

# THE SAHEL RESEARCH GROUP

LEONARDO VILLALÓN, SEBASTIAN ELISCHER, ABDOULAYE KANE, SARAH MCKUNE, FIONA MCLAUGHLIN, RENATA SERRA & ALIOUNE SOW

The Sahel Research Group at the University of Florida represents a unique collaborative effort to understand the political, social, economic and cultural dynamics of the countries of the West African Sahel. The group brings together a highly interdisciplinary set of faculty members with expertise in a wide array of topics: politics, religion, migration and diaspora, social dynamics, health, agriculture, climate change, economics, language, culture, and intellectual production in the region. A number of PhD students from various disciplines and with research focus on the Sahel are key contributors to the group's efforts and activities.

Our core interest is in the six Francophone countries of the region—Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad. We are also interested in developments in neighboring countries, to the north and south, whose dynamics frequently intersect with those of the Sahel. Collectively the Sahelian countries represent some of the least developed countries on earth—the four landlocked states are

regularly among the very bottom in the UNDP's annual Human Development Index rankings. The fragile ecology of the region is particularly vulnerable to climate variation, with serious consequences for human livelihoods and wellbeing. Global religious trends and geopolitical events have in recent years placed significant additional pressures and posed new challenges to governments in the region.

Yet there are also other dynamics in the face of this difficult context: vibrant civil societies continue to struggle to build and strengthen democratic institutions, social structures maintain often striking resilience while adapting to new contexts, and there are strong and trans-regional intellectual debates on religion, human rights, culture and social change. Our goal is to build on the diversity of training, expertise and backgrounds among Sahel Research Group members to better understand the full complexity of both the difficulties and the possibilities of the region. We have a strong commitment to engaging and working with colleagues and partner institutions in the countries of the Sahel, and to

this end we have been fortunate to host a number of visiting scholars and frequent guests from the region.

Our weekly "Sahel Seminar" meetings provide an ongoing opportunity to present findings and to share perspectives and analyses on developments in the region. In February 2017, the annual Gwendolen M. Carter Conference in African Studies will be organized by the Sahel Research Group, under the title: "On the Edge: What Future for the African Sahel?" This major interdisciplinary conference will bring together some 40 scholars from Africa, Europe and North America to discuss the wide range of factors shaping the region's future. More information on these activities, and descriptions of the range of specific research projects by group members can be found on our website at: <http://sahelresearch.africa.ufl.edu/>

Leonardo Villalón is professor of African politics and dean of the UF International Center. Sebastian Elischer is assistant professor of African politics. Abdoulaye Kane is associate professor of anthropology and African studies. Sarah McKune is clinical assistant professor of public health. Fiona McLaughlin is associate professor of African linguistics and chair of the Department of Linguistics. Renata Serra is lecturer in African economics. Benjamin Soares is professor of African religion and Islamic studies. Alioune Sow is associate professor of French and African studies.

