

Original Article

Analysis of the Sources of Community Conflicts in Burkina Faso

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Abstract: *Has there ever been a year in Burkina Faso without any recorded community conflict? The country has endured and continues to endure a wide array of violent and non-violent incidents, including terrorist attacks, intercommunity clashes, coups, popular uprisings, and political crises. This succession of events, together with the varied forms of violence, has amplified pre-existing inequalities across Burkina Faso and inflicted severe damage. This paper presents the first systematic examination of the origins of community conflicts in Burkina Faso. We conducted a literature review on community conflicts to identify their driving factors. We also gathered and analyzed data on community conflicts for 2015–2022 from the National Observatory for the Prevention and Management of Community Conflicts (ONAPREGEC). Results indicate that community conflicts represent a major problem in Burkina Faso and provide evidence that climate change–related phenomena function as threat multipliers. Additional drivers include socioeconomic and structural factors such as insecure land tenure, cultivation of pastoral areas, obstruction of transhumance routes, and state projects. The study calls for improving conflict-prevention and management strategies and enhancing people's resilience to the effects of climate change.*

Keywords: *Burkina Faso, Climate change, Community conflicts, Conflict management, Violence.*

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Burkina Faso has been heavily impacted by both violent and non-violent forms of unrest, including a rise in terrorist attacks, community clashes, coups, popular uprisings, and political crises [1], [2], [3]. This succession and variety of violent events have deepened the country's already existing inequalities and inflicted major damage. The economic literature contains numerous studies on conflict impacts [4], [5], [6], [7]. In Burkina Faso, these impacts included loss of life, destruction and deterioration of socioeconomic infrastructure, weakened social cohesion through ethnic stigmatization, worsened education and health outcomes with some 2,000 schools closed, regime change, over 40% of the territory under terrorist influence, and massive internal displacement [8]. Then, conflict reduces the economic contribution of peripheral areas.

Moreover, many terrorist incidents take place in agricultural and mining zones (strategic resource areas), hurting economic growth and lowering production [9]. Under these conditions, meeting the Sustainable Development Goals appears unlikely: "No poverty" (Goal 1), "Zero hunger" and "Responsible consumption and production" (Goals 2 & 12), access to health and education declines (Goals 3 & 4), social cohesion deteriorates through ethnic stigmatization, and over two million people have been displaced due to terrorism (Goal 16). Conflict also creates socioeconomic environments that are highly hostile to the robust economic growth needed for national development [7], [10], [11], [12]. Contemporary conflict scholars agree that conflict, violent or otherwise, is multidimensional and its recurrence depends on context-specific institutional, social, economic, and historical conditions; in some areas, climate change has also left a clear imprint. For example, in the Sahel's arid zones, repeated climate-related phenomena and detrimental human activities have produced prolonged dry spells, leading to sharp declines in agricultural and livestock production, heightened food insecurity, and competition over diminishing natural resources as land degradation and low agricultural productivity increase [13]. This aligns with predictions from the climate-change-and-conflict literature: theorists propose that climate impacts can intensify competition for land and water, push deprived users toward violence, fuel anti-state grievances, weaken governance in fragile states, and trigger migration that can be associated with conflict in receiving areas [14], [15], [16].

Such dynamics suggest that climate impacts are more likely to provoke intrastate rather than interstate conflicts. Intrastate conflict predominates this century, and Burkina Faso is an important case where disputes unfold amid acute climate challenges [17]. This study aims to analyze the root causes of community conflicts in Burkina Faso. To our knowledge, no prior study has comprehensively examined the sources of community conflict in Burkina Faso within the context of climate change.



This research contributes to the broader literature by offering synthesized empirical evidence on the drivers of community conflicts. The paper is organized as follows: Section 2 details the methods; Section 3 examines causes and spatial distributions of community conflicts in Burkina Faso; Section 4 provides the conclusion

II. METHODS

A) Data and Selection of Studies

The study used community conflict data reported by the National Observatory for the Prevention and Management of Community Conflicts (ONAPREGEC). We selected ONAPREGEC data because it covers all regions of Burkina Faso. ONAPREGEC is a national, non-judicial monitoring, alert, and mediation body tasked with contributing to the prevention and peaceful resolution of conflicts. Created by government decree in 2015, it issues printed annual reports. The dataset in this study spans 2015–2022. While ONAPREGEC data are valuable for understanding the phenomenon, they do not capture every community conflict in a given year because the observatory does not have representatives in every village. To compensate, ONAPREGEC records conflicts filed at departmental courts in provinces where it lacks on-the-ground presence. Still, assuming every community conflict appears in departmental or higher courts would be incorrect: some disputes are settled locally or amicably and never get formalized in court. In addition, we identified and reviewed published studies on conflict and climate change in Africa and, where relevant, Burkina Faso specifically. We searched for papers using keywords and synonyms relevant to the research question, e.g., “climate change,” “conflict,” “community conflict,” “conflict resolution,” across Google Scholar, academic publisher sites, Scopus, JSTOR, and SAGE. Given the small number of studies on climate change and community conflicts in Burkina Faso, we did not apply time-based filters. In total, fifty-four studies met our inclusion criteria and were selected for review. Inclusion criteria were:

- Peer-reviewed and conference papers published both in English and French;
- Studies that address at least one of our community conflicts list;
- For studies conducted outside Burkina Faso, at least one case comes from a country with similar characteristics to Burkina Faso.

III. EXAMINING THE SOURCES AND DISTRIBUTIONS OF COMMUNITY CONFLICT.

This study seeks to uncover the root causes of community conflicts in Burkina Faso. We analyzed six major categories of community conflict recorded in ONAPREGEC’s annual reports from 2015 to 2022 and found that every region experiences conflict. Figure 1 illustrates the unequal regional spread of community conflicts across Burkina Faso. According to Figure 1, land-use disputes (green) are the most frequently recorded conflict type. This is unsurprising given Burkina Faso’s heavy reliance on agriculture, which employs 86% of the workforce, and the combination of unclear land tenure and rising competition among land users over time. Farmer–herder disputes are the second most common form of violence and reflect competition for resources such as pasture and water, both between sedentary farmers and resident herders, and between settled farmers and nomadic pastoralists. Regionally, Hauts-Bassins, East, and Centre-Est record higher numbers of conflicts, notably land-use and farmer–herder clashes. The Sahel region’s dominance by farmer–herder conflicts corresponds to its reliance on pastoralism.

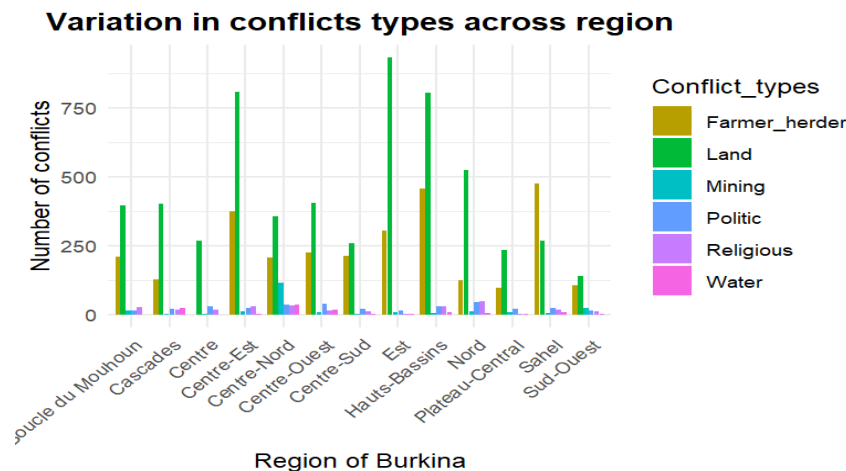


Figure 1: Frequency of community conflicts in the regions of Burkina Faso

Sources: authors’s presentation based on the ONAPREGEC database from 2015 to 2022

A) Land use Conflict: An Overview.

Analysis of ONAPREGEC annual reports and Ministry of Territorial Administration documents shows that land-use conflict is among the most common and prominent community dispute types. Land-use conflict refers to any disagreement over land arising from divergent individual or communal interests [18]. While such disputes can occur in urban settings, rural land-use conflicts are by far the most prevalent in Burkina Faso. Since 2009, policymakers have enacted “la loi no 034-2009/AN du 16 juin” on land tenure and its implementing decrees, establishing legal and institutional frameworks for land administration and conflict management. In theory, a looming land crisis could result from the combined effects of increased competition for land control and use, multiplication and intensification of disputes over land and natural resource use, expanded inter-regional agricultural migration and pastoral transhumance, and the weak effectiveness of legal and institutional mechanisms for land governance in rural areas [19].

Land disputes in Burkina Faso occur between and within communities, e.g., along field borders, between farmers, between farmers and pastoralists, between indigenous residents and newcomers, and between extraction firms and local populations [20]. Annual institutional reports document numerous land-use conflicts in recent years [3], [21] reports, including [8], [18], [22] recorded respectively between 2015 and 2016, 1390 land-use conflicts; in 2019, it was 1198 land-use conflicts, and 758 in 2020. As a consequence, there are violations of property rights, injuries, displacement, and fatalities. Several studies identify multiple drivers [23], [24]. Like many Sahelian countries, in Burkina these drivers include the expansion of cultivated land, internal migration, population growth, insecure land tenure, the development of land markets, and historical conflicts. Overall, the issue can be summarized as competition over access to and control of land and natural resources.

The expansion of arable land. This occurs when farmers expand the area under cultivation to cope with unstable or declining yields resulting from climate variability and land degradation [25], [26]. Such expansion often encroaches on common resources, protected areas, pastoral zones, and cattle tracks. It stems in part from limited mechanization and low technology adoption in agriculture. In regions such as the Sahel and the North, where soils are arid, yield-improving techniques are rarely used because subsistence farmers lack financial means. Consequently, these farmers periodically seek additional arable land near or beyond their holdings [3], [27], [28].

Burkina Faso was once regarded as relatively land-rich due to low population density. However, sustained high population growth increases density and contributes to perceived land scarcity. Environmental security scholars [29], [30] argue that natural-resource scarcity, and land scarcity in particular, can be a prime trigger of violent conflict. According to [31], the population growth rate is 2.94% per year, with a large rural share. Under such conditions and with low agricultural mechanization, land availability per capita falls relative to demand. This reduced availability of the land resource increases competition between individuals. It potentially causes intra-family conflicts, between migrants and indigenous populations, and contestation over land previously ceded as a donation [2], [32].

Migration (Internal). Internal migration is often a response to resource pressure or poverty and is a livelihood strategy for some groups, such as pastoral transhumance or the outcome of conflict or government resettlement policies aimed at development or conservation [33]. This seems to be the case in Burkina Faso. According to [31], floods or disasters, the search for arable land, insecurity, climatic stress, or environmental conditions, as well as community conflicts, are among others the main reasons for internal migration in Burkina Faso. Migration can be a source of tension: climate-motivated movements have been associated with conflict in some studies [2], [34], [35]. A key issue related to migration and land disputes is establishing who is the original inhabitant and who is the newcomer. When land is plentiful, this distinction rarely causes problems, but when competition intensifies or land governance is weak, it becomes contentious. For example, in southeastern Burkina Faso, natives accuse Mossi and Fulani migrants of mismanaging land by expanding cultivation excessively and Fulani by allowing livestock to stray into farmers’ fields and reserves [36].

As migrants settle in new areas, population growth lowers per-capita resource availability, increasing competition for scarce land, water, and food, and potentially pushing deprived individuals toward violence and weakening state capacity [37], [38]. In Burkina Faso, as in much of Africa, many rural households occupy and farm ancestral lands without formal titles. Lack of legal recognition leaves them vulnerable to encroachment and undermines their position in legal disputes. [24] Note that in Burkina, conflicts arise when indigenous groups seek to reclaim land that was lent out or when migrants attempt to claim it permanently.

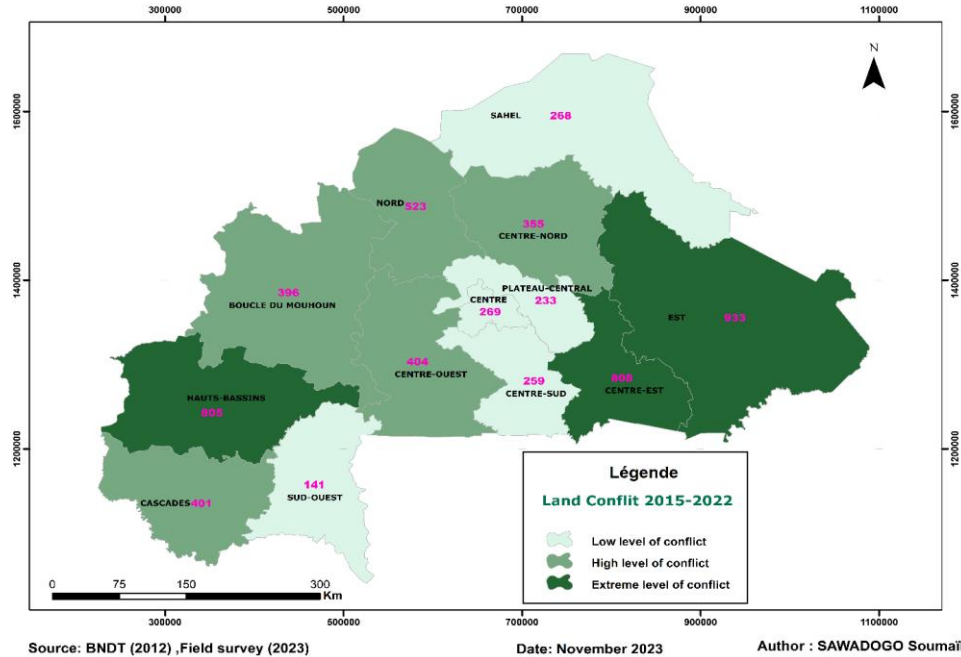


Figure 2: Regional distribution of the occurrence of Land use conflict in Burkina Faso

Sources: authors’s presentation based on ONAPREGECC database from 2015 to 2022

The map below shows geographic disparities in land conflict intensity across Burkina Faso from 2015 to 2022, categorized as low, high, and extreme. East, Centre, and Hauts-Bassins display extreme levels of conflict, while lighter green regions show lower intensity. The concentration of disputes in East, Centre, and Hauts-Bassins can be linked to a mix of socioeconomic and environmental challenges, insecure land tenure, and rapid land-use changes. A study by [1] found that migration from arid areas (north and East) into Hauts-Bassins increases land-use tensions in the receiving zones. These increases in migrant flows put pressure on limited agricultural resources, heightening disputes over land ownership, access, and usage rights.

B) Overview of the farmer-herder conflict and water dispute

Farmer–herder conflict is a variant of land-use conflict that arises in agrarian communities under particular institutional and environmental conditions [39], [40]. It is recurring and the second-most-common community conflict in Burkina Faso after land-use disputes [3]. The graph below gives an overview of the regions affected by farmer-herder conflict in Burkina.

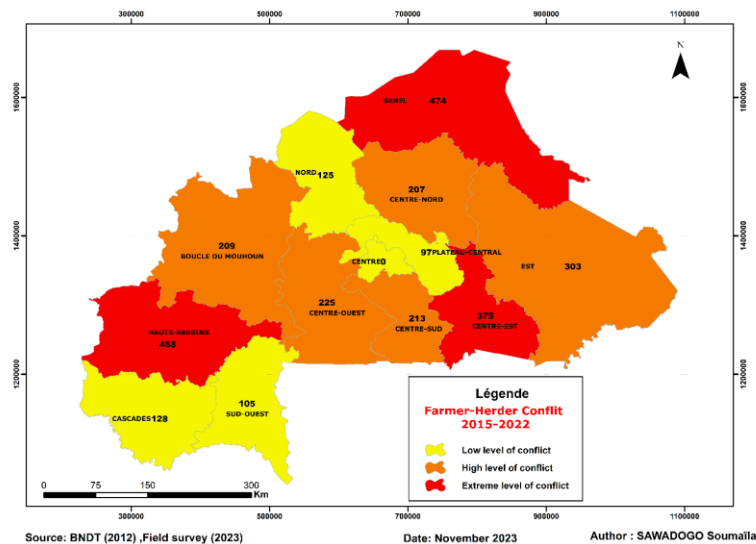


Figure 3: Regional distribution of the occurrence of Farmer-Herder conflict in Burkina Faso

Sources: authors’s presentation based on ONAPREGECC database from 2015 to 2022

The map reveals regional disparities: Hauts-Bassins, Sahel, and Centre-Est are more vulnerable to farmer–herder clashes than other regions. Literature identifies numerous drivers of these outbreaks, including competition for natural resources and unequal access, agricultural encroachment on grazing lands, obstruction of pastoral routes, crop damage, corruption, and poor livestock management systems [24], [40], [41]. Many of these studies, however, do not fully account for environmental stress. Recent scholarship recommends explicitly considering climate change’s role in farmer–herder violence because climate-related phenomena can jeopardize natural resources, destabilize agriculture, and exacerbate disputes over land, water, and grazing areas [28], [42], [43], [44], [45].

Burkina Faso’s agriculture and livestock sectors are vulnerable to climate change [27], [46], [47], [48]. The livestock sector is directly affected by climate-driven phenomena such as heat stress and drought, which reduce the availability of grazing land [27], [28]. One major impact is the loss of grazing areas, notably strategic zones like lowlands and watering points. Rainfall variability and decline have pushed farmers to expand cultivation into low-lying areas. Population growth and aridification lead farmers to increase cultivated areas to offset lower yields, intensifying pressure on zones where conflicts are more likely to erupt [28].

As climate variability reduces pasture and water availability, herders move from resource-poor areas to regions where resources are more plentiful [49], [50], [51], [52]. These movements may be internal or cross-border.

Cross-border transhumance by Fulani pastoralists' seasonal movements into Benin, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, and Togo reflects attempts to access less climate-vulnerable grazing lands [53]. Such migrations are not always peaceful and can trigger tensions that escalate into conflicts between transhumant herders and local communities [2], [32], [49]. It is estimated that 60% of nomadic herders from central and southern Burkina Faso spend part of the year across the Ghana border seeking pasture, which could lead to cross-border farmer-herder conflicts.

Within Burkina Faso, Fulani herders commonly migrate southward from the Sahelian and central plateau regions toward southern, southwestern, and eastern areas where vegetation remains more favorable [54]. This relocation of population growth in the host areas diminishes or provokes the loss of per capita availability of natural resources and contributes to land degradation in the receiving areas that Fulani migrants are looking for, such as grazing land, water [53]. As a consequence, competition increases and could lead to an outbreak of farmer herder conflict in some areas of Burkina Faso, as host farmers and herdsmen want to secure their share of natural resources while newcomers demand grassland and water to feed their cattle or to feed their animals [55]. This dynamic is consistent with what we can observe on the map, particularly in Hauts-Bassins, where stable resources and better rainfall make the area more attractive.

Another adaptive response to climate variability among Burkinabè farmers and herders is the turn toward agropastoralism [1]. Farmers diversify by adding livestock production to their activities, while pastoralists adopt crop cultivation to supplement incomes. This convergence reduces both pasture and arable land, increasing farm encroachments, crop damage, loss of pastoral areas, animal poisoning, and disputes over water points and other water bodies. Conflicts can arise when dams dry up, and market gardeners or pesticide users pollute water sources, creating new causes and forms of contestation [24], [54], [56].

Burkina Faso’s water resources depend heavily on rainfall to recharge groundwater and surface bodies. Rising temperatures combined with declining precipitation are projected to shrink and degrade pastures, reduce both pastoral and food production, worsen livestock watering conditions, and increase disputes over water use.

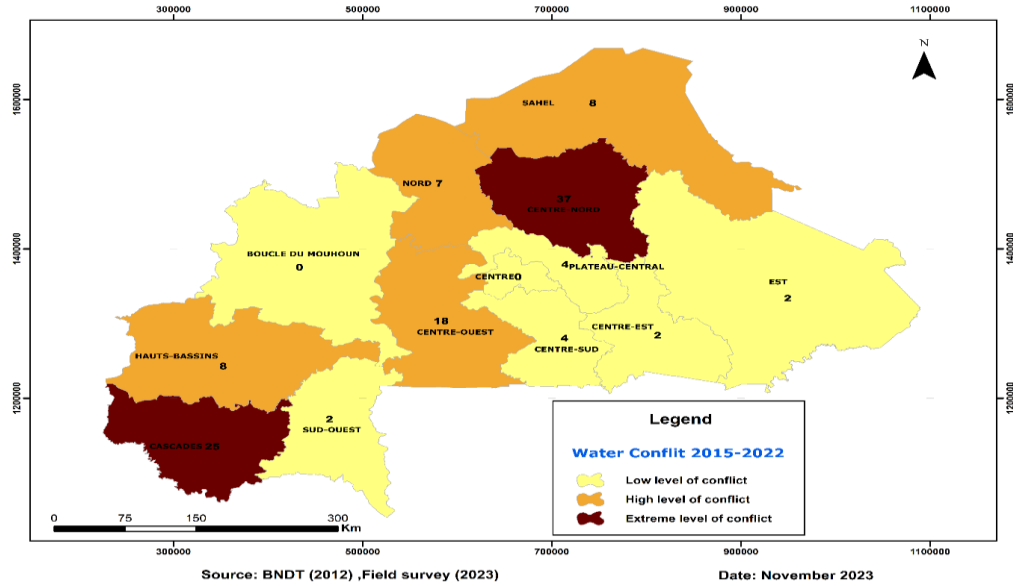


Figure 4: Regional distribution of water use conflict in Burkina

Sources: authors's presentation based on ONAPREGECC database from 2015 to 2022

C) Mining conflict: an overview

Over the past decade, gold has overtaken agriculture as Burkina Faso's principal export [57]. The mining sector expanded from the late 1990s into organized large-scale industrial mining (foreign investors), with 13 industrial mines, including 12 gold mines and one zinc mine, alongside extensive artisanal and small-scale gold mining (ASGM). Estimates of the number of artisanal sites vary across institutions, underscoring the difficulty of regulating informal sectors in developing economies. A National Assembly survey reported 1,000 gold panning sites, while the National Institute of Statistics gave a figure of 448 [58].

Despite state efforts to formalize activity through licenses and permits, many stages of gold production remain at least partially informal. According to the Artisanal Gold Council, in 2021, the informal mining sector employed far more people than the formal sector. Indeed, approximately 13 times more informal workers, including vulnerable groups such as women and children, are employed. In Sahelian countries, including Burkina Faso, artisanal gold mining has been adopted by rural households, often those reliant on climate-sensitive livelihoods, as an adaptation strategy to climate change. When agriculture becomes unviable due to irregular rainfall, drought, or other climate-related shocks, some villagers (up to 60% in certain localities) shift from farming to artisanal gold panning to sustain livelihoods [59].

Mining activity often takes place on agricultural or pastoral land, disrupting local livelihoods. This leads to eviction, reduced agricultural and grazing areas, and longer travel distances for farmers and herders. Establishment of industrial or artisanal mines frequently undermines traditional production and can contravene laws governing land appropriation for extraction. Burkinabè law requires proof of population consultation as a condition for granting operating permits; nevertheless, Drechsel et al. (2018) found that many locals in sites such as Essakane (40%), Bissa (25%), Taparko (29%), Perkoa (80%), Karma (57%), and Youga (55%) were either unaware of or not properly informed about mine installations. Such conditions breed conflict as communities perceive threats to their livelihoods and land.

The literature identifies several causes of mining-related conflict: loss of rural livelihoods with attendant unemployment and poverty; illegal occupation of cultivated land by mining operators; unauthorized extension of mining perimeters; environmental pollution of water and land; and protests against mining installations. Another source of tension arises when companies fail to honor compensation arrangements for the use of rural land. Mining operators typically pay between 175,000 and 500,000 LCU per hectare per year for five years for use of household land, yet mining operations can last 15–20 years, generating frustration among former landowners [60]. The following graph presents the state of mining conflicts.

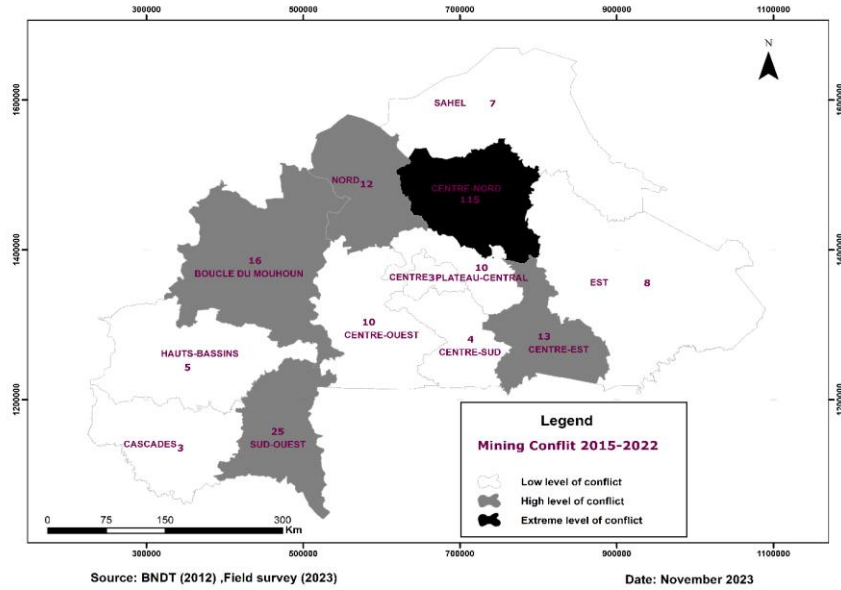


Figure 5: Regional distribution of the occurrence of mining conflict in Burkina Faso

Sources: authors' presentation based on ONAPREGCEC database from 2015 to 2022

The graph above shows the situation of mining conflicts across Burkina Faso, which varies from one region to another. According to the graph, the most conflict-prone region recorded 125 conflicts (the North-Central region). This significant number of conflicts in this region could be explained by the fact that it is home to the largest number of industrial mines (Guirou-Diouga mine, Yeou mine, Samtenga mine, Bouroum mine, Bissa-Zandkom, Taparko), posing a threat to the main traditional production activities on which the population depending on and leading to perpetual conflict between local population and miners due to the lack or decline of opportunities to generate income following the loss of their fields.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study examines the principal sources of community conflict unfolding in Burkina Faso amid pronounced climate challenges. We compiled ONAPREGCEC archival data on community conflicts and reviewed studies across various localities to deepen our understanding of the contributing factors. ONAPREGCEC data information and reviewed literature confirm that community conflict is a serious problem in Burkina Faso and provide evidence that climate-related phenomena (water scarcity, land degradation, internal migration, etc.) act as threat multipliers for such conflicts. Other drivers are structural and socioeconomic. In land-use and farmer–herder disputes, insecure land tenure is central: rural households live on ancestral land without formal titles and, combined with low living standards, lack the capacity to secure legal land rights. Additional contributing factors include cultivation of pastoral zones, obstruction of pastoral routes, and government projects such as “climate-smart villages.” Given the recurrence of community conflicts and climate change’s role as a threat multiplier, the study calls for strengthening conflict-prevention and management strategies. Without reinforced measures, conflicts are likely to intensify as climate change impacts exogenous to the country.

Interest Conflicts

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest concerning the publication of this paper.

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