

SAHEL RESEARCH GROUP

LEONARDO VILLALÓN, SEBASTIAN ELISCHER, ABDOULAYE KANE, SARAH MCKUNE, FIONA MCLAUGHLIN, RENATA SERRA, BENJAMIN SOARES, ALIOUNE SOW AND OLIVIER WALTHER

The Sahel Research Group at the University of Florida represents a collaborative effort to understand the political, social, economic and cultural dynamics of the countries of the West African Sahel. The group brings together a highly interdisciplinary set of faculty members with expertise in a wide array of topics: politics, religion, migration and diaspora, social dynamics, health, agriculture, climate change, economics, geography, language, culture, and intellectual production in the region. A number of PhD students from various disciplines and with research focus on the Sahel are key contributors to the group's efforts and activities.

Our core interest is in the six Francophone countries of the region—Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad. We are also interested in developments in neighboring countries, to the north and south, whose dynamics frequently intersect with those of the Sahel. Collectively the Sahelian countries represent some of the least developed countries on earth—the four landlocked states are regularly among the very bottom in the UNDP's annual Human Development Index rankings. The fragile ecology of the region is particularly vulnerable to climate variation, with serious consequences for human livelihoods and wellbeing. Global religious trends and geopolitical events have placed significant additional pressures and posed new challenges to governments in the region in recent years. Indeed, the Malian crisis since 2012 and its regional consequences, including the proliferation of violent extremist organizations, have brought new and complicating attention to the region by outside actors.

Yet there are also other dynamics in the face of this difficult context: vibrant civil societies continue to struggle to build and strengthen democratic institutions, social structures maintain often striking resilience while adapting to new contexts, and there

are strong and trans-regional intellectual debates on religion, human rights, culture and social change. Our goal is to build on the diversity of training, expertise and backgrounds among Sahel Research Group members to better understand the full complexity of both the difficulties and the possibilities of the region. We have a strong commitment to engaging and working with colleagues and partner institutions in the countries of the Sahel, and to this end we have been fortunate to host a number of visiting scholars and frequent guests from the region.

Highlights of our programs and activities in 2018-19 included signing a new two-year grant agreement (2019-2020) with The Sahel and West Africa Club (SWAC) of the OECD in Paris, to carry out work on the impact of foreign interventions on transnational insurgencies, as well as on contemporary urban transformations in the Sahel-Sahara. Add-on funding to our Minerva project has allowed us to organize conference/workshops on “Student Religious Movements on Sahelian University Campuses,” and another on “Debating *Laïcité* in the Sahel: What Future

for Secularism?” Each of these projects has involved a team of colleagues from the region. Other grants to group members will support work on vernacular literacies in the Sahel, and on nutrition and health in Senegal, Burkina Faso and Niger. Group members also continue active research projects on Sahelian migration, memoirs and cultural dynamics, and issues related to religion and the state.

Leonardo Villalón is professor of political science and dean of the UF International Center. Sebastian Elischer is assistant professor of political science. Abdoulaye Kane is associate professor of anthropology and African studies. Sarah McKune is assistant professor in the Department of Environmental & Global Health and the Center for African Studies. Fiona McLaughlin is professor of linguistics. Renata Serra is senior lecturer in the Center for African Studies. Benjamin Soares is director of the Center for Global Islamic Studies and professor of religion. Alioune Sow is associate professor in the Center for African Studies and the Department of Languages, Literatures and Cultures. Olivier Walther is visiting associate professor of geography.

