

# Access to Natural Resources and Autochthony in West Africa

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**In contemporary West Africa the declining resource base and power relations are causes of conflict. Many outbreaks of violence are caused by “autochthons” or first comers to safeguard “ancestral lands” against “newcomers” accused of overusing resources. This is paradoxical at a time when official discourse invites national and regional integration.**



*Photo 2: Transformation of pastoral production systems: urban pastoralism in Nouakchott, Mauritania (Photo by G. Fokou)*

In Africa, where borders are fluid due to weak state control and cross-border social organisations, mobility is a strategy for achieving livelihood goals. “Foreigners” are seen by local people as overusing resources. The autochthony discourse that emerges is rooted in the desire of local people to safeguard their assets and secure a livelihood.

Studies in West Africa (Côte d’Ivoire, Lake Chad basin) show that dichotomies between ‘locals’ and ‘non-locals’, ‘autochthons’ and ‘foreigners’, ‘in’ and ‘out’ are very flexible. Conflicts increasingly erupt over access to natural resources, commercial exchange, and access to political power. Autochthony is above all a social construct resulting from power struggles. It is often instrumentalised by powerful actors to serve their interests.

- Public space has become a shared and disputed space where poor and voiceless people can express themselves.
- Emerging youth movements try to show their patriotic ideologies through clear political positions.
- Management of natural resources has come to involve conflicting social relations with different actors deploying different strategies to benefit from surplus capital.

In the search for better living conditions, “frontiers do not matter” to many people in West Africa. To avoid conflict, there is a need to implement multilevel-institutional frameworks such as updated pastoral codes and norms for natural resource management that could directly improve livelihoods and indirectly improve access to basic social services and enhance social dialog.



*Photo 1: Long distance migration of Fulani pastoralists in the Lake Chad basin (Photo by G. Fokou)*