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HUMANITARIAN CRISIS IN THE LAKE CHAD REGION

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In the last forty years the Lake Chad Basin has hosted one of the gravest humanitarian crises on the African continent. The region – which includes North-Eastern Nigeria, South-Eastern Niger, Western Chad and Northern Cameroon – is affected by deep desertification processes that went through a rapid acceleration due to recurring droughts and anthropic causes, such as the mismanagement of water supplies, but it is also marked by agro-pastoral conflicts for access to natural resources, the socio-economic and political marginalization of resident communities, state fragility and hybrid governance systems, as well as the activism of armed jihadist groups. The different cleavages at the roots of the crisis have provoked intense insecurity and affected 17 million people overall: the effects of climate change, malnutrition, extreme poverty, endemic conflicts and widespread violence contribute to fuelling migratory flows of displaced persons and refugees.

The Lake's shoreline, streams of water (ouaddis), islands, floating islands (kirtas) and polders are customarily administered by traditional chiefs, while state officials are usually in charge of the land. Until recently a functional balance had been in place: fishers placed their nets not far from the shore, thereby creating a barrier behind which rich pasture lands were available both for herds to graze and, later, for farmers to cultivate their fields. Following the great flow of displaced persons in 2015, the traditional mechanisms for the resolution of conflicts and the attribution of access rights seem to have weakened, and the same happened to overall agricultural production. This is also the result of decades of mismanagement of polders and frequent disputes between traditional chiefs and local political authorities, which have led to general neglect of the region's water resources.

In the region over 2.6 million people have been displaced as a result of the insurgency

against the Nigeria-based jihadi-Salafi organisation jamā'at Ahl al-Sunna li-da'wa wa l-Jihād, commonly known through its sarcastic Hausa nickname "Boko Haram"¹[1]. The conflict and violent counter-insurgency have caused widespread destruction of vital infrastructures (hospitals, schools, roads, markets) and further intensified the levels of food insecurity and malnutrition which, after decades of political turmoil and systematic neglect in each of the four riparian countries (Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad), were already ravaging the region. Food access and earning opportunities have been thwarted by a condition of pervasive insecurity that prevents the local civilian population from farming, fishing and grazing their livestock – the main revenue-generating activities of Lake Chad. Moreover, the state of emergency declared in the riparian countries decreed the temporary closure of borders and regional markets, resulting in the doubling of food prices.

The humanitarian crisis is affecting mostly women, children and people over 60, since the vast majority of able-bodied men and teenagers are forcibly recruited or killed, both by insurgents and the army and civilian vigilante groups, while women and girls are frequently subjected to forced abductions, forced marriages and rapes. International NGOs in the region are virtually the sole providers of food (rice, beans, flour) and healthcare (medicines, medical care) for the majority of the displaced population, especially in the Nigerian state of Borno, which hosts some 1.9 million IDPs.

From 2015 the conflict progressively moved its frontline from inner Borno to the Lake's shorelines, heavily affecting the unstable ecological landscape of the Basin which, between the 1960s and 2000, experienced one of the worst decreases in rainfall recorded in the world[2]. In 2003 the area was one of the ten most water-impooverished regions of the world². The host communities are increasingly under pressure as they share their limited resources with IDPs.

The Lake Chad region faces historically rooted structural challenges, due to its history of economic marginalisation and the increasing environmental degradation, which are eroding the livelihood of farmers, herders and fishers. Socio-political grievances have exacerbated the drivers of the insurgency, reducing the resilience and coping abilities of the local civilian population."Boko Haram" has, indeed, successfully intercepted local grievances about lack of services, job opportunities and seasonal food crises and turned them into a means to recruit foot soldiers. In the process, it provided people with a channel for economic agency and extended its network throughout the wider Lake Chad region³. Profiting from the inability of local communities to access local resources, the organisation used violence to hijack trading networks, looting and obstructing the flow of livestock and food supplies⁴. This led to fur-

² IPCC-SREX, [2012: Summary for policy makers. Managing the risks of extreme events and disasters to advance climate change adaptation](#). A special report of Working Groups I and II of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Geneva.

³ 3. UNEP, Draft Desk Study Version 1 on the Lake Chad Basin. Report prepared by UNEP AEO, GIWA, UNEP DEPI, Michael, T.C and the Lake Chad Basin Commission. Department of Early Warning and Assessment (DEWA), UNEP, Nairobi, Kenya, 2003.

⁴ For a more in-depth analysis of "Boko Haram"'s appearance in Lake Chad, see A. Iocchi, "Space of Refuge, Space of War: Re-

¹ See A. Iocchi, "Boko Haram: Trans-National Flows and the Quest for an Economic Space", Annual Review of Islam in Africa, vol. 12\13, 2016; A. Iocchi, "The Boko Haram franchise and the War on Terror in Nigeria", Diritto e Questioni Pubbliche, vol. 15, no. 2, 2015, pp. 202-214.

ther competition over basic services, such as those provided by INGOs, pushing communities to accept precarious measures to meet needs, like hawking, child labour, transactional sex and, increasingly, joining the ranks of "Boko Haram".

The international response to Lake Chad's humanitarian crisis remains severely under-funded⁵, whereas regional governments do not seem to be much interested in working out a more comprehensive approach, besides their heavy-handed military reaction, to prevent a wider-scale famine, erosion of livelihoods and further displacements.

shaping Territorial Order in Lake Chad", Egypte/Monde Arabe, vol. 18, forthcoming 2018.

⁵ The classification between "lootable" and "obstructable" resources is drawn from M. Ross, "Oil, Drugs and Diamonds: How Do Natural Resources Vary in Their Impact on Civil War?", in K. Ballentine and J. Sherman, *Beyond Greed and Grievance: The Political Economy of Armed Conflict*, Boulder, Lynne Rienner, 2003. The United Nations' 2016 Plan for Lake Chad sought the basic \$71 per person in need that, compared to the \$150 of Ethiopia or \$230 for Syria, reflects the shallow response of the international donor community.