DROUGHT FORECASTING USING A HYBRID NEURAL ARCHITECTURE FOR INTEGRATING TIME SERIES AND STATIC DATA

Julian Agudelo * AgroParisTech, Agrial Vincent Guigue [†] AgroParisTech Cristina Manfredotti AgroParisTech Hadrien Piot Agrial

Abstract

Reliable forecasting is critical for early warning systems and adaptive drought management. Most previous deep learning approaches focus solely on homogeneous regions and rely on single-structured data. This paper presents a hybrid neural architecture that integrates time series and static data, achieving state-of-the-art performance on the DroughtED dataset. Our results illustrate the potential of designing neural models for the treatment of heterogeneous data in climate related tasks and present reliable prediction of USDM categories, an expert-informed drought metric. Furthermore, this work validates the potential of DroughtED for enabling location-agnostic training of deep learning models. All the necessary code to reproduce the experiments is available at https://github.com/JulAgu/drought_forecasting_HM.

1 INTRODUCTION

Drought is a natural phenomenon characterized by a prolonged period of below-average precipitation, which causes significant hydrological imbalances that negatively impact land resources (Reichhuber et al., 2023). Droughts are typically classified into meteorological, agricultural, hydrological and socioeconomic types (Humphreys, 1931; Dracup et al., 1980; Wilhite et al., 2007), reflecting their broad impacts on different systems. As global warming intensifies, drought events' frequency, duration, and severity increase, exacerbating vulnerabilities. Given the multifaceted nature of droughts and their effects across various spatial and temporal scales, reliable forecasting is crucial for early warning systems and adaptive resources management. Effective predictions help mitigate impacts on water supply, agriculture, ecosystems, and communities (Aghelpour et al., 2020).

Several indices are commonly used to assess drought conditions. Some well-known examples are the Palmer Drought Severity Index (PDSI) (Palmer, 1968), the Standardized Precipitation Index (SPI) (Mckee et al., 1993), and the Standardized Precipitation Evapotranspiration Index (SPEI) (Vicente-Serrano et al., 2010). These indices depend on meteorological variables to quantify deviations from climatic norms. Alternatively, the U.S. Drought Monitor (USDM) categories provide a complete evaluation by integrating hydrological, climatic and weather data with experts' insights, capturing a holistic view of drought impacts (Svoboda et al., 2002). We use the USDM categories as our target variable for this study due to their comprehensive nature and integration into DroughtED (Minixhofer et al., 2021).

Various authors have used machine learning to predict drought indices (Nandgude et al., 2023). Traditionally, manual feature extraction has been used to feed classical machine learning algorithms (Gaikwad et al., 2015). However, in recent years, there has been a significant shift toward deep learning approaches, which employ representation learning to automatically extract meaningful features from data (Zheng & Casari, 2018). A considerable number of prior studies utilizing deep learning techniques for drought prediction have predominantly focused on homogeneous regions (Dikshit et al., 2022), and primarily employed uniform structured data, as images (Chaudhari et al., 2023) or time series (Lalika et al., 2024; Vijaya Shetty et al., 2023) alone.

^{*} julian.agudeloacosta@agroparistech.fr, j.agudelo@agrial.com

[†]vincent.guigue@agroparistech.fr

This paper uses the DroughtED dataset introduced by Minixhofer et al. (2021) and presents a novel modeling approach for drought forecasting with heterogeneous data. The contributions of this research are threefold. (1) We introduce a neural architecture integrating time series and static data through FFNNs, LSTMs, categorical embeddings, and an attention mechanism. We benchmark our model against the dataset's baselines. (2) We conduct an ablation study to assess the contribution of each component within the proposed model. (3) We apply visualization techniques over latent states to perform model introspection.

2 Data

DroughtED is a large-scale dataset designed to forecast drought conditions in the United States by integrating spatial and temporal features (Minixhofer et al., 2021). It includes historical meteorological time series, soil physical characteristics, and historical drought intensity information at the county level. The meteorological data are sourced from The NASA Prediction Of Worlwide Energy Resources (NASA POWER) project (Zhang et al., 2009), the soil properties are derived from the Harmonized World Soil Database (Nachtergaele et al., 2008) and the drought intensity evaluations are taken from the USDM (Svoboda et al., 2002).

Drought data are ordinal indicators measured locally. These indicators are then reduced to continuous average values and aggregated at the county level. The target values to be predicted are 6 continuous values at county level, corresponding to 6 consecutive weeks. We have data $\mathbf{Y} \in \mathbb{R}^{N \times 6}$ where N corresponds to the number of pairs (county, timestamp) noted (c, t) in the following. To predict these targets, we have static descriptors $\mathbf{S} \in \mathbb{R}^{C \times f}$, where f is the number of features describing the soil physical properties, and C the number of counties. Note that the descriptors will be divided into categorical $\mathbf{s}_{\mathbf{d}} \in \mathbb{R}^{f_d}$ and numerical $\mathbf{s}_{\mathbf{n}} \in \mathbb{R}^{f_n}$ features below. The meteorological data is represented as multivariate time series grouped in a tensor $\mathbf{X} \in \mathbb{R}^{C \times P \times M}$: for each county, we observe M = 20 different measurements over several years corresponding to P days.

We use all the descriptors from (Minixhofer et al., 2021): each local target to predict $\mathbf{y} \in \mathbb{R}^6$ (6 weeks following t in county c) is associated with static descriptors \mathbf{s}_d and \mathbf{s}_n as well as a multivariate time series $\mathbf{x} \in \mathbb{R}^{T \times M'}$. The period extracted from X corresponds to T = 180 days before the timestamp t for the county c, while we take the M available measurements plus the M measurements corresponding to the previous year over the same days to enable the model to build comparative features, thus M' = 2M.

Counties are indexed using the FIPS (NIST, 1990) identifier. We use the train, validation and test splits available in Kaggle¹.

3 The proposed model

Despite the flexibility of neural network libraries, handling data with heterogeneous structures is still an open topic in deep learning (Guo et al., 2019; Kamm et al., 2023). We propose a hybrid neural model that combines four modules: Long-Short-Term Memory Recurrent Neural Networks (LSTM), Feedforward Neural Networks (FFNN), embedding layers and an attention mechanism. Figure 1 shows the schema of the proposed model.

The categorical features $\mathbf{s}_{\mathbf{d}}$ are passed through the embedding layer E, which maps them to dense vectors $\mathbf{e} \in \mathbb{R}^{z}$. Then, the dense representations of all categorical features are concatenated and passed through a FFNN \mathcal{F} that reduces its dimensionality, resulting in a vector $\mathbf{e}' = \mathcal{F}(E(\mathbf{s}_{\mathbf{d}})) \in \mathbb{R}^{z'}$, where z' < z. In parallel, the multivariate time series \mathbf{x} is fed into the LSTM, yielding hidden states at each time step t: $\{\mathbf{h}_t\}_{t=1:T} \in \mathbb{R}^{h \times T}$. The hidden states are further processed by the attention mechanism (detailed in Appendix A) to produce a context vector $\tilde{\mathbf{h}} \in \mathbb{R}^{h}$. The numerical features $\mathbf{s}_{\mathbf{n}} \in \mathbb{R}^{f_n}$ remain unchanged.

The final representation is obtained by concatenating the context vector $\tilde{\mathbf{h}}$, the last hidden state \mathbf{h}_T , the continuous features \mathbf{s}_n , and the latent representation of the categorical features \mathbf{e}' .

¹https://www.kaggle.com/datasets/cdminix/us-drought-meteorological-data

Table 1: Weekly results on the test set for the proposed model and the Minixhofer et al. (2021) LSTM model.

	Week	1	Week	2	Week	3	Week 4	4	Week s	5	Week	5
Model	MAE	\mathbf{F}_1	MAE	F_1								
LSTM HM	0.150 0.126	81.6 82.2	0.229 0.169	71.6 74.7	0.286 0.209	64.5 68.6	0.347 0.244	57.4 64.0	0.394 0.269	54.2 58.6	0.432 0.294	49.6 51.0

The resulting vector is $\mathbf{x}' = [\tilde{\mathbf{h}}, \mathbf{h}_T, \mathbf{e}', \mathbf{s}_n] \in \mathbb{R}^{2h+z'+f_n}$. This concatenated vector is then passed through an MLP \mathcal{M} , which outputs the prediction $\hat{y} = \mathcal{M}(\mathbf{x}') \in \mathbb{R}^6$.

To the best of our knowledge, no prior effort has employed a neural architecture combining these elements to predict USDM drought categories.

4 EXPERIMENTS AND RESULTS



Figure 1: Schematic view of the proposed model.

Given the outlined framework, we conducted some experiments to investigate the following questions. a) How does the proposed hybrid architecture perform compared to the best baseline model established by Minixhofer et al. (2021) regarding predictive performance and generalization? b) What is the relative contribution of each architectural component to the overall performance? c) Does the proposed model sustain superior performance under a location-agnostic training compared to location-specific training? d) How do the attentional mechanism and latent embeddings interact to shape the learned representations within the model?

Hyperparameter optimization was conducted using Bayesian optimization via Optuna (Akiba et al., 2019), with the AdamW optimizer (Loshchilov & Hutter, 2019) and a cyclical learning rate schedule (Smith, 2017). We replicated

the baseline LSTM model following the publicly available code and guidelines provided by Minixhofer et al. (2021), and we present results from our implementation to ensure consistency. The Transformer baseline model was excluded from the analysis since the LSTM demonstrated superior performance. This decision aligns with the findings of Minixhofer et al. (2021) and is further supported by Zeng et al. (2023), which highlights the limitations of transformer-based approaches in time series forecasting.

a) Predictive performance and generalization. After training the architecture with the optimal set of hyperparameters, we observed that the proposed Hybrid Model (HM) consistently yields better MAE and macro F_1 scores over the weeks, as shown in Table 1. Over the entire test set, the model shows relative improvements of 30% in the MAE, 9% in the F_1 and 7% in the multi-class weighted ROC-AUC score compared to the baseline LSTM. To estimate the expected prediction error more accurately, we performed 5-fold cross-validation (Appendix D) and conducted a paired t-test to evaluate whether HM significantly outperforms the LSTM. The results show a significant improvement in MAE, RMSE, and F_1 , with *p*-values of 0.03, 0.04, and 0.02, respectively.

b) Ablation study. We evaluated the model under three ablation variables (Table 2). The best performances are achieved when the attention mechanism was included. Additionally, the ablation study founds that most of the knowledge is derived from meteorological data, which aligns with previous findings (Minixhofer et al., 2021).

	Ablation settin				
Static features	Time series	Attention mech.	MAE	RMSE	F1
✓	\checkmark	\checkmark	0.217	0.377	66.3
	\checkmark	\checkmark	0.267	0.419	56.2
	\checkmark		0.271	0.420	56.6
\checkmark	\checkmark		0.280	0.427	57.1
\checkmark			0.755	0.920	21.2

Table 2: Results of the ablation study for the proposed model (HM).

c) Location-agnostic vs location-specific training. As in the experiment carried out by Minixhofer et al. (2021) for the baseline LSTM, we consider the same 3 states obtained at random (Iowa, Montana and Oklahoma) and trained HM on each state alone and on all training data (Appendix F). The model trained on data from all counties —location-agnostic— demonstrated an average relative improvement of 9.3%. This indicates that when using HM, location-agnostic training outperforms location-specific training. In comparison, Minixhofer et al. (2021) reported an average relative improvement of 4.6% for the baseline LSTM.

d) **Model introspection.** We conduct a qualitative analysis of the model's intermediate representations. By using t-SNE dimensionality reduction (with a perplexity = 100 and 1000 iterations) (van der Maaten & Hinton, 2008), we examined how observations cluster according to each categorical feature. Our findings indicate that the embeddings closely align with the categories of the "Nutrient availability" feature (see Figure 2a). We consider this a favorable outcome, as previous work have found that droughts significantly influence the presence and accessibility of nutrients in the soil (He & Dijkstra, 2014; Bista et al., 2018).

In relation to the attentional weights, we processed the test set through the model. Then, we plotted the average attention weight for each day, along with a 95% confidence interval (Figure 2b). Attention is primarily concentrated on the first 10 days, with additional focus on the last 30 days of the look-back window.



(a) t-SNE colored by "Nutrient availability".

(b) Mean attention weights on the test set.

Figure 2: t-SNE over the embeddings and mean attention weights curve.

5 CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

We present a hybrid neural architecture and validate its effectiveness through empirical evaluation on the DroughtED dataset, achieving state-of-the-art performance in forecasting USDM drought categories.

Future improvements to the proposed architecture will prioritize refining the attention mechanism through two strategies: (1) calibrating attention weights sharpness via a learnable softmax temperature parameter and (2) leveraging expert-annotated labels to supervise attention training through an auxiliary loss, mirroring the expert-guided process behind USDM categories. Beyond immediate performance gains, the architecture's modular design creates a flexible framework for extreme weather events forecasting and other tasks depending on static and temporal data interaction.

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A DETAIL ON THE ATTENTION MECHANISM

Since the proposed model is designed as a flexible framework, a simple implementation of the attention mechanism is used. This implementation resembles Bahdanau attention (Bahdanau et al., 2014). While their implementation aims to calculate the alignment scores between the sequences of an encoder and a decoder, the proposed approach focuses on differentially weighting the hidden states from the LSTM.

Given the set of hidden states $H = [h_1, h_2, ..., h_T]$ at the output of the LSTM, we calculate the scores using a linear layer:

$$s_t = Wh_t + b \tag{1}$$

where W and b are learnable matrix of weights and bias.

Then we calculate the attention weights by passing the scores through a softmax function:

$$\alpha_t = softmax(s_t) = \frac{e^{s_t}}{\sum_{i=1}^T e^{s_i}}$$
(2)

the context vector $\hat{\mathbf{h}}$ is computed as the weighted sum of the LSTM hidden states, using the attention weights.

$$\tilde{\mathbf{h}} = \sum_{t=1}^{T} \alpha_t h_t \tag{3}$$

B SELECTED HYPERPARAMETERS FOR EACH MODEL

Table 3: Hyperparameters for the baseline models (Minixhofer et al., 2021) and for the proposed Hybrid Model (HM). Where applicable, the notation remains consistent with that used in the body of the article.

Hyperparameter	Notation	LSTM	Transformer	Hybrid Model (HM)
LSTM or Transformer Number of layers		2	4	2
LSTM Hidden size	h	512	512	490
Initial embedding size	z	-	256	27
Reduced embedding size (after FFNN)	z'	-	-	6
Final MLP number of layers		-	-	2
FFNN inner hidden size		-	4096	-
Attention Heads		-	2	-
Batch size		128	128	128
Dropout probability		0.1	0.1	0.1
Embeddings dropout probability		-	-	0.4
Weight Decay		0.01	0.01	0.01
Learning rate		7e-5	7e-5	7e-5
Number of epochs		7	7	9

C RESULTS ON THE TEST SET

Table 4: Results on the test set for the LSTM baseline and the proposed model.

Model	MAE	RMSE	\mathbf{F}_1	ROC-AUC
LSTM	0.306	0.478	61.9	80.6
HM	0.218	0.378	67.3	85.9

D 5-FOLDS CV

Table 5: Extensive results of the 5-fold Cross-validation for the baseline LSTM and the proposed model.

		LSTM			HM	
Fold	MAE	RMSE	F1	MAE	RMSE	F1
1	0.347	0.553	58.34	0.244	0.433	60.22
2	0.365	0.570	42.79	0.302	0.519	59.67
3	0.272	0.444	66.22	0.254	0.404	75.22
4	0.332	0.548	44.82	0.266	0.433	59.84
5	0.310	0.504	63.88	0.299	0.502	71.06

Table 6: Mean and standard deviation for each metric on the 5-fold Cross-validation results.

Model	MAE $(\overline{x} \pm \sigma)$	RMSE $(\overline{x} \pm \sigma)$	$\mathbf{F_1} \; (\overline{x} \pm \sigma)$
LSTM HM	$\begin{array}{c} 0.325 \pm 0.036 \\ 0.273 \pm 0.026 \end{array}$	$\begin{array}{c} 0.524 \pm 0.051 \\ 0.458 \pm 0.050 \end{array}$	$\begin{array}{c} 55.2 \pm 0.108 \\ 65.2 \pm 0.074 \end{array}$

E DETAIL ON THE ABLATION STUDY

	Week 1	1	Week 2	2	Week 3	3	Week 4	1	Week s	5	Week	5
Model	MAE	F_1	MAE	F_1								
HM	0.126	82.2	0.169	74.7	0.209	68.6	0.244	64.0	0.269	58.6	0.294	51.0
TS+Att	0.134	65.9	0.189	62.3	0.250	56.3	0.307	51.2	0.360	51.6	0.361	50.8
TS	0.136	61.9	0.192	62.3	0.253	56.3	0.312	56.4	0.364	51.6	0.368	50.8
SF+TS	0.144	73.9	0.203	62.3	0.262	56.3	0.320	51.2	0.374	49.3	0.375	50.8
SF	0.779	20.4	0.746	22.7	0.752	25.3	0.713	18.9	0.754	19.5	0.787	17.0

F LOCATION-AGNOSTING VS LOCATION-SPECIFIC TRAINING EXPERIMENT

Table 8: Weekly results for the HM on county vs national training data. The selected counties are Iowa (IA), Montana (MT) and Oklahoma (OK).

		Week 1		Week 2	2	Week 3	;	Week 4	Ļ	Week 5	;	Week (5
Train	Eval.	MAE	\mathbf{F}_1	MAE	\mathbf{F}_1	MAE	F_1	MAE	\mathbf{F}_1	MAE	F_1	MAE	F_1
IA	IA	0.101	86.7	0.179	67.7	0.214	69.5	0.287	63.5	0.298	60.9	0.272	59.4
MT	MT	0.203	52.3	0.314	49.1	0.339	50.9	0.341	38.6	0.377	37.0	0.407	35.9
OK	OK	0.156	75.8	0.230	59.7	0.269	56.9	0.327	61.6	0.352	59.1	0.387	57.8
all	IA	0.086	89.3	0.122	79.2	0.151	78.4	0.189	71.9	0.214	73.9	0.235	66.4
	MT	0.144	59.5	0.168	52.9	0.178	50.0	0.209	45.5	0.237	44.4	0.265	38.6
	OK	0.096	83.1	0.160	75.8	0.196	77.9	0.209	77.5	0.260	73.5	0.298	66.3

Table 9: Results on the test set using county vs national training data.

Train	Eval.	MAE	RMSE	F ₁
IA	IA	0.201	0.383	73.8
MT	MT	0.301	0.354	46.7
OK	OK	0.278	0.402	63.1
all	IA	0.166	0.315	76.6
	MT	0.200	0.320	48.2
	OK	0.218	0.378	67.3