

Lake Chad: Another Protracted Crisis in the Sahel or a Regional Exception?

by Bernardo Venturi and Luca Barana

ABSTRACT

Common narratives on the Lake Chad Basin often focus on the nexus between conflict, development and climate change. In particular, the Lake's situation attracts international coverage due to its shrinking size and the threat of multiple crises emanating from environmental degradation. This framework appears useful for donors and local governments, but the feedback loops among climate change, social marginalisation and conflict are not as straightforward. The problem is that the dominance of this analytical framework calls for policy response tools that are not always adequate. In the security field, the role of the Multinational Joint Task Force has been growing, but a stronger push in the sphere of governance is needed in order for it to gain legitimacy and improve its effectiveness on the ground. In the meantime, the Lake Chad Basin Commission has adopted some key policy tools to manage the natural resources in the area sustainably, but these initial steps must be followed by greater investment from Commission member states to advance implementation. An integrated regional approach remains the best way forward to tackle these complex dynamics.

Water | Sahel | Chad | Niger | Nigeria | Regional integration

keywords

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by Bernardo Venturi and Luca Barana*

Introduction: Mainstream (and oversimplified) narratives on the Lake Chad crises

The Lake Chad Basin sits at the centre of a complex web of social, humanitarian, environmental and security dynamics. The geographical space revolving around the Lake plays a significant role in the common narrative that portrays the broader Sahel as a cradle of environmental degradation, inter-communal violence, economic underdevelopment and unmanaged migration. Such a dominant perspective is challenged by a growing body of research looking at the complex interaction among the Lake's specific environmental conditions and the political initiatives adopted by national, regional and international actors active in the area.

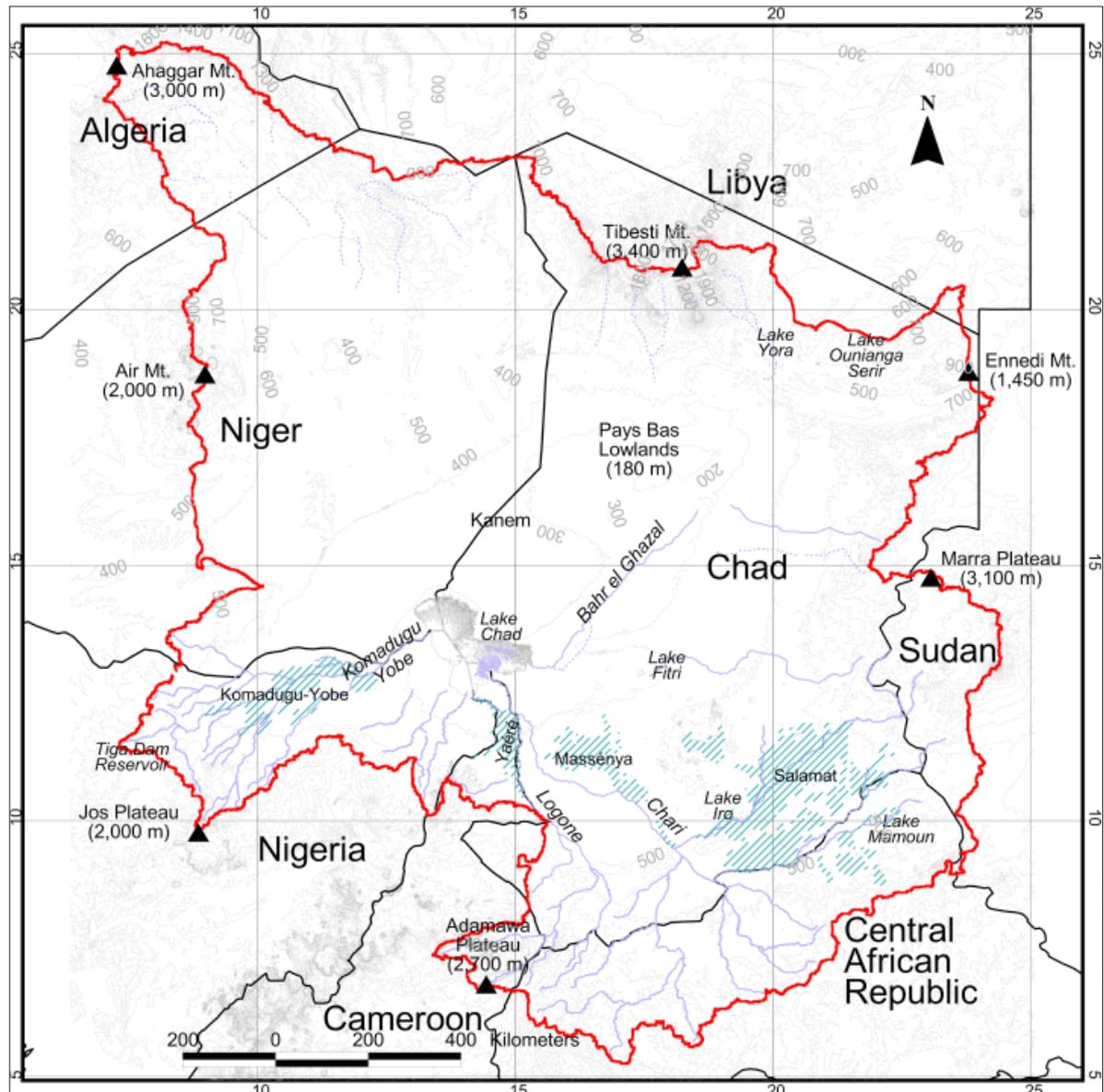
Geography matters when it comes to Lake Chad, a basin without access to the sea, located in the Sahel on the southern fringes of the Sahara Desert, straddling different climatic lines (see Figure 1). The Lake's environment has grabbed international attention due to the shrinking of the area covered by its waters: the Lake – a shallow lens of water whose depth hardly goes beyond 3–4 metres in those portions it still covers¹ – has dramatically decreased since the 1960s.

¹ Contribution by Andrea Pase in Centre for African Studies' webinar "Lake Chad: A Prospective from Different Disciplines", 9 November 2020, <https://csapiemonte.it/en/node/682>.

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Figure 1 | Extension of the Lake Chad basin and main countries concerned



Source: Frédéric Huneau, *Integrated and Sustainable Management of Shared Aquifer Systems and Basins of the Sahel Region. Lake Chad Basin*, Report of the IAEA-supported regional technical cooperation project RAF/7/011, 2017, p. 4, https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/raf7011_lake_chad_basin.pdf.

The reasons for the decrease are debated,² but some researchers describe how the area has always been affected by a significant climatic variability due to such factors as changes in rainfall patterns, rising temperatures and evaporation losses due to

² Huilin Gao et al., "On the Causes of the Shrinking of Lake Chad", in *Environmental Research Letters*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (2011), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1088/1748-9326/6/3/034021>.

the Lake's shallow depth.³ The shrinking of the body of water, which now covers only the southern component of the Lake, has been attributed in particular to the reduction in water flows from its main tributaries, like the River Chari, following a general decline in rainfall levels.⁴ The Chari, flowing from the south and being the only major tributary to the Lake, has seen its water volumes affected by an high degree of variability.⁵ Strikingly, recent studies have begun to question whether the Lake has declined over the last two decades at all.⁶

All the countries of the broader basin – Algeria, Cameroon, Libya, Niger, Nigeria, the Central African Republic, Sudan and Chad – have thus a significant interest in the management of this area, but only some of them have joined the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC), the main regional body.⁷

The management of the hydrological body and the security, social and political trends revolving around it are intrinsically transnational. As the water basin is considered a source of ecological interdependence, a conflict around the use of natural resources in one country can easily spill over into another.⁸ Furthermore, the debated origins of the Lake's current environmental context have complicated efforts to shed light on the links between climate change, the governance of natural resources, the needs of local populations and peace and security operations active in the area. In particular, the securitised approach to stabilisation apparently favoured by local governments and external partners is in peril of overshadowing much needed interventions in the fields of governance and management of natural resources.

1. Multi-layered security dynamics

Understanding the nexus between security and climate is critical to unpacking some narratives and assumptions. Violence in the Lake Chad Basin is not directly caused by climate change. However, climate change creates additional pressures on communities, further deteriorating social vulnerabilities that can fuel instability. In turn, conflict undermines the coping capacity of local populations in face of such a fragmented and complex social and environmental context. The region is

³ Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) and World Meteorological Organization (WMO), *Lake Chad-HYCOS. A Component of the World Hydrological Cycle Observing System (WHYCOS): Project Document*, October 2015, p. 6, https://library.wmo.int/index.php?lvl=notice_display&id=20506.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁵ Andrea Pase in Centre for African Studies' webinar "Lake Chad: A Prospective from Different Disciplines", cit.

⁶ Binh Pham-Duc et al., "The Lake Chad Hydrology under Current Climate Change", in *Scientific Reports*, Vol. 10, Art. 5498 (26 march 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-020-62417-w>.

⁷ The member states of the LCBC are Cameroon, Chad, Niger, Nigeria, the Central African Republic and Libya. Please refer to Section 2 for an in-depth analysis of the Commission's role.

⁸ Uke T. Okpara et al., "Conflicts about Water in Lake Chad: Are Environmental, Vulnerability and Security Issues Linked?", in *Progress in Development Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (2015), p. 308-325.

distinctly affected by multi-layered conflicts, extremist groups, insurgency and counter-insurgency.

The humanitarian situation in the Lake Chad region remains extremely critical. Violent conflicts are also one of the main drivers of vulnerability and displacement in the area: across the region, in September 2020 5.2 million people are severely food insecure and more than 2.8 million are displaced, while more than 1,100 schools have been shut due to insecurity.⁹ The local population remains vulnerable both to attacks and to forced recruitment by extremist groups like Boko Haram. Furthermore, some of the region's people have taken to criminal activities for survival, such as increasing cattle rustling. In the last years, rustling has been associated with Boko Haram which resorts to this practice for raising funds.¹⁰

Boko Haram (previously known as Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad, or JAS) is a radical Islamist insurgency founded in 2002 by Muhammed Yusuf in north-eastern Nigeria but operating also in Chad, Niger and Cameroon. Since 2009 it has carried out assassinations and large-scale acts of violence in that country. Boko Haram has associated itself with the Islamic State (ISIS)¹¹ and has taken to calling itself Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). ISWAP has capitalised local consensus as a security provider and has progressively contributed to militarising self-defence militias.¹²

The nature of ISIS's involvement in the region is not fully clear. It has agreed to Boko Haram's use of its brand and gives support through limited guidance alongside provision of equipment and funding to upgrade its military capabilities.¹³ At any rate, the relationship has been of mutual benefit. Boko Haram has received financial and logistical support, while ISIS keeps its brand alive in spite of the collapse of the territorial "caliphate" in Iraq and Syria in 2017.¹⁴ ISIS has not taken control of Boko Haram, however, although its influence may grow in the future.¹⁵ Boko Haram has killed more than 30,000 people since 2009 and continues to stage regular attacks against local populations and armed forces.

⁹ UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Lake Chad Basin: Humanitarian Snapshot (as of 16 September 2020)*, 24 September 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/node/3672967>.

¹⁰ Saheed Babajide Owonikoko, "The Key to Peace in the Lake Chad Area Is Water, Not Military Action", in *The Conversation*, 30 September 2020, <https://theconversation.com/the-key-to-peace-in-the-lake-chad-area-is-water-not-military-action-146152>.

¹¹ "Nigeria's Boko Haram Pledges Allegiance to Islamic State", in *BBC News*, 7 March 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-31784538>.

¹² Alessio Iocchi, "The Dangers of Disconnection: Oscillations in Political Violence on Lake Chad", in *The International Spectator*, Vol. 55, No. 4 (December 2020), p. 84-99, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2020.1833473>.

¹³ Vincent Foucher, "The Islamic State Franchises in Africa: Lessons from Lake Chad", in *Crisis Group Commentaries*, 29 October 2020, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/15299>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ The Global Initiative for Civil Stabilisation (GICS), *Survival and Expansion: The Islamic State's West African Province*, Abuja, GICS, April 2019, <https://divergentoptions.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/GICS-Survival-And-Expansion-of-the-Islamic-States-West-African-Province-Full.pdf>.

1.1 An integrated approach for the stabilisation of the Sahel

Lake Chad's security dilemmas cannot be addressed without dealing with issues within the broader Sahel region and beyond. For this reason, in order to manage the Boko Haram crisis, in April 2012 the countries in the Lake Chad Basin (LCB) established the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), which was launched in its current form in early 2015.¹⁶ MNJTF is composed of the four Lake Chad riparian countries (Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad and Niger) and Benin. In a previous form, MNJTF was originally established in 1994 as a political initiative of the LCBC, to check the rise in cross-border banditry in the aftermath of the Chadian civil war. Still, its operability remained very limited until 2015.

Established by the political leadership of the LCBC, the MNJTF operates under a mandate of the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council. Its total strength is around 10,000 troops and includes a civilian component. Headquartered in N'Djamena, Chad's capital, it encompasses four operational sectors.¹⁷ The task force is supposed to strengthen regional coordination and command of military operations through the provision of non-lethal equipment and services (medical services and evacuation, ground mobility, communication equipment) to national security forces. Since 2016, the European Union has been the largest donor of the MNJTF, providing support totalling around 44.7 million euro. The United States provides MNJTF with tactical and logistic support.

The joint force has achieved some tangible, yet reversible, results. For instance, in 2015–16 MNJTF operations managed to stymie the spread of Boko Haram, but in 2018 and 2019 these gains were lost. The MNJTF has since found it increasingly difficult to cope with the insurgent group, which regularly targets it. Boko Haram's deadliest attack on the MNJTF occurred in March 2020, when over 90 Chadian soldiers were killed in an MNJTF base. According to some reports, the MNJTF is now unable to prevent atrocities, such as the killing of dozens of farmers in Nigeria's Borno State in late 2020.¹⁸ Besides funding issues, member states have failed to make the kind of investment that would render the MNJTF capable of performing its tasks. Amongst the main issues of concern are the failure to define the force's priorities, problems with the transfer of command of the joint task force, and a lack of intelligence cooperation.¹⁹ Chad has been particularly frustrated by the fact that most of the fighting has fallen on its shoulders, at least in its perception. In early

¹⁶ Isaac Olawale Albert, "Rethinking the Functionality of the Multinational Joint Task Force in Managing the Boko Haram Crisis in the Lake Chad Basin", in *Africa Development*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (2017), p. 119-135, <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/ad/article/view/167098>.

¹⁷ Africa-EU Partnership website: *Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) against Boko Haram*, <https://africa-eu-partnership.org/en/node/9147>.

¹⁸ "Nigeria: Militants Kill Dozens in Attack on Farm", in *Deutsche Welle*, 29 November 2020, <https://p.dw.com/p/3lyDS>.

¹⁹ Crisis Group, "What Role for the Multinational Joint Task Force in Fighting Boko Haram?", in *Africa Reports*, No. 291 (7 July 2020), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/14439>.

2020 this resulted in Chad's unexpected withdrawal of over 1,000 troops fighting with the MNJTF in Nigeria.

The MNJTF has considerable similarities with the G5 Sahel Joint Force formed by Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Chad and Burkina Faso in 2014. The MNJTF and the G5 are both ad hoc counterterrorism task forces authorised by the AU and supported by international partners, including the EU. However, while the MNJTF achieved some tangible results in its early phase, the G5 has attained no or little progress. This is also because G5 Sahel countries scarcely have any well-functioning armed forces, with the exception of Chad. While Chad for its part does remain committed to the MNJTF and to the UN peacekeeping mission in Mali (MINUSMA), its capabilities are limited.²⁰ Instead, the MNJTF can count on stronger armies such as that of Nigeria.

Chad could thus play a role as *trait d'union* between the two forces. In spite of the authoritarian nature of his regime, Chadian President Idriss Déby Itno is considered a reliable partner by Western governments. Indeed, the long-lasting Chadian leader has played a pivotal role, along with France, in establishing the G5 Sahel and MNJTF. Chad's role poses both an opportunity and a limitation in countering terrorist threats and promoting conflict resolution in the region.

Déby will foreseeably continue to maintain Chad's military projection in the Sahel. However, Chad is one of the countries that favour security-focused strategies at the expense of efforts to tackle the structural challenges that fuel terrorism. In addition, Chad's army continues to be characterised by cases of abuse and corruption, impunity, lack of regional and ethnic diversity in command positions and ambivalent relations with the local population. The international community should urge the Chadian leadership to address these issues, which eventually may undermine the very stability of Chad itself.²¹ Yet, it is unlikely that Déby will effect significant changes with the April 2021 presidential election on his short-term agenda.

Across the Sahel, compliance with human rights standards by deployed troops is low, and the MNJTF is not sufficiently dealing with this issue. The LCBC has scant authority over the MNJTF and therefore little leeway to limit abuses. Similarly, the AU has authorised the force but has little oversight over it.²² In fact, the AU endorsed the mission to provide a legal framework indispensable to receive funds from international donors (namely the EU), but did not "mandate" it and therefore does not manage or oversee the mission. The same abuses have emerged in Western Sahel among G5 countries (in particular, Mali and Burkina Faso) and

²⁰ an Grebe, "Cooperation or Competition? Security in West Africa between ECOWAS and the G5", in *Perspective : FES Peace and Security*, December 2018, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/14998.pdf>.

²¹ Crisis Group, "Les défis de l'armée tchadienne", in *Africa Reports*, No. 298 (22 January 2021), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/16048>.

²² Ibid.

only recently – and after an investigation by MINUSMA – have some international partners publicly condemned these acts.²³ There is a severe risk that impunity, compounded by international partners turning a blind eye on the malpractices unfolding in the region, could further incentivise dysfunctional patterns on the part of security forces and political regimes in recipient countries.²⁴

Similarly to the Western Sahel, terrorist groups have taken advantage of bad governance in the Lake Chad Basin. The region remains an example of social and political marginalisation: lack of legitimacy of national governments, insufficient access to essential public services (e.g., education and health), deteriorating relations with local and customary authorities playing a key role in local governance around the Lake, and conflicts interwoven with the governance of natural resources. Out of the capitals, the state is widely perceived as a distant and hardly legitimate authority, and a tangible sense of exclusion and lack of trust is often present.

1.2 Integrating the governance sphere

Against this backdrop, the need for an integrated approach clearly emerges. First, this effort by local governments and external partners should strengthen political accountability and civilian supervision of military forces. Then, military responses to the threat posed by Boko Haram should be more balanced by other measures (e.g., governance in its domestic implications). Negative repercussions should be factored in when devising new strategies for stabilising the region, and prevented, despite possible unintended consequences in power relations between national groups, especially the army. For instance, Boko Haram has capitalised on losing livelihoods and economic woes to recruit people into its ranks. It has also worked to establish authority, improve delivery of services and encourage communities' trust in the areas it controls.²⁵ In addition, Lake Chad's countries should ensure that interventions do not aggravate climate-fragility risks, for instance through climate-fragility risk assessment.

A 2020 study conducted by the Institute for Security Studies found that large parts of civil society support dialogue with extremists, although there are many who regard such dialogue as weakness.²⁶ Dialogue between governments, armed militants and violent extremist groups should be considered a potential strategy. Numerous community organisations cited the Chibok case for the release of 276

²³ MINUSMA, *Note sur les tendances des violations et abus de droits de l'homme - 1er Janvier-31 Mars 2020*, April 2020, https://minusma.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/note_trimestrielle_sur_les_endances_des_violations_et_abus_des_droits_de_lhomme.pdf.

²⁴ Moda Dieng, "The Multi-National Joint Task Force and the G5 Sahel Joint Force: The Limits of Military Capacity-Building Efforts", in *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (2019), p. 481-501.

²⁵ Crisis Group, "What Role for the Multinational Joint Task Force in Fighting Boko Haram?", cit.

²⁶ Maram Mahdi, "Dialogue with Violent Extremist Groups: Community Perspectives in the Lake Chad Basin", in *ISS Today*, 30 March 2020, <https://issafrica.org/research/policy-brief/dialogue-with-violent-extremist-groups-community-perspectives-in-the-lake-chad-basin>.

girls as an example of a successful negotiation with violent extremists.²⁷

Finally, regional coordination through different organisations should be promoted. However, a regional approach could be efficient only if supported by the domestic level in all the countries, promoting and implementing good governance in all its forms. As discussed in the next section, different African regional organisations are potentially involved in the LCB area. The AU should promote regional learning on peace and security to advance and collect lessons learned for the whole Sahel and other sub-Saharan regions.

2. A case for regional integration

Both the trans-boundary waters of Lake Chad and the security dynamics pose transnational challenges to the countries in the area. The tightly knotted, cross-border nexus among governance, security and development calls for a regional coordinated response. The already mentioned Lake Chad Basin Commission has been the main tool identified by regional actors.

The Commission was originally established in 1964 by the four countries sharing the shores of Lake Chad. Other stakeholders in the Basin have since joined: the Central African Republic in 1996, followed by Libya in 2008.²⁸ While its main focus has been the management of water resources, other natural assets – such as newly cultivable lands – have become matter of dialogue, if not contention.²⁹ Overall, the LCBC presents an institutional structure resembling other intergovernmental African organisations, its main organs being the Summit of the Heads of States and Governments, which establishes the political direction of the Commission, and its joint implementation arm, the Secretariat. As previously discussed, during the last decade the LCBC has also increased its role in the field of peace and security through the relaunch of the MNJTF, currently framed within the African Union Peace and Security Architecture.

2.1 The LCB Water Charter and the push for infrastructure megaprojects

The main focus of the Commission remains the governance of natural resources. In 2011, it adopted a key normative tool, the Water Charter for the Lake Chad Basin.³⁰

²⁷ Maram Mahdi, "Time to Consider Talks with Boko Haram?" in *ISS Today*, 16 December 2020, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/time-to-consider-talks-with-boko-haram>.

²⁸ The main goals of the organisation are to sustainably and equitably manage the Lake Chad and other water resources of the Lake Chad Basin; to preserve the ecosystems of the Lake Chad Conventional Basin; and to promote regional integration, peace and security across the Basin. See LCBC website, *Mandate*, https://cblt.org/?page_id=9972.

²⁹ Alessio Iocchi in Centre for African Studies' webinar "Lake Chad: A Prospective from Different Disciplines", cit.

³⁰ LCBC, *Water Charter of the Lake Chad Basin*, April 2012, <https://cblt.org/?wpdmpro=water-charter-of-lake-chad-basin>.

Acknowledging that water can be a driver of conflict among states, the Charter is an ad hoc regional instrument aimed at identifying a balance between the preservation of the ecosystem and a sustainable use of water by local communities.³¹ Article 3 of the Charter states its binding nature for the signatories.³² The Charter entails the establishment by each member state of monitoring mechanisms in their respective portions of the Lake, the sharing of information and joint procedures for the approval of new projects affecting the Lake.

Beyond its thematic focus on water governance, the Charter identifies sub-regional integration and good governance as areas for further coordination. It invokes the principle of good governance for the environment to stress the need to involve local populations in the exercise of the functions of the LCBC and in the management of public resources.³³ The Charter thus reiterates the need to guarantee ownership, safeguarding the inclusion in decision-making processes of different communities within civil society and the private sector.

This appeal to ownership is even more important considering how in the past regional actors and international stakeholders have sponsored top-down infrastructure megaprojects. For instance, massive irrigation projects have been launched, aiming at exploiting the waters of the Lake so as to improve food security in the area. The South Chad Irrigation Project designed in 1972 in the Borno State of Nigeria is a prominent example of such megaprojects, whose promises have gone mostly unfulfilled. Despite only a small portion of the project being actually accomplished,³⁴ its economic and environmental consequences have nonetheless proven unsustainable.³⁵

In the same fashion, big inter-basin transfer projects have been a matter of discussion throughout the decades, also because of the involvement of external actors. The most talked about initiative has been Transaqua, a project first conceived by the Italian engineering firm Bonifacia in the 1970s. The original plan envisioned the construction of an inter-basin channel from the Congo Basin towards the River Chari in order to feed Lake Chad. The project has known various configurations over the course of the years, and has become a key topic of debate within the LCBC with the accession of the Central African Republic, which has a significant stake in the project due to its geographical position straddling the two hydrological basins of the Congo and Lake Chad. Nonetheless, the project has been heavily criticised for its harmful impact on the environment³⁶ and it does not seem to fully take into

³¹ LCBC and WMO, *Lake Chad-HYCOS*, cit., p. 12.

³² LCBC, *Water Charter of the Lake Chad Basin*, cit., art. 3.

³³ *Ibid.*, art. 7.

³⁴ Marina Bertoincin and Andrea Pase, "Interpreting Mega-Development Projects as Territorial Traps: The Case of Irrigation Schemes on the Shores of Lake Chad (Borno State, Nigeria)", in *Geographica Helvetica*, Vol. 72, No. 2 (2017), p. 243–254 at p. 248, <https://doi.org/10.5194/gh-72-243-2017>.

³⁵ Andrea Pase in Centre for African Studies' webinar "Lake Chad: A Prospective from Different Disciplines", cit.

³⁶ Alfonso Medinilla, "Understanding the International Congo-Ubangui-Sangha Commission

account the principle of ownership spelled out by the Water Charter.

2.2 The LCBC at a regional intersection: Institutional obstacles

The obstacles confronting the implementation of inter-basin projects also highlight the institutional hurdles posed to the LCBC by its peculiar geographic conformation, which sits uncomfortably within the continental integration project led by the AU. Regional integration in Africa constitutes a key component of political discourse and it is experiencing a new momentum thanks to the launch of ambitious continental projects such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). The AfCFTA, as well as other policy actions spearheaded by the AU like Agenda 2063,³⁷ is based on the recognition of eight Regional Economic Communities (RECs) at sub-regional level,³⁸ acting as building blocks for further integration. Noteworthy, the LCBC does not appear among the RECs whose role has been acknowledged by the AU. Instead, it is considered a conventional Basin authority specialised in water management, notwithstanding the fact that its focus has broadened recently.

The Lake Chad Basin sits between different sub-regions, West Africa and Central Africa, each one with its own REC, further complicating the integration of this area within the broader continental framework. Among its member states, Nigeria and Niger are members of the Economic Community of Western African States (ECOWAS), which is the recognised REC in West Africa. By contrast, Cameroon, Chad and the Central African Republic all participate in the REC of Central Africa, the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS). At the same time, all members of the Lake Chad Basin Commission with the exception of Cameroon are also members of another REC recognised by the AU, the Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD).

Not only is the LCBC not a direct stakeholder in the continent-wide integration project, but the three RECs involved have reached different stages of internal integration, with ECOWAS being the most advanced and CEN-SAD the least functional. As a consequence, it is even harder for the countries in the Lake Chad Basin to coordinate their actions, as they struggle with different normative regimes and ambiguous alignment of interests in their own sub-regional organisations, for instance on counter-terrorism.³⁹ Such obstacles emerge with strength in the

(CICOS). Going with the Flow: From Navigation to Climate Finance in Less Than 20 Years”, in *PEDRO Background Papers*, December 2017, p. 15-16, <https://ecdpm.org/?p=29698>.

³⁷ For further information on Agenda 2063, please refer to the African Union website: <https://au.int/en/node/34993>.

³⁸ Those are: Arab Maghreb Union (UMA); Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA); Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD); East African Community (EAC); Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS); Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS); Intergovernmental Authority on Development IGAD); Southern African Development Community (SADC).

³⁹ Amandine Gnanguênon, “Mapping African Regional Cooperation: How to Navigate Africa’s

trade sphere, where the low level of formal exchanges among the members of the Commission⁴⁰ does not reflect established bottom-up and informal regionalisation patterns (cross-border mobility, informal trade, movement of armed groups).

The RECs participating in – and at the same time surrounding – the LCBC can also have their own policy tools in the sphere of the governance of natural resources. ECOWAS adopted its own West Africa Water Resources Policy in 2008, following up on the provision of Article 3 of the Revised ECOWAS Treaty that mandates the harmonisation and coordination of policies on natural resources.⁴¹ While the identification of regional integration and good governance as principles governing the management of water could help devise a coordination strategy with the LCBC, the Policy itself seems to not recognise the Commission as a fellow institution, whereas it indicates other regional organisations like the Western Africa Monetary Zone (WAMZ or UEMOA) as partners.

Meanwhile, the REC of Central Africa, ECCAS, is drawn into water management especially through the Central African Republic's role and its stake in the development of inter-basin infrastructure. In particular, a specialised Central African agency, the International Congo-Ubangi-Sangha Basin Commission (commonly referred to as CICOS) received in 2005 the mandate from ECCAS to liaise with the LCBC in order to defend the interests of the countries in the Congo basin during discussions concerning the feasibility of transfer projects.⁴²

Overall, these examples of differentiated interests in the basin underline the marginalisation of the Lake Chad with respect to the key regional arrangements and pose a significant institutional challenge to the operations of the LCBC, due to the different affiliations of its member states. For instance, the dispute settlement mechanism sketched out in the LCBC Water Charter states that, when direct negotiations among the parties prove unsuccessful, the case should be brought before the Commission. If the LCBC is not able to achieve a successful mediation, "any party to the dispute may bring the case before the competent regional and sub-regional authorities".⁴³ However, the Charter does not identify which organisations must be consulted. The multiple membership patterns described above are thus in peril of hindering the functioning of a key tool at the LCBC's disposal by generating conflicting claims.

Institutional Landscape", in *ECFR Policy Briefs*, October 2020, p. 19, <https://ecfr.eu/?p=61036>.

⁴⁰ Greta Galeazzi et al., "Understanding the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC): Water and Security at Inter-Regional Crossroads", in *PEDRO Background Papers*, December 2017, p. 5, <https://ecdpm.org/?p=29760>.

⁴¹ International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), *West Africa Water Resources Policy (WAWRP). Briefing Note*, 2008, p. 2, https://www.iucn.org/sites/dev/files/content/documents/iucn_wawrp_vf.pdf.

⁴² Alfonso Medinilla, "Understanding the International Congo-Ubangui-Sangha Commission (CICOS)", cit., p. 15.

⁴³ LCBC, *Water Charter of the Lake Chad Basin*, cit., art. 88.

2.3 The LCBC mandate spread too thin

Meanwhile, more alignment between the LCBC and the relevant organisations in the peace and security field seems to be emerging through the AU's mandate to the LCBC to act as the political coordinating body of the Multinational Task Force⁴⁴ and the signing of the 2018 Regional Strategy for the Stabilisation, Recovery and Resilience of the Boko Haram-affected areas of the Lake Chad Basin Region, which also states the goal of enhancing coordination between ECOWAS and ECCAS.⁴⁵ However, the broadening of the LCBC mandate beyond its original focus on water management has met with some criticisms.

A joint audit by the national authorities of the LCBC member states has shed some light on the shortcomings of the organisation. The perplexities raised by the public accounting authorities are two-fold. First, the audit underlines how limited the national political investment has been in the implementation of actions devised by the LCBC. In particular, the regional initiatives on water management, control and information sharing have not been taken properly into account by the national strategies of member states.⁴⁶ The implementation gap – the unwillingness and/or the lack of instruments to follow up at the national level on decisions taken by the regional forums – is one of the main obstacles faced by regional integration. In this regard, the LCBC is no different from many other organisations on the continent. In the same fashion, the LCBC shares significant budgetary constraints with other African regional institutions due to delayed payments from member states. The organisation is thus heavily dependent on external donors, especially for the financing of its programmatic activities.⁴⁷

The second line of criticism refers to the broadening of LCBC ambitions in policy fields beyond its original focus on water management. This trend, which has led the LCBC to expand its policy strategies in the sphere of peace and security, has overstretched the already thin human and financial capacities of the organisation and its main implementation organ, the Secretariat. As a consequence, the strained capacities of the LCBC have been further depleted and the main goal of a sustainable joint management of the waters of Lake Chad struggles to be met. In particular, the national policies needed to implement the key provisions of the Water Charter have not been implemented at a satisfactory pace.⁴⁸ Once again, another aspect of the implementation gap emerges, as the increasing ambitions

⁴⁴ Greta Galeazzi et al., "Understanding the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC)", cit., p. 8.

⁴⁵ African Union and LCBC, *Regional Strategy for the Stabilization, Recovery and Resilience of the Boko Haram affected areas of the Lake Chad Basin Region*, August 2018, p. 10, <https://www.peaceau.org/uploads/regional-stabilisation-recovery-and-resilience-strategy-rss-.pdf>.

⁴⁶ Supreme State Audit Office of Cameroon et al., *Joint Environmental Audit on the Drying up of Lake Chad*, Bonn, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), May 2015, p. 123, <https://www.giz.de/en/downloads/giz2015-en-joint-environmental-audit-report-lake-chad.pdf>.

⁴⁷ Greta Galeazzi et al., "Understanding the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC)", cit., p. 11.

⁴⁸ Supreme State Audit Office of Cameroon et al., *Joint Environmental Audit on the Drying up of Lake Chad*, cit., p. 124.

expressed by the political leadership at the regional level have not been matched by concrete actions on the national stage.

Conclusion

Sahel and Lake Chad Basin narratives frequently point out the direct links between conflict, development and climate change. In particular, the Lake's situation attracts international coverage due to its shrinking and the perceived threat of multiple crises stemming from a difficult environmental situation. A similar framing also drives external interventions, as in peace operations and inter-basin water transfer initiatives, supported explicitly by international stakeholders.

The picture is more nuanced both in terms of conflict management and the governance of natural resources. The feedback loops among climate change, social marginalisation and conflict are not as straightforward as the dominant narratives seem to suggest, as shown by recent field research.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, this framework appears to be useful for donors, which can easily link their support for security initiatives like the G5 Sahel with the well-intentioned aim of fighting the negative consequences of climate change. Meanwhile, local governments can exploit this political discourse by avoiding responsibility for their marginalisation of fragmented areas in the Lake Chad Basin.

An integrated regional approach remains a feasible way forward to tackle these complex dynamics. Many policy tools have already been settled. In the security field, the role of the MNJTF has been growing, but a stronger push in the sphere of governance will be needed in order for it to gain legitimacy and improve effectiveness on the ground. In the meantime, the LCBC has adopted some key policy tools to manage the natural resources in the Basin sustainably, but such initial steps must be followed by an adequate political investment from member states in order to fill the implementation gap.

Whether the development of these regional structures will move in this direction remains an open question. The LCBC and the MNJTF occupy an uneasy position within the broader regional architecture. However, looking at this argument from a different perspective, one might argue that the LCBC has seen its mandate broadening exactly because it is an organisation spanning the Lake's shores, while more established institutions in the Sahel and Central Africa have a limited stake in this geographical area.

Thus, the main challenge for the future remains two-fold: on the one side, national governments will have to keep up their engagement in the organisation, providing

⁴⁹ Luca Raineri, "Sahel Climate Conflicts? When (Fighting) Climate Change Fuels Terrorism", in *EUISS Policy Briefs*, No. 20 (November 2020), <https://www.iss.europa.eu/node/2495>.

it with the necessary policy and financial tools even while avoiding steering it away from the primary goal of water governance. On the other side, the path towards the coordination of the LCBC and the MNJTF with other regional bodies, especially in the security field, will have to pragmatically consider the reality that member states will continue to choose which organisation is best suited to pursue their policy goals. No easy fix will solve this puzzle.

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