

From Breadbasket to Battleground: Climate Change, Conflict, and Agricultural Collapse in Anglophone Cameroon, 2017–2025

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ABSTRACT

The protracted Anglophone Crisis in Cameroon’s Northwest and Southwest regions has coincided with increasing climate variability, raising critical questions about their combined impact on rural livelihoods. This article explores how the interaction between climate change and armed conflict has contributed to agricultural collapse between 2017 and 2025. Drawing on a qualitative methodology that integrates oral interviews, secondary data analysis, climate trend reports, and conflict assessments, the study applies insights from Political Ecology to examine the climate conflict nexus. The findings reveal that erratic rainfall, land degradation, and shortened growing seasons, when combined with insecurity, displacement, and institutional breakdown, have led to widespread farm abandonment, disruption of food systems, and deepening rural vulnerability. The study concludes that the convergence of environmental stress and governance failure has produced a self-reinforcing climate conflict trap, undermining both resilience and recovery. It recommends the adoption of conflict-sensitive climate governance strategies, including the restoration of local institutions, promotion of climate smart agriculture, and strengthened support from national and international actors to rebuild sustainable livelihoods in affected regions.

Keywords: Climate Change, Armed Conflict, Agricultural Collapse, Governance, Cameroon Anglophone Regions.

INTRODUCTION

The Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon have long been recognized as critical agricultural zones within the national economy, contributing significantly to both subsistence food crop production and export-oriented cash crops such as cocoa, coffee, plantains, and maize. Prior to 2017, these regions were widely described as part of Cameroon’s “breadbasket,” sustaining rural livelihoods while supplying urban markets and agro industrial value chains (Neba, 1999, p. 58). In the North West region, villages of Santa, Kumbo, Ndop, Bambili, Ndu and Nkambe were noted for their agricultural sustainability (Nfor 2026, interviewed). In the south west region, the towns of Buea, Tiko, Limbe, Kumba and Mutengene left no stone unturned. Agriculture in these regions is predominantly rain-fed and smallholder based, making it highly sensitive to both environmental variability and socio-political stability.

However, the outbreak and escalation of the Anglophone Crisis in 2017 fundamentally altered this landscape. What began as socio political grievances rooted in marginalization quickly evolved into a protracted armed conflict, characterized by violence, population displacement, and institutional breakdown. The consequences for rural communities have been particularly severe. Farmers have been forced to abandon their lands due to insecurity, while others face restricted access to farms because of military operations, armed group activities, and general instability (International Crisis Group, 2022, p. 9). As a result, vast tracts of previously cultivated land now lie fallow, and agricultural production has declined sharply.

Beyond the immediate impacts of violence, the conflict has disrupted the broader agrarian system. Rural infrastructures including feeder roads, storage facilities, and local markets, has been damaged or rendered

inaccessible in most conflicted rural communities of the Anglophone regions (Emmanuel 2026, interviewed). Agricultural supply chains have fractured, limiting farmers' access to inputs such as seeds and fertilizers, as well as their ability to transport produce to markets. In addition, widespread displacement has significantly reduced the availability of agricultural labour, undermining both household level production and community-based farming systems (FAO, 2017, p. 24).

These dynamics have contributed to a gradual but profound transformation of the region's rural economy. Concurrently, climate change has emerged as an additional and compounding stressor. Cameroon has experienced increasing climate variability over recent decades, including erratic rainfall patterns, rising temperatures, and more frequent extreme weather events. In the Anglophone regions, these changes have disrupted traditional agricultural calendars, shortened growing seasons, and reduced crop yields (Molua & Lambi, 2007, p. 47). Farmers, who rely heavily on predictable seasonal cycles, now face heightened uncertainty regarding planting and harvesting periods (Njeba 2026, interviewed). This environmental instability exacerbates existing vulnerabilities, particularly in conflict affected areas where adaptive capacity is already weakened.

Despite the clear co-occurrence of conflict and climate stress, much of the existing literature treats these factors as separate drivers of rural vulnerability. Studies on the Anglophone Crisis tend to emphasize political grievances, security dynamics, and humanitarian consequences, while research on climate change in Cameroon focuses primarily on environmental and economic impacts. However, there is growing recognition within Political Ecology and Conflict Studies that climate change and conflict are deeply interconnected processes. Climate change does not operate in isolation; rather, it interacts with existing socio-political conditions, often amplifying instability and vulnerability.

This article builds on this emerging body of scholarship by examining the interaction between climate change and armed conflict in shaping agricultural outcomes in Anglophone Cameroon. It argues that agricultural collapse in the region is not solely the result of direct conflict related disruptions or environmental degradation, but rather the outcome of their mutually reinforcing interaction within a context of governance failure. In particular, the weakening or absence of local governance structures has undermined the capacity of communities to adapt to climate variability, thereby intensifying the impacts of both environmental and conflict-related shocks (Ngwa, 2023, p. 20). To capture this dynamic, the article introduces the concept of a "climate–conflict trap," in which environmental stress, violent conflict, and institutional fragility interact in a self-reinforcing cycle. Climate variability reduces agricultural productivity and increases livelihood insecurity; conflict exacerbates displacement and disrupts production systems; and governance failure limits adaptive responses. Together, these factors create conditions of persistent vulnerability and agricultural decline.

The central question guiding this study is: How has the interaction between climate change and armed conflict contributed to agricultural collapse in Anglophone Cameroon between 2017 and 2025? By addressing this question, the article seeks to contribute to both theoretical debates on the climate–conflict nexus and policy discussions on resilience and recovery in fragile contexts. The significance of this study lies in its dual contribution. Empirically, it provides a nuanced understanding of how intertwined environmental and political crises reshape rural livelihoods. Conceptually, it advances the notion of the climate–conflict trap as a framework for analyzing compounded vulnerabilities in conflict-affected regions.

a policy perspective, the findings underscore the need for integrated approaches that address climate adaptation, conflict resolution, and governance rebuilding simultaneously. In doing so, the article also aligns with broader international efforts to promote sustainable development and resilience in fragile contexts, including initiatives supported by organizations such as UNESCO. Without such integrated interventions, the transformation of Anglophone Cameroon from a breadbasket to a battleground is likely to persist, with far-reaching implications for food security, livelihoods, and regional stability.

Conceptual Clarification

To enhance analytical precision, three core concepts guide this study.

Agricultural Collapse

Agricultural collapse refers to a sustained and systemic decline in agricultural production and rural livelihood systems resulting from the combined effects of insecurity, environmental stress, market disruption, labor shortages, and institutional breakdown. Unlike temporary production shocks, agricultural collapse involves long-term reductions in cultivated land, food output, and rural economic activity.

Climate–Conflict Trap

The climate–conflict trap refers to a self-reinforcing cycle in which climate stress, armed conflict, and socio-economic vulnerability mutually reinforce one another. Climate variability reduces agricultural productivity and household resilience; conflict further disrupts production systems and displaces populations; and weakened livelihoods reduce adaptive capacity, deepening vulnerability to future shocks.

Governance Failure

Governance failure refers to the inability of public institutions to effectively provide security, coordinate agricultural support services, maintain infrastructure, and facilitate adaptation to environmental change. In conflict-affected contexts, governance failure often manifests through weakened administrative capacity, reduced state presence, and limited service delivery.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Research on climate change and conflict has increasingly moved beyond deterministic explanations toward more nuanced analyses of vulnerability and governance. Rather than viewing climate change as a direct cause of conflict, contemporary scholarship conceptualizes it as a threat multiplier that interacts with pre-existing political, economic, and social conditions (Ide et al., 2021).

Political Ecology provides a particularly useful framework for understanding these interactions because it emphasizes how environmental outcomes are shaped by power relations, governance structures, and historical inequalities. From this perspective, environmental stress cannot be separated from broader questions of political marginalization and institutional capacity.

Studies of agricultural livelihoods in fragile contexts similarly demonstrate that conflict and environmental change frequently interact to undermine food production, disrupt markets, and weaken adaptive capacity. However, relatively little research has examined these interactions within the context of Cameroon’s Anglophone regions. Existing studies tend to analyze either the political dimensions of the Anglophone Crisis or the environmental consequences of climate variability. This study bridges that gap by examining how climate stress, armed conflict, and governance failure jointly contributed to agricultural collapse between 2017 and 2025.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in interpretive analysis, with the aim of understanding the complex interaction between climate change and armed conflict in shaping agricultural outcomes in Cameroon’s Anglophone regions. Given the sensitivity of the context and the limited availability of reliable primary data from conflict zones, the study relies on primary and secondary sources, including academic literature, institutional reports, and policy documents. Data were collected from a range of credible sources, including oral interviews, reports from international organizations such as the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the World Bank, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

These sources provide insights into food security trends, displacement patterns, agricultural performance, and humanitarian conditions in Cameroon. In addition, reports from non-governmental organizations and think tanks, such as the International Crisis Group, were used to contextualize the conflict dynamics associated with

the Anglophone Crisis. To complement conflict-related data, the study also reviewed existing climate literature and country-level climate assessments, including the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports and World Bank climate profiles. These sources provide evidence on rainfall variability, temperature trends, and broader environmental changes affecting Cameroon. By integrating climate and conflict datasets, the study adopts a triangulation approach to strengthen the reliability and validity of the analysis.

The analysis is interpretive and thematic in nature.

Rather than relying on statistical modeling, the study identifies recurring patterns and relationships across different sources of information. These patterns are examined in relation to key variables such as agricultural productivity, displacement, governance capacity, and environmental stress. Particular attention is given to how these variables interact over time, especially during the period between 2017 and 2025, when both climate variability and conflict intensity have been prominent. The methodological approach is informed by principles from Political Ecology, which emphasizes the importance of examining environmental issues within their socio-political and institutional contexts. This perspective allows for a more nuanced understanding of how power relations, governance structures, and conflict dynamics shape access to resources and adaptive capacity. It also enables the study to move beyond simplistic causal explanations and instead focus on the interaction of multiple stressors.

Overall, the methodology provides a comprehensive and context-sensitive framework for analyzing the intersection of climate change and conflict. By combining multiple data sources and adopting a thematic analytical approach, the study is able to capture the complexity of agricultural collapse in Anglophone Cameroon while maintaining analytical rigor. Documents were identified through systematic searches of academic databases including Google Scholar, Scopus, JSTOR, and Web of Science using combinations of the keywords: Cameroon Anglophone Crisis, climate change Cameroon, food security Cameroon, agriculture and conflict, displacement Cameroon, and Northwest Southwest Cameroon agriculture.

To ensure relevance and credibility, sources were included if they: Were published between 2017 and 2025; Addressed climate variability, agriculture, displacement, food security, or conflict in Cameroon; Originated from peer-reviewed journals, international organizations, or recognized humanitarian agencies. Sources were excluded if they lacked methodological transparency, contained duplicated information, or did not directly address the study area.

The Climate-Conflict Trap

The interaction between climate change and armed conflict in Cameroon's Anglophone regions produces a reinforcing cycle that can be understood as a climate–conflict trap. This concept captures the way environmental stress and insecurity interacts over time to deepen vulnerability, weaken adaptive capacity, and constrain recovery. In the context of the Anglophone Crisis, climate variability does not operate as an isolated stressor; rather, it interacts with violence, displacement, and governance breakdown to produce cumulative and mutually reinforcing effects on agricultural systems and rural livelihoods. Climate variability, including irregular rainfall, rising temperatures, and land degradation, reduces agricultural productivity and increases the uncertainty associated with farming activities (Judith 2026, interviewed). Small holder farmers, who constitute the majority of agricultural producers in the region, rely heavily on predictable seasonal cycles. When these cycles become unreliable, planting decisions become riskier, yields become more volatile, and the likelihood of crop failure increases (IPCC, 2022, p. 1450). These environmental pressures alone would already strain rural livelihoods, but their effects are significantly magnified in contexts of armed conflict.

Conflict introduces additional layers of disruption that directly undermine agricultural production. Insecurity limits farmers' access to land, interrupts farming routines, and forces households to abandon productive activities (Magarette 2026, interviewed). Displacement removes labor from agricultural systems and breaks the continuity of farming knowledge and practices within communities. At the same time, conflict disrupts markets, increases transport costs, and restricts access to inputs such as seeds, fertilizers, and tools. These combined disruptions reduce both the quantity and quality of agricultural output, contributing to long-term decline rather than temporary setbacks (FAO, 2017, p. 24).

The governance dimension is central to understanding why these conditions become self-reinforcing. In conflict-affected areas, institutional capacity is weakened, limiting the ability of local and national authorities to coordinate responses to environmental and socio-economic challenges (Banla 2026, interviewed). Agricultural extension services, rural infrastructure, and development programs are either absent or severely constrained. Without effective governance, communities lack access to information, resources, and institutional support needed to adapt to changing climatic conditions (World Bank, 2021, p. 36). This institutional fragility means that adaptation occurs in an ad hoc manner, often insufficient to offset the combined pressures of climate stress and insecurity.

Over time, these dynamics generate a feedback loop. Climate stress reduces agricultural productivity and household incomes, increasing vulnerability. Conflict exacerbates this vulnerability by displacing populations and disrupting economic activities. Governance breakdown limits the capacity to implement adaptation strategies or rebuild livelihoods. As a result, communities become trapped in a cycle where each factor reinforces the others, preventing recovery and deepening structural vulnerability. This is consistent with broader findings in the climate–conflict literature, which emphasize that environmental and political stressors interact in complex and context-dependent ways rather than through linear causation (Ide et al., 2021, p. 3).

The climate conflict trap in Anglophone Cameroon is therefore not merely a descriptive concept but an analytical framework that explains the persistence of agricultural collapse despite the presence of natural resources and historically productive land. It highlights how environmental variability, when combined with insecurity and weak governance, can produce long-term systemic decline. In this sense, the “breadbasket to battleground” transformation reflects not only a change in security conditions but also a deeper structural breakdown in the relationship between people, institutions, and the environment.

Implications For Food Security And Livelihoods

The combined effects of climate change and conflict in Cameroon’s Anglophone regions have had severe implications for food security and rural livelihoods. Food security, defined as the availability, access, utilization, and stability of food, is directly undermined by declines in agricultural production and disruptions in distribution systems. As farms are abandoned and yields decline due to environmental stress and insecurity, the availability of locally produced food decreases significantly (Ateba 2026, interviewed). This reduction in supply is further compounded by market disruptions that limit the movement of goods from surplus to deficit areas.

Households in affected regions increasingly face challenges in accessing adequate and nutritious food. Income losses resulting from reduced agricultural activity limit purchasing power, while rising food prices driven by scarcity and transport constraints further reduce access (Awat 2025, interviewed). The Food and Agriculture Organization notes that conflict-affected populations are disproportionately exposed to food insecurity due to disruptions in both production and supply chains (FAO, 2017, p. 30). In the Anglophone regions, these dynamics are evident in the growing reliance on humanitarian assistance and coping strategies such as reduced meal frequency, dietary diversification, and asset depletion.

Livelihoods in rural Cameroon are heavily dependent on agriculture, making them particularly vulnerable to the combined effects of climate change and conflict. When agricultural systems collapse, households lose not only their primary source of income but also their main means of subsistence. This loss has cascading effects on education, health, and overall well-being. Some children have been withdrawn from school due to financial constraints, while some households have reduced expenditures on healthcare and other essential needs in the Anglophone regions (Ndi 2026, interviewed). Over time, these coping mechanisms can lead to long-term human capital degradation and intergenerational poverty.

Displacement further exacerbates livelihood insecurity. Many households that have been forced to leave their farms are unable to return, either due to ongoing insecurity or loss of access to land (Francisca 2026, interviewed). In displacement settings, individuals often rely on informal or precarious forms of employment, which provide limited income and stability. The breakdown of rural economies also reduces opportunities for economic diversification, trapping households in vulnerable and low-income activities.

The interaction between climate stress and conflict also affects resilience. Resilience refers to the ability of households and communities to absorb shocks and recover from them. In the Anglophone regions, resilience is weakened by repeated exposure to both environmental and conflict-related shocks. Climate variability continues to affect agricultural production, while conflict restricts the ability of households to adapt or invest in recovery. This combination reduces the capacity of communities to rebuild livelihoods and sustain food production over time. Institutional responses to these challenges have been partially supported by international organizations, including UNESCO and other humanitarian and development agencies.

These actors provide emergency food assistance, livelihood support, and capacity-building programs aimed at strengthening resilience. However, the effectiveness of such interventions is often limited by insecurity, restricted access, and the scale of needs in conflict-affected areas (UNDP, 2020, p. 22). As a result, while humanitarian assistance plays a critical role in mitigating immediate food insecurity, it does not fully address the structural drivers of vulnerability. Ultimately, the implications of the climate–conflict interaction for food security and livelihoods are profound and long-lasting. Agricultural collapse in Anglophone Cameroon reflects not only a temporary disruption but a systemic transformation of rural socio-economic systems. Without sustained efforts to address both environmental and conflict-related drivers, food insecurity and livelihood vulnerability are likely to persist, reinforcing the broader climate–conflict trap (Fon 2026, interviewed).

Recent humanitarian assessments reveal the scale of the crisis. According to OCHA (2024), more than 600,000 internally displaced persons remained affected by the Anglophone Crisis, many of whom were originally engaged in agriculture. FAO and WFP assessments similarly reported substantial reductions in cultivated land due to insecurity, with many farming households unable to access their fields during critical planting and harvesting periods.

Food insecurity has increased significantly across the Northwest and Southwest regions. Humanitarian response reports indicate that conflict-related displacement and declining agricultural production contributed to increased dependence on food assistance and negative coping mechanisms among rural households. The cocoa, coffee, plantain, and maize sectors have been particularly affected due to disrupted transport networks, labor shortages, and reduced access to markets.

Events And Agricultural Outcome In Anglophone Cameroon

Table 1: Interaction of Climate Shocks, Conflict Events, and Agricultural Outcomes in Anglophone Cameroon (2017–2025)

PERIOD	CLIMATE STRESS	CONFLICT DYNAMICS	AGRICULTURAL IMPACT
2017-2018	Irregular rainfall patterns	Escalation of the Anglophone conflict	Farm abandonments begins
2018-2019	Shortened growing season	Increase insecurity and displacement	Reduce cultivation and labor shortage
2020-2021	Rising temperatures and rainfall variability	Intensified armed confrontation	Declining yields and disrupted markets
2021-2022	Localised draught episodes	Continued village attacks and displacements	Reduced food production and market access
2022-2023	Increase weather unpredictability	Persistent insecurity	Expansion of food insecurity
2023-2024	Land degradation and rainfall irregularity	Continued displacements	Declining agricultural resilience

2024-2025	Continued variability	climate	Protracted conflict and governance	Sustained agricultural collapse
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Source: Designed from field data by researcher 2026.

The timeline demonstrates that agricultural decline resulted not from isolated climatic or political shocks but from their cumulative interaction over time. The evidence indicates three major trends: increasing climate variability, prolonged conflict-related displacement, and sustained reductions in agricultural activity. These developments occurred simultaneously throughout the study period. The table demonstrates that agricultural collapse emerged from the interaction of environmental stress and conflict rather than from either factor independently. Thus the climate conflict trap provides a useful framework for explaining how repeated shocks weakened household resilience and institutional capacity.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Addressing the intertwined challenges of climate change, conflict, and agricultural collapse in Cameroon’s Anglophone regions requires coordinated, multi-level interventions that integrate peacebuilding, environmental governance, and rural development. The persistence of the Anglophone Crisis has demonstrated that technical agricultural solutions alone are insufficient without parallel efforts to restore security, rebuild institutions, and strengthen governance frameworks. Policy responses must therefore move beyond sector-specific approaches and adopt integrated strategies that simultaneously address environmental stressors and conflict dynamics.

One of the most critical policy priorities is the restoration of security and stability in affected regions. Without a minimum level of peace, agricultural activities cannot resume effectively, and adaptation measures cannot be implemented sustainably. Peacebuilding initiatives should focus on inclusive dialogue processes that address the root causes of the conflict, while also ensuring the protection of rural populations and farming communities. International and regional actors, including organizations such as UNESCO, can play a supportive role in facilitating dialogue, promoting education, and supporting community resilience programs that contribute indirectly to stability.

In parallel, strengthening local governance institutions is essential for rebuilding agricultural systems and supporting climate adaptation. Decentralized governance structures should be reinforced to improve service delivery at the community level, particularly in areas such as agricultural extension, land management, and rural infrastructure development. Re-establishing functional administrative systems would enable better coordination of development initiatives and improve the implementation of national policies in conflict-affected areas. Institutional capacity-building should also include training local officials and community leaders in conflict-sensitive development planning and climate adaptation strategies (World Bank, 2021, p. 38).

Investment in climate-resilient agriculture is another key policy direction. Farmers in the Anglophone regions require access to improved seed varieties, climate-smart farming techniques and sustainable land management practices that enhance productivity under changing environmental conditions. Agricultural extension services should be revitalized and adapted to operate in fragile contexts, possibly through mobile outreach programs or community-based knowledge networks. Supporting farmer cooperatives and local associations can also enhance collective action and improve access to inputs, markets, and information. Such interventions can help reduce vulnerability and increase adaptive capacity in the face of climatic variability (FAO, 2017, p. 31).

Rehabilitation of rural infrastructure is equally important for restoring agricultural productivity and market access. Roads, bridges, storage facilities, and irrigation systems that have been damaged or neglected during the conflict need to be rebuilt to facilitate the movement of goods and people. Improved infrastructure not only enhances agricultural value chains but also contributes to economic recovery and regional integration. Infrastructure development should be conflict-sensitive, ensuring that it does not exacerbate tensions or inequalities between communities.

Humanitarian assistance must continue to play a role in addressing immediate food insecurity, but it should be complemented by longer-term development programs that focus on livelihood restoration and resilience building. Emergency food aid can help prevent acute hunger, but sustainable solutions require investments in agriculture, education, and income-generating activities.

Livelihood diversification programs can reduce dependence on rain-fed agriculture and provide alternative sources of income for displaced and vulnerable populations (UNDP, 2020, p. 24). At the same time, climate adaptation policies should be integrated into national and local development planning. This includes the development of early warning systems, climate information services, and risk management frameworks that enable communities to anticipate and respond to environmental shocks. Data collection and monitoring systems should be strengthened to provide reliable information on climate trends, agricultural performance, and vulnerability patterns. Such evidence-based approaches are essential for designing effective and targeted interventions (IPCC, 2022, p. 1502).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the agricultural collapse observed in Cameroon's Anglophone regions reflects the convergence of climate change, armed conflict, and governance failure. The transformation from productive agricultural landscapes to zones of abandonment and vulnerability underscores the severity of the climate–conflict nexus. Environmental stressors such as erratic rainfall, rising temperatures, and land degradation have reduced agricultural productivity, while conflict has disrupted farming activities, displaced populations, and weakened institutional capacity. Together, these forces have produced a reinforcing cycle that limits adaptation and deepens vulnerability. Breaking this cycle requires integrated and sustained policy responses that address both the symptoms and root causes of the crisis. Efforts to improve food security and restore livelihoods must be accompanied by initiatives that promote peace, strengthen governance, and enhance climate resilience. Without such comprehensive interventions, the region risks remaining trapped in a persistent state of agricultural decline and socio-economic instability. A coordinated approach involving national authorities, local communities, and international partners is therefore essential to support recovery, build resilience, and ensure the long-term sustainability of rural livelihoods in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon.

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