



Consequences of rapid ice sheet melting on the Sahelian population vulnerability

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The acceleration of ice sheet melting has been observed over the last few decades. Recent observations and modeling studies have suggested that the ice sheet contribution to future sea level rise could have been underestimated in the latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report. The ensuing freshwater discharge coming from ice sheets could have significant impacts on global climate, and especially on the vulnerable tropical areas. During the last glacial/deglaial period, megadrought episodes were observed in the Sahel region at the time of massive iceberg surges, leading to large freshwater discharges. In the future, such episodes have the potential to induce a drastic destabilization of the Sahelian agroecosystem. Using a climate modeling approach, we investigate this issue by superimposing on the Representative Concentration Pathways 8.5 (RCP8.5) baseline experiment a Greenland flash melting scenario corresponding to an additional sea level rise ranging from 0.5 m to 3 m. Our model response to freshwater discharge coming from Greenland melting reveals a significant decrease of the West African monsoon rainfall, leading to changes in agricultural practices. Combined with a strong population increase, described by different demography projections, important human migration flows could be potentially induced. We estimate that, without any adaptation measures, tens to hundreds million people could be forced to leave the Sahel by the end of this century. On top of this quantification, the sea level rise impact over coastal areas has to be superimposed, implying that the Sahel population could be strongly at threat in case of rapid Greenland melting.

climate change | ice sheet melting | impact | vulnerability | Sahel

The Sahel is particularly exposed to extreme climate variability, as evidenced by the impacts of the severe droughts in the late 20th century (1). Paleoclimatic records have also shown that megadrought episodes occurred in this area during past glacial/deglaial periods (2–5) at the time of huge surges of icebergs (i.e., the so-called Heinrich events), causing outlet glacier acceleration and thus sea level rise (6, 7) (SLR). Several modeling studies performing water-hosing experiments confirmed the close correspondence between the West African monsoon weakening and the freshwater flux (FWF) released to the ocean (8–10) due to ice sheet melting. These studies raise the question as to whether such episodes could occur during this century in response to a massive freshwater discharge triggered by a significant ice sheet destabilization or surface melting and, if so, what would be the related environmental and human impacts in the Sahel area.

According to the latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Fifth Assessment Report (AR5) (11), the likely range of global mean SLR under the Representative Concentration Pathways 8.5 (RCP8.5) scenario is 0.52 m to 0.98 m by the end of the 21st century. Although considerable progress has been made in ice

sheet modeling over the last decade, this range is provided with only medium confidence, due to large remaining uncertainties in the ice sheet dynamic response and to an improper representation of the ice–ocean interactions (12).

In Greenland, recent observations of fjords standing well below sea level suggest important processes of glacier front destabilization (13) that are not included in the current dynamic ice sheet models (14). Moreover, although there are only a few ice shelves surrounding Greenland compared with West Antarctica, post-AR5 remote sensing observations reveal that ice shelves have experienced a continuous thinning for several years, resulting in a buttressing weakening (15, 16), not only in the Antarctic ice sheet but also in Greenland. This leads to a significant ice stream acceleration and possibly to a massive discharge of grounded ice, similar to what occurred during Heinrich events or, more recently, after the collapse of the Larsen B ice shelf (17). Moreover, past episodes of rapid SLR acceleration, such as the Meltwater Pulse 1A (18), are still raising questions about our ability to evaluate the future SLR under current understanding of physical mechanisms.

Results from these past climate studies combined with present-day observations suggest that the ice sheet contribution to SLR could have been underestimated. Here, we consider different freshwater discharge scenarios equivalent to an additional SLR ranging from 0.5 m to 3 m coming from ice sheet melting and/or destabilization,

Significance

A major uncertainty concerning the 21st century climate is the ice sheet response to global warming. Paleodata indicate rapid ice sheet destabilizations during the last deglaciation, which could lead to an underestimation of sea level rise, as suggested in recent publications. Therefore, we explore the impact of different scenarios of Greenland partial melting in the very sensitive Sahel region. We first demonstrate that such a melting induces a drastic decrease of West African monsoon precipitation. Moreover, we quantify the agricultural area losses due to monsoon changes. Consequently, we pinpoint a large potential for migration of millions of people in the coming decades. Thus, the ice sheet destabilization provokes not only coastal damages but also large population migration in monsoon area.

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To illustrate the internal model variability, we considered a four-member dataset of the RCP8.5 scenario, each member differing in initial conditions. The evolution of the corrected precipitation in the West African Sahel region, obtained under the RCP8.5 dataset (baseline experiments) and the four GrIS scenarios, is displayed in Fig. 3. However, the precipitation signal simulated in response to the 0.5-m SLR perturbation is not statistically significant compared with the four members of the RCP8.5 baseline experiment, as indicated by the t test (P value <0.05 ; *Methods*), and the corresponding results will not be further discussed in the following.

The effect of the FWF perturbation radically changes the evolution of precipitation averaged over the Sahel region. The first key feature is a significant decrease of Sahel rainfall for the three larger GrIS scenarios (i.e., 1-, 1.5-, and 3-m equivalent SLR) compared with the four-member RCP8.5 dataset. This decrease occurs almost concomitantly with the FWF release and can be up to 30% over the period 2030–2060, reaching $3 \text{ mm}\cdot\text{d}^{-1}$, where the greatest differences with the baseline experiment scenario are simulated (P value <0.05). When the freshwater perturbation stops, P_{av} increases slightly, and values close to those of the baseline experiment are recovered.

Increasing Vulnerability

The Sahelian agroecosystem is likely to be strongly disturbed by these large precipitation changes; this could have significant impacts on populations extremely dependent upon rainfed agriculture for subsistence. It is documented that the rainfall decrease and the temperature elevation in the Sahel will negatively impact yields of staple food cereals, such as sorghum and millet (39). The water demand for these crops is calculated by Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) formulations (*Methods*) and depends on temperature. The north–south gradient of water demand has a similar amplitude for sorghum and millet, directly related to the temperature gradient. In the Sahel area, the sorghum needs, currently, between 520 mm and 660 mm per growing period. The millet growth period is shorter than that of sorghum and needs therefore less water (460 mm to 600 mm per growing period). The

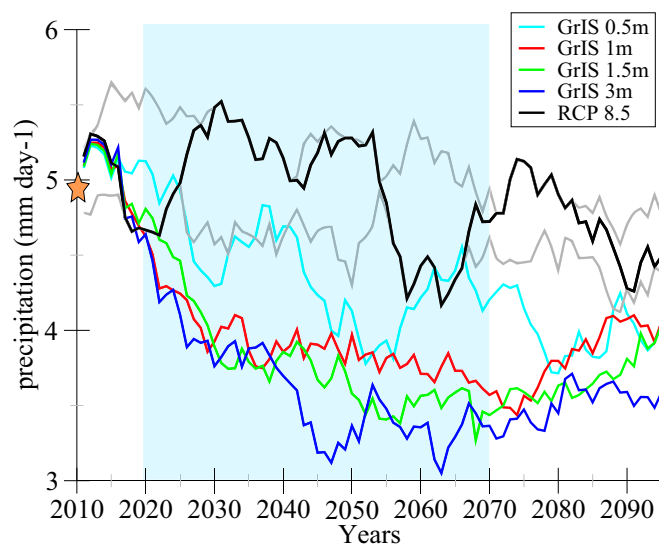


Fig. 3. Evolution of JJAS precipitation during the 21st century averaged over the Sahel area (8°N to 18°N , 17°W to 15°E) for the RCP8.5 and the GrIS scenarios. The orange star indicates the simulated JJAS precipitation over the climatic reference period (1976–2005) deduced from the IPSL-CM5A simulated precipitation (4.96 mm). To illustrate the internal model variability, we considered a four-member dataset of the RCP8.5 scenario, each member differing in initial conditions. The area delimited by the two gray curves represents the range of model variability deduced from the four-member dataset.

water demand increases over the 21st century, due to the temperature increase. In average on the Sahel area, the water demand values rise from 580 mm (515 mm) to 650 mm (580 mm) per growing period for the sorghum (millet).

To quantify the impacts of rainfall decrease on the population, we analyze the gain or loss of available area for agriculture relative to the adequacy between the sorghum water requirement and the JJAS precipitation. Fig. 4A displays the variations of available area for sorghum cultivation. Under the GrIS scenarios, a strong decrease of the cultivable area with respect to 1976–2005 is observed between 2025 and 2100, up to $\sim 1,100,000 \text{ km}^2$ for the 1-m GrIS melting scenario and even more for the 1.5- and 3-m GrIS melting scenarios. After 2070, the cultivable area slightly increases, and the RCP8.5 values are progressively recovered, except for the 3-m scenario.

The large impact of the GrIS scenarios on the local population may be enhanced by a strong demography dynamics in the Sahel. All of the projections of the demography evolution suggest an increase of the population over Africa (40). However, these projections remain uncertain and are strongly dependent on socioeconomic changes that will occur throughout the 21st century (40, 41). To estimate the range of people affected by monsoon variations, we analyze the human impacts related to a loss of cultivable areas for a demography fixed to that of 2011 (lower bound) and for an evolving demography deduced from a shared socioeconomic pathway (41) (SSP3 hereafter), which is consistent with the RCP8.5 scenario (upper bound).

Considering the Sahelian population fixed to its 2011 level (i.e., 135 million people, Fig. 4B), the GrIS scenarios lead to a rapid growth (in less than 20 y) of people impacted by the loss of cultivable area, up to ~ 60 million people in the 1.5- and 3-m GrIS melting scenarios between 2040 and 2065, due to change in precipitation regimes. This number slightly decreases at the end of the FWF perturbation. However, the most dramatic consequences are observed when the population dynamics are accounted for (Fig. 4C). According to the SSP3 scenario, the number of people living below the water threshold (*Methods*) for sorghum cultivation undergoes a rapid and continuous increase, up to ~ 360 million by the end of the 21st century. This number represents one third of the population living in the Sahel area, showing that the climatic impact is widely amplified by the demography explosion. This situation will put a considerable strain on millet and sorghum subsistence agriculture. For local farmers, migration might thus appear as a necessary option, especially if one considers the rapid development of African metropolises. Options are, indeed, likely to be limited for local farmers, and staying on their land would require substantial changes in agricultural techniques and the abandonment of subsistence agriculture (42).

We demonstrated that Greenland melting during the 21st century could drastically affect the climate, not only in high-latitude locations but also over the tropical areas, through atmospheric and oceanic teleconnections. Although most studies focus on the coastal impacts of SLR (43), we pointed out that Greenland melting could produce drastic droughts in the Sahel, with many consequences for agricultural practices and for population migrations. In the past, monsoon-dependent farmers have used the cities (44) and the coastal zones as a refuge or a final migration destination following rainfall deficit years. Under the 1-m SLR scenario or one involving higher SLR, coastal zones will be extremely destabilized, and migration to these regions will be difficult, with a possible “coastal squeeze” (45), making the urban areas the primary destination for migrants. Today, most migrant flows related to environmental disruptions occur within their national or regional boundaries (46). A rapid melting of ice sheets, however, is likely to lead to dramatic population shifts that would develop beyond borders and would entail irreversible demographic impacts.

Methods

Model and Experimental Details. All of the experiments presented in this study have been carried out with the coupled atmosphere–ocean IPSL-CM5A-LR model (19), which has been used for the CMIP5 exercise. The atmospheric

t Test for Each Simulation. To investigate the significance of the monsoon variations due to the freshwater input, we use the *t* test. We average the total monsoon precipitation on the Sahel area (8°N to 18°N; 17°W to 15°E) and compare each scenario with the RCP8.5 baseline experiment. The *t* test (Eq. 6) must be done with stationary series,

$$t = \frac{\bar{X}_{scen} - \bar{X}_{rcp85}}{\sqrt{\frac{s_{scen}^2}{n_{scen}} + \frac{s_{rcp85}^2}{n_{rcp85}}}}, \quad [6]$$

where *t* is the *t* test result, *X* is the sample mean for the scenario under study and the RCP8.5 baseline scenarios, *S*² is the unbiased estimator of the variance of the two samples, and *n* is the simulated precipitation value in each scenario (i.e., 10 for the RCP8.5 baseline experiment and 10 for each GrIS scenario).

However, our scenarios are used in transient experiments. To circumvent this problem, we calculate the *t* test values 10 y by 10 y with a time lag of 1 y (i.e., 2006–2015, 2007–2016, ...) to obtain 84 pseudostationarity periods by subsampling. We obtain a *t* value for each year between 2011 and 2094. For each *t* test, we have 10 values for one GrIS scenario and 10 for the RCP8.5 one, leading to 18 degrees of freedom, allowing us to have a robust test. A longer period would lead to nonstationarity of our time series, and a shorter period would lead to a test with a too large variability, and therefore not usable. Using a probability threshold of 97.5% combined with these 18 degrees of freedom, the critical value is 2.101.

Water Demand of Crops. The threshold of crop water demand evolves with time as a function of temperature: The crops need more water when the temperature increases. The water demand of sorghum cultivation (ET_{crop}) can be obtained for each model grid point in the Sahel area (8°N to 18°N; 17°W to 15°E). It is estimated with the evapotranspiration (ET₀) given by the Blaney–Criddle technique (63) (Eq. 7) with a correction factor *kc*, as suggested by the FAO Eq. 8 (64), which accounts for specific characteristics of a given crop species,

$$ET_0 = p(0.46 T_{mean} + 8) \quad [7]$$

$$ET_{crop} = ET_0 \times kc \times A, \quad [8]$$

where ET₀ is the potential evapotranspiration (in millimeters per day), ET_{crop} is the water demand for crop (in millimeters per growing period), T_{mean} is the mean temperature over the monsoon period (in degrees Celsius), A is the crop growing period duration (i.e., 120 d for sorghum, 105 for millet), P is the percentage of daytime duration, and *kc* is the crop factor: 0.78 for sorghum, and 0.79 for millet.

Surface Area and Population Impacted by Rainfall Changes. To estimate the variations of the agricultural area due to rainfall changes and the number of inhabitants impacted by the weakening of precipitation, we computed the land surface area receiving an amount of precipitation below the required precipitation threshold for sorghum cultivations. Because the number of

inhabitants is given by a 0.5° × 0.5° spatial resolution dataset, provided by the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research from a preliminary version of the SSP population data (the 2012-05-11 data in the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA) database), the rainfall has been bilinearly interpolated on a 0.5° × 0.5° grid. For each scenario (RCP8.5 and GrIS), the area impacted by rainfall change [R(t)] in the Sahel area (8°N to 18°N; 17°W to 15°E) is obtained year by year with the following equation:

$$R(t) = \sum R_{scen}(t) - \sum R_{ref}, \quad [9]$$

where R_{scen}(*t*) represents the area covered by the grid points where the precipitation volume is above the water demand of crops, and R_{ref} represents the area covered by the grid points where the precipitation averaged over the last 30-y climatic period (1976–2005) is above the water demand of crops.

To estimate the evolution of the cultivable area affected by a precipitation deficit, we express the number of corresponding pixels in square kilometers. When the number of pixels is negative (positive), the area available for agriculture is smaller (larger) than that of the 1976–2005 climatic period.

The number of inhabitants impacted by rainfall changes is estimated by summing the number of people living in the corresponding surface area. To count only the rural population with only rainfed agriculture practices, the surface area where the current population density is above 200 inhabitants per square kilometer is excluded. A positive (negative) value means that a greater (smaller) number of people is affected by rainfall changes compared with the reference period (1976–2005).

Code and Data Availability. All data generated in this study by the IPSL-CM5A-LR model for the Greenland scenarios as well as the Ferret and Python scripts produced for their analysis are available from the corresponding author. Other results supporting this study are based on CMIP5 model, WFDEI Reanalysis data, and population projections, which are available, respectively, from cmip-pcmdi.llnl.gov/cmip5/data_portal.html, www.eu-watch.org/data_availability, and clima-dods.ictp.it/Users/fcolon_g/ISI-MIP/.

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