

Interactive comment on “Climate and resource information as tools for dealing with farmer-pastoralist conflicts in the Sahel” by O. Mertz et al.

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The paper addresses a very topical and critical issue as farmer-herder conflicts in the Sahel appear to be increasing in frequency and severity – not a week goes by without the media reporting in one or other Sahelian country of clashes over water or access to pastures, or alleged crop damage often with loss of live and livestock. Increasing climate variability as a result of climate change is perceived by policy makers to be a major driver – it is widely believed that the increasingly erratic and variable climate is leading to greater scarcity of resources thus provoking greater competition which inevitably results in violence.

The paper’s recognition that while climate change may exacerbate the situation, the un-

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derlying factors of herder-farmer conflict reside in the poor resource governance and unequal power relations is a very welcome contribution. Climate variability and uncertainty are what define the Sahel – they are structural characteristics. Local farming and herding communities have institutions and strategies for integrating these characteristics into their production systems, which has always included cooperation such as milk-manure exchanges or water or crop residue and dung exchanges. In the 19th Century, the inner Niger Delta in central Mali under the Dina had a highly complex land use management systems enabling the relatively peaceful co-existence of farming, herding and fishing over the same land area. Sadly this has been progressively dismantled initially by the French when they colonized the country and then more systematically by a series of independent governments. In this sense, the underlying causes of conflict are not competition for resources as such, but the failure or inexistence of appropriate institutions for managing competition and enhancing cooperation – the paper could make this explicit.

The paper quite rightly concludes that improved access to timely and pertinent information, not only on climate and its effect on resource availability but also on other factors that underpin local producers’ production strategies and decisions (e.g. market prices), is likely to have a positive effect. The survey, though relatively small, does present some interesting information (e.g. examples of cooperation and better joint management resulting from information on water availability). A presentation of the profile of the respondents and an assessment, if possible, of their understanding of the complexities of the dynamics of Sahelian production systems would help in appreciating how the relevance of the results.

Reference is made in several places to zoning without an explanation of what this entails. Burkina Faso and northern Nigeria have created pastoral “zones” on the assumption that by giving herders their own land, it will protect it from encroachment or alienation and enable more rational production strategies based on sedentarisation and intensification. These have largely failed. Under customary systems, pastoralists

do actively manage the rangelands so as to have wet and dry season pastures, as well as protected areas for weak and young animals, especially during the dry season. This might be considered a form of “zoning”, but it is fluid and flexible where access is negotiated and reciprocal. The authors could better explain their understanding of zoning.

Overall, the paper is well-written and well-structured. The title and abstract are informative and true to the paper’s content. The authors clearly distinguish their work from others which is clearly credited.

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