

Learning from the Sahel

Menno Bosma

Re-imagining the Sahel: the place of endogenous knowledge, Panel E31, 3 February 2021

According to this panel, the Sahel is a place that defies easy generalisations and accommodates multiple realities. Although the region is often in the headlines for negative reasons such as conflict and poverty, the Sahel possesses perplexities and riches from which the world in general and Africa in particular can learn.

Independent researcher Ekaterina Golovko added to her paper on the Sahelian border space that borderland is a space of multiple sovereignties, of negotiation, change and power relations. Her discussion with the border police inspired her to think about the incoherence of the idea of border and reality. She used the concept of 'hybridity' based on the 'real' history of the Sahel.

The discussion touched the subject of closing borders in the name of the COVID-19 pandemic and for food security. This form of protectionism constrains human and livestock mobility and stirs up conflicts. But closing borders is no guarantee for ensuring national food security. The panel concluded that border strategies cannot be based exclusively on international standards and that quality research and new ideas can only come from collaboration involving different fields of knowledge.

Boubacar Haidara of the Université de Sékou said that researching the Sahel region is problematic due to its inaccessibility and insecurity. Research is often conducted away from the field, which affects its quality and quantity. As a consequence, it is hard to find funding for (more) research.

To solve this, collaboration should be created between international and local researchers. Truck drivers can also create data using modern technologies. Ton Dietz of Leiden University called their role crucial and mentioned the example of truck drivers doing research to fight on-the-road-corruption in East Africa. Whether you see the Sahel as a meeting ground or as a battleground depends on your perspective, said Rahmane Idrissa of the African Studies Centre Leiden. He wrote a paper on Sahelian intellectualism and described how West African, Islamic and western cultural influences meet in the Sahel.

Oriol Puig-Cepero of the Barcelona Centre for International Affairs, who researched climate change and livelihoods in the Sahel, emphasised the importance of traditional local knowledge. Local practices, such as pastoralists' nomadic circular mobility, should be incorporated in policies for climate adaptation and mitigation. Desertification and re-greening are a fact of life in the Sahel and require local coping strategies.

Take-aways

- The Sahel defies easy generalisations and accommodates multiple realities
- Truck drivers are crucial to solve the lack of research on the Sahel
- Traditional local knowledge can contribute to climate adaptation and mitigation