Peace Studies and Practice
Journal of the Society of Peace Studies and Practice

Volume 14 | Issue 1 | August 2026
Pp 48 - 65

CLIMATE (MIS) GOVERNANCE, CHILD SOLDIERING, AND SILENCING THE GUNS IN AFRICA

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.63725/jpsp.v14i1.04

Abstract

This study explores the intersection of climate misgovernance, child soldiering, and the persistence of conflict in fragile African states. It argues that the inability of state institutions to effectively address environmental crises such as desertification, irregular rainfall, and resource depletion creates socio-economic vulnerabilities that armed groups exploit, particularly through the recruitment of children. Drawing on the human security and state fragility frameworks, the paper shows how climate-induced displacement, weak governance, and institutional breakdown heighten conflict risks and entrench the use of children in armed roles. Using case studies from the Sahel, the Lake Chad Basin, South Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, it demonstrates that ecological stress intensifies insecurity while undermining child protection systems. The paper concludes by advocating integrated policies on climate adaptation, peacebuilding, and child rights as necessary steps to advance the African Union's 'Silencing the Guns' agenda and promote sustainable security.

Keywords: Climate misgovernance, Child soldiering, Africa, Human security, Silencing the guns, State fragility

Introduction

Climate change has emerged as a significant non-conventional security threat, particularly in Africa, where weak governance systems and limited adaptive capacities intensify its impacts (Chigudu, 2024; Nguyen et al., 2023). Environmental challenges such as desertification, erratic rainfall, and resource depletion are escalating across the continent and are most acute in fragile states. In regions such as the Sahel, these ecological shifts heighten competition over scarce resources, including water and arable land, fueling local grievances and violent conflict (Ruttinger et al., 2015). As governance structures fail to manage the socio-political consequences of climate-related stress, armed groups increasingly step into institutional voids, perpetuating cycles of insecurity and displacement. Within this context, the recruitment of children into armed groups emerges as a critical concern, as state institutions are unable to provide adequate

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protection, education, or livelihood opportunities for vulnerable populations (UNICEF, 2020). This paper argues that the intersection of climate change and governance failures not only destabilizes communities but also creates enabling environments in which armed actors exploit children.

Child soldiering, long recognized as both a grave human rights violation and a symptom of protracted conflict, is becoming increasingly normalized in areas where state authority is weakest. In countries such as Mali, South Sudan, the Central African Republic, and parts of Nigeria, the recruitment of children by non-state armed groups, and in some cases by government-aligned militias, has escalated (Falchetta, 2014; Blackwell et al., 2023; Onapajo, 2025). Children are drawn into these groups through ideological indoctrination, coercion, or the perceived necessity of safeguarding family survival, and in many instances they are forcibly conscripted. Climate misgovernance, characterized by inadequate policy design, poor implementation, and weak enforcement, undermines social cohesion and erodes state legitimacy. Armed groups exploit the despair and disenfranchisement that arise when governments fail to manage the socio-economic impacts of climate change, thereby increasing the reliance on children in combat roles (UNICEF, 2020; Rocque et al., 2021).

This article examines the relationship between climate misgovernance and the persistence of child soldiering in conflict-affected regions of Africa. It focuses on how environmental stress, combined with governance failures, heightens children's vulnerability to armed recruitment. The study is guided by three main research questions: How does climate misgovernance shape conflict dynamics in Africa? In what ways does this relationship facilitate the recruitment of children into armed groups? Which policy interventions can disrupt this cycle of violence and advance the goal of silencing the guns on the continent? By addressing these questions, the paper contributes to the growing body of cross-disciplinary scholarship that links environmental change with security and human rights concerns.

Moreover, the role of economic development and globalization must be accounted for in this nexus. Many African economies remain fragile because they depend largely on climate-sensitive activities such as subsistence agriculture, pastoral livelihoods, and natural resource extraction. This dependence limits their ability to provide secure and sustainable livelihoods. When inclusive economic development is absent, unemployment and poverty intensify, leaving households more vulnerable and indirectly facilitating the recruitment of children into armed groups. Globalization introduces a paradox: on the one hand, it creates openings for trade and investment, yet on the other, it exposes African states to volatile global markets, heavy debt burdens, and exploitative practices by multinational corporations (Mavodyo, 2022; Alkharafi and Alsabah, 2025).

Statement of the Problem

Across many parts of Africa, children are still being pulled into armed groups in numbers that point to something deeply systemic. International law has long been clear on this issue, yet the gap between what these instruments prescribe and what actually happens on the ground keeps widening in fragile state contexts. Most analyses of this problem trace it back to poverty, political instability, or the collapse of rule of law. While those factors are real, they do not tell the whole story. What is

DOI: https://doi.org/10.63725/jpsp.v14i1.04

often left out of the conversation is the degree to which deteriorating environmental conditions, driven or worsened by governance failure, set the stage for the insecurity that armed groups then exploit.

Across the Sahel, the Lake Chad Basin, and the Horn of Africa, years of mismanaged land, water, and natural resources have steadily unraveled community livelihoods. Families displaced by shrinking lakes, failed harvests, or intercommunal clashes over water rarely find functional state institutions waiting to support them. It is precisely in those gaps left by absent governance that armed actors find their most reliable pool of recruits. The children most at risk are not simply in the wrong place at the wrong time; they are caught in a structural trap shaped by environmental neglect at the top and insecurity at the bottom.

Despite growing academic interest in the climate-conflict relationship, the specific pathway from climate misgovernance to child soldier recruitment has not been adequately theorized or integrated into peacebuilding policy. The African Union's 'Silencing the Guns' agenda and related child protection frameworks continue to treat environmental drivers as background noise rather than as central variables. This paper takes that gap seriously. It argues that until climate governance failures are recognized as a core driver of child vulnerability and armed recruitment, efforts to end the use of child soldiers in Africa will remain incomplete and easily reversed.

Objectives of the Study

This study is broadly concerned with tracing and interrogating the connections between climate misgovernance, the recruitment of child soldiers, and the longer-term project of achieving peace in Africa. To guide this inquiry, four specific objectives were developed:

1. To investigate the ways in which climate misgovernance generates and intensifies conflict dynamics across selected African regions.
2. To establish how the convergence of environmental stress and institutional breakdown creates pathways through which children become vulnerable to armed recruitment.
3. To evaluate what policy responses can realistically interrupt the cycle of climate-driven violence and contribute to advancing the AU's 'Silencing the Guns' agenda.
4. To critically examine the institutional and governance gaps that allow child soldiering to persist in environments shaped by climate-related insecurity.

Literature Review

The relationship between climate change and armed conflict has attracted increasing scholarly attention over the past two decades. Early contributions by Ruttinger et al. (2015) positioned climate change as a 'threat multiplier' in fragile states, arguing that environmental stressors such as drought, resource scarcity, and displacement amplify pre-existing social tensions and governance weaknesses. This thesis has since been reinforced by empirical studies documenting the links between rainfall variability, agricultural shocks, and conflict onset in sub-Saharan Africa (Nguyen et al., 2023; Henrico and Dobos, 2024). While the causal pathways remain contested, there is growing consensus that climate-induced livelihood disruption, particularly in economies dependent on rain-fed agriculture, increases the risk of social unrest and violent conflict.

The concept of climate governance, or more specifically its failure, has been examined by scholars across environmental policy and political science. Ogunkan (2022) identifies weak institutional capacity, corruption, and

DOI: https://doi.org/10.63725/jpsp.v14i1.04

limited technical resources as the principal barriers to effective climate governance in Nigeria and other sub-Saharan African states. Cairney et al. (2023) further argue that climate governance failures are compounded by the absence of justice-oriented policy frameworks that address the distributional impacts of environmental change. In fragile state contexts, these governance deficits create conditions in which communities bear the full burden of climate impacts without recourse to effective state protection or support. This dynamic is particularly acute in the Lake Chad Basin, where decades of uncoordinated water management and environmental neglect have contributed to resource-based conflict and the rise of extremist armed groups (Lukong and Mahtab, 2024; Onuoha, 2016).

The literature on child soldiering has similarly expanded, with scholars examining both the structural drivers and the lived experiences of children recruited into armed groups. Falchetta (2014) identifies poverty, family separation, and the collapse of educational institutions as primary push factors, while Blackwell et al. (2023) emphasize ideological indoctrination and the promise of protection and material provision as significant pull factors. In conflict-affected regions of Central and West Africa, Human Rights Watch (2020; 2021) has documented systematic patterns of abduction and forced conscription, particularly by non-state armed groups operating in areas of weak governance. UNICEF (2020; 2023) estimates that tens of thousands of children remain associated with armed forces and groups across Africa, with recruitment patterns closely correlated with episodes of displacement, food insecurity, and the collapse of social protection systems.

The nexus between environmental degradation and child soldiering has received comparatively less direct scholarly attention, though recent work by Ide (2021) has begun to map this intersection. Ide argues that climate-related disruptions intensify child vulnerability by eroding livelihood bases, destroying educational infrastructure, and generating mass displacement, all of which increase exposure to armed group recruitment. Okpara et al. (2016) similarly document how water variability in the Lake Chad Basin has directly contributed to the socio-economic conditions exploited by Boko Haram in recruiting children. These contributions notwithstanding, a coherent framework linking climate misgovernance, child protection failure, and peacebuilding strategy remains underdeveloped in the existing literature, a gap this paper seeks to address.

The African Union's 'Silencing the Guns' initiative has been analyzed by Vhumbunu and Adetiba (2023) as a normative framework with significant potential but limited implementation capacity. The authors point to financial dependence on external donors, weak enforcement mechanisms, and the tendency of member states to prioritize short-term political stability over long-term structural reform as key constraints. Allen (2023) echoes these concerns, noting that the AU's peace operations have achieved inconsistent results and frequently fail to address the root causes of conflict. Embedding climate justice and child protection within the 'Silencing the Guns' framework, as this paper advocates, may offer a more integrated and durable pathway toward sustainable peace.

Conceptual Framework

Climate misgovernance, as a conceptual framework, refers to the persistent failure of political institutions to effectively address

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environmental challenges, implement climate adaptation strategies, and ensure the equitable distribution of natural resources (Ogunkan, 2022; Cairney et al., 2023). In the African context, this concept is particularly significant because many states remain highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change due to weak institutional capacity, corruption, and limited technical and financial resources (Dorian et al., 2024; Zhou et al., 2024). Countries such as Nigeria, Sudan, and Somalia exemplify these governance shortcomings, where fragile systems have contributed to environmental degradation and heightened risks of social instability (Henrico and Dobos, 2024; Saba et al., 2025).

Poor management of resources such as water bodies, grazing lands, and forests has often led to intercommunal conflict and displacement. The Lake Chad Basin crisis demonstrates this clearly, as excessive water extraction, ineffective irrigation practices, and the impacts of climate change have destroyed livelihoods and created conditions for the rise of insurgent groups such as Boko Haram, which thrive where state interventions are weak (Lukong and Mahtab, 2024). Climate misgovernance also reproduces environmental injustice by disproportionately affecting marginalized groups, particularly rural communities, indigenous peoples, and low-income households. Such exclusion generates resentment that can fuel violence or increase the vulnerability of these populations to recruitment by armed organizations. In addition, unsuccessful adaptation efforts, including poorly supported relocations or rigid conservation measures, create new risks and further weaken public trust in governmental institutions (Schipper, 2020; Birchall et al., 2025).

Child soldiering, as a concept, is understood within this framework not merely as a product of armed conflict but as a symptom of intersecting governance, socio-economic, and environmental failures. International law, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict, explicitly prohibits the recruitment or use of individuals under the age of 18 in hostilities (Tremblay, 2017; Drumbl and Tobin, 2019). Despite these protections, child safeguarding remains gravely undermined in many conflict-affected African countries. The drivers of child recruitment are understood in terms of push and pull factors. Push factors include poverty, family separation, lack of access to education, and forced displacement. Pull factors involve ideological indoctrination, promises of protection, and material incentives such as food, shelter, and social status (European Parliament, 2020; Urbanski, 2022).

The African Union's 'Silencing the Guns' initiative provides the overarching normative frame within which this paper situates its analysis. As a flagship component of Agenda 2063, the initiative envisions ending wars, preventing genocide, violent conflict, and human rights abuses by 2030 (African Union Commission, 2015; Vhumbunu and Adetiba, 2023). This paper argues that this vision cannot be realized without explicitly embedding climate governance and child protection within its implementation architecture. Achieving lasting peace requires addressing structural drivers of conflict, including environmental degradation and institutional failure, as part of a coherent and integrated policy agenda.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is grounded in two complementary theoretical perspectives: human security theory and state fragility theory. These frameworks provide analytical tools for understanding the mechanisms through which climate misgovernance

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translates into conditions that expose children to armed recruitment and perpetuate cycles of violent conflict in Africa.

Human Security Theory

The human security approach, which gained prominence in the post-Cold War period following the UNDP's Human Development Report of 1994, shifts analytical attention from state-centered understandings of security to the protection of individuals against chronic threats such as hunger, disease, repression, and environmental degradation (Newman, 2021). This framework is particularly relevant in the African context, where the most severe insecurities, including displacement, food scarcity, and climate-induced conflict, manifest at the level of individuals and communities rather than through conventional inter-state military threats. It underscores that the safety of individuals, particularly children, depends on reliable access to basic needs, functioning institutions, and a stable environment.

Applied to this study, human security theory illuminates the ways in which climate misgovernance directly undermines individual wellbeing. When state institutions fail to manage environmental challenges, communities lose access to food, water, and livelihoods. Children, as the most socially and economically vulnerable, bear a disproportionate share of these insecurities. The resulting conditions of desperation and displacement create the enabling environment within which armed groups recruit child soldiers. Human security therefore provides a normative foundation for evaluating governance failures not merely as political shortcomings but as threats to the fundamental rights and safety of children.

State Fragility Theory

State fragility theory offers a complementary structural lens through which to analyze the governance conditions that enable climate-driven insecurity and child soldiering. Fragile states are characterized by their inability or unwillingness to perform core state functions, including the provision of security, the delivery of basic services, the enforcement of law, and the management of natural resources (OECD, 2016; Dorian et al., 2024). In the African context, state fragility manifests along several dimensions: weak bureaucratic capacity, pervasive corruption, limited territorial control, and the inability to generate inclusive political settlements (Henrico and Dobos, 2024).

State fragility theory is particularly well-suited to explaining the dynamics of climate misgovernance analyzed in this paper. Fragile states lack the institutional capacity to implement effective climate adaptation policies, manage resource conflicts, or maintain child protection systems under conditions of environmental stress. This institutional vacuum is systematically exploited by non-state armed groups, which position themselves as alternative providers of security, resources, and belonging, thereby gaining the leverage needed to recruit children. The theory also explains why international legal frameworks prohibiting child soldiering remain largely unenforced in fragile state contexts: the very institutions responsible for enforcement are among the most compromised.

Together, human security and state fragility theories illuminate the multidimensional nature of the problem addressed in this paper. While human security draws attention to the individual-level consequences of governance failure and environmental degradation, state fragility theory identifies the structural conditions that make such

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failures both persistent and self-reinforcing. The combination of these frameworks supports the paper's central argument that addressing child soldiering and advancing the 'Silencing the Guns' agenda requires a fundamental transformation of governance structures, particularly in their capacity to manage climate risks and protect vulnerable populations.

Methodology

The study takes a qualitative approach, organized around comparative case analysis. This choice was deliberate: the subject matter, covering climate governance failures, institutional breakdown, and the conditions that expose children to armed recruitment, does not lend itself to quantification. What matters here is understanding how these processes unfold in specific contexts, what they share in common, and what they reveal about governance and security dynamics more broadly across Africa.

Data were gathered through systematic documentary review. This included peer-reviewed journal articles, UN reports and resolutions, African Union policy documents, publications from human rights bodies, and institutional reports from UNICEF, UNDP, UNEP, and ECOWAS, among others. These materials were read against the study's three core concerns: the role of climate misgovernance in producing conflict conditions; the mechanisms through which those conditions lead to child recruitment; and what, if anything, existing policy frameworks have done or can do to interrupt these dynamics.

The four cases examined, the Lake Chad Basin, the Sahel with emphasis on Mali and Burkina Faso, South Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, were selected through purposive sampling. Each was chosen because it meets two conditions simultaneously: documented and ongoing patterns of child soldier recruitment, and measurable environmental deterioration intersecting with identifiable governance failure. Taken together, they span different sub-regions and conflict types, yet share enough structural features to allow for meaningful comparative analysis.

Thematic coding was used to organize findings across the documentary evidence. Patterns were mapped against the study's theoretical framework, with attention to the specific pathways linking environmental neglect to child vulnerability and the institutional conditions that prevent protective responses. The reliance on secondary sources is acknowledged as a limitation, particularly given inconsistencies in reporting across conflict zones. That said, the range, diversity, and credibility of the sources drawn upon provide a firm enough foundation for the arguments advanced in this paper.

Climate Misgovernance and the Emergence of Conflict

Climate change has become a critical threat multiplier across Africa, particularly in regions where governance is weak and state institutions remain fragile (Henrico and Dobos, 2024). This reality is especially visible in the Sahel, Lake Chad Basin, and Sudan, where climate misgovernance, characterized by poor policy responses, corruption, and limited institutional capacity, has deepened already unstable socio-political conditions (Ford et al., 2020). In the Sahel, the southward expansion of the Sahara Desert has drastically reduced arable land, intensifying conflicts between pastoralist and farming communities. Traditional livelihoods have been disrupted by desertification and increasingly erratic rainfall patterns, which have worsened food insecurity, triggered displacement, and

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driven communities into violent confrontation.

These environmental pressures have not developed in isolation. They have been compounded by states' inability to address their root causes or implement effective adaptive measures. According to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, more than 80 percent of land in the Sahel is degraded due to unsustainable land use and the impacts of climate change (UNCCD, 2020, p. 14). However, governance systems in countries such as Mali and Burkina Faso remain too weak to deliver land rehabilitation programs or effective climate adaptation strategies. This governance vacuum has been exploited by non-state armed groups, including jihadist movements, which have positioned themselves as alternative providers of security and social services. The outcome is a dangerous convergence of environmental degradation, socio-economic marginalization, and violent extremism.

The Lake Chad region, spanning Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, illustrates the devastating consequences of climate misgovernance. Over the past six decades, the lake has lost more than 90 percent of its surface area, shrinking from approximately 25,000 square kilometers in the 1960s to less than 1,500 square kilometers today. This dramatic decline is largely attributed to climate variability, ineffective water management, and the damming of feeder rivers (UNEP, 2018, p. 22). The ecological collapse has displaced millions of people and destroyed farming and fishing livelihoods, pushing vulnerable communities toward survival-based violence and, in some cases, into the ranks of extremist groups such as Boko Haram (Papale and Castelli, 2025).

Sudan provides another striking example of how climate mismanagement and weak governance can fuel violent conflict (Smith, 2020). In Darfur, desertification and prolonged drought had been eroding the natural resource base on which millions depended long before the outbreak of civil war in 2003. Instead of addressing these challenges through inclusive climate policies or locally managed land reforms, the Sudanese government under Omar al-Bashir adopted an ethnicized counterinsurgency strategy that ignored the environmental grievances at the heart of the unrest. According to the UN Environment Programme, environmental degradation in Darfur was a key driver of conflict, and government neglect of natural resource management significantly intensified the violence (UNEP, 2022, p. 20; Elzarov, 2022). These examples highlight that it is not climate change alone but rather the failure of governance systems to mediate and mitigate environmental pressures that allows ecological stress to evolve into violent conflict.

9. Child Soldiering in the Context of Environmental Conflict

The intersection between environmental conflict and the recruitment of child soldiers has become a critical issue in many African contexts. As the impacts of climate change intensify, fragile socio-political systems are placed under greater strain, leading to violent conflicts driven by resource scarcity. These climate-related conflicts thrive in environments where governance is weak, poverty is widespread, and social protection systems are either absent or ineffective. Children are among the most vulnerable in such circumstances. They are often displaced, separated from their families, exposed to food insecurity, and deprived of education and welfare services. These conditions create the enabling environment that armed groups exploit to recruit children. The convergence of climate change and

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conflict therefore transforms climate change into both a humanitarian and a security crisis of immense scale, with children caught at its very center (UNICEF, 2023).

This reality is starkly visible in the Lake Chad Basin, where climate change has reduced the lake's size by more than 90 percent since the 1960s, devastating livelihoods based on fishing, agriculture, and livestock production (Okpara et al., 2016). Boko Haram, which emerged in northeastern Nigeria, has capitalized on this environmental and socio-economic devastation to recruit and enslave children. Thousands of boys and girls have been drawn into the group, either lured by food and a sense of belonging or taken by force. Once recruited, they are exploited in multiple roles, including combatants, spies, cooks, and suicide bombers (UN Security Council, 2022).

In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the Central African Republic (CAR), militias continue to exploit both the breakdown of state authority and environmental pressures intensified by shifting rainfall patterns and land degradation. In the DRC, deforestation, soil infertility, and struggles over control of mineral-rich territories have fueled violent clashes between communities and armed groups. Children in these fragile environments are often forcibly recruited or coerced with promises of food, safety, or revenge for past injustices (Human Rights Watch, 2020). South Sudan offers another tragic example of the intersection between environmental degradation, armed conflict, and child soldiering. Since gaining independence in 2011, the country has endured a protracted civil war aggravated by unpredictable weather patterns, recurrent droughts, and devastating floods (UNMISS and UNICEF, 2022).

The link between environmental stress and child soldiering is not coincidental but deeply rooted in the socio-political dynamics of fragile African states. Climate-related challenges such as desertification, water scarcity, flooding, and food insecurity destabilize livelihoods, erode state institutions, and heighten the risk of armed violence. Children, as the most socially and economically vulnerable, are disproportionately affected and exploited by armed groups through false promises or coercion.

Policy and Institutional Failures

The phenomenon of child soldiering in Africa is not only tied to armed conflict but also to deep-rooted governance failures, policy shortcomings, and institutional weaknesses. A particularly critical gap lies in the weak enforcement of international and national laws prohibiting the recruitment and use of children in conflict. International instruments such as the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (2000) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990) explicitly forbid the participation of children in hostilities. Yet these legal frameworks have proven largely ineffective due to the absence of political will, limited state capacity, and, in some cases, collusion by state actors (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2008).

One of the most glaring gaps lies in the failure to integrate climate policy with peacebuilding strategies. While many African states have adopted climate adaptation plans, these policies often operate in isolation from security, governance, and human rights frameworks. For example, the African Union's Climate Change Strategy (2022 to 2032) provides a roadmap for environmental resilience but lacks a clear framework for linking these efforts with

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conflict prevention and peacebuilding. As a result, climate-induced displacement and livelihood loss are rarely addressed as drivers of conflict and child soldier recruitment. This fragmented policy environment undermines the potential for holistic solutions that target the root causes of instability and child vulnerability (Ide, 2021).

Regional and continental institutions such as the African Union, ECOWAS, and IGAD have issued various declarations and action plans to address child soldiering and climate insecurity. However, implementation has often been inconsistent and weakened by political interests, limited resources, and poor coordination. The AU's flagship 'Silencing the Guns by 2030' initiative aspires to end armed conflict and child recruitment. Yet ongoing violence in regions such as the Sahel and the Horn of Africa demonstrates that these ambitions remain far from being achieved (African Union, 2020). The persistence of child soldiering in conflict settings illustrates the inability of governance systems to coordinate responses to interconnected challenges at both national and regional levels.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The analysis that follows draws on documentary evidence from four cases: the Lake Chad Basin, the Sahel (Mali and Burkina Faso), South Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Findings are presented in relation to each of the study's objectives, examining first how climate misgovernance shapes conflict conditions, then how those conditions translate into child recruitment, and finally how existing policy frameworks have responded or failed to respond.

Climate Misgovernance and Conflict Dynamics

What stands out across all four cases is that environmental deterioration alone does not produce armed conflict. The more consistent variable is institutional failure. In the Lake Chad Basin, the lake itself has contracted dramatically over the past six decades, going from roughly 25,000 square kilometers to under 1,500 today (UNEP, 2018). That contraction has many causes, including rainfall variability, but the human cost was amplified by the near-total absence of coordinated water governance among the four riparian states. The communities that fished, farmed, and herded along the basin's shores had no institutional buffer when their livelihoods collapsed. Boko Haram did not create that vacuum; it simply moved into it.

A similar story unfolds in the Sahel. The UNCCD (2020) estimates that over 80 percent of land in the region is now degraded, yet national adaptation strategies in Mali and Burkina Faso have remained largely aspirational. Political cycles, corruption, and limited administrative reach have kept meaningful land rehabilitation out of reach for the communities that need it most. When the state cannot deliver on basic resource security, armed groups offering protection and purpose find willing ears, particularly among young men with no viable alternative. In Sudan's Darfur, four decades of rainfall decline preceded the 2003 civil war, but it was the government's refusal to address land and water grievances, and its decision to securitize those grievances instead, that turned environmental stress into mass atrocity (UNEP, 2022).

Environmental Stress and Child Recruitment

The pattern across cases is consistent: climate-related displacement does not just

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move people; it dismantles the social arrangements that protect children. In the Lake Chad Basin, displacement into IDP camps has concentrated thousands of children in environments where security is thin and where Boko Haram has proven adept at operating. The UN Security Council (2022) documents verified cases of children recruited from these camps, some abducted during raids, others drawn in by the promise of food and belonging. The camps are not the cause of vulnerability; they are the point where pre-existing vulnerabilities, including destroyed livelihoods, absent schooling, and separated families, converge in ways that armed groups can systematically exploit.

In the DRC, Human Rights Watch (2020) has recorded militia recruitment of children as young as seven in communities facing deforestation and soil degradation, conditions that left farming families with almost nothing. In South Sudan, UNICEF (2023) data indicate that children in flood and drought-affected areas are considerably more likely to be approached by armed groups, with the erosion of community cohesion following displacement removing the informal oversight structures that would otherwise offer some protection. In the CAR, the pattern is similar: recurring agricultural failure gives armed factions like anti-Balaka and ex-Seleka a straightforward recruitment pitch, offering food and safety to children whose families can no longer provide either. What unites these cases is the way governance failure converts environmental stress into a lived crisis for children.

Policy Frameworks and the Silencing the Guns Agenda

Examining the relevant policy architecture reveals a coherence problem. The AU's Climate Change Strategy and the 'Silencing the Guns' initiative coexist without meaningful programmatic linkage. The former addresses environmental resilience through an environmental lens; the latter addresses conflict through a security lens. Child protection instruments sit in a third lane. None of these frameworks systematically treats the others as foundational to their own success. The result, predictably, is that interventions in one domain often fail to address the drivers operating in another.

Where more integrated approaches have been attempted, there is at least some early evidence of impact. UNDP (2021) documents community resilience programs in the Lake Chad Basin that combined livelihood support, environmental rehabilitation, and conflict mediation into a single package. These are modest in scale, but they point to what is possible when programming is designed around the reality that climate stress, insecurity, and child vulnerability are not separate problems. Scaling such approaches, and embedding them within AU and regional mechanisms, would require political will and sustained financing that have so far been absent, but the programmatic logic is established.

Discussion of Findings

The evidence assembled in this study points toward several conclusions that have implications for both scholarship and policy. On the first objective, the cases confirm that climate misgovernance functions as a proximate driver of conflict in its own right, not simply as a background condition. This matters because it shifts analytical attention from what the environment does to what governments fail to do. Ruttinger et al.'s (2015) threat multiplier framing is useful, but the cases analyzed here suggest that governance failure is often the multiplier, with environmental stress as the base. That reframing has practical consequences: it locates responsibility more clearly within state and institutional actors rather than

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treating conflict as an inevitable consequence of ecological change.

On the second objective, the findings support and extend the growing literature on climate and child vulnerability. The pathways identified by Ide (2021) and Okpara et al. (2016) are borne out in each of the four cases. What the present analysis adds is a clearer account of the mechanisms involved. Displacement does not simply expose children to risk; it removes the specific social and institutional protections that would otherwise prevent recruitment. Schools close, community elders disperse, parental oversight erodes, and state child protection systems, weak to begin with, become wholly inaccessible. Armed groups do not need elaborate strategies to exploit this situation; they only need to be present and to offer something, food, safety, belonging, that the state is no longer providing.

On the third objective, the analysis reveals that policy fragmentation is itself a governance failure with direct security consequences. When climate adaptation, peacebuilding, and child protection are designed and implemented as separate domains, each with its own institutional home and funding stream, the structural drivers of armed recruitment are never addressed in combination. This is not primarily a technical problem; it is a political one. Governments and regional bodies have incentives to maintain siloed frameworks because integration requires negotiating across institutional mandates and sharing resources. Overcoming that inertia is unlikely without explicit political commitments and accountability mechanisms tied to measurable outcomes for children in conflict-affected, climate-vulnerable areas.

Viewed through the lens of state fragility theory, these findings reinforce the argument that fragility is not simply a condition states find themselves in; it is, in part, actively produced through policy choices and governance failures over time. Decades of neglected water management, unresponsive land policy, and reactive securitization have deepened the fragility of states in the Sahel, the Lake Chad Basin, and Central Africa. Human security theory adds that the ultimate measure of this fragility is not institutional but human: it is counted in the children whose futures are foreclosed by armed recruitment, and in the communities whose capacity to protect them has been systematically dismantled.

Prospects and Pathways for Silencing the Guns

Silencing the guns in Africa's conflict-affected regions requires a multidimensional approach that addresses the root causes of violence while integrating climate resilience into peace and security frameworks. The growing connection between environmental degradation and armed conflict, particularly in the Sahel and the Horn of Africa, highlights the urgent need for governments and regional organizations to adopt policies that position climate adaptation as a preventive peace strategy. Weak governance, fragile institutions, and inadequate climate governance continue to heighten the risks of violence, especially in areas where livelihoods depend heavily on climate-sensitive resources (Ide, 2020). Embedding environmental sustainability within national security strategies not only reduces the likelihood of future conflicts but also strengthens the legitimacy and responsiveness of state institutions.

International actors such as the United Nations, the African Union, and donor agencies play a pivotal role in this process. Through the provision of funding, technical expertise, and policy guidance, they can enable regional organizations to design

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responses tailored to local ecological and social contexts (Krampe, 2019). Furthermore, community-based and youth-led peacebuilding initiatives have demonstrated promise in building inclusive and sustainable peace. Local ownership enhances trust, strengthens social cohesion, and ensures that strategies are relevant to grassroots realities. Youth engagement is particularly vital, given their demographic significance and vulnerability to conflict and recruitment. Ultimately, silencing the guns will not be possible without empowering local actors and adopting climate-sensitive, inclusive development pathways that address the intertwined challenges of governance, environmental change, and armed violence (Sultan et al., 2021).

Reintegrating former child soldiers through psychosocial support, vocational training, and access to education is also essential for breaking cycles of violence and fostering stability in post-conflict societies (UNICEF, 2021). These reintegration programs must be embedded within broader climate-resilient development frameworks to ensure that the socio-economic conditions that initially enabled recruitment are systematically dismantled.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has explored the critical intersections between climate misgovernance, child soldiering, and the persistence of armed violence in Africa. It argues that weak climate governance, reflected in fragile institutions, corruption, and the failure to implement effective adaptation measures, has deepened resource scarcity, displacement, and unrest. These conditions create fertile ground for armed groups that exploit vulnerable children, many of whom are displaced, impoverished, or orphaned by climate-related crises. The experiences of the Lake Chad Basin, the Sahel, and Central Africa illustrate how environmental degradation and institutional breakdowns converge to generate insecurity and erode social protection systems.

Child soldiering must therefore be understood not only as a by-product of armed conflict but also as the outcome of intersecting failures in climate adaptation, governance, and social equity. These systemic weaknesses perpetuate cycles of violence that stall development and obstruct the African Union's vision of silencing the guns. The application of human security and state fragility theories to this problem has demonstrated that durable solutions require both a strengthening of state institutions and a fundamental reorientation of policy frameworks toward integrated climate-security-child protection responses.

Based on these findings, the following recommendations are advanced. First, the African Union and regional economic communities should formally integrate climate risk assessment and climate governance benchmarks into the 'Silencing the Guns' implementation framework. Second, national governments in fragile states should prioritize investment in climate adaptation, early warning systems, and community resilience programs as foundational components of conflict prevention strategies. Third, child protection systems must be explicitly linked to climate adaptation planning, with dedicated resources allocated to safeguarding children in climate-vulnerable and conflict-affected areas. Fourth, disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration programs for former child soldiers should incorporate climate-resilient livelihood support to address the environmental drivers of re-recruitment. Fifth, future research should examine the long-term impacts of climate-induced displacement on child vulnerability, the influence of non-state actors in shaping environmental security, and the potential for regional and continental frameworks such as

DOI: https://doi.org/10.63725/jpsp.v14i1.04

ECOWAS and the AU to deliver more coordinated responses.

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