



External evaluation

PhD dissertation

Name of the Candidate: Martin Schmiedl

Title of the Dissertation: Internal Conflicts in Africa: Climate Change Vulnerability and Violent Conflicts

Evaluator:

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The thesis aims to analyze the so-called climate change-conflict nexus in light of mostly secondary data drawn from dataset. From the onset, it is clearly stated that the work does not aim to produce any general theory or hypothesis regarding the nexus but instead of problematizing it through the mobilization of different analytical angles (political ecology, conflict study, environmental security). The object of the thesis is highly debated, and I find it commendable that the candidate decided to pursue such an endeavor, but it is also a highly risky work, as the path towards clarifying the nexus is dotted with traps, the risk to provide no significant analytical elements and of reiterating known factors might put the product in danger. However, the work seems to mostly elude such traps and risks, also thanks to a solid methodological approach rooted in QCA (qualitative comparative analysis) and a thorough review of scholarly debates. As I am personally not a specialist in the methodology employed by the candidate, I am not able to properly review such sections, however I will provide some elements which, in my view, can certainly improve the scientific relevance of the work and strengthen the the focus of the research question.

Chapter 1 is a technical summary on the effects of climate variability in Africa. The discussion mostly revolves around the structural elements that make African countries more or less vulnerable to climate change. The summary is rich and diversified in terms of resources and data employed, while graphics (made by the author) are an important external element that helps to understand the otherwise at times obscure technical discussion. Despite the difficulty in accessing reliable data on climate, literature has been able to identify some major trends, like the increase in temperatures and the variability of precipitations. These are then connected to agricultural production, food security, malnutrition and health issues, providing thereby a sketch of how negatively climate change is impacting African societies. It does that by delivering plenty of data and mobilizing different literatures. I would suggest, however, in order to make the chapter more easily digestible for the

reader to provide, at the end, a more discursive/interpretative final summary in which the main elements discussed in the chapter are plainly exposed.

Chapter 2 functions in a three-fold way: it illustrates the data repository from which the PhD work has been mostly drawing data (ACLED, etc), problematizes their data-collections methods, acknowledging both perks and shortcomings; it attempts to define (at the same time problematizing such definition) what violent conflicts, wars, civil wars, violences and organized violence are; lastly, it equates political violence with violent conflict. In the last passage, I reckon a weak nuancing of «political violence», as this cannot be simply equated to violent conflict without recognizing crucial nuances connected to the manifestation of episodes (of more or less structured) contention or within broader claim-making processes, as discussed by authors such as Tilly, McAdam or Della Porta. A qualitative definition that incorporates a discussion on “contention” and “claim-making processes” as crucial defining elements for the shaping of violent conflicts and political violence is thereby recommended.

Chapter 3 functions as a literature review-type of chapter in which several debates regarding the occurrence of violent conflicts are tentatively linked to the debates regarding climate change. The author does a good work, he describes and assesses the pros and cons of each school of thought, as well as the contradictions brought by quantitative and econometric research on climate change with relations to social events like political violence. However, while I notice a good delving into mechanicist-like theories (Le Billon, Homer-Dixon, North) or politically-urgent debates (resource-curse, greed or grievance, identity politics), which are greatly nuanced in their most controversial aspects, I see a poor problematization of more recent theories on political (in)stability whose critique of the post-Westphalian Weberian-type State presents greater interest to the core research of this PhD. While Bøås and Strazzari are rightfully cited, I suggest to include and deepen ethnographic-based literature on conflicts (Guichaoua, Sandor, Husken, Debos, Thurston, Raeymaekers, Titeca, Vlassenroot - just to cite a few).

In Chapter 4 the author discusses about the research framework of the PhD and the hypotheses upon which its work is based. I understand that the core idea at the basis of the work is that: tough the whole world, and therefore, Global North and Global South nations are both affected, with different intensities, by climate change, Global South countries, and especially African States, are increasingly more affected due to institutional failure and weakness in governance systems. The six hypotheses discussed in chap. 4, thereby, are grounded in the questioning of institutional and governance dynamics, i.e. in political issues. H1 on access to power and group marginalization; H2 on land scarcity—or maybe access to land?; H3 on water scarcity—or maybe access to water and sanitation?; H4 on (the lack of governance on?) urbanisation; H5 on oil governance and rentier economies; H6 on regime change and political instability. While I see crucial elements to discuss the limits of political governance in Africa, it appears that some of them (H2,3,4,5) are phrased in a way that make them sound excessively mechanistic, and therefore reductionist, in their approach towards the climate change-conflict nexus. I therefore suggest to the candidate to improve the rephrasing of the mentioned hypotheses so to highlight beyond any doubt the centrality of political

issues (failures in governance, institutional weakness, decentralizing processes, deconcentration of powers): in such a way, the nexus appears more clearly problematized.

Chapter 5, on methodology, basically explains the choices of the aforementioned hypotheses as it connects them to the existing database and data repository from which the interpretative section is based. The QCA method, though debatable, works in this case, mostly as a forced choice, since I understand that the chances to conduct proper fieldwork in each of the selected case was out of question. Chapter 6 is a direct follow-up to chap. 5, implying QCA grills and templates to calculate the indicators which will be later applied to assess the case-studies.

Chapter 7 analyzes the case-studies. In the first set, Somalia and Nigeria are interpreted under the prism of marginalization, and thereby the “grievances hypothesis”. Basically, the author uses the grills developed from the QCA to develop the hypothesis about social exclusion feeding instability, insecurity and, eventually, violence. The variable effects of climate change on rain, food security and land tenure, according to the author, appear as elements that further trigger conflict while not directly provoking it. However, on the case of Nigeria’s Lake Chad (which I personally know better having worked there since 2015), climatic variability has been recognized by many different local actors as an element inherent in the geography of the region, and not a new one adding further stress. What has been recognized as a triggering factor for escalating conflicts by Lake Chad, instead, is the degeneration of resource-access management, unequal distribution of capitals and skewed market dynamics, the shortcoming in political governance given by overlapping, complex and extremely decentralized decision-making processes (see Iocchi 2022). In the cases of Sudan and Kenya identity politics, discursive exclusion and political manipulation are the prism under which the nexus between climate change and conflicts is analyzed. Again, the cases analyzed reinforces the core hypothesis that climate change is a background factor in conflicts and, at best, a triggering element among many different other preconditions.

In sum, the work aims to problematize the climate change-conflict nexus by disaggregating the influence of climatic variables in case-study countries characterized by regime instability (Somalia, Sudan) and bad governance (Nigeria and Kenya). The candidate, through the use of a sound methodology rooted in QCA and a large literature review, demonstrates that there are no mechanical explanations that induce violence from climatic conditions and that conflict-inducing factors shall be looked for in institutional failures, political governance and the destabilizing effects derived from broader insertion of local economies in the competitive global market.

As stated at the beginning of this evaluation, the candidate has chosen a difficult argument and an even more difficult methodology (QCA) to assess the nexus. The candidate has provided new analytical elements to disentangle climate change and political violence, especially with regards to the case of Kenya and of political manipulation/political communication analyzed in the *longue durée*; however, the analytical elements mobilized for the other cases appear to be those reiterated by a large strand of specialized literature, while for Nigeria’s Lake Chad case the results presented seem to be in partial contradiction with ethnographic-based works.

At the formal level, the candidate demonstrates a great command of the language, which is showed by proper use of the lexicon and of specific expressions.

In terms of content, concluding, I suggest the following revisions:

- in Chap. 2, nuance the definition of “contention” taking into account more political science and sociology-based school of thoughts as suggested above;
- In Chap. 3, reduce the space regarding not fully relevant debates on “democracy” and “weak states”—that can be aptly summarized in few lines—to delve more into more recent and up-to-date literature on hybrid governance systems, transformations of warfare and informal institutions, as suggested above;
- In Chap. 4, in order to reduce the risks of a mechanistic-prone reasoning, try to rephrase at best the working hypotheses so to stress the relevance of political mechanisms in the determination or influencing of violence and conflicts, as suggested above;
- In Chap. 7, I suggest to substantially re-evaluate the conclusions on Lake Chad by taking into account the suggestions reported above.

In general, the candidate’s work is properly executed and he is ready to defend the dissertation in front of a commission.

Date and place,
22 September 2023, Rome

Faithfully,
Alessio Iocchi

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Alessio Iocchi', written in a cursive style.