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ASSESSING POLITICAL INSTABILITY IN WEST AFRICA: A YOUTH BULGE PERSPECTIVE

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ABR	adolescent birth rate
ACLED	Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project
ADF/RDA	Alliance pour la Démocratie et la Fédération/Rassemblement Démocratique Africain
AQIM	Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
CAR	Comité AntiRéférendum
CD	Campaign for Democracy
CSRD	Conseil suprême de restauration de la démocratie
CSVR	Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation
ECA-AUC	Economic Commission for Africa and African Union Commission
ECOMOG	ECOWAS Cease-Fire Monitoring Group
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
ECPF	ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework
EU	European Union
FDI	Foreign Direct Investments
FRC	Front de Résistance Citoyenne
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HCI	Human Capital Index
IFPRI	International Food Policy Research Institute
IISS	International Institute for Strategic Studies
ILO	International Labour Organization
ING	Interim National Government
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
IPI	International Peace Institute
IRC	International Rescue Committee
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MFP	multi-factor productivity

M21	Mouvement du 21 Avril
NMLA	National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad
NYDF	National Youth Dialogue Forums
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
OECD/SWAC	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development/Sahel and West Africa Club
PAI	Population Action International
PRSP	Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper
RPCA	Food Crisis Prevention Network
RPS	Régiment de Sécurité Présidentielle
RSLMF	Republic of Sierra Leone Military Force
RUF/SL	Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone
SAP	Structural Adjustment Programs
SSA	Sub-Saharan Africa
TFP	Total-factor productivity
UEMOA	Union Économique et Monétaire Ouest Africaine
UNDDR	United Nations disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration
UN-DESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
UN OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
VSLA	village savings and loan associations
WANEP	West Africa Network for Peacebuilding
WIPNET	Women in Peacebuilding Network
YOVEX	Youth Vulnerability and Exclusion in West Africa

INTRODUCTION

Since the decolonization process, West Africa's history has been marked by recurrent episodes of successful and attempted military coups, thanks to which several despotic leaders have managed to seize power and to establish autocratic regimes at the expense of weak (or totally absent) functional and democratic state structures. The frequency of such episodes has led some authors to regard military coups in the post-colonial era as "the institutionalized method for changing governments" (Kposowa and Jenkins, 1993). In the post-independence and Cold War period, indeed, West Africa has experienced the largest share of military coups compared to other African sub-regions – between 1960 and 1989 about half of the reported successful and attempted military putsches took place in the region. Most of these coup events occurred "peacefully" and did not involve large number of casualties or heavy violence (Ben Barka and Ncube, 2012). At the end of Cold War, in the wake of the inauguration of the neoliberal democratic program aiming at removing military seizure of power in favor of political pluralism and rule of law, West Africa (and Africa in general) did experience a lower record of coups d'état. Such decline was due to states ability to set up established democratic institutions able to withstand military attempts to displace ruling regimes from power. In some cases, however, the reduction of coup attempts was caused by the insurgence of domestic conflicts and civil wars, some of which turned out to be one of the bloodiest conflicts in recent history. In West Africa, this occurred primarily with the outbreak of civil wars in Liberia first, and Sierra Leone then, which together resulted in 800,000 victims, opening the way to an upsurge of violence across the region (Marc et al., 2015). Following a short period of general decline in terms of both military coups and internal armed conflicts/civil wars, the region has experienced a new return to political instability and volatility, with five countries – Mauritania (2008), Guinea (2008), Guinea-Bissau (2008 and 2012), Niger (2010) and Mali (2012) – succumbing to military power within four years. In the emblematic case of Mali, moreover, the overthrow of government overlapped with dramatic escalation of violence due to the Tuareg rebellion and jihadist groups gaining control of the northern part of the country. Since then, the situation appears to have progressively deteriorated, as shown by the eruption of tensions in the Sahel since 2019, accompanied by new coups in Mali (2020 and 2021), Guinea (2021) and Burkina Faso (2022). Such simultaneous manifestation of both coup events and uptick of violence has pivoted policymakers and scholars' attention on a possible return of old threats arising out of political instability and fragility, with whom many West African countries have had familiarity over the last decades.

Previous academic contributions on African coups d'état have attempted to assess the likelihood of such events by referring to a multitude of causes, including economic factors (Johnson et al., 1984),

colonial heritage (Coleman and Brice, 2015; Luckman, 2001), and countries' development (Ben Barka and Ncube, 2012), among others. Interestingly, such contributions seem to have overlooked a relevant element that many West African countries have in common, that is, the presence of very large youthful cohorts within their populations. In this regard, the demographic perspective has been largely embraced by scholars, as well as by political actors and organizations, to explain the occurrence of political violence, mainly in the form of civil wars, inter- and intra- state conflict, and other threats to national/regional security. Among the literature on political demography – defined as "the study of the size, composition, and distribution of population in relation to both government and politics" (Weiner, 1971) – one of the dominant perspectives is the so-called "youth bulge" theory, which relates to the increase in the number and proportion of a country's youthful population, conventionally in the 16-25 or 16-30 age bracket (Heinsohn, 2000; Castree et al., 2013). The youth bulge theory has been largely used to investigate the occurrence of important events involving the use of violence or the development of social unrests, ranging from the 1848 English Revolution (Goldstone, 2002) to Islamic resurgence right after September 11, 2001 (Zakaria, 2001). This occurs because, in a context of precarious socio-economic conditions where the opportunities to attain social prestige and self-development are lacking, youths are keener to seek personal advancement through extra-legal means (Lam, 2014), namely by joining armed movement and engaging in violent activities against state authorities, often regarded as the main responsible of failed realization of socio-economic factors enabling youth to achieve better careers and personal wellness. The importance of demographic factors has been remarked by Huntington in his famous article "The Clash of Civilizations?" (2000), arguing that demography would have complicated the relations between the West and Islam. When asked whether Islam was believed to promote violence during an interview in the aftermath of the attacks on the Twin Towers, Huntington replied with the following words:

"I don't think Islam is any more violent than any other religions […]. But the key factor is the demographic factor. Generally speaking, the people who go out and kill other people are males between the ages of 16 and 30. During the 1960s, 70s and 80s there were high birth rates in the Muslim world, and this has given rise to a huge youth bulge"[1].

Potential threats arising out of large masses of angry and frustrated youths may endanger national security, thereby compelling public authorities to counter them with equally harmful means. Confronted with violent agitations propelled by young rioters, indeed, such authorities may be led to

[1] Interview in The Guardian, Sunday, October 21, 2001 (online)
< https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/oct/21/afghanistan.religion2 >

use coercive repression to counter such threats (Nordås and Davenport, 2013), thus creating a vicious circle in which youths may be further motivated to prolong violent anti-state dissent. Besides the lower opportunity-cost of taking part in armed movements in the face of limited resources and options, youths may be more susceptible to embrace new (and sometimes extremists) ideas challenging older forms of authority. This explains why in the Muslim world fundamentalist groups, primarily the Islamic State, have successfully managed to attract large pools of young people by exploiting the attractiveness of Islam as an alternative form of social mobility (Gouda and Marktanner, 2018; Giordano, 2021).

Although the youth bulge theory has already proliferated in demographic literature and public debate since the 1990s, it re-gained relevance in the wake of the Arab Spring, that is, the series of anti-government protests, uprisings and conflicts that spread across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), leading either to the deposal of some despotic leaders (Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia, Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, and Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen) and to the outbreak of brutal manifestations of social violence, including civil wars in Syria and Yemen, among others. Against this backdrop, the demographic outlook of MENA countries, generally characterized by very youthful populations at the time, has been invoked as one of the structural causes at the origin of the Arab Spring. As highlighted by Paasonen and Urdal (2016), educated youths accounted for the majority of participants in popular insurgencies and anti-government demonstrations, mainly in response of economic stagnation and corruption in public institutions. Although political demographers have largely embraced the youth bulge theory to explain the emergence of specific forms of political violence, yet the role of demographic factors as potential determinants of coups d'état has been barely explored (Ibrahim, 2019). Against this, literature on coups has amply demonstrated that, when assessing the likelihood of military action to displace incumbent leaders, the popular sentiment towards the ruling regime needs to be considered as well (Galetovic and Sanhueza, 2000; Hunter et al., 2020). This holds true for West African countries, where coups against governments in power have often been accompanied by popular demonstrations either in support (e.g., in the aftermath of both the 2012 Mali and 2010 Niger coups, as well as on the occasion of the 2021 coup in Guinea) or in opposition to military takeovers (as occurred after the coups in Burkina Faso in 2015 and Mali in 2020, respectively). Similar to other African sub-regions, West Africa has experienced an uptick in protests since the 2010s, interestingly in coincidence with the re-emergence of coups d'état. Such protests have seen considerable participation and active engagement of youths (Sanches, 2022). This further justifies the necessity of investigating possible linkages between the youth bulge and the likelihood of coups d'état. Beyond that, among the factors that have been

examined to infer the occurrence of coup events, some of them seem to equally have strong effects on the strength of youth-driven uprisings and social unrests. Such factors include corruption (a recurrent issue in anti-government demonstrations during the Arab Spring), urbanization – protests and uprisings taking place in cities are more credible and visible (Johnson and Thyne, 2018) – and limited economic opportunities, signaled by high levels of unemployment (Azeng and Yogo, 2015; Ibrahim, 2019). These interconnections with both youth bulge and the likelihood of coups d'état will be explained in depth throughout the thesis. Having said that, the objective of this thesis is to investigate whether the large segments of youths within West Africa's population may have influenced the re-emergence of coups across the region. To test the relationship between youth bulge (independent variable) and the likelihood of coup events (dependent variable), the thesis will consider three explanatory factors – that is, corruption, urbanization, and youth unemployment – that are assumed to influence both variables. To this aim, the thesis will refer to three case studies of West African countries that experienced the return of military putsches in the 2010s: Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. The selection of these three case studies is due to three main reasons. First, besides being vulnerable to political instability, the three countries are united by a range of security issues, including terrorist menace, human security threats (e.g., food insecurity and climate change), and exogenous shocks exacerbated by critical junctures (namely, COVID-19 and the Ukraine war). All these factors, together, are presumed to further jeopardize the livelihoods of local populaces – especially the more fragile segments of population, mainly made up of alienated and vulnerable youths – thereby triggering potential uprisings and violent rebellions against state authorities held responsible of not being able to provide their citizens of basic resources and better livelihood opportunities. Secondly, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger have very youthful age structures and fertility rates are among the highest in the world (World Factbook, 2022). This implies that national populations are forecasted to grow exponentially, as well as to remain largely made up of youths for the foreseeable future. Third, the three case studies provide fertile ground for testing the effect of the three explanatory variables aforementioned. In all the three countries, corruption has been identified as a recurring issue among popular anti-government demonstrations, as well as a leitmotiv of military interventions to displace incumbent leaders from power. Urbanization is generally increasing, with annual growth-rates up to 4.6 percent in Niamey (capital of Niger) and Bamako (capital of Mali), while the number urban residents in Burkina Faso is growing even faster (about 4.75 percent per annum). Lastly, young Malian, Burkinabe and Nigeriens are confronted with limited perspectives of employability, as well as other labor distortions, including precariousness, lack of social security, and working poverty. Following the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, which has provoked further disruptions in the labor market, mainly at the expense of more vulnerable sectors, large masses of un-/under- employed

youths will be confronted with even more fragile and complicated labor and living conditions, hence fueling frustration and desire for rebellion. Owing to lack of updated and comprehensive data on latest coup events, the present thesis will cover the period of the early 2010s, since when the new "wave" of coups has restarted. Hopefully, future research will seize the opportunity to exploit newly empirical evidence to further investigate the connections between youth bulge and the likelihood of coups.

Before introducing the outline of the thesis, it is worthwhile dwelling on the importance of interpreting the reappearance of military coups from the perspective of political demography. By assessing the potential effect of large youth cohorts on the emergence of such events, the present thesis will add new insights about the impact of youth bulge on forms of political instability other than civil wars and intra-state armed conflicts. In addition, this work will attempt to provide evidence in favor of the integration of population studies in the field of political science, in order to prove that demographic dynamics do matter in shaping politics in times of peace and war. Since ancient times, population trends have always been identified as key element of a state's security, economic power, and military capacity (Kaufmann and Toft, 2012). Yet, demographic dynamics have been found to influence the advent of democratization, as well as other ordinary issues of modern politics, such as voting patterns and fiscal policies. In a context of favorable demographic trend, as will be seen, countries can harness the potential arising out of increasing population to boost economic growth and strengthen its economic and geopolitical weight. In short:

"Demography is the story of people. Understanding that story is important because it provides a powerful lens for viewing future trends, explaining changes a country is likely to face, and providing an opportunity to create a policy environment that takes maximum advantage of a country's demographic potential" (Canning et al., 2015)

This thesis is structured as follows. The first chapter will start with a review of the literature on the youth bulge theory, with a view to better understand the concept and to see how it has been used by political demographers. Afterwards, a detailed description of past and present demographic trends in West Africa will be provided, followed by an overview of social unrests in the region that have seen active participation of youths. The chapter will end with a final section explaining why it is necessary to explore the nexus between youth bulge and coups d'état. The second chapter will focus on testing the impact of youth bulge on the likelihood of coup events. It will be opened by a presentation of the explanatory factors that are assumed to have strong effects on both youth-driven agitations and the

occurrence of coups. As stated above, the explanatory variables are corruption, urbanization, and youth unemployment. The second section will provide an overview of three case studies under examination, namely Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. After that, the empirical investigation will be carried out by running binomial regression using STATA. Regression results will be discussed in the subsequent paragraph. Finally, the third chapter will revolve around the challenges West Africa is foreseen to face in the future, thereby jeopardizing the livelihoods of its inhabitants. They include regional securitization against multi-dimensional security threats, the integration of youths into productive jobs, climate change and food insecurity. Drawing on these challenges, a range of policy suggestions to mitigate the adverse effects of these phenomena while harnessing the demographic potential to the advantage of economic growth will be delineated in the last paragraph. By doing this, the present thesis will attempt to answer the big question, "Is demography destiny?" – recalling the quote attributed to the French philosopher August Comte – in order to understand whether and how population trends could determine the future of West Africa. The thesis will end with a final section on concluding remarks.

For the elaboration of the thesis, reference has been made to the academic studies on youth bulge (Urdal, 2004; 2006; 2011; Sommers, 2011; Giordano, 2021) as well as to other publications in the field of political demography (Goldstone, 2001; 2002; Madsen, 2012; Matthew, 2012). Special attention has been devoted to the literature on the involvement of youths in conflicts, uprisings, and social unrests in West Africa (Cubitt, 2012; de Bruijn and Both, 2017; Gupte et al., 2014; Ikelegbe and Garuba, 2011; Maina, 2012). Beyond demographic publications, previous papers and articles on coups d'état – ranging from Galetovic and Sanhueza, (2000) to Hunter et al. (2020) – have been largely consulted. For the presentation of the three case studies, publications by Whitehouse (2012; 2017), Hagberg (2002; 2015) and Ajala (2021), among others, have been inspected. Academic material has been integrated with documents and policy papers by both international – namely the World Bank, the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) – and regional organizations – including the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Sahel and West Africa Club (SWAC), and the Economic Commission for Africa and African Union Commission (ECA-AUC). Finally, to conduct investigations on the nexus between the youth bulge and the likelihood of coups, as well as for the specification of explanatory variables, database provided by the World Bank (i.e., Population Estimates and Projections, World Governance Indicators, World Development Indicators) and the Coup D'état Project (CDP) by the Cline Center for Advanced Social Research have been accessed.

CHAPTER 1: YOUTH BULGE IN THE CONTEXT OF WESTERN AFRICA

1.1 Addressing the concept of youth bulge

Over the last thirty years, demography has increasingly been applied in the security literature to explain "the mass social processes that underlie the emergence of traditional and non-traditional security threats" (Droogan et al., 2012). One of the main issues in this regard is the presence of a large share of youth in a country's population, which is described by the term "youth bulge". Several authors have contributed to provide a definition of such a term and to identify the conditions under which this phenomenon occurs. For instance, Castree et al. (2013) define "youth bulge" as the relative increase in the numbers and proportion of a country's population of youthful age, conventionally 16–25 or 16–30 years old, while German social scientist Gunner Heinsohn (2000) argues that this condition occurs when at least 30 per cent of the population belongs to the 15-29 age bracket, or when at least 20 per cent is in the 15–25 age bracket. Youth bulge characterizes countries where pyramid populations are "bottom heavy" because of high fertility rates juxtaposed on declining infant mortality rates (Muchemwa, 2019).

If supported by appropriate investments, alongside the progression of demographic transition, the presence of large youth populations can be a crucial factor for one country's economic development and well-being. This phenomenon is known as "demographic dividend" and stems from so-called "demographic window of opportunity", that is, "[…] the period of time in which the age structure of a country sees a large share of the population enter the potential working age, in comparison to the number of children and old people who are not economically productive" (Giordano, 2021). In this regard, the case of the four "Asian tigers" (Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea, and Singapore) proves that adopting policies that encourage lower fertility rates (and thus lower dependency ratios) while simultaneously exploiting increasing working-age population can contribute to economic growth (Sakor, 2020a; Urdal, 2011). In other words, "demographic dividend" arises out of two main factors. On the one hand, a rising ratio of working age population to the total population increases the ratio of "producers" to "consumers", which exerts positive effects on growth of output per capita (Kögel, 2005). On the other hand, a rising ratio of working age population to the total population determines a decline in dependency ratios, causing an increase in saving rates that, in turn, enhances residual growth – as measured by total factor total factor productivity growth. On the contrary, large youth dependency burden negatively affects economic growth by reducing aggregate savings that bring down total factor productivity growth (Kögel, 2005).

Where resources and social opportunities for youth cohorts are lacking, countries are more likely to experience political violence, under both low (riots, protests) and high (internal armed conflicts) intensity unrests. Here, the literature on youth bulge can be traced back to two main theoretical traditions on civil war: the opportunity literature (*greed perspective*) on the one hand, and the motive-oriented tradition (*grievance perspective*) on the other. Both perspectives are macro-level frameworks that try to explain events consisting of a series of individual-level decisions associated with joining a rebel or terrorist organization, by focusing on economic, political, and social structure factors. In particular, the greed perspective analyzes the structural conditions that provide opportunities for rebel groups to wage war against a government (e.g., low opportunity-cost for recruitment owing to the presence of large youth rebels supply) (Collier, 2000; Collier and Hoeffler, 2004). The grievance perspective regards political violence as a means to redress economic (poverty, inequality) and/or political grievances (lack of democracy, corruption, political exclusion) (Gurr, 1970; Sambanis, 2002; Urdal, 2006). Yet, the two theoretical traditions described above may not be regarded as mutually exclusive; rather, they are most likely to be interconnected. Indeed, grievances may not be a sufficient condition to explain the outbreak of political violence, as the probability that these motives are addressed through political violence increases when the opportunity arises from the availability of financial means, low recruitment cost and weak government (Sambanis, 2002). Furthermore, some factors may equally be perceived as both opportunity and motive. For instance, a young, impoverished individual "[…] may be considered both a potential low-cost recruit, and at the same time an aggrieved individual motivated by economic and political exclusion" (Urdal, 2011).

Higher propensity to violence among youths may also be explained according to socio-biological factors, that is, the perception that social norms prevent young people from successfully achieving transition to adulthood and to becoming social adults, enabling them to gain economic independence and to support both household and community well-being. This is reflected, for instance, by the African Youth Charter definition of youth as individuals aged between 15 and 35, implying that it takes longer time for them to attain status-related social norms and resources associated with adulthood, such as steady income, valuable skills, and secure shelter (Maina, 2012; Marc et al., 2015). Blocked and delayed transition to adulthood may contribute to the erosion of parental and traditional values and norms on gender roles and family subsistence and this, in turn, may provoke alienation among youth afflicted with a sense of humiliation and low self-esteem. Subsequently, this perception among frustrated youths, further exacerbated by political, social and economic barriers hampering their transition to adulthood, may drive grievances and political violence.

Countries characterized by simultaneous presence of a large portion of youth's population, increasing working-age population and absence of employment opportunities are more prone to experience political instability at domestic level. Indeed, frustration and job competition among youth may prompt them to resort to alternative and illegal means to achieve economic and social advancement (Lam, 2014). Several authors stress the importance of youth cohort size to assess the onset of security issues. A report by the Population Action International (PAI) highlights that, between 1970 and 1999, 80 per cent of conflicts occurred in countries where at least 60 per cent population was below the age of thirty (Leahy et al., 2007). Again, Droogan Guthrie and Williams (2012) remark that in 2003, sixty out of sixty-seven nations in the world experiencing youth bulges were affected by some type of civil war or by similar episodes of mass killings. Recent quantitative estimates reveal that an increase in the size of the population group aged fifteen to nineteen raises the risk of low-intensity civil conflict incidence by 2.3 percentage points in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) (Flückiger and Ludwig, 2018).

Besides economic and political grievances, other contributing factors to the outbreak of illicit actions by youth bulges include urbanization and environmental stress. On the one hand, the trend toward increasing urbanized societies (Urdal and Hoelscher, 2012) is projected to determine considerable challenges when it comes with providing citizens with services, resources, and job opportunities, especially for rural-to-urban migrants. Where these elements are lacking, urban youths may opt for embracing illegal activities, such as working in the black market or joining criminal gangs. On the other hand, higher resource-consumption driven by rapid population increase may induce citizens to challenge the government or to engage in conflicts to gain access to first-necessity goods and items. Additionally, unprecedented consequences arising from climate change contribute to accelerate resource depletion and to force individuals to leave areas affected by environmental crisis (Finaz, 2016). On the linkages between population growth and climate change, Matthew (2012) identifies two main issues. First, most of the demographic trends are likely to increase anthropogenic causes of global warming, as population growth may provoke further emissions from fossil fuels. This will be further aggravated by population congestion in urban areas to meet the needs of both energy and resources that, in turn, may fuel urban social disorders (Urdal and Hoelscher, 2012). Second, many of the activities driven by population growth – especially those carried out by young and expanding populations (e.g., in Sub-Saharan Africa) – will also increase the number of people with heightened vulnerability to adverse climate effects. Much of the population growth is occurring in places that are already suffering water scarcity, including Sub-Saharan Africa. As argued by Brown, Hammill and McLeman (2007), climate change will further worsen the problem of water and food shortages in

these same areas. Still, population-driven deforestation will provoke the depletion of sources of food, fuel, and livelihoods for people, especially those living in the developing world (Matthew, 2012).

Empirically speaking, Sub-Saharan Africa represents the ideal location where economic, political, and social factors described above meet. Although the real economy activity in the region grew at an average annual rate of 4,8 per cent between 1996 and 2014, such a performance lowers when accounting for population growth – within the same time frame, real Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita grew at an average annual rate of 1,95 per cent. Furthermore, most of world's poor people lives in Sub-Saharan Africa, as the number of people living in poverty increased from 278 million in 1990 to 416,4 million in 2015 (Calderón, 2021). Indeed, the region has also witnessed substantial increase in the percentage of desperately poor – from 41 percent to 46 percent (Matthew, 2012). Referring to Western Africa, ILO report "*Labor Markets and Jobs in West Africa*" (Mbaye and Gueye, 2018) indicates that labor force participation rates are high compared with Sub-Saharan Africa average. However, youths are often subject to low-quality and vulnerable employment conditions, as most of them works in the informal sector (namely family farms or household enterprise), which is poorly paid and unprotected (Mbaye and Gueye, 2018). Alongside other Sub-Saharan countries, Western African ones are facing rapid urbanization as well, with rate of urbanization up to 47 per cent in 2020. Indeed, 2019 OECD report on border cities and regional integration points out that, by the end of last decade, close to one out of two inhabitants would have lived in a city (OECD, 2019). This process of urbanization is being fed by a high birth rate and heavy migration, resulting in an increase in the size and number of cities. Further urban challenges will be posed by migration flows driven by rural populations searching for better opportunities, but also by pervasive conflicts and environmental crises in rural areas. On this issue, Sub-Saharan Africa has been classified by the German Advisory Council on Global Change's report, *World in Transition: Climate Change as a Security Risk* (2007) as one of the main "hot spots" deemed to be at greatest risk of climate-related emergencies in the twenty-first century, especially for its incapacity to manage environmental stress challenges. The region reflects the conclusions drawn by scientific and policy reports, according to which climate change will weaken states with limited capacity in providing public goods, with its most pressing effects on agricultural economies, which are overrepresented in the poor and conflict-prone areas of the world. Therefore, climate-related resource degradation and insecurity will amplify state failure and violent conflict, increase climate migration, deepen vulnerability to natural disasters and thwart sustainable development and poverty alleviation efforts (Matthew, 2012).

Above all, to comprehensively assess the impact of these interrelated and overlapping phenomena, it is necessary to consider demographic trajectories affecting Western Africa. Indeed, the report

"Climate change, violence and young people" (2015) by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) and the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) argues that: "The worsening effects of climate change, combined with growing social, economic and political pressures as a result of rapidly-expanding populations, will place additional strain on governments and social systems that are already over-burdened – potentially triggering, or exacerbating, social unrest, instability and even conflict".

Finally, dependency ratio has been proven to be a significant explanatory factor when assessing the propensity of countries with large youth bulges to experience political violence. Indeed, lower dependency burden, which is associated with both demographic transition and potential demographic dividend (and subsequent economic growth), may reduce one country's inclination toward conflict, while large youth bulges, which foster both higher fertility and dependency ratio, makes countries more likely to experience domestic violence. Drawing on these assumptions, Urdal (2006) demonstrates that countries with large youth cohorts in the context of continued high fertility and high dependency are likely to experience armed conflicts, while countries undergoing demographic transition are likely to experience "peace dividend". In terms of age structure, Madsen (2012) argues that countries with very young age structure – that is those where two-thirds of the population is younger than 30 – are more than three times as likely to have experienced conflict than those with mature age structures that had completed demographic transition. Interestingly, the most striking difference in likelihood lies between the first two categories of age structures – namely "very young" and "youthful" age structures – as countries belonging to the first are twice as likely to have experienced civil conflict as those associated with the latter. This may depend also on some degree of fertility decline, which reduces the likelihood of conflict breakout, even in fertility rates remains well above replacement level – over two children for each woman (2.1) (Madsen, 2012). Since nearly all of countries in Sub-Saharan Africa have populations with very young age structures, these premises further demand demographic trajectories in Western Africa to be investigated. Hence, the following paragraph will analyze past and current demographic trends in the region, by focusing on youth population.

1.2 Western Africa: past and current demographic trends

Africa has been the last region in the world to enter the so-called demographic transition[2], in which societies shift from a high birth/high death equilibrium to a low birth/low death equilibrium

[2] The skyrocketing population increase in Africa has occurred since 1900, after a longstanding period of negative population growth between 1600 and 1900. On this issue, historians almost unanimously agree that "[…] precolonial

via high birth/low death transition phase. Such a transition phase, which is characterized by high population growth thanks to both high fertility and low mortality, has produced one of the largest growth surges ever recorded in human history (Green, 2012).

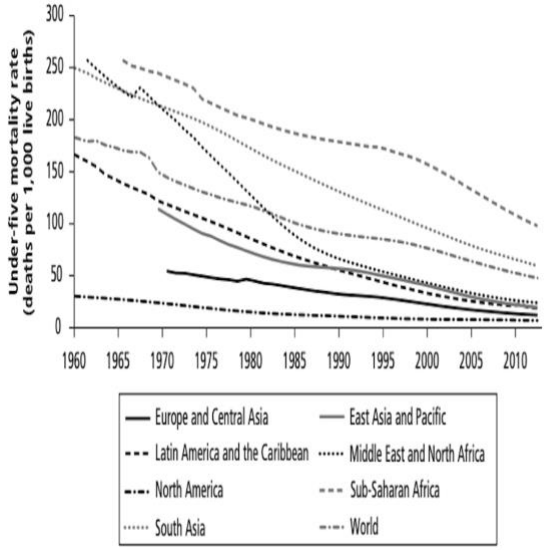
Following the skyrocketing spurt in population growth, Sub-Saharan Africa has experienced rapid population increase from 95 million in 1900 to 186 million in 1950 and up to 683 million in 2010 (Green, 2012; Eastwood and Lipton, 2011). Western Africa's population alone population increased 4.5-fold between 1950 and 2007, from 70 to 315 million (OECD/SWAC, 2009). As highlighted by Eastwood and Lipton (2011), demographic transition has occurred in diversified ways according to the Sub-Saharan regions, with the second stage progressing faster in Southern region, slower in Eastern Sub-Sahara and slowest in Central and Western regions (Eastwood and Lipton, 2011). Report by Walther (2021) highlights that demographic transition has occurred unevenly within Western Africa. On the one hand, Mali, Niger and Chad are still in the first phase of demographic transition, with birth rates above 40 per cent and rapidly decreasing death rates that are fostering population increase (thanks to high demographic growth rates, population has doubled in less than 19 years in Niger, and in less than 24 years in Chad and Mali). On the other hand, the remaining Western countries are generally experiencing the second stage of demographic transition, which is characterized by sharp fall in birth rate and slowdown in the decreasing death rate (Walther, 2021).

Western Africa had the highest under-five mortality rate in 1960, with a median value of about 291 per 1,000 live births. This level fell below 183 per 1,000 by 1990. Overall, Sub-Saharan Africa has performed poorly in reducing under-five mortality rate, mainly because of HIV/AIDS epidemic spreading across countries, as well as of political and economic factors leading towards civil war (Hill and Amozou, 2006). Unfulfillment of infant mortality decline[3] helps to understand why Sub-Saharan countries have not recorded strong fertility decline. In this regard, several authors (Conley et al., 2007; Lorentzen et al., 2008; Angeles, 2010) argue that a fall in child mortality is the biggest quantitative driver of fertility decline. Figures 1 and 2 by World Bank (2012) summarize both trends on under-five mortality and total fertility rate between 1960 and 2012.

Africa's population density was low and, due to large population growth elsewhere, sharply decreasing relative to other regions by the beginning of the colonial period in the late nineteenth century." (Green, 2012).

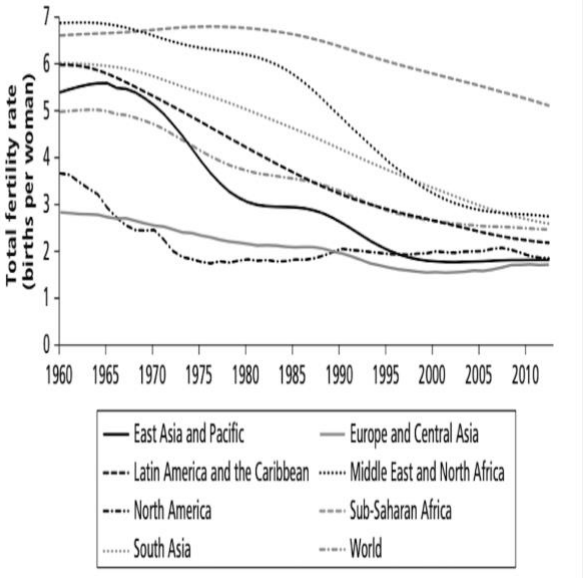
[3] Reduction of the under-five mortality rate (U5MR) by two-thirds between 1990 and 2015, equivalent to an annual average rate of reduction of 4.3 percent, was one of the six health-related Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

Figure 2: Under-Five Mortality Rate in Select World Regions, 1960-2012



Source: World Bank, 2012

Figure 1: Total Fertility Rate in Select World Regions, 1960-2012



Source: World Bank, 2012

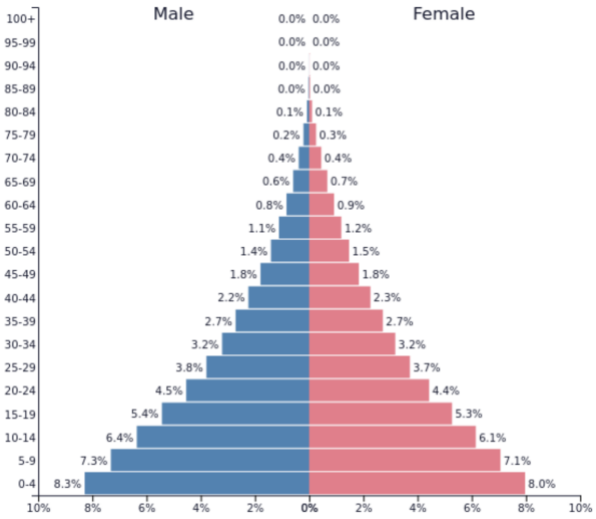
Findings by Gerland et al. (2017) highlight that, between 1950 and 1955, all sub-regions in Africa had total fertility rate above six births per woman. In Western Africa, fertility remained high until the 1980s, when it peaked at just under 7. Since then, fertility began to decline, reaching 5.5 births per woman in 2010-2015. Three main groups of countries can be identified based on fertility trajectories (Walther, 2021). The first group includes the most advanced countries undergoing demographic transition (Cabo Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Liberia, Mauritania, Togo, and Senegal), where decline in the fertility rate predates the 1980s. The second group refers to countries where fertility started declining since the beginning of 1990s (Benin, Burkina Faso, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone), with the number of children per woman decreasing from 6.5 in 1990 to 4.5 in 2020. The third group comprises Chad, Mali, and Niger, where fertility drop began in the 2000s and accelerated in the past few years (e.g., in Chad, the number of children per woman went from 7.4 to 5.6 between 2000 and 2020).

High though declining fertility rates have produced a rise in youth population, which has, in turn, increased total dependency rate. In 1950, it amounted at around 80 dependents per 100 persons at working age and continued to rise, reaching a peak of 95 dependents in the mid-1980s. After that, total dependency rate in Africa has dropped slowly, while the gap with other regions in the world has persisted throughout time (Canning et al., 2015).

Like most countries of Sub-Saharan Africa, young people represent the largest component of Western Africa's population, with 60 per cent of people being under 25 years old and one-third between 15

and 24 (OECD/SWAC., 2009; Marc et al., 2015). This is evidenced by West Africa population pyramid (see Figure 3):

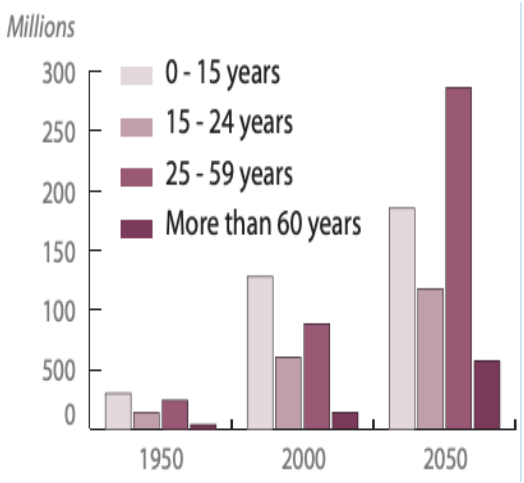
Figure 3: Western Africa Population Pyramid (2020)



Source: PopulationPyramid.net

The large presence of youths within the population is reflected by the median age. In Africa, it has declined from 19 years in 1950 to 17,3 in 1985-90 and currently it is about 18,6 years (Canning et al., 2015), while in Western Africa median age is around 18,2 years (Worldometer, 2022). The age group below 15 years old remains the largest among the population age groups, as described by Figure 4 below. Additionally, the report by UNICEF-Uk (IISS and UNICEF, 2015) highlights that: "Most of the increase in the world's population of 0–14-year-olds is in sub-Saharan Africa, which will drive world population growth and African youth bulges this century".

Figure 4: Demographic structure in West Africa



Source: OECD/SWAC (2009)

Adolescent fertility also helps to explain why the region has recorded high birth rates over the last decades. Indeed, when it comes with the percentage of women aged between 20 and 24 who had a live birth by age 18, extreme values can be observed in Sub-Saharan Africa, about 28 per cent in West and Central Africa and 25 per cent in Eastern and Southern Africa (Loaiza and Liang, 2013). Between 1996 and 2011, 40 countries had 20 per cent or more of women aged 20 to 24 having birth before age 18. Of the 15 countries where the figure was over 30 per cent, 14 were in sub-Saharan Africa, with the highest rates observed in Niger (51 per cent), Chad (48 per cent), Mali (46 per cent) (Loaiza and Liang, 2013). African sub-regions record the highest number of women aged between 20 and 24 who had live birth by age 15 as well (around 6 per cent in Western and Central Africa and 4 per cent in Eastern and Southern Africa).

Although the global prevalence of pregnancies among women below 18 years old has slightly decreased over the last years, overall levels in Sub-Saharan Africa have remained relatively constant, with changes of less than 10 per cent. Consequently, the gap between Sub-Saharan Africa and other regions has widened. Indeed, among countries where surveys were conducted between 1990 and 2008, a woman aged between 20 and 24 had a probability of giving birth before age 18 that was 1.1 times as likely as a woman in South Asia, 2.7 times as a woman in the Arab States, and 4 times as a woman in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. In the second round of surveys between 1997 and 2011, these probabilities increased to 1.3 times, 2.9 times and 4.9 times those of South Asia, the Arab States, and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, respectively (Loaiza and Liang, 2013).

Adolescent pregnancy can also be assessed by examining adolescent birth rate (ABR), that is, the average number of live births per 1000 women aged between 15 and 19 at any time. Again, Sub-Saharan Africa has higher levels of ABR than other regions, with values above 100. Several factors, including education, place of residence, knowledge of contraceptives and child marriage seem to be correlated with adolescent pregnancy. For instance, Ahinkorah et al. (2021) find an association between being married or in a relationship and first pregnancy among adolescent girls who had ever had sex in Sub-Saharan Africa. In other words, marriage or cohabitation may predispose young women to pregnancy as they increase their desire for children. In Western and Central Africa, such a correlation may be stronger as the two regions have the highest rates of child marriage before age 15 and age 18 (UNICEF, 2015). This may also depend on social factors, such as pressure on adolescent girls to marry and to have children after marriage (Ahinkorah et al. 2021). Furthermore, as reported by UNICEF publication “Ending child marriage: progress and prospects” (2014), girls experiencing

early marriage are often cut off from family and other sources of support, with limited opportunities for education. In this regard, UNICEF report claims that:

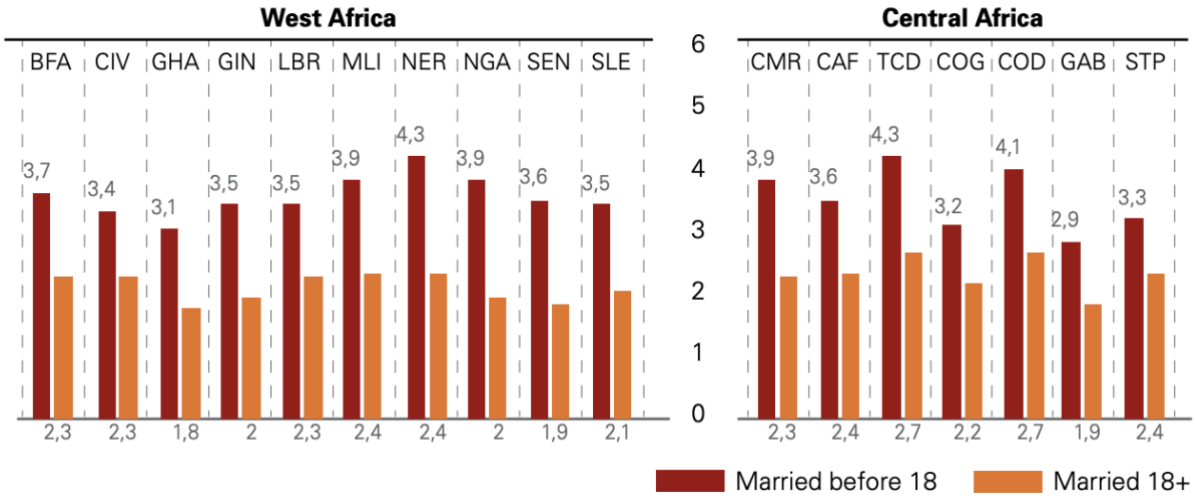
"Households typically make decisions about girls' schooling and marriage jointly, not sequentially, and education tends to lose out. Accordingly, lower levels of education are found among women who married in childhood" (UNICEF, 2014).

Exclusion from education may help to clarify why adolescent pregnancy is more prevalent among females who are working than among those who are not. Indeed, adolescent girls who are not in employment may be in school, so they may have better access to sexuality education, which reduces the likelihood of pregnancies (Ahinkorah et al. 2021). On the nexus between education level and adolescent pregnancy, Western and Central Africa provide insightful evidence, as the ABR among adolescents with no education has been found to be about four times higher (210) than among those with secondary or higher education (52) (Loaiza and Liang, 2013).

In 2013, 28 per cent of adolescent women aged between 15 and 19 living in these regions were married. The group also had the highest ABR at 129 live births per 1,000, the lowest total demand for family planning at 30 per cent, and the lowest use of contraception at 7 per cent, especially among female adolescents (Loaiza and Liang, 2013). UNICEF report on "*Child marriage, Adolescent pregnancy and Family formation in West and Central Africa*" (2015) warns that child marriage is significantly associated with higher levels of fertility, especially when compared with fertility rates among bribes who marry later (see Figure 5 below). For instance, in Nigeria child bribes marrying before age 18 have mean number of children that is almost twice as high the one of those marrying later (3,9 births for bribes marrying by age 18 vs. 2 births for those marrying later). Along with lower use of contraception and sexual activity, also duration of marriage (which is greater for those marrying as children) helps to explain why higher fertility levels occur among child bribes, as it represents the time during which women are exposed to the 'risk' of childbearing.

Having the highest population growth rates in the world with young people making up the largest component, Western and Central Africa are projected to increase the number of adolescent pregnancies (Ahinkorah et al. 2021). Indeed, the number of adolescents girls in Sub-Saharan Africa is foreseen to increase markedly over the next decades (from 75 million in 2010 to 113 million in 2030), with approximately 1 in every 4 adolescent girls living there (Loaiza and Liang, 2013).

Figure 5: Mean number of births to married women aged 25-29, by age at marriage



Source: UNICEF, 2015

As the number of females entering childbearing age increases, population in Sub-Saharan Africa is expected to experience demographic momentum, that is, the tendency to continue growing after a fertility decline because of their young age distribution. Above all, both population growth and the presence of youth cohorts bring with them both opportunities and challenges that must be appropriately addressed by national policymakers. Exploiting economic boost stemming from larger youth productive population requires great investments in education (i.e., to improve human capital and to tackle adverse social practices, including both child marriage and adolescent pregnancy), health (to reduce child mortality) and employment. However, where governance infrastructures, stable macroeconomic conditions and investment environment required to promote equitable growth are lacking, large youth cohorts risk provoking both social and political turmoil. This may sound alarming for unstable and vulnerable countries under political and economic terms - especially those located in Sub-Saharan Africa - as both population and labor force growth will take place in states that are fragile under some indicators (IISS and UNICEF, 2015). The impact of youth bulges on socio-political unrest will be discussed in the next paragraph.

1.3 Youth involvement in social unrests: literature review

As argued by Bouthoul (1970), some of the major conflicts and events in the history of humanity can be explained according to the youth bulge model. They include the rise of Nazism that took advantage of the 1910-1914 youth bulge during the crisis of the Weimar Republic; the Marxist revolutions in South America between the 1960s and the 1980s; the episodes of terrorism across Europe in the 1970s. Regarding the latter case, "[…] the endurance of the democratic institutions on the one hand and the economic recovery that the entire continent was experiencing on the other,

prevented the phenomenon from degenerating" (Giordano, 2021). Nevertheless, in Africa both political institutions and economic dynamics have not generally proved resilient over the last decades. Subsequently, several countries in the region, where youth bulges have been present [4], have experienced episodes of socio-political unrest and instability, namely the Arab Spring in the 2010s. Indeed, many countries involved in these episodes have had very youthful populations at that time, with youth between the ages of 15 and 24 making up more than 30% of the population aged 15 years and above (Paasonen and Urdal, 2016).

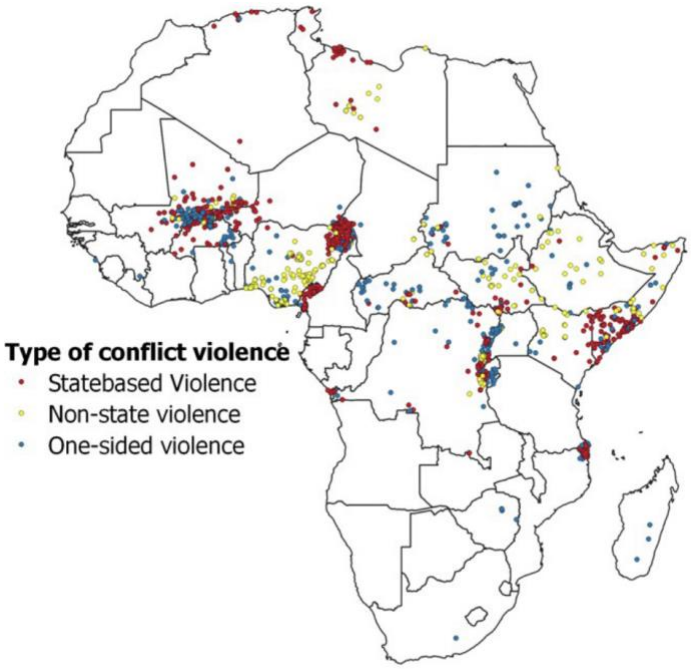
Scholars usually refer to episodes of sociopolitical upheavals in Northern Africa to underline the inability of national institutions to provide their growing populations – especially the youths – with access to basic resources, such as education, good healthcare, political rights, and employment opportunities (Sakor, 2020a; 2020b). Besides both political and economic volatility, Sub-Saharan Africa is afflicted by multiple destabilizing factors – ranging from environmental degradation, food insecurity to armed conflict, terrorism, and organized crime – which risk to exacerbate existing security challenges in the region. Several authors have suggested that the main driving forces behind these causes of instability are youth cohorts, who make up the largest segment of populations in Sub-Saharan Africa, and government's incapacity to integrate these cohorts within the economic, political, and social sphere (Sakor, 2020b). Besides delaying transition to adulthood for young men and debilitating their lifestyles and living conditions (Dhillon, Dyer and Yousef, 2009), failed integration may fuel resentment toward corrupt and manipulative state authorities and elites, as well as feelings of frustration, alienation and desire for recognition and esteem (Marc et al., 2015). Additionally, mismatch between investments in access to education and job opportunities for youths risks to further trigger both inter- and intra-generational rivalry. In this regard, Olonisakin (2008) underlines that: "As the number of schooled youth outpaces job growth, it risks leaving even those who are educated facing significant challenges to make a living, as well as feeling frustrated and resentful of those who enjoy the opportunities they lack". This may persuade youths to seek self- redemption and status by embracing violence and joining militias, extremist networks, political gangs, and insurgent organizations (Marc et al., 2015).

Over the last decades, Sub-Saharan Africa has also recorded high shares of internal armed conflicts and/or civil wars, defined as a contested incompatibility that concerns government and/or territory

[4] The Arab Spring took place in countries located in Middle East and North Africa. Among these, Yemen, Syria and Iraq were among the countries with the largest youth bulges preceding the Arab Spring. According to projections, some of the most conflict-prone areas, including Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Palestine, will continue to be youthful, while in many other key countries in the region, notably Tunisia, Iran, Turkey, and Lebanon, and later Egypt and Saudi Arabia, the proportion of youth in the population will decline more rapidly (Paasonen and Urdal, 2016).

where the use of armed force between two parties, of which at least one is the government of a state, results in at least 25 battle-related deaths in one calendar year (Uppsala Conflict Data Program, 2022). Figure 6 below illustrates conflict trends in Africa in 2019. Regardless of the type of violence (state based, non-state, one-sided), Figure 6 below highlights evident concentration of violent conflicts across both Western and Eastern regions.

Figure 6: Conflict trends in Africa, 2019



Source: Palik, Rustad and Methi (2020) – Data source: UCDP (2020)

Literature on youth bulges in Sub-Saharan Africa provides numerous and insightful case studies on how demographic issues such as large youthful segments can affect internal and/or regional security. Authors identify multiple reasons behind the decision of young people to address their grievances by embracing violence. Among these, relative deprivation fueled by horizontal inequalities – defined as inequalities in economic, social, or political dimensions or cultural status between culturally defined groups (Stewart, 2008) – is regarded as a rational mean to engage in violent conflict. For instance, Mali, which is one the weakest nations in the world and is afflicted by crucial security challenges (namely, terrorism and ethnic rebellion groups), is home to one the highest shares of youth populations in Sub-Saharan Africa. Owing to both poor governance and state's incapacity to provide its citizens – especially the youths – with basic resources and needs (education, healthcare, employment), most Malian people have been left politically and economically marginalized and excluded (Sakor, 2020b). In this regard, Agbiboa (2015) recalls one of the findings by Mali's Poverty

Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP), according to which every year 300 000 youths approach the market and the vast bulk of them seek employment in vain. This, in turn, determines poverty and frustration among unemployed youths, who become more susceptible to recruitment by terrorist and criminal organizations, which can provide both livelihood resources and recognition young people aspire to. Youth Malians were also involved in the 2012 violent conflict that followed the occupation of northern and central territories by the Tuareg, a nomadic ethnic group who have claimed their own space in the northern part of Mali extending to Algeria and Niger – the so-called "Azawad" – for years. On this issue, de Bruijn and Both (2017) recall the case of Fulani nomads, who decided to distance themselves from both their leaders and the state because of their incapacity to meet their needs. Since then, nomads organized themselves into a social movement to re-define their position *vis-à-vis* the Malian state and their own elites and to voice their feelings of marginalization. However, their grievances and demands on better measures to increase security in their region and to improve their living conditions did not receive any attention and were not followed up with concrete measures by central government. Subsequently, some members of the movement changed their tactics from peaceful negotiations to more violent protests (de Bruijn and Both, 2017). The latter was mainly embraced by youth Fulani, who became part of jihadist groups that provided them with protection in regions where the state was absent. Fulani's attitude reflects the loss of credibility of the state *vis-à-vis* its citizens because of its failure to provide security and stability (Ikelegbe and Garuba, 2011). Jihadist support to Fulani movement increased in 2012, when Tuareg rebellion began. Owing to state's incapacity to maintain security in central Mali, jihadists intervened to re-establish security and hence won the confidence of Fulani nomads. Besides meeting Fulani demands on better living conditions and regional security, jihadist helped them in developing their own defense by recruiting youth nomads in their camps to teach them how to fight. Thus, many young nomads started expressing their discontent with both central state and elder Fulani elites (who were seen as part of the state) by organizing themselves into armed counter-groups and committing attacks against security and political officials (de Bruijn and Both, 2017).

Other contributions emphasize the relationship between high levels of exclusion or inequality and increased risk of violence. In this regard, the 1991- 2002 civil war in Sierra Leone sheds light on discontent among discriminated and alienated youths (so called *rarray boys*) against entrenched state elites controlling key resources and infrastructures. In other words, the conflict in Sierra Leone can be interpreted as the "[…] violent manifestation of a rational expression of a youth crisis" (Hilker and Fraser, 2009) against exclusionary neo patrimonial practices. Along with the dominance of "blood diamonds" as founding resources of war, the conflict became known for the extreme violence against

civilians and the high number of children and youths among the armed factions, government troops (Republic of Sierra Leone Military Force, RSLMF) and rebel forces (Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone, RUF/SL). As argued by Cubitt (2012), youths' recruitment reflected a rebellious culture "[…] searching for a radical alternative to decades of corrupt rule, exploitation, and marginalization". Prior to the conflict, youths had already been victims of economic and political exclusion, as the promises for democracy they stood for faded away and access to jobs and privileges were reserved for regime sympathizers. Political elites sought to capitalize on rebellious youths by recruiting many to their party 'youth wings' to help in political campaigning (Abdullah, 1998; Rosen, 2005). Involvement of young people mainly consisted of intimidation of opposition parties and civilians, including by using force and violence if necessary.

Economic recession and deterioration of education between the 1970s and the 1980s worsened youths' status and living conditions in Sierra Leone. In the aftermath to civil war, political marginalization and socio-economic discrimination against young people were exploited for both ideological rhetoric and recruitment campaigns. Although most of the youths did not join armed factions voluntarily, some did, especially for the sake of survival and respect, but also for compensating the loss of educational opportunity. Furthermore, owing to the lack of real promises about social reintegration, education or civilian job prospects, several youth militants decided to re-enlist after the coup in May 1997 (Peters and Richards, 1998). At the end of civil war, over 70.000 youth combatants were demobilized under the United Nations disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (UNDDR) program, with 10 percent (around 6,000 units) of those being children under age 18 at the time (i.e., child soldiers) (Cubitt, 2012). After the conflict room for change was limited, as youth combatants were excluded from Lomé peace negotiations in 1999 and no specific provisions was made for them (Cubitt, 2012). With over half of youth population being illiterate and unskilled (around 53% of men and only 30% of women are literate), their livelihood conditions in post-war have been challenging, as they have had to face exclusion from family and kinship networks, lack of access to education, employment, and decision-making. The 2003 National Youth Policy, which was introduced to support youth empowerment and participation to the peaceful development of country after the war, had limited effectiveness because most of resources have been allocated to rebuild infrastructures, reform security sector, and re-establish local government. National employment schemes and policies[5], though providing opportunities for young people, have performed discontinuously due to

[5] The Youth Employment Scheme (YES) was launched in 2006, with a view to provide youth with work opportunities across the country. With a budget of US$16.7 million, the YES planned to employ 4 800 youth in public works, 16 000 in agriculture and food production and another 5 000 in entrepreneurial and self-employment activities. The Scheme was replaced by revised youth policies created by the new government under its Agenda for Change. It aimed at both reducing

policy revision in parallel with government alternations. National Youth Dialogue Forums (NYDF) were instituted to allow young people to get involved in all stages of consultation on youth related policies, and to widen political space for them. Under these Forums, young people were encouraged to conduct nationwide research to feed into the various stages of policy planning and design. Many youths joined NYDF and contributed to the drafting of subsequent report, which was presented to the government. However, recommendations put forward by the youths in their research, including concerns about general disrespect for youth demands among political elite, were covered by the final policy document, causing deep resentment among researchers who felt "slighted" at their attempts to participate in the political process (Cubitt, 2012). Although young people in post-conflict Sierra Leone displayed high levels of interest and trust in politics[6], national decision-making institutions and processes are still affected by critical underrepresentation and inactive political participation of youths. For instance, the Youth Vulnerability and Exclusion in West Africa (YOVEX) study by Ismail, Fortune and Stephen (2009) found that in 2007 there was only one lawmaker from among the youths up to 2007, and about ten after the September elections. If national youth councils are not able to appropriately represent the interest of youths and to act independently of political elite, Sierra Leone may expose itself to increasing levels of political apathy among young people. This, in turn, may trigger political thuggery and/or violence in the country.

Youth violence as sign of frustration and disillusionment towards neo patrimonial practices and empty promises by the elite, along with the denial of youths as social category, has paved the way for the emergence of organized gangs of street children and teenagers, such as so called "Area boys" in Lagos, Nigeria. In Western African cities, where youths have been deprived of stabilizing cultural models and social behaviors, joining a gang can provide young people with identification and supervision, as well as facilitate their transition into adulthood (Sommers, 2010). Nevertheless, where gangs are mainly made up of unemployed graduate students, out-of-school individuals, and unemployed artisans, then resorting to violence and crime, especially in urban centers, becomes easier. Concerning organized gangs in Nigeria, the introduction of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAP)[7]

poverty and promoting youth employment and empowerment through the establishment of agricultural farms for youth, youth enterprise development schemes, and employment in public works.

[6] The YOVEX study argues that higher levels of trust and interest in voting in post-conflict countries correlates with "[…] the upsurge in international policy engagement in and the focusing of the media spotlight" that contributed to free up the political space. Regarding this, the study points out that over 70 per cent of youth respondents voted in elections or claimed to be interested in voting in future elections or expressed belief in voting as a way of influencing public policy through regime change (Ismail et al., 2009).

[7] Structural Adjustment Programs are a set of economic reforms and policies that countries must adhere to in order to qualify for loans from the International Monetary Fund and/or the World Bank, which can help them repaying debts owed to commercial banks, government and the World Bank. SAPs share several common principles and features, such as

in the mid-1980s provoked a shift in their organization and functioning. Indeed, pressure on government to privatize public service provision and education "[…] led, among other things, to a dramatic decline in government subsidies for crucial food items on which the urban poor depended. The impacts were immediate and immense, as food scarcities increased and public sector jobs decreased" (Sommers, 2010). Subsequently, Nigerian population, especially youths, were left without any social subsides or legitimate means of livelihood to cope with the situation, so that they were forced to secure their own subsistence with whatever means. In times of economic stress and social degradation, organized gangs became organized platforms through which youths could secure their livelihood, even by resorting to criminal actions (Ya'u, 2000). Regarding Area boys, Momoh (2000) points out that, since 1989, they allied with students from the University of Lagos and got involved in anti-SAP protests to express their struggle against state politics and policies. Their participation was often expressed in looting and violence and several members got killed by the police. Area boys were very active in mass protests called by the Campaign for Democracy (CD) following the annulment of elections results on June 12, 1993. The following month, they undertook looting sprees against Igbo traders who resisted the call of the CD and burnt some public buildings, causing the army intervention under shoot-at-sight order. After the Lagos State High Court judgement on November 1993, which declared that the Interim National Government (ING) set up by General Babangida was not legally constituted, Area boys took part in protests and resorted to violence against the will of university students. Once the military dismissed the ING on November 17, new Head of State General Sani Abacha started repressive policy against the Area boys – so called "Operation Sweep"[8] – who were tried and sentenced to jail without trial or any other legal aid (Momoh, 2000).

Resort to violence as main feature of coping strategies of youths under organized groups and platforms occurred also in other Nigerian cities. In Kano, many unemployed and school dropout youths, who repudiated the poor conditions to which their social backgrounds relegated them, organized themselves in gangs named *Yandaba* and resorted to gang-violence as a means to contest space in the "post-SAP" difficult society (Ya'u, 2000). Although the *Yandaba* as a deeply rooted

export-led growth; privatization and liberalization; and the efficiency of the free market. Under SAPs, countries are usually required to balance their national budgets by raising taxes or cutting government spending. The latter is often pursued by deeply cutting programs such as education, healthcare, and social care, and by removing social subsidies. Subsequently, the poor are heavily affected by SAPs related cuts, as they are dependent on these services and subsidies.

[8] "Operation Sweep" was an anti-robbery squad made up of 4000 units from the erolice, army, state security services and National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) officials. The squad was set up by Col. Mohammed Marwa and lead under Colonel Minimah, with the aim of sweeping out armed hoodlums and criminals operating in Lagos. According to CNN, since Operation Sweep began, the number of armed robberies reported has dropped from ten per night to two (CNN, July 1, 1997). Momoh (2000) emphasizes that between September 1996 and January 1997, around 200 Area Boys have been arrested and detained. Operation Sweep was backed by both the state and federal government, which provided the squad with both vehicles and monetary resources.

violent phenomenon emerged before the introduction of SAP in 1986, subsequent loss of economic sustenance related to massive economic reforms caused a sharp turn to violence by the gangs, which, in turn, acquired a utilitarian function in the eyes of poor youths needing food and livelihood resources. Besides the inability to remain in education or to secure employment, further reason behind youth involvement in *Yandaba* gangs was housing crisis for poor, who could not bear increasing costs of land and construction materials. Thus, *Yandaba* enclaves were the best option to address shortage of sleeping places and need for accommodation. The increasing number of disillusioned and unemployed youths joining the ranks of *Yandaba* may represent a potential concern for the authority of the state, as the organization may re-orient their frustration toward a critical reassessment of their predicament in political terms (Ya'u, 2000). Indeed, between 1991 and 1995, many youths mobilized by *Yandaba* gangs fed protests and riots in Kano, though they were mainly driven by economic, rather than political motives (riots were concentrated in commercial areas where to loot supermarkets and shops). Politicians also capitalized on *Yandaba* recruiting capabilities, as they provided fertile soil for paid (or hired) voters on election day. This explains why during the 1996 local government elections in Fagge, Kano most voters were unemployed youths. Although *Yandaba* represent a potential political force, they do not regard themselves as promoters of any political agenda, nor they feel part of the political process in Kano. Rather, use of violence is not targeted toward state authority, but it has material, utilitarian, and apolitical features. In other words:

"Although central to this transformation is the role of the state in the restructuring of society through SAP and the subsequent criminalisation and brutalisation of the *Yandaba*, the *Yandaba'*s anger against society that they see as failing to meet their expectations, has not crystallised into a hostility against the state" (Ya'u, 2000)

Resort to violence by both Area boys and *Yandaba* in Nigeria can be attributed to culture of violence embedded in militarism and nurtured by youths. On the one hand, violence is regarded as an instrument gangs can refer to in order to defend and/or to promote their own interests, as well as to obtain resources for livelihood and sustenance (as highlighted by the case of *Yandaba*). On the other hand, gangs' violence can be interpreted as a response to violence propagated by military rule and culture, which endorses unlawful practices, such as extra-judicial killings and detention without trial. Thus, use of violence by Area boys may be regarded as a means to protect themselves from repressive policy under the "Operation Sweep". Such an explanation finds support in surveys conducted by Momoh (2000), revealing that most of Area boys opposed military rule under Abacha. At the same time, apolitical and volatile identity of large masses of unemployed youth enables those who can

afford them to exploit them to achieve their purposes, whether political elites and or fundamentalist militias. In Nigeria, Boko Haram organization emerged in the socio-economic environment of university campuses and militias frequented by young school dropouts and so called *almajirai*, that is, children seeking Islamic knowledge outside their parents' house, especially in Islamic schools (*madrasas*). In 2002, many among these youths, who found in violent and thuggery actions a way to vent their frustration and anger, began to develop their own ideas on religion and politics in order to forge relationships with political elites in all Nigerian regions. This prompted local politicians to capitalize on youth militias by manipulating them to fight each other to bolster their positions (Marc et al., 2015). Thus, "[…] youth militias became one component of the political organizing of mainstream parties within Nigeria" (Campbell, 2014).

Further contribution to conflict and violence across Western Africa originates from tensions surrounding migratory flows through the region. Although displacement of economic migrants has proved beneficial to subregional economy, thanks to the provision of employment for about half of the economically active population, to the generation of income through remittances and to agricultural inputs, yet migrants have usually found themselves involved in violent confrontations. These tensions can be historically traced back to contestations and claims over land, power, and resources, especially triggered by migrant pastoralists and farmers. In the wake of new trends, such as increasing levels of unemployment – especially among youths – rising levels of education, land and resource depletion, population growth, and climate change, migratory patterns across Western Africa has changed its features, bringing with them new challenges for conflict emergence (Marc et al., 2015). Among these, rapid urbanization and influx of both rural-to-urban youth migrants and internally displaced people in cities have contributed to further exacerbate social unrests, mainly as a consequence of failed integration of large masses of frustrated, marginalized and homeless people in the socio-economic context of urban centers on one side, and of the increasing demand of energy, land and other resources nurtured by the arrival of migrant, alongside the necessities requested by members of host communities on the other side. In other words, rising rate of population growth, along with the expansion of urban centers, implies stronger "[...] pressure on public services, land scarcity, reduced sizes of landholdings, disputes over migrant rights in land and property ownership, increased dependence on remittances, rising land values, and targeting of foreigners" (Marc et al., 2015). In this regard, rural-to-urban migration by landless and educated youths in a context of high unemployment and rising urbanization, as well as a climate of intolerance towards outsiders among local members of host communities, may determine the explosion of conflicts over land tenure, as it occurred in Côte d'Ivoire during the 1990s' economic recession. In that period, faced with harsh

urban prospects, skilled youths decided to return to their communities to embrace plantation activates and re-build land-based livelihood. However, owing to both youth farmers' inability to secure land possession and xenophobic resentments toward them, confrontations over land claims proliferated and contributed to the upsurge of armed rebellions over the following decades, culminating in the 2002-2003 hostilities. Owing to domestic tensions, which further worsened after the 2010 postelection crisis, around 700,000 people were displaced and more than 250,000 people were forced to seek refuge in neighboring countries (Maze, 2015). Social exclusion to land rights of bulging youths was at the origin of the 1991-2002 Sierra Leone civil war described above and contributed to further aggravate dramatic effects of civil conflict in Liberia (1989-1996 and 1999-2003), during which about 750,000 people had to flee the country and abandon their own lands. This has raised concerns over land disputes as main obstacle to achieving sustainable peace, as well as increasing worries among local inhabitants, who believe that "the next war will be about land" (Maze, 2015).

Data from the World Bank "*African migration survey*" (2011) point out that both selected internal and intra-regional migrants from four Western countries – Burkina Faso, Senegal, Ghana and Nigeria – tend to be young adults and generally having some education beyond tertiary school. Among surveyed countries, the Burkina Faso one highlights that internal migration was mainly from rural to urban areas. As reported by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) report "*Africa Migration Report: Challenging the Narrative*" (2020), the age of migrants to cities has decreased significantly over recent years – with more than 40 percent of African urban youths being under the age of 15 (Commins, 2011) – and most of their economic activities are in the informal sector where they usually undertake low paid and precarious jobs. Coupled with the natural growth of urban population due to high fertility rates, failed integration of precarious youth migrants lacking strong social ties or skills to enter the formal job market may risk exposing them to further marginalization and discrimination, which, in turn, may fuel grievances and tensions in urban centers. Such a "combustible mix" of unemployed young men populating urban centers, which can turn into a massive pool for recruitment for criminal gangs, trafficking networks, and transnational organized crime syndicates, can escalate violent crime, illicit activities, and political instability (Commins, 2011). From Fagen's point of view (2013), "[…] as numbers increase, the new migrants are forced to settle in slums and, even more frequently, in peripheral shantytowns surrounding municipalities. There, they find violence, lawlessness, unemployment, and squalid living conditions similar to those they fled". The example of "ghetto youth" in Conakry, Guinea clearly illustrates the potential consequences of population growth- and migration-driven urban crowding, especially when largely nourished by poor and vulnerable young individuals. Faced with poverty and challenging prospects

for the future, members of urban gangs in Conakry respond to their situation by resorting to delinquency, robbery, and vandalism, which usually end up being the only expertise they have gained. Ghetto youths usually engage in politics as additional business through which they can easily gain money by participating in demonstrations and confronting security forces for reward, but also by committing violent acts commissioned by political parties against their adversaries (Philipps and Grovogui, 2010). If local authorities or municipalities remain unable to manage the provision of adequate public services to the large numbers of incoming population, among which large masses of urban and poor youths, African cities may be potentially susceptible to political unrests and poverty-induced instability that, in turn, may threaten state power (Commins, 2011). In addition, the absence of state regulation in marginal neighborhoods and shantytowns opens the way for criminal bosses and strongmen to seize control over access and management of urban resources, including land, services, and security. This further contributes to a sense of insecurity and grievance among residents (Fagen, 2013).

State capacity to deliver provide resources, such as healthcare, education, and livelihood assistance, as well as to maintain order and stability may result crucial also in the face of environmental changes. To correctly assess the impact of climate change on both national and regional security, Burrows and Kinney (2016) argue that: "Understanding the local context of climate variability and change is essential to understanding the role of climate as a driver of migration and/or conflict". When intertwined with demography, environmental pressure may place one country to the risk of internal conflict. This may depend on the way the three factors behind resource scarcity – population growth, resource degradation, and the distribution of resources between individuals and groups – interact. Regarding this, two types of interactions are commonly identified: *resource capture*, which describes a situation in which resource degradation and population growth prompt powerful groups to take control over scarce resources on the expense of weaker and poorer groups; *ecological marginalization*, which refers to a situation where great land inequality and population increase result in more ecologically fragile areas where people are compelled to live in. Both interactions may be alarming for poor and underdeveloped states lacking the ability to adapt to environmental change, making them more vulnerable to environmental related violence (Homer-Dixon, 2010). When these interactions lead to lower per capita availability of land and expansions into more marginal lands, this may put further pressure on agricultural wages and cause economic marginalization as first-order effect. Subsequently, as second-order effect, rural people may be induced to migrate toward rural or urban areas. Along with demographic and environmental stress, further urbanization can stress state's ability to provide vital services such as housing, clean water, and health services. If the state fails in meeting

its functions on the provision of these services, people risk experiencing absolute deprivation, as they lack what they need to survive, but also relative deprivation, meaning that they are deprived of what they feel they are entitled to. Both forms of deprivation may fuel grievances among rural and urban populations (Kahl, 2018). This may sound worrying to West Africa, as the region is home to fast-growing population and is regarded as one of the most climate vulnerable spots at global level. For instance, Niger has one of the most numerous and youthful populations in the world – it has the second highest fertility rate in the world and the median age is around 15 years – that is heavily dependent on rain-fed agriculture, which has been impoverished by continuous droughts over the last fifty years. Owing to a severe drought in 2010, over 7 million Nigeriens were left without food. The same year, unusual floodings damaged many homes and farmland, forcing Nigeriens to move to other areas in the country or to migrate to Nigeria, Libya, and Cote d'Ivoire to seek shelter and employment. According to security experts, difficulties in agricultural and pastoral livelihood exacerbated by climate change may also have persuaded young and disenfranchised Nigeriens to join terrorist groups operating in the Islamic Maghreb in return of food and money (Werz and Conley, 2012). However, the relationship between climate change and upsurge of conflict is not unanimously accepted, as several academic contributions point out that the first may not necessarily play as a predictor of the latter. For instance, Raleigh and Urdal (2007) find that relative increase in risks of conflicts associated with high levels of land degradation are quite small, while high levels of water scarcity appear to be stronger predictors. Recently, Gizelis et al. (2021) have explored the nexus between environmental stress and urban unrests in Africa between 1997 and 2010. Their investigations report that droughts in rural urban areas are not clearly associated with increased risks of unrests. Both studies, however, agree on the impact of population growth and density on the likelihood of both armed conflict and urban social unrests. On the latter, population growth appears to be strongly associated with unrests in peri-urban areas, which are more likely to be under-serviced, under-governed, under-regulated, and poor (Gizelis et al., 2021). Since these areas presumably correspond to unplanned and unserved slums where more marginalized segments of population – including urban migrants, refugees internally displaced persons – usually settle, this confirms that migration dynamics is expected to pose further challenges to cities absorption capacity (Fagen, 2013).

In light of youth-driven turmoil and unrests as the ones that occurred in Northern Mali, Sierra Leone and Nigeria, current debate around (West)African youths tends to conceive them as ticking time bomb rather than a source of hope and development. Such a negative conception of youths lays on the assumption of a linear relationship between large youth cohorts and unemployment and/or underemployment on the one hand and the emergence of conflicts and violence on the other (Marc et

al., 2015). However, literature on youth bulges also provides evidence questioning the core assumptions that underpin the linkages between youth bulges and civil war. For instance, Sommers (2010) highlights that most nations with large youth cohorts have not experienced civil conflict; and even when civil conflicts broke out in countries with youth bulges, most young men have never got involved in conflicts. His work on Burundi and Rwanda (Sommers, 2011) reveals that unemployed and impoverished youths may not necessarily become an internal security threat even when opportunities for enrichment arise or political and economic conditions may limit their prospects. Recalling the case of *Yandaba,* despite their resort to violence, they have maintained relationships with their communities by providing them with volunteers as watchmen protecting communities against thieves and attacks by *Yandaba* from other wards and participating in communal works at the service of their districts (Ya'u, 2000). Thus, analysis of engagement of youths in violence may consider the contextual factors that may affect their livelihood and living conditions. The relevance of such factors will be addressed in the next chapter.

Still, youth may not be unequivocally portrayed as a menace for one country's domestic stability and security. Rather, several authors emphasize the role of youths as agents of both political and social change. Among these, Whitehouse (2017), who conducted interviews with Malian activists in the aftermath of the 2012 coup, finds that a new generation of activists, though facing risks and challenges, managed to communicate their messages related to civic awareness and consciousness through innovative ways – namely, via the internet, social media, private radio and television stations – that facilitated access to politics to a wider range of citizens. Drawing on case studies from Northern Nigeria and Northern Mali, where youths have played the role, respectively, of counterterrorism and development agents, Agbiboa (2015) provides evidence on positive contributions of young people to sustainable peace and development in their local communities. In Northern Nigeria, youths organized themselves in volunteer community-based police forces (Joint Civilian Task Force, or *yanboko*) supporting the government's security services against Boko Haram members operating in their communities, while in Northern Mali young people devoted their creativity to finding solutions to everyday challenges by joining a wide range of activities, such as agriculture, commerce in the informal sector and studying. Youth inventiveness and dynamism in the face of limited opportunities is comprehensively described by Fortune, Ismail, and Stephen (2015), who examine the most popular livelihood activities in the informal sector among both rural and urban youths in Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Mali, and Nigeria. They include artisanal and small-scale mining, industry, motorcycle taxis, street trading, hairdressing/barbering, and drug trafficking (despite the latter can be associated to negative social dynamics as well). These literary contributions demonstrate that African youths' potential and

resourcefulness, if channeled in a constructive manner through participation in politics and in the labor market, can help to foster governance and economic development (Agbiboa, 2015).

Youths were protagonist of so called "third wave[9]" of protests unfolding in Africa since the 2000s, which revolved around material issues (e.g., food riots that occurred in both Northern and Western Africa following the 2007-2008 global financial crisis and the subsequent increase in price of commodities), but also antigovernment/regime purposes, namely, to bring down authoritarian regimes (e.g., Egypt and Tunisia in Northern Africa, Gabon and Sudan in Sub-Saharan Africa) and to prevent national presidents from extending their mandate (e.g., Senegal, Burkina Faso or Democratic Republic of Congo) (Sanches, 2022). In Senegal, for instance, the legacy of past contestations, which have originated in the colonial period and have remained active over time, has paved the way towards the emergence of a new generation of young activists aspiring to build a trans-African network of political activism. These ambitions have been primarily driven by the *Y'en marre* ("we are fed up") movement, born in 2011, which opposed former President Abdoulaye Wade third term bid and contributed to the second national political changeover in March 2012 with the election of Macky Sall. Wade victory at the 2000 elections was praised by students, unemployed graduates, and fragile youths, as he was portrayed as "the president of youth". However, following the disappointing results of government programs targeting youths during Wade's two terms of presidency, youths withdrew their support for his third mandate and started expressing their discontent toward the ruling regime (Dimé, 2022). Although the movement emerged in a context of violent turbulence, triggered by unexpected urban riots since June 2011, *Y'en marre* managed to gain a major role in the political domain and to capture the will of youths to determine social, political, and generational changes in Senegal. Thanks to both street practices in the form of staging and strategy of systemic media presence on traditional and social platforms, the youth movement achieved in expanding its popularity beyond Senegal and to provide citizens – especially young people – with the opportunity to make their voice heard. Over the last decade, more conventional practices in the same vein of other civil society organizations during electoral campaigns have enabled *Y'en marre*

[9] According to Almeida (2016), "[…] cycles of protest [*or protest waves*] occur when multiple social movements or social groups engage in sustained protest clustered in time and spanning across a wide geographical boundary". Scholars tend to identify three main waves of protests. The first one was characterized by the emergence of national political movements that brought independence to most African countries between the 1950s and 1960s. The second wave was triggered by the global economic recession resulting from oil crisis in the 1970s, and eventually led to the start of political liberalization reforms in the late 1980s–early 1990s under structural adjustment plans (as discussed above in relation to Nigeria). For this reason, the second wave of protests was addressed toward both governments which adopted austerity policies under SAPs and international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. The third wave of protests that has unfolded in the 2000s has taken place in a context with unique features when compared with previous waves. They include rapid urbanization, rising levels of literacy among youths, expansion of ICT and telecommunications and growing calls for democracy.

movement to become a regular presence of civil society participating in public consultations on current socio-political issues and engaging relationships with international personalities, such as former French Minister of Foreign Affairs Laurent Fabius and former U.S President Barack Obama. This has marked a new passage in the history of *Y'en marre* movement, that is, its institutionalization as a structure of civil society (Dimé, 2022).

In other cases, youth movements have played a decisive role in curbing presidents' attempts to outstay their mandates[10]. In Burkina Faso, for instance, popular uprisings in 2014 successfully overthrew thirty-year Compaoré's regime and opened the way toward political transition. Protests already broke out in June 2013, when Compaoré's government announced the creation of a senate, which was seen as a stratagem to extend his mandate by launching a legislative path to amend the constitution – "[…] as his control over the nomination of senators, either appointed by Compaoré or indirectly elected, would guarantee him a parliamentary super-majority" (Bertrand, 2022) – or appointing his brother as President of the Senate (and institutional successor). The creation of the senate was regarded as a costly and unnecessary budgetary institution in a context of economic difficulties and inequalities as well. On 21 October 2014, the government called a vote to amend the Constitution's Article 37 on presidential term limits[11]. Since the proposal was backed by two-third majority in the National Assembly, thanks to the support by Compaoré's allied party *Alliance pour la Démocratie et la Fédération/Rassemblement Démocratique Africain* (ADF/RDA), Compaoré had the possibility to alter term limits, side-stepping the population and by-passing popular referendum. This prompted citizens to mobilize themselves by creating multiple movements – among which *Balai Citoyen* (Citizen's broom), the *Comité AntiRéférendum* (CAR), the *Mouvement du 21 Avril* (M21), and the *Front de Résistance Citoyenne* (FRC) – which were mainly made up of young people protesting in the capital Ouagadougou and across the country against the ruling regime (Bertrand, 2022). Civil society activists and political opposition parties called upon their supporters to gather in protests, staging rallies, and demonstrations against the proposed amendment. The government attempted to curb student protests by closing all schools in Burkina Faso. Yet, it proved insufficient, as crowds

[10] Since the 1990s, in the wake of Africa's overall progression in economic prosperity and democratic rule, presidential mandate terms as constitutional provisions became widespread across the continent in order to promote democratic consolidation. Since then, several occupants attempted to circumvent or to amend constitutional provisions to preserve (and to extend) their mandates. For instance, in the first decade of the 2000s, Yoweri Museveni in Uganda (2005) and Omar Bongo in Gabon achieved in repealing term limits and to remain in power, while Frederick Chiluba in Malawi and Olusegun Obasanjo in Nigeria attempted to do so without succeeding. Over the following decades, new leaders attempted to bypass provisions – with successful attempts in Rwanda, Cote d'Ivoire and Burundi, while in Senegal and in Democratic Republic of Congo incumbents were defeated at the polls.

[11] Revision of Constitution's Article 37 is nothing new in Burkina Faso, as its modification was already discussed before even before Compaoré was re-elected for his fourth (and legally last) term in 2010. Civil society movements and opposition parties mobilized themselves against that ploy as well at the time.

broke past security forces, entering the National Assembly and setting it on fire to prevent the vote. Following the meeting between leaders of demonstrations and the army, which withdrew its support to Compaoré's regime, the government's leader publicly announced the cancellation of the bill on the modification of Art. 37, dissolved the government, and promised not to run in the presidential elections scheduled for 2015. On 2014, October 31, in accordance with the outcome of those debates, the military officially announced the immediate resignation of Compaoré from the presidency, putting an end to its twenty-seven years of rule and paving the way toward political transition (Eizenga and Villalón, 2020). Young activists participating in protests were motivated and inspired by the revolutionary legacy of former president (and young captain) Thomas Sankara, who led the Burkinabè Revolution (1983–1987) until he was killed in the coup that brought Compaoré to power. Although many of them did not experience the revolution under Sankara's lead, youth activists embraced the ideals of hard work, integrity, and patriotism he cultivated and transmitted, as witnessed by both T-shirts wore by activists themselves bearing out pictures of Sankara and *Balai Citoyen* slogans reflecting his register (Bertrand, 2022).

1.4 Filling the gap: why the nexus between youth bulge and coup attempts matters

The cases of Senegal and Burkina Faso shed a light on the role youths can have as agents for social change and on their potential to provide positive contributions to economic and socio-political progress. This may help to counterbalance the prevailing narrative on Africa's youth as "hopeless troublemakers" (Agbiboa, 2015) and victims/perpetrators of violence. Yet, over the last years, socio-political instability has proliferated across Africa under organized violence, public mass demonstrations, or military takeovers, re-exposing the continent's vulnerabilities. This is demonstrated by the re-emergence of both successful and attempted coup d'états[12] across several African countries, with West Africa being the region where the highest number of coups and coup attempts has taken place – 20 out of over 40 (Suleiman and Onapajo, 2022). This trend paves the way for new challenges related to political stability and security in the region. Indeed, military takeovers have occurred in countries where popular uprisings against bad governance have restarted in the last years. Corruption, poverty, and unemployment prompted civilians to take part to massive demonstrations against national governments, providing soldiers with a good pretext to take power and to present themselves as supporters of popular demands. This may explain the results of recent

[12] Powell and Thyne (2011) define coup attempt as "illegal and overt attempts by the military or other elites within the state apparatus to unseat the sitting executive". Coups are often carried out by armed personnel (the state's army, police forces, or others) and at times with the cooperation of the state's political and/or economic elite, and do not involve public participation.

reports by OECD (2021) and Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), which point out that since 2010 Africa has recorded an exponential increase in the number of protests, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa (Sanches, 2022).

While Ben Barka and Ncube (2012) argue that the re-emergence of military coups[13] may be reconducted to both state inability to build integrated institutional structures that respect citizens' social and political rights and poor level of socioeconomic development, it should be considered how these weaknesses fall within a demographic context in which youth cohorts represent the largest share of the population. Indeed, concerning the internal issues that have provoked recent military takeovers in West Africa, Suleiman and Onapajo (2022) argue that: "Governance deficits, non-fulfillment of the entitlements of citizenship, frustrated masses (most of whom are young) and growing insecurity are chief among the inward-looking causes." In this regard, literature on "political demography" emphasizes that large young populations pose a challenge to stabilizing democratic governance, as they are generally associated with regime change and increase the likelihood of democracy overthrow (Paasonen and Urdal, 2016). Indeed, Weber (2013) shows that the proportion of young men has a significant and negative effect on the probability that one country has democratic institutions[14]. This is confirmed by both Freedom House (2008) and the World Bank (2008), which argue that countries with youthful age structures are more likely to have weak institutional capacity, government corruption, poor regulatory quality, fewer political freedoms and civil liberties. Additionally, large proportions of young men also affect regime change, as full or partial democracies with a share of young men exceeding 19.9% of the total adult population (which is regarded as the threshold above which the possibility of a transition towards dictatorship is much higher than below this level) have a probability of 23.1% of becoming a dictatorship within the next five years (Weber, 2013). Both democratic stability and transition to dictatorship strongly depend on GDP growth, as countries with zero growth or shrinking economies (defined as economies with a cumulated growth of GDP per capita of less than 0.5% in a five-year period) are three times more likely to experience regime change than those with little, moderate, or fast-growing economies (Weber, 2013). The nexus between youth bulge and regime type has been explored by Urdal, (2006) who claims that strongly autocratic regimes

[13] In their paper "*Political Fragility in Africa: Are Military Coups d'état a Never-Ending Phenomenon?*", Ben Barka and Ncube (2012) refer to the cases of countries that succumbed to military forces between 2003 and 2012. They include Guinea Bissau (2003, 2008 and 2012), Chad (2006), Mauritania (2008), Guinea (2008), Niger (2010) and Mali (2012).

[14] Results on the negative effect of youthful age structure on the probability of regime type are confirmed, whether the latter is measured by Polity index, the Freedom House index or a dichotomous conception based on Freedom House ratings (in which the variable is coded 1 for countries which have been classified as 'free' by Freedom House and 0 for the rest).

with large youth cohorts face higher risks of conflict. Interestingly, youth bulges seem to increase the risk of conflict also in democratic societies, possibly representing an extraordinary opportunity for conflict. This may raise concerns for West Africa, where most countries are facing both lower GDP per capita growth and rapid population increase. Still, given the relatively high levels of infant mortality, which is regarded as a good indicator of one country's level of social development[15] (Sen, 1998), West Africa is further exposed to risks of armed conflict and political violence. Nevertheless, the empirical relationship between youth bulges and the likelihood of coup has been minimally explored, as previous contributions have generally limited themselves in assessing large youth cohorts as determinants of specific forms of political violence – namely civil wars and armed conflicts (Flückiger and Ludwig, 2018; Yair and Miodownik, 2016; Urdal, 2006, 2011). In recent years, literature has also investigated the relationship between youth bulges and the intensity of protests and anti-government demonstrations (Ang, Dinar and Lucas, 2014; Lazar, 2017; Romanov and Korotayev, 2019). Nevertheless, these studies apparently tend to overlook youth bulge as a potential determinant of other types of internal conflicts, including *coups d'état*. Investigation on this issue has been conducted by Ibrahim (2019) who has found that youth bulges have the highest impact on riots, coups, and civil war onset when youth unemployment is high. Such a relationship appears to be significant and robust under different economic conditions and different model specifications (Ibrahim, 2019).

There are two main reasons behind the necessity to learn more about the linkage between youth bulge and coups in West Africa. On the one hand, the reemergence of coup attempts, which has significantly affected countries in the region, deserves to be studied from an internal perspective, to understand whether the discontent of local populations – which are mainly made up of young people – against ruling elites may have motivated the military to act on behalf of popular will. On the other hand, it seems that some explanatory factors of the likelihood of coup attempt – such as corruption, level of popular support and protests occurring near capital cities (Johnson and Thyne, 2018; Hunter et al., 2020) – apparently have stronger effects on domestic political instability when intertwined with youth bulge-driven pressure (Urdal, 2008; Urdal and Hoelscher, 2012; de Bruijn and Both, 2017; Lazar, 2017). For instance, Farzanegan and Witthuhn (2017), who have investigated the impact of youthful population structure in determining the effect of corruption on political instability, point out that "[…] corruption becomes political destabilizer when the youth bulge exceeds a critical level of approximately 20%". Indeed, popular dissatisfaction against corrupted political elites attempting to

[15] Indeed, statistics on mortality are helpful to assess the quality of policies and services that influence one's quality of life, including the availability of healthcare, the nature of medical insurance, education, and access to medical knowledge in rural communities. In this regard, infant mortality rates help to capture the quality of material living standard, as well as social disparities, such as gender bias and racial discrimination, as both females and members of discriminated racial groups have fewer chances of survival because of lower social support and protection for them (Sen, 1998).

stay longer in power has contributed to fuel anti-government protests and demonstrations across Africa (Sanches, 2022). Interestingly, these protests have recorded an exponential increase over the last decades – with 90% of the 86486 protests and riots recorded in Africa between 1997 and 2021, having taken place since 2010. Such an exponential increase seems to have occurred in parallel with the return of coups, with over 40 coups and attempted coups having occurred in Africa since 2010 (Suleiman and Onapajo, 2022). These premises further support the necessity to analyze the potential nexus between large youth cohorts and the likelihood of coup attempts. With a view to assess such link, the next chapter will provide an analysis according to explanatory factors influencing both youth-driven turmoil and coup d'états. Having experienced both military takeovers and increase of youth population over the last years, West Africa offers fertile ground to test such a relationship. Thus, three case studies – Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso – will be explored.

CHAPTER 2: WHERE POLITICAL INSTABILITY AND YOUTH BULGE MEET

2.1 Contributing factors to youth-driven social unrests and the outbreak of coups

As argued in the previous chapter, academic contributions on the relationship between large youth cohorts and the likelihood of *coups d'état* – defined as "*organized efforts to effect sudden and irregular (e.g., illegal or extra-legal) removal of the incumbent executive authority of a national government, or to displace the authority of the highest levels of one or more branches of government*" (Peyton et al., 2021) – have been limited so far. Existing literature has tried to investigate explanatory factors behind the removal of political leaders, by emphasizing both internal and external dynamics. In the first case, patterns of regime change may be attributed to power reshuffles implemented by elites within autocratic regimes, resulting in cyclical stages of elite collective action that help assessing the degree of regime stability (Carboni and Raleigh, 2021). The latter stresses the role of critical junctures and other outward elements as main determinants of regime change. Such elements include the power of social movements as key agents of change through mobilization and collective actions bringing about the downfall of autocratic rulers. This argument gained momentum during the 2011 Arab Spring, in which mass protests contributed to the deposition of longstanding rulers across MENA. In this regard, protests were interpreted as catalysts provoking elite splits where conditions for breaking up were already in place (Hale, 2019). In other words, factions among regime allies may have taken advantage of increasing social unrests following an escalation in violence or the emergence of mass protest movements to advance the hierarchy thereby fracturing the regime-supporting coalition (Tally and Tarrow, 2015). According to surveys by the Arab Barometer conducted between December 2012 and April 2014, countries experiencing the Arab Spring, including those where long-standing rulers were deposed – Tunisia, Egypt, Libya – saw massive involvement of youths in protests, with about 40% of youths aged between 18-20 reported having participated in demonstrations (Paasonen and Urdal, 2016). Active engagement in protests by youthful populations (about four million citizens) has been regarded as a crucial factor behind the unseating of Abdelaziz Bouteflika and Omar al-Bashir in Algeria and Sudan, respectively (African Business, 2019). In those countries, challenges to ruling establishment by youth protestors mainly mirrored their demand for "[…] a genuine stake in their economic and political destiny" (African Business, 2019). These premises justify the necessity of understanding whether the large presence of large cohorts in West Africa, most of whom have joined activism against restored bad governance, staid economy, and corrupted regimes (Sanches, 2022), may have motivated the military to bring down political leaders over the last decades. To this aim, it is important to investigate determinants

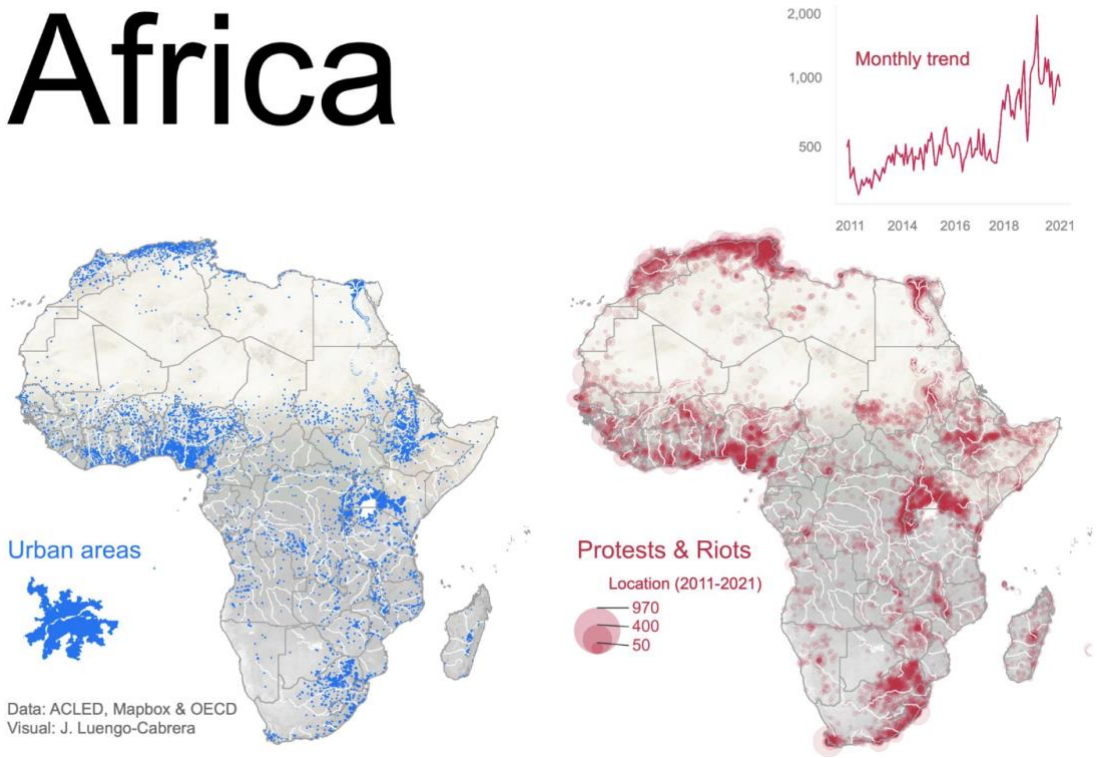
of the likelihood of coup attempt that may have stronger destabilizing effects when interconnected with youth bulge. The following paragraphs will analyze each control variable by explaining how each of them affects both youth bulge and coup d'état.

(a) Urbanization

Political opportunity and social movement theories regard urbanization as an important driver for the emergence of mass protests and mobilizations. This may be explained by the fact that people living in urban areas tend to have greater share of both society resources and personal networks, which lower costs to collective action and facilitate organization in protests (Gleditsch and Rivera, 2017). When it comes with nonviolent anti-government demonstrations and efforts to undermine state forces, they appear to be more common and effective when they take place in key cities and urban areas than in the periphery (Gleditsch and Rivera, 2017). Furthermore, when collective action is fueled by growing and youthful population, the propensity of urban residents to engage in protests may be stronger. In this regard, Sawyer et al. (2022), who have conducted research on cross-national time-series data from 1950 to 2010 for 98 countries, point out that the share of urban youth bulge – that is, the share of urban youths in total adult population – appears to be an important predictor if protests. Hence, when interacting with urbanization, large youth cohorts significantly increase the likelihood of high levels of demonstrations (Sawyer et al., 2022). Higher propensity to protest among young people may be attributed to unequal access to resources accumulated in urban areas and/or to lower opportunity costs relative to older age groups when faced with the opportunity to join in protests. In this regard, Urdal (2008) finds that youth bulges are associated with higher levels of rioting in states with greater levels of urban inequality. Such phenomenon may persuade young people to organize themselves in mobilizations to express their discontent against state inability or unwillingness to provide for their needs (Urdal, 2006) and to open "[…] gates of social and economic advancement" (Goldstone, 2002). Growth of urban youth population has been found to be strongly correlated with political violence as well. Based on cross national tests from 1960 to 2005, Korotayev et al. (2011) demonstrate that countries with very low young urban population growth rates (less than 15 percent increase per 5 years) were very unlikely to experience major internal conflicts, while countries with high (about 30–45 percent increase per 5 years) and very high (above 45 percent increase in five years) rates of young urban population growth faced great risk of particularly violent civil war. The propensity to experience political violence for countries with high levels of urban youth cohorts may be interpreted according to the so called "trap at the escape from the Malthusian trap". The latter refers to a situation of increasing poverty, famine, and mortality, stemming from a combination of population growth on a limited territory with constant productivity – typical of

agricultural societies with poor technological development. The escape from the Malthusian trap occurs when one country's economic development provokes rapid decline in the mortality rate, leading to large population growth and youth bulges. At the same time, urbanization and industrialization induce rural workers to migrate to cities. Yet, as job creation in urban areas does not keep up with large increase in the population, rural-to-urban migrants are generally absorbed in informal and precarious jobs and are forced to settle in slums, thus creating higher levels of employment and marginalization among youths. This "army" of disenfranchised youths may be keener to participate in forms of collective action such as protests, riots, and civil conflict, resulting in major sociopolitical upheavals (Korotayev et al., 2011). Such a theoretical reconstruction may sound worrying for "periphery" and "semi-periphery" countries characterized by both large youthful populations living in conditions of urban poverty (Sawyer et al., 2022). The correlation between urban areas and riots/protests break out is confirmed by visual sources, as shown by Figure 7 below.

Figure 7: Africa: urban areas and protests/riots



Data: ACLED, Mapbox & OECD
Visual: J. Luengo-Cabrera
Source: José Luengo-Cabrera (March 2022). *Africa: urban areas & protests/riots Data: OECD - OCDE, Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) & Mapbox*. [Post]. LinkedIn https://www.linkedin.com/posts/jos%C3%A9-luengo-cabrera_africa-urban-areas-protestsriots-data-activity-6907070897249992704-_Rfg?utm_source=linkedin_share&utm_medium=member_desktop_web

Interestingly, protests located in urban areas – especially in capital cities - may be interpreted as a signal from domestic actors in support of coup as well. According to Johnson and Thyne (2018), this may be justified by three main reasons. First, since costs strengthen the credibility of signals and the costs of protests increase as they move toward capitals, political leaders fearful of coups may be persuaded to create loyal paramilitary groups responsible for their protection. These groups may be more capable of facing dissidents when protest gather in capital cities, where the government leaders' and head of states seats are located. For instance, former Libyan leader Moammar Gaddafi largely relied on paramilitary forces, bolstered by foreign mercenaries, to counter popular uprisings breaking out in Tripoli during the 2011 Arab Spring (Finn, 2011). Secondly, since the target of both protesters and coup plotters – the executive and its leader – has usually its seat of power in the capital, anti-government demonstrations occurring there supposedly send the strongest signal about the popular support for a coup. In contrast to protests occurring in peripheral areas, which are often segmented by ethnic or religious issues, those within the capital will provide these segments clustered in the city with the opportunity to have their interests commonly represented. Third, based on "urban bias" theory, the military primary concern *vis-à-vis* potential massive upheavals is to maintain law and order in compliance with their edict. Thus, when faced with protests taking place near the capital and challenging the power of the state, the military cannot ignore them. Regardless of the response, either to remain loyal to the regime or to side with protesters, the military are supposedly expected to respond more to demands of contestants who are active in the capital rather than those operating in peripheral areas (Johnson and Thyne, 2018). Indeed, by conducting country-month analysis for 150 states from 1951 to 2005, Johnson and Thyne (2018) find that protests increase the likelihood of coup attempt when they are centered near the capital and nonviolent. As youths may be expected to be more prone to participate in anti-government demonstrations, these premises further justify the hypothesis that urbanization may be interpreted as a key control variable to assess the relationship between youth bulge and the likelihood of coup attempt.

(b) Corruption

According to existing literature the impact of corruption – defined as abuse of public office for private purposes (Shleifer and Vishny, 1993) – on political stability is not univocal. By buying political loyalty among elites or targeted segments of the population through illicit distribution of privileges and rents held by public offices, kleptocratic political leaders can secure their positions and expand their stay on power under the so called "patronage politics" (Acemoglu et al., 2004; Farzanegan and Witthuhn, 2017). In this regard, autocratic leaders can easily take advantage of corruption to increase the stability of political systems. However, if the popular perception of regime

corruption broadens, then political systems risks exposing their apparent stability to potential threats. This is confirmed by the comparative study of four Latin American countries by Seligson (2002), arguing that, regardless of socioeconomic, demographic, and partisan identification, exposure to corruption causes declines in perception of legitimacy. Additionally, Hunter et al. (2020) highlight that popular perception of corruption, together with support for the regime among the public, increases the likelihood of *coup d'état,* in a way that declining support for the regime may increase the endorsement for a coup attempt by the military. The latter may find it easier to rationalize its attempt to remove leaders from power as they are viewed as corrupt and unpopular with the general population (Hunter et al., 2020).

Concerning Africa, corruption has been conceived by Owoye and Bissessar (2013) as a manifestation of political and institutional failures in the post-independence period between the 1960s and the 1970s, resulting from the removal of checks and balances that existed during the colonial period to limit the power of African political leaders. Such removal enabled dictators to centralize power in their hands, giving them full discretion on the design and implementation of public policies, from which they could extract economic rents. This, in turn, provoked the expansion and proliferation of corruption across Africa (Owoye and Bissessar, 2013). Evidence by Owoye and Bissessar (2013) demonstrates that corruption persists more in countries that experienced successful military coups "[…] because military juntas in these countries ruled by decrees and were rarely or never accountable to any institutional or constitutional authorities during and/or after their tenures in office ended" (Owoye and Bissessar, 2013). Corruption poses threats to political stability of countries in West Africa as well. Forms of corruption in the public sector include the appearance of "ghost names" on the civil service payroll in Ghana, corrupt police authorities in Burkina Faso and in Senegal, and bribery in Sierra Leone (Atoubi, 2007). Several sources (Atoubi, 2007; United Nations Office for West Africa, 2006) cite actual and perceived corruption and public embezzlement among the reasons of military takeovers in West Africa, as they may fuel grievances and conflictual demands for political change through coup d'état. This is confirmed by Kandeh's analysis (2004) of coups in the region, proving that rampant corruption enfeebles popular support for the state and deprives governments of resources and public backing they need to curb threats of society. Such threats may also derive from "maneuvered" allocation of resources, as autocratic regimes are more inclined to direct more expenditure toward military defense to protect their vested interests and less on public goods like education and health (Dizaji et al., 2016). As the latter target larger portions of population, unequal distribution of budget for the benefit of the military (and the stability of the regime) may motivate marginalized sectors of civil society to exert pressures on the government to achieve fairer allocation

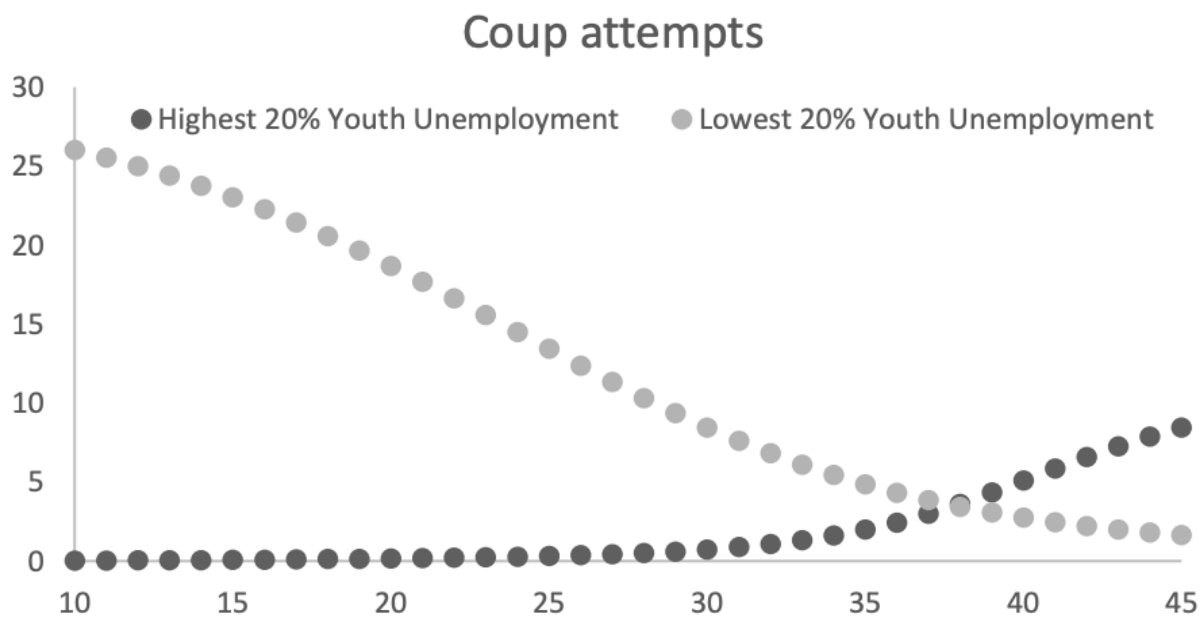
(Dizaji et al., 2016). If faced with pressures driven by youthful cohorts demanding more public investments in education, then governments may risk being confronted with violent and turbulent unrests. Indeed, study by Farzanegan and Witthuhn (2017) shows that the relative size of the youth bulge matters in how corruption affects the internal stability of a political system. More specifically, corruption becomes a political destabilizer when the youth bulge exceeds a critical level of approximately 20%. Since many West African countries are experiencing both high levels of corruption and a demographic burden of youths, which could jointly act as ticking bombs for political instability, it worthwhile to further assess the relationship between the two factors.

(c) Youth unemployment

The last variable under examination is youth unemployment, referring to people aged between 15 and 24 who are not working but actively seeking work. Both scholars and institutions generally tend to cite massive unemployment among the determinants of political instability. For instance, working paper by the African Development Bank Group (Azeng and Yogo, 2013), asserts that economic conditions represent critical factor triggering political instability in developing countries. The 2008 economic crisis further exacerbated tensions in countries where socioeconomic conditions were volatile even before the crisis, especially by provoking soaring unemployment among youths. Subsequently, countries characterized by large cohorts of jobless youths experienced violent social uprisings, as it occurred in the MENA region during the Arab Spring (Azeng and Yogo, 2015). This is confirmed by recent research on developments of social policy in emerging and developing economies (Prince et al, 2018). While examining youth employment policies that have been implemented in Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia after the conclusion of massive protests that emerged in 2011, Prince et al. (2018) report that youths living in the region expressed concerns about states' ability to equip them with necessary education, skills, and job opportunities for living a fulfilling life in which they could support themselves autonomously, raise a family and contribute to society. Such incapacity is attributed to policy failures during the 1990s to fully address demands for more and better employment opportunities for most of the population, especially the youths. Although MENA did experience economic growth, yet it did not include growing population of well-educated and skilled young Arabs who had benefitted from decades of public investments toward increasing education. The gap between what youths felt they required – in terms of education, skills, and future – and what society was providing them was found to be a major issue of discontent among Arab youths. In addition, lack of possibilities for youths to communicate their needs to authorities and to have a say in the formulation of public policies further raised disillusionment and anger toward politics among them. Thus, unmet and unheard calls for more employment opportunities contributed

to enhance grievances among youths, provoking the emergence of massive violent protests across the region (Prince et al., 2018). Large scale unemployment stemming from prolonged and severe economic crisis has been included among the factors setting the conditions for coup attempt (Luttwak, 2016). Several contributions have investigated the relationship between youth unemployment and the likelihood of military coups. For instance, using a sample of forty developing countries covering the period from 1991 to 2009, Azeng and Yogo (2015) find that the effect of youth unemployment on coup d'état is significant but not decisive. Such study, however, overlooks the effect of youth bulge on the nexus between youth unemployment and likelihood of coup. In this regard, estimations by Ibrahim (2019), reveal that: "In countries characterized with high youth unemployment, youth bulges significantly increase the likelihood of riots, coup attempts and civil wars by 17.7%, 27.9% and 25.2%, respectively. On the contrary, in countries with high employment rates for young people, youth bulges significantly reduce the probability of all three political violence outcomes: riots by 8.2%, coup attempts by 17.9%, and civil wars by 21.2%" (Ibrahim, 2019). Findings by the author are robust and significant under different economic conditions and under different model specifications. Results on the marginal effects of youth bulge on coup attempts in countries with high and low youth unemployment are illustrated in Figure 8 below.

Figure 8: Marginal effects of youth bulges



Source: Ibrahim (2019)

With a view to further deepen the relationship between youth bulge and likelihood of coup under specific economic conditions, youth unemployment will be accounted among controlling variables.

Given that countries in West Africa tendentially exhibit all the features described so far – sizeable youth population, rapid urbanization, high indexes of corruption and large cohorts of unemployed youths – it is appropriate to draw research on countries affected by coups d'état over the last decade, questioning whether the variables mentioned above may have contributed to their emergence. To this aim, the next paragraph will outline an overview of selected case studies, referring to three West African countries – Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso – that experienced military putsch in the early 2010s.

2.2 Case studies

(a) Mali

Following twenty years under purportedly vibrant multiparty democracy, gained with the deposition of long-standing dictator Moussa Traoré in 1991, on March 2012 Mali experienced the third coup d'état of its history, leading to the removal of Amadou Tomani Touré (who led the paratroopers that participated in the 1991 coup) from power. The coup was initiated by junior officers in the Kati garrison who mutinied against their commanders and civilian leaders, whom they accused of complicity with Tuareg rebellion by the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (NMLA) in northern Mali (Whitehouse, 2012; Chin, 2020). On March 22, rebellious troops looted the presidential palace, arrested ministers, and took control of the national television, where they successively read an official statement informing the population of the oust of the government. Captain Sanogo justified the coup by briefly referring to state authorities' failures against northern separatists, while emphasizing other problems confronting the nation, including "dysfunctional public education system, irregularities in civil service recruitment, high costs of living, and joblessness" (Whitehouse, 2012). Indeed, when it comes with domestic popular reaction to the 2012 coup, national surveys reveal that the forced removal of Touré proved to be generally popular among Malians. This is confirmed by an opinion poll conducted in April 2012 in Bamako, which found that 64 percent of residents supported Touré's regime demise, and 65 per cent had a favorable opinion of Captain Sanogo (Guindo, 2012). Even before the 2012 coup, Malians were aware about the problems affecting the society and government, as national political transition had gone badly under Touré's regime, amid breakdown of rule of law and corruption. The latter, indeed, had long been a concerning issue, as showed also by a 2012 Afrobarometer survey, in which 69 percent of Malian respondents argued that the government was performing "fairly badly" and/or "very badly" in the fight against corruption (Richmond and Alpin, 2013; Whitehouse, 2017). Such results may explain why so many Malians were relieved to see Touré gone (Whitehouse, 2012). From Whitehouse's (2017) point of view, public dissatisfaction with Touré's government, related to its incapacity in meeting basic needs for its citizens, became more acute in the face of rapid demographic growth and urbanization. In this

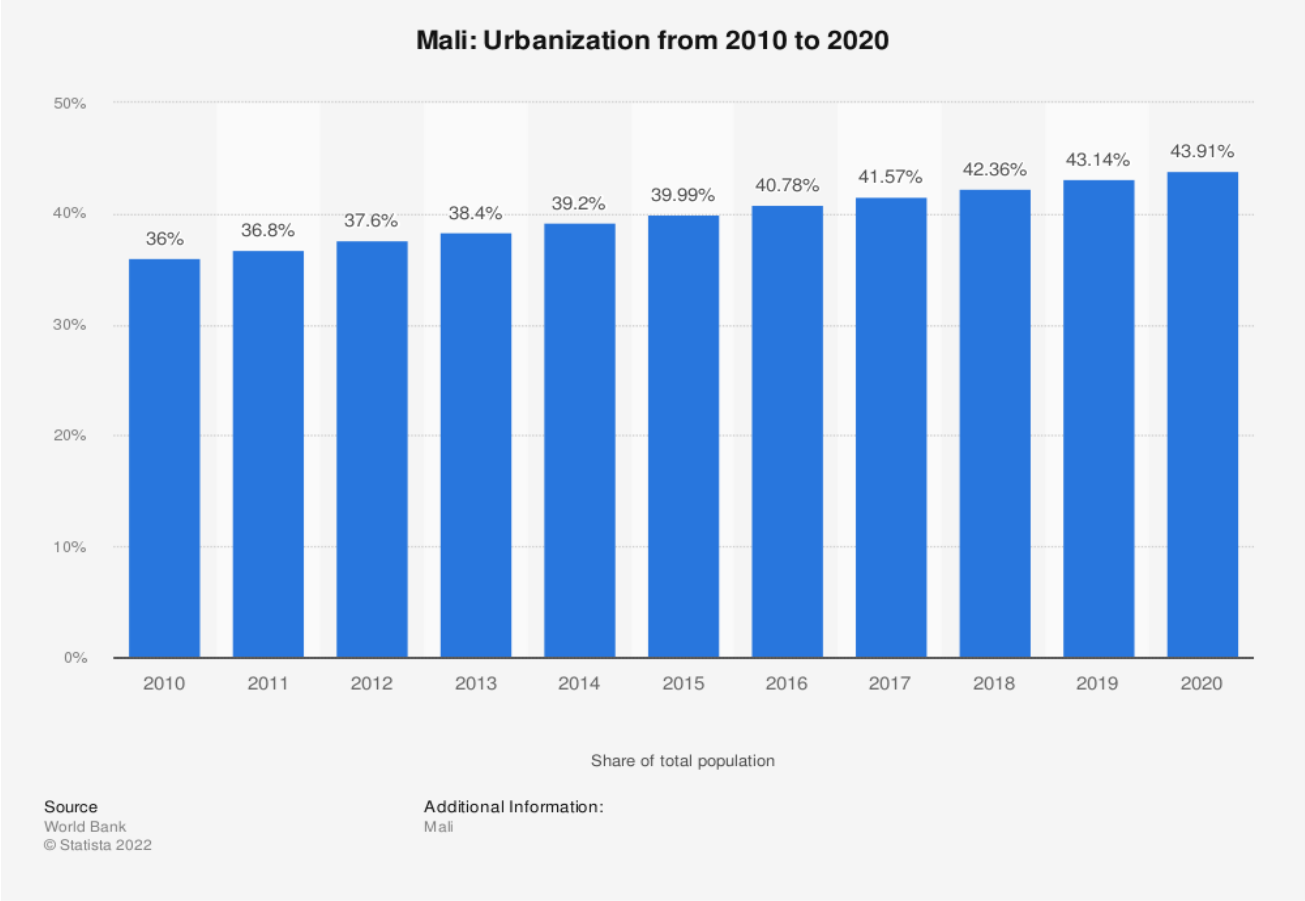
regard, the main citizens' concerns regarded reduction of poverty (particularly in fast-expanding urban areas), expropriation of properties by corrupt authorities (especially in peri-urban areas where many lacked legal titles to land) and violent urban crime (Whitehouse, 2017). These shortcomings in public authorities' ability to fulfill popular demands have contributed to increase Malians' disengagement with politics and democracy, as well as to convince people to appeal to jihadist groups to compensate state inability to provide them with basic services – namely food, services, healthcare, food, and security. Such strategy has proved successful in the Mopti-Segou in Central Mali, where the Islamist group *Katiba Macina* has targeted the most vulnerable in Malian society – especially among the poorest and least educated communities – to recruit destitute young men, mainly those perceiving that they do not have nothing to lose by joining the movement as combatants (Rupensighe and Bøås, 2019). Beyond that, youth employment and precariousness remain persistent phenomena in Mali, as 73 percent of the economically active population work in the informal sector and one third of the workers is young (meaning those aged between 15 and 39). According to ILO, the youth unemployment rate is remarkably higher than the total average – about 12% in the whole country and 32% in the capital, Bamako (ILO, 2022a). In southern-central regions, youths are penalized by low levels of literacy and enrolments in primary and secondary school (in Mopti, only 21 percent of men and 10 percent of women is literate), while in Northern Mali, regional insecurity fueled by territorial penetration by both Tuareg rebels and violent extremist groups has dramatically affected job prospects for the population living there. In this regard, tourism, which accounted for 25 percent of regional economy, has been damaged by the spread of violent conflict across the region, thereby resulting in rising unemployment and resort to banditry, cattle-theft, and other forms of illicit activities among young people (Rupensighe and Bøås, 2019). Such disruptions risk complicating the livelihood of Malian young people, presumably inclining them to meet their necessities through violent means against state authorities. Taken in combination, such persistent structural factors – economic downturn, rising unemployment and low education rates – risk to further persuading most disadvantaged segments of Malian society to seek collaboration with violent extremist groups to gain access to basic resources and needs for their livelihoods (Rupensighe and Bøås, 2019). Such disruptions pose extreme challenges to the achievement of the elements underlying the concept of "human security"[16], especially in most marginalized areas and communities. This has been recently confirmed by a survey conducted by the *Institut Malien de Recherche Action pour la Paix,* according

[16] The notion of "human security" was first promulgated by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in the 1994 Human Development Report (UNDP, 1994). The document identified seven constitutive elements: economic security, food security, health security, environmental security, personal security, community security and political security. The concept of human security gained notoriety in parallel to an increase in the security studies criticizing the so-called hegemonic state-centric and militarized national security paradigms in policy and academic circles (Newman, 2010; Osland and Herstad, 2020).

to which poor governance, quest for recognition by unemployed youths and chronic insecurity remain the key obstacles to peace in Mali (Osland and Herstad, 2020).

Struggle for access to essential goods and resources risks being further complicated by urbanization and demographic trends in Mali. City Mayors Foundation statistics on world's fastest growing cities and urban areas between 2006 and 2020 classify Mali's capital city, Bamako, as the sixth fastest growing city and urban area at global level, with average annual growth of 4.45 percent. Overall, estimates by the CIA World Factbook (2022) indicate that Mali's national urbanization rate amounts approximately at 4,6 percent per annum. In 2012, approximately 38 percent of national population was living in urban areas, with skyrocketing increase up to 44 percent in 2020. Much of this increase is mainly concentrated in the southern provinces and particularly in Bamako (Hughes and Knox, 2019). Statistics on the share of total population living in urban areas are summarized in Figure 9.

Figure 9: Mali: Urbanization from 2010 to 2020

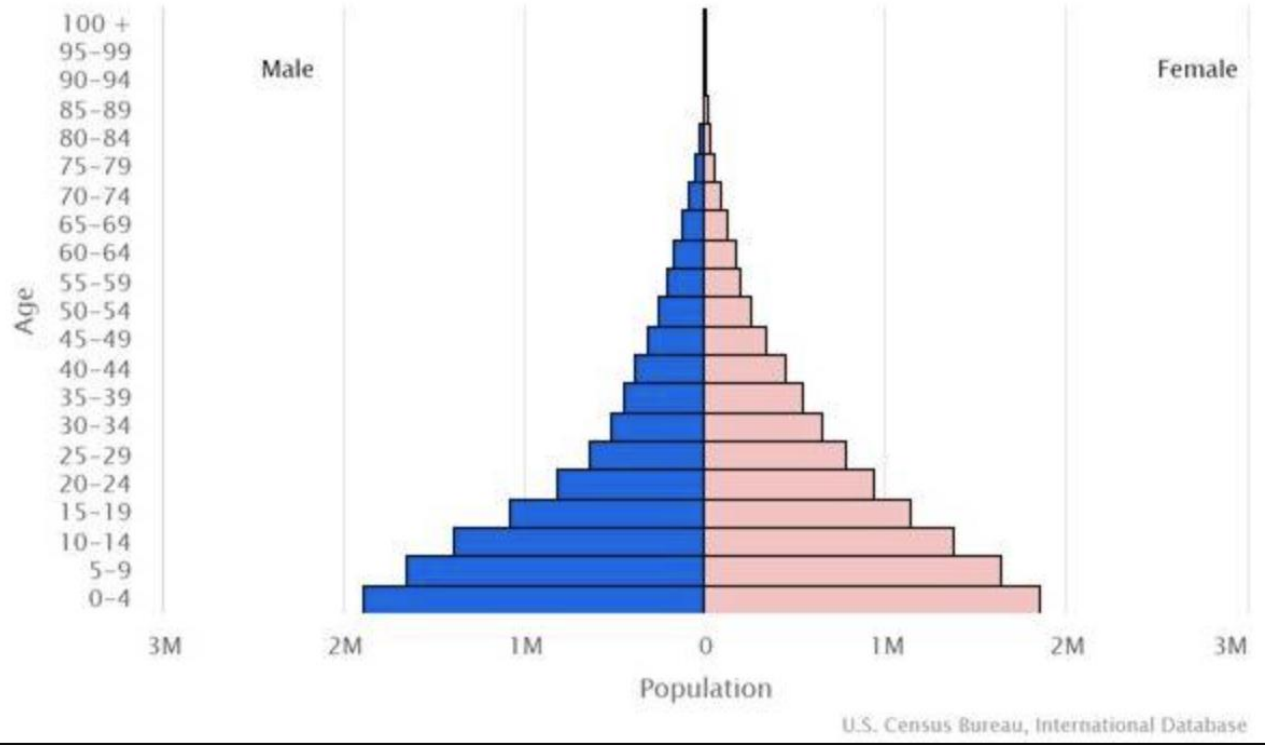


Source: World Bank (2021a) © Statista 2022

Furthermore, with estimated 20.7 million inhabitants living in the country, Mali is also characterized by fast-growing population, with a sustained high total fertility rate of 6 children per woman – the

third highest in the world – that will ensure rapid demographic growth in the foreseeable future. According to the CIA World Factbook (2022), high fertility rate in Mali has remained virtually constant for decades, mainly because of ongoing preference for large families, early childbearing, low levels of female education and empowerment, and extremely low use of contraceptives. Very young age structure – with the 0-14 years cohort making up the largest component of population pyramid (47,7%) – will drive future Mali's population growth as well. Figure 10 illustrates population pyramid for Mali.

Figure 10: Mali: population pyramid



Source: The World Factbook (2022)

Given urban and demographic pressures, along with long history of conflict and rebellions that contributed to fuel popular discontent with domestic politics, Mali provides ideal ground for testing the impact of youth bulge on the likelihood of coup d'état.

(b) Niger

Since its independence in 1960, Niger has had a long tradition of political instability, marked by four military putsches (1974, 1996, 1999, and 2010), four political transitions, eights presidents and seven republics (Baudais and Chauzal, 2011). Two years before the Mali's coup, Niger experienced the deposal of President Mamadou Tandja on February 18. Although democratically elected in 1999,

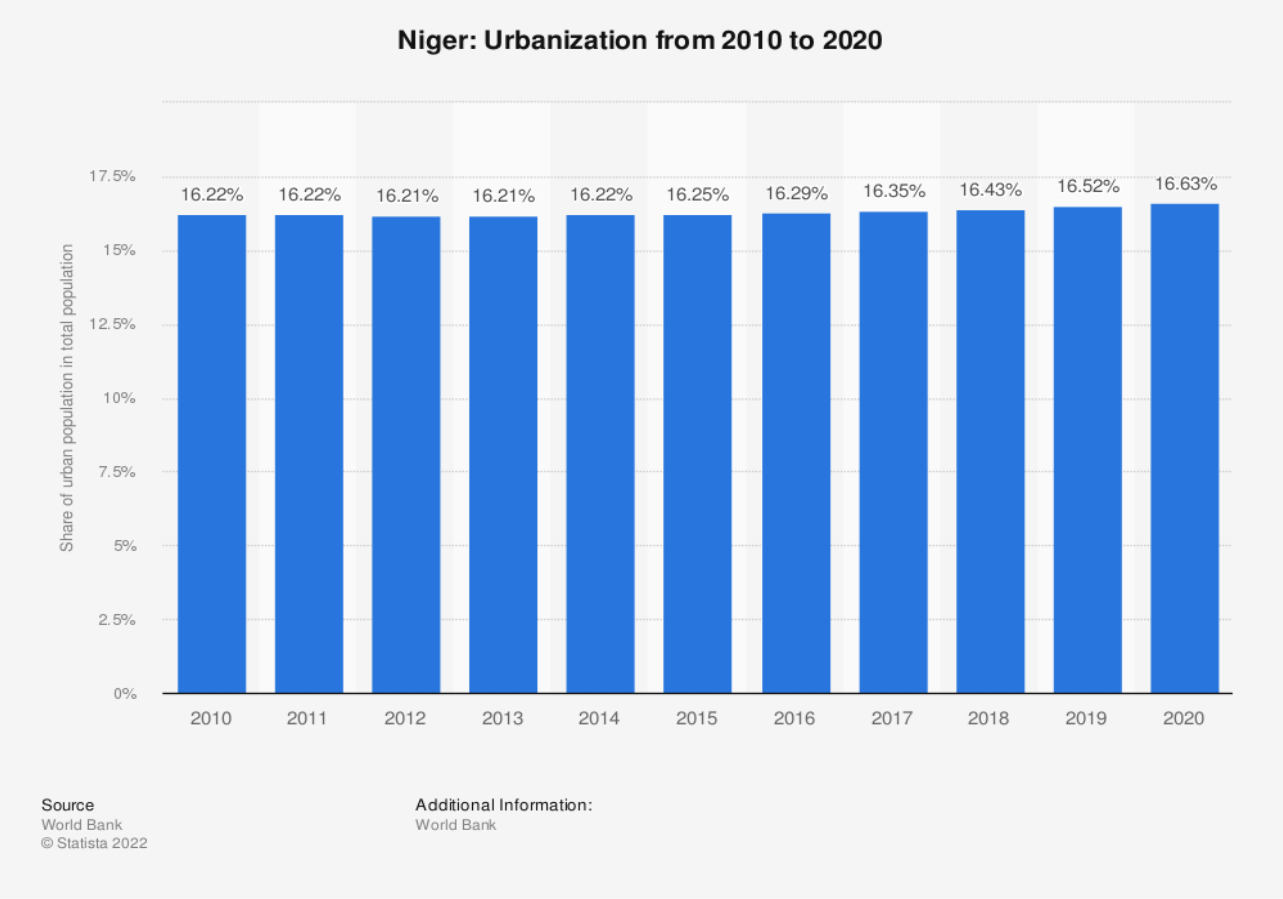
Tandja attempted to extend its stay in power by launching a public campaign in support of a referendum to revise constitutional provision about two-term's limit. After dissolving the National Assembly and dismantling democratic institutions established at the National Conference in 1990, former Nigerien President held and won the referendum, provoking the reaction of thousands of anti-government protesters who gathered in the streets of Niamey. Following government illicit action against strikes and condemn by both the ECOWAS and the international community, a military faction calling itself the *Conseil suprême de restauration de la démocratie* (CSRD) captured President Tandja and dissolved the executive. On the same day, the military junta declared its intention to restore democracy and good governance in Niger, and to save the country and its population from poverty, deception, and corruption (Miller, 2011). Military action against Tandja received public support, as ten thousand people took the streets of the capital in pro-coup demonstrations (BBC, 2010). Besides corruption and illicit constitutional maneuvers, popular discontent with Tandja's government was also motivated by its incapacity to handle socioeconomic distress caused by food crisis, which severely afflicted Nigerien population in 2005, when malnutrition was reported having caused an estimated 52 percent of deaths among children under five years old, while over seven million people were at risk of moderate to extreme food insecurity (Tsai, 2011). Unlike the 2012 Mali putsch, the 2010 coup in Niger received tacit support by the international community, as many governments tended to emphasize the positive aspects related to both the "constructive coup" and the actions the CSRD was taking to restore some semblance of democracy (Miller, 2011; Mueller, 2013). Yet, the case of Niger putsch provides evidence against the theory of democratic coup (Powell, 2014), according to which coups can act as catalysts of democratization. Such theory has been debunked by Miller (2011), proving that, in history, coups have not been an effective tool for building durable democratic institutions in Africa. In Niger, this has been recently confirmed by authoritarian proclivities under former President Mahamadou Issoufou's regime (2011-2021), as witnessed by its tendency toward suppressing the opposition. According to experts and researchers on African Affairs, such practices by Issoufou's government reflected the authoritarian attitude held by Tandja, thus highlighting that the 2010 coup event are still reverberating in Niger today's society (Cascais, 2020). Like Tandja's regime, Issoufou's government was targeted by popular protests for widespread corruption, abuses, and illicit practices against migrants by security forces (Osland and Herstad, 2020).

Faced with high rates of poverty – in 2014, 77 percent of Nigerien population was living below the international $3.2 PPP poverty line in 2014 – and drastically low levels of development – in 2018, Niger was ranked 155 out of 157 among countries on the World Bank Human Capital Index (HCI) –

the issues of food insecurity and access to other basic needs are further complicated by economic difficulties. The problem of youth unemployment and underemployment is acute, especially for women and young people with low literacy levels and lack of educational attainment (ILO, 2022b). Unemployment seems to involve youths with higher levels of education as well. According to the World Bank, in 2013 50,000 graduates were reported to be unemployed, while adult literacy rate was estimated around 11 percent among women among 15 and 49, and 28 percent for men (World Bank, 2013). Over the years, the livelihoods of Nigerien people have been further disrupted by environmental degradation and policy failures in addressing securitization of migration. On the hand, agriculture and pastoralism, crucial sources of employment and wealth, have been increasingly confronted with climate change and rain variability, thus making agricultural output unpredictable. On the other hand, unintended consequences of strengthened border management – following the adoption of Law 36-2015 criminalizing migration smuggling – have resulted in frustration and resentment against government among the population. Besides making seasonal migration more difficult, the law has failed to materialize promised job opportunities for workers involved in migration business, thereby exacerbating unemployment, trafficking, and resort to banditry or other forms of organized crime (Osland and Herstad, 2020). Such policy failures, along with discriminatory application of Law 36-2015 (limited to the Agadez region), have contributed to undermine state legitimacy in Niger. This is due to the fact that working in the migration transition hub in Agadez – the migrant transit capital in the Sahel – has long been one of the few growth sectors in the country providing people with an opportunity to earn some extra money (Raineri, 2018; Bøås, 2021). Indeed, the increase of informal "travel agencies" and ghettos offering accommodation to migrants has provided Agadez inhabitants, as well as those interested in working in the migrant transition hub, with the possibility to earn extra income. Hence, owing to the implementation of Law 36-2015, the dismantlement of such informal business that "provides people who have very little with something more" (Bøås, 2021) has resulted in grievances undermining the already fragile social stability that exists in the country. In addition, the unequal enforcement of the law – which has highly penalized the already marginalized Tebu minority, while leaving the so-called "state-sponsored protection racket" (Raineri, 2018) affiliated with Niamey's government untouched – has further exacerbated popular frustration against the state and disillusionment with democracy among the youths (Raineri, 2018). In sum, the dismantling of youths' sources of livelihood – as the migration business that has emerged around Agadez – has worsened their prospects for a better future. In light of its very youthful population, such conclusion may sound alarming for Niger. Sustained by the highest total fertility rate in the world (around 7 children per woman in 2016), the country has both one of the highest population growth rates (3.8 percent per annum) at global level, as well as a very large youthful

population – with 70 percent of the populace being under the age of 25 (World Bank, 2021b; World Factbook, 2022). Such demographic trends are occurring in both urban and rural areas, with the latter being affected by rising rural and land scarcity that prevent agricultural land expansion from keeping up with rural population growth (World Bank, 2021). Subsequently, decreasing availability of land, along with increasing competition for agricultural surface among rural workers, global warming, and other insecurity issues (including food insecurity and endemic poverty), are expected to encourage rural residents to migrate towards urban areas in search of better working opportunities and better access to scarce but necessary resources. In this regard, urbanization trends in Niger are quite interesting, as the country has never experienced high urbanization growth in the past and urban areas relative size distribution has remained stable over time. Furthermore, statistics (see Figure 11 below) suggest that, overall, the share of Nigerien urban population has remained constant over the last decades (approximately at 16%).

Figure 11: Niger: Urbanization from 2010 to 2020

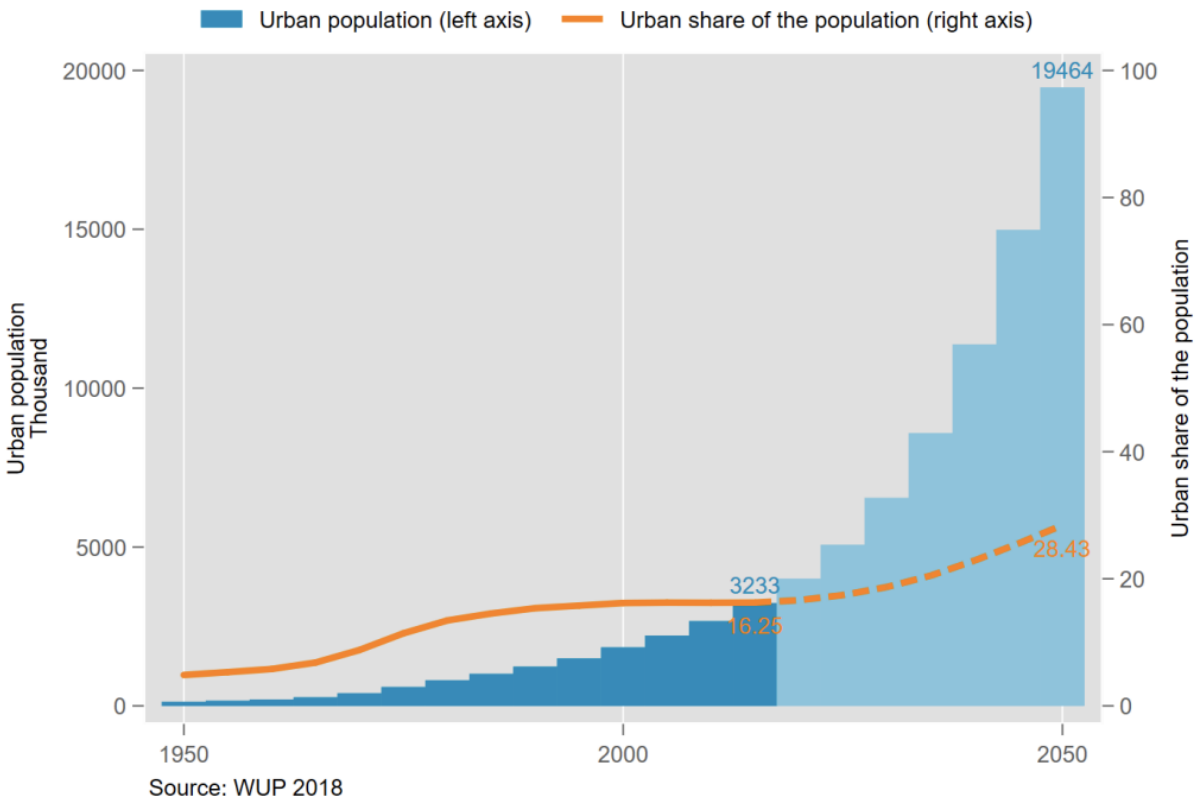


Source: World Bank (2021a) © Statista 2022

Nevertheless, both qualitative and quantitative studies on urbanization in Niger report that the country is foreseen to experience fast-growing expansion over the next years. Indeed, a paper on urban

development in Niamey provides clarification on the evolution of urbanization in the country. Since the 1990s, the capital has grown at a rate between 4.22 and 4.55 percent and its proportional growth – i.e., the demographic expansion as a share of current urban population figures – for the 2010-2020 is projected to increase up to 56.7 percent, making it the second fastest growing large city in Africa (UN-Habitat, 2010). According to Spindler (2010), much of the population growth in Niamey is correlated with periods of droughts and famine, which have led rural residents to migrate toward the capital. Indeed, "environmentally induced economic migration" represents a crucial factor affecting domestic movements toward Niamey, as the most pressing issue for agriculture-dependent Nigerien population stems from climate change. Floodings from sudden river surges following extreme weather events are expected to expose inland Nigerien cities to further vulnerability. Despite the risks associated with environmental degradation and the high rate of rural population growth (approximately at 3.75 percent), which is expected to slow urbanization, the total number of people residing in urban centers is projected to increase from 3.5 million at present to 20 million by 2050, with an average of about 500,000 new urban dwellers per year (World Bank, 2021). Figure 12 illustrates urban population growth over the next years.

Figure 12: Niger urban population growth from 1950 to 2050, and urban share of the population



Source: World Bank (2021b) © UN-DESA (2018)

Niamey is growing fast and is expected to double in size by 2030. Additionally, other urban centers are growing equally rapidly, implying that the demand for public services, housing, infrastructures, and other needs is foreseen to further increase (World Bank, 2021b). Yet, if the provision of such services does not keep the pace with population growth, then Nigerien urban residents, especially those living in informal settlements without adequate access to water, sanitation and living space, risk facing additional difficulties to their livelihood. If coupled with government's inability to address citizens needs owing to lack of governance over urban issues (Spindler, 2010), such grievances may supposedly motivate dwellers to unleash their anger against already weak state institutions, thus endangering domestic political stability. In this regard, the launch of an attempted coup on March 2021 close to the inauguration of the new President Mohamed Bazoum may raise concerns about the "demons" behind the vulnerability of the country to coups, including extreme poverty among the numerous and youthful Nigerien population (Ajala, 2021).

(c) Burkina Faso

One year after the 2014 uprisings that led to the overthrow of Compaoré's regime (see Chapter 1), inaugurating a one-year transition period, Burkina Faso experienced a failed coup d'état launched by the *Régiment de Sécurité Présidentielle* (RPS) – founded by Compaoré himself – in the attempt to dissolve the interim government led by Michel Kafando (Sawo, 2017). The *Régiment* coup attempt was justified by its promoters as an "[…] action to prevent the disruption of Burkina Faso due to the insecurity looming during pre-elections" (Rakotomalala and Karoui, 2015), but encountered soon reaction by the Burkinabe population, civil society organizations and political parties, as well as the international community. Unlike the coups in Mali and in Niger, the 2015 attempted putsch in Burkina Faso faced a strong popular mobilization in forms of resistance and civil disobedience. Such mobilization was marked by a strong degree of youth militancy, who engaged in active resistance by building barricades and defending the neighbors in the capital, Ouagadougou, against the military. Youth movements that participated in the 2014 revolution against Compaoré – among which *Balai Citoyen* – contributed to spread popular disobedience to other Burkinabe cities and towns. This further complicated the possibility for RSP to seize control over the country. Under strong pressure by demonstrators, the regular army intervened and initiated negotiations with coup plotters, which culminated in an agreement on the disarming and the retreat of the *Regiment*. President Kafando and his government were restored in office. After seven days of popular resistance and disobedience, the September coup failed, thus nurturing the idea that the Burkinabe revolution had been finally accomplished (Hagberg, 2015). Besides demonstrating the importance of popular resistance and revolutionary sentiment in Burkinabe political culture (Hagberg, 2002), the episode of failed coup

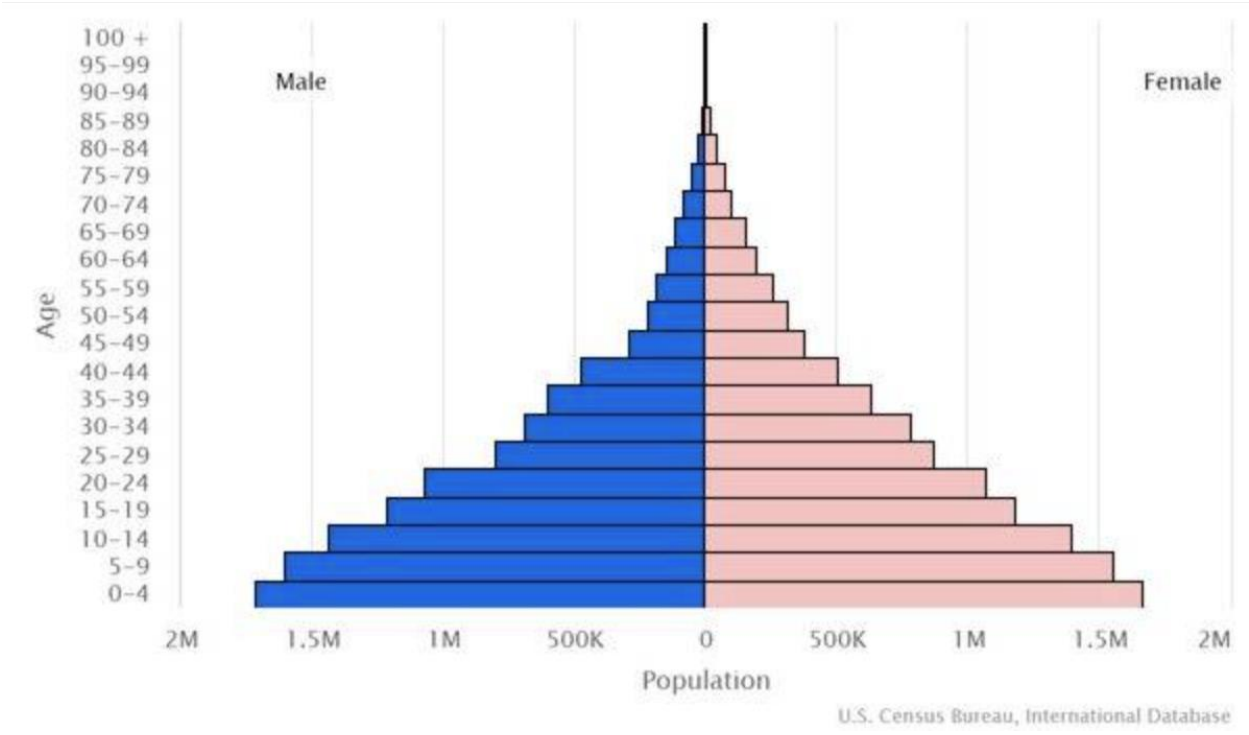
marked the generational shift that occurred with the 2014 revolution and culminated with popular resistance and mobilization against RPS soldiers following the launch of the putsch on September 16. Indeed, the main feature of this "youth revolution" was the massive militancy of young people being fed up waiting for a better society with equal employment and educational opportunities (Hagberg, 2015). Such disillusionment, along with the desire to fulfill the revolutionary ideals of Thomas Sankara (Bertrand, 2022), drove young people to gather in the streets and face brutal military violence in Ouagadougou. Further elements about this generational shift concerned the use of social media for instant publication of news – the hashtag #lwili (meaning "little bird" in Mooré, the most widely spoken language of Burkina Faso) was created to share the latest news updates on the crisis as well as promote various citizen's initiatives (Rakotomalala and Karoui, 2015) – and "non-alignment" of younger RPS soldiers, who wanted to stop the coup well before their superiors decided to do so. Furthermore, given that young officers' goal was to force changes related to working conditions rather than carry out a coup, they felt betrayed by their commanders, thus igniting tensions between generations within the RPS itself (Hagberg, 2015).

Manifestation of Burkinabe political culture under form of protest and social movements occurred long before the 2014 revolution and the failed coup d'état in 2015. For instance, impunity and big corruption – which became a leading theme after the so called "*Affaire Norbert Zongo*[17]" – have represented recurring issues of both socio-political public discourse and struggle against criminalization and misdeeds within the national state, especially in the urban-based popular and trade union movement *Trop c'est trop* (Hagberg, 2002). Such movement gained popularity among urban and French-speaking population, which is more politically powerful and articulated in national politics than the rural one. This may also explain why, following Zogno's death, he became particularly popular among the urban youth (Hagberg, 2002). In a way, the *Trop c'est trop* movement rode the wave of instances of reported demonstrations, mass rallies, marches occurring in several urban municipalities since the first round of decentralized local governments elections were held in 1995. This seems to suggest that the implementation of urban modernization schemes in Burkina Faso may have contributed to the emergence of collective protests complaining about local issues, such as police violence, municipal corruption, and resistance to neighborhood displacement.

[17] Norbert Zongo (1949-1998) was an investigative journalist, founder of the newspaper *L'Indépendant* (1993). He became known as a particular observer of Burkinabe politics by exposing extortion and impunity within the Compaorè's government. After his newspaper started investigating the David Oue!draogo, the driver of the younger brother of President Compaoré, Zongo was assassinated, provoking the reaction of many Burkinabe who took the streets to demonstrate their anger against Compaoré's alleged responsibility for the murder. Such demonstrations gave birth to the *Trop c'est trop* movement, which brought together public sentiment against impunity, that is, political elites going unpunished in spite of having undertaken illegal actions such as killings and economic crimes (Hagberg, 2002).

According to Harsch (2009) this may be attributed to several factors, including demographic pressures and economic dislocation, which have affected the grievances felt by Burkinabe citizens and the way they view and interact with local authorities. In 2001, about 17 percent of total population was living in urban areas (yet cities and towns were growing at more than 5 percent annually) (UN-Habitat, 2006), while nowadays about one third (31.9 percent) lives in cities, with an annual rate of change of 4,75 percent (World Factbook, 2022). In Harsch's words (2009): "Such rapid urban growth has increased competition over the allocation of urban land titles and comes on top of other problems of persistent corruption, rivalries among local elites, and serious limitations in the democratization of the broader political system." Thus, if coupled with persistent demographic growth, urbanization in Burkina Faso is expected to stretch the capacity of both the central government and local municipalities to provide basic urban services, thus providing turmoiled society good pretext to express their revolutionary sentiment. Like Niger and Mali, Burkina Faso has a very young age structure, with 65 percent being under the age of 25. Fertility rate remains high – about six children per woman – and today's large youth cohort entering childbearing age is projected to sustain high population growth for the foreseeable future (World Factbook, 2022). Figure 13 depicts population pyramid of Burkina Faso.

Figure 13: Burkina Faso: population pyramid



Source: The World Factbook (2022)

Although the availability of youths in the working age population is relatively high, yet they are confronted with low levels of employability. Indeed, young workers are faced with numerous working deficits, including precariousness, vulnerability, working poverty and informality. With over three quarters of total youth unemployment, the agricultural and the informal sectors remain the largest labor destinations for young workers (ILO, 2022c). Gold mining, a crucial source of jobs and absorption of mass of unemployed youths, as well as an important share of government's income and fiscal capacity – Burkina Faso is the fifth most important gold producer in Africa – is closely intertwined with the stability of the state, due to the protection offered by political elites to informal production and export networks (Raineri, 2020). In this regard, during Comaporé's regime (1987-2014) most of gold permits were allowed to loyals of former President's network, including his family, his party, and the government. Such untransparent system of permits allocation has often collided with existing customary and formal entitlements, thus resulting in discontent, conflicts and abuses against local villagers being expelled from their lands and being hired as miners under precarious contracts. Subsequently, discriminated rural community members have developed resentment against urban elites being tied with patronage networks, and many of them have turned to banditry as source of livelihood, further exacerbating tensions and deepening "[…] the gulf between central state rulers and the marginalized ruled" (Raineri, 2020). These masses of unemployed and precarious youth workers may turn into a recruitment pool for anti-government demonstrations and protest movements across Burkina Faso. These contestations will presumably persist as domestic and external pressures are sustained by a growing urban population, as more decentralized governments and municipalities are created in cities, and as citizens themselves demand equal access to limited resources and more democratic reforms at both central and local level (Harsch, 2009).

In sum, the overview of the three case studies has served to qualitatively explain how demographic shifts, growing urbanization, concerns about corruption, and limited (or disrupted) job opportunities may to varying degrees have probably contributed to the outbreak of general tensions and violence in conjunction with the onset of coups d'état. The next paragraph will discuss data and methodology to be used to test the relationship youth bulge and the likelihood of military putsch. Data will refer to such variables, as well as to controlling variables described above in paragraph 2.1.

2.3 Data and Methodology

(a) Definition of variables and data source

The aim of this section is to quantitatively test the relationship between the youth bulge and likelihood of coup in the three countries outlined above while considering the impact of three

intervening variables: corruption, urbanization, and youth unemployment. The relationship will be tested using binomial logistic regression. Before conducting analysis on such relationship, it is appropriate to define each variable and to provide background information on their respective data sources.

Dependent variable

For the purpose of this research, the likelihood of coup d'état is the dependent (or response) variable, whose outcome depends on, or is illustrated by, the value of the explanatory variable. Here, coup d'état will be interpreted in accordance with definition by provided the Coup D'état Project (CDP) by the Cline Center for Advanced Social Research (Peyton et al., 2021) (see Paragraph 2.1). CDP dataset outlines a comprehensive list and categorization of coups that have occurred since the end of World War II. Besides providing accurate chronology of coups throughout post-WWII history, this dataset identifies the outcomes of coup events (i.e., realized, unrealized, or conspiracy), the type of actor(s) who initiated them (i.e., military, rebels, and others), as well as the fate of the deposed leaders. More specifically, "unrealized coups" refer to coup that fail in to achieve the effective removal or displacement of the targeted incumbent actor or fail to end their ability to direct national governance (Peyton et al., 2021). Unrealized coups are distinguished in "conspiracies" – namely coup plots discovered and disrupted in the planning stages – and "attempted coups" – that is, planned and initiated plots that fail in achieving the removal or displacement of targeted leader. In contrast, "realized coups" refer to the successful accomplishment of the aforementioned target. Since the main hypothesis here is that grievances felt by the youths may have motivated soldiers or dissidents to undertake the removal or displacement of incumbent leader, two dummy variables covering the 2010-2017 period of reference will be adopted, with dummy variable computed 1 if a realized or unrealized coup (be it conspiracy or coup attempt) has been reported on a specific year, and 0 if there's no indication of neither realized, nor unrealized coup.

Independent variable

Youth bulge is the independent (or explanatory) variable in the analysis. When it comes with quantitatively measuring the youth bulge, two main proxies are usually identified. On the one hand, some authors – including Collier (2000), Collier and Hoeffler (2004), Fearon and Laitin (2003), Goldstone (2001), Huntington (2000) – refer to youth bulge as the share of individuals aged between 15 and 24 on the total population. On the other hand, the second proxy relates to the same share of the youth population (young people aged between 15 and 24) on the total adult population (above 15 years). From the methodological perspective, Urdal (2004) argues that the first proxy tends to

underestimate the importance of the youth cohort, as the population under the age of 15 inflates the total population. For this reason, the second proxy will be used to carry out the analysis. Data will be extrapolated from the Population Estimates and Projections database by the World Bank. Such database provides estimates on population projections for total population and other demographic indicators from 1960 to 2050, which are disaggregated by age-group and sex. When compared with the United Nations Population Projections, the World Bank's method of projection is based on annual revision and updating of estimates and projections, as well as on the integration of changes in base data when new censuses or sample surveys are received. In contrast, U.N Population Division updates its evaluations on a biennial basis. Although the differences between the two organizations' projections are not too large, the reliability of the World Bank database, sustained by its increasing use by analysists, demographers, students, social scientists, and national planners (Zachariah and Vu, 1988), justifies its adoption to test the relationship between youth bulge and the likelihood of coups.

Control variables

As argued above, the analysis will evaluate the impact of three controlling variables – corruption, youth unemployment, and urbanization – on the relationship between the response (likelihood of coup) and the explanatory variable. The first control variable, corruption, will be interpreted as the perception of the extent to which public power is used for private gain, including both petty and grand forms of corruption, as well as "capture" of the state by elites and private interests (Kaufmann et al., 2010). For research purpose, data on corruption will be based on the "Control of Corruption" by the World Governance Indicators. Estimate gives the country's score on the aggregate indicator, in units of a standard normal distribution, ranging from approximately -2.5 (most corrupt/least effective) to 2.5 (least corrupt/most effective). Such indicator has been found to be highly correlated with the "Corruption Perception Index" by Transparency International and has been extensively used in empirical literature (Persson and Tabellini, 2003; Hamilton and Hammer, 2018). Therefore, when testing the robustness of their model on the incidence of corruption and youth bulge on political instability, Farzanegan and Witthuhn (2017) point out that the moderating role of large youth cohorts in the political stability-corruption nexus remains robust even when the latter is computed with the "Control of corruption Index". The second control variable, urbanization, refers to number of people living in urban areas. For this variable, data will be extrapolated from the World Bank population estimates and projections. Data are collected and smoothed by United Nations Population Division and are computed by using World Bank population estimates and urban ratios from the United Nations World Urbanization Prospects. Unlike the UN World Urbanization prospects, whose data on urban residents refer to observations at intervals of 5 years, World Bank estimates on the share of

population living in urban areas are processed and available on a yearly basis. This allows to evaluate annual trends on urbanization. For this reason, the analysis will draw on the World Bank "Urban Population (% of total population)" indicator to explore the impact of urbanization on the relationship between the two variables under examination. The last indicator, youth unemployment, is the share of labor force aged 15-24 without work, seeking work in a recent past period and currently available for work. Data on this indicator is provided by World Development Indicators by the World Bank, drawing on the estimates by ILO. The series is harmonized to ensure cross-country and cross-time comparability by accounting for differences in data source, scope of coverage, methodology, and other country-specific factors. Data on youth unemployment from World Development Indicators has already been used by scholars (Urdal, 2004; Prince et al, 2018; Ibrahim, 2019) to investigate whether such phenomenon increases the chances for youth bulge to engage in political violence and or trigger political instability. Hence, estimates on youth unemployment in Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso from 2010 to 2017 will be used.

(b) Research Design and Results

To test the relationship between youth bulge and the likelihood of coup d'état, binomial logistic regression is used. Such model applies to categorical binary response variables, that is, variables having only two possible outcomes. In this analysis, the response variable, the likelihood of military putsch, is computed 1 if a coup event (realized, attempt, conspiracy) occurred in a given year, and 0 if otherwise. Multiple independent variables include youth bulge, perception of corruption, urbanization, and youth unemployment. Binomial logistic regression has the following form:

$$logit[P(y = 1)] = \propto + \beta_1 youth_{i,t} + \beta_2 corrup._{i,t} + \beta_3 urban_{i,t} + \beta_4\, youth\ unempl._{i,t}$$

The variable $youth$ measures the ratio of the population between 15-24 to the population above 15 years, with country i and time t. The second variable, $corrupt$, quantifies the perception of the extent to which public power is used for private gain. $urban$ indicates the number of people living in urban areas, and $youth\ unempl$ is the share of labor force aged 15-24 without work, seeking work in a recent past period and currently available for work. Regression is computed using STATA. Results with coefficients and odds ratio are shown in Figure 14 and Figure 15, respectively.

Figure 14: Binary Logistic Regression, reporting coefficients (STATA output)

```
.
. logistic A B C D E, coef

Logistic regression                                     Number of obs =     24
                                                        LR chi2(4)    =   2.84
                                                        Prob > chi2   = 0.5857
Log likelihood = -12.07829                              Pseudo R2     = 0.1050
```

A	Coefficient	Std. err.	z	P>|z|	[95% conf.	interval]
B	-59.33283	91.93832	-0.65	0.519	-239.5286	120.863
C	-3.18397	3.057777	-1.04	0.298	-9.177104	2.809163
D	12.41932	19.35019	0.64	0.521	-25.50635	50.34499
E	-.4078807	.4783802	-0.85	0.394	-1.345489	.5297272
_cons	21.69819	34.9407	0.62	0.535	-46.78431	90.1807

Figure 15: Binary Logistic Regression, reporting odds ratio (STATA output)

```
. logistic A B C D E

Logistic regression                                     Number of obs =     24
                                                        LR chi2(4)    =   2.84
                                                        Prob > chi2   = 0.5857
Log likelihood = -12.07829                              Pseudo R2     = 0.1050
```

A	Odds ratio	Std. err.	z	P>|z|	[95% conf.	interval]
B	1.71e-26	1.57e-24	-0.65	0.519	9.4e-105	3.09e+52
C	.0414209	.1266558	-1.04	0.298	.0001034	16.59603
D	247538.5	4789917	0.64	0.521	8.37e-12	7.32e+21
E	.6650582	.3181507	-0.85	0.394	.2604124	1.698469
_cons	2.65e+09	9.26e+10	0.62	0.535	4.81e-21	1.46e+39

Note: **_cons** estimates baseline odds.

Legend:
A = Coup/No coup B = youth bulge C = perception of corruption
D = urbanization E = youth unemployment

In both outputs, results highlight that none of the independent variables outlined above seems to influence the likelihood of coups d'état. In other words, none a variable seems to significantly predict the occurrence of any coup event. Statistical non-significance of the model is indicated by the likelihood-ratio test, as indicated by $LR\ chi2(4) = 2.84$. Perhaps, attempting to forecast an event that usually stems from elite-level organized plots exclusively based on quantitative factors may provide an incomplete theoretical picture on the causes of coups d'état. Rather, the recurrence of such events may be explained according to other determinants. Thus, the next section will provide an alternative interpretation on which factors appear to determine the occurrence of military takeovers.

2.4 Discussion

In the previous section, it has been attempted to quantitatively assess the effect of demographic and socio- economic factors on the proneness of one country to coup d'état. Evidently, these factors seem not to be significantly strong enough to explain why coups occur following this methodological approach. Compared with other forms of political violence – e.g., civil war and riots – which generally involve public participation, coups d'état do not include direct mass participation for its execution. Since coups are generally "the business of an elite" (Galetovic and Sanhueza, 2000), drawing a model to make solid inferences about the relationship between youth bulge and the occurring of such events may prove quite challenging. This may explain why academic contributions on such relationship have been limited so far, while devoting great attention on the effect of large youth cohorts over alternative forms of political violence. Yet, for some variables – e.g., corruption – statistical insignificance may be attributed to biases affecting cross-temporal validity of indicators as well. In this regard, the "Control of Corruption" measure may be impacted by the annual change in number of sources on the basis of which the indicator is elaborated. Such change may influence the reliability of the indicator to make inferences over time (Hamilton and Hammer, 2018). Further complications may derive from the existence of multiple definitions of "corruption". In the analysis above, the variable "corruption" recalls the definition of "Control of Corruption" in the World Governance Indicators' framework (Kaufmann et al., 2010), focusing on the perception of the extent to which public power is used for private gain. Transparency International refers to corruption as "[…] the abuse of entrusted power for private gain", the latter encompassing the reception of money or valuable assets, as well as increases in power or status (Transparency International, 2022; Lambsdorff, 2008), while the United Nations identify three different forms (and expressions) of corruption: grand corruption; petty corruption; bribery (Christelis et al., 2004). Subsequently, ontological divergences around the concept of "corruption" may make the conduct of empirical analysis more difficult. Yet, existing literature (Hunter et al., 2020) argues that perception of corruption of the ruling regime is regarded as an important determinant of military coups. Referring to Thailand, Ockey (1994) claims that the civilian government exploited its authority and resources to gain support among its political bases. Nevertheless, owing to the military being excluded from the benefits of corruption, this has caused frustration among some sections of the army, thus paving the way towards the removal of civilian government from power. The same goes for postcolonial Africa, where perception of corruption and subsequent popular mobilizations fueled dissatisfaction among military leaders resulting from repeated military action in support of the state. These leaders, in turn, became frustrated with perceived corrupt and ineffective executives, thus provoking the military direct intervention in politics, often in the form of coups (Kposowa and Jenkins, 1993). In

West Africa, nowadays, corruption still represents a driver of popular resentment against governments, as witnessed by fieldwork interviews in Niger collected by Osland and Herstad (2020) between 2018 and 2019. Interviewed civil society representatives and local politicians in Niamey and in Agadez reported that the executive has been widely criticized for allegedly widespread corruption, abuses and discriminatory extortion of migrants by security forces. Furthermore, criticism against central government performance has become a source of legitimacy for local politicians, who have built their popularity on speaking out against the executive (Osland and Herstad, 2020). Similarly, in both Mali and Burkina Faso corruption has been regarded as one of the most relevant issues of concern motivating the military to displace longstanding incumbent leaders from power. Such conclusions suggest that, when coupled with perception of corruption, government inefficiency seems to strongly motivate soldiers to seize power by removing political leaders from office. In other words, an inefficient regime may lose its legitimacy *vis-à-vis* both the military and citizens due to its poor performance in addressing both structural and/or short-term adverse phenomena, such as economic crisis, high inflation, and low levels of development and modernization (Hiroi and Omori, 2013). As argued by Welch and Smith (1974), the likelihood of military intervention increases with perceived economic deterioration, "[…] especially if accompanied by a belief that the government cannot resolve, or is responsible for, this deterioration". In times of economic juncture, the military may be driven to intervene in politics for two reasons. On the one hand, worsening economic conditions may force the government to adopt unwelcomed austerity programs that can directly impact upon the military's lifestyle, size, equipment, and training programs. On the other hand, potential unrests and violent strikes resulting from economic downturn may represent a threat to the national interest, thus motivating soldiers to act in its defense (Welch and Smith, 1974). The effect of economic performance over one country's "propensity" to experience military coup is confirmed by Johnson et. al (1984), who conducted a study on the states in Sub-Saharan Africa between 1960 and 1982. Authors find that countries with relatively dynamic economy and low levels of social mobilization were more stable, while those with the opposite set of characteristics experienced high levels of political instability in the form of coups and military involvement in politics (Johnson et. al, 1984). When it comes with development, the event history of coup data by Hiroi and Omori (2013) points out that countries with highest levels of poverty rate and social backwardness are more vulnerable to coups. Such discovery may sound alarming for West Africa, where structural peripherality, state weakness and poverty are regarded as the main causes of the varied forms of political instability the region has experienced over the past years, namely coups d'état and civil conflicts. A study by McGowan (2003) covering all failed and successful coups in SSA reported that, between 1956 and 2001, 45 percent of 188 attempts that occurred since then took place in West Africa, although the

states of the region represent only 33 percent of SSA's states. From a rational choice perspective, the vulnerability of West African states and their exposure to political instability can be traced back to the political strategy through which leaders seek short-term gain rather than long-term national development and economic reform. Faced with institutional weakness and political violence exposing them to the risk of losing office, political leaders may be motivated to behave in a corrupt, nepotistic, and rent-seeking fashion, thus choosing actions that bring the greatest benefit for themselves, at the expense of both market-oriented economic policies and the democratization of political systems (Olson, 1993; Goldsmith, 2001; McGowan, 2005). Similar to the rational choice model, the agent-principal approach can help understanding the existing conflict of interest between the citizenry, who wants the state to be appropriately run in compliance with its demands, and incumbent leaders, who may choose to adopt policies that reduce the welfare of citizens to their own advantage and private gain (Galetovic and Sanhueza, 2000). In this regard, Galetovic and Sanhueza (2000) point out that the occurring of coups d'état lies on two assumptions. First, the more the incumbent leader pursues his private interest, the more likely a bad economic performance, potentially resulting in a recession. Second, due to economic downturn, popular discontent with incumbent autocrat is expected to rise, thereby increasing the likelihood of successful coup attempt. Both approaches fit well with the highly uncertain political environment in West Africa, where political leaders may opt for current political consumption rather than long-run political and economic investments from which they may never benefit. Furthermore, insecure and unstable tenure threaten by political violence may persuade ruling leaders to feather their nests by embracing corruption, as well as to favor their own kin and the ethnic kin group they belong to (McGowan, 2005). Coupled with underdeveloped socioeconomic setting, such short-term rational behavior by political leaders risks keeping West Africa exposed to political instability and state weakness, thus creating the conditions to transform politics into a competition for scarce resources, in which elite corruption, bribery, nepotism and coups become the norm (Jackson, 2002; McGowan, 2005). In the face of opposition and high popular mobilization, ruling governments may be inclined to resort to violence to maintain power, thus making it more likely that political opposition may turn violent. This may strengthen the role of security forces in domestic politics, thus motivating them to implement their own political agendas (Azam, 2001).

In recent years, the position of authoritarian states across West Africa has been further strengthened by the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic and its related crisis, which has been exploited by governments to repress opposition and manipulate elections. Interestingly, data by ACLED highlight that levels of political violence across the region have remained unchanged since the COVID-19 outbreak. Yet, many of the reported incidents that occurred across countries did involve mobilization

over the coronavirus pandemic, mainly in the form of popular riots and protests against the enforcement of harsh regulations to face the emergency. Thus, West African governments exploited such turmoil to justify resort to repression against civilians, as well as to curb opposition. Furthermore, political leaders have capitalized on the pandemic response for their political advantage in times of elections, as the COVID-19 crisis has presumably resulted in lower voter turnout, restrict public campaigns and manifestations, and manipulation of electoral processes (de Brujine and Bisson, 2020). In this regard, for instance, Malian government under President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita pushed through legislative elections despite the COVID-19 outbreak and the kidnapping of the formal head of political opposition, Soumaïla Cissé, on 2020, March 25 (Schmauder, 2020; Thurston, 2020). Despite very low voter turnout – about 12,5 percent in Bamako – and subsequent anti-government demonstrations, electoral results benefitted Keita's regime, enabling it to adopt a law bypassing the newly elected parliament. Nevertheless, suppressing opposition and fueling popular discontent and disillusionment with politics risks to persuade opposition and civil society to appeal to violent extremist groups to achieve political space and to compensate state enduring inability to provide citizens with services and resources. In Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger – which are in the Sahel, a region afflicted by fragile security issues, as well as a cluster of "global" armed conflict – jihadist groups have gained ground by delivering basic services and security where central states have failed to do so. For instance, the justice system implemented by the jihadists, based on *sharia*, has won popular consensus, due to its effectiveness in solving disputes (Osland and Herstad, 2020). Poor governance, chronic insecurity and exclusion from political decision making are the main causes of both growing anti-state sentiment and radicalization among local and marginalized tribes living in remote regions, such as Mopti-Segou in Mali and Tillabéri in Niger, thus transforming the poorest and least educated communities into a pool of recruitment for Islamist groups (Osland and Herstad, 2020). As argued above, disrupting sources of livelihood in countries where prospects for the future are precarious – as discussed with respect to both migration business in Niger and gold mining in Burkina Faso – risks fueling public and anger against state authorities, as well as resort to illicit crime and adhesion to rebel/extremist organizations. Therefore, although assessing a nexus between youth bulge and likelihood of coup may prove challenging from a statistical point of view due to the indirect role of the citizenry, yet investigating and understanding anti-government grievances behind popular discontent, thereby prompting the military to take action against incumbent leaders, remains essential. From Galetovic and Sanhueza's point of view: "Coups occur when plotters perceive a reasonable chance of succeeding, which happens when there is widespread discontent with the autocrat and the majority of the population is willing to passively follow the rule of a new ruler" (Galetovic and Sanhueza, 2000). In other words, when it comes with assessing the making of military putsch, public

sentiment towards ruling authority represents a key determinant. Difficulties in empirically quantifying such sentiment may complicate the operationalization of the extent to which popular discontent affect the outcomes of coups. Nevertheless, in all the case studies, popular reactions have been found to relevantly influence the success of military action: while in Mali and in Niger the military did achieve in removing incumbent leaders, thereby winning the public's praise, the unpopular 2015 coup in Burkina Faso ended in a failure. Based on this discussion, several conclusions concerning the making or unmaking of coups can be drawn. First, when it comes with determining the causes of popular discontent against governments – thereby providing the military with a justification to depose incumbent leaders – state inefficiency and failure in providing the citizenry with basic resources, as well as in addressing their requests and grievances, can be regarded as a recurring element behind the occurrence of coups. Such inefficiency may be attributed to either administrative and institutional weakness characterizing most of West African countries and authoritarian leaders' calculations to maximize their own private gain at the expense of the welfare of their citizens and the development of their countries in the long run. In this regard, public complaint against state incapacity to tackle the most important problems related to human security – such as food insecurity and malnutrition in Niger and physical protection of Malians residing in the territories afflicted by conflict and penetration of violent extremist groups – provides evidence and explanation about what drives civilians to sustaining the extra-legal removal of ruling governments from power. Second, the more durable popular dissatisfaction against leaders in power, the more likely the military intervention to displace them through coup d'état. This may explain why many segments of Nigerien population mobilized and rebelled up against the attempt by Tandja to extend his presidential mandate, thereby leading to the 2010 coup. Similarly, general discontent among the public helps clarifying the outbreak of the 2014 revolution in Burkina Faso, resulting in the deposal of longstanding Compaoré's regime. Yet, if not backed by public support, military attempt to take power may not necessarily end up successfully, as it occurred in Burkina Faso with the failed putsch launched by the *Régiment de Sécurité Présidentielle* in September 2015.

Similar to other countries in West Africa, Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso are expected to face with multidimensional challenges over the next years, ranging from climate change to regional security. These will further complicate already weak states performance in providing their citizens with limited services and resources. This will depend also on projected demographic trends that will occur in the three countries, thereby increasing the competition among citizens (especially the youths) and political elites for access to these resources. Subsequently, tensions between central authority and the public are expected to fuel social turmoil and unrests, thus exacerbating domestic conflicts, as well

as political instability. For this reason, the next chapter will outline future demographic trajectories in West Africa and key challenges stemming from resource scarcity *vis-à-vis* skyrocketing population growth in the region. Drawing on such population-related challenges, some implications and suggestions for policymakers will be laid out.

CHAPTER 3: WHAT'S NEXT? FUTURE PROJECTIONS FOR WEST AFRICA

3.1 Quantity needs quality: addressing governance deficit

In the concluding remarks of previous chapter, it has been affirmed how empirical investigation on the inference of coup events requires a quantitative approach to be paired with qualitative analysis in view of elaborating a comprehensive theoretical picture on the causes of such events. Arguably, the most relevant qualitative indicators for the prediction of military putsches seem to be government capacity to provide services for the citizenry and popular sentiment, often influenced by such performance. In other words, in the event of government inability to properly fulfil its tasks in compliance with the demands by its citizens, it can be assumed that the populace will be more prone to develop increasing dissatisfaction toward the ruling regime, possibly paving the way to military intervention to remove it from power. This may sound problematic for developing countries characterized either by booming and youthful populations and underdeveloped infrastructures and institutions unable to meet up the needs of larger populations. In this regard, Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso – which fall in the second stage of demographic transition, thus implying that their populations are forecasted to soar up again and to preserve large youth cohorts over the next years – fit perfectly with such alarming scenario. This implies that one of national governments' main concerns, in a context of political instability in concert with population boom, is to address governance deficits jeopardizing their capacity to serve their citizens. Hence, to mitigate the risk of coup onset, good governance and policies that provide basic needs and opportunities for all citizens and that create the conditions for improving their wellness and, in turn, their positions *vis-à-vis* public authorities will be required. Before elaborating such policies, however, it is necessary to firstly identify the main obstacles and challenges that may hinder their implementation, thus exposing governments to the menace of coups. Concerning West Africa, such obstacles relate to the adverse phenomena that may affect the correct provision of basic needs, such as food, drinking and shelter. In this regard, the biggest threats arise out of food insecurity and climate change, which have already disrupted the livelihoods of many people across the region. Projections highlight that both issues are expected to plague West Africa over the upcoming years, possibly laying the ground for violent uprisings against governments, which may be held responsible for having failed to address such adversities. Beyond that, exogenous shocks stemming from COVID-19 and the indirect effects of the Ukraine war are presumed to add further constraints to the living conditions of local communities. Without appropriate policies to counter labor-market distortions and inflation effects caused by such critical junctures (e.g., by boosting vocational opportunities to alleviate youth unemployment), many people – among which vulnerable and alienated youths – may be "sentenced" to fall into poverty.

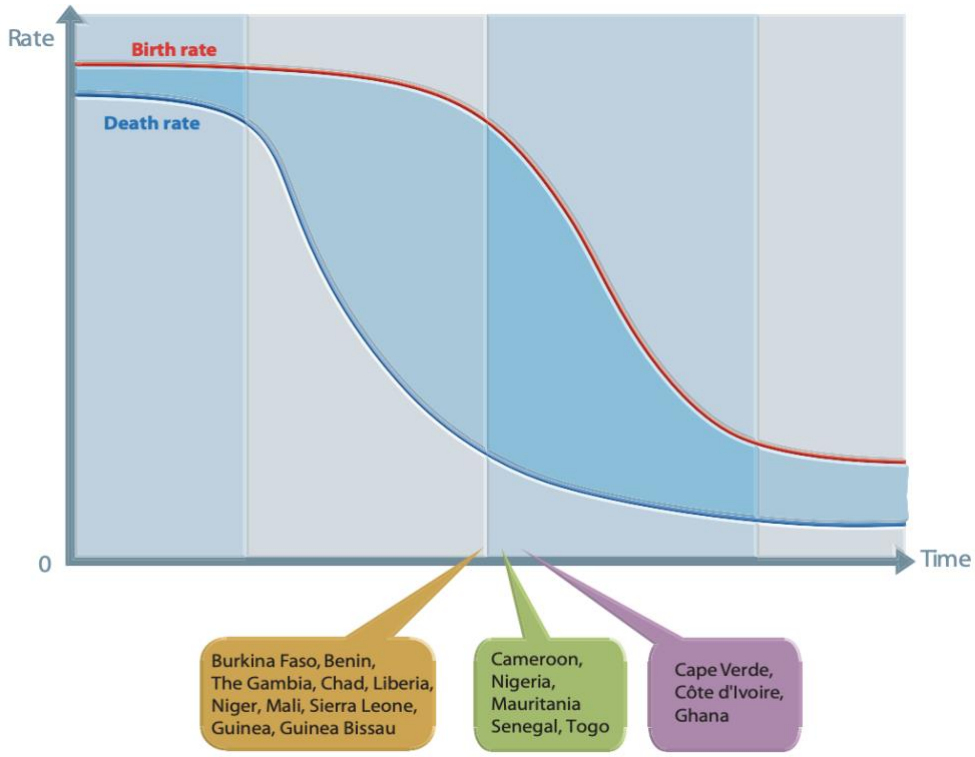
Lastly, many countries across West Africa (especially those located in the Sahel, among which Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso) have been facing for years security threats posed by the penetration of terrorist groups within their territory. Besides endangering the security of national borders, the expansion of jihadists across the region may represent a red flag for national governments due to the ease with which they have managed to recruit young people among their ranks. This may sound worrying for Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, where populations are mainly made up of youth cohorts, and the hard and soft power resources in the hands of terrorist groups are greater. These challenges together represent a ticking bomb against governments' capacity to address governance deficit, as well as to carry out good policies in favor of the citizenry, thereby setting the stage for the onset of political instability under the form of coups d'état and, if worse, domestic/regional armed conflicts. With this in mind, the aim of this chapter is to identify the main challenges that may presumably provoke the outbreak of coups. After that, a set of policy recommendations to mitigate the effects of such adversities, and the subsequent risk of coup events, will be laid out. As stated above, the effects of these challenges are presumed to be amplified in countries characterized by sizable youth bulges, as they may fuel intra-population struggle for access to scarce but vital resources. For this reason, before describing regional challenges, it is worthwhile devoting attention to demographic dynamics that will develop across West Africa.

3.2 Demographic trends in West Africa

When it comes to assessing the evolution of population trends at global level, institutions, and scholars uniformly agree on one point: over the next thirty years, Sub-Saharan Africa will account for most of the growth of world's population. As reported by the UN World Population Prospects (2019), of the additional 2 billion people that may be added to the global population by 2050, about 1 billion will be born in Sub-Saharan Africa. These trends are foreseen to further obstacle states' capacity to keep pace and satisfy the needs of rapidly growing populations. Due to existing junctures already constraining its internal borders, West Africa will arguably be the region where demographic challenges are expected to be more evident in the next decades. Thus, when it comes with elaborating relevant policies to address such challenges, national authorities will be required to take into account demographic trends across the region. This will be necessary to enable West African countries to take advantage from economic and development opportunities arising out of the demographic dividend (Giordano, 2021). As stated in Chapter 1, the latter stems from declines in mortality, followed by declines in fertility, thereby producing a large number of people in the working-age population and a smaller number of dependents (Canning et al., 2015). Unlike other African regions well undergoing the demographic transition – such as North and Southern Africa, where fertility is lowering, and the

working-age population is already large – Western Africa is one of the last regions to enter such transition. Indeed, many countries in the region, including Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, are still in the second stage of the demographic transition and are projected to record skyrocketing population growth over the next years. This is confirmed by Canning et al. (2015), who point out that, along with East Africa, much of the population growth in Sub-Saharan Africa will occur in West Africa, with 38 percent of African population living in the region by 2060. In this regard, populations in Mali, Niger and Burkina are included among the countries with fastest population growth at global level. Estimates by ECA-AUC report that the three countries are expected to experience population increase by 500 percent or more by 2100 (ECA-AUC, 2013). Much of this growth will be driven by sustained high levels of fertility (about six children per woman in both Mali and Burkina Faso, and above seven children in Niger) which are expected to produce larger youth cohorts for the foreseeable future (The World Factbook, 2022). Although increasing urbanization may slightly decrease fertility levels, yet such decline is expected to occur slowly. Furthermore, if not sustained by both relevant rural-to-urban migration and low deal of return to rural areas, the effect of urbanization on fertility may be insignificant (Canning et al., 2015). Slow decline of fertility, in turn, implies that countries in West Africa may take long time to undergo demographic transition, thus making it more complicated for them to maximize benefits of demographic dividend. Figure 16 below summarizes the state of play of demographic transition across the region.

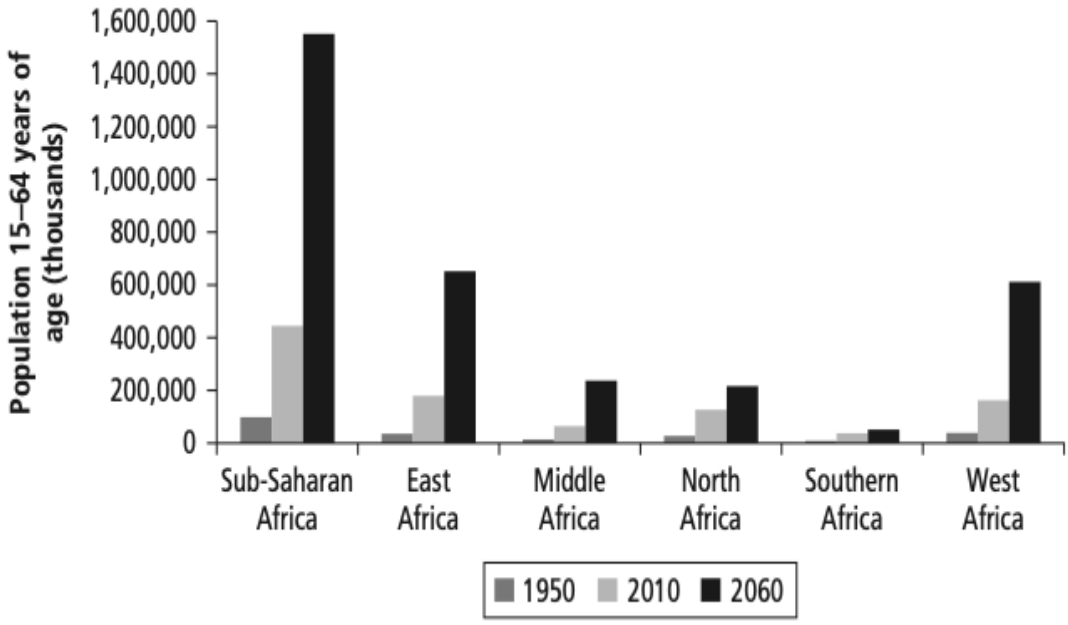
Figure 16: Demographic Transition in West Africa: Three groups of countries



Source: ECOWAS-SWAC/OECD (2007)

Concerning the second key element of demographic dividend – the working-age population – UN estimates suggest that, together with East Africa, West Africa will increase its share of population between 15 and 64 years of age to 55-60 percent by 2035, hosting over 600 million people in the working-age share by 2060 (UN Population Division, 2012; Canning et al., 2015). Elevated fertility levels across the region implicate that, as large youth cohorts reach working and reproductive age, they will be followed by even larger younger cohorts. Subsequently, for most West African countries, the dependency ratio is not expected to decline even though the working-age population will increase (ECA-AUC, 2013). Therefore, the latter is projected to peak by 2080, with a ratio of working-age population per dependent below 2 (Canning et al., 2015). This will further decelerate demographic transition, thereby making the demographic profile of many West African countries not consistent with the one needed to realize demographic dividend. Figure 17 illustrates demographic trends in working-age population across African regions, including West Africa.

Figure 17: Size of the Population 15-64 years of age in Africa, by region, 1950, 2010, 2060



Data : UN Population Division (2012)
Source : Canning et al. (2015)
Note: Data after 2010 are projections based on medium-variant fertility.

In sum, although demographic trends across West Africa set the conditions for realizing a potential demographic dividend, decreasing but slow decline of fertility risks nullifying the rewards arising out of the increase of working-age population, thus preventing countries to achieve economic growth. As argued by Canning et al (2015): "Without the appropriate social and economic policies, the extra labor supply can result in unemployment and underemployment, which can lead to political instability

[under the form of civil war or coup d'état, emphasis added], elevated crime, and a deterioration of social capital". Along with other shocks already plaguing the region – namely wars, epidemics, natural disasters, and trade frictions – political instability may fuel further junctures, including higher poverty, smaller investments in children and persistent low labor productivity (Calderón, 2021). Thus, in order to correctly elaborate and implement policies to seize the demographic dividend, it is necessary to firstly identify obstacles and challenges that, if coupled with rapid population growth – especially of large youth cohorts – may constrain states ability to exploit demographic opportunities and to capitalize on them. To this aim, the next section will provide an outline of challenges and junctures affecting countries in West Africa in the present and future, with special focus on Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. Drawing on these challenges, some policy suggestions on how to direct demographic trends toward socio-economic progress will be laid out.

3.3 Future challenges in West Africa

(a) Absorbing large youth cohorts into productive jobs

The positive relationship between the increasing working-age population and the attainment of demographic dividend is not necessarily one-way forward, as the rising absolute number of youths entering the labor force may have negative effects on labor productivity. This occurs because the labor market entry of those born into a large cohort – also known as "cohort crowding" (Korenman and Neumark,1997) – may result in lower cohort wages and curb individual labor supply (Korenman and Neumark, 1997; Canning et al., 2015). Furthermore, if the labor market is unable to generate productive jobs absorbing such massive inflows of working youths, then the latter may be forced to remain unemployed or to seek employment in low-productivity and low-waged sectors, mainly agriculture and other informal household enterprises. This holds true for many countries in West Africa (and in Sub-Saharan Africa), where the share of agricultural employment remains relatively large, with above 60 percent of labor force being engaged in agricultural activities in both Mali and Niger (Calderón, 2021). Thus, the combined effect of relative low productivity of the agricultural sector and wage restraint for workers belonging to large youth cohort implies that the region lags the rest of the world in so called "structural transformation", which depends on large movement of labor from the agricultural to the non-agricultural sector (Deudibe et al., 2020). Subsequently, slow shift from agricultural to non-agricultural employment is expected, in turn, to curb poverty reduction, which has been found to be associated with the speed of structural transformation (Deudibe et al., 2020). Coupled with low-productivity, rapid population growth is expected to slow down such transformation, as increasing population implies a greater demand for agricultural goods, thereby

prompting more people to engage in agricultural labor and reducing total factor productivity[18]. This holds true for poor countries – including those in West Africa – where population-driven subsistence and food requirements "[…] lead workers that are relatively unproductive in agricultural work to nonetheless select into the agriculture sector" (Lagakos and Waugh, 2013). Beyond agriculture, the informal sector represents the main basin of inflows of large cohorts of young workers. Estimates on the size and determinants of informal economy in Sub-Saharan Africa (Medina et al., 2017) highlight that in low-income countries – including Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and other countries in West Africa – unreported economy accounts for 40 percent (and above) of GPD. As affirmed in Chapter 1, most youths in West Africa are employed in a multitude of shadow activities, ranging from artisanal mining to street trading (Fortune et al., 2015). Nevertheless, empirical evidence highlights that informal and noncompliant businesses are significantly less productive than those operating in the formal and tax-regulated sector. In this regard, Calderón (2021) points out that total factor productivity and the extent of informality are negatively correlated. This is because the relative cost advantage enjoyed by informal firms, due to tax avoidance, motivates them to increasingly participate in aggregate output at the expense of compliant enterprises, thus provoking distortions and resource misallocation in business dynamics (Calderón, 2021). Such disruptions may manifest under suboptimal choices, as individuals may be persuaded to join the informal economy to bypass barriers of the formal sector, like registration and entry costs, taxation enforcement, and credit market frictions. By doing so, less productive and informal businesses may proliferate and overcome the number of formal and compliant ones, thus leading to a reallocation of inputs toward informal enterprises (Leal Ordóñez, 2014). Furthermore, inefficient taxation enforcement may provoke distortions on the side of the capital stock input through tax payment evasion, thereby provoking significant output losses (Leal Ordóñez, 2014). Concerning West Africa, Grimm et al. (2011) conducted a study investigating the patterns of capital entry and capital return in informal micro and small enterprises in seven capitals. Their findings suggest that returns to capital are quite heterogeneous, with extremely high levels of marginal return at low levels of capital stock but rapidly decreasing as the amount of invested capital increases (Grimm et al., 2011). Such findings suggest that micro and small enterprises may have the potential to emerge from poverty. Hence, besides encouraging labor-force to enter formal labor market, boosting productivity of informal businesses, such as nonfarm household enterprises, may

[18] Total-factor productivity (TFP), also called multi-factor productivity (MFP), is usually computed as the ratio of aggregate output to aggregate inputs. It is a measure of the output of an industry or economy relative to the size of all its primary factor inputs. As explained by the APO glossary, when comparing the growth of a nation's economic output over time with the growth of the two traditionally measured inputs – labor force and capital stock – generally the first is found to exceeds the latter. This is due to the growth of TFP, boosted by better combination of the two inputs over time, as a result of better organization, labor force upskilling and/or technological innovation. Hence, TFP captures any effect in total output not accounted for by inputs. For further information, see also: https://www.apo-tokyo.org/resources/p_glossary/total-factor-productivity-2/

provide a solution against poverty and underemployment (Filmer et al., 2014). According to Filmer et al. (2014) raising the productivity of smallholder farms and household enterprises will enable the formal sector to develop, in line with the structural transformation that occurred in Asia and Latin America. Above all, the informal economy plays an important intermediating role of linking sub-sectors of formal economy to consumers. In other words, the informal economy "[…] supplies the low and middle income employees of the formal economy with products and services not offered by the formal economy" (Aryeetey, 2015). Additionally, although earnings may be lower than those in the formal sector, yet informal sectors provide poorer individuals with alternative sources of livelihood. Owing to the lack of protection under social systems and labor laws, however, COVID-19 pandemic has exposed (and will expose) informal and self-employed workers to health shocks and vulnerability, mainly for three reasons. First, lockdowns, social distancing policies and travel bans severely prevent most of informal workers from carrying out their economic activities, which rely to a large extent on social interactions with customers (Schwettmann, 2020; Dodoo, 2020). Second, most of informal workers are not covered by guaranteed access to health and medical care or safety protection under employment injury benefits, thereby making them more likely to suffer from illness, accidents, COVID-19, and death. Third, many informal workers and their families live in overcrowded slums, where sanitary conditions are precarious and physical social distancing is difficult. Subsequently, informal workers remain exposed to the virus even if they stay at home (Schwettmann, 2020). Although informal workers living in rural (and less overcrowded) areas may be less exposed to infection risk, COVID-19 has equally disrupted their economic activities by provoking sharp decrease in demand for rural products, mainly because of generalized decline in purchasing power. In short, mobility restrictions and Coronavirus-related market disruptions have jeopardized the subsistence of many individuals working in the informal sector, by making them unable to secure the income needed to meet their basic needs (OECD, 2020). Along with policies to contain COVID-19 transmission, improve health facilities, and support national economy, some governments adopted specific measures targeting the informal sector. For instance, Burkina Faso government has suspended fees charged to informal sector operators for rent, security, and parking in urban markets, while Côte d'Ivoire has set up a Support Fund for the informal sector of 171 million US dollars. Along with state-level intervention, continental and regional organizations – the African Union, ECOWAS and the *Union Economique et Monétaire Ouest Africaine* (UEMOA) – have supported member states across West Africa by providing logistic and monetary resources in response to COVID-19. As affirmed by the OECD (2020), the crisis has highlighted the social and economic importance of the informal sector, which sustains most of the population and is the major driver of economic growth in West Africa. To achieve the potential arising out of informal economy,

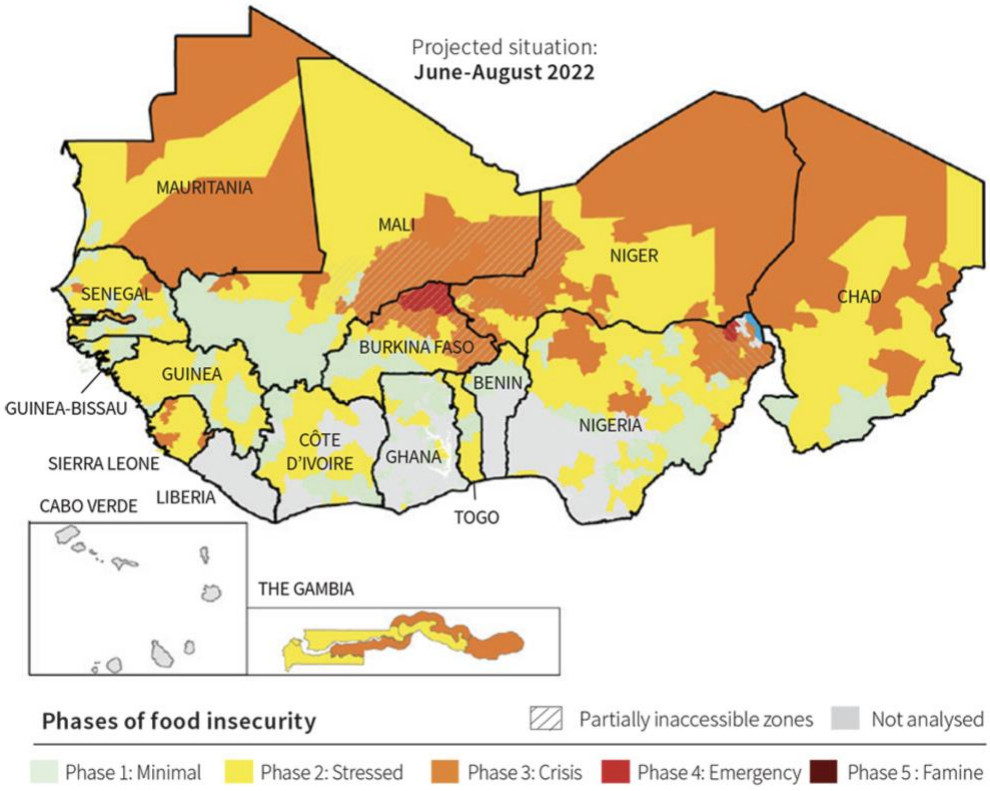
enterprises will be required to capitalize on the large cohort of youth workers they are foreseen to absorb over the next years. Furthermore, it will be necessary to give due recognition to the informal sector by including it in the realm of public policy. To this aim, governments and institutions will be called to carry out appropriate policies supporting the development and integration of informal household enterprises in the formal market economy, as well as to listen to demands of informal economy actors through social dialogue. Regarding this, several suggestions for policymakers on how to harness the potential of informal economy will be laid out in the final section.

(b) Tackling food insecurity

Food insecurity represents a longstanding adverse phenomenon in West Africa. Between the 1960s and in the 1980s, following the breakdown of rainfall-driven migratory pastoralism, overgrazing and misinformed interventions under state aid projects in the Sahel caused soil erosion and desertification, thus leading to a decrease in rainfall. The latter, in turn, was subverted by a series of self-perpetuating droughts further fueling land degradation. As a result, populations residing in the Sahel were afflicted by severe famines, thereby provoking the death of 100,000 people and forcing 750,000 people to depend on food aid in order to survive (Sinclair and Fryxell, 1985). Since then, similar episodes of famine have occurred over time, thus exposing an increasing number of people to food emergence and assistance. Coupled with security crisis and conflict, food emergence and malnutrition caused dramatic increase of internally displaced people. The 2020 Humanitarian Snapshot by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) notes that in Mali, Burkina Faso and western Niger alone, the number of internally displaced people increased four-fold to more than 1.1 million as of February 2020 (OCHA, 2020). Along with that, the number of people facing critical lack of food was reported to have spiked due to rising insecurity and climate shock, with about 3.7 million people exposed to food insecurity at “crisis” and “emergence” level during the lean season of the year – a 110 percent increase compared to 2019. The outbreak of COVID-19 has further worsened the on-going food and malnutrition crisis, namely by forcing 50 million people to face such crisis as a result of combined effects of conflict insecurity and sanitary measures, such as confinement, trade bans and market closures (OECD, 2020). Thus, the consequent reduction of purchasing power of households and States, the increase in food prices and difficulties in the supply of food stemming from bottlenecks in supply chains have worsened the food security emergency in West Africa, mostly at the expense of the most vulnerable communities and households suffering acute malnutrition (Sobgui et al., 2020). In addition, COVID-19 crisis has affected the implementation of emergency food programs sustained by donor countries and organizations, mainly by causing budget cuts and hampering the mobility of humanitarian assistance and personnel. In this

regard, millions of school age children, due to the interruption of classes, have been deprived of free daily meals offered by school feeding programs (Sobgui et al., 2020). Because of this, the number of children afflicted by severe under- and malnourishment in West Africa is presumed to have risen. The worsening trend related to food insecurity and malnutrition has been confirmed by the latest report by the International Rescue Committee, pointing out that, between 2015 and 2022, the number of people in the Sahel in need of food emergence assistance quadrupled, from 7 to over 30 million. Record numbers of people suffering such situation are reported in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso alone: within the next months, the number could rise to over 40 million (IRC, 2022). Without appropriate actions, about 33.4 million people could be in the immediate need of food assistance during the lean season (June-August 2022) (RPCA, 2021). This trend is described by Figure 18 below, which illustrates the phases of food insecurity across West Africa.

Figure 18: Sahel and West Africa: food and nutrition outlook



Source: *Cadre harmonisé* analysis, regional concentration meeting, Banjul, the Gambia, Nov 2021
www.food-security.net
©2021. Food Crisis Prevention Network (RPCA), map produced by CILSS/AGRHYMET

Against this background, the outbreak of war in Ukraine has further worsened the hunger threat around the world – especially in Africa – as Ukraine and Russia alone account for a third of global wheat and barley exports and more than 70 percent of sunflower oil exports (The Lancet Regional

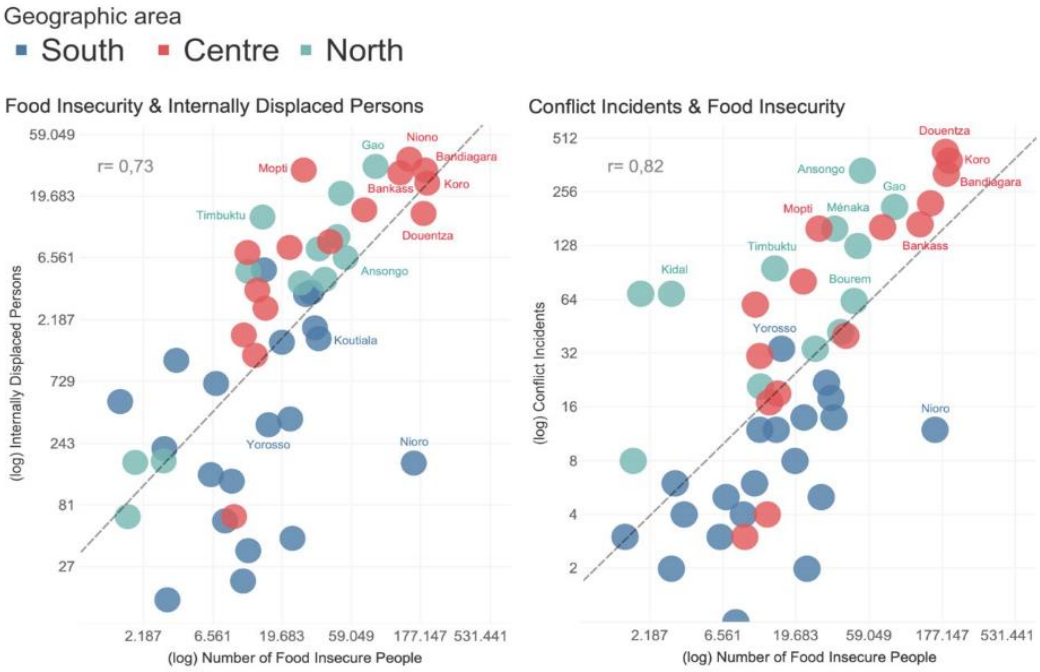
Health-Europe, 2022). Concerning West Africa, a publication by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) highlights that the region trades little with Russia and Ukraine, except for Benin's exports to Ukraine – accounting for 4.7 percent of its total exports – and Benin and Senegal imports from Russia (between 4 and 5 percent of total imports, respectively). In the food sector, Ukraine and Russia significantly contribute to the supply of calories in West Africa only through the trade of wheat, which accounts for 1.7 percent of total calories (Bouët et al., 2022), with particularly high dependence in Mauritania, Mali, Cameroon, Senegal, and Benin, where half of the wheat consumed comes for Russia (World Food Programme, 2022). Although trade relations between the region and the two countries are moderate compared to other regional blocs, the greatest challenge for West Africa is likely to arise out the indirect effects of price increases exacerbated by the Ukraine war. As reported by Ehui et al. (2022), shortages of supply following the outbreak of the conflict have led to skyrocketing increase of global wheat and maize prices at respectively 48 and 28 percent higher than in early February (before the Russian invasion) and 79 and 37 percent higher than 2021. "Higher global food prices will directly translate to domestic food price inflation, especially in food import dependent countries, limiting the ability of people to afford their food" (Ehui et al., 2022). Given West Africa's high dependency on food imports, global food crisis and subsequent price increase are expected to further worsen food emergency across the region, with dramatic consequences for the more marginalized and vulnerable segments of population. Additionally, the crisis is foreseen to affect the agricultural sector – which accounts for a large share of regional economy – through the reduction of fertilizer imports from Russia, the ECOWAS' second largest supplier with 12 percent of the market (Bouët et al., 2022). In particular, the region imports 82 percent of its potassium consumption, and for many countries in the region – Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, Niger, Senegal, and Sierra Leon – most of this comes from Belarus and Russia (Bouët et al., 2022). Subsequently, reduced (or total lack of) access to imported fertilizers, due to their prices soaring up, could elevate food costs, as well as damage agricultural production – especially in arid areas of the Sahel – thereby affecting food accessibility and insecurity (Ehui et al., 2022; World Food Programme, 2022). Faced with rapid-growing population, which is expected to raise demand and consumption of food, lower accessibility to basic commodities may potentially trigger social tensions and popular mobilization, as occurred with the 2007-2008 food riots that followed the global crisis. Episodes of violent protests occurred across West Africa – with food riots sweeping from Burkina Faso to Senegal – as a reaction to steep increase in food prices (Berazneva and Lee, 2013). According to Gupte et al. (2014), urban youth dwellers were found to be more sensitive to rising food prices than their rural counterparts, mainly because they usually devote most of their available income on acquiring food. Again, among youths living in urban slums, recent migrants were hit harder by price shocks than long-term residents,

presumably due to the absence of social networks that could have supported them in coping with rising food insecurity (Gupte et al., 2014). Similar episodes of food related riots that saw massive participation of youths were reported during the Arab Spring, as countries in the MENA region were highly vulnerable to food insecurity as well, mainly because of their dependency on international food market. For instance, following skyrocketing increase of international food prices therefore elevating domestic food prices, the purchasing power of Egyptians eroded, thus exposing them to increasing food insecurity. This, along with other socio-economic issues, motivated citizens to participate in protests and social unrest, thereby provoking the fall of Mubarak regime in 2011 (Soffiantini, 2020). The unrest occurred with various levels of intensity across the MENA, with countries in the Gulf region experiencing "small taste of the Arab Spring within their borders", while others (Bahrain, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Yemen, and Syria) were hardly hit by outright rebellion and unrest (Tree, 2014). The different degree of intensity of protests may be attributed to the capacity of states to exploit their wealth to mitigate the risks of acute food insecurity exacerbated by the rise of international food prices. In this regard, wealthier states were able to use their resources to keep the risk of food insecurity low, while poorer states lacking the funds against food price shocks exposed their population to acute food insecurity, thus generating sociopolitical instability (Tree, 2014). This may sound worrying for many West African states, especially those with lowest GPD levels and wealth resources. On this issue, the case of Mali, currently embargoed under the initiative of ECOWAS, provides insights about potential consequences arising out of food insecurity. In response to the 2021 coup[19], ECOWAS imposed an embargo on the country in January, locking it out from regional financial markets and closing its borders to all member states, except for trade in basic necessities. Malian authorities reacted by contesting the legality of the embargo on the one hand, and by suspending exports of some products – namely meat and livestock – within ECOWAS on the other. Such measures resulted in both domestic financial distortions, leading to Mali's default of more than $300 million in debts (Duho et al., 2022), and market tensions in some countries, with wheat price soaring up in Senegal (Bouët et al., 2022). Testimonials collected by African Business (Dietz, 2022) have reported that: "About 70% of food is imported and a food crisis has been worsened by the insurgency. Transnational movement for work and trade supports that majority of rural, border populations so many risk losing sources of income if border closures are enforced" (Dietz, 2022). Furthermore, the closure of borders has enhanced economic stress among traders in Côte d'Ivoire, whose economic activities largely depend on border economy being in circulation," […] as many

[19] Sanctions were originally imposed in response to a preceding coup in August 2020, in which the troops led by Colonel Assimi Goïta overthrew President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta. Following the establishment of a roadmap for the return to civilian rule, agreed between the military junta and ECOWAS, sanctions were greatly relaxed. Yet, when it became clear that the military government would not abide by the roadmap, the ECOWAS imposed a new round of tough sanctions on Mali (Dietz, 2022).

have money locked up in goods that are standing still in Abidjan due to sanctions" (Dietz, 2022). In short, economic distortions arising out of the embargo on Mali could worsen food security across West Africa, further aggravating the effects caused by the COVID-19 crisis. Drawing on the experiences of both the 2007-2008 food riots and the Arab Spring, food price shocks and limited provision arising out the Ukraine war and the trade blocs may expose Malians to acute food insecurity, thereby provoking outright tensions and exacerbating political instability. The relationship between food insecurity and outbreak of domestic tensions, in terms of conflict incidents and internally displaced persons, is described by Figure 19 below.

Figure 19: Mali: conflict incidents, internal displacement & food insecurity

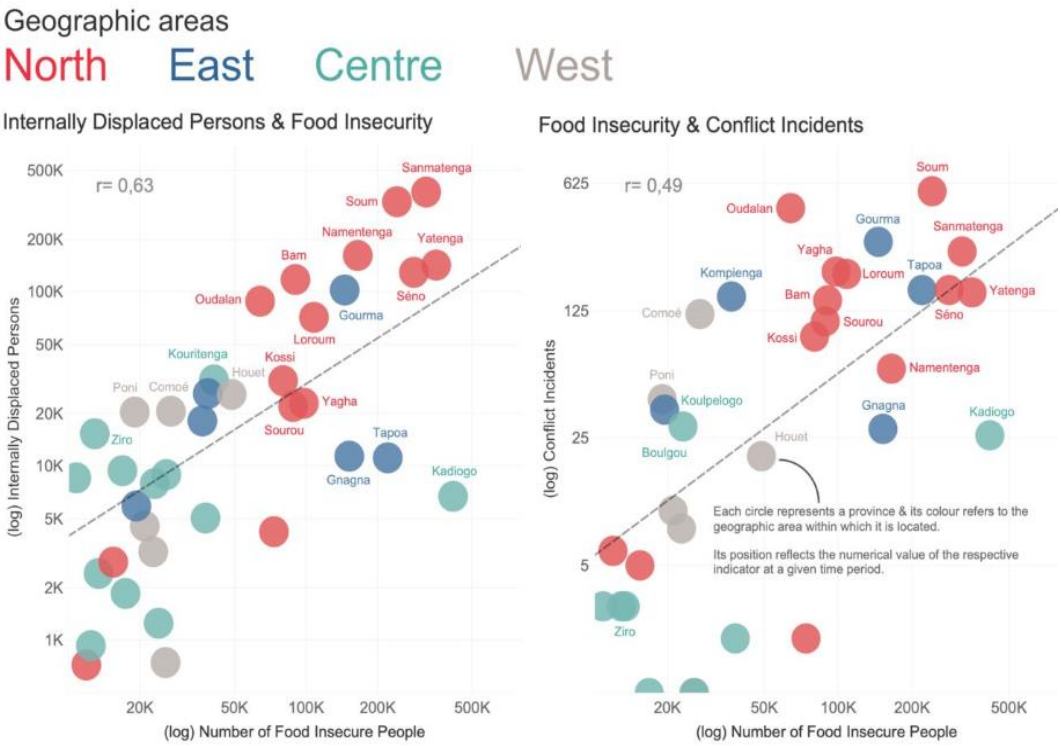


Data: Data: *Cadre Harmonisé* (People in IPC Phases 3-5, Q4 2022 forecast), IOM (IDPs, Apr 2022) & ACLED (Conflict Incidents, Jan 2018 - May 2022)
Visualisation : J. Luengo-Cabrera
Source : José Luengo-Cabrera (July 2022). *Mali: conflict incidents, internal displacement & food insecurity Data: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), IOM - UN Migration & Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET)* [Post] LinkedIn https://www.linkedin.com/posts/jos%C3%A9-luengo-cabrera_mali-conflict-incidents-internal-displacement-activity-6958369869025144832-YGpy?utm_source=linkedin_share&utm_medium=member_desktop_web

Like Mali, Burkina Faso has suffered from food emergence, as more than one out of three households have been found to be food insecure (Tankari, 2020). According to the OCHA Humanitarian Snapshot (2020), in 2020 about 1.8 million Burkinabe were classified under "crisis" or worse (Phases 3+) phase of food insecurity, with severe implications for under-five children dramatically exposed to malnutrition. Most of food insecure households are in rural areas, where dependency on agriculture

– the main source of domestic food consumption and income (the sector accounts for more than 30 percent of GDP and absorbs up to 80 percent of the workforce) (OECD, 2013) – is stronger (Tankari, 2020). Owing to strong reliance on rainfall, agriculture in Burkina Faso is hardly impacted by climate shocks, including droughts, floods and rise in temperatures, therefore producing spillover effects that make households more vulnerable to food insecurity. Besides climate-related disruptions, rising tensions and violence, which have recorded spike escalation since 2019, are the main determinants of food insecurity across Burkina Faso. Indeed, recurrent conflicts and terrorist led to the closure of hundreds of health centers – in 2019, 121 were reported to be nonfunctional (OCHA, 2020) – and schools, jeopardizing the livelihoods of many children and communities and, in turn, forcing them to leave their homes, economic activities and livelihoods behind (International Rescue Committee, 2022; Zidouemba et al., 2020). As shown by Figure 20, the outbreak of frequent conflict incidents has dramatically aggrieved food emergency, as well as the displacement of people across Burkina Faso.

Figure 20: Burkina Faso: conflict incidents, internal displacement & food insecurity



Data: *Cadre Harmonisé* (People in IPC Phases 3-5, Sep 2022 forecast), CONASUR (IDPs, May 2022) & ACLED (Conflict Incidents, Jan 2018 - May 2022)
Visualisation : J. Luengo-Cabrera
Source: José Luengo-Cabrera (July 2022). *Burkina Faso: conflict incidents, internal displacement & food insecurity Data: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), SP/CONASUR & TheIPCinfo* [Post] LinkedIn https://www.linkedin.com/posts/jos%C3%A9-luengo-cabrera_burkina-faso-conflict-incidents-internal-activity-6958484747165536257-xG_P?utm_source=linkedin_share&utm_medium=member_desktop_web

Against this background, the outbreak of COVID-19 has contributed to a worsening of food security. In this regard, Zidouemba et al. (2020) find that the pandemic has negatively affected food emergency, mostly at the expense of poor households in both rural and urban areas, whereas rural-non-poor have become more vulnerable to food insecurity. Besides social distancing measures and trade restrictions disrupting supply chains, increased vulnerability of poor households *vis-à-vis* the COVID-19 crisis may be attributed to declines in remittances and to the impossibility for households to receive income from the diaspora. This is confirmed by Kalantaryan and Kahlon (2020), who have analyzed the effect of COVID-19 on remittances in Sub-Saharan Africa, pointing out that countries with highest levels of dependency on remittances are characterized by highest economic vulnerability and financial exclusion. These are Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali (Kalantaryan and Kahlon, 2020).

Although the suspension of Burkina Faso from ECOWAS, in response to a coup in January 2022, may have produced limited effects compared to sanctions imposed against Mali (on July 3, ECOWAS said it would have immediately lifted economic and financial sanctions placed on Mali and Burkina Faso[20]), yet domestic junctures resulting from market shocks related to the pandemic and the Ukraine war, climate change and persistent violence are expected to amplify food insecurity, thereby exacerbating the vulnerability of Burkinabe communities lacking the foodstuff and being dependent on humanitarian assistance to survive. Against this background, rapid population growth undergoing in Burkina Faso, as well as in other countries in West Africa, will further challenge the capacity of national authorities to meet food demands of the population. Market constraints on food imports, which help filling the gap between food production and national demand, may worsen food situation of fragile households (Tankari, 2020), thereby motivating masses to participate in outright rebellions to gain livelihood necessities for the sake of survival.

(c) Coping with climate shocks

As affirmed in Chapter 1, when assessing expected challenges emerging from demographic dynamics, the effects of climate change and environmental stress must be taken into account. This is because population growth increases anthropogenic activities, therefore producing greater amount of fossil fuel affecting global warming this way. Indeed, the rise of global temperature has already provoked adverse effects – including changes in the distribution of water that impact agriculture and other human activities, increase in the number of extreme weather events, longer heat waves and droughts, desertification and floodings (Matthew, 2012). In this regard, West Africa – especially the Sahel – has been identified as one of the most climate-sensitive areas in the world, due to its

[20] Okafor, C. (2022). ECOWAS lifts sanctions on Mali, Burkina Faso. *Premium Times*, July 4 (online) < https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/top-news/540759-ecowas-lifts-sanctions-on-mali-burkina-faso.html >

vulnerability to increased desertification and dryness and the consequent complexities around water availability (Marc et al., 2015). Climate sensitivity, indeed, is deeply rooted within the West African society, as evidenced by the 1930-60 wet period, the 1970-80 droughts that caused famines in the Sahel, and variability in the occurrence and intensity of rainfall (Sarr, 2012). Variability in rainfall and rainy season characteristics (quantity and distribution) have been perceived by households to have caused decreases in production and income of rain-fed agriculture (Mertz et al., 2011). However, when it comes with forecasting climate change trajectories in the region, projections are far from certain. For instance, the Atlas on Regional Integration in West Africa (ECOWAS-SWAC/OECD, 2007) warns that existing models for projecting climate trends, mainly focusing on rainfall, reported estimate errors in relation to both the timing and the occurrence of rainfall as compared to the data observed. Indeed, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) points out that there is low to medium confidence in the robustness of projected regional precipitation trends until a larger body of scientific evidence is provided (Niang et al., 2014). Despite this, scientific reports generally agree on the impact of climate variability, droughts, and floods on Africa's food production. For instance, rising temperatures are foreseen to significantly diminish the availability of suitable agro-climatic zones for growing crops (Niang et al., 2014). Evaluations on the incidence of climate change on cereal products in Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have come up with divergent findings (ECOWAS-SWAC/OECD, 2007). On the one hand, the average yield of millet and sorghum are projected to fall by 15 to 25 percent in Burkina Faso and Niger by 2080. On the other hand, average rice yields are likely to increase, with a rise by 2 to 10 percent (ECOWAS-SWAC/OECD, 2007). Yet, these estimates will depend on changes in the cropping season, as well as on other variables, such as changes in breeding and the appearance of destructive crop pests (ECOWAS-SWAC/OECD, 2007). Recent case studies in Burkina Faso (Tankari, 2020) and Mali (Generoso, 2015) provide noteworthy evidence about the effect of rainfall variability on food insecurity. In Burkina Faso, Tankari (2020) demonstrates that both short- and long-term rainfall variabilities significantly impact farm households' food insecurity, especially among rural communities. For both time frames an increase in rainfall has been found to reduce the level of food insecurity. In Mali, vulnerability to rainfall fluctuations concerns households living in the Sudano region as well, since rise in rainfall variability is associated with greater likelihood of being in a lower food-secure category (Generoso, 2015). Indeed, local communities and their agricultural activities are highly exposed to inter-annual and intra-annual rainfall variation, thus evidencing their dependence on rainfall for sustenance and income (Generoso, 2015). Besides food insecurity, climate patterns like changing temperatures and extreme weather conditions affect the incidence of vector-borne diseases, ranging from diarrheal diseases to malaria. For instance, the frequency and duration of cholera outbreaks have been found to be associated with

heavy rainfall in several West African countries. Since cholera is already endemic in the region, projected rainfall variations are foreseen to further increase the frequency of such disease (Niang et al., 2014). Further risks for health may arise out of heatwaves and high ambient temperatures, which have contributed to increased mortality in Ghana, Burkina Faso, and other West African countries. Given the estimates of temperature increase in Africa – with temperatures rising about 3°- 4°C – climate influence on mortality is presumed to produce worrisome consequences across the region. Along with scientific reports analyzing the evolution of climate change in all its facets, contributions from political demography and security institutions investigate its impact on national and regional security. In this regard, the CNA Corporation's report "National Security and the Threat of Climate Change" (2007) highlights that climate change could act as a risk multiplier for the most volatile regions in the world, namely those where states are not able to provide their citizens with minimal set of public goods (Matthew, 2012). The case of the densely populated and oil-producing Niger Delta provides important lessons on how environmental degradation may fuel tensions among communities living along riverbanks (Odoemene, 2011). Owing to its coastal position, the Niger Delta is highly susceptible to floodings caused by rise in sea-level. The latter is expected to worsen coastal erosion, as well as to provoke floodings and intrusion of seawater into fresh water sources, thus affecting agriculture, fisheries, and livelihoods of communities (Uyigue and Agho, 2007). In this regard, Uyigue and Agho (2007) point out that floodings have already rendered some communities homeless – as occurred, for instance, in Egor and Ogida communities in Edo State, where people have been forced to abandon their houses owing to floodings – and several roads have become uncrossable, paralyzing commercial and economic activities in urban areas (Uyigue and Agho, 2007). Besides this, oil extraction and exploitation have further worsened the environmental vulnerability of the area. Starting from the 1950s', petroleum businesses conducted exploration, drilling and transportation activities, thereby transforming the Delta into an industrial wasteland. Such activities, together with gas flaring, resulted in destruction of the natural environment and release of gas substances polluting air, land, and groundwater, thereby producing rapid environmental and climate changes, which have dictated social and livelihood changes for local inhabitants (Odoemene, 2011). Communities that most depend on environmental and natural resources for their living have seen their activities getting dislocated by the effects of land degradation on crops, farmlands, and freshwater sources. Hence, the erosion of economic activities, together with high cost of goods and services due to petroleum business in the Niger Delta, have condemned such communities to absolute poverty and deprivation of basic needs. Deconstruction of natural habitat, together with denial of access to resources, have motivated communities' members to stand up for their human and environmental rights, often in the form of agitations and violent protests. The latter gained momentum in the 1990s, thanks to the

adoption of popular declarations – from the Ogoni Bill of Rights (1990) to the Warri Accord (1999) – which coincided with the emergence of several pressure groups, such as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta, Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force, and others. Tensions culminated with episodes of kidnapping and hostage, which have turned into "[…] an insalubrious phenomenon in the Niger Delta society" (Odoemene, 2011). As long as the State demonstrates complicity with oil companies operating in the region, local communities will be driven to cultivate anti-state sentiment and anger, as well as to increasingly engage in illicit activities against the system. In addition, if climate shocks will further deprive these destitute communities, thereby jeopardizing the capacity of national authorities to provide them with basic needs, they will be presumed to escalate violence to gain access to what they stand up for.

Further climate-related threats to regional security are foreseen to arise out of the "climate-refugee" phenomenon. In other words, adverse climate effects on food insecurity, floodings and droughts are foreseen to pressure more individuals to migrate toward least environmentally affected regions. In Burkina Faso, for instance, biophysical and environmental variables – such as land degradation, land availability and climate variability – have been found to significantly affect inter-provincial migration (Henry et al., 2003). Controlling for socio-demographic variables, Henry et al. (2003) highlight that out-migration and inter- and intra-annual rainfall variability in regions of origin (and, interestingly, also in those of destination) are positively correlated. Land degradation is a key determinant of migration as well, as explained by the latter being negatively related with soil erosion at the region of destination and positively at the origin (Henry et al., 2003). Population vulnerability, and subsequent propensity to migrate, increases also in the event of flooding and coastal erosion due to sea levels rise. In coastal zones of West Africa, for instance, such shocks affect economic activities through destruction of property, loss of farmland, damages to tourism sites and fishing infrastructures, thereby worsening livelihood conditions and motivating people to migrate to find alternatives to improve the quality of their lives (Enríquez-de-Salamanca, 2022). In this regard, Enríquez-de-Salamanca (2022) defines migrants in Senegal as environmental, as the factors that have driven them to migrate – namely unemployment, lack of expectations, and desire for better life – have been caused by overfishing and climate change. Against this background, the outbreak of COVID-19 and consequent economic crisis have further deteriorated living conditions among Senegalese living in coastal zones, then forcing their decision to migrate (Enríquez-de-Salamanca, 2022). For many communities across the region, however, migration represents an adaptation and livelihood strategy to cope with environmental junctures. As evidence by surveys conducted in Bandiagara, Mali, and Linguère, Senegal, agriculture dependent communities regard seasonal migration as a means to

mitigate the negative effects of climate variability, as well as to find alternative sources of income and to secure food provision (Hummel, 2015). More specifically, strategies linked to migration consists in increasing financial contributions from family members that have already migrated on the one side and increasing the number of migrants within the family on the other side (Hummel, 2015). Yet, climate change is neither the only coping strategy to compensate for environmental losses, nor the only motive for migration. Rather, several studies (Hummel, 2015; Mbaye et al., 2021; Enríquez-de-Salamanca, 2022) acknowledge that, when it comes with assessing migration drivers, climate change generally overlaps with other factors, such as conflict, socio-demographic pressure, unemployment, and poverty. On this issue, Mbaye et al. (2021) argue that: "Climate change is usually a part of a very complex and dynamic system where ecological variables interact with social, political, and economic factors in a way that makes it difficult to isolate its individual effect on migration by merely relying on observational data". Therefore, environmental degradation shall be interpreted as one out of many drivers motivating individuals to leave their home countries. As argued by Kaplan in his article "The Coming Anarchy", which was based on his travel across coastal West African countries, the environment was expected to become the national-security issue of the early twenty-first century (Kaplan, 1994). Indeed, his predictions on environmental impact have gone well beyond the early twenty-first century, thereby producing further challenges to regional security in the years to come. This implies that climate shocks will add to other existing threats across West Africa, primarily security and conflict risks.

(d) Addressing regional security

The three issues outlined above – employment, food insecurity, climate shocks – represent some of the most acute challenges falling within the framework of regional security. Overall, these factors have added to the complex patterns explaining the root of conflict and civil strife in West Africa. Such patterns attribute the outbreak of violent conflicts to the interplay of several triggers, among which bad governance and corruption, human rights violations, inter-ethnic disputes and proliferation of small arms and weapons across the region (Annan, 2014). Along with these triggers, new waves of terrorism in the Sahel threatening the integrity of national states have further hindered the path toward regional securitization (Maiangwa, 2013). Against this background, non-state and regional actors, primarily the ECOWAS, have taken several initiatives to resolve and end conflicts in the region. Such initiatives include, for instance, the setting up of the ECOWAS Cease-Fire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) in the 1990s, with the aim of restoring peace and security in Sierra Leone and Liberia following the outbreak of conflict in the two countries (Arthur, 2010). Other examples include ECOWAS involvement in negotiations during the 2012 coups d'état in Mali and Guinea

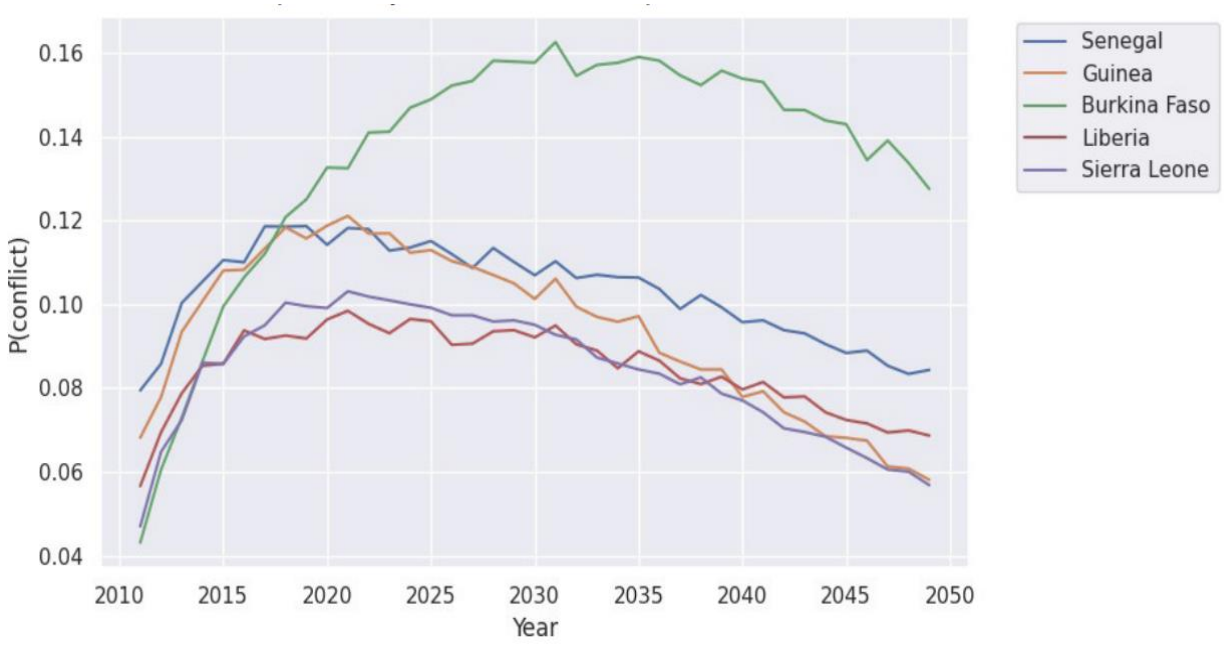
Bissau (Annan, 2014) and the adoption of the Counter-Terrorism Strategy and Implementation Plan in 2013 to cope with the escalating violence by jihadist terrorists in Mali and Nigeria, as well as to compensate for the absence of a counter-terrorism strategy for West Africa (Maiangwa, 2013). Along with the ECOWAS, civil society organizations and women's groups have played pivotal role in curbing conflicts and promoting peace talks in West Africa. Among these, the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP), the West Africa Civil Society Institute and the Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET) in Liberia have successfully achieved in brokering peace and ending violent conflicts in West Africa (Annan, 2014). Despite such efforts, the region continues to experience sporadic violent conflicts and volatile security threats, often in the form of worrisome escalation as occurred in Burkina Faso since 2019. In this regard, when it comes with assessing the prospects for conflict prevention and regional securitization, it is important to identify the shortcomings by both (inter)national and regional actors in addressing the motives of past and presents conflict and violent events. Concerning terrorism, Annan (2014) argues that failures in countering jihadist threat may be attributed to poor understanding of fundamental causes of conflicts. Referring to the Mali crisis that has been plaguing the country since 2012, the author argues that failed responses by Western power lies in having placed the conflict within the rhetoric framework on "War on Terror" (Taylor, 2013), thereby drawing attention away from the original causes of the crisis, that is, bad governance, corruption, discrimination, and ethnic marginalization – especially at the expense of the Tuareg (Annan, 2014). Such misunderstanding resulted in a somewhat late response to terrorist threats by international actors, mainly led by France under the so-called "Operation Serval" and followed by the deployment of European Union (EU) military training mission in 2013. Faced with the incapacity to resist pressure from Al-Qaeda and ISIS in their attempt to expand toward Mediterranean coast, on February 2022 France decided to withdraw its troops from Mali, thus ending its mission to restore stability and stop terrorist infiltration in the Sahel in a failure (Micalessin, 2022). On its part, the EU seems to be oriented towards disengagement from Mali as well, mainly because of the outbreak of the two coups in 2020 and 2021, the military retreat by some Member States (France in the first place) and new security threats and interferences by the so-called Wagner Group (Venturi, 2022).

Another unaddressed issue behind failed attempts to end conflicts in West Africa, among others, is the lack of coordination between national, regional, and non-state actors participating in the mission to restore peace and security. In this regard, Aning and Bah (2009) warn that improved governance-level coordination between ECOWAS' institutions and agencies drawn by the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF) is needed in order to successfully implement conflict prevention mechanisms and to ensure peaceful resolution of political disputes. Nevertheless, during the April

2012 roundtable discussion hosted by the International Peace Institute in the aftermath of the Mali and Guinea-Bissau crises, criticism was raised against the incapacity of preventing conflicts and adopting early response measures in spite of visible signs of early conflict in both countries (IPI, 2012). Lack of coordination on regional security on the part of West African governments explains also why the conflict in northern Mali has escalated since January 2012. Indeed, in the research report written shortly after the deployment of EU training mission troops in Mali, Lacher and Tull (2013) invited the EU, states and international organizations to coordinate their political engagement and material efforts in Mali, as well as to assist the country in accomplishing democratic transition. Despite efforts to resemble peace and democratic rule, in the end the country has remained vulnerable to both political instability and terrorist menace by jihadist groups. Besides violence escalation, failed coordination has enabled foreign drug traffickers to expand their business across West Africa. More specifically, coastal states – namely, Guinea Bissau, Nigeria, Cape Verde, Guinea, Ghana, Gambia, and Senegal – have become major drug transit sites, mainly because of their inhabited archipelagoes and islands that make detection difficult (Maiangwa, 2013; Aning and Pokoo, 2014). Drug traffickers from Latin America have taken advantage of domestic political instability "shared" by these countries to expand their business across the region, as occurred during the 2012 crisis in Mali. Although the use of violence by drug traffickers is presumed to be less manifest compared to civil conflicts, yet such phenomenon has been described as a potential human security threat, as well as a danger for national and regional security in West Africa. In this regard, Aning and Pokoo (2014) point out that escalation of violence may arise out of increasing competition for routes, profit, and control of production of drugs. Furthermore, security threats posed by drug trafficking may derive from potential linkages between criminal organizations and terrorists, who may be persuaded to engage in drug trafficking activities to finance their operations in return for protection of drug smugglers. Indeed, alleged connections between Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and drug traders have occurred in the trans-Sahel (Maiangwa, 2013). Both parties may also have mutual interests in destabilizing weak or failed states by corrupting governments with money earned by drug trafficking, as well as in motivating local populations to participate in illicit activities as a profitable way to get out of poverty. This explains the increased rate of drug consumption among local communities, especially the youths (Rousseau, 2017). Along with ill-response capacity of national authorities to cope with drug trafficking, the latter has taken advantage of governments complicity and impunity of security officers thanks to bribery and corruption practices. For instance, in Guinea-Bissau documented ties between senior government and security officials and criminal organization have played pivotal role in paving the way toward the 2012 military upheaval. Indeed, Aning and Pokoo (2014) report that between 2009 and 2010, a series of assassinations and arrests involving the army

chief of staff and the president were believed to be linked with struggles over control of drug trafficking. The arrests of former *ad interim* president Raimundo Pereira and former prime minister Carlos Gomes Junior and at the time of the 2012 coup were attributed to their connections to drug business as well (Aning and Pokoo, 2014). In sum, the lack of political will by West African governments to create transparent governance institutions to cope with the need of regional securitization, if coupled with complicity with criminal groups for the purpose of furthering personal interests, risks hindering the resolution of violent conflicts and security threats, thereby leaving West Africa vulnerable to the potential recurrence and emergence of new security challenges. In this regard, quantitative models tracking conflict trends help to understand how the regional security outlook is expected to evolve. Drawing on the conflict prediction model by Hegre et al. (2013), Sakor (2020) examines projections on conflict onset for the 2010-2050 period, focusing on a set of West African countries. Such model is based on information on previous and current conflict history, conflict details (whether minor or major conflict), neighboring countries conflict status (because of the so-called cross-border spill-over effect), demographic characteristics (namely, the effect of youth bulge on conflict prediction), and other socio-economic factors – education, population size and infant mortality (Hegre et al., 2013). Figure 21 shows predicted probability of conflict risk for five countries.

Figure 21: Predicted probability of conflict risk

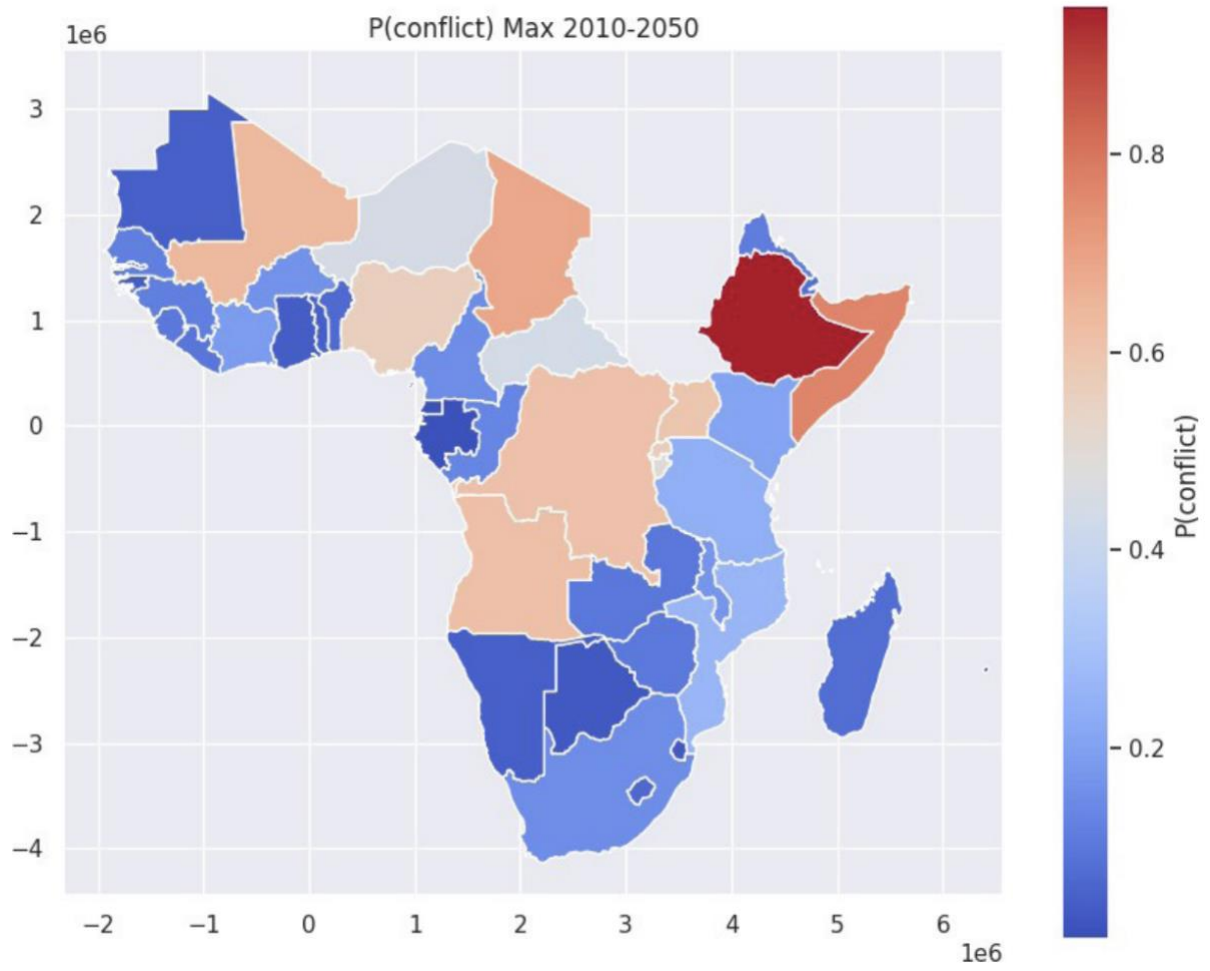


Data source : Hegre et al. (2013) replication data
Source : Sakor (2020)

Predictions highlight that probability of conflict risk in Burkina Faso is projected to peak by 2030, then recording high thought declining trends. Neighboring countries, conversely, are expected to

experience sharply lower conflict trends, which are forecasted to further decrease over time. As argued by Sakor (2020), these results sound surprising in a way, especially for states like Sierra Leone, Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire, whose recent story has been marked by bloody civil wars and conflicts. Further information on conflict trends is provided by Figure 22, which shows the maximum probability of conflict risk across Africa.

Figure 22: Predicted probability of conflict risk- maximum across Africa 2010-2050



Data source : Hegre et al. (2013) replication data
Source : Sakor (2020)

Referring to West Africa, it appears that coastal states are foreseen to record lower probability of conflict risk, while Sahelian countries – namely Mali and Niger – are predicted to experience higher incidence of conflicts. This may be explained by lower levels of socio-economic development, large and rapid-growing populations, high (though declining) infant mortality rates, lower levels of education attainment, and geographic proximity to other countries with equally high conflict risks. Regardless of how these trends will really develop, it is important for policymakers to elaborate conflict prevention and response mechanisms in due advance. Such mechanisms will be required to

take into account exogenous shocks – for instance, the effects of Ukraine war and climate change on food security and economic activities – that have recently occurred, as well as those that may potentially emerge over the next years. To this aim, the next paragraph will provide a range of policy suggestions to face future challenges in West Africa.

3.4 Policy suggestions

The challenges described above apparently portend an uncertain future for West Africa and its inhabitants. Some adverse phenomena that have persisted for years, together with recent exogenous shocks like COVID-19 and the Ukraine war, will surely produce socio-economic distortions, thereby opening the way to new potential tensions. Nevertheless, if tackled in due advance with adequate measures, it is possible to mitigate the impact of such distortions. Moreover, there's no reason to be deterministic about West Africa future perspective, as the region has still experienced sustained economic growth despite the recurrence of conflict episodes and political instability over the past years. As argued above, West Africa can count on a massive resource, that is, its vast and young population. If accompanied with appropriate policies to the advantage of their economic potential and their human capital, such population can drive socio-economic progress and development, thus paving the way toward prosperity. In other words, to harness the full potential of demographic dividend in West Africa, proactive policies for its realization are required. Hence, drawing on the future challenges outlined above, a range of policy suggestions to both curb distortionary effects of junctures and capitalize on the potential of West African population resource will be delineated.

(a) Harnessing productivity of the informal sector and boosting human capital

Concerning the labor market, it has been argued that large inflows youth cohorts in the working-age could make it difficult to generate enough jobs to ensure that they are productively employed. Furthermore, such inflows have been forecasted to be absorbed, for the most, by low-productive and informal sectors. Yet, provided that most of West Africa population entering the job market is projected to be employed in the informal sector, the best solution is not (only) to encourage the creation of jobs in the formal sector, but to profit on the potentiality of the large mass of informal workers by raising the productivity of smallholder farms and household enterprises. This can be achieved by streamlining constraints on access to credit and capital on the one side and formalizing informal enterprises on the other side. On the first issue, the example of village savings and loan associations (VSLA), firstly launched in Niger in the 1990s, provide important insights on how young agricultural entrepreneurs can get better access to credit. Based on self-managed and self-capitalized

saving groups that use members' saving to lend each other, VSLA help their members in saving money to invest in farms, while providing them with mentoring and access to information to benefit from money lending (Filmer et al., 2014). Such associations have successfully empowered their members – mostly women – with entrepreneurial skills and self-capacity to start a business, improving agricultural productivity, and gaining a voice in the political domain. Along with local associations, foreign direct investments (FDI) to the advantage of women empowerment are welcome. Concerning the formalization of informal enterprises, decreasing taxation and registration costs may persuade an increasing number of young workers to shift from household enterprise to regulated industry, thus increasing aggregate income and ensuring complete tax enforcement to the advantage of government tax revenues (Calderón, 2021). Beyond fiscal and credit maneuvers, harnessing productivity in the informal sector cannot be separated from physical wellness and legal protection of workers, especially following the outbreak of COVID-19 and the socio-economic disruptions it has provoked. Arguably, these disruptions may drive governments to "[…] to formulate comprehensive informal economy strategies and policies, to establish dedicated administrative structures for the informal economy, to extend relevant labour laws and all human rights to the informal economy, and to integrate informal economy organisations in social dialogue structures and processes" (Schwettmann, 2020). In this regard, national executives will be required to pay attention to ensuring clear and secure land rights for young people, as contestations over land possession have triggered tensions across West African in the recent past, among which the hostilities in Côte d'Ivoire and civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone (Maze, 2015; Marc et al., 2015). This can be addressed by using an inventory of registered land and by refining land registration and titling procedures, which have been found to drive farmers to invest in improving their land (Filmer et al., 2014). Similar to land issues, governments will be demanded to change their approach toward the informal sector. As argued by Fortune et al. (2015), the narrative of governments has tended to place too emphasis on formal job creation, stressing the importance of secured and salaried job positions. By doing this, youths in the informal sector may experience a sense of failure due to the mismatch between job aspirations echoed by the society and the reality (Fortune et al., 2015; Marc et al., 2015). Conversely, to harness the full potential of both the informal sector and its workforce, state authorities shall take initiatives aimed at involving them in social dialogue structures and making their voice heard (Schwettmann, 2020).

Policies and investments on human capital to enrich young workers' skills and know-how in order to boost productivity in the informal sector will be required as well. In this regard, draining resources in basic education and high-level practical skills in processing, marketing, transportation, and logistics will presumably help farmers to learn new methods to maximize production and output efficiency,

for instance by resorting to new technologies and techniques (Filmer et al., 2014). Investments in education and training programs may prove beneficial to other activities in the informal sector, including household enterprises, for instance by providing young workers with technical training, business and financial literacy, and behavioral skills to enter and expand such enterprises (Filmer et al., 2014). As highlighted by previous contributions, indeed, education plays a pivotal role in realizing the demographic dividend, as the first is generally associated with lower levels of fertility, mainly due to the cost-opportunity for women to pursue professional career rather than childbearing (Canning et al., 2015). Hence, in order for West African countries to capitalize on demographic dividend, education and training programs shall be equally and inclusively accessible to young women as well. In this regard, government effort shall concentrate on disseminating information about the availability of these programs and ensuring that youths in the working-age can access them without gender discrimination. Demographic trends may have indirect effects on agriculture as well since slower population growth is presumed to lower demand for both agriculture goods and workforce in the sector. This would accelerate structural transformation and reduce the pressure on food production, thereby generating higher agricultural productivity (Calderón, 2021).

By overcoming challenges related to job productivity and human capital, West African governments and societies will be able to exploit their youth population as an asset in the global marketplace.

(b) Boosting regional food production

On the issue of food insecurity, the prevailing scenario for West Africa foresees protracted emergence in which an increasing number of people is expected to suffer from food unavailability and acute malnutrition. Against this backdrop, the outbreak of COVID-19 first, and Ukraine war then, and their effects on global food trade and price increase will amplify disruptions across the region, especially at the expense of more vulnerable communities. Despite these dramatic projections, West African policymakers are not allowed to adopt a "wait-and-see" approach to things, supposing that things will automatically self-correct once the pandemic and the war will end. Now more than ever, policymakers are required to adopt structural and efficient policies to address market distortions arising out of these shocks. Although West Africa dependence on food imports from Russia and Ukraine is less pronounced than in other regions across the continent, adopting policies to promoting domestic and regional interdependence at the expense of imports is a necessary option. This can be done by strengthening cross-border food and products circulation across the ECOWAS member states. This is because some countries have the capacity to substitute for missing imports from Russia and Ukraine. For instance, Nigeria has exploited its sizable natural gas reserves to start huge investments in the fertilizer sector through Indorama Nigeria and Dangote Group. The first has a capacity of 1.4

million tons, the latter 3 million, and Nigerian fertilizer consumption is only 1.5 million tons. Given these capacities, Nigeria alone can compensate for the cessation of fertilizer imports from Russia – about 0.24 million tons – in seven West African countries (Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Mali, Niger, Senegal, Togo) (Bouët et al., 2022). Such solutions shall be explored also for other food products and agricultural inputs. In this regard, the realization of so-called "foodsheds" – self-reliant local- and/or region-based food systems – and "city-region food systems" for urban-rural connections shall be encouraged to facilitate the free movement of food products and to counter disruptions provoked to COVID-19 cross-border restrictions (OECD, 2020). Together with policies enhancing regional economic integration, short-term measures under subsidies to curb declines in purchasing power among poorer households, while persuading farmers to diversify agricultural food production shall remain. Regional cooperation shall extend the use strategic food reserves, namely by setting common plans in which governments are required to agree on the optimal size of food reserves, as well as the costs to store them. In 2013, for instance, the ECOWAS has adopted the Regional Food Security Reserve, which intends to achieve two main objectives. First, to mitigate price shocks and the magnitude of resulting food crises via market regulation. Second, to support the establishment of social safety net programs, in compliance with the Charter for Food Crisis Prevention and Management (Shaer, 2015). In 2020, the Regional Food Security Reserve was mobilized to assist more vulnerable and food insecure populations in Mali, Niger, Nigeria and Burkina Faso. Such mobilization included USD 1 million from the ECOWAS Humanitarian Emergency Fund and EUR 2 million for contingencies under the EU West Africa Food Security Storage Support Project to support food assistance in the targeted countries (SWAC/OECD, 2020). Based on the example of the Regional Food Security Reserve, similar regional strategic plan shall be set up in order to mitigate the effects of exogenous shocks, such as food price increase provoked by the Ukraine war. Such reserves, indeed, would provide supply in times of crisis and […] build confidence that trade remains the most efficient mechanism for stabilizing domestic food economies" (Shaer, 2015). International partners shall be involved in food crisis management affecting West Africa as well, since food insecurity may persuade local populations to migrate toward European borders in search of better livelihood opportunities, thereby exposing Mediterranean countries to a potential refugee emergence as occurred between 2015 and 2016. Drawing on the example of the World Bank USD 700 million West Africa Food System Resilience Program, which aims at increasing regional preparedness against food insecurity and improving the resilience of food systems in targeted countries, international partners (i.e., the EU) shall commit themselves to provide support to West African countries against the disruptive effects of both the Ukraine war and the COVID-19 crisis.

Against this backdrop, demographic policies limiting the impact of rapid population growth on demand for food can contribute to mitigate food insecurity across West Africa. Such policies shall aim at reducing fertility rates and slowing population growth, thereby lowering the demand for food and boosting agricultural productivity. This will enable policymakers to collect enough resources for the achievement of regional food security goals (Calderón, 2021). To be successful, however, such demographic policies will be required to go hand in hand with those aimed at addressing climate and environmental shocks.

(c) Adjusting and coping with climate change

Although Africa has the lowest contribution to the causes of climate change, yet the continent is forecasted to experience the worst manifestations of environmental degradation and to suffer greater distortions due to its low adaptive and resilience capacity (Enríquez-de-Salamanca, 2022). Rainfall variability, coastal erosion exacerbated by sea level rise, temperature increase and subsequent desertification in the Sahel, all these adverse climate phenomena have already produced heavy damages across West Africa, thus bringing down economic activities and livelihoods of millions of people and forcing them to migrate toward least affected areas. Similar to the Ukraine-war, a "wait-and-see" approach *vis-à-vis* climate change is not an option, mainly because the recurrence and the consequent adverse effects of climate variability are foreseen to continue over the long term. Thus, the best solution to cope with such events is to carry out adaptive strategies enabling populations to live with them. Such strategies will presumably rely more on planned adaptations, that is, they will be largely driven by government investments, policies, and institutional reforms. This is because in developing countries agricultural research and development is generally supported by public investments rather than private R&D (Hertel and Lobell, 2014). In this regard, public support in support of farmers under the form of updated information about the distribution of possible weather outcomes can help them to plan adaptation decisions. In Mali, for instance, farmers receive three-tiered information packages including seasonal forecasts, forecasts for the next-three days and ten days bulletins. Moorhead (2009) finds that participants have largely benefitted from significantly higher yields and income, up to 80 percent more than non-participants. By using historic and monitored weather data, indeed, it is possible to quantify in advance climate-induce risks, thus giving decisionmakers time and resources to prioritize interventions with higher probability of success (Jarvis et al., 2011). Such monitoring and information strategy shall be extended to other countries in the region, as well as to other phenomena influenced by climate change, including the spread of diseases and pests affecting plants, livestock, and humans (Jarvis et al., 2011; Farrow et al., 2011). Jarvis et al.'s findings (2011) fit perfectly with the climate policy needs of West Africa aimed at

addressing food security, poverty reduction and sustainable natural resource management in the face of climate change. They argue that these policies require "[…] strong *ex-ante* analytical capacity to diagnose points of vulnerability and assess the impacts and trade-offs between socioeconomic and environmental goals associated with alternative strategies". Such analytical framework will require policymakers to actively engage with rural communities, scientists, and other stakeholders with a view to jointly elaborate regional/national/local response mechanisms against climate shocks. Among such mechanisms, for instance, improved field water management under innovative conservation techniques, together with investments in equipment and energy and the institutionalization of water users' associations, may help to ensure adequate governance for food and water security in the face of undesirable climate events (Sarr, 2012).

Migration is forecasted to remain one of the most adaptive instruments to cope with climate change. As in the past (and even nowadays), people will be driven to temporarily move to other regions/countries to find better livelihood opportunities and to provide for their families and themselves. Although the free movement of people within the ECOWAS borders is protected by the 1979 Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons and the Right of Residence and Establishment, supported by the Common Approach on migration, yet its implementation remains difficult due to the absence of standardized legislation, weak institutional frameworks, and inefficient mobility policies. Thus, better harmonization on cross-border migration norms, followed by concrete polices to ease entry and exit of labor migrants shall be pursued. By doing this, the adaptive capacity of communities affected by adverse climate stressors is presumed to be strengthened (Hummel, 2015). Besides investing on the positive effects of cross-border migration (e.g., remittances and transfer of skills), it is strongly recommended to emphasize the relationships between development levels in rural and urban areas, respectively. Given the development disparities between the two areas, mainly due to divergent socio-economic frameworks, regional integration strategies shall reflect the need to invest in efficient infrastructures, as well in water and land resources management against environmental degradation. This will enable policymakers and communities to develop resilient systems in the face of climate change (Hummel, 2015). Climate policies, however, should not just addressing adverse consequences arising out of climate stressors. Rather, they may seek to capitalize on the availability of natural resources, as well as on positive potential prospects in West Africa. Indeed, the continent has sizeable hydroelectric, solar, and energy potential that could be exploited by launching investments in clean energy and development. Furthermore, compared to the rest of the world, Africa will still have the largest potential agricultural land area by 2080 (ECOWAS-SWAC/OECD, 2007). Thanks to greater land availability, it will be possible to mitigate food

insecurity and alleviate tensions around competition over natural resources and access to arable land (Marc et al., 2015). Therefore, Africa will be required to take advantage of forecasted resource availability to create sustainable and resilient systems in the face of future climate impacts. Such systems will be called to absorb the large masses of young people, who could contribute to strengthen security environment by making available to communities their knowledge, creativity, and skills for the realization of multi-level adaptive strategies.

(d) Securing the region and investing on youth as peacemaking agents

The security challenge plaguing West Africa is multi-dimensional, ranging from human security to the fight against terrorism, from territorial penetration of drug traffickers to the outbreak of sporadic violence across the region. This implies that national-level response to volatile security threats is no longer sufficient, calling upon the ECOWAS to take the lead in countering these multi-dimensional security challenges. If necessary, such challenges will require the ECOWAS to be assisted by other international actors interested in the maintenance of regional security and peace, primarily the African Union and the UN. Owing to its organizational and institutional proximity in comparison to the latter, however, the ECOWAS is in a position to better appreciate and articulate the security concerns of West Africa. For this reason, it shall be empowered with a directing role in the conduction of regional securitization, peacebuilding, and conflict resolution initiatives. In this regard, to cope with terrorist and domestic conflict threats, the ECOWAS approach shall go beyond exclusively military response, but it should focus on the underlying causes that have prompted many civilians – especially youths – to embrace fundamentalist radicalization and join terrorist groups. Such causes include poverty, marginalization and disillusionment with society and politics, the latter being perceived as totally disinterested in youths' social integration and self-realization. Hence, these factors cannot be resolved militarily, while foreign aid to stabilize economies in countries plagued by violence may not be sufficient (Maiangwa, 2013). To solve deep seated causes of domestic conflicts, ECOWAS must be able to count on increased financial, human and material resources to support national states with limited budgetary and enforcement capacity (Maiangwa, 2013). This will enable to enforce programs in favor of both democratic transitions and Western Africa's people capacity to resist repressive regimes. This will require, however, governments and security commitment and political will to participate in the mutual sharing of financial and logistical resources at regional level on the one hand, as well as information and legal assistance among West African states to combat transnational crime (Maiangwa, 2017). Conversely, if national governments will not go beyond the rhetorical commitment to support the ECOWAS in achieving its peace-making, while perpetuating

corrupt practices and ambiguous relationships with criminal organization, then ECOWAS efforts to counter security threats will presumably end up in a failure (Annan, 2014).

Certainly, ECOWAS approach to regional securitization cannot be detached from sanctioning measures, when necessary. In this regard, Maiangwa (2017) stresses that the effectiveness of ECOWAS approach will depend on its ability to properly ensuring the enforcement of its protocols by member states and to sanctioning them in the face of a violation or circumvention of legal provisions established by the protocols themselves. Yet, since diplomatic sanctions and embargoes imposition are presumed to have repercussions on the lives of citizens, such approach risks to provoke disruptions at the expense of people's livelihoods, thereby fueling popular disillusionment and anger against ECOWAS and triggering social tensions and civil unrests. Rather, an inclusive strategy that builds on the active involvement of populations in the ECOWAS activities shall be encouraged and pursued. This can be done in three ways. First, to build trust among the citizenry and convince them to engage in conflict prevention and peacemaking initiatives, ECOWAS shall consider whether it is appropriate or not to involve certain despotic leaders in the mediation of conflicts in the region, including those who have contributed to trigger conflicts in their home countries by seizing power with military coups or insurgencies (Maiangwa, 2017). This was the case of former Burkina Faso's President Compaoré, who was appointed by the ECOWAS as head of mediation mission during the 2012 Mali crisis despite having staged a military coup in 1987 leading to the death of preceding President, Thomas Sankara. "To have such ex-leaders occupying after-office roles could irk many West African citizens and impede the progress of ECOWAS from truly becoming an organization of the people" (Maiangwa, 2017). Alternatively, mediation and peace-building processes promoted by the ECOWAS shall increasingly involve civil society, grassroot organizations, local communities and women. The latter, indeed, have played pivotal role in peacemaking in their communities, as shown by the women associations born in the middle of civil wars. Hence, the involvement of these actors in formal negotiations and peace talks shall be fostered. Second, among these actors, youths shall be empowered with key roles in the implementation of ECOWAS programs and policies, for instance by opening traineeship opportunities for those who are interested in deepening their understanding of peace and security issues and approaching practical work on the ground about conflict resolution and counterterrorism (Maiangwa, 2013). The examples of youths' contribution to sustainable peace and development in Northern Nigeria (Agbiboa, 2015) and young Malian activists as promoters of social change (Whitehouse, 2017) provide evidence on how the active participation of young people in ECOWAS activities can help achieving regional securitization and peace consolidation. Finally, drawing on the example of Ex-combatants/Military Veterans Policy Dialogue Project initiated by the

Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation's (CSVR) in 2007, the ECOWAS strategy for peacebuilding shall include policy dialogue workshops in which youth ex-combatants are actively involved in their planning, in order to understand their needs and the motives that have driven them to distance themselves from the society. Indeed, by engaging ex-combatants on the policy issues that are relevant to them, it will be possible to convince them that "[…] not only do their interests matter, but that their voices also matter, and that they have a role in influencing policies that concern them" (Adonis, 2009). Drawing on the successful achievements in reconciliating with former militants through policy dialogue workshops, such model shall be extended to engage marginalized youths on policy debates. By doing this, ECOWAS will be able to fulfill its objectives of regional securitization and peace, while putting people at the center of its policy agenda.

CONCLUSION

In his notorious article “The Coming Anarchy”, Robert Kaplan (1994) pictured the future of West Africa with the following words: “West Africa is becoming the symbol of worldwide demographic, environmental, and societal stress, in which criminal anarchy emerges as the real "strategic" danger. Disease, overpopulation, unprovoked crime, scarcity of resources, refugee migrations, the increasing erosion of nation-states and international borders, and the empowerment of private armies, security firms, and international drug cartels are now most tellingly demonstrated through a West African prism” (Kaplan, 1994). Have Kaplan’s predictions on the future of West Africa gone too far, or have they materialized to a large extent? Certainly, the recent history of the region has not been solely catastrophic, as many countries have experienced economic growth and development in spite of domestic political instability and the onset of exogenous shocks, such as climate variability. Compared to the twentieth century, indeed, since the beginning on the twenty-first West Africa has witnessed a general decline in terms of number of internal conflicts, civil wars, and coups d’état. However, from the second decade of the twenty-first century, such declining trend appears to have stalled, with a return to repeated successful and attempted coups d’état across the region, as well as an upsurge of sporadic violence escalated by terrorist and jihadist groups expanding their territorial control. Against this backdrop, the present thesis has attempted to investigate the re-emergence of military putsches across the region from the “youth bulge” perspective, with the aim to discover whether the presence of large youth cohorts may have contributed to predict their occurrence. The decision of focusing on coups d’état has been driven by the necessity of filling the gap with other forms of political violence (i.e., civil wars and domestic armed conflicts) whose outbreak has been largely explained according to the youth bulge theory. Furthermore, in West Africa young people have historically played pivotal roles in both enhancing social unrest during the episodes of political instability and promoting social change and peaceful reconciliation in their aftermath. To that end, the relationship between large youth cohorts and the probability of coup d’état has been examined by considering three explanatory variables that have been previously found to influence both the upsurge of youth-driven turmoil and the occurrence of military action against despotic regimes: youth unemployment, corruption, and urbanization. The analysis has focused on three case studies – Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso – referring to countries characterized either by very large youthful populations and by the return of political instability under coup events and sporadic violence over the last decade. The results of binomial logistic regression highlight that neither the youth bulge, nor the explanatory variables mentioned above seem to significantly infer the probability of coups d’état (both successful and attempted). Arguably, attempting to forecast the occurrence of an event that does not involve public participation may prove difficult, especially in the case of coups d’état, which usually stem

from elite-organized plots against ruling leaders. Hence, investigating the probability of coup events according to quantitative factors may provide an incomplete theoretical framework on the causes of coups d'état. Based on the results of the present investigation and on the subsequent discussion (see Chapter 2), however, several methodological and final conclusions can be drawn. Such conclusions may be helpful for future research on both youth bulge theory and the onset of military coups:

- from the methodological perspective, when identifying the variables and indicators to carry out quantitative analysis on this subject, it shall be borne in mind that some of them may lack strong reliability due to biases affecting their cross-temporal validity. In this research, for instance, the variable of corruption has been found to not significantly influence the probability of coups d'état. Such finding collides with existing literature, which points out that, to a large extent, perception of corruption among both the citizenry and the army has been found to considerably drive the military to displace incumbent leaders from power. This may be attributed to the existence of multiple definitions of corruption, as well as to other ontological divergences around its concept;

- when assessing the likelihood of military action against despotic leader in power, a quantitative approach may not necessarily provide a comprehensive outlook. Hence, statistical inference of coup events shall be accompanied by qualitative analysis to identify the elements that may make one country more prone to experience the onset of a coup. Among the qualitative indicators, popular sentiment towards the ruling regime has been found to influence the outcome of the coup attempt. In the three case studies, indeed, the military putsches were successful when backed by popular support, as occurred in Mali and Niger, while in the face of contested coup attempt (Burkina Faso) the military intervention ended up in a failure. This is because popular discontent may be regarded as a driver, as well as a justification, for the military to displace the contested regime. In the event of future research on military coups, it is recommended to take into account how the regime in power is perceived among the citizenry;

- along with external dynamics developing outside the palace of power, when it comes with computing the probability of coup events, it is important to examine government capacity to meet the demands of citizenry and to provide it with resources and services. Indeed, government inefficiency (or unwillingness) to address the most relevant issues among the public has driven people to sustain the illicit removal of incumbent regimes from power. This has been witnessed in both Niger and Mali, where popular discontent against ruling regimes

has been triggered by the governments' inefficiency in addressing human security issues, such as physical and food security. Arguably, the outbreak of COVID-19 and the Ukraine war are expected to add new constraints to people's livelihoods, thereby complicating governments' ability to fulfill their duties toward their citizens. Hence, future research shall explore the extent to which such critical junctures are forecasted to fuel popular anger against inefficient state authorities and institutions, paving the way toward new episodes of political violence, including coups d'état.

After having discussed the factors related to the occurrence of coups d'état, the present research has outlined a range of challenges that are forecasted to jeopardize both the securitization of West Africa and the future of its inhabitants (Chapter 3). If not immediately addressed, these challenges may hinder governments' capacity to resolve governance issues, as well as to carry out policies for the citizenry, thereby setting the stage for the onset of new coups d'état and/or other forms of political violence. Furthermore, such challenges are presumed to have amplified effects in countries characterized by sizable youth bulges, as they may intensify intra-population conflict for access to limited resources. For each challenge, a span of policy options has been laid out. The future regional challenges and related policies are the following:

- first, the West African labor market (as the rest of the continent) is foreseen to absorb an increasing number of youths entering the working-age population. Most of them is expected to flow into the informal economy, which is often associated with lower productivity and less social security compared to the formal one. Despite this, the informal sector represents an important element in West African society, as it represents the main source of income and sustenance for most of its population. Hence, beyond encouraging more informal enterprises to move into the formal sector, the main challenge is to capitalize on the large pool of youth workers that is expected to enter the informal sector. This can be done by providing new entrants with fiscal and credit incentives, as well as by ensuring them secure rights and entitlements under both labor and land laws. Beyond that, it will be necessary to invest large amounts of resources in education and labor upskilling. By doing this, West African governments and societies will be able to capitalize on the youth bulges that will join the labor market in the upcoming years;

- second, increasing population is forecasted to raise the demand for food resources, thus fueling intra-population competition for their possession and, in turn, exacerbating the already

widespread food insecurity emergency. Against this background, perennial conflicts, climate shocks, and indirect effects of both COVID-19 and the Ukraine war on food prices and value chains will further worsen such situation, leading more people to suffer acute malnutrition and lack of necessary food products. In this regard, policymakers will be required to adopt measures to mitigate the impact of exogenous shocks on food security on the one side, while enhancing regional integration to diversify production and facilitating free movements of food items on the other side. This will require active involvement of the ECOWAS by setting up regional food security reserves in which governments are required to take part in the mutual sharing of food reserves and jointly contribute to the funding of such regional plans;

- third, projections on climate change highlight that climate-related phenomena (e.g., rainfall variability, sea-level rise, and temperature increase) will add further pressure to the livelihoods of West African populations. Given that climate events have already provoked disruptions on economic activities and people's livelihoods, it will be necessary for West African communities to carry out adaptive strategies to cope with environmental degradation and other climate-related phenomena. Such adaptive strategies will have to rely on large investments by public entities, as well as on the provision of updated information about weather outcomes to support farmers in making decisions and planning interventions. Since migration is assumed to remain a pivotal coping strategy *vis-à-vis* climate change, then policymakers shall facilitate the free movement of people across West African countries, as well as migration from rural to urban areas. In addition, in the event of favorable climate projections, governments will have to capitalize on the potential availability of both additional arable land and natural resources for the production of clean energy and development;

- finally, the most immediate challenge that West African countries will face is securing the territory against terrorist groups and criminal organizations. These actors have interests in recruiting most marginalized communities in their illicit activities and destabilizing already weak or failed states in the region by winning the sympathy of corrupt governments and security authorities. Against this backdrop, ECOWAS will be called to take the lead against these violent groups, as well as to engage in conflict-prevention and peacebuilding activities. If necessary, ECOWAS activities shall be assisted by other actors, primarily the African Union and the UN, through the supply of additional resources for the maintenance of regional security and peace. Yet, since the ECOWAS is in a position to better appreciate and articulate the security concerns of West Africa compared to the other two organizations, it shall be

empowered with a directing role in the conduction of regional peacebuilding and conflict resolution initiatives. The latter will require West African public authorities' commitment and political will to participate in the mutual sharing of financial and logistical resources at the service of ECOWAS counterterrorism and conflict resolution strategies. Yet, ECOWAS will be called to review some aspects of its mediation activities, primarily the appointment of despotic leaders who have contributed to trigger conflicts in their home countries by seizing power with military coups or insurgencies. Rather than controversial political personalities, ECOWAS shall consider to actively involving civil society, women and youths in its mediation and peace-building processes. This will enable the ECOWAS to achieve its policy objectives, while winning the direct support of West African population.

Before ending the thesis, it is worthwhile to add final considerations on the role of demography in informing public policy and individual decisions. Throughout the literature on demography, a wide range of contributions, encompassing the Malthusian trap and the youth bulge theory, has emphasized the negative implications arising out of sustained population growth and the formation of large youth cohorts within one country's population. These contributions warn that, if not accompanied with appropriate policies in support of their favorable integration in the labor market and in the society, such large pool of youths may turn into a multiplier of political violence and social turbulence, thereby jeopardizing national and regional security. In this regard, recent escalation of violence and sporadic conflicts across West Africa provides fertile empirical ground to testing whether the sizeable youthful portions within the regional population may have contributed to provoke the outbreak of such events. Here comes the most fashioned question in the field of demography: is demography destiny? The most appropriate answer is: not necessarily. Again, if backed by smart policies harnessing the full potential of large segments of youthful populations entering the working-age, countries can capitalize on the realization of demographic dividend to attain economic growth and development. As argued in the initial part of the thesis, the formulation of policies taking advantage of favorable demographic trends laid the basis for the socio-economic emergence of the Asian tigers. Currently, several West African countries are still undergoing the second stage of demographic transition, which implies that their populaces will remain very youthful for the foreseeable future and will take long time before experiencing sustained population decline. In the face of general population decline undergoing in many parts of the world – namely in Europe and in East Asia (especially in Japan, South Korea and China) – this youth bulges represent a crucial asset for West Africa development and competitiveness in the global stage. What matters, here, is to abandon the prevailing narrative describing youths as a threat, and to start treating them as a resource, thereby helping them to achieve self-realization and

setting the stage to release their full potential. For this purpose, policymakers must not ignore demographic projections. Hence, it is worth concluding the present thesis by echoing Ian Goldin's words (2022): "If we stop kicking the demographic time bomb down the road, it will be possible to achieve stable and sustainable societies that provide a better life for future generations as well as our own".

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Dipartimento di
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DEMOGRAPHY AND SOCIAL CHALLENGES

ASSESSING POLITICAL INSTABILITY IN WEST AFRICA: A YOUTH BULGE PERSPECTIVE

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SUMMARY

West Africa has a long tradition of military coups. Following a period of general decline, a new wave of coups and political violence has broken out.

Since the decolonization process, West Africa's history has been marked by recurrent episodes of successful and attempted military coups, thanks to which several despotic leaders have managed to seize power and to establish autocratic regimes at the expense of weak (or totally absent) functional and democratic state structures. In the post-independence and Cold War period, indeed, West Africa has experienced the largest share of military coups compared to other African sub-regions. Following a period of general decline in terms of both military coups, mainly due to the launch of the neoliberal democratic program in favor of political pluralism and rule of law since the end of Cold War, the region has experienced a new return to political instability and volatility. In the emblematic case of Mali, moreover, the overthrow of government overlapped with dramatic escalation of violence due to the Tuareg rebellion and jihadist groups gaining control of the northern part of the country. Since then, the situation appears to have progressively deteriorated, as shown by the eruption of tensions in the Sahel since 2019, accompanied by new coups across West Africa. Such simultaneous manifestation of both coup events and uptick of violence has pivoted policymakers and scholars' attention on a possible return of old threats arising out of political instability and fragility, with whom many West African countries have had familiarity over the last decades.

Previous contributions on African coups seems to have overlooked the impact of youthful populations on their onset.

Previous academic contributions on African coups d'état have attempted to assess the likelihood of such events by referring to a multitude of causes, including economic factors (Johnson et al., 1984), colonial heritage (Coleman and Brice, 2015; Luckman, 2001), and countries' development (Ben Barka and Ncube, 2012), among others. Interestingly, such contributions seem to have overlooked a relevant element that many West African countries have in common, that is, the presence of very large youthful cohorts within their populations. In this regard, the demographic perspective has been largely embraced by scholars, as well as by political actors and organizations, to explain the occurrence of political violence, mainly in the form of civil wars, inter- and intra- state conflict, and other threats to national/regional security. Among the literature on political demography – hereby defined as "the study of the size, composition, and distribution of population in relation to both government and politics" (Weiner, 1971) – one of the dominant perspectives is the so-called "youth bulge" theory, which relates to the increase in the number and proportion of a country's youthful population, conventionally in the 16-25 or 16-30 age bracket (Heinsohn, 2000; Castree et al., 2013).

The youth bulge theory has been largely used to investigate the occurrence of important events involving the use of violence or the development of social unrests, ranging from the 1848 English Revolution (Goldstone, 2002) to Islamic resurgence right after September 11, 2001 (Zakaria, 2001). This occurs because, in a context of precarious socio-economic conditions where the opportunities to attain social prestige and self-development are lacking, youths are keener to seek personal advancement through extra-legal means (Lam, 2014), namely by joining armed movement and engaging in violent activities against state authorities, often regarded as the main responsible of failed realization of socio-economic factors enabling youths to achieve better careers and personal wellness.

The nexus between the youth bulge theory and the onset of coups d'état has been barely explored.

Although political demographers have largely embraced the youth bulge theory to explain the emergence of specific forms of political violence, yet the role of demographic factors as potential determinants of coup d'état has been barely explored (Ibrahim, 2019). Against this, the present thesis has attempted to fill such a gap by investigating possible linkages between youth bulges in West African population and the return of coups d'état in the early 2010. This has been done by considering three main factors – corruption, urbanization and youth unemployment – that have been found to have strong effects on both the onset of coups and on the intensity of youth-driven uprisings and social unrests.

Urbanization, corruption, and youth unemployment are assumed to have strong effects on both the onset of coups and youth-driven uprisings.

More specifically, growth of urban youth population has been found to be strongly correlated with political violence (Korotayev et al., 2011). Beyond that, anti-government protests located in urban areas – especially in capital cities where the executive and the incumbent leader usually have their seat of power – may be interpreted as a signal from domestic actors in support of coup as well, as they are assumed to have stronger political credibility than those occurring in peripheral areas (Johnson and Thyne, 2018). Concerning corruption, previous studies (Seligson, 2002; Hunter et al. (2020) highlight that popular perception of corruption, together with popular dissatisfaction against the ruling regime, increases the likelihood of coup d'état, in a way that declining support for the regime may allow the military to justify its attempt to remove the incumbent leader from power as the latter is viewed as corrupt and unpopular with the general population (Hunter et al., 2020). Against this background, indeed, corruption has been found to become a political destabilizer in presence of a sizeable youth cohort within one country's population (Farzanegan and Witthuhn, 2017). This may be due to youth-driven unrests against governments corruption practices at the expense of public investments in education and provision of job opportunities for youths. Lastly, large scale youth unemployment has been found to significantly increase the likelihood several forms of political violence, including riots, coup

attempts and civil wars. Conversely, in countries with high employment rates for young people, youth bulges significantly reduce the probability of all three political violence events (Luttwak, 2016; Ibrahim, 2019). Against this backdrop, the present thesis has attempted to assess whether the large segments of youths within West Africa's population may have influenced the re-emergence of coups across the region. To this aim, the relationship between youth bulge (independent variable) and the likelihood of coup events (dependent variable) has been tested by considering the three explanatory factors described above.

Case studies: Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso

The thesis has drawn on three case studies of West African countries that experienced the return of military putsches in the 2010s: Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. The selection of these three case studies is due to three main reasons. First, besides being vulnerable to political instability, all the three countries have been afflicted by several security threats, including terrorist menace, human security threats (e.g., food insecurity and climate change), and exogenous shocks exacerbated by critical junctures (COVID-19 and the Ukraine war). All these factors, together, are presumed to further jeopardize the livelihoods of local populaces – especially the more fragile segments of population, mainly made up of alienated and vulnerable youths – thereby triggering potential uprisings and violent rebellions against state authorities held responsible of not being able to provide their citizens of basic resources and better livelihood opportunities. Second, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger have very youthful age structures and fertility rates are among the highest in the world (World Factbook, 2022). This implies that national populations are forecasted to grow exponentially, as well as to remain largely made up of youths for the foreseeable future. Third, the three case studies provide fertile ground for testing the effect of the three explanatory variables. In all the three countries, corruption has been identified as a recurring issue among popular anti-government demonstrations, as well as a leitmotiv of military interventions to displace incumbent leaders from power. Urbanization is generally increasing, with urban residents growing at high annual rates in all the three countries. Lastly, young Malian, Burkinabe and Nigeriens are confronted with limited perspectives of employability, as well as precariousness, lack of social security, and working poverty. Following the outbreak of COVID-19, large masses of un-/under- employed youths will be confronted with even more fragile and complicated labor and living conditions, hence fueling frustration and desire for rebellion.

To test the relationship between youth bulge and the likelihood of coup d'état, binomial logistic regression has been used. Such model applies to categorical binary response variables, that is, variables having only two possible outcomes. In this analysis, the response variable, the likelihood of military

putsch, has been computed 1 if a coup event (realized, attempt, conspiracy) occurred in a given year, and 0 if otherwise. Regression has been computed with STATA. Results highlight that none of the variables outlined above seems to significantly predict the likelihood of coups d'état. Arguably, this is because coups do not involve public participation for their execution, as they usually stem from elite-organized plots against ruling leaders. This may explain why academic contributions on the relationship between youth bulge and the occurrence of such events have been limited so far, while devoting great attention on the effect of large youth cohorts over alternative forms of political violence – e.g., civil war and riots – which generally involve public participation. Yet, for some variables (i.e., corruption) statistical insignificance may be attributed to biases affecting cross-temporal validity of indicators, as well as by the existence of multiple definitions of "corruption".

Quantity needs quality

Drawing on regression results, a quantitative approach seems not to comprehensively explain why military coups occur. Hence, statistical inference of coup events shall be accompanied by a focus on qualitative elements behind their onset. Among such elements, popular sentiment towards the ruling regime has been found to influence the outcome of the coup attempt. In the three case studies, indeed, the military putsches were successful when backed by popular support (Mali and Niger) while in the face of anti-coup contestations they ended up in a failure (Burkina Faso). This is because popular discontent may be regarded as a driver, as well as a justification, for the military to displace the contested regime. Arguably, popular sentiment largely depends on governments' capacity to meet the demands of citizenry and to provide it with resources and services. Indeed, government inefficiency (or unwillingness) to address the most relevant issues among the public may drive people to sustain the illicit removal of incumbent regimes from power. This has been witnessed in both Niger and Mali, where popular discontent against ruling regimes has been triggered by the governments' inefficiency in addressing human security issues, such as physical and food security.

Great challenges require great policies

In the third chapter, the present thesis has outlined a range of obstacles and challenges that are expected to jeopardize West African governments' capacity to meet up the needs of their fast-growing populations, thereby exposing them to increasing popular dissatisfaction and subsequent menace of coups. Such challenges include food insecurity, climate change, exogenous shocks (COVID-19 and the indirect effects of the Ukraine war) and security threats posed by the penetration and expansion of terrorist groups and criminal organizations across West Africa. These factors have already disrupted the livelihoods of many people across the region and are projected to add further constraints over the upcoming years. If not immediately addressed, these

challenges may hinder governments' capacity to resolve governance issues, as well as to carry out policies for the citizenry, thereby setting the stage for the onset of coups d'état and/or other forms of political violence. For each challenge, a span of policy options has been laid out. First, the West African labor market will have to absorb and capitalize on the increasing number of youth workers in the working-age that is expected to enter the informal sector. This can be done by providing new entrants with fiscal and credit incentives, securing rights and entitlements under both labor and land laws, and investing in education and labor upskilling. Second, increasing population – together with perennial conflicts, climate shocks, and indirect effects of both COVID-19 and the Ukraine war on food prices and value chains – is presumed to further exacerbate the already widespread food insecurity emergency across the region. Against this background, policymakers will be required to adopt measures to mitigate the impact of exogenous shocks on food security on the one side, while enhancing regional integration to diversify production and facilitating free movements of food items on the other side. This will require active involvement of the ECOWAS by setting up regional food security reserves in which governments are required to take part in the mutual sharing of food reserves and jointly contribute to the funding of such regional plans. Third, projections on climate change highlight that climate-related phenomena will add further pressure to the livelihoods of West African populations, who will be required to carry out adaptive strategies to cope with the adverse effects of environmental degradation. Such strategies will have to rely on large investments by public entities, as well as on the provision of updated information about weather outcomes to support farmers in making decisions and planning interventions. Since migration is assumed to remain a pivotal coping strategy *vis-à-vis* climate change, then policymakers shall facilitate the free movement of people across West African countries, as well as migration from rural to urban areas. In the event of favorable climate projections, governments will have to capitalize on the potential availability of both additional arable land and natural resources for the production of clean energy and development. Finally, when it comes with regional securitization against terrorist groups, criminal organizations, ECOWAS will be called to take the lead against these violent groups, as well as to engage in conflict-prevention and peacebuilding activities. If necessary, ECOWAS activities shall be assisted by other actors, primarily the African Union and the UN, through the supply of additional resources for the maintenance of regional security and peace. Yet, since the ECOWAS is in a position to better appreciate and articulate the security concerns of West Africa compared to the other two organizations, it shall be empowered with a directing role in the conduction of regional peacebuilding and conflict resolution initiatives. The latter will require West African public authorities' commitment and political will to participate

in the mutual sharing of financial and logistical resources at the service of ECOWAS counterterrorism and conflict resolution strategies. Yet, ECOWAS will be called to review some aspects of its mediation activities, primarily the appointment of despotic leaders who have contributed to trigger conflicts in their home countries by seizing power with military coups or insurgencies. Rather than controversial political personalities, ECOWAS shall consider to actively involving civil society, women and youths in its mediation and peace-building processes. This will enable the ECOWAS to achieve its policy objectives, while winning the direct support of West African population.

Policymakers must not overlook demography

When faced with the formulation of public policies outlined above, policymakers will be called not to ignore demographic projections undergoing in West Africa. Beyond that, they will be required to abandon the prevailing narrative describing youths as a threat, and to start treating them as a resource. Throughout the literature on demography, a wide range of contributions, encompassing the Malthusian trap and the youth bulge theory, has emphasized the negative implications arising out of sustained population growth and the formation of large youth cohorts within one country's population. These contributions warn that, if not accompanied with appropriate policies in support of their favorable integration in the labor market and in the society, such large pool of youths may turn into a multiplier of political violence and social turbulence, thereby jeopardizing national and regional security. Nevertheless, if backed by smart policies harnessing the full potential of large segments of youthful populations entering the working-age, countries can capitalize on the realization of demographic dividend to attain economic growth and development. Currently, several West African countries are still undergoing the second stage of demographic transition, which implies that their populaces will remain very youthful for the foreseeable future and will take long time before experiencing sustained population decline. Subsequently, policymakers will be required to adopt smart policies harnessing the full potential of youth bulges, thereby boosting West Africa's economic development and competitiveness in the global stage.

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