POLICY BRIEF SUMMARY
COMMONS AND COMMON GOOD – WHAT NEW PATHS OF COOPERATION FOR REDUCING SECURITY AND ENVIRONMENTAL RISKS?

Context

Since the early 1990s, access to environmental resources has been identified as a security issue, particularly through the prospect of future "water wars". While "there is high scientific agreement that ... increased rivalry [over natural resources] is unlikely to lead directly to warfare between States" according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, they have already contributed on diverse occasions to the development of inter-community conflicts (e.g. the Darfur conflict in Sudan since 2003 or, more recently, the conflicts between Dogons and Fulani in Mali in 2018, linked to the theft of livestock in a context of global warming).

The security - climate/environment - development nexus is high on the international and European agenda (see e.g. recent UN Security Council resolutions and statements on the Chad Basin, West Africa and the Sahel, and Somalia that recognize the adverse effects of climate and ecological changes on the stability of these regions).

The recent rediscovery of the commons (i.e. modes of management of a resource by the community of its users, who define governance rules for guaranteeing availability and sustainability of the resource – see figure below) as a mode of sustainable management of natural resources has opened up new avenues for stabilizing the management of natural resources under tension at a local or regional level and preventing and managing conflicts over them. At the international level, commons are at the root of institutional innovations involving networks of actors around common initiatives.

\[\text{Figure - The 3 constitutive elements of a commons}\]

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1 Resolution 2349 (2017) of the UN security council, statement S/PRST/2018/3 by the President of the Security Council of 30th January 2018 and resolution 2408 (2018) of the UN security council
Key messages

Commoms is a widely spread mode of subsistence and of management of natural resources

About 2 billion of people worldwide depend for their livelihood on natural resources (pastures, wetlands, forest, fisheries, ...) used as common-pool resources and regulated and maintained through community-based governance structures which are traditional forms of commons.

This mode of management of natural resources is threatened as the collective rights to access and manage these resources are still often not recognised and protected by national legal and regulatory frameworks. A recent study estimates that 65% of world’s land area is held by communities and indigenous people under customary systems, while only 18% of world’s land is officially recognised as owned or controlled by these communities (Rights and Resource Initiative, 2015).

Neo-commons supporting development goals constitute new tools for international organisations and public policymakers

The idea that commons constitute useful tools to preserve or restore environmental resources is supported by international organisations like the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN or development agencies like the French Development Agency.

Public authorities, civil society organisations as well as development agencies can (and do) mobilise the tools of the commons through the development of modern forms of commons (neo-commons), which connect users-based governance of natural resources based on the principles of commons to modern frameworks of management of natural resources that include public regulation and/or the private sector.

These neo-commons are confronted to 3 specific challenges:

- reconciling the inherently endogenous dynamics of commoning with external goals in a process of negotiation between public actors and communities;
- maintaining the engagement of external public and private actors over a long time;
- ensuring that the newly formed commons genuinely operate as such and are not captured by actors in position of power.

Renegotiating respective roles of local communities and public actors is not a process of withdrawal of public actors, but a process of transformation of their engagement, with new forms of subsidiarity in which public authorities facilitate the formation of commons and support them to ensure their sustainability and check that the commons actually play their role of regulating and preserving the resource.

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2 The estimation of this number varies, from “millions of people” (FAO, 2016) to 2 billion people (Bollier, 2014), and up to 2.5 billion people according to the International Land Coalition.
Transboundary commons are a source of innovation for international and inter-State cooperation addressing the environment-development-security nexus

A wide range of threatened environmental resources extends across national borders, thus calling for cross-border cooperation. Neo-commons can be mobilised at a transnational scale through transboundary commons which articulate local, State and inter-State scales of action.

Transboundary commons add 2 complementary dimensions to neo-commons:

- **Transboundary commoning**, i.e. development of practices of supporting and building commons between actors from different States over a shared environmental resource, notably in a view to overcome the inconsistencies incurred by the regulation of the same resource by different national institutional frameworks;

- The development of transboundary institutional cooperation frameworks making room for and supporting these practices of commoning, thus connecting the governance of commons with institutional frameworks and cross-border public action.

Transboundary commons can also support environmental peacebuilding approaches, which takes cooperation around transboundary environmental issues as an opportunity to facilitate reconciliation between two rival states and abate cross-border tensions. However, preventing and solving conflicts over environmental resources requires case-dependent combination of factors which cannot be limited to the implementation of a commons-based approach.

In the Policy Brief, transboundary commoning is explored through 3 case studies:

- A process of securing transboundary pastures at the border between Mali and Burkina Faso;
- Management of natural resources around the Chad lake;
- The Kavango-Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area.

Key lessons for international cooperation: conditions for successful development of transboundary commons

States should adopt a perspective that is not only focused on the resource but also empowers the communities that depend on it as active contributors to the stewardship of the resource.

A principle of subsidiarity should be applied, defining objectives at different levels and leaving room for self-organisation of users supported by public authorities, NGOs and international organisations.

The rule-making rights of community members at the different scales should be respected by outside authorities to sustain the active engagement of resource users.

Renegotiating roles between public actors, communities and the private sector at an international level necessitates a degree of direct representation of user communities and of the commons that is not uniquely channelled through the usual representation by State actors.

Direct cross-border commoning activities between communities, NGOs, academics and experts, and local authorities should also be encouraged and supported.

The adaptative and evolutionary nature of commons also calls for national and transnational institutional frameworks that make room for adaptation and collective learning.