

2 Environmental crisis narratives in the Sahel and the solutions they call for

The case of Lake Chad

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Introduction

The Sahel tickles the imagination. Primed by a flood of documentaries and NGO campaign videos, the mind's eye presents endless, desolate dried-out landscapes, traversed by hungry tribes and animals. This fallacious, exotic and popular image has its counterpart in policy images reflected in countless think-tank analyses and policy plans for the Sahel. The dominant policy narrative is one of an environmental crisis. “Over the last half century”, the UN notes,

the combined effects of population growth, land degradation (deforestation, continuous cropping and overgrazing), reduced and erratic rainfall, lack of coherent environmental policies and misplaced development priorities, have contributed to transform a large proportion of the Sahel into barren land, resulting in the deterioration of the soil and water resources.¹

Moreover, this environmental crisis is seen as being at the basis of, or as exacerbating, many of the other crises and challenges in the Sahel (food insecurity, poverty, migration/displacement and violent conflict) subsuming them under an all-encompassing yet digestible “environmental fragility” paradigm.²

Overlapping with the Sahel belt is the site of another powerful image, the supposedly disappearing Lake Chad, once the world's sixth largest lake. Its 90% shrinkage since 1963, from 25,000 ha to less than 1000 ha, has been repeated many times, along with imaginaries of violent conflict over water and terrorism, compounding problems for its riparian countries and beneficiaries—Cameroon, Central African Republic, Libya, Nigeria, Niger, Sudan and, indeed, Chad. [Magrin \(2016\)](#) rates the lake in a class of its own as a global environmental icon, a geosymbol.

Why are these images of environmental and developmental doom so persistent, even in the face of clearly contradicting and overwhelming scientific evidence? Strong candidates for explanations have come from critical postdevelopment literature published since the late 1990s. Authors such as Jonathan Crush, Arturo

Escobar, James Ferguson and Timothy Mitchell influentially started asking existential questions about the rationale for development imaginaries, and other authors (e.g., [Leach et al., 1999](#)) showed non-equilibrium rangeland trends for the Sahel that were very different from the dominant equilibrium ecology narrative. Their data countered the conventional wisdom on desertification.

Drought and desertification discourse has long captured the common imagination of the Sahel region. The desertification narrative emerged from or at least was reinforced by the great Sahelian droughts of the 1970s and the 1980s. It was shaped in the international arena by “organizations working in the fields of international cooperation, human rights, regional development, economic regulation and environmental questions” ([Gangneron et al., 2022](#), p. 117) and has been repeatedly presented as inexorable, a modern-day Dust Bowl, a self-inflicted mess due to overexploitation that could only be reverted by radical policies. The widespread acceptance of this narrative in development circles led to draconian measures, including sedentarising nomads ([Scoones & Nori, 2023](#)) and mega-infrastructure projects ([Haller & Weissman, 2024](#)), such as the Great Green Wall ([Haller et al., 2023](#)) and the Trans Africa Pipeline (TAP). Critical authors showed the resilience of the Sahel, which started to regreen in the 1980s (e.g., [Brandt et al., 2015](#); [Giannini et al., 2008](#); [Hickler et al., 2005](#)), and they surmised that chronic poverty in the Sahelian belt did not occur despite but *because of* such interventions. These authors observed that much of the science underlying environmental crisis narratives about the Sahel was dominated by like-minded expatriates. Thus, focusing on how ideas shape policies and how policies shape projects is in order. After all, new ideas cannot gain much political force without facilitation by institutions and power constellations already in place ([Hall, 2020](#)), and the Sahel crisis discourse has been successfully institutionalised in international policy practice. Development narratives “structure options, define relevant data and rule out alternatives” ([Cooper & Packard, 1997](#), p. 24) for decision-making, establishing the authority to legitimise interventions while silencing local environmental knowledge ([Glenzer, 2002](#)). When applied to a particular region, regional discourse formations develop ([Peet & Watts, 1993](#)) as a relation between dominating and dominated forces. The Sahel literature shows the persistence of such policy narratives, which have a surprisingly long pedigree, rooted in Eurocentric beliefs about the tropics as a dangerous, chaotic place—whether ridden by disease, poverty or disaster ([Bankoff, 2001](#)).

However, narratives are not static; they develop over time, mutate, merge and sometimes disappear and reappear. Counternarratives develop, challenging the hegemonic account, as does the current decolonial narrative. The “social life” of concepts ([Molle, 2008](#), p. 131) can be illustrated by the current evolution of the Sahel crisis narrative. The critical view is persistent but currently challenged in turn by a decolonising narrative, exposing it as perpetuating Northern ideas and practices.

As we shall explain, due to their reductionism of complex realities, environmental crisis narratives are powerful fairy tales with predictable but powerful quests. Such fairy tales or stories provide a “deep structure”, filling uncertainty and complexity gaps in understanding the world we live in, but, crucially, they point to solutions and the way forward.

Crisis narratives occupy a particularly potent place in the discursive field as they bring urgency to the story. Bilateral and multilateral agencies in the North are interested in representing the Global South as areas that need development and intervention (Mitchell, 2005). However, NGOs and national ministries also peddle crisis narratives, responding to the perverse incentives for promoting accounts of environmental degradation—disasters bring fundraising opportunities and employment (Swift, 1996).

We review this literature and illustrate it by presenting the case of Lake Chad, which, in the environmental development discourse, is in (climate and security) crisis and needs to be saved. As noted about desertification, the incredibly shrinking lake turns out to be oscillating between growing and shrinking, and inexorable “water wars” narratives (Warner et al., 2023) have not been borne out, yet a megaproject has been put forward as a solution to these problems.

We first introduce (crisis) policy narratives, followed by a brief overview of their evolution during and after colonial times and underpinning by colonial and postcolonial science. Next, we turn to a number of Sahelian narratives and the (often infrastructural) megaprojects they engendered, before zooming in on the case of Lake Chad. In closing, we briefly discuss the emerging decolonial literature and its potential to offer an alternative account closer to the complexity of reality.

Nature of policy narratives

Language, categories and labels are not neutral. How they are understood and interpreted depends on the context in which they are used. Discourse privileges some concepts and relations between concepts at the expense of others (Peet & Watts, 1993). Environmental narratives, crisis narratives included, fit particular policy agendas.

As alternative agendas vie for (hegemonic) control of the discourse, legitimising myths and beliefs are created to influence perceptions of the problem (Warner & Thomas, 2015). Discourse coalitions bring to the fore certain issues and relegate others to the background to promote their particular solutions. Specific narratives and ideas underpin knowledge constructions, imposing their view of realities on others (Hajer, 1995).

This issue points to the role of power relations. Power relations are largely about the capacity to convince other actors to mobilise and coordinate their efforts in a certain way because it is in their perceived interest to do so.

We cannot live without narratives, myths and fairytales (van Eeten, 1997) to make sense of the world. Narratives fill in the blanks to simplify and rationalise decision-making. They are sense-making constructs that seemingly explain how situations and contexts have come to be, meant to persuade others to take certain kinds of action (Czarniawska-Joerges & Joerges, 1988).

Policy narratives are “scenarios (stories and arguments) that stabilize the assumptions for decision-making in situations of high turbulence and dynamics” (Roe & van Eeten, 2004, p. 36). Narrative framing is a strategy used to fixate on certain meanings at the expense of others by developing accounts with a view to making a certain discourse on future actions hegemonic and legitimate (Haller & Galvin, 2011). Some narratives are actively promoted internationally, to the disadvantage of others. Once a narrative has become hegemonic, everyone will have to draw on the hegemonic storyline for their contribution to be taken seriously (Hajer, 1995).

Narratives are populated with characters (heroes, villains and victims) and their relationships, entangled in plotlines, with complications, reactions and resolutions. These plotlines unfold in particular settings and have resonances. van Eeten (1997) has shown how narratives and counternarratives often mirror each other—one person’s hero is another person’s villain and vice versa.

Crisis narratives

The crisis narrative is a “rhetorical strategy by means of which the shadows of past catastrophes, or an impending one, are invoked to authorize particular forms of political power, or the use of collective power and resources, while depoliticizing the catastrophe in question” (Vázquez-Arroyo, 2013, p. 740). As Rahman et al. (2023, p. 24) note:

A crisis narrative implies an urgent demand for action, serving to justify immediate decision making in the face of a looming danger. In contexts of an uncertain future, such narratives serve to stabilise policy-making processes, renew the authority of policymakers, and foster decisive solutions to unpredictable events. However, a key problem with crisis narratives is that they tend to come at the expense of complexity (Roe, 1995). Labeling a situation as a “crisis” helps focus attention and mobilises resources, but it also risks sidelining alternative ideas and responses, as crisis narratives are often constructed by powerful policy actors to advance particular interests.

Crisis is both socially produced and discursively constituted “in its prevalence, disruptiveness and (appearance of) inevitability” (de Rycker & Don, 2013, p. 499).

Crisis is socially constructed—not only in the sense of intersubjectively giving meaning to an overwhelming situation but also materially propelled by the responses to an earlier crisis. The *crisis* identification and labelling, often by outsiders, can trigger and legitimise measures that lead to a new crisis, [Rocheleau et al. \(1995\)](#) claim. For this contribution, we follow these authors in that crisis construction has two meanings:

- discursive framing, the mobilisation of representational discourses that attempt to exert social power by telling one particular story of crisis, and
- mobilising factors that create an actual crisis—the discursive construction of one crisis over another leads to policies or acts of resistance that contribute materially to the next crisis.

In this context, [Lewis \(2010\)](#) indicates that crisis narratives not only simplify and depoliticise reality but also evidence amnesia, a forgetfulness about what actually led to the crisis in the first place. Crisis narratives are used to centralise or consolidate existing forms of dominance and social hierarchy.

[Daoust and Selby \(2023\)](#) present the key elements that make the (in their case, Lake Chad) crisis narrative so compelling to spread:

- visualisation: striking, media-genic images;
- climatisation/securitisation of issues, making them extraordinary challenges with one way out;
- validation by think tanks (SIPRI, Clingendael, Adelphi); and
- evasion and organised ignorance (undergirded by only scant primary research).

Catastrophisation, that is, invoking an impending catastrophe, raises an issue from the normal democratic debate to the level of life and death for immediate intervention with extraordinary measures ([Warner, 2013](#); [Warner et al., 2023](#)). Framing a situation as a crisis gives the story an edge over alternative narratives and fast-tracks measures and resources, at the expense of a considerable loss of accountability. Crisis scenarios “generate extra-ordinary consensus, open up new avenues of legitimacy and stretch thresholds for accepting sacrifice” ([Krätli, 2013](#), p. 1); when collective survival is at stake, people will accept more than they do normally, even if it hurts them.

Other elements of dominant narratives are intuitiveness and an appeal to simple, causal and explanatory beliefs ([Molle, 2008](#)), clothed in neutral scientific language ([Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982](#); [Shore & Wright, 2003](#)). Although the basis may not be all that scientific ([Sullivan, 2000](#); [Verhoeven, 2014](#)), scientists’ involvement provides an aura of “scientistical” objectivity and truth and a buffer against counterevidence ([Ribot, 2004](#), p. 74).³

In the next section, we examine the production of this science.

Colonial and postcolonial Sahel science

Critical post-development analysts claim that environmental and development discourse reinforces a separation of the Northern *us* from the Southern *them*. In this discourse, homogenised *others*, obviously lower in status than *us*, are not only alienating; they also come from a dangerous place that requires control or a vulnerable place in need of saving.

[Bankoff \(2001\)](#), for example, shows that the early discoveries of the non-European world instilled delight and awe at the exotic landscapes and abundant resources encountered. However, as large groups of the settlers that roamed the world fell ill and perished, the focus shifted to unfavourable images of danger—weather extremes, wild animals and rough terrains.

The misery found in the tropical world came to be perceived as self-inflicted by the godless Indigenous peoples. The marriage of the theological and the secular is epitomised in the Malthusian narrative, named after the reverend scientist who in the late 18th century predicted that population growth would outpace natural resource availability and that this would lead to conflict over scarce resources. The currently hegemonic thinking about environmental conflict still reflects this thought.

The belief that deserts and drought were results of divine punishment for indigenous peoples' sinful ways was widely embraced ... colonial officials, military officers, missionaries and scientists accused the indigenous colonial subjects of creating their own misery by undermining their natural resource base.

(Benjaminsen & Hiernaux, 2019, p. 208)

With the rise and more systematic application of ecology as a science, this morality tale moved from a religious to a scientific narrative after the severe African droughts and famines of 1910–1915. A self-regulating ecological equilibrium was assumed, and humans were identified as the culprits of the disturbance of that equilibrium, responsible for the desiccation of certain regions ([Glenzer, 2002](#)). Among colonial scientists, the belief that Africans were carelessly destroying their environment through practices of slash-and-burn agriculture, bush fires and overgrazing started to become normalised. Some researchers extrapolated “very localized and short-term studies to the larger region in order to explain broad-scale environmental changes”, while neglecting to incorporate local knowledge into their models ([Moseley & Laris, 2008](#), p. 60). As the latter authors indicate, these colonial interpretations tended not to be based on systematic investigation but on the direct transposition of ecological models derived from temperate climates to the tropics.

The beliefs expressed in colonial discourses reflected some self-interest: “... discrediting of native land uses was used to justify land rights dispossession of

these peoples and to prepare for other land uses such as settler agriculture, state-led irrigation schemes, large-scale forest exploitation and forest and fauna conservation areas” (Benjaminsen & Hiernaux, 2019, p. 209).

In the post-1945 Cold War context, development came to be merged with security. Immiseration would risk the spread of communism, so abject poverty needed to be rooted out. Many non-European societies came to perceive themselves as backward and in need of development intervention.

With the end of the Cold War as a grand scheme and the declining global sway of development as a driving force, the development/security nexus did not let up; indeed, as noted by Duffield (2007), “their” development was supposed to benefit “our” security. In the early 1990s, the US Pentagon started to prepare for new wars as the “green wars” (including water wars) discourse took off. A new domain, environmental security, saw the light, strongly dominated by a scarcity-conflict assumption rooted in Malthusianism and arising in the 1960s and the 1970s, when the World Bank CEO Robert McNamara put population growth central to the crisis discourse (Glenzer, 2002). In this line of thought, farmer–herder conflicts in the Sahel were represented as “competing for scarce resources”, a dispute between two social groups contending for access to resources (Homer-Dixon, 1994, p. 10).

Successive UN Secretary-Generals, presidents and politicians, such as, of late, European Commissioner Frans Timmermans, have claimed that the next war would be about water. Countless semi-academic books titled *Water Wars* (starting with Starr & Stoll, 1988) were published, inciting the Clinton administration to create an environmental security undersecretariat under US Defense Secretary Warren Christopher (Thomas, 1997, p. 397).

After US Vice President Al Gore released his *Inconvenient Truth* film in 2006, a seemingly inexorable climate crisis narrative has come up, merging with or even overtaking developmentalism—curiously reflecting the worldview of the US military establishment (Daoust & Selby, 2023). While academics hardly agree on this nexus, a link between climate change and conflict is now commonly inferred in international policy circles, especially around the Sahel, while Lake Chad remains one of the key hotspots of the literature on water wars, next to the Middle East.

In those days, the two popular representations of the Third World, especially in the US, were the failed state (incapable of providing basic services) and the rogue state (supporting terrorism threatening the West); after 9/11, these two were collapsed into weak states harbouring terrorist elements (Bachmann, 2008).

The (post)colonial narratives have now mostly been superseded by climate narratives, again largely originating in the Global North. The climatisation of security has led to a narrow, reductionist focus on climate as the explanation for every problem. Assumed links among climate disaster, migration and war have

become commonplace, with nothing much in the way of evidence. As Krätli and Toulmin (2020, p. 47) note, “When closely examined, the correlation between the intensity of conflict and the intensity of climatic events appears weak and inconsistent. Most importantly, the majority of conflict incidents never escalate into violence”. As Buhaug (2010) found, climate variability is a poor predictor of armed conflict. Rather, exclusion and frustration drive conflict (Buhaug, 2010), a finding supported by a growing body of research.

Sahelian green and blue megaprojects

Sahelian policy narratives tend to call for megaprojects as solutions to environmental crises. Many of these have proven to be castles in the air but continue to attract donors and backers (Mitchell, 2005; Warner et al., 2023). The Great Green Wall project is a case in point. It was launched in 2005 by three African heads of state (O. Obasanjo of Nigeria, A. Wade of Senegal and M. Gaddafi of Libya) and approved by the African Union in 2007. The idea was to reforest a 7000-km-long and 15-km-wide strip of land from Senegal to the Horn of Africa, located between the isohyets of 100 and 400 mm of rain per year (Haller et al., 2023, pp. 116–117). The “wall” was meant to stop the advance of the desert, which threatened to overwhelm the region, according to the desertification narrative (Cherlet et al., 2018; Morel, 2006). The Sahelian countries promoting the Great Green Wall project intended to redesign development (or perhaps better, re-engage it) in line with the new dictates of environmental sustainability (Mugelé, 2018). The image of a “green wall” (not new actually, having already been applied to other African contexts; Goffner et al., 2019; Mugelé, 2018; Reenberg, 2012) wields great evocative power, effectively mobilising and rallying donor countries and major international institutions for support. Often described as “pharaonic”, it was intended to bring improvements over a huge area, with impressive targets (“100 million hectares of land restored, 250 million tons of carbon sequestered and 10 million jobs created”) on the horizon of the year 2030 (United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification [UNCCD], 2020, p. 6). The impressive rhetoric has been matched by scant results. The 2020 UNCCD report states that after 15 years, only 4,000,000 ha of land has been restored in the region. The only country really committed to the project has been Senegal, so much so that some researchers speak of the “*Grande muraille sénégalaise*” (Magrin & Mugelé, 2020, p. 10).

Another idea for a megaproject is the TAP, proposed by “a not-for-profit organization working in collaboration with the 11-country Pan African Great Green Wall (PAGGW) agency”, according to the agency’s website.⁴ The motivations for the project lie in three keywords that align seamlessly with the climate security crisis narrative: *crisis* (“Safe, clean water is vital to human existence but for tens of millions of people across 11 countries in the Sahel region of northern Africa a reliable fresh water supply has always been a distant dream”), *desertification* (“Chronic Food & Water Shortages. Drought causes water-related disease and death, and the loss of farmland to increasing desertification results in chronic food

and water shortages. Lack of safe water has historically proved to be the single greatest obstacle to human survival, development and prosperity across this vast and vital region”) and *severe drought* (“Persistent in the Sahel Region. The African continent is warming faster than the global average due to climate change. Some 60% of Africa is dry and the Sahel region is the driest, suffering severe drought conditions year after year. Regional conflicts over fresh water supplies are predicted to rapidly increase, also resulting in large-scale migration to Europe. The problem is immediate and worsening, the challenge immense”). The project proposal intends to respond to this “immense challenge” by building an 8800-km pipeline across the entire Sahel (“the largest humanitarian civil engineering project of the 21st century”) to bring fresh water, desalinated in four solar-powered plants, two located on the Atlantic Ocean and two on the Red Sea, to Sahelian populations and enterprises. The designers, all Westerners, firmly believe that “upon completion, and in perpetuity, TAP will distribute an unlimited supply of safe, free, clean water for communities and people across the Sahel, and cost-efficient water for use in agriculture, forestry and commercial entities in all 11 countries in the region”. Presented since 2015 at various conferences, notably organised by the PAGGW agency, it received “enthusiastic endorsement” (<https://transafricapipeline.org/>, accessed July 22, 2024).

The Great Green Wall and the TAP are two projects that promise a heroic, salvific solution to the crises of the Sahel, which aligns with a long-standing history of megaprojects believed to be capable of changing reality, a reality full of problems awaiting rational solutions, such as the large-scale irrigation systems discussed in [Chapter 1](#). We now turn to another massive project that, different from the former two that (aspire to) traverse and expand across the Sahel, is located in the geographical heart of the Sahel and seeks to address the problem of a “disappearing lake”.

Saving Lake Chad

Lake Chad is ... *strange*. It is an endorheic lake, depending essentially on the flooding of only one river, Chari. The bottom is shallow, around 3 m; therefore, the variation in annual flooding rapidly affects the lake’s water level. It has a long track record of great changes in shape and size. It is assumed that around 6000 BP, the lake, with its water level 310–320 m above the mean sea level, occupied a large area (over 300,000 km²), the so-called Mega-Chad, a large inland sea of fresh water. In historical times, the lake has receded a great deal and decreased in surface area, while maintaining its pattern of continuous movement. The classification proposed by [Tilho \(1928\)](#), already in colonial times, provides three levels for the lake. *Normal Chad* is determined by reaching an elevation of water 281–282 m above sea level; the lake is composed of two large basins (south and north), with a water surface area of around 20,000 km². The open waters are extensive, particularly in front of the Chari and Komadugu Yobè rivers, and navigation is also possible between the islands of the archipelagos. The height of the water table above 284 m determines

the situation known as *Great Chad*; this was observed in the 19th century by European travellers in the region but never in the 20th century. *Small Chad*, from an altitude of 280 m or less, finally occurred several times in the 20th century, alternating with *Normal Chad*: in the period between 1904 and 1917, around the 1940s and from 1973 until the second half of the 1990s (Lemoalle & Houdret, 1996, p. 23). In the *Small Chad* situation, the two cuvettes are separated, and there is no longer a single water surface.

Although well known to hydrologists, this continuous and strong fluctuation of the lake (which can change from a large area of open water to a collection of ponds) disappeared from the environmental narratives about Lake Chad. It is now common to mention that Lake Chad has been shrinking since 1963. This presumed shrinkage is represented as a crisis of climate security that needs saving by both (Northern) funders and consultants, as well as the national leaders of the region, and one of the ways to do so is through a megaproject that transfers water from the Congo basin to the lake. The UNEP calls Lake Chad one of the ten most “water-impooverished” regions in the world. Daoust and Selby (2023) show that there are plenty of arguments against the three key elements of the Lake Chad crisis narrative: (1) the lake is shrinking (2) due to climate-induced drought, (3) which leads to radicalisation and human insecurity.

Dismantling the crisis narrative

“*The lake is shrinking ...*”. Daoust and Selby (2023, pp. 1292–1293) link the spread of the disappearing lake idea to the effectiveness of aerial and satellite photography. It is precisely visualisation that proves to be a highly effective persuasive tool. In fact, the visual effect of the great droughts has “lingered in memory” in the narratives about the dying lake (the years 1983–1984 and especially 1984–1985 were the most dramatic for the Sahel; only 6.7 km³ of water reached Lake Chad, which is one-sixth of the average supply; Olivry et al., 1996, p. 221). However, there has been a positive trend since the mid-1990s, leading to large areas being back underwater, even in the most exposed part, the northern cuvette. Taking the maximum flow rate of Chari River at N’Djamena as a rough but indicative reference, compared with an average of 1870 m³/s in the 1980s and 1930 m³/s in the early 1990s (Olivry et al., 1996, p. 232), the Agrhyment data show that from 1998 onwards, years with a maximum flow rate of over 2500 m³/s up to over 3000 m³/s alternated with years with a flow rate around or even below 2000 m³/s. Pearce (2022) claims that the massive irrigation schemes in place contribute to the shrinkage of the lake. In reality, the anthropogenic contribution is minimal. given the struggles and failures of large-scale irrigation schemes (e.g., the South Chad Irrigation Project and Baga Polder in Nigeria; see Chapter 1) and the weak impact of dams on Chari River and its main tributary, the Logone (see Chapter 7). The river system with the most anthropogenic modifications is Komadugu Yobé, which, however, has a minor contribution to the lake.

“... *due to climate-induced drought ...*”. Many observers appear to prefer a linear “drying out” explanation for Lake Chad’s shrinkage, taking a nicely stable lake

as a reference point (Gangneron et al., 2022). As noted, cycles of shrinkage after prolonged drought and expansion after a return to regular flood patterns have always characterised Lake Chad. Fluctuations in the level of a relatively shallow lake can be observed not only within a year (flood/recession) but also from year to year, with wet and dry phases over a few decades and beyond. Developments around Lake Chad are thus dynamic and far from straightforward. However, the World Bank has clearly adopted the linear climate-conflict narrative.⁵

“... which leads to radicalisation and human insecurity”. As Daoust and Selby (2023, pp. 1293–1294) note, this assertion is linked to the spread of violence in the region, especially in the 2010s, due to the Islamist insurgents belonging to Boko Haram and the movements that grew out of it, as well as the violent repression by the Nigerian army. Radicalisation and violence are discursively linked to climate change, asserting that scarcity of resources (water) exacerbates conflict and insecurity. However, such an assertion ignores a longer and more complicated history of conflict and violence that involves border disputes (Abdouraman, 2008) and clashes among the armed forces of the countries adjoining Lake Chad (Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon and Chad), as well as the failure in reforming a joint force in the face of increased activities by armed gangs in the 1990s. Given this background, Treszakai (2018) presents the Lake Chad crisis as a two-level diplomatic process, a game of chess in which the moves at both the domestic and transboundary levels strongly influence each other. These events are not *water wars* per se but successfully illustrate the potential of an environmental violence narrative to a willing policy audience. The climate argument only reinforces this insecurity and instability narrative. For national leaders, climate is a convenient scapegoat, diverting attention from violent counterinsurgency in countries such as Nigeria, and presenting themselves as victims. Saliently, the Nigerian government has accused Boko Haram of systematically poisoning water streams, which, despite the lack of verification, has ended up being a reality in the literature (Nett & Rüttinger, 2016).

The solution

The first hypothesis put forward to save the lake through a transfer of water from the Congo basin to the Lake Chad basin emerged in the second half of the 1980s. The Italian company Bonifica's Transaqua project first presented in 1988 (Mimbale 2021), was imposing; it envisaged a radical transformation of the Central African region, with the opening of a large waterway between the Congo, Chad and Niger basins, as well as the production of electricity and the extension of irrigation with a view to developing an agro-industry. Sayan et al. (2020) note that Bonifica actively promoted an alarmist discourse—calling their proposal “The Sahel Belt, an impending tragedy”—and, in 1988, produced a short video aired on national Italian TV, juxtaposing the drought-stricken Sahel with the water-abundant Congo River spilling unused water into the Atlantic Ocean. As noted, the plentiful (water) resources that European discoverers found were sources of early fascination; in this context, we may point to the fascination with the origin of the Nile. Africa's water abundance is still a modern obsession, generating a plethora of gigantic

infrastructure projects (Warner et al., 2019). In its most visionary version, this was the case for the *Atlantropia* formulated in the 1930s by German architect H. Sörgel, who envisaged linking an enormous Lake Congo, to be created, with what, thanks to the new gigantic water inflows, would become Chad Sea (wider than the 6000 BP Mega-Chad), perhaps even to be joined with the Mediterranean (Magrin & Lemoalle, 2015, p. 156). A proposal of a lesser impact compared to that of Transaqua was later presented by the Nigerian National Electric Power Authority, limited to recommending the transfer from Ubangi River, one of the largest tributaries of Congo River, to a tributary of Chari River, the Fafa (Lake Chad Basin Commission [LCBC], 2000, p. 3). The formulation of the project has these main components: a dam on the Ubangi River at the Palambo site, a 150- to 170-km long tunnel/canal to connect the basins, the widening of Chari River's bed and a connecting canal to the Benue River. The 49th session of the LCBC's Council of Ministers in Yaoundé, 2002, therefore decided to proceed with a feasibility study—entrusted to the Canadian research bureau CIMA International—which was concluded in 2011 (CIMA International, 2012; Magrin & Lemoalle, 2015). The CIMA project proposal contained two options, related to the construction of two dams: one on the Ubangi River at Palambo and the other on the Kotto tributary at Bria (see Fig. 2.1; CIMA International, 2012, pp. 24–47). From the first by pumping and from the second by gravity, water could reach the Chari River, suitably reprofiled. The solution that appeared most reasonable and realistic at the time was to divert water from the Bria dam and use the Palambo dam to regulate the flood, allow navigation on the Ubangi River and enable hydroelectric production (Magrin & Lemoalle, 2015, pp. 156–157).

In keeping with the environment–security nexus, Transaqua is not only expected to promote development for poverty reduction but also to reduce the risk of terrorism. During the 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP21) in Paris, Mahamadou Issoufou, President of Niger, “underlined the close link between the drying up of Lake Chad and terrorism in an area threatened by Boko Haram since 2009” (quoted in Magrin, 2016, p. 205). The arguments for proposing this salvaging of Lake Chad pertain to the climate security crisis narrative (Bøås 2019) and are effective to the extent that the drastic shrinking of the lake can be visualised, which (as argued earlier) has not been demonstrated since the mid-1990s. Following this narrative evidently makes sense to some parties: Western engineering companies, the governments of the countries concerned with the lake and the authorities involved in overseeing water usage, such as the LCBC (Daoust & Selby, 2023). It is in the latter's interest to engage Western narratives in order to attract funds and to direct international attention to the conditions in the region. This is not just an adaptive or opportunistic attitude. Even if the narrative is out of focus with respect to (hydrological, first of all) reality and the solution of transferring water between river basins is questionable, certainly the request for attention is understandable. By speaking the language that can be heard and understood by donors, perhaps a request for consideration might align with the interest of international decision-makers.

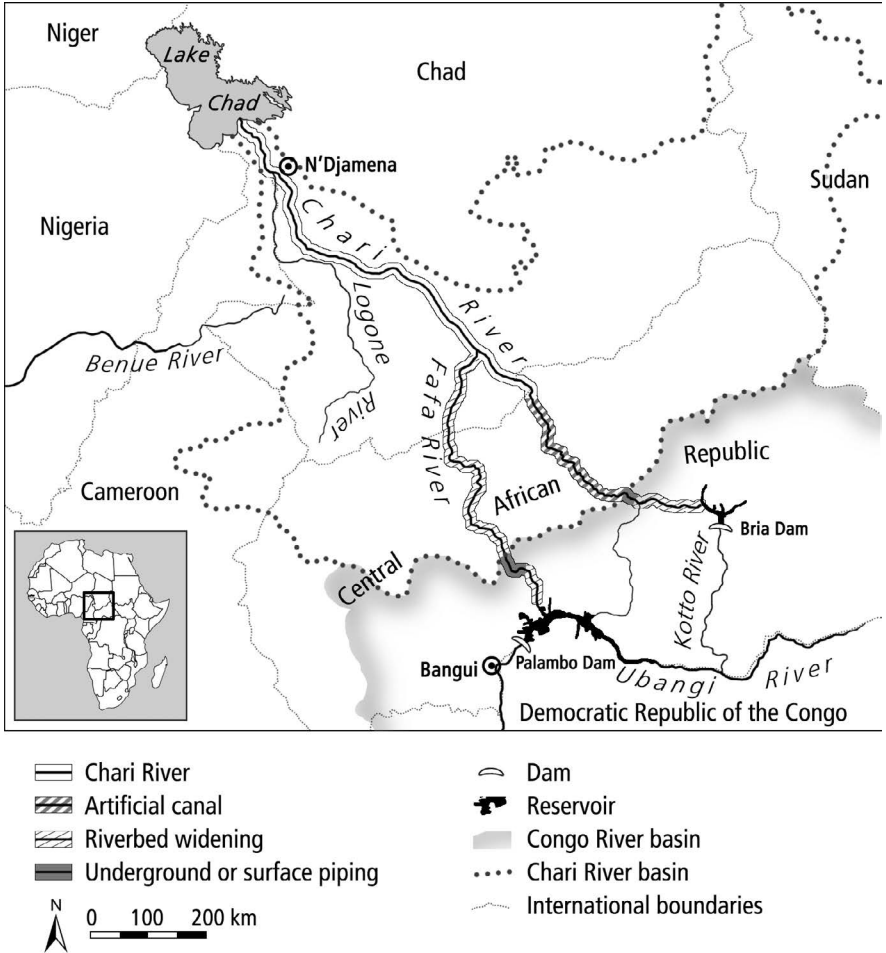


Figure 2.1 The proposed water transfer from Ubangi River to Lake Chad, as drafted by CIMA International (CIMA International, 2012, p. 23; kindly redrawn by F. Ferrarese).

Decolonising African crisis narratives?

It is perhaps past time that a counternarrative be written, critiquing not only how development is conceived but also what happens in the kitchen—the science. The current wave of decolonial analysis puts itself squarely opposed to the continuing assumption that the problems are created in the Global South and the solutions are devised in the Global North, and stands in antithesis to all contrasting elements celebrated by the hegemonic development discourse: North versus South, capitalism versus anticapitalism, patriarchy versus feminism, technocracy versus Indigenous practices, rationality versus identity and even old versus young.

This new counternarrative can also be heard in discussions on water and climate security. For example, [Khandekar et al. \(2023\)](#) decry the current “hegemonic knowledge systems, ontologies and epistemologies, underpinned by technocratic, capitalist, extractivist, and patriarchal systems” and argue that “framings, interpretations, and methods of doing water science need to emerge from, be shaped by, and ultimately serve the needs of marginalised communities from the Global South”. Relevant to the Lake Chad case discussed here, [Nagheeb and Amezaga \(2023\)](#) lambast the hydrodiplomatic initiatives in conflict areas, such as Lake Chad, all originating in the North, for taking an approach based on material interests and rationality (e.g., the Harvard school’s mutual-gains approach) rather than an identity- and equity-based strategy on negotiations. They advocate taking emotions, harms and resentments seriously. While this matter needs more thought and practical elaboration, such contributions are likely to point a way forward to different modes of conflict resolution.

Nonetheless, tensions remain. In rebutting dominant discourses, counternarratives risk reproducing its lack of nuance in some aspects, though this is understandable—after all, for a counternarrative to gain traction and have an impact, it needs to speak in the same (simple) language in order to resonate with its intended audience. There is an apparent tension between the desire to detach from liberal universalist notions and the wish to appeal to other global totalising notions of justice and sustainability. The pairing of the Global North with colonial science and the Global South with decolonial thought is another example. Not only the modernist mainstream but also the political ecologists and critical analysts exposing Eurocentric assumptions (present company included) are from the Global North themselves or, where authors are from the Global South, their ideas are often shaped in Northern institutions. It is also notable that not only are many influential decolonial authors from the Global North and at times repeat its tropes (e.g., Deborah Rose invoking resource wars as the wars of the future), but the elements of the discourse often echo critical and feminist theories, as taught at European and American universities.

To date, there is no clear consensus on what exactly constitutes “African solutions to African problems”—as unpacked by an African scholar ([Kaweesi, 2023](#)) in (you guessed it) a European journal. Questions such as “where do you speak from?” and “where do you write?” make good sense on a decolonial horizon. Even though we (the three authors of this chapter) are Westerners (by training if not by residence), it still seems useful to us to try to point out a possible direction towards the construction of alternative narratives.

Small steps towards a decolonial narrative that embraces complexity

Its elusiveness and constantly changing environmental conditions ([Bertoncin & Pase, 2012](#)) may make Lake Chad precisely the right place to imagine a different narrative. We have mentioned how dominant narratives are based on a simplification of factual complexity in order to be persuasive and thus be able to

shape policies. Hegemonic narratives are all the more dangerous the simpler they are. The extreme effectiveness of the narrative (“the shrinking lake due to climate change, leading to competition over resources and insecurity”) is evidenced by the choice of a megaproject; the high-impact option of large-scale water transfers makes it possible to conceal the strategic interests of the proponents.

The first requirement of a decolonial counternarrative would be to avoid crushing complexity. Decolonial counternarratives on the Lake Chad situation would do well to proceed right in the opposite direction: the layered articulation of times, spaces, living beings, practices and actors.

We can observe many times (temporalities) at play on different scales. The *short time*, annually, of the high and low waters of the lake is a function of the flooding of the Chari River. There is the *inter-annual variation*, with the cycles of drought and rainy years and their effect on the height of the lake’s waters. In the *long term*, the alternating advance of water and desert leaves its traces in the composition of the soils (clay and sandy) and in the geomorphology (e.g., with the dikes of the Kanem erg). These time scales are also impacted by climate change, currently expressed as an increase in rainfall, but often concentrated in extreme episodes (flash floods) (see [Chapters 3 and 7](#)).

Many spaces fit one inside another, thus identifying multiscale dimensions and transscale interactions. One cannot understand Lake Chad without reading it in relation to the desert, on the one hand, and the Sahelian belt, on the other hand. At the regional level, the lake is part of a whole set of wetlands linked to the expansion of permanent and temporary river floods throughout the vast and flat Chadian basin. On yet another scale, it is necessary to distinguish the northern from the southern basin and their shores characterised by very different forms.

Finally, the lake is an extremely complex mosaic of differentiated spaces: islands, marshes, open waters, sandy extensions of the erg from the north and constantly changing shorelines, depending on the height of the lake’s waters. All these spaces, amphibious and multiple, together open on vast horizons and close in particular niches, are teeming with living beings: insects, fish, mammals and birds; grasses, reeds and plants; and microorganisms and algae. Human communities, also differentiated and constantly reshuffling, interact with a plurality of practices in the changing temporal, spatial and living scenarios: recessionary agriculture and multiple forms of irrigation, collective and individual fishing and smoking of the catch, transhumant farming and pasture search, and mobility by water (pirogues) and by land (on foot or with Chinese motorbikes and the most varied vehicles). So many actors are interested and involved in the framework of the lake: states (but which ones and with what kinds of force and presence?), so-called traditional authorities (e.g., the sultanates, but even here, we may ask: with how much ancient heritage, colonial invention and continuous adaptation?), illegal and insurgent forces, the LCBC and international organisations, various organisations of cooperation (local and foreign NGOs), farmers’ and fishers’ associations and so on.

This, then, is the lake that is meant to be saved: both the lake itself and saving it are anything but simple. The narratives we construct and choose to embrace on saving Lake Chad should really try harder to somehow reflect this remarkable depth and the many imbrications embedded in it.

Notes

- 1 <https://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/december-2013/sahel-one-region-many-crises> (accessed September 26, 2023).
- 2 https://www.oecd.org/dac/Environmental_fragility_in_the_Sahel_perspective.pdf (accessed September 26, 2023).
- 3 Ferguson (1990) has shown the importance of policy discourses in depoliticising development problems into technical problems that can be solved by the development industry. In the process, territories are simultaneously turned into objects in need of intervention.
- 4 <https://transafricapipeline.org/> (accessed July 22, 2024).
- 5 <https://blogs.worldbank.org/water/water-security-way-out-conflict-climate-risk-trap-lake-chad-basin> (accessed September 26, 2023).

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