



CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE CHALLENGES OF DEVELOPMENT SERIES

Rethinking the Sahel: Climate, Social Capital and Knowledge

- **Nora Berrahmouni (Senior Forestry Officer for Africa, Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO))**
- **Ousseyni Kalilou (Chair of the Forest Interest Group of the Environmental Peacebuilding Association)**
- **Dr Cheikh Mbow (Director of Future Africa, University of Pretoria)**

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Summary

This side event examined critically pessimistic narratives of desertification, catastrophic climate change, and rural livelihood demise in the Sahel. It featured the participation of three leading African scientists, each with deep academic knowledge of, and policy expertise on, the Sahel. Together, they demonstrated the creativity deployed by millions of people who call the Sahel home and who have no desire to leave their region.

Professor Mbow stressed the resourcefulness of local actors while emphasizing the diversity of ecosystems, entry points, and drivers in a region known to have the most variable climate in the world. He warned against one-size-fits-all policy approaches such as cash cropping for international trade at the expense of all other forms of agriculture and food production. Land restoration coupled with equitable use of new sources of water would lead to stronger markets. Through an intelligent use of ground water, for instance, the people of the Sahel could create the socio-ecological conditions needed for the massive expansion of tree cover. Parts of the Sahel such as Mali and Senegal could, in his view, soon become net carbon sinks, generating virtuous ecological and economic cycles that would sustain rural livelihoods and benefit human development.

Ms Berrahmouni gave a historical overview of the restoration projects at the heart of the UN-backed 'Great Green Wall' and 'Support Plan for the Sahel.' She gave details of some of the projects developed with the scientific support of the FAO over the last 20 years. Focused on local knowledge, community ownership and biodiversity conservation, these projects have done much to advance our knowledge of biodiversity in the Sahel. She gave examples of the

high diversity of plant and animal species (both wild and domesticated), and landscapes. As she explained, innovative experiments in water harvesting and mechanized technology based on traditional methods have demonstrated their potential and are now ready to be rolled out on a wide scale throughout the region as a response to the population's aspirations and economic needs.

Mr Kalilou focused his talk on the complex relationship between climate change and internal displacement. Having worked for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Niger and won an award in 2019 for his research on environmental peacebuilding, he explained the importance of virtuous economic linkages between rural and urban areas in a region where fishing and agropastoral activity still produce about 36% of GDP and support 75% of jobs. He mentioned the importance of acacia trees in local livelihood systems and showed how gum arabic production could play an important role in bottom-up rural development approaches centred on the most marginalized households in areas of conflict.

The round of questions and answers that followed the presentations enabled participants to tackle further depoliticizing narratives that frame the Sahel in terms of vulnerability and resilience, or of spiralling inter-ethnic violence. Neither a disastrous space of external nature unfit for human flourishing, nor an ungovernable land where the state barely exists or could never work, the Sahel is, for its people and its scientists, a land full of opportunities and potentials.