

Food Security Shocks and Political Instability: A Sub-National Analysis of the Sahel

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines food security shocks and political instability. Drawing on original data and 60 expert interviews, we find that existing policy frameworks underestimate systemic risk and overestimate institutional capacity. Technology is both part of the problem and part of the solution. The same digital tools that enable faster coordination also create new vulnerabilities, from data leaks to targeted disinformation campaigns that exploit existing social divisions. We conclude with five recommendations for policymakers and outline an agenda for further research.

1. INTRODUCTION

Not everyone shares this assessment. Some analysts contend that the risks have been overstated and that markets have already priced in most of the downside. The evidence for this more optimistic view is real, but it rests on assumptions about stability that recent events have repeatedly challenged. Local communities, meanwhile, are adapting in ways that rarely make headlines. Municipal authorities, civil-society groups and private firms have developed informal networks that in some cases respond faster than national institutions.

2. METHODOLOGY

The legal framework has struggled to keep pace. Existing rules were designed for a different era and leave significant grey areas, particularly where state and non-state actors operate in the same space or where activity crosses multiple jurisdictions.

3. FINDINGS

None of this means that a negative outcome is inevitable. But it does suggest that the window for preventive action is narrowing, and that decisions taken in the next six to twelve months will shape the landscape for much of the coming decade. Interviews with security officials suggest a growing recognition that deterrence must be paired with resilience. Hardening critical infrastructure, rehearsing crisis responses and communicating clearly with the public are no longer optional extras.

4. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The private sector has emerged as an unexpectedly important actor. Companies with global footprints increasingly find themselves making decisions with geopolitical consequences, often without clear guidance from governments.

5. CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the question is not whether the system will be tested again, but how prepared it will be when that happens. On current evidence, the answer is: better than before, but not yet good enough.