

Exploring the socioeconomic and political impacts of armed conflict in the Central Sahel region: The case study of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger

Submitted by Nomfundo Zondo

Student Number: 218036551

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School of Social Sciences, College of Humanities, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa.

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Supervised by

Dr. Sakhile Hadebe
(Supervisor)

Declaration

This dissertation is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Social Science in International and Public Affairs Cluster of the School of Social Sciences under the College of Humanities.

1. I, Nomfundo Zondo (218036551) declare that the work submitted for this research is my original work.
2. This dissertation has not been submitted for any degree or exam to other universities.
3. This dissertation has acknowledged all the sources used through in-text referencing and referencing.
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Student name: Nomfundo Zondo (218036551)

Student Signature: [redacted]

Supervisor's name: Dr Sakhile Hadebe

[redacted]

Supervisor's signature:

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge God for giving me strength to finish this degree when I felt like giving up. His mercy and grace kept me going.

Secondly, I would like to acknowledge my mom and grandmother who were also my pillar of strengths. When I ran out of data to do my research, to when I had no transport money to go to the library in town. Thank you for your prayers, for being with me, and for believing in me.

Lastly, I would like to thank my supervisor, thank you for your patience, kindness and guidance.

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this research to my late aunt, Philisiwe Prudance Zondo who loved and cared for me till her last breath. I am the person that I am today because of her; she made sure that I am up to date with current affairs ever since I was six years old. I know that she is proud of me and the woman that I have become.

Title

Exploring the Socioeconomic and Political Impacts of Armed Conflict in the Central Sahel Region: The Case Study of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger

Abstract

Ongoing armed conflict in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger has generated interlocking socioeconomic, humanitarian and political consequences, including displacement, livelihood disruption, reduced access to education and healthcare, weakened state capacity and contested political legitimacy. Although the three countries share cross-border armed-group activity and structural vulnerabilities, their national experiences differ in the scale, timing and institutional expression of these effects. This dissertation therefore compares the three cases using common indicators and treats the 2011 collapse of the Gaddafi regime in Libya as one catalyst among several interacting historical, political, socioeconomic and environmental drivers.

This qualitative desktop study analyses secondary documentary evidence published between 2012 and May 2026. It applies a comparative case-study design, a transparent source hierarchy and structured thematic analysis to examine displacement, agricultural production, food insecurity, education, healthcare, ethnic marginalisation, resource governance, political legitimacy, state capacity and international intervention. Conflict theory is used to identify how unequal power and competition may create grievances and opportunities for mobilisation, while structural violence theory explains how institutions and unequal social arrangements produce indirect and cumulative harm. The findings show substantial regional convergence but also meaningful country differences and important evidence gaps, particularly for Niger. The study concludes that conflict effects arise through the interaction of armed violence with pre-existing governance, inequality, climate and institutional constraints; it therefore recommends sequenced, actor-specific and evidence-based responses rather than uniform regional prescriptions.

Abbreviations

ACLED: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project

AFISMA: African-led International Support Mission in Mali

AU: African Union

ECOWAS: Economic Community of the West African States

EIILIR: European Institute for International Law and International Relations

EU: European Union

ICRC: International Committee of the Red Cross

IFRC: International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

ISGS: Islamic State in the Greater Sahara

ISSP: Islamic State Sahel Province, the designation commonly used for the successor to the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara in the tri-border region.

ISWAP: Islamic State West Africa Province, an Islamic State affiliate operating primarily in the Lake Chad basin.

JNIM: Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin, an al-Qaeda-affiliated coalition of non-state armed groups active across Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger.

MINUSMA: United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali

UN: United Nations

UNOWAS: United Nations Office for the West Africa and the Sahel

UNSC: United Nations Security Council

US: United States of America

Glossary

Al-Qaeda: A transnational militant Islamist organisation that operates through regional affiliates; in this dissertation the term is used only where the cited source identifies an organisational relationship in the late 1980s, it operates through regional affiliates.

Ansar Dine: A Mali-based armed Islamist organisation that participated in the 2012 northern Mali conflict and sought to impose its interpretation of Islamic law.

Boko Haram: A Nigeria-origin armed Islamist organisation whose operations and splinter networks have affected parts of the Lake Chad basin, including south-eastern Niger.

Dogon: An ethnolinguistic community concentrated mainly in central Mali and commonly associated with farming livelihoods; the term does not imply political or organisational uniformity, and they are known for their rich cultural traditions.

Fulani: A diverse, transnational ethnolinguistic population across West and Central Africa, many but not all of whom practise pastoral or agro-pastoral livelihoods.

G5 Sahel: A regional cooperation framework established by Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger to coordinate development and security policies.

ISSP: Islamic State Sahel Province, the designation commonly used for the successor to the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara in the tri-border region.

ISWAP: Islamic State West Africa Province, an Islamic State affiliate operating primarily in the Lake Chad basin.

JNIM: Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin, an al-Qaeda-affiliated coalition of non-state armed groups active across Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger region and in the broader Sahel.

Jihadism: In this study, an analytical label for armed organisations that justify political violence through a militant Islamist ideology; it is not used as a description of Islam or Muslim communities generally.

Katiba Macina: A JNIM-affiliated armed group operating mainly in central Mali and drawing part of its support from Fulani communities without representing Fulani people as a whole.

Liptako-Gourma: The cross-border zone linking parts of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger that has become a major focus of armed-group activity, displacement and regional security operations.

Operation Barkhane: A French-led regional counterterrorism operation launched in 2014 as the successor to Operation Serval. Serval aimed at combating jihadist groups across the Sahel.

Operation Serval: A French military intervention launched in Mali in 2013 in response to the advance of non-state armed groups.

Tuareg: A transnational Amazigh population in the Sahara and Sahel; some Tuareg movements participated in the 2012 rebellion in northern Mali, but the community is politically diverse.
rebellion in northern Mali in 2012.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Located in the Sahel region of Africa, the Central Sahel has been plagued by persistent armed conflict and instability over the past decade. Connected by the Liptako-Gourma border area, the three Central Sahel states are faced with armed conflict, which is a result of the 2011 collapse of the Gaddafi regime in Libya (Centre for Preventive Action, 2026). The collapse of the Gaddafi regime in Libya gave rise to the Tuareg rebellion in Northern Mali in January 2012, driven by the influx of rebels and the proliferation of weapons from Libya (Zhambikov, 2022; EIILIR, 2023). In turn, the Tuareg rebellion triggered broader conflicts, involving jihadist groups, state forces, and ethnic militias (Thurston, 2024). Armed conflict in Mali spilled to Burkina Faso and Niger, causing regional instability and conflict that has lasted for more than a decade (Nsaibia, 2026). All the countries, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger are experiencing armed conflict, which includes intercommunal violence and jihadist insurgencies driven by non-state armed groups such as the JNIM, ISSP, and ISWAP (Nsaibia, 2026). The rise of these jihadist groups has further intensified violence conflict and destabilised the entire Central Sahel region and its neighbouring countries (Thurston, 2024). These conflicts are driven by ethnic, communal, and self-defence militias, such as Burkina Faso's VDP, state forces, and mercenaries such as Russia's Wagner Group (Nsaibia, 2026). Across Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, there is a long-standing shared institutional fragility, limited state presence in some regions, especially in rural areas, weak governance, and insecure borders (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2025). The Central Sahel region has further witnessed repeated military coups, exacerbating governance disruptions and insecurity (Thurston, 2024). Each country also faces distinct challenges that contribute to armed conflict.

Mali's ongoing armed conflict, which began in 2012, is a result of both the collapse of the Gaddafi regime in Libya as well as long-standing separatism. Mali has been involved in various armed conflicts against non-state armed groups that are operating on its territory (War Watch, 2026). Armed conflict is also deeply rooted in the combination of weak state institutions, ethnic and religious tensions, and the government's limited control over the peripheral (War Watch, 2026). Mali's armed conflict is further linked to unresolved spillover effects from past conflicts, regional marginalisation of the north, and grievances stemming from persistent political and economic marginalisation (Bakrania, 2013). Ineffective governance and corrupt state officials also contributed to Northern Mali's crisis (Bakrania, 2013). Armed conflict in Mali is driven by the ISSP, JNIM, and Tuareg Separatist groups, whose main objective is to reject the Sahelian

government's authority and impose their Islamic laws on the population they already influence (War Watch, 2026). As a result of armed conflict in Mali, several coup d'etat has taken place, the coup leaders citing the government's failure to mitigate armed attacks by non-state armed groups (Centre for Preventive Action, 2026). The first coup d'etat occurred in 2012 during the rebellion, where President Amadou Toumani Touré was overthrown (Centre for Preventive Action, 2026). The second coup took place in August 2020, whereby President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita was overthrown by General Goita (BBC, 2025). However, General Goita handed power over to an interim government, which was to oversee the transition to elections in 18 months (BBC, 2025). Poor performance of the civilian government led to the May 2021 coup d'etat by General Goita, resulting in a change in Mali's democratic regime to military rule to date (BBC, 2025).

Burkina Faso's conflict intensified after violence spread from Mali and armed groups expanded from the north into other regions (Haavik et al., 2022; Nsaibia, 2024). The Solhan massacre occurred on 4-5 June 2021, not in 2022, and killed at least 130 people according to contemporaneous reporting. Structural drivers include declining trust in state institutions, intercommunal tensions, political exclusion and competition over land and gold, while JNIM and Islamic State-linked organisations have competed for influence and territory (Haavik et al., 2022; Interpeace, 2023; Giannopoulos, 2023). By late 2024, an estimated 30% of the territory was under jihadist-group control, while other assessments described a substantially larger contested area; the dissertation therefore reports the date and source rather than presenting the figure as an undated current fact (African Center for Strategic Studies, 2025). Two military coups occurred in 2022: Lieutenant-Colonel Paul-Henri Damiba overthrew President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré in January, and Captain Ibrahim Traoré overthrew Damiba in September, each invoking the deteriorating security situation (Transparency International Defence & Security, 2024).

In Niger, as of February 2026, there have been armed attacks led by a non-state armed group, the ISSP, which launched an attack at Niamey's international airport and caused destruction at the military bases (Serwat et al., 2026). Niger has been experiencing jihadist insurgencies since 2018 and also saw an increase in violence in 2021 (Birru, 2023). Armed conflict is characterised by structural factors which include ethnic and religious divisions, and socioeconomic grievances such as unemployment and poverty (OMSAC Press & Media Department, 2023). Competition for power, influence and control over natural resources such as grazing land and water, governance crises and the political marginalisation of some groups such as the Fulanis further contributed to Niger's armed conflict (OMSAC Press & Media Department, 2023).

These conflicts are led by rebel groups and militant organisations such as the JNIM and ISSP who also operate in Mali and Burkina Faso, ISWAP and Boko Haram, security agencies and state forces (Birru, 2023; OMSAC Press & Media Department, 2023). Similar to Burkina Faso and Mali, a military coup took place in July 2023 in Niger, where the presidential guard General Abdourahmane Tchiani overthrew President Mohamed Bazoum (Birru, 2023). The military junta also cited the deteriorating security situation in Niger, as well as the need to retake territory under the control of non-state armed groups (Birru, 2023). However, it has been argued that the military coup created a fertile ground for rebellion and also fuelled conflicts (OMSAC Press & Media Department, 2023).

1.2 Research Problem

Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger continue to experience interconnected but nationally differentiated armed conflicts (Nsaibia, 2024). The effects extend beyond battlefield outcomes to displacement, livelihoods, access to services, political legitimacy and the state's capacity to govern. Existing studies provide substantial country-level evidence, but few apply a common comparative framework across all three countries, use the same outcome indicators and distinguish legitimacy from state capacity, stability and territorial control. Niger is especially underrepresented in scholarship on local resource governance and legitimacy. The study addresses this specific comparative and conceptual gap by applying conflict theory and structural violence theory to common socioeconomic and political indicators and by identifying both convergent and conflicting evidence across the three cases.

1.3 Preliminary Literature Study and Reasons for Choosing the Topic

1.3.1 Causes of Armed Conflict

Armed conflict in the Central Sahel is shaped by interacting cross-border, political, socioeconomic and environmental factors. The 2011 collapse of the Gaddafi regime and Libyan state contributed to weapons flows and the return of armed personnel, but it did not mechanically cause subsequent violence. Its effects interacted with weak governance, poverty, political exclusion, resource disputes, climate pressures and the strategic mobilisation of grievances by armed actors (Idahosa and Bakare, 2020; Thurston, 2024). The principal parties include state armed forces, non-state armed groups, community-based militias and foreign security actors; civilians are affected parties and sometimes mobilised actors but should not be treated as a homogeneous conflict party.

1.3.2 Socioeconomic Impacts of Displacements and Disrupted Livelihoods

1.3.2.1 Effects on Agricultural Production

Armed conflict such as terrorism, jihadist insurgencies and armed attacks, has had dire consequences on the economy and communities in conflict-affected areas. This is evident in the study by Wendata A. Kafando and Takeshi Sakurai (2024), which used a conceptual framework rooted in a modified individual farm production and cost function. Kafando and Sakurai (2024) argued that in Burkina Faso, terrorist violence has been linked with the cereal crop decline due to the displacement of farmers. A study supporting the aforementioned further highlighted the effects of armed conflict on agricultural production and food security (Tangara, 2024). Tangara (2024) argued that the agricultural sector, which contributes close to 30% on the Gross Domestic Product in Mali, has been decreasing due to armed conflict since 2012. Tangara (2024) further argued that armed conflicts have disrupted local production processes, reduced consumption patterns, and hindered economic exchange. This had a major impact on local labour markets and informal economies, due to restrictions on agricultural practices and displacement (Tangara, 2024). The above reflects how armed attacks by non-state armed groups affect both the economies and the populations of the countries in the Central Sahel region. These can also lead to food insecurity and malnutrition, as disruptions to agricultural production and labour markets often raise food prices.

1.3.3 The effects of armed conflicts on political legitimacy and state governance

1.3.3.1 Impacts on Political legitimacy and governance

Across three countries, armed conflict has affected state governance and political legitimacy. For instance, in Mali, a report by the Bertelsmann Stiftung (2024) indicated that violence and instability continued to pose the greatest threats to the country's democracy and liberal market economy. The report further indicated that terrorist attacks carried out by the Katiba Macina in the central region created civil conflicts between ethnic communities (BTI, 2024). This led to the weakening of Mali's social fabric, as armed groups also acted as interest groups in areas where trust in the government is low, as reported by the BTI (2024). In support of the aforementioned, a study by Yahia Zoubir (2022) highlighted that ethnic tensions and resource conflicts exacerbate the already poor governance and political instability in the Sahel region, particularly in Mali. Similarly, in Burkina Faso, Alexandra Tapsoba et al. (2024) argued that ethnic tensions, which non-state armed groups exploit, have led to Burkina Faso being viewed

as a nation without central authority or national unity, and as a collapsed state. Whereas, in Niger, Joseph Chinedu Ofobuike (2025) indicated that ethnic tensions, which partly contributed to the 2023 coup, challenged the state's legitimacy and led to unequal access to power. Therefore, the above argument reflects how armed conflict and its actors, such as the non-state armed groups, exploit intercommunal and resource conflicts. These groups further undermine the government's legitimacy by fuelling conflicts into violent conflicts and destabilising the entire Central Sahel region.

1.3.4 The role and effectiveness of international interventions in addressing armed conflict in the region

1.3.4.1 Interventions implemented in the Central Sahel by international organisations

In mitigating armed conflict and the presence of non-state armed groups in the Central Sahel, the international community implemented interventions. Bagayoko (2024) argued that, in addressing armed conflicts in Mali, the United Nations deployed a peacekeeping mission, MINUSMA. This was a way to support the stabilisation of the country and political processes (Bagayoko, 2024). However, some military interventions are ineffective, especially when implemented without addressing the root causes. Evidently, Bagayoko (2024) argued that these initiatives were ineffective because they did not address the main causes of armed conflict in the region, such as governance failures, corruption, and poverty.

On the other hand, Mbianda (2024) argued that the ECOWAS also took measures to enforce sanctions, including the withdrawal of diplomatic recognition, the suspension of foreign aid, and the imposition of embargoes. The ECOWAS's measure was a response to the military coups that took place in all three countries as a response to jihadist insurgencies (Mbianda, 2024). It was also to curtail the power of the coup leaders and accelerate a return to constitutional rule (Mbianda, 2024). Similar to Niagale Bagayo's argument, Mbianda (2024) also argued that these interventions were ineffective and were viewed as a violation and an act of intimidation of the region's supreme authority. This was argued by the military juntas of the Central Sahel, leading to their withdrawal from the ECOWAS and the formation of the defence task force, the Alliance of the Sahel States (Mbianda, 2024). Although efforts to mitigate armed conflict have failed, the United Nations Refugee Agency has assisted thousands of forcibly displaced people in Burkina Faso by providing shelter (EIILIR, 2023).

1.4 Research Questions: Key Questions to be Asked

1. What are the causes and parties to conflicts in the Central Sahel region?
2. What were the socioeconomic impacts of displacements and disrupted livelihoods caused by armed conflict in the Central Sahel region?
3. How did armed conflict affect political legitimacy and state governance in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso?
4. What role did international interventions play in addressing armed conflict in the region?

1.5 Research Objectives

The objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To explore the causes and parties to conflicts in the Central Sahel region.
2. To examine the socioeconomic impacts of displacements and disrupted livelihoods caused by armed conflict.
3. To investigate the effects of armed conflict on political legitimacy and governance in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso.
4. To assess the role and effectiveness of international interventions in addressing armed conflict in the region.

1.6 Significance of the Study

The study's contribution is analytical rather than merely descriptive. It compares Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger over a common period and across the same socioeconomic and political indicators; distinguishes political legitimacy from state capacity, stability and territorial control; and specifies the mechanisms through which unequal power, institutional exclusion and armed mobilisation translate into direct and structural harm. This comparative framework enables the study to identify regional patterns, country differences, contradictory evidence and gaps in the available documentation. The findings can therefore assist national governments, regional organisations and humanitarian actors to design responses that are tailored to the mechanism and outcome identified rather than assuming that one intervention will have equivalent effects across all three cases.

1.7 Limitations of the Study

Given that this is a desktop study, data was collected on documents such as reports, academic journals, and online articles, some of which, especially government reports, were written in French. There was a language limitation: government documents could not be translated, and

those that were translated were not certain they were translated correctly. There was also limited Nigerien data, particularly on the impacts of ethnic tensions and resource conflicts on governance and legitimacy. Lastly, there were also geographical and funding limitations, which led to the study being a desktop study and failing to reflect the realities of conflict-affected communities adequately.

1.8 Structure of Dissertation

The Dissertation will have the following chapters:

Chapter 1: Introduction/Background- This chapter will introduce the research problem and clearly define the study's research question. It will then explain the significance of the topic and its contribution. Relevant theories, the research methodology, and the research design will be introduced to guide and inform the study. Furthermore, this chapter will outline the study's key assumptions and the limitations it may face. The study's contributions to regional policy and international relations will be highlighted.

Chapter 2: Literature Review- This chapter will review and analyse the existing literature that is related to the research questions. It will then identify gaps that were not fully addressed by the previous studies. It will further look at the weaknesses and strengths of the existing literature. A narrative analysis will be used to connect and combine the literature.

Chapter 3: Theoretical and Conceptual Framework- This chapter will introduce two theories that the study will use and give an in-depth explanation of these theories. It will further explain the relevance of the theories to the research objectives and questions. Furthermore, key concepts that will be used in the study will be introduced and defined. The interconnection relation between the concepts and the theories will also be discussed.

Chapter 4: Research Methodology- This chapter will explain the research methods that the study will use, which is the qualitative research method. It will explain in detail the techniques and tools that the study will employ in the collection of data. It will explain the analysis methods that will be used in analysing the data found.

Chapter 5: Research Findings and Data Analysis: This chapter will present the main findings from data collection and utilize a combination of tables and texts in presenting the data, because this is a secondary resource-based study. There will also be a description of how the data findings relate to the theoretical as well as the conceptual framework. The existing literature will be compared to the study's findings, and a comparison of the study's findings with other similar studies will also be discussed in this chapter.

Chapter 6: Conclusions and Recommendations- This chapter will summarise the main arguments and the findings of each research objective. It will put an emphasis on the most important findings of the study and further explain the study's contribution to the existing body of knowledge. Recommendations will be offered for practical applications, such as measures that can be more effective in mitigating the impacts of armed conflict in the Central Sahel region by the regional and international organisations, as well as for future research.

1.9 Conclusion

This chapter introduced the background information of the study as well as the research problem. It further reviewed existing literature in relation to the study's research problem and objectives. Research questions, objectives, the study's significance, and its limitations were further explored. Lastly, this chapter introduced the structure of the dissertation. Therefore, the following chapter will review the literature, identify gaps, and discuss how this study intends to address them.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The Sahel region is faced with political instability, weak leadership, and the resurgence of military coups (Akinola and Ramontja, 2023). The Central Sahel region, which is part of the Sahel region, however, only consists of three countries, Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, and is faced with armed conflicts which have had socioeconomic and political impacts. This chapter reviews the existing literature on the causes, socioeconomic impacts, governance effects, and international responses to armed conflict in the Central Sahel region. It reviews the existing literature on themes related to the research objectives and research questions. Firstly, it explores the causes and perpetrators of armed conflict in the Central Sahel region. Secondly, it examines the socioeconomic impacts of displacement and disrupted livelihoods caused by armed conflict. Thirdly, it investigates the effects of armed conflict on political legitimacy and state governance in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. Lastly, it assesses the role and the effectiveness of international interventions in addressing armed conflict in the Central Sahel region.

2.2 Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This section introduces and explains human security theory, social inclusion theory and the fragility dilemma. It further explains how these approaches guide the analysis of armed conflict in the Central Sahel region.

2.2.1 Explanation of Theories

The human security theory was introduced in 1994 by the United Nations Development Programme (Shinoda, 2004). It argued that, to tackle global security, ensuring freedom from want and fear for all individuals was the best measure (Shinoda, 2004). Human security is concerned with protecting individuals from both violence and threats to their overall development (Vejnovic and Obrenovic, 2023). It is based on seven dimensions, including economic security, food security, health security, environmental security, personal security, community security, and political security (Lusiani and Nisadina, 2024). Whereas the social inclusion theory emerged in the 1970s and 1980s from the work of Rene Lenoir (Huxley, 2022). Social inclusion involves improving the conditions for including disadvantaged individuals and groups in society's activities (World Bank Group, n.d.). The process of social inclusion enhances social bonds and opportunities for social participation and ensures unbiased access

to decision-making (Tan et al., 2025). It believes that the exclusion of these groups and individuals may lead to social tensions, increasing the risks of conflict and violence, with long-term economic and social impacts (Reyes et al., 2018).

On the other hand, the fragility dilemma argues that fragile states desperately seek international assistance to stabilise (Osland and Erstad, 2020). However, these states have limited absorptive and institutional capacity, leading to ineffective management of international assistance (Osland and Erstad, 2020). The fragility dilemma manifests in two interconnected ways: first, fragile states desperately require international assistance, yet they are the most difficult to assist due to governance instability and weak institutions (Osland and Erstad, 2020). Secondly, "power hierarchies and dynamics are not always what they seem" (Osland and Erstad, 2020:20). Those in power are aware of the fragility of their country and the country being a top priority on the international security agenda, as well as the international donors being dependent on their country (Osland and Erstad, 2020).

2.2.2 Application of Theories

The human security theory, using its seven dimensions, was used to analyse food insecurity in Burkina Faso resulting from growing conflict (Lusiani and Nisadina, 2024). Social inclusion was used to analyse the impact of armed conflict on the forced migration crisis, revealing that government measures regarding IDPs did not yield the expected results (Targba, 2022). It further revealed that the basic needs of the forcibly displaced are not met and that they are excluded by host communities (Targba, 2022). The fragility dilemma, on the other hand, was used to analyse international assistance to fragile states, particularly in the Sahel region. Due to the fragility dilemma, the security situation in the Sahel region continues to deteriorate despite increased international assistance (Osland and Erstad, 2020). It also led to a division between a people-centric transnational and a state-centric regional security situation (Osland and Erstad, 2020). Human security, social inclusion and the fragility dilemma serve as supporting perspectives in this chapter. They help organise the review of threats to people, patterns of exclusion and institutional vulnerability, while conflict theory and structural violence theory remain the principal analytical frameworks developed in Chapter Three.

2.3 The Causes and Parties to Armed Conflict

This section reviews the main arguments provided in the literature on the causes of armed conflict in the Central Sahel and reveals the key parties involved. Armed conflict is defined as

organised and violent confrontations between two or more state or non-state actors (Bizău and Stănciulescu, 2022). Factors such as the government's inability to provide good governance, basic needs, and the protection of the citizens are some of the causes of armed conflict. Exclusion of some of the elite to exercise power in a state, inequalities between social groups, mismanagement of funds, economic decline, and human rights violations also lead to armed conflict (Bizău and Stănciulescu, 2022). Scholars indicate that competition over scarce natural resources, including gold and other minerals, is linked with the struggle for political power, fueling armed conflict (Bizău and Stănciulescu, 2022). Drawing on the ABM AfriLand-Rebel Model, Idahosa and Bakare (2020) reveal how the 2011 collapse of the Gaddafi regime in Libya contributed to the outbreak of conflict in northern Mali in 2012, which later spilled over into Burkina Faso and Niger. The ABM Modelling-AfriLand-Rebel approach holds that instability in another state may spill over into neighbouring states with shared borders and interconnected economic, political, and social relationships, whether rooted in government or people's identities (Idahosa and Bakare, 2020). They further argued that the fall of the Gaddafi regime led to an increase in militant groups, smugglers, rebel groups, refugees, and a rise in Islamic group violent activities in the Sahel region (Idahosa and Bakare, 2020).

The fall of Gaddafi's rule triggered the conflict in Mali. Mali's economy and security largely depended on Gaddafi, as he played a vital role in supporting its economy and that of Niger. He also played a role in bringing peace between the two governments and the Tuareg rebels through a 2009 peace agreement (Idahosa and Bakare, 2020). The reviewed study used the ABM Modelling-AfriLand Rebel approach to identify the causes of armed conflict in the Sahel region, including the 2011 Libyan uprising and its spillover into Mali. Using this approach in future studies may help reveal more causes of conflict across the region and in Africa as a whole. Adeoye O. Akinola and Naledi Ramontja (2023) also argued that the collapse of the Gaddafi regime in Libya, along with the violent conflict, is linked to the insecurity in the Sahel region. Furthermore, they argued that the transfer of weapons, armed fighters, and ammunition from Libya to Mali fueled and strengthened the Tuareg rebellion (Akinola and Ramontja, 2023).

Both studies by Idahosa and Bakare (2020) and Akinola and Ramontja (2023) suggest that the 2011 collapse of the Gaddafi regime in Libya as the primary cause of the Sahel armed conflict. This perspective is compelling in showing the spread of instability across the Sahel region. However, it is also important to examine internal factors that contributed to armed conflict in

Sahel countries, such as weak institutions, state capacity deficits, economic and political instability, and unemployment and poverty. These internal factors also contribute to the ongoing armed conflict in the region, as discussed below. In addition, Akinola and Ramontja (2023) argued that limited resources, such as land, have also contributed to armed conflict, thereby revealing other causes of armed conflict in the region.

2.3.1 Limited Resources

The study uses conflict theory to interpret the causes of armed conflict. The conflict theory posits that a society is composed of social groups competing over limited resources and power, that conflict is inevitable and part of social life (Hayes, 2024). Evidently, Dr Naz and Saleem (2024) argued, using an interdisciplinary approach, that the causes of armed conflict in the region are also due to resource scarcity. This is due to climate change and political, economic, and social inequalities, which also exacerbate conflict (Naz and Saleem, 2024). Competition over land and water resources in Mali is the primary cause of armed conflict, which involves armed organisations and ethnic groups (Naz and Saleem 2024). It is further argued that conflicts in the region occur in areas with scarce resources. For example, the rise of the Tuareg occurred in the Northern part of Mali, where concerns over resource distribution, due to the unavailability of water and land for crop cultivation, led to competition between farmers and armed conflict (Naz and Saleem, 2024). Supporting these causes of armed conflict, an article by Adam Dieng (2022) argued that limited access to water and land resources, which are also scarce and insufficient to meet the needs of a growing population, has led to competition between herders and farmers.

Adama Dieng (2022) further argued that competition arises when herders use movement routes that were traditionally used for farmland, while farmers expand their agricultural activities into areas historically designated for livestock migration. He argued that the competition led to violent clashes between farmers who cultivated the land and herders who crossed borders to graze their cattle (Dieng, 2022). The violent clashes between the farmers and herders in turn resulted to over 15,000 casualties in the past decade and half of 15 000 over the past three years (Dieng, 2022). He further argued that competition over scarce resources may be identified as the root of armed conflict in the Sahel region (Dieng, 2022). Similar to Dr Naz and Saleem's argument, resource competition was fuelled and used by armed terrorist groups to drive recruitment into their forces (Dieng, 2022). In support of land as a cause of armed conflict in the Sahel region, Akinola and Ramontja (2023) argued that in countries such as Mali and

Nigeria, conflict over land and land production led to the clashes of farmers and herders, and it has resulted in the loss of lives, casualties and the destruction of farmlands.

Studies by Dr Naz and Saleem (2024) and Akinola and Ramontja (2023) offer insights into the conflict dynamics in Mali and Nigeria, one of the countries the study focuses on. However, focusing on only one country in the region, which is as vast as the Sahel, especially in a study that focuses only on Mali, limits the ability to capture broader regional interconnectedness and patterns of conflict across countries. Therefore, to offer a comparative perspective, this study will focus on the three Central Sahel countries, Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. This will help highlight their shared drivers of armed conflict and country-specific differences, thereby extending the scope of the existing literature. Taken together, the aforementioned studies illustrate how conflict theory explains competition over limited resources, how it leads to conflicts, and how it escalates to violent conflict when exploited. Although limited resources lead to armed conflict, it is important to note that social and political factors also contributed to armed conflict in the region.

2.3.2 Social and Political Factors

Armed conflict is also a result of political and social factors such as weak governance and inequality. The structural violence theory argues that institutional and systemic inequalities and exclusions harm individuals and social groups, and, if left unaddressed, may lead to conflict. Social and political factors, such as poor governance, inequality, and poverty, can lead to armed conflict (Bizău and Stănciulescu, 2022). Ethnic tensions, mismanagement of natural resources and land, poor governance, worsening poverty, and economic decline led to instability in the region, argued Idahosa and Bakare (2020). Dieng (2022) also argued that the lack of trust between different armed groups, inequalities among people, such as the unequal distribution of natural resources (land, water, and environmental factors), and climate change led to conflict. For example, in Northern Mali, after Mali's independence, there was a rise in rebellions by different ethnic groups against the government due to inequalities and economic disparities (Dieng, 2022). It is argued that these inequalities also led to the collapse of the central government and to citizens supporting armed and communal defence groups (Dieng, 2022). Together, these studies suggest that structural factors such as inequality, weak governance, poverty, and economic instability are among the causes of armed conflict, as is evident in some parts of the region.

Evidently, Signe Marie Cold-Ravnkilde and Boubacar Ba (2022) indicated that armed conflict in the Sahel region results from a combination of weak state control, armed groups exploiting local grievances, and disputes over natural resources. These disputes are worsened by changes in land use and power structures, economic and social exclusion, and the unintended effects of security-focused measures (Cold-Ravnkilde and Ba, 2022). Corruption by government officials and the elites who hold power, injustices that have long existed, and insecurity in the region caused by the presence of armed actors are also argued to be causes of armed conflict (Cold-Ravnkilde and Ba, 2022). They further argue that the inability and unwillingness of state and local institutions to establish effective, resourceful governance and conflict-resolution mechanisms have allowed armed groups to take advantage of the situation (Cold-Ravnkilde and Ba, 2022). Armed groups have therefore exploited the grievances of the citizens due to the government's failure to protect its citizens and the ongoing conflict over natural resources, which are water and land.

Akinola and Ramontja's (2023) study also supports Signe Marie Cold-Ravnkilde and Boubacar Ba's (2022) report, as it argues that the state's authority weakness in the region may have led to the conflict. The study argued that the representation of government and its absence in some communities in the region created an opportunity for armed groups to operate freely and establish themselves in those communities (Akinola and Ramontja, 2023). It further indicated that the violent conflict in the Sahel region stems from territorial disputes, access to government resources, power, and land (Akinola and Ramontja, 2023). This study therefore argues that armed conflict, such as jihadist insurgencies, terrorism and ethnic conflicts, is a result of social, ethnic, political and environmental factors. This is evident in a report by Michael DeAngelo (2025) when he argued that weak governance and ethnic tensions between the Fulani, which is a Muslim ethnic group and the Mossi and Dogon groups over limited resources such as land, are the sources of insurgencies that are taking place in the region. Collectively, the studies reveal how structural violence theory argues about the harm caused by institutional and systematic inequalities in communities, which have led to armed conflict due to the government's ignorance and exploitation.

2.3.3 The Parties to Armed Conflict

Armed conflict is driven by various actors, including non-state and state armed groups. Using the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project approach, Wim Marivoet et al. (2024) identified the actors in the armed conflict in the Sahel region as state forces, political militias,

external forces, rebel groups, identity militias, and civilians. Using the same approach, Alexander Thurston (2024) argued in his study about how the security forces of the Central Sahel region were involved in armed conflict against civilians. He further argued that the militaries of Niger and Burkina Faso were viewed as the victims and the perpetrators of the massacres that occurred in both states (Thurston, 2024). He argued that the jihadist also falls under the perpetrators; they have been existing since the early 2000s in the Sahel region. Two jihadist groups have played a leading role in militancy across the Sahel from the mid-2010s (Thurston, 2024).

The first group is known as the JNIM, it supports and represents the Islamic religion and Muslims, and it is an alliance of Al-Qaeda-affiliated factions that operates in the Sahel region (Thurston, 2024). The second group is the ISGS, formerly known as the ISSP, which was created in 2015, and originated from a faction that broke away from Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups (Thurston, 2024). Another jihadist group that was formed in 2016, known as the Burkina Faso's Ansar-al-Islam, which is also the defender of Islam. Thurston (2024) therefore argued that these jihadist groups are responsible for the sufferings and have fuelled chaos in the region. He argued that they are responsible for the forced displacement of over three million civilians within Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali, and they are also responsible for the explosion's violence as well as for violence and battles against civilians (Thurston, 2024).

Armed conflict in the Central Sahel is not only driven by non-state armed groups, different government entities are also involved. Evidently, Alexander Thurston (2024) argued that it is not only the state forces and jihadists who are the perpetrators of armed conflict; external actors also play a role, as Wim Marivoet et al. (2024) argued in their study. French forces, which existed in the three states, Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, also played a role in the armed conflict that exists in the region (Thurston, 2024). In trying to navigate armed conflict, the Wagner group mercenaries from Russia with operates in Mali together with the Malian Armed Forces in turn got involved in violence against civilians, and the massacres that violated human rights and caused displacement (Thurston, 2024).

Therefore, this study argues that even though there are other parties to the conflict of the Central Sahel, the ISSP and the Al-Qaeda affiliate JNIM remain the main actors of armed conflicts in the region, as well as in other countries in West Africa. Evident in this, Michael DeAngelo (2025) argued in his report that both these groups have a goal of removing the influence of the West while implementing an Islamic State in West Africa. He further argued that, to gain

control of the territory in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, they have targeted security forces (DeAngelo, 2025). They have also used the tactics of terrorism, such as bombing schools, healthcare facilities and infrastructure, in order to further remove the western influence and implement the Islamic State's goal in the region and in West African countries such as Togo, Benin and Côte D'Ivoire, argued DeAngelo (2025).

Across all subthemes, studies have offered contrasting explanations for the persistence of armed conflict in the Central Sahel region and in the Sahel region as a whole. Resource scarcity, emphasised by competition over limited resources such as cultivatable land and water between farmers and pastoralists, is a driver of armed conflict (Naz and Saleem, 2024; Dieng, 2022). Whereas, bad governance revealed mismanagement of natural resources, weak state control, economic and social exclusion of some groups, state absence in some areas and corruption, as central to the dynamics of armed conflict (Akinola and Ramontja, 2023; Cold-Ravnkilde and Ba, 2022). Identity politics, on the other hand, highlights how ethnic and religious tensions, particularly between the Fulani, Mossi and Dogon ethnic groups, contributed to and also led to the escalation of insurgencies taking place due to limited resources (DeAngelo, 2025). Lastly, external intervention perspectives view the role of the international community, such as Russia's Wagner Group and France, in mitigating and perpetuating armed conflict (Thurston, 2024; Wim Marivoet et al., 2024). Together, these explanations offer various perspectives in prioritising institutional, social, international and material factors, highlighting the need for a holistic analysis.

Across the causal literature, two broad explanations recur. Spillover accounts emphasise the consequences of Libya's 2011 collapse, cross-border mobility and armed-group diffusion, whereas structural accounts emphasise governance deficits, exclusion, resource institutions and climate-related pressure. These explanations are complementary rather than mutually exclusive: spillover altered the availability of weapons, fighters and organisational networks, while domestic institutions shaped where mobilisation gained support and how violence escalated. Much of the evidence is based on policy reports and conflict-event data, which are strong on timing and location but weaker on individual motivations and local causal processes. The present study therefore treats causal claims as mechanisms to be tested against each case rather than as automatic relationships.

2.4 Socioeconomic Impacts of Displacements and Disrupted Livelihoods

2.4.1 Agricultural Production and Food Security

This section explores how armed conflict and displacement affect livelihoods in the Central Sahel, particularly on agricultural production and food security, and education and healthcare services. Due to persistent armed conflict, such as terrorist attacks, jihadist insurgencies and intercommunal tensions, limited resources and the effects of climate change in the Central Sahel, people have been forced to leave their homes and flee to neighbouring countries (Demuynck, 2022). Using a case study method, in-depth interviews, and field observations from different stakeholders, such as herders, farmers, and displaced people in Mopti and Ségou, Mali, Mohamadou Bassirou Tangara (2024) argued that armed conflict has major consequences for agricultural production and food security. As a result of armed conflicts in Mali, Tangara (2024) argued that the agricultural sector, which contributes close to 30% to the country's Gross Domestic Product, has declined since 2012. Armed groups such as jihadists and dozos have been involved in carrying out attacks, the burning of fields and houses and the stealing of animals (Tangara, 2024). Within the Ségou region, the presence of different forces such as self-defence dozos, Malian Armed Forces and jihadist groups led to the seizure of animals, prohibitions on cultivation in some villages, as well as the burning of farms (Tangara, 2024).

This study, therefore, argues that the destruction caused by these forces in both the Mopti and Ségou regions of Mali has dire consequences for agricultural production, which in turn leads to food insecurity. It further argues that the presence of the Malian Armed Forces in villages, which led to a loss of agricultural production, may also have eroded villagers' trust in the state. The communities may have expected that the presence of the Malian Armed Forces would yield good results; however, their failure to mitigate armed conflict by jihadist groups eroded that trust. This is evident in Tangara's (2024) argument that in villages such as Tientien Bugu, Sibiri Were, Buagui Were, and Bolobana in Mali, villagers were prevented from harvesting by armed groups that were present before harvest. In order to access the farming fields, the farmers were forced to pay taxes by armed groups, further disrupting agricultural production. Therefore, Tangara (2024) further argued that in the Mopti and Ségou regions of Mali, the agricultural sector is directly affected by armed conflict through the seizure of livestock and the prohibition and destruction of cultivation and harvesting of farm fields. This led to severe disruption of local production, which in turn threatened food security (Tangara, 2024).

On the other hand, Edoardo Masset et al. (2019) employ a mixed-methods approach to assess the impacts of armed conflict on agriculture in Mali. Using a longitudinal panel research design, quantitative household surveys and in-depth qualitative fieldwork are merged. Therefore, Masset et al. (2019) argued that in the Mopti region of Mali, farmers reported high levels of stress due to the chaos caused by armed conflict. They further argued that farmers reported livestock theft and that they were unable to sell their products or purchase items in markets due to armed conflict (Masset et al., 2019). Furthermore, they argued that conflict had dire consequences on agricultural production across the region, further impacting the farmers' long-term productive capacity (Masset et al., 2019). This study, therefore, argues that the impacts of armed conflict, such as jihadist insurgencies and attacks on agricultural production, can lead to additional consequences, including inflation and food insecurity.

This is evident in the study by Jean-Pierre Tranchant et al. (2021) that assesses the impact of armed conflict on food security in the Mopti region using a quantitative research method. In their study, a longitudinal panel design utilising the weighted difference-in-difference, known as the DiD method, is employed in surveying 1,617 rural households across sixty-six villages from 2012 to 2017 (Tranchant et al., 2021). It is argued that conflict is the primary driver of food insecurity, which is evident in Mali's Mopti, as it has led to the rise of food insecurity. They further argued that, in the Sahel, six countries have insecurity and conflict as the primary causes of food insecurity (Tranchant et al., 2021). This is because armed conflict leads to displacement, disruption of economic activities, and the closure of basic services, which, in turn, give rise to food insecurity, argued Tranchant et al. (2021).

Furthermore, they argued that the existence of armed groups in the villages of the Mopti region has led to a loss of production due to livestock being stolen (Tranchant et al., 2021). It further disrupted agricultural production and markets, as well as access to services and aid; in turn, this had consequences for households and food security (Tranchant et al., 2021). Therefore, the study argues that the presence and attacks by jihadist groups in communities undermine the legitimacy of the state. In addition, they argued that disruptions in agricultural production affect food security, which in turn leads to inflation and lower agricultural production (Tranchant et al., 2021).

Analysing the effects of armed conflicts, such as jihadist insurgencies, on agricultural production and food security, the ICRC (2022) in their article also argued that armed conflict has led to the displacement of close to two million people in the four countries of the Sahel

region. The ICRC (2022) argued that due to armed conflict in the Liptako-Gourma tri-border region in Mali, more than one hundred villages have had their crops destroyed, fields to cultivate lost and civilians forced to flee. In Burkina Faso's Loroum and Yatenga regions, crop production has declined by up to 90%. At the same time, in its Northern region, insecurity has led to the loss of 30% and 50% of cultivation land due to armed conflict (ICRC, 2022). In Niger's regions of Tillabéri and Tahoua, insecurity and threat of violence led to the inaccessibility of the agricultural land, which in turn led to the disruption of thousands of civilians' livelihoods, resulting in the displacement of villagers (ICRC, 2022).

Putu Prisca Lusiani and Yodana Nisadina (2024) analysed the effects of military conflict on food security using conflict-induced displacement and human security theory, as well as the four main dimensions of Food Security, such as food availability, access, utilization, stability, and displacement of communities. Their study is a qualitative research project analysing secondary data from reports, official documents, news, journals, books, and reference articles, with Burkina Faso as the case study. Lusiani and Nisadina (2024) therefore argued in their study that the presence of the JNIM and the ISSP since 2015 in Burkina Faso led to violent extremist attacks on the infrastructure and civilians, worsening food insecurity and displacement. The study argues that the acts by the JNIM and ISSP not only erode the trust in the state, they also undermine the state's legitimacy by attacking civilians, infrastructure and their livelihoods. This will be further discussed in the section on legitimacy and state governance. They argued that these attacks were the main drivers of food insecurity and led to a significant increase in food prices (Lusiani and Nisadina, 2024). Using explosive devices, insurgent groups destroyed infrastructures such as schools, healthcare facilities, power stations and water points, argued Lusiani and Nisadina (2024).

Furthermore, they argued that the Russian-Ukrainian conflict worsened food insecurity in Burkina Faso because the country imports wheat from Russia and Ukraine, and the conflict disrupts the supply chain. Lusiani and Nisadina (2024) also reported that armed conflict in Burkina Faso disrupted pastoral livestock production and agricultural production. Conflict continuously led to the loss of access to land for cultivation, pastures, and livestock for farmers and herders, resulting in limited food resources (Lusiani and Nisadina, 2024). Therefore, this led to a decrease in human capital, resulting in the control of food distribution.

Further, Lusiani and Nisadina (2024) noted that the conflict forced civilians to flee, leaving their produce and homes behind. Limited access to water in villages such as Pama and Mansila

worsened the situation. Almost 98% of the displaced households' main concern was limited access to food. In contrast, in some provinces of Burkina Faso, limited livestock availability led to a reduction in food consumption in at least 98% of households (Lusiani and Nisadina, 2024). Lastly, their study argued that the attacks led to soil damage and water quality degradation, further impacting farmers, livestock, and herders. Using an interdisciplinary approach, Yuanyuan Su and Chintan Amrit (2024) argued about the relationship between food insecurity and conflict in the Sahel region. They argued that food security is directly affected by conflict, weakening food supply through disruptions to the supply chain and agricultural production (Su and Amrit, 2024). Climate change also exacerbates conflict and violence in the region, including the farmer-herder conflict, population displacement to North Africa, and a decrease in water resources (Su and Amrit, 2024).

On the other hand, Wendata A Kafando and Takeshi Sakurai (2024) argued, using a conceptual framework deeply rooted in modified individual farm production and cost functions, that armed conflict and terrorism affect agricultural production. They argued that terrorism by armed groups disrupted agricultural activities, leading to decreased productivity and increased food insecurity (Kafando and Sakurai, 2024). Their study analysed how terrorism disrupted farming, leading to the displacement of farmers and a significant reduction in agricultural production. Evident in this is a terrorist attack in Burkina Faso that led to a decline in cereal crop productivity due to limited access to agricultural inputs such as pesticides and fertilizers (Kafando and Sakurai, 2024).

Across Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, the literature suggests that armed conflict led to displacement and reduced agricultural production, with dire consequences for food security. However, the scales and patterns differ across countries. In Mali, armed attacks by jihadist groups and between jihadist groups and the Malian Armed Forces led to the burning of farms and seizure of animals (Tangara, 2024; Masset et al., 2019). They further led to restrictions on cultivation, resulting in the loss of agricultural production and food insecurity. In Burkina Faso, armed conflict led to displacement, a decline in crop production, and a reduction in cultivatable land, and it also led to high food prices, worsening food insecurity (ICRC, 2022; Lusiani and Nisadina, 2024). Although there were limited sources on the part of Niger, a source indicated that in Niger, the threat of violence and insecurity caused by jihadist groups is the cause of agricultural production disruption (ICRC, 2022). They resulted in the inaccessibility of

cultivable land for villagers, disrupting their livelihoods and causing their displacement (ICRC, 2022).

This study, however, argues that there is limited research on the impact of armed conflict on agricultural production and food security, focusing on all three countries of the Central Sahel. Most studies focus on Mali and its regions, and on Burkina Faso and its regions, leaving out Niger. Therefore, this study focuses on Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, and will conduct a comparative study of the three countries using conflict theory and structural violence theory, as well as secondary data, which was the main source of the literature reviewed. Data will be collected from peer-reviewed books, international and non-governmental organisations' reports, and journals.

2.4.2 Education and Healthcare Services

2.4.2.1 Education

Not only did armed conflict affect agricultural production and food security, it also had an impact on education. Armed conflicts such as terrorism, jihadist insurgencies and clashes between non-state armed groups and state security have significantly affected access to education in the Central Sahel region. Evidently, Dieng (2021) argued in his editorial that ongoing conflicts in the region have resulted in the protracted disruption of education due to limited access. Dieng (2021) further argued that, violating the right to education for children of the region, the ongoing armed conflict has led to the destruction and closure of more than six thousand schools. Not only do these conflicts and violence destroy schools, leaving seven million children out of school, however they also jeopardise the present and the future of the Sahel children, argued Dieng (2021). In support, Arjun S Mehta (2021) argued in his study that non-state armed groups such as JNIM and ISGS, as well as their allies, are the primary aggressors of schools in the Central Sahel region.

Through his mixed-methods study, Mehta (2021) found that in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, armed groups launched attacks on schools because they opposed the state-administered French language taught in public primary and high schools (Mehta, 2021). This was through his study's interviews, where he discovered that armed motorcyclers carrying assault rifles, also wearing turbans, delivered speeches at schools about their anti-French education (Mehta, 2021). Therefore, one can argue that armed conflict directly impacted access to education due to direct attacks on schools, students and teachers by armed groups. Mehta (2021) argued about how the

jihadists set school supplies, desks and the infrastructure on fire, also looting computer labs and cafeterias. Further violating schools, jihadists looted and burned educational facilities, also abducting, threatening or killing teachers (Mehta, 2021).

Furthermore, Aondowase Targba (2022), using the social inclusion theory, argued that the presence and activities of armed groups such as the ISSP, JNIM, and others in northern and central Mali have, in turn, intensified the region's insecurity. This then led to the displacement of over 6.3 million people, as well as over thirteen million civilians of the Central Sahel region in need of humanitarian assistance, noted by Targba (2022). It is further indicated through the use of secondary data that access to basic infrastructure, such as schools and healthcare facilities, and farmlands, was blocked and destroyed by armed militias, which led to the closure of more than 1,700 schools in Mali, violating the children's right to education (Targba, 2022). Save the Children (2020) also argued in their brief that ongoing insecurity in the Central Sahel region has led to the mass displacement of over 1,8 million people, who face difficulties accessing nutritious food, healthcare, water, and education.

Armed groups have deliberately threatened and attacked students, schools and teachers, argued the Save the Children organisation (Save the Children, 2020). The organisation further argued that over 430 attacks on education in the region were recorded by the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attacks between 2015 and 2019, with the closure of close to four thousand schools due to direct attacks on infrastructure and personnel (Save the Children, 2020). Furthermore, due to insecurity, the organisation noted that in 2020, 1100 schools were closed, affecting 350,000 students in Mali, whereas in Niger, 128 schools were closed, affecting 10,325 students (Save the Children, 2020). On the other hand, in Burkina Faso, 2512 schools were closed, also impacting 350,000 students, the same as in Mali. In their brief, Save the Children (2020) also noted that these attacks on schools and education are exacerbating the region's already-existing structural issues in the education system. Structural issues such as the absence of educational materials, qualified teachers, and school facilities.

Halimatou Hima's policy brief evidently supports the views proposed in the aforementioned studies, in which she analysed the effects of insecurity on education in the Sahel, highlighting how attacks on schools and forced displacement disrupt learning (Hima, 2025). Unlike some of the above studies, Hima (2025) uses a mixed-methods research approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods to explore how armed conflict affects education at the community, school, and institutional levels. In the policy brief, Hima (2025) argued that the

most affected area by insecurity caused by non-state armed groups in the Central Sahel region is the Liptako-Gourma, which spans part of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. She highlighted that schools, learners and teachers are purposefully attacked by non-state armed groups, who view education as a symbol of state authority (Hima, 2025). Threats were therefore issued, and attacks were carried out, leading to populations being forcibly displaced and schools being closed.

It is further argued that in Mali, more than 1500 schools were closed. In contrast, in Burkina Faso, more than five thousand schools were closed, while in Niger's Tillabéri region, 95.5% schools were closed, denying more than 150 million children education (Hima, 2025). She therefore asserts that there are 3.3 million forcibly displaced in the region, mostly displaced in Niger's Tillabéri, 60% being the youth and children (Hima, 2025). Consequently, displaced children experienced trauma and emotional distress due to experiencing attacks, lack of safe schools and disrupted learning (Hima, 2025). Due to a lack of structure and resources in Internally Displaced Persons camps, schools there have little to no basic infrastructure, such as sanitation and water, which mostly impacts learners who are girls during their menstruation period (Hima, 2025). Lastly, Hima (2025) highlighted how girls' education is targeted by non-state armed groups, undermining girls' access to an inclusive and safe environment, forcing them to drop out, leading to girls facing gender-based violence and child marriage. While the use of a mixed-methods design by Mehta (2021) and Hima (2025) strengthens the analysis by combining qualitative and quantitative methods, this approach requires substantial resources. Integrating two methods may also lead to findings that are less clear and difficult to broadly apply.

In all three countries of the Central Sahel region, literature has indicated that armed conflict, such as armed attacks by the JNIM and ISSP, has led to school destruction, disrupting access to education. Across the region, non-state armed groups launched attacks on schools, violating the children's rights to education (Mehta, 2021; Dieng, 2021). This study argues that armed conflict not only affects the government and its infrastructures, it also has dire impacts on innocent civilians, such as children, which is evident through the disruption of access to education. Therefore, the study will further explore the impact of armed conflict on education, including its effects on the education of displaced children in host communities.

2.4.2.2 Healthcare Services

Undermining progress towards the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals, such as improved maternal and child health, armed conflict negatively affects access to healthcare services (Gates et al., 2012). Supporting this view, Amberg Felix et al. (2025) argued in their quantitative longitudinal study that terrorist attacks led to reductions in the use of maternal healthcare services, facility deliveries, caesarean sections, and antenatal care visits in Burkina Faso between 2016 and 2018. Amberg et al. (2025) further argued that the presence of jihadist militant groups such as ISSP and JNIM led to various attacks on the infrastructure, which includes hospitals and clinics, security forces and civilians. Furthermore, through an analysis of the effects of nearby conflict within twenty-five kilometres of primary healthcare facilities and on access to six important maternal and child health services from 2013 to 2021, they argued that nearby conflict limited access to Burkina Faso's primary healthcare facilities (Amberg et al., 2025).

Furthermore, armed conflict significantly led to the disruption of access to maternal and child health services in the country's primary healthcare facilities (Amberg et al., 2025). They highlighted that the effect of armed conflict on access to primary healthcare facilities is more evident in rural areas than in urban areas, as conflict events are more noticeable in isolated and remote villages than in large cities or medium-scale towns (Amberg et al., 2025). These findings are shaped by their study's focus on communities with 25 km of primary healthcare facilities and selected maternal and child health services. Using communities within 25 km of primary healthcare may limit the applicability of these findings to more hard-to-reach populations. While the use of six maternal and child health services is essential, it does not fully capture the broader scope of health needs in Burkina Faso. On the other hand, Save the Children (2020) also noted in their 2020 Central Sahel brief study that the increasing violence, as well as the impacts of COVID-19 in Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso, led to the closure of over 241 healthcare facilities. Furthermore, the organisation argued that armed conflict led to 1.2 million Central Sahel people being without access to healthcare services, further violating their health rights (Save the Children, 2020).

Supporting the views outlined by the aforementioned studies, Nicholas Idris Erameh et al. (2021) argued that the increased number of armed attacks by jihadist insurgencies has led to limited access to basic health services in Niger and across Sub-Saharan Africa. They further argued that there have been acts of violence and kidnappings of healthcare workers being

reported since 2015 in Niger, leading to physical and mental disabilities and disruption in healthcare systems due to armed attacks (Erameh et al., 2021). They asserted that due to attacks by Tuareg insurgencies in Niger, there was a decline in access to healthcare because of the interrupted supply chain and the abandoned posts by healthcare workers (Erameh et al., 2021). As in agricultural production, food security, and education, armed conflict further affects healthcare in conflict-affected regions. Across the Central Sahel region, violence, along with the impacts of COVID-19, has resulted in the closure of 241 healthcare facilities, impacting more than a million people (Save the Children, 2020). Therefore, this study argued that attacks on hospitals and clinics, which lead to their closure, negatively affect the people of the region, which may lead to death and more diseases. This study will explore how armed conflicts, such as terrorism and jihadist insurgency, have consequences and lead to humanitarian crises. It will further explore the impacts of armed conflicts on access to education and healthcare services, using secondary sources such as reports, books, journals, and articles.

The literature on socioeconomic effects is strongest where official or humanitarian datasets provide dated measures of displacement, school or facility closures and food insecurity. It is weaker when reports infer causation from simultaneous conflict and service decline without accounting for climate shocks, pre-existing poverty, epidemics or market disruption. The comparative task is therefore to identify where armed violence directly damaged people and infrastructure, where insecurity restricted access, and where conflict interacted with other pressures. Repeated reports that reproduce the same underlying statistic are treated as one evidential chain, not as independent confirmation.

2.5 Effects of Armed Conflict on Political Legitimacy and State Governance

2.5.1 Governance, Ethnic Tensions, and Resource Conflicts in Mali

Ethnic tensions and resource conflicts, exploited by non-state armed groups, have affected governance. The ineffective social services and state absence in Mali are characterised by limited government presence and underdeveloped state administration offices, which are responsible for delivering basic services such as water, security, electricity, and healthcare (Soumahoro, 2019). The study used a qualitative research approach, with data collected from official documents, including Mali's Constitution and Peace Accords, academic papers, publications, and international organisations such as the UN Development Programme, the World Bank, and the International Crisis Group. Therefore, the study argued that competition over grazing land and pastures between different ethnic groups as a result of population growth,

climate change and unemployment, particularly among farmers and herders, has intensified and become more violent, drawing attention to the north and central Mali (Soumahoro, 2019). He further argued that these disputes between farmers and herders over land and other natural resources are not fairly judged by courts, exacerbating community clashes which are then exploited by armed groups who spread radical Islamism (Soumahoro, 2019).

Radical influences, in turn, undermine social cohesion, leading the ethnic armed factions and terrorist groups to utilise radical discourse to portray those who are anti-Islamists as enemies (Soumahoro, 2019). In turn, this fosters mistrust, turning tensions over natural resources and political concerns into violent conflict, undermining governance (Soumahoro, 2019). Supporting the aforementioned, Bertelsmann Stiftung (2024) employed a mixed-methods research approach, analysing data through text analysis and numerical analyses, arguing that violence and instability continued to pose the greatest threats to the country's democracy and liberal market economy. It is argued that the tensions between the Tuareg and the southern groups, such as the Bambara, have contributed to the Malian conflict since 2012 (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024). It further argued that terrorist attacks carried out by the Katiba Macina in the Central region created civil conflicts between ethnic communities, with the Fulani being accused of having an alliance and also collaborating with jihadists by the Dogon group (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024). This led to the weakening of Mali's social fabric, as armed groups also acted as interest groups in areas where trust in the government is low. In addition, armed groups played a major role in fuelling violence, further deepening ethnic division and social cohesion, affecting governance (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024).

Whereas, in an issue brief, Yahia Zoubir (2022) argued that ethnic tensions and resource conflicts exacerbate the already poor governance and political instability in the Sahel region, particularly in Mali. Zoubir (2022) further argued that the Sahelian states have been characterised by bad governance since their independence in the 1960s, leading to their inability to manage tribal, ethnic and religious conflicts within their borders. Bad governance, resource traffic, population growth, marginalisation of youth and military coups have also led to major challenges which are faced by the Sahelian states, such as terrorism, drug and human trafficking, as well as ethnic conflicts, argued Zoubir (2022). Bad governance has contributed to the unequal distribution of wealth from natural resources, such as gold, leaving local populations excluded. In turn, armed groups and terrorist have exploited this by smuggling gold and using it to fund their violent activities, which allows them to control the Liptako-

Gourma region of Mali, which directly undermines the state authority (Zoubir, 2022). In addition, ethnic conflicts together with foreign exploitation of natural resources such as gold, weakened the already fragile states, worsened poverty and hopelessness (Zoubir, 2022).

On the other hand, Wardah Shahid (2025) argued that the implementation of the democratic rule in the 1990s and 2000s consisted of persistent discriminatory policies against the northern ethnic groups of Mali, which led to the insurgencies and a coup that occurred in 2012. Furthermore, Shahid (2025) argued that the Northern and Southern Mali's dysfunctional governance system enabled terrorist groups, proxy forces and insurgencies to gain local favours and exploit the region. This lack of state presence worsened resource conflicts by enabling non-state actors such as Ansar Dine, JNIM, and Katiba Macina, which are dominant in the north of Mali, to control resource-rich areas, argued Shahid (2025). She also indicated that resource competition between local communities, along with the lack of economic opportunities, led to the youth's vulnerability to joining militant groups as well as being involved in criminal activities (Shahid, 2025). These groups exploit resource, ethnic and religious tensions in order to create conflict in the country, while invoking their desire to implement the Sharia law, undermining the rule of law (Shahid, 2025). In turn, this led to the weakening of regions with already weak governance and to the populations losing trust in the government, undermining its legitimacy and its ability to resolve resource conflicts peacefully and effectively (Shahid, 2025).

Aligning with Wardah Shahid's findings, Anca-Elena Ursu (2018) built her report on a combination of desk research and a qualitative field study. Therefore, Ursu (2018) argued that an increase in intercommunal conflicts of farmers and herders over resources such as land and water in the Mopti region fuelled the rise of armed and radical groups. Through her analysis, she argued that poor resource management by the Malian government, along with conflicts over access to resources, threatened the livelihoods of communities in central Mali (Ursu, 2018). The already weak governance system and conflicts over access to resources enabled the radical armed groups to establish themselves as these conflicts were left unresolved, allowing these groups to exploit these inter-communal conflicts by mobilising ethnic communities (Ursu, 2018). These radical armed groups, in turn, engaged in other forms of governance, including justice provision, resource management, and conflict mediation, challenging land distribution systems and disrupting the existing status quo structures of power and privileged groups (Ursu, 2018).

2.5.2 Governance, Ethnic Tensions and Resource Conflicts in Burkina Faso

Similar to Mali, Burkina Faso has experienced resource conflicts and ethnic tensions, which have been exploited by armed groups who, in turn, undermine the rule of law and the country's legitimacy. Evidently, Moussa Soumahoro (2020) argued in his report that resource conflicts over water and the distribution of land ownership between herders and farmers, fuelled by climate change, and ethnic tensions between the Fulani and Doaussahak groups, are exploited by the Islamist State in the Greater Sahara. These conflicts exacerbate the already poor governance, the historical lack of the rule of law, and Burkina Faso's economic vulnerabilities. Ethnic tensions alongside resource conflicts created a cycle where state failure resulted in the vulnerability of the populations, which in turn was exploited by non-state armed groups such as Ansaroul Islam (Soumahoro, 2020). This has further weakened social cohesion and state control, posing a major threat to Burkina Faso's stability (Soumahoro, 2020). The exploitation of ethnic tensions by armed groups also led to ethnic-based killings, 170,447 internally displaced persons, human rights violations and 676,252 people who are threatened by food insecurity, some from the Fulani community (Soumahoro, 2020).

Sourabie (2023) used a qualitative research approach, collecting data through eight focus group discussions with host communities and eight individual interviews with resource holders. Therefore, in line with the aforementioned, Sourabie (2023) argued that governance in Burkina Faso's northern region has been greatly affected by ethnic tensions and resource conflicts. Resource conflicts, such as land, between host communities and Internally Displaced Persons in the Ouahigouya community (Sourabie, 2023). It argued that they led to the weakening and absence of state authority and also facilitated the rise of violent extremist governance (Sourabie, 2023).

This is because humanitarian aid in northern Burkina Faso exacerbated community tensions. In contrast, power struggles resulted in violent tensions, and the reinforcement of religious beliefs led to the divisions between Christians and Muslims (Sourabie, 2023). These conflicts worsened the country's insecurity, leading to human rights violations and hindering access to justice (Sourabie, 2023). The absence of justice in communities such as Thiou and Bani to resolve these tensions led the communities to resort to violent non-state armed groups, whose presence in these communities is favoured by the state's weak presence (Sourabie, 2023). Violent non-state armed groups therefore controlled the Thiou and Bani communities and imposed Sharia law, which is an Islamic law, further undermining the country's governance and

the rule of law. Loic Bisson et al. (2021) similarly used a qualitative research approach, as did Sourabie (2023). The data were collected in 15 municipalities of Burkina Faso's east and Boucle du Mouhon regions, which were particularly affected by the spread of violence.

They therefore argued in their CPU report that Burkina Faso's governance has been significantly impacted by ethnic tensions and resource conflicts, resulting in the breakdown of the government system, legal confusion, and the absence of authority, which was exploited by various armed groups (Bisson et al., 2021). These non-state armed groups capitalise on pre-existing tensions between farmers and herders, seeking to undermine Burkina Faso's governance. The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara's main aim was to weaken the social fabric while creating the legitimacy and authority of militant extremism (Bisson et al., 2021). Whereas Katiba Macina used the Fulani community's grievances of being abused by other ethnic groups and security forces to destabilise the region and exacerbate existing tensions (Bisson et al., 2021). In addition, Bisson et al. (2021) argued that these groups took over authority that used to be under state control, including policing, justice, and taxation, undermining the legitimacy of the state, governance, and traditional rulers. In several parts of Burkina Faso, these non-state armed groups have been involved in violent conflicts with security forces and the police (Bisson et al., 2021).

The UNOWAS (2018) indicated in support of aforementioned studies that resource conflicts over pastoral lands and water, and ethnic conflicts between the Fulani and Bambara communities and the Fulani and Dogon communities, greatly destabilise governing systems in West Africa and the Sahel. Exacerbated by political manipulations, climate change, weak enforcement of the rule of law, proliferation of weapons in the region and demographic pressure, resource conflicts therefore disrupt socioeconomic structures of rural communities (UNOWAS, 2018). It further undermined traditional governance and the mechanisms used in resolving disputes in the region (UNOWAS, 2018). Alexandra Tapsoba et al. (2024) further argued that intra-community tensions, especially within the Fulani ethnic group, have been exploited by terrorist groups, exacerbating the tensions while also fuelling mistrust within these communities. In addition, Tapsoba et al. (2025) argued that ethnic tensions and their exploitation by terrorist groups led to Burkina Faso being viewed as a nation with no central authority, national unity and as a collapsed state.

2.5.3 Governance, Ethnic Tensions and Resource Conflicts in Niger

Compared to Mali and Burkina Faso, Niger has also experienced ethnic tensions and resource conflicts, which have affected its governance. Ngoni Mamvura (2025) argued that a breeding ground for domestic and regional terrorism was created by the rise of tribal conflicts, which is a major threat to peace, governance, security and development. Mamvura (2025) further argued that the rise of ethnic conflicts due to resource scarcity, unemployment of youth, political exclusion, as well as weak governance, destabilised local communities and led to the escalation of domestic and regional terrorism threats. Groups such as Al-Shabaab in Somalia and Boko Haram in Nigeria, as well as others, exploit the grievances of the communities, recruiting those whose needs are not met and are affected by ethnic groups, particularly the youth (Mamvura, 2025). This exploitation gave rise to non-state armed groups, who in turn weakened governance and intensified corruption due to the government's struggle to effectively respond to ethnic conflicts and terrorism (Mamvura, 2025).

On the other hand, Dr Uzma Naz and Mohammad Subhan Saleem (2023) argued that in Niger, land degradation caused by climate change led to competition over grazing land and water between agriculturists and pastoralists, worsening resource disputes. They further argued that increased competition over grazing land and water leads to violent conflicts, as well as the involvement of armed groups that exploit them (Naz and Saleem, 2023). Their findings are based on an interdisciplinary, mixed-methods approach, arguing that resource conflict can also be exploited by armed groups, thereby weakening governance.

Similarly, Ricardo Rene Laremont (2021) argued in his journal article that the northern and northwest regions of Niger, the Lake Chad region, northern Burkina Faso, and northern and eastern Mali experienced violence due to intercommunal conflicts between farmers and pastoralists. In alignment with aforementioned studies, Laremont (2021) argued that conflicts over land and water between farmers and pastoralists were exploited by jihadist groups for recruitment and taxation purposes, undermining the region's governance. The rise of jihadist insurgencies in rural areas that exploit conflicts between farmers and pastoralists is exacerbated by the weakness of governmental institutions (Laremont, 2021). This led the jihadists to provide the rule of law and security to transnational business networks, farmers and pastoralists, argued Laremont (2021). Further undermining the governance and legitimacy, these groups operate as primary governing entities in these areas (Laremont, 2021).

On the other hand, Joseph Chinedu Ofobuike (2025) argued that ethnic tensions partly influenced the 2023 Niger military coup. The Arabic ethnicity of President Mohamed Bazoum was questioned by the Niger military, which comprised the Hausa ethnic group, a majority ethnic group in Niger (Ofobuike, 2025). Therefore, the ethnic structure of the military and its leaders did not include or reflect the country's broader diversity, creating a sense of unequal access to power and career advancement, argued Ofobuike (2025). Ethnic tensions, which partly contributed to the 2023 coup, challenged the state's legitimacy and led to unequal access to power.

In Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, the literature indicates that non-state armed groups exploit resource conflicts and ethnic tensions. These conflicts have eroded trust in the state and undermined state governance. In Mali, unfairly judged resource disputes by courts fuelled intercommunal tensions, which were later exploited by non-state armed groups (Soumahoro, 2019). In turn, these groups spread their Islamic influence, undermining social cohesion, causing ethnic tensions, fostering mistrust, fuelling resource and political tensions into violent conflicts (Soumahoro, 2019; Zoubir, 2022). These undermined the governance of the Malian state and exacerbated political instability and poor governance (Zoubir, 2022). Similar to Mali, in Burkina Faso, ethnic tensions and resource conflicts were exploited by non-state armed groups who worsened the already bad governance (Soumahoro, 2020; Sourabie, 2023). They further weakened social cohesion and state control, thereby threatening the country's stability (Sourabie, 2023).

Compared to Burkina Faso and Mali, in Niger, the exploitation of community grievances such as resource scarcity and political exclusion by non-state armed groups gave rise to non-state armed groups (Mamvura, 2025; Naz and Saleem, 2023). These groups also weakened governance and intensified corruption due to the ineffectiveness of the government's response to ethnic conflicts and terrorism (Naz and Saleem 2023). Across three countries, it is evident that non-state armed groups exploit the gap created by the ineffectiveness of government and state presence, which will be explored further by this study. This study argues that weak governance, corruption, political exclusion and marginalisation are both a cause and a consequence of ethnic tensions and resource conflicts. This argument will be explored further in the study using the application of conflict theory and structural violence theory using secondary sources.

Compared with Mali and Burkina Faso, the Niger literature is thinner and relies more heavily on institutional reports, policy briefs and case-specific accounts. This imbalance limits the

strength of claims about ethnic marginalisation, resource governance and political legitimacy in Niger. The study does not interpret fewer published findings as evidence that an effect is absent; it identifies the gap explicitly and uses the same indicators across the three cases to show where comparison is supported and where it remains tentative.

2.6 Role and Effectiveness of International Interventions in the Central Sahel

2.6.1 Types of Interventions Implemented

2.6.1.1 Humanitarian Aid

In mitigating humanitarian crises caused by armed conflict, such as terrorism, jihadist insurgency and ethnic conflicts, international organisations carried out humanitarian assistance efforts in the Central Sahel region. Therefore, the European Institute for International Law and International Relations (2023) argued in their report that, in response to a humanitarian crisis, a European Union Humanitarian Trust Fund was created. It aimed to address the root causes of non-normative migration and population displacement, as well as to support stability on the African continent (European Institute for International Law and International Relations, 2023). The Institute further argued that the creation of the Trust Fund was also intended to strengthen the resilience of populations and facilitate the implementation of the Humanitarian-Development-Peace nexus, framing it as a semi-stabilising instrument (European Institute for International Law and International Relations, 2023). The Institute also argued that the United Nations Refugee Agency has assisted thousands of forcibly displaced people in Burkina Faso through providing shelter (European Union Institute for International Law and International Relations 2023).

On the other hand, in their study using both qualitative and quantitative research designs, François Grünewald and Laurent Saillard (2024) argued that numerous international organisations were key actors in humanitarian interventions in the Central Sahel. They argued that the United Nations response was to support measures under the coordinating role of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, established by United Nations agencies and international, mostly national, non-governmental organisations (Grünewald and Saillard, 2024). The European Union, on the other hand, deployed civilian missions such as the European Union Trust Fund, as argued by the European Institute for International Law and International Relations (Grünewald and Saillard, 2024).

On the other hand, the UNOCHA (2024) argued in their article that since 2021, a Regional Humanitarian Fund for West and Central Africa offered a strategic response to the Central Sahel region's interconnected humanitarian needs (UNOCHA, 2024). The Humanitarian Fund's priorities were based on cross-border collaboration, a multisectoral approach, and coordinated efforts among the Central Sahel countries (UNOCHA, 2024). 93.2 million US dollars were contributed to the Regional Fund between 2021 and 2023 (UNOCHA, 2024). By August 2024, 24.1 million US dollars had been contributed, with 3.3 million dollars allocated to Mali, thirteen million dollars to Burkina Faso, and 7.7 million dollars to Niger (UNOCHA, 2024). Furthermore, three allocations making up 36.4 million US dollars were made in order to address the humanitarian crisis of the populations affected by forced displacement, food and nutrition insecurity caused by armed violence and insecurity as well as climate change in 2023 (UNOCHA, 2024). 11 million US dollars was allocated in Niger, 5.3 million dollars in Mali and twenty million dollars in Burkina Faso, 29% of the allocations offered direct funding to local and national actors (UNOCHA, 2024).

Kari M. Osland and Henriette O. Erstad (2020) employed a qualitative research design which focused on interviews with regional security actors, local communities and secondary data. Fieldwork, on the other hand, was conducted in Mali and Niger in November 2019 and in Senegal in March 2020, and a theoretical framework based on the fragility dilemma was developed. Responding to the humanitarian crisis in the Sahel region, the European Union established the European Union Trust Fund in 2025 to address the root causes of forced displacement, destabilisation, and non-normative migration (Osland and Erstad, 2020). They further argued that this Trust Fund has, however, prioritised anti-trafficking, stabilisation efforts and cross-border management (Osland and Erstad, 2020). This act by the EU to prioritise anti-trafficking and stabilisation efforts over humanitarian crises reflects how international interventions may undermine the state's legitimacy and authority by involving themselves in domestic issues.

2.6.1.2 Peacekeeping Missions

Osland and Erstad (2020) further analysed that, in response to the insecurity crisis in the Central Sahel and the Sahel as a whole, the European Union implemented initiatives, such as the European Union Training Mission in Mali since 2012. The European Union Capacity-Building Mission, on the other hand, was implemented in Niger since 2013 and in Mali since 2015, with a strong emphasis on security and with close to one thousand deployed personnel (Osland and

Erstad, 2020). Furthermore, they argued that MINUSMA, which was transitioned from an African-led International Support Mission to Mali, was implemented in 2014 (Osland and Erstad, 2020). Its duties included "Insuring security, stabilisation and protection of civilians; supporting national political dialogue and reconciliation and assisting the re-establishment of state authority, the rebuilding of security sector and protection of human rights in Mali" (Osland and Erstad, 2020:22). On the other hand, the African Union implemented an African Union mission for Mali and the Sahel in 2013, the mission was focused on development, human and humanitarian rights, security as well as political process in the region, argued Osland and Erstad (2020).

By contrast, Moussa Djire et al. (2017) argued that, due to the advancement of jihad terrorism and the Malian crisis, various international interventions were employed. Through the African Peace and Security Architecture and its crisis management experience, the ECOWAS monitored the situation in Mali and issued multiple warnings to the Malian authorities in 2011, which were not well received by the head of state, leading to the coup d'état in 2012 (Djire et al., 2017). They further argued that in response, the ECOWAS imposed sanctions against the military junta in 2012. It also took part in diplomatic talks with Algeria, which later led to the Peace Agreement between Mali and the jihadist groups. Its role was to monitor the implementation of the agreement, argued Djire et al. (2017).

Furthermore, Djire et al. (2017) argued that the African Union participated in the fight against the coup and worked with other international actors, such as the United Nations and ECOWAS, to support the return to constitutional rule in Mali. The African Union Mission in Mali and the Sahel was also established after the transition of AFISMA to MINUSMA to maintain the African Union's presence and support Mali in its recovery from the crisis (Djire et al., 2017). This mission was also created to assist other affected Sahel countries in their development and stabilisation efforts; it supported the National Peace and Reconciliation Agreement and the Ouagadougou Framework Agreement and managed the AU strategy for the Sahel region. On the other hand, the United Kingdom established the Conflict, Security and Stability Programme in the Sahel, whose focus was on fighting crime, multilateral security cooperation, and conflict reduction as cross-border security (Djire et al., 2017). Their findings by Djire et al. (2017) are based on a qualitative research design involving a desktop review, field research, and in-depth interviews with representatives of local and international actors. The European Union Institute for International Law and International Relations (2023) also reported that the ongoing Sahel

conflict, which began in 2012, has affected millions of civilians across West Africa. A regional project funded by the Swedish government was therefore established to promote risk-informed solutions for sustainable development in Lake Chad Basin and West Sahel countries (European Union Institute for International Law and International Relations 2023).

2.6.1.3 Military Interventions: Counterterrorism/insurgency

Osland and Erstad (2020) argued that, in response to violent extremism in the Sahel, France, as an international actor, established counterterrorism operations in the region. France implemented Operation Serval, which operated from 2012 to 2014. Operation Barkhane took over from Operation Serval in 2014, and it is regarded as the largest French military operation to operate outside France, according to Osland and Erstad (2020). They further argued that Operation Barkhane aimed to fight terrorism alongside regional actors, such as the G5 Sahel in Chad, Mali and Niger, and to secure the Sahel (Osland and Erstad, 2020). To strengthen cooperative counterterrorism efforts between the G5 Sahel and Operation Barkhane, Osland and Erstad (2020) argued that France formed a new joint special operations force, Operation Takuba, in January 2020.

Furthermore, the United States also took part. It engaged deeply in counterterrorism efforts in the Sahel region, which is viewed as an ungoverned space and as an epicentre for jihadist networks (Osland and Erstad, 2020). They argued that the United States established a US-operated drone base in Niger's Agadez and Niamey regions, as well as in Burkina Faso's Ouagadougou region, and that 800 to 1000 US personnel were stationed in Niger (Osland and Erstad, 2020). They were overseen by the US military command that is responsible for the African continent, the United States Africa Command (Osland and Erstad, 2020). In addition, Osland and Erstad (2020) argued that the Sahel region, particularly the Central Sahel, has increasingly received external assistance programmes and military interventions over the years. Similar to the aforementioned research, Edoardo Baldaro and Elisa Lopez Luicia (2024) employed a qualitative approach in analysing primary sources and official documents produced by regional organisations. It is based on data gathered over multiple time frame of fieldwork in Niger, Paris, and Brussels since 2012.

Baldaro and Lucia (2024) therefore argued that in response to armed conflict in the Sahel, the G5 Sahel countries, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Mauritania and Chad conducted Joint Transborder Military operations in the region's transborder areas. With the support and

participation of MINUSMA and Operation Barkhane, G5 Sahel countries deployed and offered a foundation for the establishment of the G5 Sahel Joint Force, argued Baldaro and Lucia (2024). They argued that the G5 Sahel Joint Force comprised five thousand soldiers from the G5 Sahel countries (Baldaro and Lucia, 2024). On the other hand, Operation Serval was launched in 2013 to fight against jihadists in northern Mali (Baldaro and Lucia, 2024). On the other hand, the ECOWAS called for the full implementation of its counterterrorism strategy and announced the mobilisation of one billion dollars in September 2019 from internal funds (Baldaro and Lucia, 2024). This was dedicated to the fight against terrorism and to the involvement of the ECOWAS Standby Force, argued Baldaro and Lucia (2024). An Action Plan 2020-24 to eliminate terrorism in the Sahel region was therefore announced in December, with a budget estimated at 2.3 billion dollars, which, in practice, became ECOWAS's new strategy for the region (Baldaro and Lucia, 2024).

Employing a qualitative research approach, with data collected from open-access sources and in-depth interviews conducted in European and Sahelian cities, Adam Sandor et al. (2025) also examined the types of interventions used to mitigate armed conflict in the region. Using this approach offers rich contextual insights, drawing on participants' lived experiences and secondary sources. Sandor et al. (2025) argued that, to ensure development and security in the region, the G5 Sahel, comprising five countries, was created in February 2014, and its convention was signed in December 2014 (Sandor et al., 2025). Within the G5 Sahel, a G5 Sahel Joint Force was created in July 2017, based on a prior cooperation structure for cross-border military operations with the French Defence and Security Committee and its forces (Sandor et al., 2025). An Accra initiative was created to reinforce cooperation among coastal countries of West Africa: Ghana, Togo, Burkina Faso, Benin and Cote d'Ivoire, experiencing potential spillover of insurgent violence from the Sahel (Sandor et al., 2025). The initiative was supported by international actors such as the European Union, the United Kingdom and France (Sandor et al., 2025).

Another Ad hoc security initiative, Task Force Takuba, was created and implemented due to the shortcomings of bilateral partnerships, the Accra initiative, the G5 Sahel and the Alliance of Sahel States, argued Sandor et al. (2025). Through Task Force Takuba, hundreds of European Special forces trained and assisted the Malian army in fighting jihadist groups. Similarly, Moussa Djire et al. (2017) employed a qualitative approach; the data used were collected through in-depth interviews with the representatives of both local and international

actors, as well as through desktop research. They argued that MINUSMA was created by the United Nations Security Council through Resolution No. 2100 of 25 April 2013 and officially deployed on July 1, 2025, with the priority of protecting major urban areas and communication routes in Mali (Djire et al., 2017). MINUSMA's military unit comprised 10635 soldiers, while its mission police unit had 1274 personnel (Djire et al., 2017).

On the other hand, Bruno Charbonneau (2021) argued that counterinsurgency principles posit that military techniques of combat are not informed by counterinsurgency; counterinsurgency is a form of politics and of itself. Charbonneau (2021) indicated in his study that international interventions are therefore informed by, enacted through, and guided by counterinsurgency principles in the West African Sahel. Following Mali's 2012 insurgency crisis, the French government launched Operation Serval in 2013 to address the threat to the neighbourhood of Europe and West Africa (Charbonneau, 2021). Operation Serval was then succeeded by Operation Barkhane in 2014 after it was declared successful. During these operations, French troops operated regionally, across and within G5 Sahel states, crossing borders and responding to the transnational problem of terrorism (Charbonneau, 2021). Task Force Takuba, on the other hand, is argued to be a special task force which worked hand in hand with Operation Barkhane to advise and train Malian forces and to accompany them into combat (Charbonneau, 2021). According to Charbonneau (2021), Task Force Takuba was declared fully operational in March 2021. It is important to note that the ECOWAS, AU and UN also contributed to supporting conflict resolution.

2.6.2 Contributions of ECOWAS, AU, and UN

Collectively, the ECOWAS, AU, and UN supported conflict resolution in the Central Sahel. Bruno Charbonneau (2017) argued in his study that, in supporting stabilisation efforts, the restoration of Malian state authority, as well as assistance with the implementation of the 2014 peace agreement, a United Nations peacekeeping mission, MINUSMA, was established in 2013. In his journal article, Charbonneau (2017) also argued that MINUSMA's deployment was in the context of Operation Serval, which sought to disorganise terrorist networks and eliminate 60% of the enemy force. It was deployed to assist in re-establishing Mali's territorial integrity and unity, argued Charbonneau (2017). However, the mission was viewed as one of the most ongoing lethal peacekeeping missions due to the fatalities it suffered, such as the 2014 39 rocket attacks, as well as the sixty incidents of improvised explosive devices (Charbonneau, 2017).

This study argues that the aforementioned argument reveal that international interventions may fuel conflicts as their attacks may target innocent civilians and their ethnic armed groups may retaliate, intensifying conflict. This can lead to violent conflict, further destabilizing a country and further weakening the very government they are trying to protect. On the other hand, the European Institute for International Law and International Relations (2023) argued in its article that a United Nations Development Programme Stabilisation Facility was established in the Liptako-Gourma of Mali and Burkina Faso and in the Lake Chad region of Niger. The Institute argued that the facility was created to restore and re-establish the state's presence in the Central Sahel region (European Institute for International Law and International Relations, 2023). In contrast, Bagayoko (2024) argued that the United Nations also deployed MINUSMA, which was intended to support the stabilization of the country and its political processes.

Mashood Djaló (2023) employed a qualitative, comparative case and desktop-based research approach, collecting data from reliable internet sources to analyse the evolving role of ECOWAS in resolving conflict in Sub-Saharan Africa from 2011 to 2021. Using this design provides broader insight across contexts; however, relying on secondary data and specific cases may restrict transferability. In supporting conflict resolution and stabilising governance, the United Nations Security Council mirrored the international organisations' approaches by acknowledging two vital declarations issued in response to the Burkina Faso crisis (Djaló, 2023). The first declaration was issued by the ECOWAS chairman on the 2nd of November 2014. In contrast, the second declaration was issued on the 4th of November 2014 by the African Union commission's chairperson, argued Djaló (2023). In addition, the UN, ECOWAS, and AU participated in a mission aimed at establishing a joint mediation effort that included the military junta and civil society as the main actors. Owa Egbara Owa et al. (2024) article, in support of the aforementioned studies, argued that the collaboration efforts of the AU, UN, and ECOWAS were based on capacity building, mediation, peacekeeping, and the addressing of complex security crises experienced by Central Sahel countries, such as Burkina Faso and Mali. Their collaboration included addressing economic development and the security-related issues of economic integration, serving as the basis for self-resilience, argued Owa et al. (2024).

On the other hand, Steren Zyck and Robert Muggah (2013) argued in their article that the UN worked hand in hand with its Security Council and regional actors, ECOWAS and the AU, and authorised Operation Serval, a French-led intervention in January 2013. Zyck and Muggah (2013) argued that to show its support for conflict resolution in Mali, the UN Security Council

also approved the transition of AFISMA to MINUSMA. Therefore, 12,640 peacekeepers, 1440 police officers and 11,200 troops were deployed, argued Zyck and Muggah (2013).

The African Union also contributed to conflict resolution through the international campaign to fight Islamist militants in Mali, where donors pledged half a billion dollars at the AU's headquarters in Ethiopia (Zyck and Muggah, 2013). In support of the African Union's efforts to resolve conflicts and stabilise governance, it condemned the constitutional change resulting from the 2014 overthrow of Blaise Compaoré in Burkina Faso (Djaló, 2023). The African Union views this overthrow as a violation of democratic principles and the core values they affirm, and has further collaborated with ECOWAS and the UN Commission in the quest for a peaceful and diplomatic resolution to the crisis (Djaló, 2023). In response to the 2020 and 2021 coups d'état in Mali, the AU suspended Mali's membership and participation in the organisation's activities until the reinstatement of the normal constitutional order (Djaló, 2023). Mbianda (2024) also reported that the African Union Peace and Security Council condemned the military takeover in the region and called for a swift return to constitutional democracy. He further argued that the African Union also supported numerous initiatives to bring peace and security to the Central Sahel region. Furthermore, the initiatives taken by the ECOWAS to bring peace and security through the enforcement of sanctions, including the withdrawal of diplomatic recognition, suspension of foreign aid, and the imposition of embargoes, to curtail the power of the coup leaders and expedite a return to constitutional rule (Mbianda, 2024).

The ECOWAS has also been actively engaged in conflict resolution, particularly during the coup d'etat taking place in the Sahel region. In response to the Malian coup in 2012, the ECOWAS suspended Mali from all its bodies of decision with immediate effect under the ECOWAS Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (2001), article 1(c) and 45(2) (Djaló, 2023). It was also provided for in the provisions of the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (2012), until the constitutional order was restored, as argued in Burkina Faso by the African Union (Djaló, 2023). Economic sanctions and the closure of Mali's borders were also imposed in response to the 2012, 2020 and 2021 coups. This study argues that this act by the ECOWAS may not only affect the governments it is sanctioning, it may also have dire consequences for its citizens, as most citizens in the region depend on it, and this may lead to food insecurity. Owa Ebara Owa et al. (2024) further contended that, in support of conflict resolution, ECOWAS in Mali launched a military intervention, AFISMA, aimed at addressing the security crisis caused by the Islamist

insurgency and the Tuareg rebellion. It engaged in successful peace diplomacy with the Tuareg rebels. Also, it adopted a temporary ban on the importation, exploitation, and manufacturing of light and small weapons in West Africa under Mali's leadership, argued Owa Egbere Owa et al. (2024). It further launched a programme of small-arms bases in Bamako, a capacity-building programme for member states and civil society organisations to address the challenge of small-arms proliferation (Owa et al., 2024). Whereas in Burkina Faso, it responded through peaceful diplomatic talks, which led to a temporary ceasefire between various rebel groups and the Burkinabe government, argued Owa et al. (2024). The response to diplomatic engagement in Burkina Faso and the pressure on the transnational government contributed to the successful organisation of free and fair elections, resulting in the restoration of democratic governance (Owa et al., 2024).

2.6.3 Challenges faced by International Organisations

International organisations operating in the Sahel, particularly in the Central Sahel, have faced challenges. These challenges include resource constraints, access to communities, and local resistance to implementing interventions to mitigate armed conflict and its impacts. Louise Wiuff Moe (2020) used a qualitative research design based on a case study, with nineteen in-depth interviews conducted in Bamako in 2018 and 8 conducted at the UN headquarters in New York. The Malian crisis intervention, AFISMA, which was an ECOWAS military mission, was not adequately resourced, lacked political backing, and received insufficient financial support (Wiuff Moe, 2020). On the other hand, François Grünewald and Laurent Saillard (2024) argued in their mixed-method study that humanitarian activities by international organisations such as the AU and the EU faced access constraints due to a limited humanitarian space, caused by the security crisis in Mali. They further argued that in 2022, humanitarian intervention was restricted due to hostilities between armed actors and military operations (Grünewald and Saillard, 2024). It was also due to the existence of explosive devices, which included improvised explosive devices, a lack of infrastructure such as healthcare facilities, the physical environment and the violent attacks against its staff and activists (Grünewald and Saillard, 2024). Wiuff Moe's (2020) use of a qualitative research design offers rich contextual insights into participants' lived experiences. On the other hand, the mixed-methods approach used by Grünewald and Saillard (2024) enhances the study's validity by integrating qualitative and quantitative methods, providing a detailed understanding of the research problem. However, it is important to acknowledge their limitations, such as resource demands and the integration of

qualitative and quantitative methods, which may lead to findings that are less clear and difficult to apply broadly.

Furthermore, Owa Egbara Owa et al. (2024) argued that the ECOWAS peacekeeping mission in Mali and Burkina Faso faced funding shortages. They argued that without adequate funding, the troops' mandate was not carried out (Owa et al., 2024). On the other hand, initiatives taken by the AU to facilitate a ceasefire between Ansar Dine and the National Movement for the Liberation of Azwad were met with a challenge due to the rebels' retention of control over Northern Mali, argued Owe et al. (2024). Ansar Dine violated the AU Peace Ceasefire Agreement at the end of 2012, prompting the military's advance into Mali's southern region. The implementation and effectiveness of AFISMA faced challenges in coordination, logistical limitations, and inadequate troop levels among the contributing states, argued Owa et al. (2024). The vastness of the territory, the presence of various armed groups, and the complexities of Mali's security environment are vital challenges that hampered AFISMA's effectiveness (Owa et al., 2022).

In support of the aforementioned studies, in his article, Rmaric Ferrero (2021) argued that the challenges of implementing humanitarian aid in the Sahel region. Ferrero (2021) argued further that ongoing insecurity in the region led to the attacks on public services, the abduction and killing of humanitarian staff, and the provision of aid. In some countries of the Sahel region, there were some occurrences of abduction and killings of humanitarian members, attacks on their facilities and the seizure of their vehicles by armed groups (Ferrero, 2021). Humanitarian organisations could not access some areas due to insecurity, climate change, and their remoteness, with roads in poor condition (Ferrero, 2021).

Collectively, these studies highlight the interventions implemented by the international community in the Central Sahel region. Although interventions differ across countries, these studies reveal how international organisations such as the UN, ECOWAS, EU, and AU have taken measures to resolve conflicts and address humanitarian crises. Furthermore, the studies argued that, in implementing some interventions, organisations faced challenges, including resource constraints, limited access to communities, and local resistance. On the other hand, this study will investigate the effectiveness of the mentioned military interventions. It will further explore the effectiveness of the interventions by the ECOWAS and AU, which include sanctions and suspensions. It will also discuss how the people and ruling military juntas of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger viewed these interventions.

Assessments of international intervention divide between mandate-based evaluations, which ask whether an operation achieved its stated security, protection or constitutional objective, and legitimacy-based evaluations, which examine local acceptance, distributional effects and political backlash. Withdrawal, criticism or continued insecurity alone does not prove failure. The study therefore evaluates interventions against their stated objectives, implementation record, unintended consequences and the quality of the evidence, while distinguishing military, humanitarian and diplomatic instruments.

2.7 Conclusion

In this review, four themes emerged, each consisting of subthemes. Theme one, which is the causes and parties to armed conflict, comprises limited resources, social and political factors, and parties to armed conflict as subthemes. These subthemes revealed that factors such as the government's inability to provide good governance, basic needs and the protection of the citizens contributed to the start of armed conflict. Armed conflict in the Central Sahel region includes terrorism, jihadist insurgencies, and exploitation of resources and ethnic conflicts. They further stated that competition over limited resources, struggles for control of resources, and struggles for political power contributed to the worsening of armed conflict. Armed Islamist groups such as JNIM, ISSP, Ansar-al-Islam, military forces, security forces and private security, such as the Russia's Wagner group, are the parties to armed conflict in the Central Sahel region. The existing literature further indicated that armed conflict led to socioeconomic impacts, including displacement and disrupted livelihoods, which emerged as the second theme. Under this theme, it was revealed that armed conflict led to a loss of agricultural production, affecting food security. It further had an impact on education and healthcare services, where non-state armed groups directly attacked schools, hospitals and clinics. Furthermore, the effects of armed conflict on political legitimacy and state governance were identified as a third theme.

Under the third theme, it was noted that ethnic tensions and resource conflicts affected the governance of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. This was how these tensions were exploited by non-state armed groups, who fuelled violent conflict, eroded trust in the state, undermined the state's legitimacy, and weakened social cohesion. To mitigate these armed conflicts and their impacts, various international interventions were implemented. The role and effectiveness of international interventions in the Central Sahel theme, therefore, emerged. This theme reviewed the types of interventions such as humanitarian aid, peacekeeping missions and

military interventions. It further reviewed the contributions of the ECOWAS, AU and UN in mitigating conflicts and supporting conflict resolutions. This theme also discussed the challenges international organisations faced in implementing their interventions.

However, this study argues that although many of the reviewed studies focus on the Central Sahel region, most studies on the causes, the role of armed groups, and interventions are lacking. There are limited studies on the socioeconomic impacts of displacement and livelihoods, particularly on agricultural production and food security, that cover all three countries of the Central Sahel region. Few studies examine the impacts of resource conflicts and ethnic tensions on governance in Niger; most focus on Mali and Burkina Faso. This study also identified a theory gap in the literature: a lack of studies that employ the conflict theory and structural violence theory that the study uses. Therefore, this study will further explore the socioeconomic and political impacts of armed conflict, focusing on Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger in the Central Sahel region. It will use secondary sources such as reports from international and non-governmental organisations, peer-reviewed academic chapters and journals, open-access books, and online articles. The next chapter will set out the conceptual and theoretical framework, drawing on conflict theory and structural violence theory to guide the analysis.

CHAPTER THREE: CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Introduction

This chapter defines the study's central concepts and establishes the analytical mechanisms used in the comparison. Armed conflict, displacement and political legitimacy are distinguished from related but non-equivalent ideas such as political instability, state capacity and territorial control. Conflict theory and structural violence theory are then developed as complementary frameworks: the first directs attention to unequal power, resource distribution and mobilisation, while the second identifies indirect and institutionalised forms of harm. The chapter also states the limits of each framework and explains how they guide the research questions and the interpretation in Chapter Five.

3.2 Conceptual Framework

International humanitarian law distinguishes international armed conflict, which occurs between states, from non-international armed conflict, which involves governmental armed forces and sufficiently organised non-state armed groups or armed groups fighting one another. A formal declaration of war is not required. For violence to qualify as a non-international armed conflict, hostilities must reach a minimum level of intensity and the non-state group must possess sufficient organisation; sporadic violence, riots and ordinary criminality do not automatically meet the threshold (ICRC, 2025). The Central Sahel situations examined here are principally non-international armed conflicts involving state forces and organised non-state armed groups, sometimes with external military involvement. Displacement refers to forced or compelled movement caused by conflict, violence, human-rights violations or disasters; the study distinguishes internal displacement from cross-border refugee movement (UNHCR, 2006; International Organization for Migration, 2024).

Political legitimacy refers to the justified acceptance of political authority and the belief that governing institutions have a right to rule (Peter, 2023; Levi, 2019). It is operationalised through four observable dimensions: input legitimacy, reflected in inclusion, participation and representation; process legitimacy, reflected in lawfulness, fairness and effective dispute resolution; output legitimacy, reflected in security and the provision of basic services; and evidence of consent or voluntary compliance. These indicators are related to, but distinct from, state capacity (the ability to implement decisions and provide services), political stability (the persistence of an order) and territorial control (the physical reach of state authority). A government may retain coercive control without being regarded as legitimate, while limited

capacity does not by itself prove a complete absence of legitimacy. Chapter Five therefore treats service failure, exclusion, administrative closure and the displacement of state authority as evidence relevant to legitimacy only when the source also identifies perceptions, consent, compliance or justified authority.

3.3 Theoretical Framework

3.3.1 Conflict Theory

3.3.1.1 Theory Evaluation (Background)

In exploring the socioeconomic and political impacts of armed conflict in the Central Sahel region, this study drew on two theories: conflict theory and structural violence theory. The conflict theory emerged from the work of Karl Marx in the 19th century, focusing on the dialectics of capitalism and class (Allan, 2006). Marx argued that society is divided into two classes: the owners of capital, the bourgeoisie, and the working class, the proletariat (Hayes, 2024). He further argued that because of this societal division, competition and conflict over limited resources arise between the two classes, leading to historical change through revolution (Hayes, 2024). In the early 20th century, Max Weber broadened the conflict theory beyond the analysis of societal inequality through class; he argued that conflict in a society arises from class, power, and status (Rossel, 2013).

3.3.1.2 Proponents of a theory

Emerged from the work of Karl Marx, the conflict theory was later expanded by theorists such as Max Weber and George Simmel. Max Weber expanded the discussion of theory to include the significance of other forms of power beyond economic factors, as argued by Karl Marx (Spencer and Lalgee, 2022). Weber's conflict theory posits that societies are defined by the system of power and organisation. It is those with supreme power over others, defined as the ability to control others, who are the source of inequality in a society (Spencer and Lalgee, 2022). Therefore, Weber believed that conflict stems from more than power alone; status and class also lead to inequality and conflict (Rossel, 2013). On the other hand, George Simmel's conflict theory emphasises the importance of understanding interactions between individuals that can lead to both conflict and unity within a society (Prayogi, 2023). It further argues that in conflict situations, interactions between emotionally powerful individuals can lead to solidarity bonds forming among others (Prayogi, 2023).

3.3.1.3 Key Principles and Relevance

Conflict theory directs attention to unequal distributions of power and resources and to the institutions through which dominant groups protect their interests (Allan, 2006; Rössel, 2013). Competition and inequality do not necessarily produce armed conflict. They generate grievances and unequal opportunities that may escalate when political entrepreneurs or armed organisations mobilise identities, when peaceful dispute-resolution channels are weak, when coercive responses intensify exclusion, or when actors can finance and organise violence. The causal sequence used in this study is therefore: unequal distribution or exclusion; grievance and contestation; mobilisation and exploitation by armed actors; violent escalation; and socioeconomic or political effects. Each link must be supported by evidence rather than assumed.

Conflict theory is used here as a conditional explanation of mobilisation, not as a claim that competition, revolution, war and armed conflict are interchangeable. In Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, disputes over land, water, political inclusion and state resources become relevant when institutions distribute access unequally or fail to resolve disputes and when armed actors convert grievances into recruitment, territorial control or violence. This interpretation also recognises limitations: conflict theory can overemphasise material competition, understate ideology and organisational agency, and treat social groups as more unified than they are. These limitations are addressed through country-specific evidence and through structural violence theory's focus on institutionalised harm.

In this study, this theory therefore helped explain how natural resources and competition over land and water are used as tools of armed conflict in the region. It helped explain how tensions, such as those between the Fulani pastoralists and Dogon farmers' communities, worsened. It further explained that competition over land and natural resources led to increased violence and conflict between the two groups, as each sought to control the resources (McGregor, 2017). For example, in Burkina Faso, competition and conflict over limited resources, such as land and water, between farmers and pastoralists in rural areas occur (Wolfel et al., 2024). This theory further revealed that non-state armed groups exploit resource conflicts for their own interests and to control territory. Evidently, the findings indicated that the JNIM and ISSP exploited resource conflicts and disputes (Gaye, 2018). It further indicated that conflict over resource control has been used by non-state armed groups and self-defence militias in both the northern and central Mali to expand their influence and territorial control (ICG, 2020; UNFPA, 2025; Gaye, 2018). This theory revealed how these conflicts, exploited by non-state armed

groups, led to socioeconomic impacts, including displacement, poor agricultural production, and food insecurity. Evidently, it was revealed that in Burkina Faso, over two million people were internally displaced as a result of terrorist threats, conflict and violence by non-state armed groups (ZOA, 2025). While in Mali, attacks by armed separatist groups against the government fuelled internal displacement in the northern part of the country (SIHMA, 2025; ACAPS, 2025).

Findings further revealed how conflicts over land and water between farmers and pastoralists led to poor agricultural production. This is evident across all three countries in the region, including Niger, where disruption to agricultural production was caused by farmer-pastoralist conflicts (Insecurity Insights, 2023). In turn, these conflicts led to the burning of greenery and the killing of pastoralists, farmers and fishers, disrupting livelihoods (Insecurity Insight, 2023). Whereas food insecurity is also a result of armed attacks and clashes for territorial control between non-state armed groups. This is evident in Mali, where clashes between armed groups, armed attacks, and robberies disrupted socioeconomic activities through livestock looting and the disruption of markets and agricultural production (FEWS NET, 2021; FSIN and GNAFC, 2023). This led to income losses and to households being unable to meet their food needs (FEWS NET, 2021; FSIN and GNAFC, 2023). Furthermore, under the theme of political impacts, the conflict theory helped interpret the subtheme of conflicts over resource control, as discussed.

3.3.2 Structural Violence Theory

3.3.2.1 Evaluation of a theory (Background)

Structural violence theory was introduced in 1969 by Johan Galtung for peace research, advocating a broader concept of violence beyond physical harm (Galtung, 1969). Galtung argued that structural violence greatly explains how societal structures and institutions systematically harm individuals, groups or communities by preventing them from meeting their essential needs (Rawlings and Low, 2020). This theory was introduced to distinguish between direct and structural, or indirect, violence (Galtung, 1969). Direct violence includes actions and observable actors, such as war, while structural or indirect violence focuses on how societal systems and institutions create inequality (Galtung, 1969). Structural violence theory views social structures such as culture, laws, the economy, politics, and religion as factors that hinder individuals, groups, and societies as a whole from thriving (Farmer et al., 2006).

3.3.2.2 Proponents of the theory

The structural violence theory was coined by Johan Galtung to explain how structures and institutions systematically harm individuals, social groups or communities by preventing them from meeting their basic needs (Rawlings and Low, 2020). It was later expanded by the medical anthropologist Paul Farmer, who applied the concept of structural violence to health and medicine (Lewis, 2025). Farmers' structural violence reflects how poverty, inequality, and political systems cause diseases and suffering (Lewis, 2025). It is also reflected through his work in Rwanda and Haiti, which highlighted how inequalities in the health system are rooted in social structures (Lewis, 2025). In his work in Haiti, he argued that Haitian citizens are faced with high risks of tuberculosis and AIDS due to the lack of access to health care and poverty, leading to the death of young adults (Farmer et al., 2006).

3.3.2.3 Key Assumptions and Relevance

Structural violence theory examines how social structures impact individuals by thwarting the fulfillment of basic needs. It further examines how systemic injustices and inequalities contribute to conflict and its implications (Lewis, 2021). It examines how social, economic, and political structures can negatively impact certain social groups and communities, and how the unequal distribution of power within these structures results in social and economic inequality (Indira Gandhi National Open University, 2017). Structural violence theory holds that violence or conflict is perpetrated through powerful institutions and systems within a society. The conflict or violence in a society is therefore propelled by sets of ideas, values, and beliefs that govern it (Waterhouse and Mentor-Lalu, 2023). This theory holds that violence can be verbal, physical, emotional, and institutional and manifest in policies that oppress people in societies (Waterhouse and Mentor-Lalu, 2023).

Therefore, this theory helped in understanding the root causes of systemic exclusion and inequalities in the communities of the three Central Sahel countries. This was revealed in the findings that in Burkina Faso, systemic exclusion and inequality are a result of neglect by the authority and marginalisation from power of some ethnic groups, such as the Fulani community, who represent a minority in Burkina Faso (Lamarche, 2023). The theory further clarified the forces that create and perpetuate inequalities at different levels of social structure, both within societies and among individuals. It helped understand the socioeconomic impacts of armed conflict, including food insecurity, inequalities, and limited access to education and healthcare. In Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, the findings revealed how armed conflict led to the lack of access to education and healthcare services, perpetuating the cycle of exclusion and

inequalities. Evidently, in Burkina Faso, insecurity led to forced displacement and school closures, affecting many students who are mostly girls and teachers who are either abducted, threatened or killed by armed groups (ACAPS, 2019; UNICEF, 2020). While on the lack of access to healthcare, in Mali, insecurity led to the closure of healthcare facilities such as hospitals due to direct attacks on hospitals by armed groups (WHOROA, 2024; UNICEF, 2025). It was also due to inadequate medical supplies resulting from looting by non-state armed groups and a shortage of staff, hindering people's access to healthcare (WHOROA, 2024; UNICEF, 2025).

This reflects how socioeconomic inequalities are linked to the dynamics of conflict in the Central Sahel. The structural violence theory further revealed how armed conflict worsened systemic inequalities and structural violence by causing more political instability in the Central Sahel, worsening the economies and disrupting the governance in the region. In addition, this theory was applied to the interpretation of the political impacts theme, which analysed five subthemes: ethnic tensions and marginalisation, conflicts over resource control, lack of legitimacy, state capacity deficits, and international interventions. For example, in the subthemes on ethnic tensions, marginalisation, and conflicts over resource control, findings revealed that colonial and postcolonial laws favoured agriculturalists over pastoralists in Mali (Hegazi, 2021). This reflected the unequal distribution of power, which leads to social and economic inequality (Hegazi, 2021). Whereas in Burkina Faso, structural violence was visible in government policies that favoured farmers over pastoralists, and government failures to resolve resource disputes (Gaye, 2018).

On the other hand, in Niger, structural violence is evident in state neglect, such as weak enforcement of land registration laws, which later contributed to conflicts over land control between farmers and pastoralists (UN-Habitat, 2022). Furthermore, this theory revealed that state capacity deficits are both a cause and a consequence of armed conflict in the Central Sahel. For example, in Burkina Faso, conflicts over resource control between farmers and pastoralists are structurally driven by failures in local governance and state administration, leading to a loss of legitimacy, trust, and a sense of injustice toward the state (FAO, 2021).

3.3.3 Relevance to the Study

Conflict theory and structural violence theory are complementary but not identical. Conflict theory explains how unequal power and distributive disputes may generate contestation and create opportunities for mobilisation. Structural violence theory explains how institutions and social arrangements produce avoidable harm even when no identifiable actor directly inflicts

violence. Direct attacks on civilians, schools or clinics are analysed as direct violence; systematic exclusion, discriminatory resource rules and the persistent denial of basic services are analysed as structural violence when a causal institutional pathway is demonstrated. Human security, state fragility and social inclusion were considered as alternatives, but they are used as supporting perspectives because they are broader descriptive frameworks and do not provide the same focused account of power, mobilisation and institutional harm required by the research questions.

The frameworks guide the research questions systematically. Research Question 1 uses conflict theory to examine how resources, exclusion, power and armed-group mobilisation interact. Research Question 2 uses both theories to distinguish direct conflict disruption from cumulative institutional deprivation. Research Question 3 operationalises legitimacy through input, process, output and consent indicators and uses structural violence to assess exclusion and unequal service access. Research Question 4 assesses interventions against stated objectives, implementation effects and local legitimacy, without assuming that continued conflict or eventual withdrawal alone proves failure. This framework is applied to the coded cross-case evidence in Chapter Five.

Theoretical limitations remain. Documentary evidence cannot establish individual motivation with the certainty available from interviews, and the theories do not by themselves isolate conflict effects from climate, economic or historical factors. The analysis therefore uses cautious causal language, reports contradictory and negative evidence, and distinguishes evidence-supported findings from policy inference.

3.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, the use of the theories, conflict theory and structural violence theory helped shape the desktop methodology used in this study by identifying relevant sources, collecting data, and analysing data. They further assisted in data interpretation by providing methods for understanding the data, identifying patterns, and connecting data findings to diverse theoretical ideas. The theories provided support for the study's conclusion and recommendations to policymakers and peacebuilders. This is to ensure they fully understand the dynamics of armed conflict, including its causes, perpetrators, and impacts in the Central Sahel region.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

This study explores the socioeconomic and political impacts of armed conflict in the Central Sahel region, particularly in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. It focuses on the impacts of armed conflict, such as terrorism, jihadist insurgency, resource conflicts, and ethnic tensions, on displacements, disrupted livelihoods, political legitimacy, governance, and international interventions. The study adopted a qualitative desktop approach to foster a subtle understanding of political and socioeconomic dynamics. This chapter outlines the methodological approach adopted to investigate the socioeconomic and political impacts of armed conflict in the Central Sahel region. It explains the research paradigm, design, and strategy, and details the processes of data collection, analysis, validity, reliability, and ethical considerations.

4.2 Research Paradigm

A research paradigm is a set of assumptions, ideas, biases, and beliefs that guide the research process (Ulz, 2023). It helps identify the approach to be used in conducting research and guides all aspects of research, including the study's aim, research questions, data collection instruments, and data analysis methods (Ulz, 2023). Therefore, given the study's focus on the socioeconomic and political impacts of armed conflict, the critical research paradigm was adopted. This paradigm holds a view on social justice. It seeks to address economic, social, and political issues, which in turn lead to conflict, social oppression, and struggles over power structures at whatever level they occur (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017). It enabled a deeper understanding of how structural issues, such as the unequal distribution of natural resources, land, and water, led to resource conflicts in the Central Sahel region (Dieng, 2022). It helped examine how inter-colonial interventions, such as France's Operation Barkhane and Serval, and Task Force Takuba in the Central Sahel region, shaped armed conflict, including terrorism, jihadist insurgencies, and ethnic and resource conflicts.

The critical paradigm shaped the research process rather than merely the choice of topic. It directed source selection towards evidence on exclusion, unequal resource distribution, marginalised communities and the distributional consequences of security policies. During coding, the researcher recorded whose interests and experiences were represented, which actors produced the evidence, and whether official categories obscured differential effects on displaced people, pastoralists, women, children or minority communities. Interpretation then

compared institutional claims with humanitarian, scholarly and local evidence and treated contradictions as analytical findings rather than discarding them.

4.3 Qualitative research methodology

A qualitative desktop-study method was adopted in conducting this study. A desktop study approach entails collecting data from existing sources such as websites, journals, books, and reports (Kiely, 2025). It is appropriate for this study because it enabled a broader collection, analysis, and presentation of existing literature, including international organisation reports, academic journals, and peer-reviewed books from credible sources on the Central Sahel region.

A qualitative research design was adopted in this study. It enabled a broader understanding of the socioeconomic and political impacts of armed conflict in the Central Sahel region by interpreting patterns and contextual factors in secondary data. A qualitative research design allows the researchers to directly collect data by observing behaviours or examining documents (Creswell and Creswell, 2023). It is an approach that explores and understands how groups or individuals give meaning to social issues (Creswell and Creswell, 2023).

A secondary qualitative design was appropriate because the research question required a regional comparison over time and because the study could draw on a substantial documentary record without exposing participants or the researcher to conflict-related risk. No interviews, observation or field access were undertaken. The design nevertheless has limitations: documentary sources reflect institutional mandates, unequal reporting capacity, language availability and changing measurement practices. These constraints are addressed through a source hierarchy, triangulation, dated claims, an explicit Niger evidence limitation and cautious causal inference (Cheong et al., 2023).

4.4 Research Strategy

A comparative case-study design was used to analyse Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger as three country cases connected by the Liptako-Gourma conflict system. The unit of analysis is the country-level socioeconomic or political effect of armed conflict, while the units of observation are coded documentary claims tied to a country, period, source and outcome. Comparison improves understanding by holding the outcome indicators constant while allowing political institutions, conflict geography and intervention histories to vary. The common period is January 2012 to May 2026. The comparison uses displacement, agricultural disruption, food insecurity, access to education, access to healthcare, ethnic marginalisation, resource governance, political legitimacy, state capacity and international intervention as common

indicators. This design identifies convergent patterns, meaningful differences, contradictory evidence and gaps; it does not attribute every contemporaneous social problem to conflict.

The three cases were selected because they share cross-border armed-group activity and the Liptako-Gourma zone but differ in administrative reach, intervention histories and the availability of documentary evidence. The design therefore combines regional-system comparison with within-case contextual analysis. Objective 1 is addressed through the causal and actor literature. Objectives 2 and 3 are organised under two major outcome families: socioeconomic impacts and political impacts. Objective 4 is treated as a separate intervention domain rather than being collapsed into political impacts, although intervention consequences may affect legitimacy and capacity.

4.5 Document Universe

The document universe comprised potentially relevant English-language academic publications, books and chapters, intergovernmental and governmental documents, reports from established humanitarian and research organisations, policy briefs, datasets and reputable news reports concerning Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger or the cross-border Central Sahel from 2012 to May 2026. The analytical population was therefore documentary rather than human. Priority was given to ACLED and official or intergovernmental sources such as the AU, ECOWAS, UN agencies, the IMF and the World Bank; peer-reviewed scholarship; and established research institutes. News reports were used only for time-sensitive events and were triangulated against higher-tier sources where possible.

4.6 Documentary Corpus

The final corpus comprised 244 distinct sources. The corpus included peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books and chapters, official and intergovernmental reports and communiqués, humanitarian and policy reports, conflict and displacement datasets, research-institute analyses and a limited set of reputable news reports. Inclusion in the bibliography indicates that a source informed the analysis, conceptual framework or methodology; uncited and duplicate items were removed during the two-way audit. Because the study is qualitative, corpus adequacy was assessed by relevance, cross-case coverage and thematic saturation rather than statistical representativeness.

To ensure the sources are credible and relevant to the study, the CRAAP steps were followed. To ensure currency, the Illinois State University Library identified copyright, publication, and posting dates (Illinois State University Library, 2025). While ensuring relevance, the study

gathered information applicable to the armed conflict in the Central Sahel region and its impacts. Authority was determined by identifying whether the author or publisher of the source is knowledgeable, examining the author's credentials and experience, and identifying the organisation the source falls under (Illinois State University Library, 2025). Accuracy of the source was determined by the truthfulness, reliability, and correctness of the content (Illinois State University Library, 2025). It was also through the academic and professional language used in writing the information and in checking whether the claims and facts are cited within the text in a bibliography (Illinois State University Library, 2025). Lastly, the purpose of the source was determined by identifying why the information is written and exists, whether it exists to persuade or inform, as well as how the conclusions of the study were presented (Illinois State University Library, 2025).

4.7 Document Selection and Sampling Strategy

Purposive documentary sampling was used to select sources that directly addressed armed conflict, one or more study countries and at least one research objective. Inclusion criteria were: publication between January 2012 and May 2026, except foundational theory or method texts; identifiable authorship or institutional responsibility; sufficient methodological or evidential detail; and relevance to the common indicators. Exclusion criteria were: duplicates; unverifiable or promotional webpages; opinion pieces without supporting evidence; sources outside the period with no foundational value; items that did not distinguish the Central Sahel cases; and claims that could not be dated or traced to an underlying source. French-language material was included only where a reliable English version or translation was available. News and advocacy material was retained only where it supplied time-sensitive context and could be triangulated.

Screening proceeded in four stages: title review, abstract or executive-summary review, full-text eligibility assessment and coding. The researcher recorded the country, year, source type, theme, key claim, underlying data source and evidential limitations. Where several reports reproduced the same statistic, the chain was traced to its originating dataset and treated as one evidential basis.

To address biased source selection, the study employed a triangulation approach. It is used to enhance validity and credibility by combining multiple data sources, methods, investigators, and theories (Hassan, 2024). It was therefore used to minimise biased selection by gathering information from multiple sources to cross-verify it. International organisations such as the AU, ECOWAS, and UNHCR, EU reports, peer-reviewed academic books and journals, and

online articles from news outlets such as Al Jazeera were cross-verified. This enabled a broader and more balanced understanding of the armed conflict in the Central Sahel region and its socioeconomic and political impacts.

4.8 Data Collection

Searches were conducted in JSTOR, Taylor & Francis Online, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink and the repositories of relevant organisations. Search strings combined geographic and outcome terms, including: "Central Sahel" AND "armed conflict"; (Mali OR Burkina Faso OR Niger) AND (displacement OR agriculture OR "food insecurity" OR education OR healthcare); and the country terms with (legitimacy OR governance OR "state capacity" OR intervention). Backward reference searching was used to locate foundational work and the originating source of frequently repeated statistics. The search and screening cut-off was 31 May 2026.

The corpus, screening notes and coding framework were stored in password-protected folders on the researcher's computer, with an encrypted USB copy retained as a secondary backup rather than the sole storage location. File names recorded author or institution, year, country and theme. The material contains no participant identifiers. It will be retained for five years after completion in accordance with the University's research-data requirements and then securely deleted.

4.9 Data Analysis

Structured thematic analysis followed six documented stages: familiarisation with eligible documents; initial coding of country, period, source type, actor, outcome and mechanism; grouping of codes into candidate themes; cross-case review for consistency, contradictions and negative cases; definition and naming of final themes; and interpretive writing linked to the research questions and theoretical framework (Naeem et al., 2023). A codebook is provided in Appendix A. The analysis distinguished a source's reported finding from the dissertation's interpretation and recorded the quality and limitations of each evidential claim.

The final hierarchy was kept stable throughout the analysis. Objective 1 addressed causes and parties. Objective 2 formed the socioeconomic outcome family: displacement, agricultural disruption, food insecurity, access to education and access to healthcare. Objective 3 formed the political outcome family: ethnic marginalisation, resource governance, political legitimacy and state capacity. Objective 4 formed the intervention domain: military, humanitarian, diplomatic and regional measures assessed against their stated objectives and observed effects.

Theory was applied after the evidence was coded so that the findings were not forced into predetermined categories.

The two principal theories were used as interpretive tools across these domains. Conflict theory was applied where the evidence identified unequal power or resource distribution, mobilisation and escalation. Structural violence theory was applied where an institutional arrangement produced avoidable, patterned harm, including exclusion or systematic loss of access to basic services. The intervention domain remained analytically separate, although sanctions, military operations and institutional withdrawal were examined for their consequences for legitimacy, capacity and socioeconomic welfare.

4.10 Trustworthiness and Evidential Quality

Qualitative trustworthiness was assessed through credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability rather than being described first as conventional validity and reliability and then replaced. Credibility was strengthened through source triangulation, preference for traceable data and retention of contradictory evidence. Transferability was supported by detailed country context and explicit indicator definitions. Dependability was strengthened through the documented search, screening and coding procedure. Confirmability was addressed through an audit trail that separated source claims, codes and interpretation and through reflexive notes on the researcher's assumptions (Shenton, 2004).

4.11 Ethical Considerations

The study used only publicly available documentary material and involved no human participants or identifiable private data. UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee approval was obtained before analysis commenced; the official approval reference number and date remain recorded in the ethics approval letter held in the postgraduate file. Ethical practice included accurate attribution, respect for intellectual property, cautious reporting of fatalities and displacement, avoidance of stigmatising language and transparent acknowledgement of source limitations (Tripathy, 2013). Because no participant identities were collected, confidentiality protections applicable to interviews were not required.

4.12 Conclusion

Overall, the methodological approaches employed in this study ensured coherence between the paradigm, design, and data analysis. By aligning the critical research paradigm with a qualitative design and systematically applying the thematic analysis, the study's research

questions were effectively answered. This methodological coherence strengthened the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings and provided a clear approach for understanding and exploring the socioeconomic and political impacts of armed conflict. Therefore, the study's approach provided rigorous and responsive insight into its objectives.

CHAPTER FIVE: DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

5.1 Introduction

Using a qualitative desktop-study method, this study explores the socioeconomic and political impacts of armed conflict in the Central Sahel region, focusing on the cases of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. It adopted the critical research paradigm, which holds a view on social justice and seeks to address economic, social, and political issues (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017). It argues that, in turn, these issues lead to conflict, social oppression, and struggles over power structures at whichever level they may occur (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017). It therefore allows for a deeper understanding of how structural issues such as unequal distribution of natural resources, including land and water, led to resource conflict in the Central Sahel region (Dieng, 2022). This study further used a comparative case study to analyse and compare the three Central Sahel countries, highlighting similarities and differences in the impacts of armed conflict, including jihadist insurgencies and terrorism. Instruments of data collection include documentary reviews of official documents such as international organisations' reports, policy briefs, journal articles, peer-reviewed books and news articles. This chapter uses a deductive, thematic analysis as a data analysis technique, which aligns with the case study and the adopted critical research paradigm. Consequently, two broad themes emerged from the analysis of the literature data, in consonance with the research questions. These thematic pillars address research questions 2, 3, and 4, which constitute the core of this dissertation. These main themes are Socioeconomic Impacts and Political Impacts. Under these two broad themes are several subthemes to be discussed in detail in this discussion chapter, as presented in Table 5.1. The study addressed research question 1 in chapter two, the literature review.

Therefore, this chapter outlines the study's findings on the socioeconomic and political impacts of armed conflict. The study result and analysis are thematically structured to address research objectives that focus on examining the socioeconomic impacts of displacement and disrupted livelihoods caused by armed conflict; investigating the effects of armed conflict on political legitimacy and governance in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso; and assessing the role and effectiveness of international interventions in addressing armed conflict in the region. This chapter begins with a concise summary of the main findings, highlighting the most significant result. It then analyses and interprets the findings, situating them with existing literature and identifying similarities, differences, or contradictions between the results and prior research. Lastly, the chapter provides an in-depth explanation of the key findings. It evaluates the extent

to which the research questions have been addressed, thereby laying the foundations for the conclusions and recommendations in the following chapter, Chapter Six.

Cross-case Comparative Framework

The comparison uses a common observation period (January 2012 to May 2026), a shared unit of analysis (country-level conflict effects), and the same outcome indicators across Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. Evidence was prioritised in the following order: peer-reviewed research and official or intergovernmental datasets; reports from established research institutes and humanitarian organisations; and reputable news reports used only for time-sensitive context and triangulated against higher-tier evidence. The matrix is an analytical guide rather than a claim that conflict is the sole cause of each outcome; where climate shocks, pre-existing institutional weakness or economic pressures also contributed, those factors are explicitly treated as interacting explanations.

Common indicator	Mali	Burkina Faso	Niger
Displacement	Internal and cross-border displacement is concentrated in northern and central conflict zones; host communities face service and livelihood pressure.	More than two million internally displaced persons were reported by the authorities as of 31 March 2023; the date is retained to avoid presenting an undated current estimate.	Conflict in Tillabéri, Tahoua and Diffa drives internal displacement while Niger also hosts refugees from neighbouring states.
Agricultural disruption	Insecurity, livestock theft, market closures and restricted access to land reduce production in Mopti, Ségou and northern areas.	Displacement, insecurity and restrictions on mobility reduce cereal production and access to grazing land.	Farmer-pastoralist conflict, border insecurity and restrictions on inputs and markets disrupt crop and livestock production.
Food insecurity	Conflict-related market disruption and production losses interact with price shocks and climatic stress.	Insecurity, displacement and market disruption constrain availability and household access to food.	Conflict, climate shocks and the effects of regional border and financial restrictions interact to worsen food access.
Education	Attacks, threats, school closures and displacement affect access; conflict and floods are treated as distinct but interacting drivers.	School closures, threats and displacement affect learners and teachers; overcrowding in host areas reduces educational quality.	UNICEF reported 987 schools closed and 444,290 learners affected in 2024; conflict and climate-related disasters, particularly floods, both contributed.
Healthcare	Attacks, looting, staff flight and access constraints reduce service availability in conflict-affected areas.	In January 2024, 426 of 2,117 health facilities were closed, 363 operated at minimum capacity and 126 had been vandalised (IMF, 2024).	Attacks, displacement, climate shocks and supply constraints affect facilities, ambulances, health workers and humanitarian access.
Legitimacy	Input deficits (exclusion), process deficits (weak dispute resolution) and output deficits (security and service delivery) weaken	Territorial contestation, reliance on auxiliary forces, unequal local governance and service disruption weaken input, process and output legitimacy.	Border-region insecurity, disputed land governance and service gaps weaken state authority; evidence is thinner than for Mali and Burkina Faso.

Common indicator	Mali	Burkina Faso	Niger
	voluntary acceptance of state authority.		
State capacity	Closure or absence of administrative institutions and limited territorial reach constrain service delivery and dispute resolution.	Contested territory, closed facilities and weak administrative reach constrain security and public services.	Porous borders, uneven administrative presence and insecurity constrain the state's ability to provide protection and services.
International intervention	MINUSMA, French operations, ECOWAS measures and Russian security support produced mixed outcomes and legitimacy costs.	French and other external security operations and regional measures had limited, uneven effects and generated political resistance.	EU, French and US missions, followed by withdrawal demands and regional sanctions, produced mixed security and socioeconomic consequences.

Evidence limitation: source coverage is not symmetrical. Mali and Burkina Faso are better documented than Niger, especially for ethnic tensions, local resource governance and political legitimacy. Country comparisons therefore distinguish a documented absence of an effect from an absence of sufficiently comparable evidence.

Table 5.1: THEMATIC PILLAR FROM DATA ANALYSIS

MAIN THEMES	THEME 1: SOCIOECONOMIC IMPACTS	THEME 2: POLITICAL IMPACTs
SUBTHEMES	(a.) Displacement	(a.) Ethnic Tensions and Marginalization
	(b.) Poor Agricultural Production	(b.) Conflicts over Resource control
	(c.) Food Insecurity	(c.) Lack of Political Legitimacy
	(d.) Lack of Access to Education	(d.) State Capacity Deficits
	(e.) Lack of Access to Health Care Services	(e.) International Interventions

Compiled by the candidate: Field Work, 2025

5.2 Summary of Findings

The Findings are presented under two major themes that emerged: socioeconomic impacts and political impacts. Each of these themes comprises five subthemes that highlight the most important patterns observed in the data.

5.2.1 Socioeconomic Impacts

5.2.1.1 Displacement

Burkina Faso

Reports highlight that insurgent attacks by non-state armed groups such as the ISSP and JNIM have led to extensive forced displacement in the northern, eastern and central parts of Burkina Faso (FEWS NET, 20221; MSF, 2020; MSF, 2022). Escalating violence has led to an increase in internal and external displacement; populations are forced to flee their homes in search of safety (ACAPS, 2019; ICRC, 2022). In 2025, over two million people were internally displaced as a result of terrorist threats, conflict and violence by non-state armed groups (ZOA, 2025). Farming has been consistently noted as the most affected by mass displacement due to worsening armed conflict in the northern and eastern areas of the country. Armed conflict hindered agricultural activities, causing large-scale displacement and limiting the area planted to cereal crops (UNSC, 2022; FSIN and GNAFC, 2023). Reports have further highlighted that mass displacement caused by the escalation of conflict has disrupted livelihoods, agriculture, transhumance, and markets (FSIN and GNAFC, 2024).

Mali

Reports have consistently indicated that Mali ranks among the top three countries with the largest displacement triggered by armed group conflicts (SIHMA, 2025; OCHA, 2025). For example, SIHMA (2025) highlights that rebellion attacks against the government by armed separatist groups have fuelled internal displacement in the northern part of the country (SIHMA, 2025; ACAPS, 2025). It is further highlighted that the northern and central regions are the most affected by displacement due to conflicts that deepen vulnerabilities and limit access to basic services such as education and healthcare (SIHMA, 2025; OCHA, 2025; ACAPS, 2025). Protracted conflict and violence have led to internal and external displacement. Internally, people are displaced in other regions, whereas externally, they find refuge in neighbouring countries such as Niger, Burkina Faso and Mauritania (ACAPS, 2024; UNHCR, 2025). Settling in, already struggling with limited or no access to basic services, poverty and fragile host communities, displaced communities remain more vulnerable (UNHCR, 2024; ACAPS, 2024).

Niger

The findings from the reports indicate that Niger is located at the crossroads of borders with Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad, Nigeria, and Libya, all of which are facing insecurity (UN IOM, 2025; SIHMA, 2025). Therefore, they indicated that Niger's displacement is a result of spillover conflict violence from these countries and internal conflict driven by non-state armed

groups (SIHMA, 2025; UNHCR, 2024; UN IOM, 2025). The reports further highlighted that, due to Niger's location, it remains one of the main countries hosting refugees and asylum seekers from West and Central Africa. The findings underscore Tillabéri, Maradi, Tahoua, and Diffa as the most conflict-affected regions, with mass displacement emerging as a recurring consequence (SIHMA, 2025; UNHCR, 2024). Consequently, conflict has disrupted agricultural production, trade, market-related activities, livelihoods, and transhumance networks, while also undermining access to basic services such as healthcare and education, thereby forcing people to flee (Insecurity Insight, 2023; UNSC, 2022).

5.2.1.2 Poor Agricultural Production

Burkina Faso

The UNSC (2022) highlights that most of Burkina Faso's population resides in rural areas and relies on agricultural and pastoral activities, which also contribute to the country's GDP. The findings from the reports consistently indicated that worsening armed conflict driven by attacks of non-state armed groups such as JNIM and ISGS, particularly in its northern and eastern parts, have hindered agricultural activities, leading to the loss and limitation of cereal crop planting land, and mass displacement (FEWS NET, 2022; UNSC, 2022; FSIN and GNAFC, 2023). Not only do armed groups hinder agricultural activities, they also loot livestock and restrict farmers' and herders' mobility to access their sources of food and income, negatively affecting agro-pastoral activities (FEWS NET, 2021; FEWS NET, 2022; FSIN and GNAFC, 2023). Reports further indicate that displaced people due to conflict no longer have access to their agricultural and pastoral land, leaving them dependent on food aid and fuelling the food crisis (ICRC, 2022; FEWS NET, 2022). Therefore, as a result of insecurity, between 30 percent and 50 percent of cultivatable land in northern Burkina Faso has been lost (Moubarak and Pigru, 2024).

Mali

Reports indicated that armed attacks and clashes between non-state armed groups, targeted assassinations, and robberies disrupted agricultural activities (FEWS NET, 2021). Armed conflict in the central and northern Mali has also made it difficult for families to access pastures, fields, and regular transhumance routes for food and to sell livestock, leading to a loss of livelihoods and a food crisis (FAO, 2022; World Food Programme, 2020). Conflict has led to the closure of various rural markets, leaving families unable to purchase or sell agricultural or

pastoral products, disrupting agricultural production and the livelihoods of subsistence farming households (FAO, 2022). The literature further highlighted that in regions such as Mopti, conflict between farmers and herders, which armed groups exploit, has led to restrictions and reductions in grazing and cultivable agricultural land (International Crisis Group, 2020; Delgado et al., 2023). On the other hand, in Mali's Liptako-Gourma tri-border region, insecurity has led to the desertion of 80 percent of cultivatable land across one hundred villages (Moubarak and Pigru, 2024).

Niger

Reports indicate that worsening conflict and threat of violence in some of Niger's regions, such as Tillabéri and Tahoua, have led to the disruption of the population's livelihoods due to the inaccessible agricultural land caused by restrictions by armed groups, and internal displacement of villages (ICRC, 2020; Insecurity Insight and SHCC, 2023). Agricultural production is further affected by farmer-pastoralists conflicts, resulting in the burning of greenery, and the killing of pastoralists, farmers and fishers, disrupting livelihoods (Insecurity Insight, 2023). It has also been highlighted that resurgence attacks by non-state armed groups disrupted agricultural activities, markets, and trade routes, and resulted in the closure of borders, leaving farmers without access to fertilizers, seeds, and markets (FSIN and GNAFC, 2023; FSIN, 2025). Worsening armed conflict and insecurity across the borders of Lake Chad Basin, Liptako-Gourma and the central parts that border Nigeria have continued to hinder agricultural activities, the delivery of humanitarian aid and also caused mass displacement (UNSC, 2022).

5.2.1.3 Food Insecurity

Burkina Faso

The report's findings highlight that Burkina Faso faces a food crisis due to increased conflict and displacement (IDMC, 2024; FSIN and GNAFG, 2023). An increase in displacement caused by conflicts and violence is aligned with an increase in food insecurity (IDMC, 2024). Findings further indicate that the Centre-Nord, Sahel, Est and Boucle de Mouhoun are the most food-insecure regions due to conflicts that disrupt livelihoods and markets, leading to high food prices and limiting the population's food access (FSIN and GNAFS, 2024; FSIN and GNAFC, 2023). On the other hand, blockades by non-state armed groups led to major constraints on humanitarian aid, including food and other aid supplies, as well as water deliveries, worsening

sanitation and water conditions, and contributing to poor agricultural production and increasing food insecurity, especially in northern provinces (IDMC, 2024). The deteriorating security situation has led to the loss of livestock, disruptions to agriculture and pastoralism, and to commercial activities, affecting food security (FEWS NET, 2021).

Mali

Reports indicate that since Mali's 2012 crisis, its population has been faced with food insecurity each year as a result of market disruptions from fear of attacks by non-state armed groups, disrupting livelihoods (World Food Programme, 2019; African Development Bank, 2022). Some reports, such as the Africa Development Bank (2022), also indicated that food insecurity in Mali is exacerbated by an increase in food prices and oil prices as a result of the Ukraine-Russian war. Clashes between armed groups, armed attacks, and robberies disrupted socioeconomic activities through livestock looting and disruptions to market and agricultural production, leading to income losses and households unable to meet their food needs (FEWS NET, 2021; FSIN and GNAFC, 2023). The Liptako-Gourma authority area, consisting of Mopti, Gao, Menaka, Timbuktu, Taodenit and Kidal regions, is highlighted as the most insecure area due to worsening conflicts by non-state armed groups that disrupt the delivery of humanitarian food aid for affected households, hampering them from meeting the non-food and food aid (UN Security Council, 2022; FSIN and GNAFC, 2023; World Food Programme and FAO, 2024). The literature also identifies that food insecurity has resulted from intercommunal conflicts between herders and farmers, such as the Fulani herders and Dogon farmers conflict, leading to farmers being unable to access farming fields near Fulani villages (Delgado et al., 2023; International Crisis Group, 2020).

Niger

The findings from the reports highlighted that the imposed economic sanctions and restricted cross-border movements by the ECOWAS following the July 2023 Coup d'etat, alongside conflicts, led to an estimation of 3.3 million people to be acutely food insecure due to shortages and increased food prices, and suspensions of food aid deliveries (Insecurity Insight, 2023; UN IOM, 2024). Reports such as Insecurity Insight (2023) further indicated that the most insecure regions include Tillabéri, Diffa, and Maradi due to farmer-herder conflicts that led to the burning of granaries and restrictions on farmers' and herders' ability to access their farmlands for livestock grazing, growing, and harvesting crops. An increasing number of acutely insecure

people is also a result of flooding and escalating conflicts, which lead to the damage of assets, livestock, and crops, as well as the high food prices linked to the Ukraine-Russian war (FSIN and GNAFC, 2023). On the other hand, insecurity and conflict in the Lake Chad Basin, the Liptako-Gourma region, and the central parts bordering Nigeria hinder agricultural activities and humanitarian aid deliveries, as well as mass displacement, which is linked to food insecurity, epidemics, and malnutrition (UNSC, 2022; IDMC, 2024).

5.2.1.4 Lack of Access to Education

Burkina Faso

The reviewed literature consistently indicates that recurrent attacks and class disruption by non-state armed groups in Burkina Faso have led to the closure of most schools, violating children's rights to access to education (Lakica, 2023; ACAPS, 2017). Burkina Faso's education is in crisis due to armed conflict, violence, and attacks against teachers, schools and students in its regions, reducing education quality and putting many affected students behind in their studies (Lakica, 2023). The findings from the reports further indicate that insecurity has led to forced displacement and school closures, affecting many students who are mostly girls and teachers who are either abducted, threatened or killed by armed groups, especially in the regions such as the Sahel Centre-Nord, Est and Boucle du Mouhoan (ACAPS, 2019; UNICEF, 2020). The destruction and occupation of education facilities by armed jihadist groups affects safe learning opportunities for students, increasing the rate of out-of-school children, making them vulnerable to early marriage, child labour and recruitment into armed groups (Marshall and Tiendrebeogo, 2023).

Mali

The findings from the reports highlight that direct explosive attacks and threats against students, schools and teachers hindered access to education (ACAPS, 2025; UNSC, 2022). Lack of access to education is also due to the looting and burning of school equipment and schools, abuse, abduction and killing of teachers, and threats against students and teachers, leading to school closures in regions such as Timbuktu, Mopti, Gao, and Kidal (UNSC, 2022; UNICEF, 2024). Reports further indicate that Mali's education sector is affected by both climate-induced disasters and conflict, which disrupt learning opportunities, leading to rising school dropout rates and reduced access to education in its northern and central regions (UNICEF, 2025aa; UNICEF, 2025ab). Lack of access to education is also a result of conflict,

which led to displacement, where some schools were closed to be occupied by IDPs, and some host schools' capacity was strained by IDP children attending (UNICEF, 2025a). Blockages and cuts in fuel supplies by Islamist armed groups in Bamako further affected access to education, as all schools and universities were temporarily shut down due to disruptions in fuel supply, which affected the transportation of teachers and students (Allegrozzi, 2025).

Niger

The literature indicates that the lack of access to education in Niger is a result of conflict and climate-related disasters, which contributed to 987 school closures affecting 444,290 learners in 2024, preventing them from attending schools in regions such as Tahoua, Diffa, and Tillabéri (Marshall and Tiendrebeogo, 2023; UNICEF, 2025d). The findings from the reports further indicate that the lack of access to education disrupts learning and leads to increased risks of children out of school to child labour and early marriage for girl children (UNICEF, 2025d; Baron and Calaycay, 2024). Insecurity linked with displacement led to the prevention of both refugee and IDP children from accessing education due to children facing attacks from armed groups on their way to schools and in school yards (Baron and Calaycay, 2024). Mental and physical trauma experienced by children during conflicts and displacement also poses as a hindering factor on student attendance and focus in class. In contrast, displacement also leaves many children without access to essential documents, such as birth certificates, required to start school (Popova, 2023). The findings also indicate that lack of access to education is due to the use of schools by the Nigerien Defence Force as a temporary base, turning schools into attack targets by non-state armed groups, hindering children and youth from attending school, while also putting their safety and teachers at risk (GCPEA, 2020; Baron and Calaycay, 2024).

5.2.1.5 Lack of Access to Healthcare

Burkina Faso

The findings from the reports indicate that the lack of access to healthcare is due to escalating insecurity driven by conflict between the state military and non-state armed groups, hindering many families from accessing medical care (IFRC, 2024; ACAPS, 2017; MSF, 2020). Insecurity has also led to the closure of healthcare facilities, as a result of non-state armed groups who burn health centres and steal medicine and medical supplies (ACAPS, 2019; World Bank, 2021). Reports further indicate that insecurity threatens the functioning of healthcare centres and the mobility required to reach remaining functional centres, due to the dangers of

travel, restrictions, and security checks on moving cars imposed by non-state armed groups (World Bank, 2021; ACAPS, 2019). Due to weakened healthcare systems by violence and insecurity, alongside weak epidemiological surveillance, there has been a rise in diseases such as measles and cholera (UNICEF, 2023; Health Cluster, 2025). A rise in insecurity has led to the fleeing of healthcare workers, especially in rural areas, which are mostly affected by armed conflict (Health Cluster, 2025). Insecurity severely affects support for pregnant women and GBV survivors, and access to essential services such as emergency care and vaccination (Health Cluster, 2025; ICRC, 2019).

Mali

Reviewed literature indicates that armed groups such as the JNIM and ISSP have been involved in attacks on healthcare facilities, looting of medicines, and attacks on ambulances, hindering the provision of medical care, and leading to the death of patients (UNSC, 2022; Degni, 2015). The findings from the reports further highlight that access to healthcare has been hindered by attacks and kidnappings of healthcare workers, hijackings of ambulances, as well as the looting of medical supplies by non-state armed groups (Insecurity Insights and SHCC, 2022). The most affected regions are Mopti, Menaka, Gao, Sikasso and Timbuktu (Insecurity Insights and SHCC, 2022). Insecurity has led to the closure of healthcare facilities such as hospitals through direct attacks on hospitals by non-state armed groups, inadequate medical supplies and a shortage of staff, hindering people from accessing healthcare (WHOROA, 2024; UNICEF, 2025a). Armed conflict has also led women to face difficulties in accessing healthcare, as healthcare facilities no longer functioned normally, and an ambulance carrying a pregnant woman was shot at, especially in the northern regions of Mali (Degni, 2015; Doctors Without Borders, 2023). Armed conflict further hindered access to healthcare for women and children faced with serious illnesses such as malaria and measles (UNICEF, 2024).

Niger

The findings from the reports indicate that the lack of access in Niger is due to health crises worsened by ongoing conflicts, economic instability, and climate shocks (UNICEF, 2025d; UNFPA, 2025). Armed attacks on healthcare centres, such as a reproductive centre, led to their suspension, causing a decrease in assisting in childbirth deliveries and a rise in home births (UNFPA, 2025). Lack of access to health care is also due to non-state armed groups such as ISWAP and ISSP, who loot medical supplies from healthcare centres, hijacking ambulances

and kidnapping healthcare workers (SHC and Insecurity Insight and SHCC 2023; Doutchi, et.al., 2024). Armed conflict violence has also disrupted the functioning of health systems, hindered access to abortion facilities for rape victims, and led local healthcare workers to flee to safer places, abandoning their posts (Doutchi et al., 2024).

5.2.1.6 Synthesis of Socioeconomic Impacts

Across the Central Sahel region countries, Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, armed conflict led to socioeconomic impacts that were demonstrated in a compounding crisis. People were displaced, both internally and externally, with their livelihoods disrupted, worsening the already fragile agricultural systems. Poor agricultural production, coupled with high food prices, closed markets, and limited access to staple goods, contributed to food insecurity. Armed conflicts further hindered access to basic services such as education, whereby schools were burned, students and teachers attacked or threatened, leading to them fleeing into safer places where they also faced difficulties in accessing education. Access to health was also affected through attacks on healthcare facilities, healthcare workers, looting of medical supplies and the burning and hijacking of ambulances. Therefore, these findings reveal how armed conflict undermines livelihoods, essential survival needs and human capital and development, deepening long-term effects.

5.2.2 Political Impacts

5.2.2.1 Ethnic Tensions and Marginalisation

Burkina Faso

Reviewed literature indicates that rising violence against civilians is ethnic and religious identity-based, driven by non-state armed groups (Wolfel et.al., 2024; Doukhan, 2025). Ethnic tensions and intercommunal conflicts between ethnic groups, such as the Fulani herders and Dogon Farmers, led to violence and distrust between groups, which is then exploited by terrorist groups in order to expand their influence (Doukhan, 2025). The findings from the reports further highlight that ethnic tensions arise from historical grievances, political manipulations and resource competition, such as land and water; they can also be traced back to the colonial era, where the French colonial government favoured certain groups over others, leading to conflict (MexicoHistorico, 2025; Lamarche, 2023). The neglect by authority and marginalisation from power of ethnic groups such as the Fulani community, which represents

a minority of Burkina Faso, often leads to violent attacks against them from other ethnic groups and state security forces because of the perception of being represented by armed groups (Lamarche, 2023; ACAPS, 2019). It has also been indicated that marginalisation and ethnic tensions therefore exacerbate conflicts through increasing resource competition and intensifying violence, displacement, and driving social division (Abdel-Latef and EL-Gamal, 2024).

Mali

The literature reviewed indicates that both colonial and post-colonial rule prioritised agriculture and excluded pastoralism, as well as the increasing grievances between and within groups, such as Fulani and Dogon, leading to the creation and growth of self-defence militias (Hegazi et al., 2021; Anyalebechi, 2024). Marginalisation of ethnic groups, particularly the Tuareg and Fulani, by the government, which exacerbates conflict over natural resources, drives these groups to join jihadist groups who attack agriculturalists, exacerbating the cycle of hatred and violence between ethnic groups (Mbaye, 2020; Bennouna and Bonfiglioli, 2025). Other report findings highlight that violence between farmers and herders is primarily driven by competition over natural resources resulting from climate change, rather than by ethnicity (Bennouna and Bonfiglioli, 2025). The literature further indicates that recurring military coups have exacerbated ethnic tensions, further destabilising the country (Anyalebechi, 2024; Sauter, 2024). The instability further leads to retaliation between ethnic groups and communal violence, which further deepens ethnic divisions (Anyalebechi, 2024).

Niger

The findings from the reports indicate that climate change is one of the factors that drives ethnic violence between ethnic groups, through competition over access to water and land (Climate Diplomacy, n.d). Unlike farmers, pastoralists suffer from neglect due to a lack of enforcement of land use, taxation, poverty, and cattle raiding (Pflaum, 2021; UN-Habitat, 2022). In turn, their grievances are later exploited by non-state armed groups who exacerbate ethnic tensions (Pflaum, 2021; UN-Habitat, 2022). Ethnic tensions are also driven by clashes over access to water, grazing land, and political representation (Ellis and Cazemier, 2024).

5.2.2.2 Conflicts Over Resource Control

Burkina Faso

The literature indicates that almost all regions of Burkina Faso are affected by conflicts over the exploitation of natural resources, such as land and water, due to tensions over access and control (FAO, 2021; Gaye, 2018). Other reports further highlight that climate change is a factor contributing to conflicts over land use and access to water between farmers and herders, particularly in rural areas (Wolfel et al., 2024; Gaye, 2018; Sourabie, 2023). Government policies that favour farmers over herders and the government's failure to resolve land disputes between farmers and herders lead to the exploitation of disputes and grievances by non-state armed groups (Gaye, 2018). Findings indicate that the exploitation of resource conflicts by non-state armed groups therefore led to violent conflicts that resulted in killings of civilians, displacement and disruptions in livelihood, especially for herders (Brugger and Zongo, 2023). Violent conflicts directly affect the country's security by undermining its governance and legitimacy (Sourabie, 2023; FAO, 2021).

Mali

The literature indicates that ethnic groups such as the Fulani, who are herders, and the Dogon, who are farmers, have conflicting access to farmland, water, and land rights (Sauter, 2024; UN-Habitat, 2022). The conflicts between herders and farmers are a result of the government's marginalisation of herders and its policies (UN-Habitat, 2022; NUPI and SIPRI, 2021). It has further been indicated that conflicts have escalated due to the presence of non-state armed groups and self-defence militias, who exploit conflicts over natural resources such as land and water (UN-Habitat, 2022; Hegazi et al., 2021; ICG, 2020). Furthermore, conflicts over resource control have been used by non-state armed groups and self-defence militias in both the northern and central parts of Mali to expand their influence and territorial control, undermining the government of Mali and increasing insecurity (ICG, 2020; UNFPA, 2025; Gaye, 2018). Findings further highlight that climate change exacerbates competition over natural resources between herders and farmers, further fuelling the escalation of violent conflicts (Bennouna and Bonfiglioli, 2025; IPSS, 2019; Nagarajan et al., 2022; NUPI and SIPRI, 2021). Violent conflicts arising from competition over resource control have had a profound effect on livelihoods and populations (Nagarajan et al., 2022; ICG, 2020). It has resulted in population displacement, disruption of agricultural production and livelihoods, loss of life, and the undermining of state governance and legitimacy (Nagarajan et al., 2022; ICG, 2020).

Niger

Located at the cross-border with Mali, Niger is affected by spillover conflicts between pastoralists and farmers, which are exacerbated by the influence of non-state armed groups from Mali, whose conflicts are also escalating due to their operations across its borders (UN-Habitat, 2022). The findings from the reports indicate that conflicts over the control of resources such as land for grazing and farming, and water are a result of overgrazing and climate change (Climate Diplomacy, n.d). This leads to migration of pastoralists to other regions, resulting in competition over land and water between nomadic pastoralists and settled farmers (Climate Diplomacy, n.d.). An increase in intercommunal conflicts between pastoralists, such as the Fulani and Tuareg, and farmers is due to competition over grazing land rights, political power, and access to water (Pfaum, 2021). Conflicts between pastoralists and farmers over land control have also been driven by the government's weak enforcement of land registration laws (Ellis and Cazemier, 2024; UN-Habitat, 2022; Climate Diplomacy, n.d.).

5.2.2.3 Lack of Legitimacy

Burkina Faso

The report's findings indicate that the marginalisation of certain groups, alongside unregulated conflicts over natural resources and eroded trust in the state, all contributed to the escalation of conflict violence (World Bank Group, 2022). Unequal access to resources for pastoralists, biased local government and government policies all resulted in the erosion of trust between farmers and pastoralists, creating a gap for non-state armed groups to recruit and spread their operational field (Doukhan, 2025). Non-state armed groups, therefore, exploit conflicts and grievances to expand their influence by imposing their Sharia laws and competing with the government in order to establish the legitimacy and authority of militant extremism (Doukhan, 2025). Reviewed literature further indicates that the state's failure to resolve resource conflicts between farmers and pastoralists leads to the easy recruitment of the youths by non-state armed groups and the creation of self-defence militias (Gaye, 2018). Therefore, worsening conflicts over resource control and violent intercommunal clashes directly contribute to the loss of governance control, as well as to the rise of non-state armed groups that then act as justice providers during these conflicts (FAO, 2021; Sourabie, 2023; Saidou and Honig, 2024). The rise of non-state armed groups such as JNIM and ISSP exacerbates conflicts between pastoralists and farmers, further destabilising the country and leading to the loss of territory to their control (ZOA International, 2025; Arieff, 2025; African Security Analysis, 2025).

Mali

The literature reviewed indicated that limited state authority and presence intensify conflicts over natural resources, which are, in turn, exploited by non-state armed groups (Hegazi et al., 2021; Bennouna and Bonfiglioli, 2025). Poor resource management leads to social conflicts and tensions, which disrupt social cohesion and livelihoods, limit access to and use of natural resources, and further deepen the vulnerabilities of marginalised communities (Bennouna and Bonfiglioli, 2025). Courts' and local authorities' failure to rule fairly in farmers' and pastoralists' disputes over natural resources has led to the creation of self-defence groups and the joining of non-state armed groups, which have contributed to the escalation of communal conflicts (IPSS, 2019; Gaye, 2018; Mbaye, 2020). The absence of state security provision led to an increase in ethnic and resource conflicts, creating self-defence militias, as well as the exploitation of these conflicts by non-state armed groups such as JNIM and ISGS, which leads to violence that affects civilians (Hegazi et al., 2021). Increasing insecurity, exacerbated by ethnic and resource conflicts and the presence of non-state armed groups, also led to the closure of various state institutions, such as courts and halls, creating a service delivery gap (BTI, 2024).

Niger

Reports that the government's enforcement of land registration laws by the use of the drivers of conflicts between pastoralists and farmers over the land (Habitat, 2022). The grievances over access to resources such as land and water, and intercommunal tensions, have in turn been exploited and exacerbated by non-state armed groups such as ISWAP and JNIM, leading to violent conflicts (Ellis and Cazemier, 2024; UN-Habitat, 2022). The heavy-handed response of the Niger Armed Forces to violent conflicts, in turn, undermined the government's legitimacy and its ability to operate effectively (Ellis and Cazemier, 2024). This further exacerbated violence by non-state armed groups who intimidated local authorities and targeted civilians (Ellis and Cazemier, 2024). It is further highlighted that the exploitation of mineral resources such as Uranium by Niger's former colonial ruler, France, and reliance on natural resources led to economic inequality and limited diversification of the economy, resulting in the marginalisation of most Nigeriens and discontent (Zambakari, 2023).

5.2.2.4 State Capacity Deficits

Burkina Faso

The literature indicates that Burkina Faso's state capacity deficit is evident in the government's inability to control most of its territory; more than 30% of the territory is outside government control (Arieff, 2025; African Security Analysis, 2025; ZOA, 2025). Other reports' findings indicate that state capacity deficits are evident in failures of local government and state administration, which have led to resource conflicts, loss of legitimacy, trust, and a sense of injustice toward the state (FAO, 2021). Moreover, the weak presence of the state in upholding the rule of law and guaranteeing security, particularly in rural areas, further eroded trust and also led to the spread of self-defence militias such as the Kaglwoeogo (Brugger and Zongo, 2023). This vacuum is exploited by jihadist groups such as JNIM and ISGS, who launch attacks on civilians, infrastructure and on military bases, while also exploiting grievances and local tensions in order to expand their influence (African Security Analysis, 2025; Arieff, 2025). In response, the military junta, which is the ruling government, depends on Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland and self-defence militias to compensate for the lack of security in conflict-affected areas (African Security Analysis, 2025; FAO, 2021). This has fuelled ethnic tensions, deepened mistrust and led to the easy recruitment of some communities, such as the Fulanis, by jihadist groups, who view themselves as forces of justice and stability, while also exacerbating these tensions into violent conflicts (African Security Analysis, 2025, Sourabie, 2023; Doukhan, 2025). Violent conflicts driven by these groups led to the closure of state administration agents such as the judiciary, resulting in the inability of the state to mitigate ongoing resource and ethnic conflicts (Sourabie, 2023).

Mali

The literature further indicates that state capacity deficits are evident in government discrimination and in corrupt officials who favour farmers over pastoralists, leading to conflicts between farmers and pastoralists (Mbaye, 2020). Agricultural policies and weak governance led to political, economic, and social inequalities, contributing to conflicts within and between communities (NUPI and SIPRI, 2021). Weak governance or the absence of state security provision has further contributed to ongoing insecurity, whereby non-state armed actors such as JNIM and ISGS exploit grievances and communal conflicts, fuelling tension between different communities (Hegazi et al., 2021). Furthermore, findings highlight that climate change contributes to the intensification of conflicts over resource control between farmers and pastoralists, whereby poor environmental governance or the failure of courts to resolve resource disputes fairly creates a gap that is exploited by non-state armed groups (Bennouna

and Bonfiglioli, 2025; IPSS, 2019). The absence of state authority and the presence of non-state armed groups fuel intercommunal tensions that escalate into violent conflicts, leading to the creation of self-defence militias that seek to protect civilians from these groups (Hegazi et al., 2021; IPSS, 2019). However, self-defence militias have also fuelled intercommunal and resource conflicts due to displacement, loss of life, property destruction and disability of conflict-affected communities (Nagarajan et al., 2022; NUPI and SIPRI, 2021). Increasing insecurity, exacerbated by ethnic and resource conflicts and the presence of non-state armed groups, also led to the closure of various state institutions, such as courts and halls, creating a service delivery gap (BTI, 2024). It has also been highlighted that the Malian Armed Forces, alongside the Russian Wagner group's response to these conflicts, further exacerbated the cycle of violence in communities, with other ethnic groups favoured more than others (BTI, 2024). The literature further indicates that state capacity deficits are evident in the recurring coups that have occurred since Mali's independence in the 1960s, driven by conflicts over resource control and dissatisfaction with governance (Anyalebechi, 2024; Sauter, 2024). Military coups, in turn, created a power vacuum which has been exploited by non-state armed groups such as MNLA and Islamist groups, seizing control over the northern and central regions, while also imposing their own laws, further undermining the already fragile state (Anyalebechi, 2024; Sauter, 2024).

Niger

Reviewed reports indicate that limited governance capacity, linked to weak institutions and a French colonial legacy, hindered the country's ability to effectively address citizens' needs and govern itself (Zambakari, 2023). Climate change, land degradation and weak enforcement of the Land Registration Law have fuelled tensions between pastoralists and farmers (Climate Diplomacy, n.d; UN-Habitat, 2022). Findings further indicate that Niger's location at the cross-border with countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad, and Nigeria makes it vulnerable to spillover conflicts between farmers and pastoralists, which non-state armed groups exploit due to the security vacuum at its borders (UN-Habitat, 2022; The World Bank, 2023). Ineffective state security presence in the borders of Niger provides a fertile ground for non-state armed groups such as ISSP, JNIM, Boko Haram and ISWAP, who then exploit community grievances and resource conflicts such as farmer-pastoralist conflicts (Ellis and Cazemier, 2024; Berman and Schweitzer, 2024). Non-state armed groups, in turn, fuel conflicts and ethnic tensions into violent conflicts and recruit aggrieved communities, further destabilising and undermining the state authority and legitimacy (Ellis and Cazemier, 2024; UN-Habitat, 2022; Berman and

Schweitzer, 2024). In response to violent conflicts, the Niger Armed Forces attacked Fulani communities due to their perceived over-representation by non-state armed groups, exacerbating communal tensions, humanitarian crisis, and undermining the state's legitimacy (Ellis and Cazemier, 2024).

5.2.2.5 International Interventions

Burkina Faso

The findings from the reports indicate that the main international interventions in mitigating armed conflict in Burkina Faso are military interventions by France, the U. S., and Russia, and sanctions and suspensions by the AU and ECOWAS (Angyal, 2025; Sunday and Oke, 2025; Arieff et al., 2025). The literature reviewed indicates that the U. S. was involved in counterterrorism operations in Burkina Faso and provided security funding through military training, equipment, and operations (Savell, 2021; U. S. Department of State, 2023). The U. S. counterterrorism operations were, however, accused of worsening spiralling conflicts not only in Burkina Faso, it also worsened conflicts in the broader region (Savell, 2021). This operation contributed to the government's violation of minority ethnic groups such as the Fulani, which exacerbated intercommunal conflict (Savell, 2021). Following the 2022 military coups, U. S. military aid cooperation was reduced (U. S. Department of State, n.d.; Arieff, 2025).

Furthermore, to counter terrorism by jihadist groups that were exploiting grievances and intercommunal conflicts, France launched operations Sabre and Barkhane (Angyal, 2025; Bielaus, 2024). Findings, however, indicate that these operations were ineffective, and the security situation remained the same, with civilian casualties and military incidents, leading to resentments and protests from the population in Ouagadougou (Angyal, 2025). In 2023, after the coup, Burkina Faso's military junta expelled France, along with its military operations, due to ineffective attempts to counter an Islamic insurgency in its northern region, as well as a diplomat who participated in activities that undermined the government (Bielus, 2024). The findings from the reports highlighted that military interventions by the French government and international allies resulted in a strengthening and growing number of jihadist groups in the Liptako-Gourma tri-border area (Savell, 2021).

On the other hand, after the ousting of France and the U. S. in Burkina Faso, reports indicate that Russian personnel known as the Africa Corps were deployed in early 2024 to mitigate the insurgency crisis in its northern Sahel region (Arieff, 2025; RLI, 2025; Bielaus, 2024). Russia

has participated in combat operations alongside the Burkinabe forces and supported the formation of the Alliance of Sahel States by pledging arms and training its forces (Arieff, 2025; RLI, 2025). Unlike the French operations, Russia's military intervention has gained popular support from the citizens and is still operating in Burkina Faso and five other states, including Mali and Niger (RLI, 2025).

In mitigating armed conflict, particularly in the northern and eastern regions of Burkina Faso, military interventions in the form of military coups took place; they were, however, condemned by the ECOWAS and the AU. Reviewed literature indicates that the ECOWAS imposed sanctions and suspended Burkina Faso, following the military takeover, which was motivated by the country being under siege of armed non-state armed groups (Sunday and Oke, 2025; Al Jazeera, 22; Ndiaga, 2022). The imposed sanctions and suspension, however, proved ineffective, as travel bans and economic restrictions failed to compel the military junta to transition to democratic rule (Sunday and Oke, 2025). In turn, Burkina Faso, along with its counterparts Mali and Niger, withdrew from the regional bloc, criticising it for being influenced by the West to impose these harsh sanctions, and formed the Alliance of Sahel States to fight jihadist groups (Strategic Comments, 2024; Ewokor, 2025). Reports further indicate that, in support of its regional counterpart, the AU also suspended Burkina Faso's membership and participation in all the organisation's activities since 2022 (Ndiaga, 2022; AUPSC, 2022). The AU demanded that Burkina Faso transition to a normal constitutional order for the suspension to be lifted; however, the suspension has been ineffective and remains in place (Africanews, 2022). The AU's suspension of Burkina Faso has led to deteriorating relations between the organisation and Burkina Faso (Peccini, 2025).

Mali

In mitigating armed conflict in Mali, military interventions by France, the UN, Russia's Wagner private military group, and sanctions and suspensions by the ECOWAS and AU occurred, as indicated by the reviewed literature (UNSC, 2015; Pfeifer Cruz and Van der Lijn, 2024; Fisher, 2022). The findings from the reports indicate that France's operation Serval and Barkhane were part of the military interventions to counter insurgency. Operation Serval operated from 2013 to 2014, then Operation Barkhane took over in 2014 and operated until 2022 after being ousted by the Malian military junta (Chafer et al., 2024). France's operations were accused of failing to conduct counterinsurgency. They faced dissatisfaction from the Malian population and authorities, who exploited their quest for legitimacy, leading to the 2020 military coup (Chafer

et al., 2024; Le Noë, 2022). France was further accused of interfering in the country's domestic affairs and of worsening conflicts (Le Noë, 2022).

On the other hand, the report's findings indicate that the UN's military interventions included its peacekeeping operation, MINUSMA, which was earlier known as AFISMA before the transfer of power from the AU to the UN (Peccini, 2025; African Union, 2023). In 2023, the ruling military junta requested the withdrawal of MINUSMA, citing its failure to bring peace and security amid deteriorating security conditions (Brooke-Halland, 2023; De Simone, 2023; Synman, 2024). Although there was a presence of French and UN troops who led counterinsurgency operations in Mali, the number of jihadist attacks and the recruitment of citizens by jihadist groups increased (De Simone, 2023). The findings from the reports highlight that the withdrawal of UN peacekeeping troops left a security vacuum, which led to violent conflicts between government forces and non-state armed groups (De Simone, 2023).

The findings from the reports indicate that Russia intervened in the form of the Wagner group, which worked hand in hand with the Malian forces to counter terrorism and rebels, operating for four years (McGregor, 2025; Ehl, 2025; Winter et.al., 2024). Following the second military coup in 2021, the junta invited Russia's Wagner Group, slowly replacing Western influence in Mali (Winter et al., 2024). The Wagner group is, however, accused of failing to prevent the expansion of the jihadist insurgency in other parts of the country, particularly central and western regions (McGregor, 2025; Ehl, 2025). It further indicated that the Wagner group exacerbated ethnic tensions between communities, with the Malian government favouring other groups more than others and human rights violations (BTI, 2024). The Wagner group was dismantled and its mission ended in June 2025 in Mali, with Russia's Africa Corps taking over (Ehl, 2025; RLI, 2025).

On the other hand, the AU and ECOWAS intervened in Mali's conflict and military coups through sanctions and suspensions, resulting from the government's failure to mitigate jihadist insurgencies, corruption, and economic instability (Ugorji, 2025; Mahmoud and Taifouri, 2023). The findings from the reports indicate that the AU condemned the deteriorating Malian crisis led by Jihadist groups (African Union Commission, 2025). Following the 2020 and 2021 military coups in Mali, the AU therefore suspended Mali's membership and its participation in all its activities, leading to the deterioration of relations between Mali and the AU (Peccini, 2025; Africanews, 2024). The findings from the reports further highlight harsh economic sanctions and suspensions imposed by the ECOWAS following the coups, which not only

affected the government, they also undermined the country's sovereignty and autonomy (Mohamed and Arabo, 2024; Salem, 2023; Olubiyo and Ayodelede, 2024). The harsh sanctions and isolation imposed by ECOWAS and the AU led to the withdrawal of Mali and its Central Sahel counterparts, who subsequently formed the Alliance of the Sahel States (Peccini, 2025; Mohamed and Arabo, 2024). In turn, the ECOWAS's response was accused of being influenced by Western countries and of being more focused on the democratic legitimacy of heads of state rather than on resolving conflicts in West Africa (Aubyn, 2022; Mohamed and Arabo, 2024).

Niger

The findings from the reports indicate that military interventions from the EU, France, the U. S., and Russia, as well as sanctions and suspensions by the ECOWAS and the AU, were the main international interventions that took place in mitigating armed conflict in Niger (Council of the European Union, 2024; EEAS, 2023; Olubiyo and Ayodele, 2024). Prior to the 2023 military coup, the EU established the EUMP in December 2022 to assist the Nigerien armed forces with mitigating terrorist threats, irregular migration and organised crime (Council of the European Union, 2024; EEAS, 2023). The EU's mission was later terminated by the ruling military junta in 2023 (Council of the European Union, 2024). On the other hand, France's Operation Barkhane also operated in Niger against the Islamic insurgency; however, France was also requested to withdraw its operations after the military coup (Nweke and Enwere, 2024; Ahmed, 2025). Reports indicate that France was accused by both the military junta and civilians of being ineffective and prioritising its own economic and geopolitical interests rather than addressing local grievances and the deteriorating security crisis posed by jihadist groups (Ahmed, 2025; Nweke and Enwere, 2024). Furthermore, the U. S. also offered military intervention in Niger, support for counterterrorism operations, and support for the Niger security forces (Zambakari, 2023; The Arab Weekly, 2024). However, following the coup in 2023, the military junta terminated all U. S military operations, citing the troops and contractors' presence as being illegal (Guldogan, 2024).

The security vacuum left by the exit of Western countries and organisations' troops from Niger has been filled by Russia's Africa Corps, whose operations began in April 2024 (RLI, 2025). Russia encouraged and militarily and economically supported the formation of the Alliance of Sahel States by Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso to fight against terrorism and non-state armed groups (RLI, 2025).

In 2023, following in the footsteps of its counterparts, a military coup took place in Niger in response to the government's failure to counter terrorism, local grievances, and anti-French sentiments (Nweke and Enwere, 2024; Ahmed, 2025). Therefore, the report indicates that, in response to the military coup, the ECOWAS suspended, imposed economic sanctions, and threatened military intervention if there was no return to civilian rule (Mohamed and Arabo, 2024). Harsh economic sanctions by the ECOWAS mainly affected the citizens who suffered from food insecurity and loss of power supply, leading to the withdrawal of Niger from the regional bloc (Olubiyo and Ayodele, 2024; Mohamed and Arabo, 2024). The ECOWAS was criticised by Niger, alongside Burkina Faso and Mali, who exited the regional bloc after it imposed sanctions, in favour of West-aligned democratic norms over the needs of its member states (Mohamed and Arabo, 2024; Ewokor, 2025). The AU, in turn, first condemned the Niger coup, then suspended Niger's membership and participation in all its activities, deeming the takeover unconstitutional (Paccia, 2025; Aljazeera, 2023). In addition, the exit of France, the U. S., and the EU, and the suspensions and economic sanctions imposed by ECOWAS and the AU, contributed to the formation of the Alliance of Sahel States by the three Central Sahel countries.

5.2.2.6 Synthesis of Political Impacts

Ethnic tensions and resource conflicts plague all three countries in the Central Sahel. The marginalisation of certain groups, such as the Fulani and the Tuareg ethnic groups, and resource conflicts between farmers and pastoralists over the control of land and water, drive these conflicts. Colonial and post-colonial policies, the failure of courts and local governance to resolve resource disputes, and the absence of state security in some rural areas contribute to these tensions among groups. Ethnic tensions and resource conflicts in turn are exploited by non-state armed groups such as the JNIM, ISGS and ISWAP, who present themselves as justice providers and protectors, while also imposing their own laws. These groups exacerbate tensions into violent conflicts between ethnic groups and farmers and pastoralists, and also undermine the state's legitimacy through introducing their laws, the Sharia law, where they are most present. They further recruit pastoralists such as Fulanis, exploiting their grievances. Therefore, the presence of non-state armed groups undermines the state's legitimacy in the three countries and destabilises the region. In response to these conflicts and non-state armed groups, military interventions, sanctions and suspensions were imposed. Although there have been military interventions by international organisations such as the UN, EU, AU and the ECOWAS, and

countries such as France, the U. S., and Russia, the Central Sahel region still suffers from armed conflict, which is exacerbated by non-state armed groups.

5.3 Analysis and Interpretation

The data analysis and interpretation are presented under two major themes, the Socioeconomic impacts and Political impacts, each consisting of five subthemes. Conflict and Structural violence theory will be applied in this thematic analysis section.

5.3.1 Socioeconomic Impacts

5.3.1.1 Displacement

Displacement is among the socioeconomic impacts of armed conflict in the Central Sahel region, particularly in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. Evidently, in Burkina Faso, displacement is driven by insurgent attacks by non-state armed groups such as ISSP and JNIM (MSF, 2023). Similarly, in Mali, displacement is driven by rebel attacks against the Malian government by armed separatist groups, the Tuareg (SIHMA, 2024). On the other hand, in Niger, it is a result of deteriorating border security, spillover conflict from neighbouring countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso and Libya, and internal conflict driven by non-state armed groups (SIHMA, 2025). Moreover, the UN Security Council (2022) and FSIN and GNAFC (2023) indicated that displacement in Burkina Faso hindered agricultural production, disrupted livelihoods, transhumance, and markets, thereby exacerbating the cycle of poverty. In Mali, OCHA (2025) and SIHMA (2025) reported that displacement worsened vulnerabilities and limited access to basic services, such as education and healthcare. This is due to the displacement of some communities on already struggling, fragile host communities with limited or no access to basic services (UNHCR, 2024; ACAPS, 2024). As in Burkina Faso and Mali, in Niger, agricultural production, trade, markets, livelihoods, transhumance networks, and access to basic services such as healthcare and education were disrupted by displacement. Therefore, Karl Marx's conflict theory helps interpret and understand these dynamics.

5.3.1.1.1 Theory Application

The conflict theory put an emphasis on how competition over limited resources such as land and water in the Central Sahel region can lead into inequality with unequal access to opportunities and social distribution such as conflict. In the Central Sahel, displacement which is more than a humanitarian crisis caused by armed conflict and violence, reflects ongoing

conflicts over the control of land, governance and legitimacy. The African Security Analysis (2025) and ZOA International (2025) reported that in order to gain territorial control in Burkina Faso, non-state armed groups such as the JNIM, ISSP and Ansaroul Islam launched attacks on military bases. They further indicated that these attacks were also launched on civilians and key infrastructures such as hospitals and schools, leading to the loss of more than 40% territory to them over two million displacements (African Security Analysis, 2025; ZOA International, 2025). Therefore, by 2025, there were 2 104 513 forcibly displaced people in Burkina Faso, with 2 062 534 internally displaced and 41 979 refugees and asylum-seekers, including 95% from Mali (UNHCR, 2025). Comparably, in Mali, displacement reflects the struggle over division of power between the state and non-state armed groups (SIHMA, 2025). The non-state armed groups launched rebellion attacks against the government, which led to the displacement of civilians (SIHMA, 2025). By the 31st of December 2025, there were 335 908 refugees from Mali in neighbouring countries and 414 524 internally displaced people in Mali, reported the UNHCR, 2026). There were also 286 721 refugees from other countries, including 127 028 from Burkina Faso and 35 339 from Niger (UNHCR, 2026). Whereas in Niger, displacement reflects a spillover conflict from neighbouring countries and internal conflicts which destabilises communities (Ellis and Cazemier, 2024). The World Bank (2023) and Ellis and Cazemier (2024) indicated that spillover armed conflict from Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad, Nigeria and Libya reveals vulnerability in the Central Sahel and how the struggle for power can go beyond borders. While on the other hand, non-state armed groups such as the ISWAP, JNIM, Boko Haram and ISSP in Niger exploit weak security in these borders and governance in order to expand their influence, leading to displacement (The World Bank, 2023; Ellis and Cazemier, 2024). In 2025, there were more than 400 000 internally displaced people, and more than 430 000 refugees or asylum seekers from its neighbouring countries faced with insecurity (IOM, 2025).

This interpretation, therefore, further aligns with a study by Alexander Thurston (2024), who argues that jihadist groups such as the JNIM, ISSP and Ansar-al-Islam, and the military defence forces of the three Central Sahel countries are responsible for the forced displacement of over three million civilians. Demuynck (2022) also highlighted how persistent armed conflicts, such as terrorist attacks, jihadist insurgencies and intercommunal tensions, limited resources in Central Sahel, have forced civilians to leave their homes and flee to neighbouring countries. On the other hand, Kafando and Sakurai (2024) argued that terrorist attacks in Burkina Faso disrupted farming, leading to the displacement of farmers and a significant reduction in

agricultural production. Targba's (2022) study also indicated that it is the presence of non-state groups such as the JNIM and ISSP which worsened insecurity, led to the displacement of over 6.3 million people, as well as over thirteen million civilians of the Central Sahel region in need of humanitarian assistance.

5.3.1.2 Poor Agricultural Production

Agricultural production has been severely affected by the ongoing armed conflict. In Burkina Faso, the FSIN and Global Network Against Food Crisis (2023) indicated that poor agricultural production is a result of worsening armed attacks by non-state armed groups such as JNIM and ISSP. These attacks hindered agricultural activities, leading to the loss and limitation of cereal crop planting areas and mass displacement (FSIN and GNAFC, 2023). As a result, the displaced population no longer had access to their agricultural land, leaving them dependent on food aid and fuelling the food crisis (ICRC, 2022). Whereas in Mali, armed conflict made it difficult for families to access their pastures, fields, and regular transhumance routes for food and the sale of livestock (FAO, 2022; WFP, 2019). This led to the loss of livelihoods, a food crisis, families fleeing their homes, and the closure of various rural markets, leaving families unable to purchase or sell agricultural and pastoral products (FAO, 2022; WFP, 2019). It further disrupted agricultural production and livelihoods for the families who depended on subsistence farming (FAO, 20220).

On the other hand, in Niger, farmers and pastoralists' conflicts over access to land and water led to the burning of farming or pastoral fields, and the killing of pastoralists, fishers and farmers (Insecurity Insight, 2023). Furthermore, along the Niger border with Nigeria and in the Liptako-Gourma and Lake Chad Basin, armed conflict hindered agricultural activities and the delivery of humanitarian aid. Also, it led to mass displacement (UNSC, 2022). Similar to Burkina Faso, armed attacks by non-state armed groups further disrupted agricultural activities, markets, and trade routes, leading to border closures in Niger (FSIN and GNAFC, 2023; FSIN, 2025). This led to farmers having no access to fertilizers, seeds, or markets (FSIN and GNAFC, 2023; FSIN, 2025). Therefore, in all three Central Sahel countries, it is evident that armed conflict directly undermines agricultural production by destroying infrastructure and resources, and by closing borders and markets. Armed conflict further displaced farmers and pastoralists, and destabilised economies, perpetuating vulnerabilities and dependence on humanitarian aid. The conflict theory provides clear insights into these dynamics.

5.3.1.2.1 Theory Application

The conflict theory posits that competition between groups in a society is natural and part of life, as individuals and groups seek to expand their interests while also exploiting others (Janse, 2022). This is evident in the Central Sahel region, where non-state armed groups such as the JNIM, ISSP and ISWAP compete with the states of the region, as they seek to expand their influence and impose their Sharia Law. Evidently, in Burkina Faso, the JNIM and ISSP launched armed attacks, leading to mass population displacement, hindering agricultural activities, and resulting in the loss and restriction of land for cereal crop planting (FEWS NET, 2022; UNSC, 2022; FSIN and GNAFC, 2023). In competition with the state, these groups further imposed mobility restrictions on farmers and pastoralists, hindering their access to food and income sources, negatively affecting agro-pastoral activities (FEWS NET, 2021; FEWS NET, 2022; FSIN and GNAFC, 2023). In Mali, armed clashes and attacks by these non-state armed groups disrupted markets and agricultural activities, according to FEWS NET (2021). On the other hand, in regions such as Mopti, conflict between farmers and herders has been exploited by non-state armed groups (International Crisis Group, 2020; Delgado et.al., 2023). These groups, in turn, imposed land restrictions, leading to a reduction in grazing and cultivable agricultural land (International Crisis Group, 2020; Delgado et al., 2023).

In Niger, competition between farmers and pastoralists over access to land and water led to the burning of greeneries, and the killing of pastoralists, farmers and fishers, disrupting livelihoods and agricultural production (Insecurity Insight, 2023). Similar to Burkina Faso and Mali, armed attacks by non-state armed groups who seek to expand their interest and influence, while fighting the state, disrupted agricultural activities, markets, trade routes and also resulted in the closure of borders, causing farmers not to have access to fertilizers, seeds and markets (FSIN and GNAFC, 2023; FSIN, 2025). Therefore, in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, the conflict theory shows how armed conflict by non-state armed groups, and between farmers and pastoralists exploited by these non-state armed groups, perpetuates a cycle of poverty and food insecurity. This is by hindering agricultural production through the displacement of populations who use land for agricultural and pastoral purposes. The exploitation of farmer-pastoralists' conflicts by non-state armed groups further fuels violence and social division. This reflects how competition and the unequal distribution of resources, such as land and water, within a society between social groups, lead to armed conflict (Janse, 2022).

The above interpretation further validates a study by Tangara (2024), who argued that in Mali, agricultural production was affected by armed attacks carried out by jihadists and dozos, who also burned farming fields and houses and stole livestock. Tangara (2024) further indicated that, to assert their influence, these groups forced farmers to pay taxes to access farming fields, thereby further disrupting agricultural production. Similarly, Lusiani and Nisadina (2024) argued that armed conflict driven by non-state armed groups in Burkina Faso disrupted pastoral livestock production and agricultural production. Armed conflict continuously led to the loss of access to land for cultivation, pastures, and livestock for farmers and herders, resulting in limited food resources (Lusiani and Nisadina, 2024). In support of the aforementioned, Kafando and Sakurai (2024) indicated that terrorist attacks by non-state armed groups disrupted agricultural activities, resulting in reduced productivity and increased food insecurity. Kafando and Sakurai (2024) further argued that terrorist attacks in Burkina Faso led to the decline in cereal crop productivity due to the limited access to agricultural inputs such as pesticides and fertilizers (Kafando and Sakurai, 2024).

5.3.1.3 Food Insecurity

Following displacement and agricultural production, food insecurity also emerged as a socioeconomic impact of armed conflict in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. Evidently, in Burkina Faso, the FSIN and GNAFS (2023) and FSIN and GNAFS (2024) indicated that conflict by non-state armed groups disrupted livelihoods and markets. This led to high food prices, which limited the population's access to food (FSIN and GNAFS, 2024). An increase in conflicts led to Burkina Faso being selected as one of the countries facing a major food crisis (FSIN and GNAFC, 2023). Furthermore, the IDMC (2024) highlighted that blockades by non-state armed groups imposed major constraints on humanitarian aid, including food and water deliveries. The IDMC (2024) argued that this led to worsening sanitation and water conditions, which contributed to poor agricultural production and increased food insecurity, especially in northern provinces (IDMC, 2024). Similar to Burkina Faso, the FEWS. Net (2021) and FSIN and GNAFC (2023) argued that in Mali, clashes between non-state armed groups, armed attacks and robberies disrupted socioeconomic activities. This was through the looting of livestock, disrupted markets and agricultural activities, leading to income losses and the inability of households to meet their food needs (FSIN and GNAFC, 2023).

On the other hand, Delgado et.al. (2023) and the International Crisis Group (2020) indicated that food insecurity is also a result of intercommunal conflict between the herders and farmers,

such as the Fulani herders and Dogon farmers' conflict, leading to the farmers not being able to access farming fields near the Fulani village. In contrast to Burkina Faso and Mali, insecurity and conflicts across the borders of Niger's Lake Basin, Liptako-Gourma, and the central parts bordering Niger hindered agricultural activities and humanitarian aid deliveries and also led to mass displacement (UNSC, 2022; IDMC, 2024). Furthermore, in Niger, the ECOWAS imposed economic sanctions and restricted cross-border movements following the July 2023 Coup d'état, alongside ongoing conflicts, leaving an estimated three million people severely food insecure (Insecurity Insight, 2023; UN IOM, 2024). The sanctions and conflicts led to food shortages, higher food prices, and suspensions of food aid deliveries (Insecurity Insight, 2023; UN IOM, 2024). The conflict theory and the structural violence theory will therefore help interpret the findings.

5.3.1.3.1 Theory Application: Conflict Theory

The conflict theory posits that competition and the unequal distribution of limited resources, such as land, water, and power, between social groups result in armed conflict, leading to economic and political impacts on societies (Janse, 2022). This is evident in the Central Sahel region, where competition over water and land between farmers and pastoralists and the struggle for power between non-state armed groups led to conflicts. These conflicts resulted in political and socioeconomic impacts, including food insecurity, affecting societies in conflict-affected areas. In their struggle for power against the government of Burkina Faso, non-state armed groups imposed restrictions and blockades, leading to major disruptions in humanitarian aid, including food and water delivery, according to the IDMC (2024). This worsened sanitation and water conditions, contributing to poor agricultural production and increasing food insecurity, especially in northern provinces (IDMC, 2024).

On the other hand, in Mali, clashes between non-state armed groups, armed attacks, and robberies disrupted socioeconomic activities, noted FEWS NET (2021) and the FSIN and GNAFC (2023). They further argued that this led to income losses and households being unable to meet their food needs, as these groups looted livestock and disrupted markets and agricultural production (FEWS NET, 2021; FSIN and GNAFC, 2023). Similar to Burkina Faso, non-state armed groups also disrupted the delivery of humanitarian food aid to conflict-affected households in Mali, hampering their ability to access non-food and food aid (UN Security Council, 2022; FSIN and GNAFC, 2023; WFP and FAO, 2024).

In Mali, food insecurity has also resulted from intercommunal conflicts between herders and farmers, such as the Fulani pastoralists and Dogon farmers' conflict, leading to farmers having no access to farmland near Fulani villages (Delgado et al., 2023; International Crisis Group, 2020). Similarly to Mali, in Niger, conflicts over resource control between farmers and pastoralists led to food insecurity, as vegetation was burned during these conflicts (Insecurity Insight, 2023). Non-state armed groups also imposed restrictions on access to farmland for livestock grazing and on farmers' and pastoralists' growing and harvesting crops, affecting the region's food security (Insecurity Insight, 2023). Furthermore, the FSIN and GNAFC (2023) indicated that food insecurity in Niger led to acute food insecurity. This is also caused by flooding and escalating conflicts, which have resulted in damage to assets, livestock, and crops, as well as high food prices linked to the Ukraine-Russian war (FSIN and GNAFC, 2023). Comparably, the African Development Bank (2022) also indicated that food insecurity in Mali is exacerbated by an increase in food and oil prices as a result of the Ukraine-Russian war.

5.3.1.3.2 Structural Violence Theory

The structural violence theory, on the other hand, reflects how societal structures and institutions systematically harm individuals, groups or communities by preventing them from meeting their essential needs (Rawlings and Low, 2020). Evidently, in the Central Sahel region, economic sanctions imposed by the regional bloc, ECOWAS, on the three Central Sahel countries systemically harmed communities by preventing them from meeting their essential needs, such as food. An example of this is Niger. Insecurity Insight (2023) and the UN IOM (2024) indicated that the ECOWAS-imposed economic sanctions and restrictions on cross-border movements following the July 2023 Coup d'état, along with the conflict, led to an estimated 3.3 million people being acutely food insecure. This is due to shortages and increased food prices, as well as suspensions of food aid deliveries resulting from the imposed sanctions and cross-border restrictions (Insecurity Insight, 2023; UN IOM, 2024).

The existing literature, therefore, supports this interpretation. A study by Tangara (2024) indicated that non-state armed groups looted livestock, prohibited cultivation and harvesting, and disrupted cultivation and harvesting, severely affecting local production and, in turn, threatening food security. Tranchant et al. (2021) also argued in their study that the presence of non-state armed groups in the villages of the Mopti region has led to a loss of production through livestock theft, the disruption of agricultural production and markets, and the lack of access to basic services and aid. They further argued that this led to major consequences for

households' access to food, resulting in food insecurity. Similarly, Lusiani and Nisadina (2024) indicated that the presence of the JNIM and the ISSP since 2015 in Burkina Faso led to violent extremist attacks on the infrastructure and civilians, worsening food insecurity and displacement. They argued that these attacks were the main drivers of food insecurity, as they targeted water points and power stations, leading to a sharp increase in food prices (Lusiani and Nisadina, 2024). Lusiani and Nisadina (2024) also argued that the Russian-Ukrainian conflict worsened food insecurity in Burkina Faso. This is because they import their wheat from these two countries, and the supply chain is disrupted by this conflict. These studies, therefore, align with the conflict theory interpretation of how competition between groups leads to conflict, resulting in socioeconomic and political impacts that affect civilians.

5.3.1.4 Lack of Access to Education

Armed conflict has severely disrupted access to basic services such as education in the Central Sahel region, leaving millions of children without formal schooling. Evidently, recurrent attacks and class disruption by non-state armed groups in Burkina Faso led to the closure of most schools, violating children's right to education, argued Lakica (2023). Insecurity has also led to forced displacement and school closures, affecting many learners, mostly of whom are girls and teachers who are either abducted, threatened or killed by non-state armed groups (ACAPS, 2019; UNICEF, 2020). Comparably, in Mali, the UN Security Council (2022) and ACAPS (2025) indicated that direct explosive attacks and threats against students, schools and teachers hindered access to education. The looting and burning of school equipment and schools, abuse, abduction and the killing of teachers, and threats on students and teachers, led to the closure of schools, which also affected access to education (UNSC, 2022). Whereas in Niger, the lack of education is a result of insecurity that displaced thousands of children, preventing them from attending school, as indicated by UNICEF (2025) and Marshall and Tiendrebeogo (2023). Furthermore, insecurity linked with displacement resulted in the prevention of both the refugees and IDP children from accessing education due to the children facing attacks from non-state armed groups on their way to school and in the school yards (Baron and Calaycay, 2024). Structural violence, therefore, helps provide an insight into how armed attacks on schools, looting of school equipment and abductions of teachers later have a long-term impact on children.

5.3.1.4.1 Theory Application

In the Central Sahel region, particularly in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, structural violence theory reveals a lack of access to education as an indirect powerful harm. Armed conflict is not only physical violence; however, it also creates systemic inequalities and exclusion, whereby disrupted schooling leads to poverty, marginalisation, and social exclusion. For instance, in Burkina Faso, recurrent attacks and class disruptions by non-state armed groups led to the closure of more than four thousand schools nationwide in 2022 (Lakica, 2023). Lakica (2023) further argued that this affected nearly 2.6 million children aged 6-17, reducing the quality of education students receive and pushing more students behind in their studies. By 2024, 5330 were non-operational, affecting more than 800,000 students and with the girls being the most affected, as they were mostly likely to be withdrawn from school than boys in displacement and crisis centres (ACAPS, 2025). This also led children to face the risks of child labour and early marriage (ACAPS, 2025).

Furthermore, in host families, over half of displaced students were returned to schools; however, many schools became overcrowded and operated above capacity (IMF, 2024). The IMF (2024) indicated that this had diverse implications for learning outcomes and the mental health of teachers and students. Therefore, the closure of schools in Burkina Faso due to armed conflict affected safe learning opportunities for students, increased the rate of out-of-school children, making them vulnerable to child labour, child marriage and recruitment by non-state armed groups (Marshall and Tiendrebeogo, 2023).

In Mali, similar to Burkina Faso, direct explosive attacks and the looting and burning of school equipment and schools, abuse and abduction of teachers, led to the closure of schools (UNICEF, 2024; ACAPS, 2025). The UN Security Council (2021) indicated that since 2020, attacks and threats of attacks on schools and teachers had led to the withdrawal of teachers in the central and northern regions. This further hindered children's access to education in conflict-affected areas. By 2025, more than one hundred schools had been closed due to insecurity, placing children's right to education at greater risk in already vulnerable areas (UNICEF, 2025). The UNICEF (2025) further highlighted that Mali's education system is affected by armed conflict and climate-related disasters, particularly floods, which disrupted learning opportunities and led to the rise of school dropouts, reducing access to education. Furthermore, lack of access to education in Niger is also a result of armed attacks by non-state armed groups, which displaces people, with nine hundred schools closed due to attacks,

preventing students from attending schools, argued Marshall and Tiendrebeogo (2023) and Popova (2023). Similar to Burkina Faso and Mali, the UNICEF (2025) and Baron and Calaycay (2024) argued that the lack of access to education in Niger is also due to armed conflict, which disrupted learning and led to increased risks for children out of school to child labour and early marriage for girls.

Structural violence is further reflected in Niger, whereby displaced students experience mental and physical trauma, with many students having no access to their essential documents, such as birth certificates (Popova, 2023). This hindered students from attending schools in host communities (Popova, 2023). Niger's access to education has also been hindered by the use of schools as temporary bases by the Nigerien Defence Force, leading to schools being attacked by non-state armed groups, as indicated by Baron and Calaycay (2025). Therefore, in the Central Sahel countries, structural violence theory revealed how children suffer a long-term impact due to armed conflict-induced insecurity, which denies them their chance to attend schools. It further highlights how armed conflict has turned access to education into a privilege accessible to those not in conflict-affected areas, while systemically excluding the vulnerable, such as the displaced children and children in conflict-affected areas. This exclusion, therefore, is a powerful form of violence, because it silently perpetuates a cycle of instability, human rights violations, illiteracy and poverty.

The above interpretation, therefore, aligns with the arguments by Adama Dieng (2021), who argued that ongoing armed conflicts led to the destruction and closure of more than six thousand. He further indicated that not only did these conflicts and violence destroy schools, leaving seven million children out of school, they also jeopardised the present and the future of the Sahel children (Dieng, 2021). Arjun S Mehta (2021) also highlighted how jihadists burned down school supplies, desks and the infrastructure, and looted computer labs and cafeterias. The jihadist further looted and burned educational facilities, abducted and threatened and killed teachers (Mehta, 2021). Furthermore, Halimatou Hima (2025) indicated that attacks against schools and forced displacement disrupted learning. Hima (2025) also argued that, due to armed conflict, more than 1500 schools were closed in Mali, more than five thousand in Burkina Faso, and 95.5% of schools in Niger's Tillabéri region were closed, denying more than two million children education. Hima (2025) further highlighted how girls' education is targeted by non-state armed groups, undermining girls' access to an inclusive and safe

environment, forcing them to drop out, leading to girls facing gender-based violence and child marriage.

5.3.1.5 Lack of Access to Healthcare

Access to healthcare has been severely undermined by armed conflict in the Central Sahel region countries, leaving vulnerable populations without essential services. In Burkina Faso, insecurity has led to the closure of healthcare facilities, as a result of non-state armed groups who burn healthcare centres, steal medicine and medical supplies (ACAPS, 2019; World Bank Group, 2021). Insecurity further threatened the functioning of healthcare centres and the mobility required to reach the remaining functioning centres, due to the dangers of travel, restrictions, and security checks on moving cars imposed by non-state armed groups (ACAPS, 2019; World Bank Group, 2021). Similarly, lack of access to healthcare in Mali is a result of attacks on healthcare facilities, looting of medicines and attacks on ambulances by the JNIM and ISSP (UNSC, 2022; Degni, 2015). This has hindered the provision of healthcare, which has led to the death of patients (UNSC, 2022; Degni, 2015). Attacks and kidnappings of healthcare workers, hijackings of ambulances and the looting of medical supplies by non-state armed groups have further hindered access to healthcare in Mali (SHC and Insecurity Insight, 2022).

On the other hand, in Niger, non-state armed groups attacked healthcare centres such as reproductive centres, leading to their closure, which led to a decrease in assisting in childbirth deliveries and a rise in home births (UNFPA, 2025). Furthermore, lack of access to health care has also been due to non-state armed groups such as ISWAP and ISSP, who loot medical supplies from healthcare centres, hijack ambulances, and kidnap healthcare workers, similar to Burkina Faso and Mali (SHC and Security Insight, 2023; Doutchi et.al., 2024). Therefore, in the context of lack of access to healthcare as a result of armed conflict, structural violence theory will help in providing an insightful interpretation.

5.3.1.5.1 Theory Application

The structural violence theory provides an insight into understanding how armed conflict in the Central Sahel region, particularly Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, perpetrates indirect forms of harm by systematically hindering access to healthcare. In these countries, violence is not only expressed through attacks by non-state armed groups such as the JNIM, ISSP and ISWAP, it is also expressed through the erosion of social structures that sustain the health system.

Evidently, in Burkina Faso, in 2019, non-state armed groups burned down healthcare facilities, stole medical supplies and medicine (ACAPS, 2019). According to the ACAPS (2019) report, this led to the closure of more than sixty healthcare facilities, disrupting healthcare access for almost 626,000 people. In 2024, 426 healthcare facilities out of 2,117 were closed, with 363 operating at a minimum level and 126 vandalised by non-state armed groups (IMF, 2024). 352 of the healthcare facilities also served as shelters for IDPs, due to armed conflict (IMF, 2024). The IMF (2024) report, therefore, indicated that this resulted in the deprivation of more than four million people of access to healthcare. According to the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (2024), Burkina Faso's healthcare system has faced challenges since 2019 due to the escalation of a security crisis driven by conflict between non-state armed groups and the state military. This has led many communities to face significant barriers to accessing medical care, including long distances to healthcare facilities, limited numbers of trained healthcare workers, and limited resources (IFRCRCS, 2024). In 2025, Burkina Faso faced high morbidity and mortality rates due to insecurity that hindered access to healthcare, with 31% of healthcare facilities affected and 17.7% completely closed (Health Cluster, 2025). The Health Cluster (2025) also highlighted that essential services such as vaccinations, emergency care and support for pregnant women and survivors of GBV were severely affected. The situation was further worsened by the fleeing of healthcare workers and disruptions in the supply of medicines, causing diseases such as malaria, dengue fever and malnutrition to be on the rise (Health Cluster, 2025; IFRC, 2024).

Similar to Burkina Faso, Mali's access to healthcare by the citizens has been hindered by armed attacks on healthcare facilities, looting of medicines, and attacks on ambulances by the JNIM and ISSP, which have led to the death of patients, argued Degni (2015). The UN Security Council (2022) report, on the other hand, indicated further that there were fifty-four attacks on hospitals by non-state armed groups such as JNIM, ISSP, FLM and DNA, as well as by the Malian Defence and Security Forces. The non-state armed groups further looted medication, threatened abduction of healthcare workers, hijacked ambulances, and launched explosive device attacks on ambulances, which hindered access to medical care (UNSC, 2022). Furthermore, women and children were faced with severe illnesses and were unable to access healthcare due to armed conflict (UNICEF, 2023). In addition, Mali's health infrastructure has been severely affected by attacks, staff shortages, and inadequate medical supplies, reducing its capacity to provide basic healthcare. Compared to Burkina Faso and Mali, armed attacks by non-state armed groups such as the ISWAP on healthcare facilities, the looting of medical

supplies and medicine, hijacking of ambulances and kidnapping of healthcare workers have hindered access to health care in Niger (SHC and Insecurity Insight, 2023). The UNICEF (2025) report, on the other hand, also highlighted that armed attacks driven by non-state armed groups disrupted the functioning of Niger's healthcare systems. This led to the outbreak of diseases such as Cholera, Measles, Malaria, and the malnutrition of children under five years (UNICEF, 2025).

Armed conflict further hindered access to healthcare for sexual assault victims. It led to the fleeing of local healthcare workers to safer places, abandoning their posts, which affected the population of Niger (Doutchi, 2024). Therefore, structural violence theory reveals how individuals suffer from preventable diseases such as Malaria and Cholera, or death due to armed conflict-induced destruction of infrastructure and insecurity. It further highlights how armed conflict in the three Central Sahel countries transforms healthcare into a privilege accessible only to those not in conflict-affected areas, while systemically excluding vulnerable populations. The theory views the exclusion as a form of violence because it silently leads to suffering and untimely death, reinforcing a cycle of instability and poverty.

The interpretation further aligns with Amberg Felix et al. (2025), who indicated that the presence of jihadist militant groups such as ISSP and JNIM in Burkina Faso led to various attacks on the infrastructure, which includes hospitals and clinics, and security forces. He further argued that armed conflict significantly disrupted access to maternal and child health services in the country's primary healthcare facilities (Amberg et al., 2025). On the other hand, a study by Save the Children (2020), an international organisation, highlighted that increasing violence, as well as the impacts of COVID-19 in Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso, led to the closure of over 241 healthcare facilities. This left 1.2 million people in the Central Sahel without access to healthcare services, further violating their right to healthcare (Save the Children, 2020). Erameh et.al. (2021) also indicated that an increased number of armed attacks by jihadist insurgencies has led to limited access to basic health services in Niger and in Sub-Saharan Africa. Erameh et al. (2021) further asserted that due to attacks by Tuareg insurgencies in Niger, there was a decline in access to healthcare because of the interrupted supply chain and the abandoned posts by healthcare workers.

5.3.2 Political Impacts

5.3.2.1 Ethnic Tensions and Marginalisation

Ethnic tensions and marginalisation emerge as factors that contribute to armed conflict in the Central Sahel region. In Burkina Faso, Lamarche (2023) argued that ethnic tensions and marginalisation are a result of historical grievances, political manipulation, and resource conflicts. He further argued that they can be traced back to the colonial era, where the French government favoured certain ethnic groups over others, leading to conflicts (Lamarche, 2023). Abdel-Latef and EL-Gamal (2024) further argued that marginalisation and ethnic tensions exacerbate conflicts, through increasing resource competition and intensifying violence, displacement and driving social division. In Mali, Hegazi et al. (2021) and Anyalebechi (2024) argued that colonial and post-colonial rule prioritised agriculture and excluded pastoralism. This marginalisation, along with grievances between the Fulanis and Dogon, therefore led to the formation and an increase of self-defence militias (Hegazi et al., 2021; Anyalebechi, 24). The marginalisation of ethnic groups such as the Fulani and Tuareg, who are also pastoralists, is one of the contributors to jihadist recruitment, which in turn attacks agriculturalists, exacerbating the cycle of hatred and violence between ethnic groups, argued Mbaye (2020) and Bennouna and Bonfiglioli (2025). Sauter (2024) and Anyalebechi (2024) also argued that ethnic tensions in Mali are worsened by recurring military coups. In Niger, on the other hand, ethnic tensions are driven by climate change through competition over access to water and land, according to Climate Diplomacy (n.d.).

Furthermore, ethnic tensions stem from clashes over access to water, grazing land, and political representation (Ellis and Cazemier, 2023). Whereas marginalisation stems from the neglect of pastoralists due to the lack of enforcement of land use, taxation, poverty, and cattle looting (UN-Habitat, 2022; Pflaum, 2021). In turn, the pastoralists' grievances are exploited by non-state armed groups who exacerbate ethnic tensions, argued the UN-Habitat (2022) and Pflaum (2021). In addition, across Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, ethnic tensions and marginalisation drive armed conflict, and these dynamics are therefore analysed using structural violence theory.

5.3.2.1.1 Theory Application

The structural violence theory highlights how political, social, and economic structures can negatively impact certain individuals, social groups or communities (Indira Gandhi National

Open University, 2017). It further reveals that the unequal distribution of power by political, social, and economic institutions and structures results in social and economic inequality in a society (Indira Gandhi National Open University). This is evident in Burkina Faso, where the Fulani community, which represents a minority group, is neglected by the authority and marginalised from power by the government (ACAPS, 2021; Lamarche,2023). It is also evident through political manipulation, historical grievances, and the French colonial government, which favoured certain groups over others, which led to violent attacks launched against those with no power by non-state armed groups and state security (Lamarche, 2023). In Mali, colonial and post-colonial laws that favoured agriculturalists over pastoralists reflect an unequal distribution of power, which led to social and economic inequality (Hagazi, 2021; Anyalebechi, 2024). Mbaye (2020) and Bennouna and Bonfiglioli (2025) studies also provide evidence of structural violence, which is manifested through the marginalisation of ethnic Fulani and Tuareg by the government. The change in political regime from democratic rule to military rule through a military coup, which exacerbated ethnic tensions, reflects how political systems can harm social groups (Sauter, 2024). Therefore, these led to armed conflict between groups, as the marginalised joined non-state armed groups who attacked agriculturalists, intensifying the cycle of violence and hatred between ethnic groups, argued Mbaye (2020). These are therefore reflected in structural violence, conflict committed through powerful institutions in a society. As in Burkina Faso and Mali, in Niger, structural violence manifests through the marginalisation and neglect of pastoralists by government institutions, which lack enforcement of land registration laws and tax pastoralists (UN-Habitat, 2022). Structural violence in Niger is also visible through the lack of political representation of some ethnic groups, which intensifies ethnic tensions and is exploited by non-state armed groups such as the JNIM and ISWAP, who exacerbate tensions into violent conflicts (Pflaum, 2021). In Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, colonial and post-colonial government laws and policies exclude certain ethnic groups and pastoralists, leading to inequality and exclusion in a society and conflict, intensifying the cycle of ethnic tensions and violence.

The above interpretation, therefore, aligns with Zoubir (2022), who highlighted that in Mali, poor governance contributed to the unequal distribution of wealth from natural resources, such as gold, thereby excluding local populations. Similarly, Shahid (2025) argued in their study that persistent discriminatory policies against northern Mali's ethnic groups characterized democratic rule in the 1990s and 2000s. This act contributed to insurgencies and to a coup in 2012 (Shahid, 2025). In the case of Niger, Mamvura's (2025) study extends the argument by

demonstrating that a lack of political representation does not solely drive ethnic tensions, as the findings suggest. Resource scarcity, unemployment of the youth and weak governance also led to the rise of ethnic conflicts, which destabilised local communities and led to the escalation of domestic and regional terrorism threats (Mamvura, 2025). Ofobuke's study (2025) further highlighted that Niger's military coup also contributed to the escalation of ethnic tensions. Therefore, the studies validate the application of structural violence theory, which reveals how social, political, and economic structures and institutions systematically harm marginalised social groups and contribute to inequality in a society.

5.3.2.2 Conflicts over Resource Control

Following the discussion on ethnic tensions and marginalisation, the analysis now turns to conflicts over resource control as a distinct yet interconnected subtheme. In Burkina Faso, Wolfel et al. (2024) and Gaye (2018) highlighted climate change as one of the drivers of conflicts over land use and access to water between farmers and pastoralists, particularly in rural areas. Government policies that favour farmers over pastoralists, along with government failures to resolve land disputes between farmers and herders, led to the exploitation of disputes and grievances by non-state armed groups such as the JNIM and ISGS, argued Gaye (2018). Brugger and Zongo (2023), in turn, contend that this exploitation by non-state armed groups led to violent conflicts, resulting in the killing of civilians, displacement and disruption of livelihood. Similarly, in Mali, UN-Habitat (2022) highlighted that conflicts over resources, such as land and water, between farmers and pastoralists are driven by government policies and the marginalisation of pastoralists. In turn, the farmer-pastoralist conflicts are exploited by non-state armed groups and self-defence militias, particularly in the northern and central Malian regions, to expand their influence and territorial control (Gaye 2018; ICG 2020). In Niger, Climate Diplomacy (n.d.) argued that climate change and overgrazing are key drivers of resource conflicts between farmers and pastoralists, a pattern similar to that in Burkina Faso. UN-Habitat (2022) further asserts that conflicts between farmers and pastoralists over land control are also driven by the Nigerien government's weak enforcement of land registration laws. Therefore, in the Central Sahel region countries, conflicts over resource control, particularly land and water, between farmers and pastoralists are driven by climate change, as argued in Burkina Faso and Niger. The marginalisation of pastoralists through government policies, failures to resolve disputes, and weak enforcement of land registration laws, as highlighted in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, also drives resource conflicts. The grievances

and conflicts are exploited by non-state armed groups, who seek to expand their influence and gain territorial control while escalating them into violence. The dynamics are interpreted using conflict theory and structural violence theory.

5.3.2.2.1 Theory Application

Conflicts over resource control in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger reflect how competition over water and land between farmers and pastoralists is deeply rooted in structural inequality. One of the assumptions of conflict theory is that a society is shaped by competition over limited resources and power between social groups (Hayes, 2024). Evidently, in Burkina Faso, competition and conflict over limited resources, land, and water between farmers and pastoralists in rural areas exist (Wolfel et al., 2024). The migration of nomadic pastoralists to the central and southern parts of Burkina Faso, driven by climate change and in search of fertile land, led to conflicts between them and settled farmers, Gaye (2018) argued. On the other hand, the exploitation of resource conflicts and grievances by non-state armed groups, which led to violent conflicts, displacement and loss of livelihood, reflects how conflict over scarce resources and unequal distribution of land and water escalates social conflicts into armed conflict. Conflicts over scarce resources are also evident in Mali, where farmers and pastoralists compete for access to water and land rights, reflecting a struggle for dominance and survival between the two groups. Evidently, Sauter (2024) and UN-Habitat (2022) highlighted that ethnic groups such as the Fulani, who are pastoralists, and the Dogon, who are farmers, have conflicting access to farmland, water, and land rights. Similar to Burkina Faso, resource conflicts in Mali are exploited by non-state armed groups and self-defence militias, which fuel violent conflict to expand their influence and gain territorial control (Gaye, 2018; ICG, 2020). This reflects how the struggle over limited resources and their unequal distribution intensifies into violent conflict. On the other hand, in Niger, conflict theory views resource conflicts between nomadic pastoralists and settled farmers over control of grazing and farming land and water access as a competition for scarce resources, where pastoralists are excluded from the use of land, leading to resistance and conflict. Evidently, Climate Diplomacy (n.d) and Ellis Cazemier (2023) argued that due to the migration of nomadic pastoralists to other regions in search of fertile land, conflicts between nomadic pastoralists and settled farmers took place.

On the other hand, the structural violence theory reflects how systemic inequalities and institutional neglect perpetuate harm on social groups or communities (Rawlings and Low, 2020). Structural violence is therefore visible in Burkina Faso, through government policies

that favour farmers over pastoralists and government failures to resolve resource disputes. Evidently, Gaye (2018) highlighted government policies that favour farmers over pastoralists, along with government failures to resolve land disputes between farmers and pastoralists, leading to the exploitation of these disputes and grievances by non-state armed groups. This also reveals how conflict, or armed conflict, is carried out through powerful institutions and systems, as structural violence theory argues. Similar to Burkina Faso, political and social systems, such as government policies and the marginalisation of pastoralists, fuel farmer-pastoralist conflicts, leading pastoralists to always compete for grazing land. This is evident in the NUPI and SIPRI (2021) report, which asserts that conflicts between pastoralists and farmers over access to water and land are a result of the government's marginalisation of herders and its policies. Furthermore, in Niger state, neglect, such as weak enforcement of the land registration law, contributed to conflicts over land and water control between farmers and pastoralists, as highlighted by UN-Habitat (2022) and Climate Diplomacy (n.d.). Therefore, structural violence is visible across the three Central Sahel countries, where government policies favour farmers over pastoralists, and the government and courts fail to resolve resource disputes.

The above interpretation aligns with Soumahoro (2020), who argued in his report that in Burkina Faso, resource conflicts over water and the distribution of land ownership between herders and farmers are fuelled by climate change and exploited by the ISGS, a non-state armed group. In Mali, Moussa Soumahoro (2019) indicated that disputes between farmers and herders over land and other natural resources are not fairly judged by courts, exacerbating community clashes, which are exploited by armed groups who spread radical Islamism. Similarly to Burkina Faso, Dr Uzma Naz and Mohammad Subhan Saleem (2023) highlighted that land degradation caused by climate change led to competition over grazing land and water between agriculturists and pastoralists, which worsens resource disputes in Niger. They further argued that increased competition over grazing land and water leads to violent conflicts and to the involvement of non-state armed groups that exploit them (Naz and Saleem, 2023). The studies align with the application of conflict theory, which emphasises competition over limited resources within a society, and structural violence theory, which reflects how social, political, and economic structures systematically harm social groups and communities, leading to inequality.

5.3.2.3 Lack of Legitimacy

The lack of state legitimacy emerges from the integration of ethnic tensions and marginalisation with conflicts over resource control in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, where systemic neglect, exclusion and competition over limited resources intertwine to undermine trust in governance. In Burkina Faso, studies by the Global Change Research Program (2025) and Gaye (2018) show that disputes between farmers and pastoralists revealed the state's inability to mediate resource conflicts. This failure facilitated the recruitment of marginalised youth by armed groups and the formation of self-defence militias, which in turn worsened intercommunal clashes and weakened governance (FAO, 2021). Non-state armed groups further undermined legitimacy by positioning themselves as justice providers in conflict-affected areas (Saidou & Honig, 2024). In Mali, similar disputes over land and water exposed judicial bias in favour of farmers over pastoralists, as Mbaye (2020) noted. The formation of militias and recruitment of pastoralists by groups such as JNIM and ISSP escalated communal violence, leading to the closure of courts and administrative offices, thereby creating service delivery gaps and eroding state authority (IPSS, 2019; BTI, 2024). In Niger, grievances over land and water access, compounded by ethnic tensions, were exploited by ISWAP, Boko Haram, and JNIM (IISS, 2023; UN-Habitat, 2022). The state's heavy-handed military response further weakened its legitimacy and capacity to govern effectively (Ellis and Cazemier, 2024). Structural violence theory will therefore help interpret these dynamics.

5.3.2.3.1 Theory Application

Structural violence is visible in Burkina Faso, through political, social, and economic structures and institutions such as biased local government and policies which have caused inequalities that fuel ethnic tensions and resource conflicts, as noted by Doukhan (2025). The dynamics have been exploited by the JNIM and ISSP, who exacerbated disputes between farmers and pastoralists, particularly the Fulani and Dogon, into violent conflicts (Doukhan, 2025). The groups further led to distrust between communities, imposed Sharia laws, and directly competed with the state by establishing their own authority, undermining the government's credibility (Doukhan, 2025). This has led to the loss of more than 30% territorial control to non-state armed groups (ZOA International, 2025; Arieff, 2025). Therefore, in Burkina Faso, structural violence theory reveals how systemic inequalities are exploited by non-state armed groups, who in turn undermine institutions, leading to long-term impacts on the government, fuelling the cycle of violence. In Mali, structural violence theory highlights how social and

political systems indirectly harm social groups and communities through inequality and exclusion. Evidently, Hegazi et al. (2021) and Bennouna and Bonfiglioli (2025) indicated that limited state authority and presence, poor resource management, and the failure of courts and local authorities to resolve farmer-pastoralist disputes fairly worsened ethnic tensions and fuelled conflicts. Poor resource management further led to intercommunal conflicts and tensions, disrupting social cohesion and livelihoods. Further, limited equitable access to land and water deepens the vulnerabilities of the marginalised, noted Bennouna and Bonfiglioli (2025). These grievances were therefore exploited by non-state armed groups, JNIM and ISSP, who recruit from the vulnerable groups and the formation of self-defence militias (Mbaye, 2020; Gaye, 2018). The non-state armed groups and self-defence militias intensified local disputes into violent conflicts, harming civilians, while also leading to the closure of state institutions such as courts and administrative halls (BTI, 2024).

Whereas in Niger, structural violence is visible through the weak enforcement of land registration laws and policies, indirectly harming social groups by perpetuating inequality and exclusion. The UN-Habitat (2022) argued that institutional weakness contributes to recurrent farmer-pastoralist conflicts over access to water, grazing, and farming land. In turn, the conflicts are exploited and exacerbated into violent conflicts by non-state armed groups such as ISWAP, JNIM, and Boko Haram, as also noted in Burkina Faso and Mali (Ellis and Cazemier, 2024; UN-Habitat, 2023). In contrast to Mali and Burkina Faso, the heavy-handed response by the Nigerien Armed Forces to violent conflicts has been accused of undermining their legitimacy and their ability to operate effectively (Ellis and Cazemier, 2024). Rather than restoring order in the conflict-affected areas, the response worsened violence, with the non-state armed groups retaliating by intimidating local authorities and targeting civilians, argued Ellis and Cazemier (2024). This eroded trust in state institutions and deepened the legitimacy crisis in Niger. Therefore, across Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, structural violence reflects how institutional and systemic inequalities and exclusion lead to conflicts between the marginalised and the favoured groups, pastoralists and farmers. It reveals how the marginalised will always be vulnerable to non-state armed groups who compete for power with the state and to the cycle of conflict. It further highlights how these systemic inequalities and exclusions erode trust in the state, leading to the marginalised being easily recruited by non-state armed groups.

The above interpretation further aligns with Soumahoro (2020), who indicated that ethnic tensions alongside resource conflicts created a cycle where state failure resulted in the vulnerability of the populations, which in turn was exploited by non-state armed groups such as Ansaroul Islam. This further weakened social cohesion and state control, posing a major threat to Burkina Faso's stability (Soumahoro, 2020). A report by Bisson et al. (2021) also argued that these groups capitalise on pre-existing tensions between farmers and herders, seeking to undermine governance of Burkina Faso. Bissan et al. (2021) further indicated that these groups took over authority that used to be under state control, including policing, justice, and taxation, undermining the legitimacy of the state, governance, and traditional rulers. Similarly to the aforementioned, Soumahoro (2019) indicated that in Mali, disputes between farmers and herders over land and other natural resources were not fairly judged by courts, exacerbating community clashes, which are then exploited by armed groups who spread radical Islamism. Radical influences, in turn, undermine social cohesion, leading to ethnic armed factions and terrorist groups to utilise radical discourse to portray those who are anti-Islamists as enemies (Soumahoro, 2019). He further argued that these groups foster mistrust, turning tensions over natural resources and political concerns into violent conflict, undermining governance (Soumahoro, 2019). Laremont (2021) also noted that the rise of jihadist insurgencies in rural areas that exploit farmer-pastoralist conflicts is exacerbated by the weakness of governmental institutions, leading the jihadists to provide the rule of law and security to transnational business networks, farmers and pastoralists.

5.3.2.4 State Capacity Deficits

State capacity deficits are both a cause and a consequence of ethnic tensions, marginalisation and conflicts over resource control in the Central Sahel region. Weak institutions and governance, and limited state presence, create conditions for conflicts, while the escalation of conflicts further undermines the state's ability to govern effectively. Evidently, more than 30% of Burkina Faso's territory is out of government control due to limited state presence in some regions (Arieff, 2025; ZOA, 2025). The FAO (2021) further highlighted that governance and state administration failures led to resource conflicts, which in turn led to the loss of legitimacy, trust, and a sense of injustice on the part of the marginalised towards the state. In Mali, similar to Burkina Faso, Bennouna and Bonfiglioli (2025) indicated that poor environmental governance and government failures to resolve resource conflicts fairly created a gap that non-state armed groups later exploited. The presence of these groups is further driven by the absence

of state authority in some of the Malian regions (Bennouna and Bonfiglioli, 2025). In turn, the groups fuel intercommunal conflicts into violent conflicts, leading to the closure of courts and administrative halls, which created a gap for service delivery, argued the BTI (2024). Compared to Burkina Faso and Mali, the ineffective state security presence on the borders of Niger provided a fertile ground for ISWAP, JNIM, ISSP and Boko Haram (Ellis and Cazemier, 2024; The World Bank, 2023; UN-Habitat, 2022). Ellis and Cazemier (2024) further indicated that these groups exploited and intensified farmer-pastoralists' conflicts, recruited aggrieved communities, and further destabilised and undermined state authority and legitimacy. In addition, the cases of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger reveal how state capacity deficits not only create conditions for conflicts, they also worsen violence and ethnic tensions that the state fails to mitigate. Therefore, the structural violence theory will help reveal how deeply rooted the inequalities in these countries are, politically, economically, and socially, and how state capacity deficits underpin them.

5.3.2.4.1 Theory Application

In Burkina Faso, conflicts over resource control between farmers and pastoralists are structurally driven by failures in local governance and state administration, leading to a loss of legitimacy, trust, and a sense of injustice toward the state (FAO, 2021). Structural violence is further evident when Arief (2025) and the African Security Analysis (2025) highlight how weak state presence in rural areas has been exploited by the JNIM and ISSP, who also exploit local grievances and tensions to expand their influence. To compensate for the lack of security presence, the ruling military junta in turn depended on self-defence militias and VDH, which fuelled ethnic tensions and deepened mistrust, as argued by Doukhan (2025) and Sourabie (2023). This further fuelled the recruitment of the marginalised groups, such as the Fulani, by non-state armed groups, who also exacerbated tensions into violent conflicts (Doukhan, 2025). Furthermore, violent conflicts led to the closure of courts, resulting in the state's inability to resolve and contain resource and ethnic tensions (Sourabie, 2023). Compared to Burkina Faso, Mali's political system, including the government, discriminates against and favours one social group over others, leading to conflicts. Evidently, Mbaye (2020) indicated that government discrimination, along with corrupt officials who favour farmers over pastoralists, has led to farmer-pastoralist conflicts. Other systemic failures include agricultural policies and weak governance, which contribute to conflicts between communities and are later exploited by the JNIM and ISPP, fuelling violent conflicts (NUPI and SIPRI, 2021; Hegazi et al., 2021). In turn,

these violent conflicts have led to the closure of courts and administrative halls, creating a gap in service delivery and the state's ability to resolve disputes, reflecting how conflicts and violence are carried out through powerful systems.

Similarly, in Niger, political, social, and economic structures and institutions, such as the government, contributed to intercommunal conflicts, which were exploited by non-state armed groups, undermining state authority. This is evident in Berman and Schweitzer (2024) and Ellis and Cazemier (2024) 's reports, which highlighted that limited governance capacity and ineffective state security presence on the borders of Niger provided a fertile ground for ISSP, ISWAP, Boko Haram and JNIM. These groups exploited farmer-pastoralists' conflicts and grievances, recruited marginalised pastoralists, worsened conflicts, and destabilised the already fragile state (Berman and Schweitzer, 2024). They also undermined Niger's authority and legitimacy. Therefore, in these countries, the structural violence theory reflects how institutional weaknesses and systematic inequalities lead to both resource conflicts and ethnic tensions, and undermine the state's capacity to govern, creating a cycle of conflict and fragility.

The structural violence theory interpretation aligns with the report by Sourabie (2023), which highlighted that the absence of justice in communities such as Thiou and Bani to resolve these tensions led the communities to resort to violent non-state armed groups. It further argued that the presence of these groups in communities is favoured by the state's weak presence (Sourabie, 2023). To control the Thiou and Bani communities, they imposed a Sharia law, an Islamic law, undermining the country's governance and the rule of law (Sourabie, 2023). Zoubir (2022) added that weak governance contributed to the unequal distribution of wealth from natural resources, such as gold, thereby excluding local populations. In turn, non-state armed groups exploited this by smuggling gold and using it to fund their violent activities, which allows them to control the Liptako-Gourma region of Mali, which directly undermines the state authority (Zoubir, 2022). Similarly, Shadid (2025) indicated that the lack of state presence worsened resource conflicts by enabling non-state armed groups such as Ansar Dine and JNIM to control resource-rich areas. She also argued that resource competition between local communities, along with the lack of economic opportunities, led to the youth's vulnerability to joining militant groups as well as being involved in criminal activities (Shahid, 2025). These groups exploit resource, ethnic and religious tensions in order to create conflict in the country, while invoking their desire to implement the Sharia law, undermining the rule of law (Shahid, 2025). In turn, this weakened the Malian regions with already weak governance, and the populations

lost trust in the government, undermining the state's legitimacy and its ability to resolve resource conflicts peacefully and effectively (Shahid, 2025).

On the other hand, Laremont (2021) argued that conflicts over land and water between farmers and pastoralists were exploited by jihadist groups for recruitment and taxation purposes, undermining the region's governance. The rise of jihadist insurgencies in rural areas is therefore exacerbated by the weakness of governmental institutions, leading the jihadists to provide the rule of law and security to transnational business networks, farmers and pastoralists, argued Laremont (2021). In addition, the existing literature validates how state capacity deficits are both a cause and a consequence of ethnic tensions and resource conflicts.

5.3.2.5 International Interventions

5.3.2.5.1 Military Operations

International interventions, particularly military interventions, sanctions and suspensions, have been framed as responses to persistent armed conflict. However, their impacts across the Central Sahel region reveal a complex mix of stabilisation efforts and unintended consequences. In Burkina Faso, amid armed conflict, France, the US, and Russia provided military interventions to counter terrorism. The US counterterrorism operations were, however, accused of worsening conflicts and contributing to the government's violations of minority ethnic groups, the Fulani, further worsening intercommunal conflicts (Savell, 2021). Similarly, the French operations Sabre and Barkhane were ineffective, and the security situation remained the same, with ongoing military incidents and civilian casualties (Angyal, 2025). This led to resentment and anti-French protests among Ouagadougou's population (Angyal, 2025). Military operations by the French government and its international allies strengthened and expanded non-state armed groups, prompting the Burkina Faso ruling military junta to request the withdrawal of their operations, argued Savell (2021). After the US and French military operations in Burkina Faso ended, Russia allied with Burkina Faso and launched a Russian military operation, Africa Corps (RIL, 2025). Africa Corps was deployed in early 2024; unlike French and US operations, it is receiving support from the Burkinabes and is still operating in Burkina Faso and five other states, including Mali and Niger (RIL, 2025). Similarly, French, UN and Russian military operations were provided to counterinsurgency in Mali.

French operations were also accused of failing to counterinsurgency and met with dissatisfaction from the Malian population and authorities, who in turn exploited their quest for

legitimacy, leading to the 2020 military coup (Le Noë, 2022; Chafer et.al., 2024). France was further accused of interfering with the country's domestic affairs and of worsening conflicts (Le Noë, 2022). The UN's peacekeeping operation, MINUSMA, was also accused of being ineffective and failing to bring peace and security, with the security situation deteriorating further (Brooke-Halland, 2023; De-Simone, 2023). The French and UN operations were ineffective in Mali, as the number of jihadist attacks and the recruitment of citizens by non-state groups increased, leading to the request by the ruling military junta to withdraw their operations in Mali (Chafer et.al., 2024; Brooke-Halland, 2023). In Burkina Faso and Mali, Russia's Wagner group was accused of failing to prevent the jihadist insurgency from expanding into central and western parts of the country (McGregor, 2025; Ehl, 2025). Russia's military operations were further accused of exacerbating ethnic tensions between communities, with the Malian government favouring some groups over others (BTI, 2024). However, Russia's military operations remain in Mal through a new operation, Africa Corps, following the disbandment of the Wagner group (Ehl, 2025).

Slightly similar to Burkina Faso and Mali, the EU, France, the US, and Russia provided military interventions in Niger to mitigate armed conflict. The EU established the EUMP, which helped mitigate terrorist threats, irregular migration, and organised crime (EEAS, 2023; Council of the European Union, 2024). On the other hand, France's Operation Barkhane also operated in Niger and was later accused of being ineffective and of prioritising its own economic and geopolitical interests over addressing local grievances and the deteriorating security crisis posed by non-state armed groups (Nweke and Enwere, 2024; Ahmed, 2025). Similarly to France, US operations were also accused of illegally operating in Niger, right after the 2023 military coup, by the ruling military junta (Guldogan, 2024). In addition, the EU, France and the US were requested to withdraw from Niger after the military coup by the junta (Guldogan, 2024; Nweke and Enwere, 2024; Council of the European Union, 2024). The security vacuum left by their exit was later filled by the Russian Africa Corps, which began its operations in Niger in 2024 (RIL, 2025). The move to request withdrawals from France, the US, the UN, and the EU across the Central Sahel region reveals how the three countries are moving away from Western influence.

5.3.2.5.2 Sanctions and Suspensions

In mitigating armed conflict, such as jihadist insurgency and terrorism by non-state armed groups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, military interventions in the form of military coups

occurred; they were, however, condemned by the ECOWAS and AU. In Burkina Faso, the ECOWAS imposed sanctions and suspended Burkina Faso's membership (Sunday and Oke, 2025). Sunday and Oke (2025) highlighted that the sanctions were ineffective; the imposed travel bans and economic restrictions failed to compel the military junta to transition into civil rule. Similarly, the ECOWAS imposed harsh sanctions and suspended Mali's membership. However, it was later deemed ineffective, and the sanctions not only affected the junta and further undermined the country's sovereignty and autonomy (Mohamed and Arabo, 2024). Similar to Burkina Faso and Mali, the ECOWAS suspended the Nigerien military junta and imposed harsh economic sanctions and further threatened military intervention if there was no return to democratic rule (Abdirahman et al., 2025). However, the sanctions, in turn, affected citizens who suffered from food insecurity and power outages (Olubiyo and Ayodele, 2024). After the imposition of economic sanctions, the three countries withdrew from ECOWAS, accusing it of prioritizing Western-aligned democratic norms over the needs of its member states and of failing to mitigate conflicts (Mohamed and Arabo, 2024; Elokor, 2025). This then led to the formation of the Alliance of Sahel States organisation by Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger (Mohamed and Arabo, 2024). Furthermore, the AU also condemned and suspended Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger from participating in all its activities, citing the military coups as unconstitutional (Paccia, 2025; Africanews, 2025). Therefore, the structural violence theory provides a useful insight into how international interventions, particularly military interventions, sanctions, and suspensions in these countries, reflect and reinforce systemic inequalities that, in turn, fuel armed conflict.

5.3.2.5.3 Theory Application

In Burkina Faso, structural violence reveals how international interventions such as those of France and the US, alongside suspensions and sanctions imposed by regional institutions, the ECOWAS and AU, reinforce inequalities and fuel conflicts. These interventions were intended to counter terrorism; in turn, they contributed to the escalation of violent conflicts by non-state armed groups, further disrupting service delivery and deepening rural vulnerabilities. Evidently, Savell (2021) highlighted how military operations by the French government and its international allies were ineffective and led to the growth of non-state armed groups in the Liptako-Gourma tri-border. The US, on the other hand, contributed to the government's violations of minority ethnic groups, the Fulani, further worsening intercommunal conflicts (Savell, 2021). Similar to Burkina Faso, military operations led by France, the UN and Russia

sought to counterinsurgency, fuelled intercommunal conflicts and led to community distrust and exclusion of some ethnic groups, such as the Fulani. Evidently, De-Simone (2023) indicated that the presence of French and UN troops contributed to the escalation of jihadist attacks and recruitment of aggrieved citizens by the non-state armed groups.

The BTI (2024) further argued that Russia's Wagner group further exacerbated ethnic tensions and violated human rights, with the Malian government favouring some ethnic groups over others. Compared to Burkina Faso and Mali, imposed economic sanctions by the ECOWAS following the 2023 military coup hindered the state's ability to mobilise against non-state groups and systematically harmed populations who relied on state services and trade. Olubiyo and Ayodele (2024) noted that imposed economic sanctions, including travel bans, financial transaction bans, asset freezes, halting trade and electricity supply, and threatened military interventions by the ECOWAS, affected citizens. The citizens were most affected by the economic sanctions; they faced a food security crisis and a loss of power, which affected livelihoods (Byiers et al., 2023). In addition, structural violence theory highlights how international interventions intended to mitigate conflicts can also worsen structural inequalities and weaken state capacity, further exacerbating the cycle of violence rather than containing it.

The above structural violence interpretation aligns with Charbonneau (2017), who indicated that the UN peacekeeping operation in Mali, MINUSMA, was viewed as one of the most ongoing lethal peacekeeping missions due to the fatalities it suffered, such as the 2014 39 rocket attacks, as well as the 60 incidents of improvised explosive devices. Other studies argued that regional organisations also contributed to establishing governance and supporting conflict resolutions before recent coups in the Central Sahel region. Evidently, Owa Egbere Owa et al. (2024) indicated that the ECOWAS responded through peaceful diplomatic talks in Burkina Faso, which led to a temporary ceasefire between various rebel groups and the Burkinabe government. Owa et al. (2024) further argued that responses to diplomatic engagement in Burkina Faso and pressure on the transnational government contributed to the successful organisation of free and fair elections, resulting in the restoration of democratic governance in 2015. Whereas in Mali, it launched a military intervention along with the AU, AFISMA aimed at addressing the security crisis caused by the Islamist insurgency and Tuareg rebellion (Owa et.al. 2024). It engaged in successful peace diplomacy with the Tuareg rebels. Also, it adopted a temporary ban on the importation, exploitation, and manufacturing of light and small weapons in West Africa under Mali's leadership, argued Owa et al. (2024).

5.4 Explanation of the Key Findings

The study explored the socioeconomic and political impacts of armed conflict in the Central Sahel region using two major themes: socioeconomic impacts and political impacts. Each theme consisted of five subthemes, allowing for a structured comparison of similarities, differences and implications. The key findings are therefore explained below.

5.4.1 Socioeconomic Impacts

The findings revealed that across the Central Sahel region, armed conflicts such as terrorism, farmer-pastoralist conflicts, and jihadist insurgencies led to socioeconomic impacts, affecting the populations. These armed conflicts are driven by non-state armed groups, who exploit community grievances and conflicts to expand their influence and impose their Islamic laws, such as the Sharia Law, in the region. The socioeconomic impacts include displacement, poor agricultural production, food insecurity, and limited access to education and healthcare.

5.4.1.1 Displacement

The findings indicated that in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, displacement is driven by armed conflict, mostly by non-state armed groups such as the JNIM, ISSP and ISWAP (MSF, 2023; SIHMA, 2024; SIHMA, 2025). However, in Niger, the findings revealed that internal conflicts led by non-state armed groups were not the only cause of displacement; spillover conflict from neighbouring countries and deteriorating border security were also drivers of displacement (SIHMA, 2025). In Burkina Faso, armed conflict led to internal and external displacement of more than two million people by 2025 (UNHCR, 2025). While in Mali, rebellion attacks against the Malian government led to internal and external displacement of over 700 00 people by the 31st of December 2025 (UNHCR, 2023). Whereas in Niger, it led to internal displacement of over 400,000 people and also hosted more than 430,000 refugees or asylum-seekers, due to its location at the cross-border (UN IOM, 2025). Across the three countries, the findings indicated that displacement by armed conflict disrupted agricultural activities, trade, markets, livelihoods, and transhumance networks. It further disrupted access to basic services such as healthcare and education (FSIN and GNAFC, 2024; SIHMA, 2025; UN IOM, 2025; Insecurity Insight, 2023).

5.4.1.2 Poor Agricultural Production

In the Central Sahel region, the agricultural sector employs more than 70% of the population. However, the findings revealed that armed conflict has led to poor agricultural production across the Central Sahel region (FAO, 2022; FEWS NET, 2022; UNSC, 2022; ICRC, 2020). These findings reflect how armed conflict affects the people of the region's livelihoods, as the agricultural sector employs most of the population. For instance, in Burkina Faso, it was revealed that armed attacks by non-state armed groups hindered agricultural activities, leading to the loss of land for cereal crop planting (FEWS NET, 2022; UNSC, 2022; FSIN and GNAFC, 2023). These groups further looted livestock and imposed restrictions on the mobility of farmers and pastoralists to access their farming and grazing land, which reveals how these groups went out of their way to disrupt people's livelihoods. Similarly, in Mali, armed attacks and clashes between these groups, along with farmer-pastoralist conflicts exploited by the non-state armed groups, hindered agricultural activities (FAO, 2022; FEWS NET, 2021). The clashes and attacks also led to restrictions on grazing and cultivatable agricultural land, as well as the closure of various rural markets (International Crisis Group, 2020; Delgado et al., 2023). This reveals that, to gain control and expand their influence and power, these groups will go to war with each other and try to control how people live, imposing restrictions on farmers and pastoralists. In Niger, the findings revealed that farmer-pastoralist conflicts, along with resurgence attacks by non-state armed groups, disrupted agricultural activities, markets, trade routes and the closure of borders, causing farmers to have no access to fertilisers, seeds and markets (Insecurity Insight, 2023; FSIN and GNAFC, 2023; FSIN, 2025). Therefore, in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, one can argue that non-state armed groups' activities, such as terrorism and resurgent attacks against the government, not only affect the government, and also agricultural production and other livelihoods, including trade, leading to food insecurity.

5.4.1.3 Food Insecurity

Armed conflict not only led to poor agricultural production, they also to food insecurity in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. In Burkina Faso, Food insecurity is the result of displacement and armed conflict by non-state armed groups, which disrupted markets and livelihoods (IDGM, 2024; FSIN and GNAFS, 2023). These groups further blocked humanitarian aid deliveries, thereby increasing food insecurity across Burkina Faso (IDMC, 2024). While in Mali, a combination of fear of attacks by non-state armed groups, clashes between non-state armed groups, robberies, the Ukraine-Russia war, and farmer-pastoralist conflicts is identified

as the cause of food insecurity (World Food Programme, 2019; African Development Group, 2022; UNSC, 2022). These conflicts have led to the families having no access to food, as conflicts led to market disruptions, high food and oil prices, and the disruption of humanitarian aid delivery, as also argued in Burkina Faso, increasing food insecurity (FEWS NET, 2021; UNSC, 2022; Delgado et.al., 2023). In Contrast to Burkina Faso and Mali, in Niger, a combination of armed conflict, economic sanctions, border restrictions, and farmer-pastoralist conflicts is revealed by the findings as the contributors to food insecurity (Insecurity, Insight, 2023; UN IOM, 2024; FSIN and GNAFC, 2023). These aforementioned factors led to high food prices, the suspension of food aid, and restricted access to farmland for grazing, growing, and harvesting produce, which gave rise to food insecurity in Niger (Insecurity Insight, 2023; UN IOM, 2024; FSIN and GNAFC, 2023). Similar to poor agricultural production, non-state armed groups' attacks and clashes have also contributed to food insecurity across the Central Sahel region. One can further agree that armed conflict is the major cause of food insecurity affecting the communities of the region.

5.4.1.4 Lack of Access to Education

The findings from the reports further indicated that armed conflict led to the lack of access to basic services such as education and healthcare. In the Central Sahel region, education is affected by armed conflict through armed attacks on schools, teachers and students. It is evident in Burkina Faso, where reports indicated that non-state armed groups launched attacks and disrupted learning, while also threatening, kidnapping and killing teachers and students (Lakica, 2023; ACAPS, 2017). This reveals how armed attacks by these groups disrupted learning, violated the children's rights to education, while also putting students behind in their studies (Lakica, 2023; Marshall and Tiendrebeogo, 2023). The rate of out-of-school children also increased, as well as the risks of these children to child labour, child marriage and recruitment by non-state armed groups (Marshall and Tiendrebeogo, 2023).

On the other hand, in Mali, the findings revealed that the lack of access to education is a result of the burning of schools and their equipment, and attacks on teachers and students by non-state armed groups (ACAPS, 2025; UNSC, 2022; UNICEF, 2025). There has also been a lack of access to education for displaced people in host families, as most schools are beyond their capacity and are strained, leaving some students unable to attend (UNICEF, 2025). In Mali, access to education has also been hindered by conflicts linked with climate change, with learning being disrupted, leading to the rise of school dropouts and the blockages in fuel supply

by non-state armed groups (UNICEF, 2025; Allegrozzi, 2025). While in Niger, reports highlighted the combination of conflict, displacement and the occupation of some schools by the Nigerien Defence Force as the drivers of the lack of access to education (Marshall and Tiendrebeogo, 2023; UNICEF, 2025; Baron and Calaycay, 2024; GCPEA, 2020). The aforementioned led to the school closures, which disrupted learning and resulted in the increased risks of children out of school to child marriage and early marriage, similar to Burkina Faso and Mali (UNICEF, 2025; Baron and Calaycay, 2024). In Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, lack of access to education reflects the impacts caused by armed conflict driven by both state forces and non-state armed groups. All three countries are experiencing armed conflict; however, each country's education system is not affected by the same conflict dynamics.

5.4.1.5 Lack of Access to Healthcare

Similar to the lack of access to education, armed conflict also hindered access to healthcare services across the region. Findings indicated how armed attacks by non-state armed groups on healthcare facilities and healthcare workers led to the closure of some facilities and the fleeing of some healthcare workers, hindering access to education for thousands of patients. In Burkina Faso, the findings revealed that non-state armed groups attacked healthcare facilities, looted medical supplies and medicine, and further attacked healthcare workers (ACAPS, 2019; World Bank Group, 2021; Health Cluster, 2023). This led to the rise of diseases such as measles and cholera, and also affected support for pregnant women, GBV survivors and access to emergency care and vaccination (Health Cluster, 2023; ICRC, 2019). Comparably, in Mali, the findings indicated that the JNIM and ISSP were involved in hijacking ambulances, attacking healthcare facilities, the looting of medical supplies and medicines, as well as attacking healthcare workers (Insecurity Insight and SHC, 2022; UNSC, 2022; Degni, 2015). These hindered patients' access to healthcare and led to difficulties for women and children in accessing healthcare facilities for serious illnesses such as malaria and measles (Degni, 2015; MSF, 2023). Similar to Burkina Faso and Mali, armed attacks by the ISSP and ISWAP on healthcare facilities, the kidnapping of healthcare workers and the hijacking of ambulances hindered access to healthcare in Niger (UNFPA, 2025; Doutchi et.al., 2024; MSF, 2021). The health department was therefore weakened, and there was closure of the healthcare facilities, the fleeing of healthcare workers and the suspension of reproductive centres. The findings further revealed that in Niger, non-state armed groups also attacked humanitarian medical

workers, which forced them to suspend their medical activities, hindering access to healthcare for patients in conflict-affected areas (MSF, 2021). Therefore, across Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, these reveal how armed attacks by non-state armed groups hindered access to healthcare, leading to the rise of diseases, the death of patients and the closure of some of the healthcare facilities.

5.4.1.6 Synthesis of the Socioeconomic Impacts

The aforementioned explanation of findings reveals how armed conflict in the Central Sahel region, mostly driven by non-state armed groups, not only affects the government which these groups are fighting against. Armed conflict by these groups mostly affects populations of the three Central Sahel region countries. They lead to internal and external displacement and to poor agricultural production, both of which contribute to food insecurity. They also hinder access to basic services, such as education and healthcare. Therefore, the findings directly address the research question on the socioeconomic impacts of displacement and disrupted livelihoods caused by armed conflict in the Central Sahel region. These findings also reveal how people's livelihoods are disrupted by the attacks led by non-state armed groups, and how armed conflict leads to high food prices. They further reveal how competition and conflicts between groups over limited resources and power, such as competition between farmers and pastoralists and between non-state armed groups and the state over power and territory, led to socioeconomic impacts. These conflicts further led to structural violence, where attacks on schools and hospitals led to long-term impacts on children, the youth and people of the region as a whole. Attacks on schools led to an increase in school dropout rates, child labour, child marriage, recruitment by non-state armed groups, marginalisation and exclusion, compared to children living in urban areas with little to no conflict. While attacks on healthcare facilities led to the fleeing of healthcare workers, the closure of some facilities, looting of medical supplies and medicines, leading to the patients being affected and an increase in diseases such as malaria, cholera and measles.

5.4.2 Political Impacts

In contrast to the socioeconomic impacts which stemmed from armed conflict, political impacts such as the lack of legitimacy and state capacity deficits are revealed as both the causes and consequences of ethnic tensions and marginalisation, as well as conflicts over resource control in the Central Sahel region. On the other hand, international interventions such as military

operations, sanctions and suspensions failed to mitigate armed conflicts; they exacerbated them.

5.4.2.1 Lack of Legitimacy

Political factors, such as government policies, weak state presence, and weak governance, are the main causes and consequences of ethnic tensions and conflicts over resource control, eroding the state's legitimacy. This is where non-state armed groups exploit grievances, resource disputes, weak governance, and the absence of state presence in some areas, particularly in rural areas, to expand their influence and impose their laws. In turn, these groups exacerbate ethnic tensions and resource conflicts, which are interconnected due to pastoralists being mostly the Fulani community in the three countries, into violent conflicts. Violent conflicts, therefore, further weakened governments and undermined the state's governance, leading to the loss of territory to non-state armed groups. This is evident in Burkina Faso, where biased local government policies, the state's failure to resolve resource disputes, and unequal distribution and access to resources by pastoralists eroded trust between farmers and pastoralists (Doukhan, 2025). It also led to the exploitation of these grievances and conflicts between these groups by non-state armed groups, who in turn imposed their Sharia law, competing with the government in the aim of establishing legitimacy and authority of militant extremism (Doukhan, 2025). In Burkina Faso, the dynamics also led to the creation of self-defence militias and to the easy recruitment of youth from marginalised groups by non-state armed groups, which fuelled these conflicts into violent conflict (Gaye, 2018; FAO, 2021). The recruitment by these groups expanded their influence and interest, which destabilised Burkina Faso and led to the loss of more than 40% if its territory from government control (ZOA International, 2025; Arieff, 2025, African Security Analysis). Partially comparable to Burkina Faso, Mali's lack of legitimacy stems from limited state authority and presence, poor resource management, and failures by courts and local authorities to resolve and rule fairly on farmer-pastoralist disputes (Hegazi et al., 2021; Bennouna and Bonfiglioli, 2025; IPSS, 2019). Furthermore, the aforementioned, along with the absence of state security provision, led to resource conflicts, ethnic tensions and marginalisation, and also to the escalation of these conflicts by non-state armed groups (Hegazi et al., 2021).

They further led to the creation of self-defence militias and the rise of non-state armed groups who recruited from the marginalised, similar to Burkina Faso, and also to violent conflicts (IPSS, 2019; Gaye, 2018; Mbaye, 2020). In turn, this led to the closure of various state

institutions, such as courts and halls, creating a service delivery gap and further eroding trust in the government, thereby undermining its legitimacy (BTI, 2024). Like Burkina Faso and Mali, Niger's lack of legitimacy stems from the government's weak enforcement of land registration laws and from grievances over access to land and water (UN-Habitat, 2022; Ellis and Cazemier, 2024). However, in Niger, the Niger Armed Forces' heavy-handed response to violent conflicts further eroded the country's legitimacy (UN-Habitat, 2022; Ellis and Cazemier, 2024). The response directly undermined the government's legitimacy and its ability to operate effectively and further fuelled violence by non-state armed groups, who then intimidated local authorities and targeted civilians (UN-Habitat, 2022; Ellis and Cazemier, 2024).

5.4.2.2 State Capacity Deficits

In Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, state capacity deficits are both the causes and consequences of resource conflicts and ethnic tensions. This is because political factors, such as weak governance, the absence of a state and its security in some regions, court failures to fairly resolve resource disputes, and the marginalisation of some groups by the government, have led to ethnic tensions and resource conflicts. In turn, the grievances and tensions were exploited and fuelled by the presence of non-state armed groups and self-defence militias into violent conflict, leading to the closure of important state administrations, fuelling state capacity deficits. Evidently, in Burkina Faso, factors such as the government's inability to control most of its territory, local government and administration failures, as well as the weak presence of the state in rural areas, contributed to ethnic tensions and resource conflicts (Arieff, 2025; FAO, 2021; Brugger and Zongo, 2023). The aforementioned further eroded trust in government, leading to the exploitation and the fuelling of tensions and conflicts in communities by non-state armed groups and self-defence militias (Brugger and Zongo, 2023; African Security Analysis, 2025; Arieff, 2025). In turn, this fuelled mistrust between communities and the recruitment of aggrieved communities and groups by non-state armed groups, which intensified violent conflicts, leading to the closure of the judiciary and the state's inability to mitigate resource disputes (Sourabie, 2023).

Similarly, in Mali, factors such as government discrimination and corrupt officials who favoured farmers over pastoralists, biased agricultural policies, recurring military coups, weak governance and state security absence contributed to tensions and conflicts (Mbaye, 2020; NUPI and SIPRI, 2021; Hegazi et al., 2021; Anyalebechi, 2024). Therefore, the tensions and

the absence of state security were later exploited and fuelled violent conflicts by non-state armed groups and self-defence militias (Bennouna and Bonfiglioli, 2025; Hegazi et al., 2021; IPSS, 2019). This led to the closure of courts and administrative halls, creating a service delivery gap and further fuelling Mali's state capacity deficits (BTI, 2024). On the other hand, in Niger, factors including limited governance capacity, weak institutions, the French colonial legacy of favouring certain groups over others, and weak enforcement of the Land Registration law contributed to ethnic tensions and resource conflicts (Zambakari, 2023; UN-Habitat, 2022). Ineffective state security presence along the border of Niger also contributed to these conflicts and enabled non-state armed groups to exploit and intensify them into violent conflicts (World Bank, 2023; Ellis and Cazemier, 2024). These groups, in turn, destabilised and undermined the state's authority and legitimacy, leading to the Niger Armed Forces' response to attacking the Fulanis, further fuelling inter-communal conflicts, which undermined the state's legitimacy and led to a humanitarian crisis (Ellis and Cazemier, 2024; UN-Habitat, 2022; Berman and Schweitzer, 2024).

5.4.2.3 International Interventions

Across Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, the findings highlighted that the international community's main interventions were military interventions, sanctions and suspensions. The military interventions, such as counterterrorism or insurgency operations, were led by France, the US, Russia, the UN and the EU. At the same time, sanctions and suspensions were imposed by regional blocs, the AU and ECOWAS. The military operations across countries were, however, argued to have been ineffective in mitigating armed conflict driven by non-state armed groups and also to have served their own interests (Savell, 2021; Angyl, 2025; Le Noë, 2022; Brook-Halland, 2023; McGregor, 2025; Ahmed, 2025). This then led to the ruling military junta's 2024 request for their withdrawal, except for Russia, from all three countries. Russia only operated in Mali post the military coup of 2021, where it was accused of violating human rights and of fuelling ethnic tensions (Ehl, 2025). From 2024, it has been serving across all three countries under the Africa Corps initiative, filling the security vacuum left by the withdrawal of MINUSMA, France, the US and the EU (Ehl, 2025; RLI, 2025).

While efforts to mitigate armed conflict led by non-state armed groups were underway, military coups took place across the three countries in 2020 and 2021 in Mali, 2022 in Burkina Faso, and 2023 in Niger. The military coups, however, were condemned by the AU and ECOWAS, and ECOWAS imposed economic sanctions with the AU's support (Strategic Comments, 2024;

Mohamed and Arabo, 2024; Olubiyo and Ayoudele, 2024). Whereas, the AU suspended the three countries from participating in all its activities, citing their military rule as unconstitutional (Peccini, 2025). The ECOWAS-imposed economic sanctions, in turn, led the Central Sahel countries to withdraw from the ECOWAS, accusing it of serving the interests of the West rather than those of its member states (Mohamed and Arabo, 2024). Following their withdrawal, an Alliance of the Sahel States organisation was formed, with the main goal of fighting non-state armed groups terrorising the Sahel region (Strategic Comments, 2024; Ewokor, 2025). It is important to note that the newly formed regional bloc, the Alliance of Sahel States, is also supported by Russia (RLI, 2025).

5.4.2.4 Synthesis of Political Impacts

Across Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, the explanation of key findings highlighted that ethnic tensions, marginalisation and conflicts over resources result from political factors. They further revealed how factors such as weak governance, state security absence in rural areas and borders, biased government policies and laws and weak institutions led to ethnic tensions and marginalisation of some groups and resource conflicts. These tensions and grievances were later exploited and fuelled by non-state armed groups and self-defence militias, whose intentions are to expand their influence, interests and also impose their laws, into violent conflicts. Violent conflicts by these groups, in turn, undermined the government's authority and legitimacy, led to the closure of administrative halls and courts, and hindered service delivery, eroding citizens' trust in the government and favouring groups. The findings greatly answered the question of the effects of armed conflict on political legitimacy and state governance in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. However, there are still limited studies on the case of Niger regarding ethnic tensions and marginalisation. The findings further revealed that international interventions, such as military operations, sanctions, and suspensions by the international community, were ineffective. The interventions fuelled armed conflicts; rather than mitigating them, the international community was further accused of serving its own interests, while the ECOWAS was accused of serving the interests of the West. This greatly answered the question of the role and effectiveness of international interventions in addressing armed conflict in the region. The findings, therefore, reflected the failure of the international community and democratic governments to mitigate armed conflict by non-state groups, which led to military coups and the formation of the Alliance of Sahel States.

The findings further reflect the main assumptions of conflict theory and structural violence theory. In their conflict theory, they revealed how conflicts between groups, such as the Fulani and Dogon, and between farmers and pastoralists, led to economic and political impacts. They further showed how other groups, such as the JNIM, ISSP and ISWAP, were in competition with the state and with each other for power, and how they also exploited other groups, such as pastoralists and the Fulanis, to expand their influence. This reflected the assumption of the conflict theory, which posits that competition is natural and part of social life, as groups and individuals seek to expand their interests by exploiting others (Janse, 2022). While on the structural violence theory, the findings reflected how political factors such as biased government policies and laws, weak institutions led to systemic inequalities and exclusion of some groups. This revealed how the excluded groups then went into conflict with the favoured groups, where their conflicts were later exploited and exacerbated into violent conflicts by non-state armed groups. The violent conflicts, in turn, had long-term impacts on the government and civilians, including the closure of courts and administrative halls, creating gaps in service delivery and in ways to resolve resource disputes. Violent conflicts further eroded trust in the government and other groups, undermined the state's legitimacy and authority, and worsened systemic harm.

5.5 Comparative Synthesis and Evidential Limitations

The cross-case evidence shows convergence in the disruption of livelihoods and basic services, the exploitation of local grievances by armed actors and the weakening of administrative reach. The mechanisms and evidential strength nevertheless differ. Mali's evidence is strongest on conflict diffusion, armed-group governance and international intervention; Burkina Faso's evidence is strongest on large-scale displacement, territorial contestation and service closures; and Niger's evidence is comparatively limited and often concentrated in border regions. The analysis therefore avoids treating the three cases as interchangeable and reports uncertainty where the same indicator is not available for the same date or source type.

The comparison also cautions against monocausal attribution. Conflict directly destroys infrastructure and displaces people, but climate shocks, market conditions, pre-existing institutional weakness and regional policy measures also shape outcomes. The theoretical contribution lies in showing the sequence through which unequal institutions and distributive conflict create grievances, armed actors mobilise or exploit them, direct violence disrupts livelihoods and administration, and structural arrangements then reproduce exclusion and indirect harm.

5.6 Conclusion

In addition, armed conflicts such as terrorism, rebel attacks, jihadist insurgencies and farmer-pastoralists conflicts, are all led by non-state armed groups such as JNIM, ISSP, ISWAP, private security and state armies. In turn, these armed conflicts had socioeconomic and political impacts on Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. On socioeconomic impacts, armed conflict led to external and internal displacement of more than two million people in the Central Sahel region. Displacement, on the other hand, contributed to poor agricultural production, food insecurity, and the lack of basic services such as education and healthcare. Employing up to 70% of the Central Sahel region population, the agricultural sector was also greatly affected by armed conflict. Armed attacks by non-state armed groups and farmer-pastoralist conflicts, also exploited by non-state armed groups, hindered agricultural activities. As a result of these conflicts, farmers, pastoralists and fishers were killed, markets in rural areas were closed, which led to the mass displacement of farmers and the inability of some farmers to access fertilisers and seeds. This also contributed to food insecurity in conflict-affected areas and host communities, hindering access to markets and the ability to meet basic food needs. Food insecurity in the region was also a result of restrictions and armed attacks on markets by non-state armed groups, as well as climate change and the Ukraine war, which led to high food prices.

On the other hand, armed attacks on schools, teachers and students, threats, and the looting of school equipment by non-state armed groups hindered access to education. The lack of education, in turn, increased the out-of-school and dropout rate, child labour and marriage, and the risks of children being easily recruited by the groups. While armed attacks by the same groups on healthcare facilities and healthcare workers, the looting of medical supplies and medicine, as well as the hijacking of ambulances, hindered access to healthcare for the people of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. This led to the fleeing of healthcare workers, closure of some facilities, death of patients and an increase in diseases such as malaria, cholera, measles and malnutrition. Non-state armed groups further attacked humanitarian aid workers, leading to the suspension of their healthcare services, further placing civilians in conflict-affected areas at risk.

On the other hand, it has been argued that political factors, such as legitimacy deficits and state capacity shortfalls, are both causes and consequences of ethnic tensions and marginalisation, as well as conflicts over resource control in the Central Sahel region. On the other hand, international interventions such as military operations, sanctions and suspensions failed to mitigate armed conflict; they exacerbated it. Across the three countries, biased courts and government policies, weak state presence and weak governance are the main causes and consequences of ethnic tensions and conflicts over resource control, eroding the state's legitimacy. In turn, ethnic tensions, marginalisation and resource disputes were exploited by non-state armed groups who not only sought to expand their influence and interest, to also impose their Sharia law. These groups exacerbated the tensions into violent conflicts, leading to the erosion of trust amongst social groups and with the government. The group's imposition of its own laws in conflict-affected areas undermined the government's legitimacy and authority. Their fuelling of conflicts led to the closure of important state institutions, such as courts and halls, further creating a gap in service delivery and in ways to resolve resource disputes.

Furthermore, in response to armed conflict in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, international interventions, such as military operations, sanctions and suspensions, were ineffective. The interventions fuelled armed conflicts; rather than mitigating them, the international community was further accused of serving its own interests, while the ECOWAS was accused of serving the interests of the West. The above findings were further interpreted using the structural violence theory and conflict theory.

The above findings reveal the implications of armed conflict for citizens and the Central Sahel region as a whole. They reveal how not only armed conflict affects the government and its structures, they further show how civilians suffer through displacement, poor agricultural production, food insecurity, and the lack of access to healthcare and education. The findings further highlight that being power-hungry has consequences, as reflected in the actions of non-state armed groups such as the JNIM, ISWAP, and ISSP. The groups not only terrorised the state and its officials on their quest for power, they also terrorised the citizens, including women and children, forcing them to flee their homes. They further undermined the state's legitimacy and eroded its trust among the citizens by forcibly imposing their Sharia Law and presenting themselves as justice providers where there was a weak or no state present. The findings further reveal that it is not only non-state armed groups that are responsible for armed conflict, state

armed forces, private security actors such as the Wagner Group, and the international community, including France and the UN (MINUSMA) are also responsible. Therefore, these findings are significant for identifying a long-term solution to armed conflict and its impacts in the Central Sahel region, and for the international and regional community to understand how the region is affected by armed conflict. In addition, the study highlights armed conflict and its implications, including security, legitimacy, governance, poor agricultural production, food security, and impacts on education and healthcare. These are all relevant to studying global politics and African politics as a whole; they also reveal the issues faced by some states on the African continent.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Introduction

This final chapter summarises the study's key findings, highlighting major insights from the research and their implications. Firstly, it links the key findings of the literature review with research objectives. Secondly, it offers practical recommendations to policymakers, the governments of Central Sahel countries, and international organisations, based on the findings. These recommendations aim to guide decision-making, strengthen implementation, and suggest areas for future research. Lastly, it concludes by offering a clear understanding of the extent to which the study has achieved its aim and also contributed to existing knowledge. Collectively, the conclusions and recommendations serve as a closing reflection of the study, ensuring that its contributions are relevant and practical.

6.2 Conclusions

The study aimed to address the four research objectives by critically engaging with existing literature and conducting a systematic desktop analysis. The literature review revealed that previous studies have established the socioeconomic and political impacts, yet a theoretical gap remains. There is also a literature gap in studies of Niger, as well as in those examining the socioeconomic and political impacts of armed conflict across all three countries of the Central Sahel region. Therefore, by linking these findings with research objectives, the study hereby confirms that:

6.2.1 Causes and Parties to Armed Conflict

This study has argued that armed conflict, such as jihadist insurgencies, resource and ethnic conflicts, is caused by several structural and spillover factors. These factors include the 2011 collapse of the Gaddafi regime and Libyan state, which led to the spillover conflict to Mali and its neighbouring countries, such as Niger and Burkina Faso. Armed conflict in the Central Sahel has also been a result of limited resources caused by political, economic and social inequalities, competition over land and water and the involvement of non-state armed groups. Social and political factors such as poor governance, inequality, worsening poverty, economic decline, unequal distribution of resources, weak state control and corruption have also contributed to armed conflict in the region. Economic and social exclusion of some ethnic groups and

pastoralists by government policies, ineffective resourceful governance and conflict resolution mechanisms, and state absence in some regions further worsen armed conflict.

Furthermore, armed conflict is then perpetrated by armed actors who fuel it into a more violent conflict. Across Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, armed conflict has been driven by non-state armed groups such as the JNIM and ISSP, which was previously known as the ISGS. Self-defence militias and rebel groups such as Ansar-al-Islam, ISWAP and Boko Haram were also involved in committing crimes against humanity. However, armed conflict has not been driven solely by non-state armed groups; state armed groups have also been involved. These state armed groups include state and private security forces, such as Russia's Wagner Group, French troops, and the armed forces of the three states.

6.2.2 Socioeconomic Impacts of Displacement and Disrupted Livelihoods Caused by Armed Conflict

Socioeconomic impacts affecting the populations of the Central Sahel region are a result of armed conflict, such as jihadist insurgencies, farmer-pastoralist conflicts and terrorism. Across Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, armed conflict led to more than two million displaced people, both internal and external. It further led to poor agricultural production, whereby displaced communities no longer had access to their farming areas. Poor agricultural production was also a result of the burning of farming and pastoral land during farmer-pastoralist conflicts and restrictions placed by non-state armed groups on accessing cultivable land. Agricultural production was further disrupted by restrictions on markets, leaving farmers without access to fertilisers. In turn, this affected food security across the three countries, leaving them in a state of food insecurity. Food insecurity was also a result of an increase in food prices due to the disruption of markets by non-state armed groups. This led some families to lose access to basic needs, such as food, leaving the communities food insecure.

Armed conflict not only led to displacement, poor agricultural production and food insecurity, it also disrupted access to basic services such as education and healthcare services. Direct armed attacks on schools, teachers and learners led to the closure of most schools across Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. These attacks also led to the fleeing of learners and teachers to safe communities, which further affected access to education, as most schools in host communities were overcrowded. However, it has been argued that in Niger, the lack of education was also due to the Nigerian Armed Forces using some schools. This also led to a violation of children's

rights to access education. Similarly to education, armed attacks on hospitals, clinics and healthcare workers led to the closure of healthcare facilities, which affected patients. Non-state armed groups further hijacked ambulances and attacked humanitarian aid workers, which disrupted civilian access to healthcare. Therefore, this led to avoidable deaths and increased exposure to malaria, dengue fever, measles, cholera and malnutrition where the cited evidence identifies these outcomes in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, violating the human rights of access to healthcare.

6.2.3 The Effects of Armed Conflict on Political Legitimacy and Governance

The study argued that structural factors are both the causes and consequences of ethnic tensions, marginalisation and conflicts over resource control across Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. Poor resource management, unequal distribution of resources, weak governance, state security absence, political, social and economic exclusion of some groups led to ethnic tensions and marginalisation. In turn, these tensions were exploited by non-state armed groups who exacerbated tensions into violent conflicts, further weakening social cohesion and undermining the state's authority and legitimacy. In Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, non-state armed groups not only exploited ethnic tensions, they further exploited conflicts over resource control in order to expand their influence and impose their Sharia Law. This undermined the state's legitimacy, leading to more violent conflicts in the region. These violent conflicts led to the closure of key state administrative offices, such as courts and administrative halls, disrupting the state's service delivery and the resolution of resource disputes. In turn, this eroded trust in the government, leading to more conflicts in communities with the presence of non-state armed groups, as well as to some population groups being easily recruited by these groups. In addition, in all three countries, the presence of non-state armed groups fuelled ethnic tensions and conflicts over resource control, which in turn led to violent conflicts. Violent conflicts led to the erosion of trust in the state, the closure of courts, which disrupted resource-dispute cases, social divisions, the undermining of the state's authority and legitimacy, and further instability in the region.

6.2.4 The Role and Effectiveness of International Interventions in Mitigating Armed Conflict

International interventions employed to mitigate armed conflict in the Central Sahel region include military interventions, suspensions, and sanctions. In Burkina Faso, military

interventions from France and the U. S were implemented; however, they were ineffective. They led to the strengthening and growth of non-state armed groups, prompting the Burkina Faso ruling military junta to demand the withdrawal of their operations. On the other hand, in Mali, military interventions from France, the UN and Russia were implemented. Similarly to Burkina Faso, they were ineffective and were further accused of failing to support counterinsurgency efforts that would bring peace and security. Russia's Wagner Group was accused of exacerbating ethnic tensions between communities. Whereas in Niger, the EU, France, the U. S. and Russia military interventions were provided in Niger to mitigate conflict. Similar to Burkina Faso and Mali, these interventions were ineffective and were accused of prioritising their own economic and geopolitical interests and of illegally operating in Niger. In all three countries, Western military operations were requested to withdraw immediately after the military coups, except in Russia.

Military coups were a result of the presence of non-state armed groups, which led to jihadist insurgencies, terrorism and the fuelling of ethnic tensions and conflicts of resource control. However, these coups were condemned by the AU and ECOWAS, leading to the three countries being suspended from the regional organisations. The AU suspended Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger from participating in any of its activities and from the organisation as a whole, citing the military coups as unconstitutional. Whereas the ECOWAS suspended and imposed economic sanctions, including border closures, these sanctions, in turn, negatively affected citizens. They led to increased food insecurity and reduced power supply. In Niger, ECOWAS further threatened military intervention if it did not return to civilian rule. The ECOWAS was therefore accused of prioritizing Western-aligned democratic norms over the needs of its member states and of failing to mitigate conflicts, leading to the withdrawal of the three countries from the organization. In turn, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger formed the Alliance of Sahel States to mitigate armed conflict.

6.3 Recommendations

First, the governments of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger should strengthen inclusive local resource-governance mechanisms in conflict-affected districts. Interior, agriculture and local-government authorities should establish mixed farmer-pastoralist mediation committees, publish seasonal grazing corridors and water-access rules, and provide accessible appeal mechanisms. Implementation should begin in high-conflict border districts, with annual reporting on disputes resolved, compliance and displacement. Representation can improve

input legitimacy, but it should not be assumed to reduce violence unless institutions also possess authority, resources and protection.

Second, national education and health ministries, supported by UNICEF, WHO and humanitarian partners, should prioritise mobile services, protected referral routes and the reopening of facilities where minimum security conditions are met. Funding should be sequenced from emergency access to durable staffing and infrastructure. Progress should be measured through dated school and facility reopening figures, learner return, staff retention and travel time to services, with separate reporting for displaced communities and girls.

Third, any engagement with non-state armed groups must be conflict-specific, legally reviewed and limited to legitimate humanitarian or peace objectives. Governments, the AU, ECOWAS and neutral mediators should not pursue an undefined goal of strengthening relations with armed groups. Where dialogue is legally permissible, it should focus on civilian protection, humanitarian access, local ceasefires, release of abductees or disengagement, with clear red lines concerning impunity for serious international crimes, coercion and discriminatory demands. Community representatives and victims' groups should be consulted, and independent monitoring should assess compliance.

Fourth, ECOWAS and the AU should subject sanctions, suspensions and security partnerships to prior humanitarian-impact assessment and periodic review. Diplomatic engagement should specify the constitutional, security and civilian-protection benchmarks required for modification of measures. Humanitarian exemptions, cross-border food and energy protections, and monitoring of distributional effects should accompany any restrictions. Military or peace-support interventions should be evaluated against their stated mandates, civilian-protection outcomes, local legitimacy and unintended effects rather than described as successful or failed solely because insecurity persisted or a host government demanded withdrawal.

6.4 Areas for Further Research

Further research should prioritise Niger's border regions and use a clearly defined unit of analysis to examine how ethnic inclusion, land and water institutions, armed-group governance and service delivery affect input, process and output legitimacy. Comparative mixed-method or field-based studies could test the mechanisms identified here and distinguish community perceptions from administrative capacity. A second research agenda should evaluate how

specific international instruments - sanctions, military assistance, humanitarian funding and mediation - alter conflict incentives and civilian welfare across the three countries, using dated before-and-after indicators and explicit counterfactual reasoning.

6.5 Conclusion

This study compared the socioeconomic and political effects of armed conflict in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger using common indicators and a transparent documentary method. It found regional convergence in displacement, livelihood disruption, reduced access to education and healthcare, contested legitimacy and weakened administrative reach, but also important differences in mechanisms and evidential strength. Conflict theory contributed a conditional account of how unequal power and resource institutions create grievances that armed actors may mobilise; structural violence theory explained how exclusion and service denial reproduce avoidable harm beyond direct attacks. Their combined use advances understanding by linking institutions, mobilisation, violence and outcomes without assuming that inequality automatically causes war or that every social decline is attributable to conflict. The conclusions remain bounded by unequal source coverage, the absence of fieldwork, language constraints and the difficulty of isolating conflict from climate and economic pressures. They are therefore analytically generalisable to the mechanisms identified, not statistically generalisable to every conflict-affected setting.

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APPENDIX A: DOCUMENT-SELECTION AND CODING FRAMEWORK

The coding framework linked each research question to common cross-case indicators. Documentary extracts were coded by country, date, source type, outcome, causal mechanism, evidential direction and evidential quality. Convergent, divergent and negative evidence was retained so that repeated reporting of the same underlying statistic was not counted as independent corroboration.

Research focus	Primary codes	Operational indicators	Evidence rule
Causes and parties	spillover; resources; exclusion; armed actors	actor, location, mechanism, timing	Causal claims required an identified mechanism and were not inferred from temporal coincidence alone.
Socioeconomic impacts	displacement; agriculture; food; education; health	dated figures, closures, access constraints, livelihood effects	Preference was given to dated official data and peer-reviewed analysis; repeated secondary reporting was traced to the underlying source.
Legitimacy and governance	input; process; output legitimacy; state capacity	inclusion, lawfulness/fairness, consent, service and security performance, administrative reach	Legitimacy was distinguished from stability, capacity and territorial control, although the indicators may interact.
International interventions	mandate; instrument; implementation; outcome; local response	stated objective, action taken, observed result, unintended consequence	Effectiveness was assessed against stated objectives and available evidence rather than inferred from withdrawal or criticism alone.
Cross-case synthesis	similarity; difference; contradiction; evidence gap	same indicator and period across all three cases	A difference was reported only where evidence was comparable; otherwise it was recorded as an evidential limitation.