



Policy pointers

State officials must recognise, and translate into practice, changes in the law that support local rights; thereby ensuring ordinary people can access the provisions.

Government must give stronger protection to communally used woodland and grazing areas, since these are particularly vulnerable to land seizure.

Policymakers must design measures with pastoral herders' needs in mind, ensuring their mobility and access to pasture, forests and croplands after harvest.

National and state authorities should invest in traditional institutions and local platforms where people can listen, negotiate and resolve conflicts.

Local institutions: resilient in the face of change?

Two decades ago, legal provisions gave local institutions rights to manage natural resources in four dryland African countries: Mali, Niger, Sudan and Ethiopia. This briefing examines how resilient such decentralised institutions have been, under rapidly changing circumstances, and notes common lessons learned. Local management rights remain largely unsupported by government or legal implementation. The state has further complicated land management challenges by allocating large holdings to investors and by taking partisan roles in local politics. Changing politics, insecurity, demography and climate have exacerbated stresses, many of which have distant root causes. Neighbouring conflicts have driven influxes of people and animals. Increasing wealth inequalities and shifting livelihood strategies have eroded farming and herding communities' common interests.

Our research explores changes within natural resource institutions in Mali, Niger, Sudan and Ethiopia as they responded to shifting politics, climate, security, demography and economy over 20 years. SOS-Sahel GB had established field operations at four sites (see Figure 1) in the 1980s and 90s. Researchers returned in 2019 to collect data and describe local and wider forces affecting land and natural resource management. This research forms the second phase of an AFD-IIED partnership. The first explored and challenged the simplistic analysis lying behind much recent comment about conflict in Africa: neither recent history nor surveys of armed violence support 'farmer-herder conflict' as a root cause of current violence.¹

The field-sites experience low and variable rainfall of 250-700mm per year, which is typical of the semi-arid Sahelian zone. Over the past two decades, rainfall has increased slightly in Mali and Niger, but fallen slightly in Sudan and

Ethiopia. Variability has increased markedly at all sites, with rain falling in larger, more intense storms, heightening run-off and soil erosion risks. Where temperature data are available, they show a rising trend.

At each site, SOS-Sahel GB worked alongside state and community organisations with a shared commitment to decentralised community-based natural resource management. In every case, legislation had opened up new opportunities for promoting local land and resource management. Once SOS-Sahel GB's initial involvement ended, project activity continued to varying extents. In Borena, Ethiopia, all activities stopped, whereas at Bankass, Mali,² parallel initiatives continued some activities.

Natural resource trends

In Sudan, land clearance for agriculture and inflows of southern herds have put vegetation under heavy pressure. Regeneration of trees and

The state's search for income conflicts with its role in adjudicating local rights to forests and grazing

shrubs is not keeping up with harvesting for fuelwood, forage cutting and clearing new fields. Many more valuable local species have disappeared. Satellite images show that, across the Kordofan region, land under agriculture and urban settlement more than doubled from 2000-2012, bare land greatly expanded, and forest coverage more than halved.

Satellite images for the Ethiopian project sites show forest area fell 6-22% from 1999-2019, much of it converted into wooded grassland and scattered field-plots.

However, in Bankass, Mali, local people agreed that land degradation had slowed since the project started, successfully reducing bush fires, and encouraging natural regeneration, soil and water conservation. And at Takiéta, Niger, the Kou Tayani Association is proud that forest boundaries remain largely intact, though the hard, clay soils in the Forest Reserve, which are far less

valuable for agriculture than the surrounding sandy plains, will have helped.

Politics and insecurity

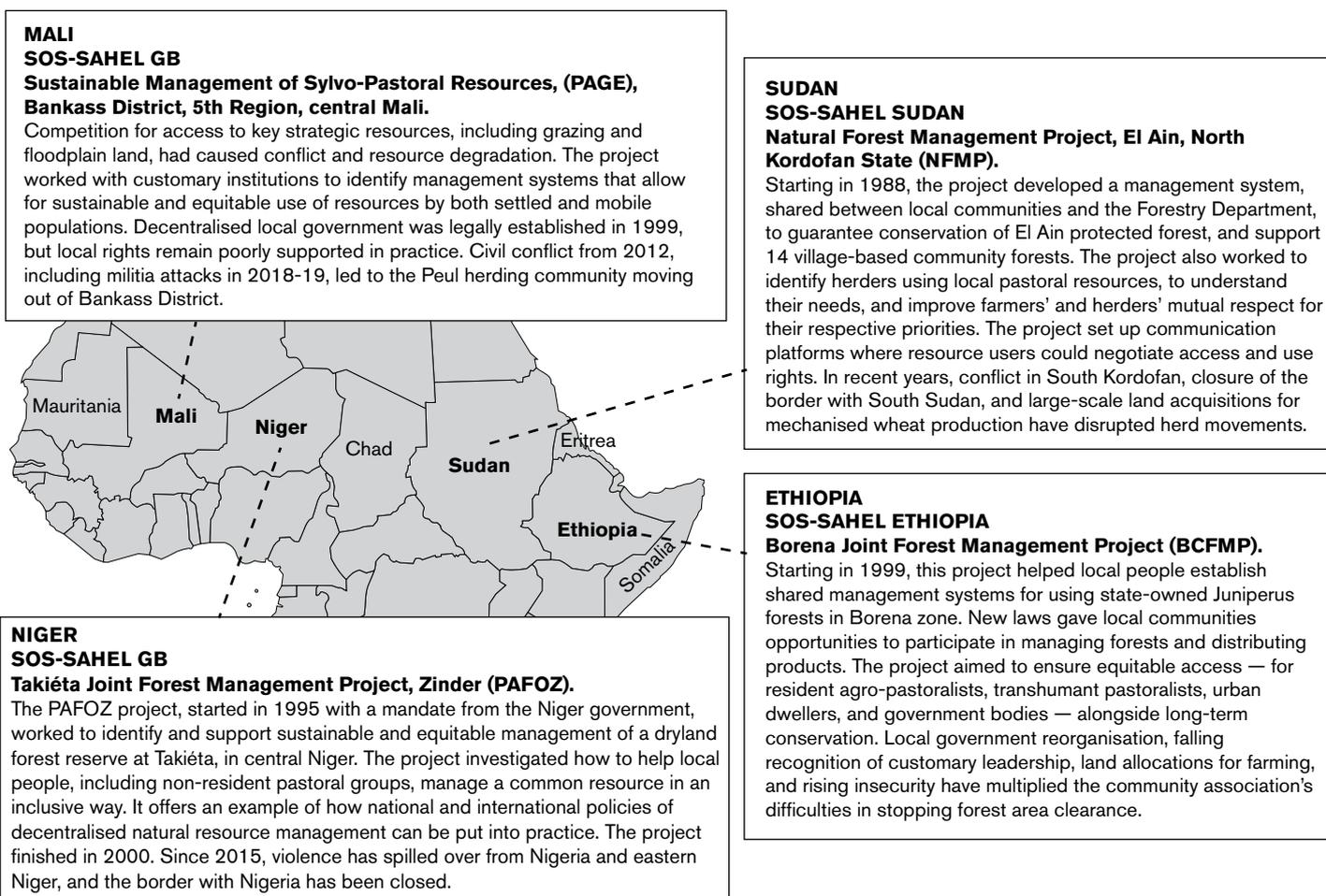
All four countries have experienced political changes bringing major consequences for effective local management systems. In Ethiopia, the 1995 Constitution established regional, ethnically-based states. Boundary disputes between Oromia and Somali states led to major conflicts, including in the districts where the SOS-Sahel GB Borena project operated. People abandoned some areas for fear of clashes.

In Mali, widening conflict and insecurity have spread from the north into central areas, where there are long-contested claims over land and water. The state's long-standing failure to adjudicate such conflicts has opened space for competing armed militias.³ Pastoral Peul people's presence in certain jihadist groups has rekindled historic rivalries and mutual accusations between Dogon and Bambara settled people and the Peul.

Land is vulnerable to seizure

Woodland and grazing areas are very vulnerable to seizure by people seeking revenue or farmland,

Figure 1. Research field-sites



and the projects only partially succeeded in protecting them. State administration has been slow to recognise new laws supporting local rights and decentralised management, and legal changes are not translated into practice by officials, judges and technical services. The law remains inaccessible to most people, and their rights are not respected.

In Ethiopia, the government has made land available to private investors, taking high value areas out of pastoral grazing. Wheat is now a significant cash crop on this privatized land. In the Sudan, federal, state and local governments rely on money acquired from large-scale land allocations. In one North Kordofan situation, 25,000 feddans (about 10,000ha) were leased to a foreign company producing gum arabic. Large areas have also been allocated to political elites for mechanised wheat farming across the state.

Local and national government

On the one hand, revised legal provisions have supported participatory management systems and stronger rights in all four countries. On the other, state land allocations to 'investors' have undermined local rights. Government often seems biased towards a particular group or set of interests. With limited finances, administrations at all levels seek revenue, and land is one of the few resources generating income. Hence the state's search for income conflicts with its role in adjudicating local rights to forests and grazing.

The legal status and powers of community associations managing woodlands have been particularly challenged by changes to local government structures. New districts have been carved out of existing jurisdictions, and with each subsequent re-allocation of administrative powers, new legislation and orders have been issued, old orders abolished, and revised boundaries established, all of which adversely affect land and forest rights and conflict resolution.

Niger's Kou Tayani association predates commune-level local government structures, and is only now ensuring the commune be represented in the management committee. For El Ain Forest in Sudan, relations between federal, state and local government, and local communities are complex. Land values are rising. Most land is unregistered and considered state property, while tribal leaders have limited control over land allocations. In Ethiopia, local government changes have put state and traditional powers at odds over revenues from forest produce. The state plays a partisan role in local politics, supporting rival groups unequally. Government structures and officials are

replacing elders' councils, undermining the authority of customary laws and practice. Only in Bankass, Mali, was the 1999 local government structure brought into the project's plan from the start.

Human pressures

Data are patchy, but populations are expanding in many places, due to demographic growth, urbanisation and arrivals of people displaced by conflict. In Mali's Bankass District, numbers have almost doubled over the 20-year period. The settled Dogon farming population has increased significantly, but the Peul herding community has largely disappeared. All available land is now cultivated, leaving little space for grazing. Bankass District has seen much conflict between Peul and Dogon communities, with rival militias attacking villages, killing people and destroying homes (for example the massacre of Peul villagers in Ogossagou, 2019).

In southern Ethiopia and the Sudan, people seeking refuge from conflict elsewhere have added to demographic growth. South Sudan's establishment as an independent country in 2011 has closed off seasonal movements for many pastoral herders, keeping them in North Kordofan. Many people have also arrived from neighbouring South Kordofan state, to avoid war, crisis and insecurity.

Changing herds

Data on livestock numbers are sparse in all areas studied, but herd-owners are moving into seemingly-more-secure areas. Across the West African Sahel, many formerly-mobile herding groups have settled, seeking farmland. Simultaneously, many farmers have invested cash surpluses in cattle — which also provide services such as traction, dung, milk and meat. This homogenisation of livelihood strategies has eroded complementarity. Instead of welcoming visiting herd-owners, farmers want to reserve stubble and village grazing lands for their own animals. Both groups have cut fields in former grazing areas, fragmenting them and disrupting livestock movements.

There are also growing wealth disparities. Many urban professionals, government officials, military men and traders see advantages from investing in cattle. Livestock numbers are increasing, cattle are using shorter distance grazing patterns, and often have a single, heavily-armed hired herder who struggles to keep close control. Such new forms of herd ownership and management generate rising tension among farmers. Traditional pastoralists have also shifted towards fewer larger herds, with owners hiring labour to care for their stock.

Conflicts and their management

All four project areas agreed management rules and ways to handle conflict between different land users. Local associations and traditional structures seemed relatively effective in dealing with local people's infractions. However, many root causes of conflict are more distant, resulting from decisions made by higher level institutions, such as large-scale land allocations to domestic elites and foreign investors.

In Ethiopia, customary rules for managing the forests were upheld for some years after the SOS-Sahel-GB ended. But in the past decade, the rules have been largely ignored. People are settling and illegally exploiting the forest areas. Traditional Borena leaders have been unable to maintain their authority over woodland protection, due to weak support from government, and lack of recognition by younger generations. In the Sudan, disputes are often handled locally, with fines for crop damage by herds. Respected local leaders mediate conflicts. However, not everyone accepts traditional administration systems and conflict resolution. When the local sheikh cannot resolve disputes, they go to the local court system, requiring more time and expense.

Women and young people

At all four sites, many young men work away for much of the year. In Niger, over a third of Kou Tayani association members are women. They take management roles and actively guard the forest, helped by widespread ownership of mobile phones. In the Sudan, women rarely own land and they have very different responsibilities from men, taking charge of children and the family. Getting fuel wood and non-timber products, such as medicines, fruits, nuts, and edible leaves from the community forest has become increasingly difficult. Women's participation in forest management varies, but each forest committee is meant to have at least three women members.⁴ In Bankass Cercle, while a few women are on the management committee, they are much less active than men.

Common lessons

While conflicts and their causes vary across the region, common factors are fuelling tensions, with increasingly deadly results:

- The state has often complicated the management challenges faced by local

institutions, by making large-scale land allocations to investors, and supporting partisan local politics.

- Woodland and grazing areas are particularly vulnerable to people seizing land for farming and revenue generation.
- Falling complementarity between livestock and cropping systems means common interests and cooperation between farmers and herders have eroded.
- Policies have ignored pastoral herders and their need for mobility and access to pasture, forests and croplands after harvest.
- Many rural people (both pastoralists and farmers) are caught up in larger struggles, with ethno-politics and jihadist groups exploiting the vacuum created by state failure.
- Increasing wealth inequalities within pastoral groups, and concentration of animal wealth in fewer households, are eroding common interests in maintaining collective range and water resources, as production strategies and objectives diverge.

The projects SOS-Sahel established created a valuable platform for people to meet and discuss management of their shared woodland and grazing resources. But these institutions' power, authority and effectiveness relied in part on the technical and financial support external funding provided. Such decentralised institutions need formal recognition from state authorities for carrying out their responsibilities, and continued funds for investment and ongoing operations if they are to fulfil their promise.

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Knowledge Products

The International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) promotes sustainable development, linking local priorities to global challenges. We support some of the world's most vulnerable people to strengthen their voice in decision making.

Established in the mid-1980s, SOS Sahel-GB was a charity which supported African-led development amongst herders and farmers in Africa's drylands, which then helped in-country partners transform into independent organisations: Sahel-Eco Mali; CRAC-GRN Niger; SOS Sahel Sudan; and SOS Sahel Ethiopia, with whom this research was carried out.

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Notes

¹ Kr tli, S and Toulmin, C (forthcoming) Farmer-herder conflict in sub-Saharan Africa? IIED, London. / ² For a synthesis of the detailed research reports, see: Toulmin, C et al. (forthcoming) How have decentralised natural resource management institutions evolved over 20 years? Summary of findings from Mali, Niger, Sudan and Ethiopia. IIED, London. / ³ Benjaminsen, TA and Ba, B (2018) Why do pastoralists in Mali join jihadist groups? A political ecological explanation. *Journal of Peasant Studies* 46(1):1–20. / ⁴ Kerkhof, P (2015) Community natural resource management and farm forestry. Twenty-five years of experience in Kordofan and Darfur. UNEP, Forest National Corporation Sudan, SOS Sahel.