Injustice and inequalities under development regimes

When I did fieldwork in Burkina Faso, in 2019 – 2020, **working on Pastoralist youth mobility to Cities**³ in a context of widespread violence and displacement, several actors (public officers, members of professional organizations, associations for civic rights...) put forward different explanations.

These insisted on **two main long-time trends**:

- (i) **firstly, a despotic, predatory attitudes of public servants** towards the rural poor and pastoralists in particular (illegal fines, taxes, unequal arbitration of local contentious);
- (ii) **secondly, a trend of grab of land and resources** driven by both international projects and national urban and rural elites, including religious and customary authorities.

This trend, occurring in several sectors (environmental conservation, agri-business, mining) were taught as **problematic because it generates exclusion and ruptures in local moral economies**.

These alternative views **pointed at a set of power relationships within a specific framework of public action** that with Lavigne-Delville (2017⁴) we can define as **under aid regime**.

³ Magnani, S., Rangé, C., Ancy, V. Pastoralist youth in towns and cities: mobility patterns in times of crisis of governance in Burkina Faso. IUAES Congress “Coming of Age on Earth: Legacies and Next Generation Anthropology”, Panel no. 10 - Lost in Representation: Changes and Paradoxes in the Nomads' Life, Sibenik, Croatia, March, 2021.

Ancy, V. (coord), Rangé, C., Magnani, S. et Patat, C. 2020. Jeunes pasteurs en ville – Synthèse finale. Accompagner l’insertion économique et sociale des jeunes pasteurs – Tchad et Burkina Faso. Rome, FAO.

Magnani, S., Ouedraogo, M., Barry, A., Dao, F. 2019. « Jeunes pasteurs en ville (Tchad, Burkina Faso) : Contexte institutionnel d’insertion des jeunes issus des populations pastorales : perceptions, dispositifs et stratégies d’action publique au Burkina Faso ». FAO – IRAM.

⁴ Lavigne Delville, P. (2017). Pour une socio-anthropologie de l’action publique dans les pays ‘sous régime d’aide’. Anthropologie & développement, (45), 33-64.

This definition refers to **long and fragmented chains of public action** connecting a wide range of actors on international, national and local scales. The main characteristic of this are: (i) **the central role** of diagnosis and **development models** elaborated by the international expertise for intervention in strategic sectors (land, agricultural and environmental policy) and then circulating across scales and contexts; (ii) **extraversion**, the capacity to manipulate external resources to comfort specific sets of interests; (iii) a **precarious and discretionary delivery of public services** a **low level of accountability** to the citizens.

Recent research confirms that this set of connections and power relationships and the forms of exclusion it produces, perceived as unjust, are the object of open contestation and **at the core of dynamics of insurgency** in the Sahel.

Can we describe this situation in terms of crisis in the sense of rupture or radical change? In other terms, is this a moment bringing about durable changes in the forms of authority exerted over Sahelian rural areas by the State, international development and local and national elites? And in this case, how politics and policies are going to be reorganized?

The outcomes of these processes remain uncertain, but under this hypothesis the notion of ‘crisis’ is an entry point **to account for the emergent** and not as a decisive judgement.

If we take seriously into account this perspective, we can envision new levers of actions and opportunities for reform at different scales:

- (i) international – recognize scientific knowledge, change narratives and development models (deep reform of development cooperation, as well as trade and agricultural policies – i.e. Economic Partnership Agreements UE-ACP);
- (ii) national – question the nature of the presence of the State in rural areas, social, land, agricultural, environmental political orientations reversing the current trends of privatization/concentration of land and fragmentation of the space and the exclusion this creates);
- (iii) local – recognize the political dimensions underlying local conflicts, take power relations and changing balances into account, arbitrate local agreements with a clear and coherent objective of preserving political and moral institutions for cooperation, sharing and livelihood upholding for the most.