

Lake Chad and Boko Haram

Case study on wetlands, peace & security



The wetland and its people

Lake Chad is the remnant of a former inland sea, which straddles four countries (Nigeria, Cameroon, Niger, and Chad), each of these countries have named their part of the lake a Ramsar wetland of International importance. The Lake Chad Wetlands in north-eastern Nigeria are one of these. The site (607,354 ha) comprises a disjointed complex of permanent freshwater marshes, which were formerly inundated as part of Lake Chad, some rivers and their deltas and the remaining part of Lake Chad, an historically large, shallow lake whose size has varied greatly over centuries⁽⁹⁾. It is an important habitat for a great variety of Palearctic water birds, including the vulnerable Marbled Teal and indigenous fish species⁽¹⁰⁾. Vegetation consists of grasses, sedges floating macrophytes and shrubs⁽¹⁰⁾.

The wetland is used by the lakeshore dwellers in order to support their livelihoods in three main ways, fishing, farming and pastoralism⁽⁷⁾. The most dominant group in the area is the Kanuri people, but others include the Shuwa, Fulani-Hausa and Tera people. During the same season, the local populations are, alternatively or simultaneously, fishers, herders, and farmers, and each piece of land is potentially a fishing ground, grazing area and cultured field, depending on the period in the flood cycle⁽³⁾. In addition to this direct support to livelihoods, the lake serves as a veritable source of fresh water for drinking, sanitation and irrigation⁽⁹⁾. Lakeshore dwellers are generally poverty stricken, the lake is economically important since it provides these resources to them⁽⁷⁾⁽¹⁰⁾. Management in the Nigerian part of lake Chad is provided by the Kanuri traditional rulers, who see to the sale of fishing rights in ponds and stretches of water, as well as farming rights on the receding lakebed⁽¹⁰⁾.

Threats



Changes in the Lake Chad system, as shown in satellite images over time. Blue areas in each image show open water. These satellite images clearly show the water is receding and the lake is shrinking (United States Geological Survey).

The wetland area is currently under heavy stress. Over the last 40 years, the lake has been seen to shrink significantly, due to a decrease in the number of large rainfall events, an increase in droughts and decreased river inflow into the lake⁽⁷⁾⁽⁹⁾. The lake is very shallow, rarely deeper than 7m, which makes it vulnerable to water losses due to evaporation⁽⁷⁾⁽⁹⁾. This leads to a loss of 95% of the surface area of the lake since the early 1970's.

The UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) maintain that inefficient damming and

irrigation methods on the part of the countries bordering the lake are also partly responsible for its shrinkage⁽¹⁾. It is still controversial whether the drying of the lake is caused solely by external factors such as this mismanagement and climate change, since reversible small lake episodes have occurred in the past, independently of the present global climate change⁽⁴⁾. This makes it hard to definitely say that global climate change or mismanagement is the cause of the lake's current state, however, forecasts of a rise in temperatures and a flat rate of rainfall in the area could increase the likelihood of low levels or total drying up of the lake in Nigeria, which leads to a fragile situation for the wetland⁽⁴⁾.

Boko Haram

The terrorist insurgency group Boko Haram has been active in the area either since 2002, or since 1995 under the name "Shabaab", different sources give different stories⁽²⁾. Their main ideology is to enshrine Orthodox Islamism all over Nigeria, since it has currently been 'polluted' by Western values and culture, their eventual goal is overthrowing the government to enact Sharia law all over the country⁽²⁾. The group uses both conventional and unconventional weapons to terrorise, maim and kill vulnerable citizens in the area, killing at least 20.000 in northeast Nigeria alone⁽⁵⁾⁽⁶⁾. Different classes of people: military, paramilitary and civilian populations are seriously affected by the actions of this group⁽⁶⁾. The mass of Boko Haram currently consists of unemployed youths called Almajiris, these are children entrusted into the care of an Islamic teacher to learn the Quran, however, they roam the streets begging for alms instead, which makes them vulnerable to recruitment into terrorist activities⁽²⁾.

The insurgency & the wetland

The disruption of economic livelihoods as a result of the shrinking of the lake has increased competition among the various livelihoods: farmers, pastoralists and fishermen, over the available water resources, as well as an increase of economic-driven migration of pastoralists, farmers and fishermen in search of areas of better opportunities⁽⁹⁾. Due to the lack of arable and grazable land as a consequence of the decline of the lake, several farmer-herder conflicts over the damaging of or grazing on crops of farmers by cattle from pastoralists have taken place in the area⁽⁸⁾⁽⁹⁾. However, in this brief the focus will lay on the interplay between the degradation of Lake Chad and the terrorist insurgency group Boko Haram in Nigeria.



Boko Haram is currently being combatted by the joint State security forces and Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), but fighting alone will not stop them. It has been statistically proven that poverty and unemployment have a very strong impact on domestic terrorism, such as Boko Haram⁽¹¹⁾. The decline of Lake Chad has led to the farmers, fishers and herders in the area paying the price, vastly increasing poverty in an already poverty-stricken area⁽⁷⁾⁽¹¹⁾. Some lakeshore dwellers, when they cannot sustain themselves or their families through their previous activities, turn to illegal sources of income or join an armed group, such as Boko Haram⁽¹¹⁾⁽¹³⁾. Underlying this is the loss of potential gain from their former activities, if traditional activities, such as fishing or farming, do not bring in enough benefits, the relative gain from joining Boko Haram increases, causing a higher amount of locals to choose this path⁽¹¹⁾⁽¹³⁾. However, unemployment and poverty are most certainly not the only factors influencing the choice whether or not to join Boko Haram. The UN-WB Pathways to Peace report explains how young people's motivation to join armed groups extend beyond more practical needs, such as employment, to a broader frustration with the rigidity of intergenerational social structures, frustrated aspirations for social and economic mobility, discrimination and unmet needs for recognition and respect⁽¹²⁾.

The current problem linking degradation of the wetland and Boko Haram, has been underlined by several experts in the area, for example by Mamman Nuhu, executive secretary of the Lake Chad Basin Development commission⁽⁵⁾: Barbara Bendadi, policy officer in migration and security at the UN convention to combat desertification, stated, during an event on landscape restoration and migration in Africa, that many people joining Boko Haram are not, in fact, radicalized, but they are desperately looking for employment. They do not commit terrorist acts for the cause, but because someone will pay them for it.

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