



COMPETITION FOR NATURAL RESOURCES IN THE BORDER REGIONS OF BENIN (MATÉRI) AND TOGO (KPENDJAL): WHEN VIOLENT EXTREMISM FEEDS ON TENSIONS BETWEEN FARMERS AND HERDERS

INTRODUCTION

The management of agropastoral spaces and the regulation of cross-border transhumance are potential drivers of tensions and violence, and pose major challenges for many West African states (Mossi & Sambieni, 2025; Bako-Arifari et al., 2024; Baudais et al., 2023). Matéri and Kpendjal, two northern regions of Benin and Togo respectively, with similar socio-demographic profiles and rich in natural resources, are no exception. These recurrent conflicts create fertile ground for the radicalisation of individuals and communities, fuelled by a loss of trust in conflict-resolution institutions that have been accused of corruption and favouritism in the handling of land disputes (Africa Centre for Strategic Studies, 2021).

Added to this is the expansion of armed jihadist groups, which, for nearly a decade, have been intensifying their attacks on coastal countries and have become established in northern Benin, in the W and Pendjari National Parks (Bernard & Mossi, 2022; Mossi & Sambieni, 2025; Bako-Arifari et al., 2024). These attacks have had a significant impact on the exploitation of natural resources and the activities of farmers and herders, especially transhumant herders (Baudais et al., 2023). Incursions by armed groups are straining relations between farmers and herders in Matéri and Kpendjal. In Kpendjal, the increase in attacks against the Defence and Security Forces (Forces de Défense et Sécurité, FDS) has led the authorities to introduce several measures, including the suspension of cross-border transhumance. However, some transhumant herders still cross the Togolese border in search of pasture. In this context, violence by armed groups appears to be exacerbating pre-existing tensions between farmers and herders around the exploitation of natural resources.

This policy brief aims, firstly, to analyse the impact of terrorism on agropastoral relations in Matéri and Kpendjal, and secondly, to understand how decisions taken by the Beninese and Togolese authorities regarding the management of agropastoral areas and the fight against terrorism are increasing pressure on the exploitation of natural resources, thereby affecting relations between farmers and herders.

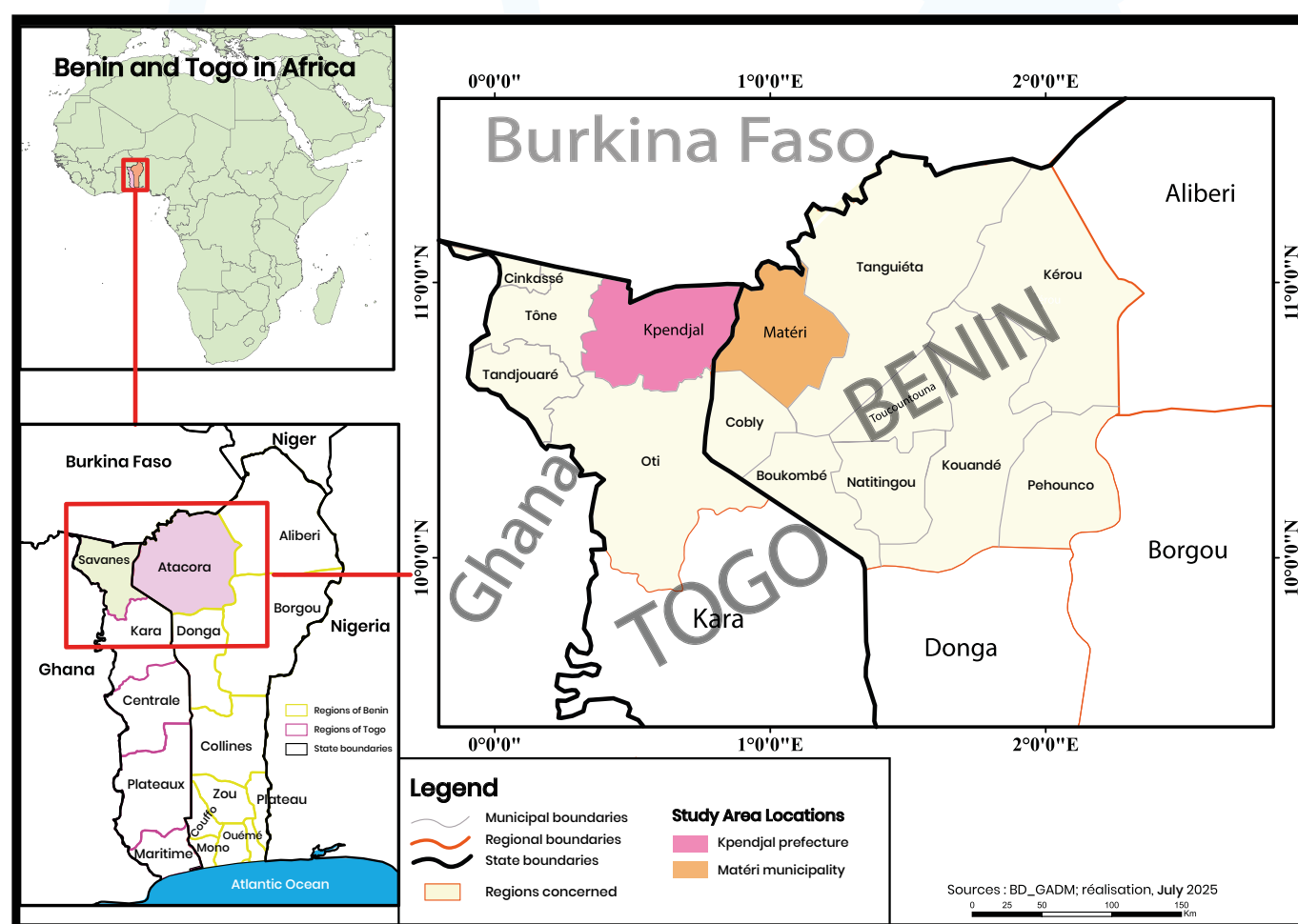
Two types of data sources were used: academic literature and semi-structured interviews conducted between April and May 2025, both in person and remotely. Owing to the refusal of some respondents to participate in interviews over the telephone, experienced local assistants with in-depth knowledge of the field were recruited in Kpendjal. In Matéri, data were collected via telephone calls. The sample was selected using the snowball method, which made it possible to interview civil society actors, local authorities, and farmers and herders. A total of 21 interviews were conducted across the two areas.

This policy brief focuses on the coexistence of farmers and herders in Matéri and Kpendjal, as well as on the management of natural resources in a context of armed violence. It then discusses the strategies implemented by local actors to resolve conflicts, and finally makes recommendations.

1 DYNAMICS OF COEXISTENCE BETWEEN FARMERS AND HERDERS IN MATÉRI AND KPENDJAL

The border regions of Matéri and Kpendjal are both favourable for livestock farming and agriculture. Livestock farming is mainly practised by the Fulani (Peul) people, who coexist with the Berba, Gurma¹, Mossi, Moba, and other ethnic minorities². In both areas, land use relies on community-based mechanisms such as allocation, gifting, loan, lease, or sale.

Figure 1 : Geographical location of the study areas



Source: Moustapha Abdoul Kader (cartographer/UAM), July 2025.

However, pastoral resources—water and pasture—are subject to competition owing to agricultural expansion, the conservation of protected areas, and climate-related shocks. This ecosystem creates a dynamic of coexistence between communities that is sometimes conflictual.

¹ In both of the localities studied in Matéri, members of this ethnic group make up the majority of both landowners and customary chiefs. ² In the prefecture of Kpendjal, the Gurma make up 68.8% of the population (but also most landowners and customary chiefs belong to this ethnic group), while the Mossi make up 10%, the Moba 5.9%, and the Fulani 5%, followed by other minority ethnic groups (source: 2010 General Population Census).

1.1 COEXISTENCE BETWEEN FARMERS AND HERDERS: COMPLEMENTARITY AND TENSIONS

In Matéri and Kpendjal, relations between farmers and herders are both complementary and conflictual (Krätli & Toulmin, 2020). In Matéri, as in other contexts, Fulani herders look after livestock belonging to other ethnic groups, thereby creating a relationship of interdependence, which can sometimes become a source of conflict. In Kpendjal, the practice of grazing animals in fields after harvests allows for soil fertilisation, in exchange for access to available animal feed (such as crop residues and cereals) (Sokemawu, 2011; Sourisseau & Ancey, 2021). In both areas, the demarcation of pastoral and agricultural spaces is governed both by traditional methods of land transfer, as mentioned in our interviews³, and by state regulation as reflected in public policy.

Although herders, whether transhumant or settled, contribute to the socio-economic balance of both areas, their presence makes coexistence with farmers more complex. Relations between farmers and herders are governed by several texts: in Togo, the Plan stratégique de développement du secteur agricole (Strategic Development Plan for the Agricultural Sector) and the Code pastoral (Pastoral Code); in Togo, the Code foncier et domanial (Land and Property Code) (Law No. 2018-005), and since March 2025, an inter-community committee for peaceful transhumance⁴. These public policies aim to regulate the exploitation of natural resources by demarcating agricultural and pastoral areas, while preserving forests and protected areas. Thus, in Benin, to compensate for the expansion of agricultural areas at the expense of livestock farming, part of the Pendjari National Park has been allocated to livestock farming—an area described by one respondent as a ‘free zone’⁵. Herders occupy this zone during the rainy season (June to October), which allows livestock to move northwards to free up areas for agricultural use. The aim of this strategy is to reduce conflicts and preserve the National Park, the use of which is now regulated and limited.

The demarcation of transhumance corridors is another formal measure favoured by the authorities in both regions. However, interviews revealed that, where such corridors exist, they are difficult to enforce. Farmers extend their fields at the expense of grazing areas: ‘Currently, there is no more free space for livestock grazing or for harvesting plants for therapeutic purposes’⁶. This situation is exacerbated by population growth, an increase in livestock numbers, and climate change. On the one hand, population growth drives the expansion of agricultural areas. For example, in the Savanes region of Togo, population density rose from 51.6 inhabitants/km² in 1995 to 97.8 inhabitants/km² in 2010 (Sokemawu, 2011), creating a greater need for land for the development of cash crops. On the other hand, the growth in livestock numbers increases the need for grazing land and the risk of damage to crops. In Kpendjal, for example, livestock numbers are increasing each year by 2-3% or more (Sourisseau et al., 2020; Sourisseau & Ancey, 2021), which requires more grazing land and encourages farmers to favour cashew cultivation over yams to prevent their fields from being destroyed by animals. Once mature, cashew trees are more resistant than yam plants to animal damage. Soil depletion is also a significant factor, as it pushes farmers to expand their fields into areas used by herders as transit zones. Finally, the

drying up of water sources due to climate change is forcing livestock farmers to migrate southwards to the agricultural areas of Gléi, Wahala, and Anié in the Plateaux region, and those of Agbelouvé, Aklakou, and Assahoun in the Maritime region. In these areas, herders prefer to graze their animals close to fields. Owing to these constraints, some transhumant herders are choosing to settle or adopt a practice of limited mobility within their region, which can generate competition with farmers over the use of resources. This fierce competition for land is increasing tensions and even conflicts between farmers and herders, whether transhumant or local.

Damage caused to crops by livestock is one of the main causes of conflict, as ‘herds cause significant damage to farmers’⁷. According to some respondents, this phenomenon is exacerbated by the fact that children are often entrusted with watching over herds in the vicinity of villages, as is often the case in Matéri⁸. Fulani children are introduced to herding at a very young age, which promotes the intergenerational transmission of pastoral knowledge and the integration of young people into the community (Dupire, 1962; Oumarou, 2012), but this also complicates herd management. It is against this context of conflicts over land use that terrorist attacks take place, exacerbating tensions between farmers and herders.

1.2 TERRORIST ATTACKS: A CHALLENGE TO COEXISTENCE BETWEEN FARMERS AND HERDERS

One of the direct effects of terrorist attacks in the two areas studied is the socio-economic instability they cause. To combat this threat, the authorities have revised pastoral policies.

For example, in Benin, the authorities have banned the use of Pendjari National Park by the local population. Nevertheless, some local residents access the park clandestinely under the protection of armed groups, who ‘show kindness towards the population’ in this way in order to gain their trust and obtain supplies or information on military movements (Mossi & Sambieni, 2025). In Togo, the postponement of the start of cross-border transhumance in 2021 (Ali & Douti, 2021) certainly reduced some of the clashes linked to the large-scale arrival of foreign herds, but internal tensions between farmers and herders persist, especially as some transhumant herders cross the Togolese border illegally, flouting the ban⁹.

Tensions between farmers and herders are further exacerbated by discriminatory prejudice against the Fulani community, which is often viewed as being associated with terrorist groups operating in these regions. Indeed, the terrorist attacks in Matéri and Kpendjal have increased the mistrust of Gurma, Moba, and Berba farmers towards Fulani herders, who are often considered to be informants or members of armed groups. This perception, reinforced by the actual presence of Fulani individuals within these groups, leads to collective stigmatisation and encourages an identity-based retreat that threatens social cohesion. One of the consequences of this stigmatisation, as evidenced by the respondents, is that Fulani are over-represented among those arrested by the FDS on suspicion of terrorism in Matéri. These arrests result either from denunciations by other ethnic groups or from initiatives by the FDS. A civil society actor in Matéri stated that, ‘at roadblocks, Fulani are the most likely to be stopped’¹⁰. ‘Fortunately, many are released after their first court appearances’, reported another respondent¹¹.

³ Interview conducted on 28 June 2025 with a civil society actor in Kpendjal and on 1 July 2025 with a community representative in Matéri. ⁴ This committee was created in March 2025 by the Minister of State in charge of Fisheries, Animal Resources, and Transhumance Regulation, through Decree 2007-089/PR on the creation, composition, and powers of the national committee and prefectural committees on transhumance. ⁵ Interview conducted with a respondent from Matéri in April 2025. ⁶ Excerpt from an interview conducted remotely on 23 April 2025 with a member of a herders' association in Matéri. ⁷ Excerpt from an interview conducted remotely on 27 April 2025 with a facilitator from a local NGO in Matéri. ⁸ Excerpt from an interview conducted remotely on 27 April 2025 with a facilitator from a local NGO in Matéri. ⁹ Comments from an interview conducted remotely on 6 May 2025 with a researcher from Kpendjal based in Kara. ¹⁰ Comments from an interview conducted remotely on 28 April 2025 with a member of an international NGO working in Matéri. ¹¹ Interview conducted remotely on 23 April 2025 with a member of a herders' association in Matéri.

Without concrete measures by the authorities to regulate these checks, this stigmatisation could lead to discrimination and exclusion of the Fulani (Djaho, 2023), thereby increasing the risk of retreat into their own community. To be effective, the fight against terrorism should include fair and regulated management of natural resources.

2 MANAGING NATURAL RESOURCES IN A CONTEXT OF TERRORISM: DIVERSE APPROACHES

In the Matéri and Kpendjal regions, the presence of terrorist groups is changing the roles of the actors involved in the management of natural resources. In addition to administrative and customary authorities, civil society organisations are also actively involved in strengthening social cohesion and peace between communities, through various mechanisms and actions. However, terrorism often complicates the implementation of these interventions.

2.1 LAND DISPUTES: AN APPROACH DOMINATED BY CUSTOMARY LAW

Despite the land policies in place, conflicts arise over the exploitation of resources in Matéri and Kpendjal. To address this, two types of conflict resolution mechanisms—customary and stateled—are mobilised.

Customary mechanisms are centred around traditional leaders. In the event of damage to farmland, they establish the facts and estimate the amount of compensation due. However, they are limited in their role ‘by a lack of the technical, human, and financial resources needed to fully perform their duties’¹². Nevertheless, these mechanisms remain the preferred option in both localities, as they are based on conciliation. According to one respondent, in the commune of Matéri, out of more than 100 land disputes recorded, no fewer than 63 disputes between farmers and herders were settled through customary channels¹³. In Kpendjal, between the beginning of 2024 and August 2025, nearly 200 conflicts were managed through customary mechanisms. In the cantons of Mandouri and Tambigou, three to four conflicts related to natural resources are dealt with each week¹⁴, and as many as five cases per week can arise during the rainy season. In general, state mechanisms are less frequently used, because the courts, which hand down judgements, are perceived as being less attuned to community issues. Whereas judicial actors judge and decide, customary mechanisms seek reconciliation between the parties. However, recourse to state mechanisms becomes necessary when the customary route fails to satisfy, or when the conflict involves assault and battery, or murder. This duality of mechanisms reflects the coexistence and complementarity between locally consensual solutions and institutional mechanisms, and raises the question of their coordination for more effective land governance.

In Togo, in order to strengthen institutional arrangements, a ministry responsible for transhumance was created in 2024. One of the recent actions of this institution is the launch of a call centre, accessible via a free hotline (8424). This mechanism should enable the authorities to anticipate and prevent community-based conflicts by promoting local participation, just as traditional mechanisms do, particularly in the context of the fight against terrorism.

2.2 WHEN THE FIGHT AGAINST TERRORISM IMPACTS SOCIAL COHESION

In addition to their military operations, the Beninese and Togolese authorities involve local actors in their counter-terrorism strategies. In Benin, the army is collaborating with Fulani community leaders, such as in a highly publicised meeting on 17 April 2025 in Natingou (Houunkpe, 2025), where the latter were invited to dissuade young people from joining armed groups. While this approach aims to mobilise communities in preventing radicalisation, it carries a major risk: by specifically targeting Fulani communities, it may reinforce stereotypes that associate this group with terrorism. This perception, fuelled by the arrests mentioned above and the security focus on this community, risks deepening ethnic divides and eroding social cohesion in northern Benin, thereby undermining long-term stabilisation goals.

Furthermore, alert systems have been set up, first by a local NGO (in Matéri) and then by the local authorities in Kpendjal, with the aim of reporting any suspicious behaviour to the administrative and/or military authorities. Although these measures have the potential to prevent security threats, they remain largely ineffective owing to the lack of protection guarantees for informants and the risks of discrimination. In an environment marked by open or latent community conflicts and stigmatisation, they may also reinforce divisions unless preventive measures are taken against this (the training of intermediaries for reporting, strict confidentiality, and the creation of protection mechanisms).

Nonetheless, the awareness-raising activities carried out by NGOs are making an important contribution. In Matéri, for example, during the weekly market in the village of Kouforpissi, the mass arrest of Fulani by the police was opposed by members of other ethnic groups. Better still, the municipal authorities of Matéri travelled to Kpendjal to plead for the release of two local Fulani suspected of terrorism. In addition, an NGO in Matéri is mobilising Fulani women as intermediaries in prevention work, given their influence in family and community decisions, and especially their potential for dissuading men from joining terrorist groups. Women are involved in promoting peace and preventing terrorism, and, according to one respondent¹⁵, this type of involvement has proved to be a successful strategy.

¹² Excerpt from an interview with a member of an NGO in Kpendjal on 28 April 2025. ¹³ By way of comparison, in the commune of Kandi, out of around 100 land disputes, 58 are managed through customary mechanisms, according to the head of a local NGO representing herders. ¹⁴ Data from Gestion de l’environnement et valorisation des produits agro-pastoraux et forestiers (GEVAPAF), a national NGO based in Mandouri. ¹⁵ Interview conducted remotely on 4 May 2025 with the head of an NGO in Matéri.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Terrorist attacks in Matéri and Kpendjal occur in a tense environment, marked by land disputes between farmers and herders. In order to alleviate both these tensions and the impacts of terrorist attacks on them, local authorities, civil society actors, and the population are stepping up their efforts. To make these actions more effective, several recommendations should be considered:

1. NATIONAL AND LOCAL AUTHORITIES

- Strengthen mutual collaboration through intelligence sharing, bilateral exchanges, and joint patrols in order to harmonise counter-terrorism strategies.
- Provide more training for community leaders on collaborating with the FDS, and on the merits of doing so, in order to limit their exposure to terrorist attacks and avoid arbitrary denunciations.
- Provide more training to FDS personnel on respect for human rights and freedoms in contexts of insecurity in order to prevent arbitrary and targeted arrests of civilians.
- Mark out transhumance corridors to enable farmers and herders to identify the boundaries of their land.
- Increase awareness-raising activities among the population on the risks posed by stigmatisation and prejudice towards a particular community.

2 . THE ADMINISTRATIVE AUTHORITIES OF MATÉRI AND KPENDJAL

- Strengthen collaboration with local NGOs involved in the management and resolution of land disputes in order to coordinate interventions and create synergy.
- Provide training on modern farming and herding techniques to local young people.
- Strengthen the technical capacities of customary mechanisms for land dispute resolution and management by training relevant actors.
- Strengthen the financial capacities of customary mechanisms by granting them funds to increase their level of intervention.

3 . THE DEFENCE AND SECURITY FORCES (FDS)

- Avoid publicising the collaboration of members of a particular ethnic group with the FDS so that they are not targeted by terrorist groups or stigmatised by other ethnic groups.
- Increase social interventions (medical consultations, healthcare, food donations, repair of infrastructure, etc.) in communities in order to build trust.

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Funded by the European Union

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