



Mixed
Migration
Centre

Navigating borderlands in the Sahel

Border security governance and mixed migration
in Liptako-Gourma

MMC Research Report, November 2019



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Armed police patrol on road to Goudebo refugee camp at Mali border.

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The Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) is a global network consisting of six regional hubs (Asia, East Africa and Yemen, Europe, Middle East, North Africa & West Africa) and a central unit in Geneva. The MMC is a leading source for independent and high-quality data, research, analysis and expertise on mixed migration. The MMC aims to increase understanding of mixed migration, to positively impact global and regional migration policies, to inform evidence-based protection responses for people on the move and to stimulate forward thinking in public and policy debates on mixed migration. The MMC's overarching focus is on human rights and protection for all people on the move.

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List of acronyms

| | |
|--------------------|--|
| AfDB | African Development Bank |
| AFD | Agence Française de Développement (French Development Agency) |
| AfS | Alliance for the Sahel |
| ALG | Autorité de Développement Intégré des Etats du Liptako-Gourma (Authority for the Integrated Development of the Liptako-Gourma States) |
| CFA (franc) | Communauté Financière en Afrique (African Financial Community) |
| CIGEM | Centre d'Information et de Gestion des Migration (Centre for Migration Management and Information) |
| CMA | Coordination des Mouvements de l'Azawad (Coordination of Azawad Movements) |
| CSO | Civil society organization |
| DDG | Danish Demining Group |
| DGME | Délégation Générale des Maliens de l'Extérieur (General Directorate for Malians Abroad) |
| DRC | Danish Refugee Council |
| DST | Direction de la Surveillance du Territoire (Directorate of Territorial Surveillance) |
| DTM | Displacement Tracking Matrix |
| ECOWAS | Economic Organization of West African States |
| EIGS | Etat Islamique au Grand Sahara (Islamic State in the Greater Sahara) |
| EUCAP | EU Capacity-building mission |
| EUTF | EU Trust Fund for Africa |
| EUTM | EU Training Mission to Mali |
| FAMa | Forces Armées Maliennes (Malian Armed Forces) |
| FLM | Front de Libération du Macina (Macina Liberation Front) |
| FMP | Flow monitoring point |
| GAR-SI | Groupes d'Action Rapide - Surveillance et Intervention au Sahel (Rapid Action Groups – Surveillance and Intervention in the Sahel) |
| GATIA | Groupe Autodéfense Touareg Imghad et Alliés (Imghad Tuareg Self-Defense Group and Allies) |
| GIZ | Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (German Corporation for International Corporation) |
| G5S | G5 Sahel (grouping Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger) |
| G5SJF | G5 Sahel Joint Force |
| IBM | Integrated Border Management |
| IDPs | Internally displaced persons |
| IOM | International Organization for Migration |
| JNIM | Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (Group to Support Islam and Muslims) |
| MIDAS | Migration Information and Data Analysis System |
| MINUSMA | Mission Multidimensionnelle Intégrée des Nations Unies pour la Stabilisation au Mali (United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali) |
| MMC | Mixed Migration Centre |
| MSA | Mouvement du Salut de l'Azawad (Movement for the Salvation of Azawad) |
| MUJAO | Mouvement pour l'Unité et le Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest (Movement for the Oneness of Jihad in West Africa) |
| PARSEC | Programme d'Appui au Renforcement de la Sécurité (Support Program for Enhanced Security (in Mali)) |
| PNF | Politique Nationale des Frontières ((Malian) National Border Policy) |
| PONAM | Politique Nationale de Migration du Mali (Malian National Migration Policy) |
| ProGEF | Programme d'Appui à la Gestion des Frontières (Integrated Management of Borders Programme) (Burkina Faso) |
| SDF | Security and defense forces |
| SNGF | Stratégie Nationale de Gestion des Frontières (National Border Management Strategy (Burkina Faso)) |
| SNMig | Stratégie Nationale de Migration (National Migration Strategy (Burkina Faso)) |
| UEMOA | Union Economique et Monétaire Ouest-Africaine (West African Economic and Monetary Union) |
| UNDP | United Nations Development Programme |
| UNODC | United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime |

Executive summary

This research report explores the intersections between border security and cross-border mobility in the area known as Liptako-Gourma straddling three fragile states - Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. The capacity to regulate, constrain, and control people's movement has always been a key feature of the construction of political authority. What is new is that border policing has been elevated to the center stage of global political priorities, involving a shift in the definition of "security threats" and in border security practices.

This is especially so in the Sahelo-Saharan region, where the ease of circulation and the necessity of connection combine with the weak capacity of local states to deploy forces across remote borderlands and ensure effective border enforcement. In particular, Liptako-Gourma has attracted considerable attention both because of the proliferation of violent extremist groups and militias, and because of intense short and long-range cross-border migration.

Border security governance has gained prominence as one of the standard responses to forestall the spread of transnational threats. Liptako-Gourma has been a laboratory for the experimentation of internationally-based policies aimed at supporting the strengthening of national sovereignties and international boundaries. Within this wielding of power, specific vulnerabilities and protection needs tend to cluster around borders and exacerbate the tension between border security and patterns of mobility.

The first part of the study maps, compares and contrasts border security and migration governance measures put in place in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, as well as in their respective regions in Liptako-Gourma. Building on this analysis, the second part aims to shed lights on the mutual relationships between border management, security governance and mixed migration in Liptako-Gourma, addressing a variety of interrelated questions relevant to policy-makers, humanitarian actors and scholars:

- how have the variations of border security, including the weakening and strengthening of border controls by state and non-state actors, affected mixed migration flows across Liptako-Gourma?
- do unstable borderlands tend to reduce migration flows – because of insecurity, unpredictability, and disruption of communication – or to attract them – because of reduced border controls?
- is the safety and security of refugees and migrants better ensured by state presence or state absence? Is mobility a source of resilience or a source of danger in a conflict context?
- what are the security perceptions of refugees, migrants, IDPs, smugglers, local authorities, security and defense forces and international actors in Liptako-Gourma?

Answers to these questions are elaborated building on fieldwork in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, including a mixed migration monitoring (4Mi) survey with 805 refugees and migrants carried out between July and December 2018, complemented by 98 semi-structured interviews with key informants and five focus groups held between November 2018 and February 2019.

Key findings:

- **Demography of mixed migration flows:** most of the 805 refugees and migrants surveyed by 4Mi while in transit across Liptako-Gourma came from West African countries, including Mali (22%), Côte d'Ivoire (15%), Guinea (14%), Togo (10%), Burkina Faso (9%) and Senegal (8%). The average age of refugees and migrants interviewed was 27 years old.
- 91% of 4Mi respondents cited “economic reasons” as one of the **main reasons for departure**, yet the majority of them were not unemployed, suggesting that low-quality jobs, informality and underemployment remain crucial challenges in both rural and urban settings. Furthermore, the choice to migrate is reportedly strongly influenced by peer-pressure, including reports by former migrants and returnees (60%), or by friends and family members abroad (52%), but also family expectations in the country of origin (38%).
- Among the **factors influencing the choice of migration routes and destinations**, 4Mi data indicate that security considerations only have a marginal influence. Most respondents to the 4Mi survey reported to have left their countries of origin in spite of being aware of the risks that awaited them on the road, while most conceded that awareness of existing risks would not alter their determination to migrate. Access, costs, as well as presence of law enforcement, are much more determining factors, suggesting that, as a general rule, migration occurs wherever accessibility and affordability make it materially possible and wherever (poor) law enforcement so allows. As an illustration of this, increased controls on the main transit routes, such as in Agadez, have led to a shift in routes West (from Agadez to Gao, and from Gao to Timbuktu) towards areas with weaker border enforcement, even if the route is more risky.
- While reliable quantitative data on the **scale of mixed migration in Liptako Gourma** is scarce, interviews with law enforcement officers, smugglers, transporters, migrants, and border communities suggest that migratory flows in Liptako-Gourma have significantly declined compared to the peak of the so-called migration ‘crisis’ in 2015. This is in line with trends in the broader Sahel. While north-bound migratory flows from and across the Sahel have considerably reduced, return flows, both voluntary and involuntary, from North African countries to the Sahel are on the rise.
- Looking at the **causes of such a reduction of flows**, the study finds that the deterrent of restrictive measures implemented further along migratory routes – such as the enforcement of law 2015-36 criminalizing human smuggling and implemented predominantly in Agadez, is resulting in a greater impact than law enforcement and border control measures within Liptako-Gourma itself. Here, in fact, measures to curtail irregular migration and fight against migrant smuggling have proved unsteady, largely as a result of the lack of resources and political determination. At the same time, the militarization of borders and increased control measures is impacting short-range cross-border movements in Liptako-Gourma. While cross-border commerce of livestock and other goods used to thrive, general insecurity (particularly fear of attack by insurgents and bandits) and frustrations linked to the albeit unevenly applied but growing number of controls and road checkpoints have made traders more reluctant to cross borders.
- **Role of smugglers:** for refugees and migrants interviewed by 4Mi in Liptako-Gourma, the reliance on smugglers was limited: approximately two thirds of respondents (64%) said they did not use smugglers. Among those who did, most perceive them as service providers to meet a demand for mobility, who often enjoy a greater degree of legitimacy and trust than the law enforcement apparatuses tasked with fighting them. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that cases of abuse, mistreatment, cheating and deliberate violence perpetrated by smugglers against refugees and migrants are occurring, particularly where law enforcement action is intensified and legal migration pathways are reduced.
- **Perceptions of migration by security forces:** few of the security and defense personnel interviewed regarded migration as a major source of concern but consistently cited terrorism, banditry and drug trafficking as the top security threats.
- **Perception of security forces by migrants:** most of the refugees and migrants interviewed by 4Mi tend to see the security and defense personnel deployed in the Liptako-Gourma more as a source of threat and abuse than of protection, an obstacle and leading to a need to pay for passage and extortion, which may lead them to questioning the overall legitimacy of local security systems.

- The most prevalent form of **protection incidents** reported by migrants and refugees interviewed by 4Mi in transit in Liptako-Gourma is the extortion of bribes, gifts or other services. These represent two thirds of the overall incidents recorded in the survey, with 50% of the interviewees reporting to have suffered or witnessed these abuses at least once (but in the majority of cases more than one time). Other protection incidents include robbery (10% of total reported incidents) and physical abuse or harassment (10%). Security and defense forces are mentioned by 4Mi respondents as the main perpetrators of protection incidents.
- **Extortion targeting refugees and migrants** does not only occur at border posts during identity checks, but also at internal checkpoints set up for security reasons in unstable areas. These practices are sometimes normalized and factored in the inevitable hassles of migration. Yet the racket on migrants is also an **enabler of a multiplicity of serious violations**, including discrimination based on national identity, systemic corruption, and a stimulant to undocumented migration and human trafficking and smuggling. Even with papers migrants must pay at least 1,000 CFA francs at checkpoints. Citizens of neighboring countries within Liptako Gourma are reportedly requested to pay double the amount charged to nationals. Some interviewed refugees and migrants indicated that they sometimes hide or abandon their documents to conceal their nationality at checkpoints to evade these discriminatory rates. Undocumented migrants are also reportedly required to pay larger sums, up to 5,000 or even 10,000 CFA francs. There is some evidence to suggest that non-Sahelian refugees and migrants (such as Senegalese, Gambians or Guineans) are using smugglers to circumvent border checkpoints to avoid these fees, including within ECOWAS.
- There are **significant gender differences in protection incidents** at borders and checkpoints. While the extortion of bribes is reported in equal proportions by men and women, 4Mi data suggests that women are much more exposed than men to very serious abuses, with 20-25% of women reporting physical violence, robberies, sexual assaults and harassment. Also, the constraining of migration opportunities appears to be prompting a shift from smuggling to trafficking which heavily affects women, many of whom run the risk of eventually being trapped in situations of labor and sexual exploitation in transit countries.
- **Monitoring mixed migration flows across Liptako-Gourma:** accurate, reliable and comparable information on mixed migratory flows in the Sahel, and in Liptako-Gourma more specifically, is limited. Properly monitoring mixed migration flows in areas characterized by poor state presence and major insecurity is also challenging, compounded by a shortfall of capacity and tools to adequately monitor migratory flows. At local level, where migration is seen as a normal phenomenon and part of a strategy of resilience, collecting data on migration is not seen as a high priority by some local state authorities.



Introduction

The Liptako-Gourma is the area adjacent to the River Niger bend between the cities of Gao (Mali) and Niamey (Niger), which broadly comprises the adjacent administrative regions of Gao in Mali, Sahel in Burkina Faso, and Tillabéry in Niger.¹ Because of its tri-state composition, since decolonization the region has also come to be known as the “three-borders zone”. Despite its administrative divisions, environmental, sociological and historical commonalities mean that this area is characterized by coherence and homogeneity. It therefore provides a valuable case study on the mutual relationships, influences and variations between security and mobility in border areas.

Significant cross-border flows have shaped the unity of Liptako-Gourma. Livelihoods in the region depend on the management of natural resources, which in turn is closely linked to mobility. Seasonal rainfall variability dictates the movements of transhumant pastoralism (mobile livestock raising using regular migration routes) and small-scale farming, leading to the development of a common way of life built on cross-border interdependence and cultural interaction. As a result, the same social, livelihood and ethnic groups are found throughout Liptako-Gourma, including the Fulani, the Tuareg, and the Songhai/Zarma.

Weak governance & transnational “threats”

After gaining independence, the three neighboring states did not apply strict border controls both because of weak enforcement capacity and the need to win over border communities which feared marginalization. In the past decade, however, the fragility of regional states and the lack of adequate governance frameworks have made the Liptako-Gourma region a fertile ground for the entrenchment of illicit activity,² organized criminal groups, non-state armed actors and jihadist insurgents.³ Moreover, since 2012, the collapse of the Malian state has further undermined state presence, contributing to the spread of transnational threats across the region.⁴

The Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (*Mouvement pour l'unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest*, MUJAO), which in 2012 managed to attract recruits from across Liptako-Gourma, is a case in point. Military action by international and Malian forces chased MUJAO from northern Mali's towns in 2013, but failed to regain control of Liptako-Gourma's porous borderlands. This prompted the reorganization of the MUJAO into smaller units, giving rise in subsequent years to a variety of splinter jihadist armed groups with strong local rooting, such as the Macina Liberation Front (*Front de Libération du Macina*, FLM) in Central Mali, Ansarul Islam in the north of Burkina Faso, and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (*Etat Islamique au Grand Sahara*, EIGS) in Tillabéry Region. The borders among these groups remained porous, in terms of both membership and ideology, and observers suggest that they are loosely coordinating under the umbrella organization of the Group to Support Islam and Muslims (*Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin*, JNIM).⁵

An escalation of local and regional conflicts has been fueled by the unconstrained circulation of weapons, people and ideas and the inherent tensions between traditional and state rule.

The Sahel: a testing ground for security policies

As security has rapidly deteriorated, Liptako-Gourma has attracted growing international concern.⁶ Multilateral initiatives and strategies to respond to these challenges have proliferated. Restricting cross-border mobility and enhancing controls over borders and borderlands have emerged as the standard approach to forestalling the spread of violent insurgency and transnational threats in Liptako-Gourma. On the one hand, the rise of transnational and transborder phenomena has helped further cement the continuity of Liptako-Gourma's security dynamics across national divides. On the other hand, Liptako-Gourma has become something of a laboratory for the experimentation of internationally

- 1 Liptako-Gourma is a geographically ambiguous term, the definition of its borders and surface area vary according to different institutions and other sources. Some definitions include the regions of Mopti, Timbuktu and Ménaka in Mali, and/or Burkina Faso's Nord and Est regions. Established in 1970, the Authority for the Integrated Development of Liptako-Gourma (ALG) initially focused on an area of 370,000 km² roughly corresponding to the zone traditionally known as Liptako-Gourma. Since 2011, however, the ALG has proposed to stretch its institutional mandate to cover all of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, an area of some 2.7 million km². (Interview with ALG officer, Ouagadougou, February 2019.)
- 2 McDougall, J. & Scheele, J. (2012) 'Saharan Frontiers: Space and Mobility in Northwest Africa', Bloomington: Indiana University Press; see also: OECD/SWAC (2014) 'An Atlas of the Sahara-Sahel - Geography, Economy and Security West African Studies', Paris: OECD Publishing.
- 3 Lacher W. (2012), 'Organized crime and conflict in the Sahel-Sahara region', The Carnegie Papers, New York: September 2012; Raleigh C., Dowd C. (2013), 'Governance and conflicts in Sahel's "ungoverned spaces"', Stability: International Journal of Security & Development, 2(2).
- 4 Chauzel, G., Van Damme, T., (2015), 'The roots of Mali's conflict Moving beyond the 2012 crisis', Clingendael Netherlands Institute of International Relations.
- 5 ICG (2015), 'The Central Sahel: A Perfect Sandstorm', Africa Report 227, Dakar/Brussels: June 2015; ICG (2018), 'Frontière Niger-Mali: mettre l'outil militaire au service d'une approche politique', Rapport Afrique 261, Brussels/Dakar: June 2018.
- 6 ACLED (2019), [Political Violence Skyrockets in the Sahel According to Latest ACLED Data](#), Press Release, 28 March 2019..

sponsored policies designed to strengthen national sovereignties and international boundaries.

These measures are usually negotiated in international forums and adopted under the pressure of emergencies unfolding on the ground. As a result, they often fail to adequately consider the complexity of the context, and they may yield unexpected, if not counterproductive results. For instance, recent research has suggested that state force projection alone is unlikely to prevent the rise of insecurity, radicalization, and crime, unless underlying socio-political issues are addressed, including respect for human rights,⁷ good governance,⁸ equitable management of natural resources⁹ and job creation.¹⁰

Border security governance: a response to rising mobility and forced displacement?

A growing international focus on migration management and the fight against irregular migration have caused these tensions to become even more acute. Strategically positioned over routes connecting West Africa with North Africa, the Liptako-Gourma region has been greatly affected by an increase in regional and interregional migration, with hundreds of thousands of people in transit since 2014. Well-established regional networks of cross-border trade, both small-scale and large-scale, formal and informal, have helped grow the infrastructure that supports these movements of people. As a result, the towns of Gao, Tillabéry and Dori have emerged as important hubs and transit points for migration towards Libya, Algeria and, in some cases, to Europe. At the same time, escalating local and regional conflicts have generated both internal and cross-border forced displacement. As of early 2019, approximately 80,000 Malian refugees were hosted in camps in neighboring

Niger and Burkina Faso, while at least 160,000 people were displaced by conflict in the regions of Gao, Ménaka, Tillabéry, Sahel, and Nord.¹¹ While forced displacement increased significantly in the first half of 2019, these flows intermesh with widespread mobility habits of cross-border communities living in Liptako-Gourma, including transhumant pastoralists, nomadic people and dual-nationals.¹²

While mobility has traditionally been a resilience strategy in the region, an alarmistic rhetoric conflating mixed migratory flows with “irregular migration” and “human smuggling” has helped fuel a narrative of a global migration “crisis”. In this context, the views of foreign interveners and outsiders contrast sharply with local perceptions of migration. The portrayal of violent insurgencies as a transnational phenomenon reinforces the framing of Sahelian borderlands as “ungoverned” spaces characterised by cross-border irregular activity. At the intersection of these dynamics, border security governance has rapidly gained prominence as one of the top priorities pursued by the international community in Liptako-Gourma.

Research gaps, driving questions, and objectives of the report

In spite of much policy discourses, the relationships between cross-border mobility and border security governance remain poorly understood to date. While there is some research about how border security governance and migration influence each other, it has mostly focused on other migration routes from and across Africa, including those from the Horn of Africa to Libya,¹³ from Gao to Algeria,¹⁴ from Agadez (Niger) to Libya,¹⁵ and from Libya to Italy.¹⁶ Research specifically on Liptako-

- 7 Raineri L. (2018), 'If victims become perpetrators. Factors contributing to vulnerability and resilience to violent extremism in the Central Sahel', London Human Rights Watch (2019), 'By Day We Fear the Army, By Night the Jihadists', Ouagadougou/New York.
- 8 ICG (2017), 'Nord du Burkina Faso : ce que cache le jihad', Rapport Afrique 254, Dakar/Brussels; Lebovich A. (2018), 'Halting ambitions. EU migration and security policy in the Sahel', *ECFR Policy Brief* 266, London: September 2018.
- 9 Sangaré B. (2016), 'Le centre du Mali: épicerie du djihadisme ?', Note d'Analyse du GRIP, Brussels: May 2016; HACP (2017), *Conflit au Nord-Tillabéry: Analyse du conflit des ressources naturelles. Le transfrontalier au cœur de l'analyse et de l'action*, Paris: August 2017.
- 10 DDG (2014), 'Evaluations des Risques Sécuritaires aux Frontières. Région du Liptako-Gourma: Mali, Burkina et Niger', Bamako/Copenhagen: July 2014; Arnaud C. (2016), 'Jeunesses sahéniennes: dynamiques d'exclusion, moyens d'insertion', *AFD Notes Techniques* 15, Paris: March 2016.
- 11 See UNHCR data portals (accessed in April 2019). Mali: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/malisituation>; Niger: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/country/ner>; Burkina Faso: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/country/bfa>.
- 12 [Conflict and displacement in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso - Briefing note, 22 March 2019.](#)
- 13 Sahar/IGAD (2016), 'Human Trafficking and Smuggling on the Horn of Africa-Central Mediterranean Route', Nairobi: February 2016; Tubiana J., Warin C., Saeneen G. (2018), 'Multilateral Damage. The impact of EU migration policies on central Saharan routes', *Clingendael CRU Report*, The Hague: September 2018.
- 14 Molenaar F., Van Damme T. (2017), 'Irregular migration and human smuggling networks in Mali', *Clingendael CRU Report*, The Hague: February 2017.
- 15 Reitano T. (2015), 'A Perilous but Profitable Crossing: The Changing Nature of Migrant Smuggling through sub-Saharan Africa to Europe and EU Migration Policy (2012-2015)', *The European Review of Organized Crime* 2(1); Malakooti A., Benattia T., Armitano F. (2015), 'Irregular Migration Between West Africa, North Africa and the Mediterranean', Altai Consulting, Paris-Abuja: December 2015; Molenaar F. (2017), 'Irregular migration and human smuggling networks in Mali', *Clingendael CRU Report*, The Hague: February 2017.
- 16 Toaldo M. (2015), 'Migrations Through and From Libya: A Mediterranean Challenge', *IAI Working Papers* 15, Rome: May 2015; El Kamouni-Janssen F. (2017), 'Only God can stop the smugglers. Understanding human smuggling networks in Libya', *Clingendael CRU Report*, The Hague: February 2017; Micallef M., Reitano T. (2017), 'The anti-human smuggling business and Libya's political end game', *ISS and Global Initiative against TOC, North Africa Report 2*, Geneva: December 2017; Stocker V. (2017), 'Leaving Libya. Rapid Assessment of Municipalities of Departures of Migrants in Libya', Altai Consulting, Tunis: June 2017.

Gourma has mostly focused on border(lands) security governance in relation to radicalization¹⁷ and security.¹⁸ Less research has been devoted to understanding how the variations of border security, including the weakening and strengthening of border controls by state and non-state actors, has affected mixed migration flows across Liptako-Gourma. This paper aims to bridge the gap between the research on migration and border management, and violent insurgency, and responses thereto, and aims to shed light on their mutual interactions.

This research addresses several questions relevant to policy-makers, humanitarian agencies, migration actors, and scholars. Exploring the extent to which various security considerations affect mobility choices and practices, for example, can provide insight as to whether mixed migration flows are more likely to occur in conflict zones, where violent insurgencies thrive, or in peaceful zones fully controlled by state authorities. In other words, do unstable borderlands tend to reduce migration flows – because of insecurity, unpredictability, and disruption of communication – or attract them because of reduced border controls?

In a context where research suggests that security providers, both state and non-state actors, engage in abusive behaviors, to what extent does state presence or absence impact the safety of refugees and migrants? Is mobility a source of resilience or of danger (or both) in a conflict context? And how does border security, and variations thereof, affect mixed migration flows, in terms of both infrastructure (routes, use of smugglers, means of transportation, etc.) and composition (nationality, gender, legal status, social origin, etc.)? What does “security” actually mean in these contexts and to different actors? What are the threat perceptions of refugees, migrants, IDPs, smugglers, local authorities, security and defense forces (SDF) and international actors? Who are, or who are perceived to be, security spoilers and security providers where state authority fluctuates between local challenges and international sponsorship?

Analytical approach and structure of the report

The prism of governance provides our entry point to address these questions. Throughout Liptako-Gourma, state actors do not have a monopoly on coercion and political authority but rather operate in a densely

populated and highly competitive environment. Alongside (admittedly weak¹⁹) states, one finds other important actors, both non-governmental (international NGOs, local civil society organizations, customary authorities) and intergovernmental (regional and international organizations, UN agencies, foreign donors), to which the region’s states have a demonstrated tendency to outsource some of their sovereign functions. To fully understand the complex dynamics between border security and cross-border mobility in Liptako-Gourma, this plurality of actors, standards and practices cannot be overlooked. In other words, one needs to pay attention to governance more than to governments in order to capture this inherent hybridity between government control and government outsourcing.²⁰

The first two sections of this paper map the governance of migration and border security at regional and state levels of Liptako-Gourma. By comparing how migration and border security are defined and governed across the region, these sections illustrate the variations of threat perceptions and responses, and identify potential gaps and challenges. Building on this analysis, sections three and four explore the impact of these intersecting governance frameworks on mixed migratory flows and on protection concerns.

Methodology

The analysis in this paper is based on extensive data collection, combining quantitative and qualitative tools including surveys, focus groups and interviews with key informants.

The most important nodes of transboundary mixed migratory flows in the Liptako-Gourma region were identified through an extensive literature review, as well as the longstanding field experience of the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC), the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), and the Danish Demining Group (DDG).²¹ These include in particular the towns (and surroundings thereof) of Gao in Mali, Tillabéry in Niger, and Dori in Burkina Faso.

Survey data

Data was collected by the Mixed Migration Monitoring Mechanism Initiative (4Mi) with 805 refugees and migrants in Gao, Tillabéry and Dori between 1 July 2018

17 International Alert (2018) 'If victims become perpetrators. Factors contributing to vulnerability and resilience to violent extremism in the Central Sahel', London.

18 Danish Demining Group (2014), Evaluations des Risques Sécuritaires aux Frontières. Région du Liptako-Gourma: Mali, Burkina et Niger, Copenhagen

19 Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso consistently rank at the bottom of international indexes such as the UNDP's [Human Development Index](#).

20 Bagayoko N., Hutchful E., Luckham R. (2016), 'Hybrid security governance in Africa: rethinking the foundations of security, justice and legitimate public authority', *Conflict, Security & Development* 16(1).

21 The Danish Demining Group (DDG) is a Humanitarian Mine Action Unit in the Danish Refugee Council (DRC).

and 31 December 2018.²² Three monitors per town who were native to the communities were trained and tasked with reaching out to refugees and migrants with a closed question interview survey. The survey invited consenting respondents to anonymously self-report on a range of issues related to their mobility experience, including demographic profiles, migration drivers, means and conditions of movement, aspirations and destination choices, protection incidents and assistance needed and received. Responses were recorded on a custom-designed smartphone application that safely submits data to a secure platform.²³ Each monitor carried out an average of 15 interviews per month, with minor variations due to fieldwork contingencies, resulting in a database of 805 valid questionnaires: 264 from Gao, 256 from Tillabéry, and 285 from Dori.

Caveats

Survey results are based on respondents' self-reported information, which in most cases is impossible to verify independently, thereby exposing the process of data collection to the risk of monitor bias and respondent bias. Potential monitor biases were mitigated through the careful selection, close supervision and intentional diversification (by gender, age, ethnicity, language skills) of 4Mi monitors. The survey data was also triangulated with other sources of information. As the 4Mi survey relied on a non-randomized, purposive sampling, it does not provide a representative estimate of the scale of mixed migration flows nor of the prevalence of protection incidents along the routes.

Though there were fewer female monitors per town than male monitors, female 4Mi monitors tended to predominantly interview women and therefore the gender balance of 4Mi data may be skewed in favor of women: these made up 20% of the respondents interviewed and surveyed for this paper, while the International Organization for Migration's (IOM) Data Tracking Matrix (DTM) for West and Central Africa shows that 14% of refugees and migrants on the move are women.²⁴

In both Dori and Tillabéry the capacity of local data collectors to interact in languages other than French and local languages, and most notably their limited English-speaking skills, may have influenced the number of interviewees from anglophone countries, such as Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Ghana, Liberia and The Gambia. The sample captured in the 4Mi survey demonstrates a clear dominance of refugees and migrants from Francophone countries.²⁵

Qualitative data

Survey results were complemented by in-depth semi-structured interviews with key informants in the capital cities and target regions of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. In order to maximize access while addressing security and logistical constraints (linguistic, cultural, economic, etc.), MMC analysts and consultants carried out interviews in the capitals, while local researchers were deployed in the Liptako-Gourma region. Interviewees included national and international officers of security forces (police, gendarmerie, customs, military, etc.), international organizations (UN agencies, regional organizations, etc.), civil society organizations and human rights defenders, conflict analysts, refugees and migrants, transporters, smugglers, and humanitarian actors. The reliance on MMC's local networks helped minimize the risks of community bias and suboptimal target selection, while snowball sampling was employed to ensure flexibility and to accommodate sudden "openings" for interviews. In total, 98 interviews were conducted between November 2018 and February 2019: 38 in Mali (16 in Bamako, and 22 in Gao, Labezzanga and Wabaria); 32 in Niger (17 in Niamey, and 15 in Ayorou, Téra and Bankilaré); and 28 in Burkina Faso (16 in Ouagadougou, and 12 in Dori and Seytenga).

With a view to further triangulating research data and understanding community perceptions, local researchers carried out five focus group discussions in communities in Liptako-Gourma exposed to mixed migratory flows. These included Ayorou and Petelkolé in Niger, Dori and Seytenga in Burkina Faso, and Gao in Mali (with the participation of individuals gathered from various communities in the region).

Ethics of the research

The data collection process abided by the best practices of ethical research standards, including context and conflict-sensitivity, "do no harm" principles, free and fully-informed consent by the respondents, anonymity, confidentiality, right to withdraw and safe data management. Oral procedures to share information and obtain consent were favored as they were better suited to the specificities of the context. In order to circumvent potential biases, misinterpretations and manipulations, all researchers involved were instructed to make clear that no connection existed between engaging in interviews and potential access to humanitarian assistance or development projects. A workshop for the preparation of the fieldwork was held in November 2018. At the end of the data collection phase, the researchers participated in a two-day restitution workshop to share, compare and

22 4Mi is the Mixed Migration Centre's flagship data collection system, an innovative approach aimed at filling knowledge gaps and informing policy and response on mixed migration and the protection risks for refugees and migrants. The towns where data was collected for this paper are important nodes of the major regional routes: Gao is connected to Niamey through Tillabéry, Dori lies between Ouagadougou and Niamey. All major bus companies have a stop in these towns, but the transit time for refugees and migrants tends to be less than an hour, unless they lack funds to continue their journey or have reason to stay longer.

23 4Mi methodology can be found [here](#).

24 IOM (2018), [Regional Mobility Mapping West and Central Africa](#), Geneva.

25 Other reasons may also be relevant, for instance that Nigerians do not travel through Liptako Gourma.

contrast their results, discuss the interpretation of the findings, so as to reduce misinterpretation biases and collectively refine the research outline.

Terminology

- **Mixed migration.** Mixed migration refers to cross-border movements of people including refugees fleeing persecution and conflict, victims of trafficking and people seeking better lives and opportunities. Motivated to move by a multiplicity of factors, people in mixed flows have different legal statuses as well as a variety of vulnerabilities. Although entitled to protection under international human rights law, they are exposed to multiple rights violations along their journey. Those in mixed migration flows travel along similar routes, using similar means of travel. MMC uses 'refugees and migrants' when referring to all those in mixed migration flows, unless referring to a particular group of people with a defined status within these flows.
- **Irregular migration.** According to UNODC's 2018 Global Study on Smuggling of Migrants, "There is no clear or universally accepted definition of irregular migration, but it is generally understood as movements that take place outside the regulatory norms of sending, transit, or receiving countries".²⁶ Irregular migration and smuggling are not necessarily coextensive notions. In principle, migrants who are smuggled are irregular at the moment of border crossing, but they may be regularized afterwards. Similarly, migrants who entered one country legally may eventually become undocumented or irregular.
- **Human smuggling.** The smuggling of migrants (or "human smuggling") is defined in international law as the "procurement, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit, of the illegal entry of a person into a State Party of which the person is not a national or a permanent resident".²⁷
- **Human trafficking** is the "recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation".²⁸ Unlike human smuggling, consent and border-crossing are not defining characteristics of human trafficking. In spite of the important differences between the legal categories of human trafficking and human smuggling, in practice the two may overlap, occur jointly, or shift into one another.²⁹
- **Smuggler.** Human smugglers comprise a diverse range of actors who facilitate irregular movements of people. These include "those who develop contact with and recruit potential migrants, those who are involved in the movement process, and those who engage in or facilitate financial transactions associated with the movement of people".³⁰ There is a semantic difference between the French word 'passeur', which is largely perceived positively in West Africa, and the English word 'smuggler', which has a more negative connotation.³¹ For the purpose of this paper, the concept of smuggler is understood with broad connotations and a neutral normative value, synonymous with "facilitator".

26 UNODC (2018), Global Study on Smuggling of Migrants, Vienna: June 2018.

27 UN (2000), Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime', A/RES/55/25, New York: 15 November 2000.

28 UN (2000), 'Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime', A/RES/55/383, New York.

29 Reitano T., McCormack S., Micallef M., Shaw M. (2018), 'Responding to the Human Trafficking–Migrant Smuggling Nexus', Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime Policy Note, Geneva.

30 http://www.mixedmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/4mi_summary_methodology.pdf

31 Golovko, E., (2019) Players of Many Parts. The evolving role of smugglers in West Africa's migration economy, MMC West Africa, Briefing Paper.

Section 1: Border security

Key findings:

- Functions of border security management and governance in the Liptako-Gourma region are carried out by a large variety of actors, both local and international, state and non-state.
- In recent years, the security budgets of Sahelian countries have risen significantly, and international partners have encouraged a regional approach to border security governance, particularly through support to military cooperation and border enforcement.
- At the same time, new initiatives have aimed to promote synergies between security and development by supporting stabilization projects in the Sahelian states, though critics contend that this approach risks subordinating development resources to military objectives.
- With a view to fostering coordination and policy coherence, since February 2017 the government of Niger has put in place a technical committee in charge of drafting a National Border Policy and a plan of action, under the aegis of the Ministry of Interior.
- In contrast to the situation in Mali, the government of Niger has not informally outsourced border control and security functions to non-state actors such as vigilante groups, communal militias and parastatal armed actors.
- Border communities in Niger have largely been left to their own devices, and thus their allegiances to state actors cannot be taken for granted. Reports of systematic abuse perpetrated by Nigerien SDF in Tillabéry region are rare.

Mali

- Mali's 7,561 kilometers of border are monitored by 14 border posts, mostly concentrated in the southern part of the country, and almost entirely absent in large parts of the desert borderlands in the north.
- Border security governance in Mali has traditionally been characterized by tolerance of informal cross-border flows in exchange for social acquiescence and political loyalty of border communities.
- In response to the fragmented nature of border security governance in Mali – which as of 2016 depended on seven different ministries – a new Politique Nationale des Frontières (PNF – National Border Policy) was adopted in 2018.
- Border communities in Liptako-Gourma have consistently cited issues related to lack of development and livelihoods as their most pressing concerns, in contrast to the state focus on security.

Niger

- Niger's 5,688 kilometers of border are monitored by 23 border posts, 16 of which lie along the almost 2,000 kilometers of border shared with Nigeria.
- Responsibility for securing Nigerien borders is shared by four different ministries and their respective security forces.

Burkina Faso

- Burkina Faso's 3,611 kilometers of border are monitored by 21 border posts. However, the effectiveness of border control mechanisms is undermined by patchy distribution and poor equipment. Border posts are scattered and situated in isolated areas, which has made them easy targets for attacks by non-state armed actors, especially since 2015.
- In 2015, the government launched its National Border Management Strategy (SNGF) and the related Action Plan for 2016-2025. The SNGF shifts the focus away from the regional integration and cross-border mobility prioritized by regional organizations to emphasize fostering peace, security and prosperity across the entire sovereign space of Burkina Faso, including in the borderlands.
- Governance of security in Burkina Faso is also strongly influenced by the presence of self-defense militia groups, the most well-known of which are the Koglweogo, or "bush guardians".
- The heavy-handedness of Burkina Faso's counter-terrorism policies has worsened relations between border communities and the state, particularly the SDF. Fear and mistrust are on the rise, while non-state armed actors such as the Koglweogo are sometimes seen as more reliable providers of protection

Regional overview

Violent insurgency, organized crime, and human trafficking have been on the rise across the Sahel. The transnational and cross-border dimensions of these threats to regional security has prompted international partners to support a regional approach to border security governance. In the past few years this has led to a proliferation of multilateral and bilateral initiatives fostering cross-border security cooperation. Although some cases of overlap and duplication have been observed, two fundamental – and complementary – types of intervention have been privileged: military cooperation and border enforcement.

Foreign boots on the ground

Military cooperation has sought to help Sahelian states regain control over the unstable borderlands where weak state presence was thought to offer a fertile ground for insecurity.³² Sahelian states have accepted military assistance offered by a variety of international partners to strengthen their security structures and share responsibilities with external actors. As a result, the Sahel has become a zone of intense military investment by donor countries. The security budgets of Sahelian countries have risen significantly and the militarization of the region is becoming more evident.³³ Furthermore, in 2019, international military operations deployed in the Sahel included at least 3,500 French soldiers of Operation Barkhane, 450 European Union (EU) troops supporting the EU-Training Mission in Mali (EUTM), an estimated 1,000 US military personnel in the broader Sahel, as well as between 5,000 and 10,000 soldiers planned for the G5 Sahel Joint Force (G5S JF).³⁴ While the specific mandates of these forces vary, they all contribute to the governance and provision of security in border areas across the Sahel.

France's **Operation Barkhane** was launched in 2014 with a view to contributing to the fight against terrorism in the region. It is deployed in five former French colonies: Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad, with the main headquarters in N'Djamena (Chad) and advance bases scattered in both regional capitals and desert outposts. Its main contribution consists of mobilizing sophisticated air assets that are unavailable to local states, such as attack helicopters and drones, to help

identify and neutralize violent insurgent elements considered as terrorists.³⁵

The Sahel's own joint force

In 2014, the five states hosting Operation Barkhane formed the G5 Sahel, a framework for cooperation on cross-border issues, with a particular emphasis on security. In February 2017, the same countries agreed to pool some of their military resources. The resulting **G5S Joint Force** (G5S JF) conducts military operations under a single command in an effort to control a large swathe of territory that straddles their shared boundaries, of which Liptako-Gourma is the most significant target area.³⁶ Between its launch in July 2017 and late 2018, G5S JF activities in Liptako-Gourma include: Operation Hawbi (October/November 2017) in the tri-border zone; Operation Pagnali (January 2018) on the Mali-Burkina Faso border between Boulikessi and Nassoumbou; Operation Irgo Ka (May/June 2018) at the Burkina Faso-Niger border between Markoye and In-Ates; and Operation Gourma' (June 2018) in the tri-border zone.³⁷

Several shortcomings, however, undermine the functioning of the G5S JF. From an institutional point of view, the operationalization of the joint force has been hampered by structural lack of funding and a complex bureaucratic setup for channelling international support.³⁸ On the ground, doubts remain about its military effectiveness amid reports of abusive behaviour by some local troops.³⁹ As a result, there seems to be quite widespread scepticism about the real impact of the Joint Force on Sahelian border security, including among local communities, regional governments and the international community, not least the UN and the US.⁴⁰

Complementing the G5S's focus on military cooperation, the EU-funded Groupes d'Action Rapides - Surveillance et Intervention au Sahel (GAR-SI Sahel) project aims to build the capacity of G5S countries' internal security forces to fight violent insurgency and organized crime in remote borderlands. The initiative is spearheaded by the Spanish Guardia Civil, and it has a budget of €41 million. Its objective is to build specialized units of 120 people within the gendarmerie of each target country, by providing training modules and non-lethal equipment.

32 The perceived threat posed by "ungoverned spaces" has been a recurrent theme in Western governments' rhetoric about the Sahel. Research findings however have demonstrated a growing skepticism about such framing. See: Raleigh C., Dowd C. (2013), 'Governance and conflicts in Sahel's 'ungoverned spaces'', *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development* 2(2).

33 Berghezan G. (2016), 'Dépenses militaires et importations d'armes dans cinq États ouest-africains', *Note d'analyse du GRIP*, Brussels.

34 Charbonneau B. (2019), 'Faire la paix au Mali : les limites de l'acharnement contre-terroriste', *Le Monde*, 27 March 2019.

35 <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/operations/barkhane/dossier-de-presentation/operation-barkhane>.

36 For an early analysis of the joint force see: Offner, F. (2017) *New Sahel anti-terror force: risks and opportunities*, The New Humanitarian.

37 UN Security Council (2018), Report of the Secretary-General on the Joint Force of the Group of Five for the Sahel, S/2018/1006, New York: November 2018. For an account (in French) of Operation Hawbi, see: Fourt, O. (2017), *G5 Sahel: Operation Hawbi, les premiers enseignements*, RFI Afrique.

38 Interview with G5S officer, Niamey, November 2018.

39 ICG (2017), 'Finding the Right Role for the G5 Sahel Joint Force', *Africa Report* 258, Brussels/Dakar: December 2017.

40 Information corroborated in several interviews with local and international security officers, NGOs, G5S officers, in Niamey, Bamako and Ouagadougou between November 2018 and February 2019.

Beyond security

At the same time, new initiatives have emerged to try to redress the almost exclusive emphasis of the G5S on security. Launched in July 2017, the Alliance for the Sahel (AfS) aims to promote synergies between security and development by supporting stabilization projects in the Sahelian states, with a particular emphasis on border regions. The AfS brings together major donors, including the EU, France, Germany, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the African Development Bank (AfDB) and the World Bank, later joined by the UK, Italy, Spain and Saudi Arabia. At a donor conference in February 2018, the Alliance pledged to invest €10.9 billion in youth education, training and employment; food security and agriculture; climate and energy; provision of basic services; and decentralization.⁴¹ The AfS is designed to support the implementation of the G5S development strategy, which in turn is largely inspired by the EU Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel.⁴² In December 2018, international partners of the G5 Sahel pledged €2.4 billion to stabilization projects as part of the group's 2019-21 development strategy. However, critics contend that by conflating development and security, there is a risk of subordinating development resources to military objectives, as demonstrated by the increasing trend of embedding military personnel into aid agencies.⁴³

Border cooperation

Security cooperation in Liptako-Gourma therefore encompasses a variety of fields of border security governance, including bilateral and multi-lateral action, internal security and defense, and stabilization and development projects. Alongside military cooperation, programs designed to support border enforcement help define the regional framework of border security governance. These programs aim to bolster Sahelian states' capacity to adequately control their borders and monitor cross-border flows. A multiplicity of actors are involved at the intersection between security, trade, governance, migration, peace-building, assistance to border enforcement and border cooperation.

The IOM is implementing a regional project on "Coordinated border management in the Sahel". Sponsored by Japan, the EU and the US, its main activities include: constructing, rehabilitating and equipping police posts (44 in total since 2014); installing IOM's Migration Information and Data Analysis System (MIDAS) and supporting its users; tackling document fraud, including by developing modules on passport control, risk analysis and modern investigative techniques; and improving relationships between SDFs and local communities in

border regions through trust-building measures and the creation of a mechanism for information sharing.⁴⁴

Germany's development agency GIZ supports the implementation of the African Union Border Program and the West African Economic and Monetary Union's (UEMOA) Framework Agreement on Security with the (re-)construction and equipping of border posts across the region, and training of their personnel, including in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. GIZ also contributes to the conflict-sensitive demarcation and delimitation of international boundaries and strives to reduce corruption among border security forces.⁴⁵

In 2014, the Danish Demining Group launched a Border Security and Management program in the Liptako-Gourma region with the aim of reducing armed violence, improving community safety, and enhancing border security and management capacity. Building on a community-based approach, the project focuses on facilitating dialogue between security providers and communities so as to better identify the sources of concern and conflict, strengthen conflict prevention and management capacity, enable information sharing, build mutual understanding and consensus on shared interests, and foster cooperation in response to insecurity.⁴⁶

41 Venturi B. (2019), 'An EU Integrated Approach in the Sahel: The Role for Governance', IAI Papers 19/03, Rome.

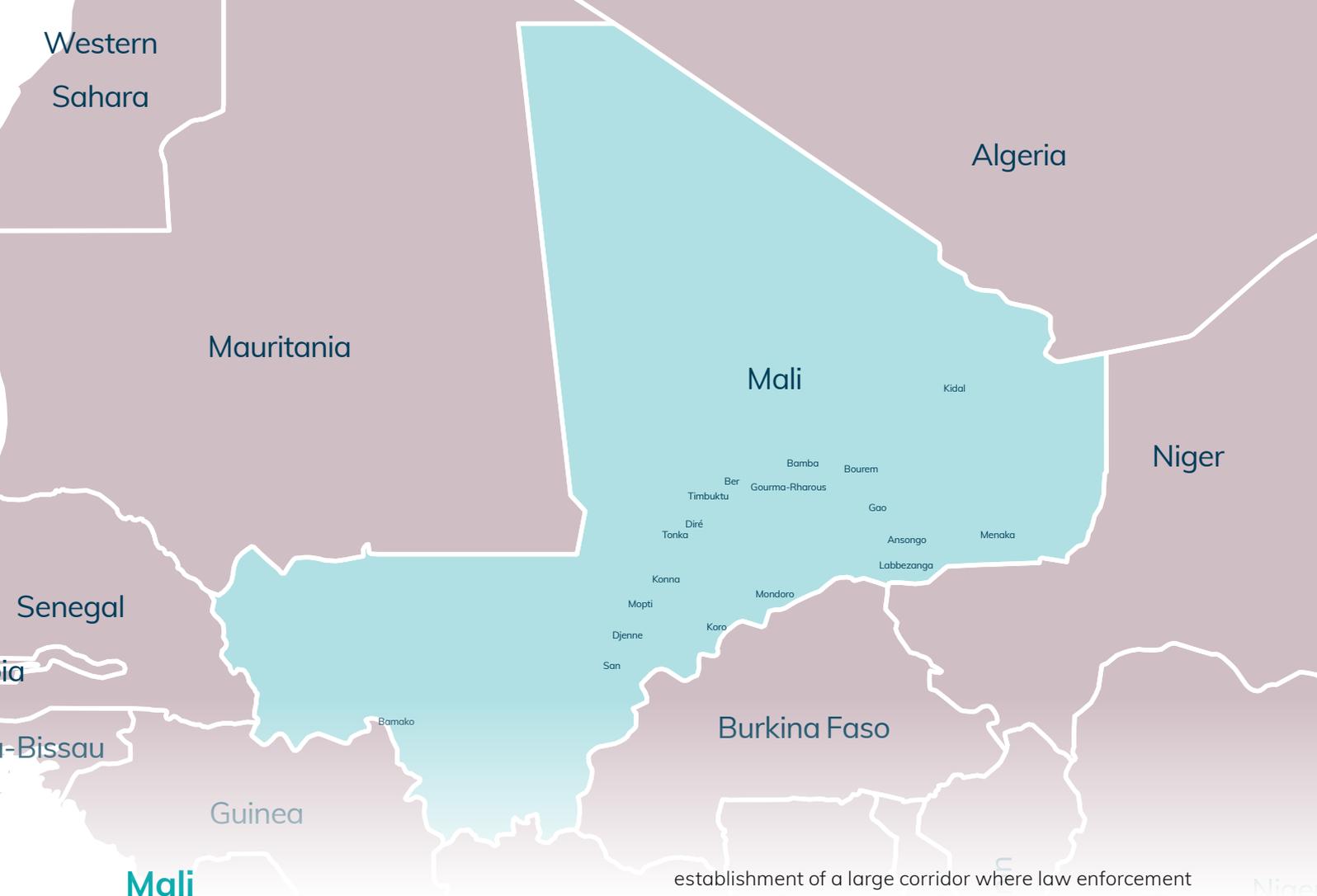
42 Interview with G5S officer, Niamey, November 2018.

43 Lebovich A. (2018), 'Halting ambitions. EU migration and security policy in the Sahel', ECFR Policy Brief 266, London.

44 <https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/country/docs/mauritania/IOM-Mauritania-Enhancing-Security-in-the-Sahel.pdf>.

45 <https://www.giz.de/en/worldwide/15759.html>.

46 https://danishdemininggroup.dk/media/2920567/bsm_sahelfactsheet-november-2016-eng.pdf.



Mali

Towards a national border policy

The specificities of Mali's border security governance are a result of a combination of contextual spatial features, historical dynamics and deliberate policy choices. Since 2000, Mali has endorsed a National Border Policy rooted in the notion of "border country" ("pays-frontière"). This policy formalized what was already implicit in the informal social contract between central state authorities and borderland residents, namely, weak suppression (read tolerance) of informal cross-border flows in exchange for social acquiescence and political loyalty. In other words, the key idea was to "achieve the integration of the peoples across the borders through an active strategy aimed at fading state borders away".⁴⁷

The 2006 Algiers Agreement, which put a provisional end to the Tuareg-led uprising in northern Mali, further reinforced this trend. The accord provided for the withdrawal of Malian security forces several kilometers away from the country's northern borderlines. The de facto

establishment of a large corridor where law enforcement was virtually non-existent helped create an enabling environment for unchecked extra-legal enterprises to develop and thrive.⁴⁸ This led to the consolidation of patronage networks profiting from lucrative cross-border trade which managed to exert a significant influence on Mali's policy-making.⁴⁹ The protection of these illicit revenue streams has stirred considerable competition among state and non-state security providers. This helps explain not only the endemic instability of north Mali's borderlands but also the institutional fragmentation of border security governance in the country.⁵⁰

The instability in Mali after 2012 further exacerbated these problems. As a result of intense territoriality, border posts manned by competing security forces multiplied and overlapped over time, while operations were increasingly siloed, information shared insufficiently and public money spent unreasonably.⁵¹ It is therefore no coincidence that Mali's current rulers have inherited a highly decentralized system of border security governance, depending on seven different ministries, and lacking oversight and coordination.⁵²

47 Cited in Cantens T., Raballand G. (2016), «Une frontière très très longue, un peu difficile à vivre» : le nord du Mali et ses frontières', *Recherches et Documents* 03/2016, Paris: Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique, p.4.

48 Scheele J. (2009), 'Tribus, Etats et Fraude: la région frontalière algéro-malienne', *Etudes Rurales* 184(2).

49 Daniel S. (2014), 'Les Mafias du Mali', Paris, Descartes et Cie; Tinti P. (2014), 'Illicit Trafficking and Instability in Mali: Past, Present and Future', Research Paper, Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, Geneva.

50 Lacher W. (2012), 'Organized Crime and Conflict in the Sahel-Sahara Region', *The Carnegie Papers*, Washington D.C.; ICG (2018), 'Drug-Trafficking, Violence and Conflict in Northern Mali', *Africa Report* 267, Dakar/Brussels.

51 Strategic Capacity Group (2016), 'Border Security in the Sahel: Building a Regional Platform for Dialogue and Action. An Assessment of Mali's Border Security Capacity and Capabilities', SCG Report, Bamako.

52 Ibid.

In response to a clear need for a review, a new Politique Nationale des Frontières (PNF – National Border Policy)⁵³ was adopted in 2018. Covering the period 2018-2027, the revamped policy aims to foster a holistic and inclusive view of border governance. It was elaborated through a participatory approach involving local, regional and state authorities and civil society organizations, and with the support, in terms of both funding and expertise, of international partners such as IOM, the UN's Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), the EU's capacity building mission (EUCAP Sahel Mali) and the G5 Sahel.

The new PNF identifies six strategic objectives encompassing the realms of security and development. These include: physical demarcation of the borders; capacity-building of implementing actors; cross-border cooperation; development of border areas; a push towards decentralization of governance; and strengthening institutional monitoring frameworks. A 2018-2023 Action Plan sets out (with deadlines) priority activities to be carried out in pursuit of these objectives. The new policy also strives to clarify the border management roles and responsibilities of disparate actors and institutions. Placed under the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization, the National Directorate of Borders (DNF) centralizes and oversees the implementation and management of the PNF. Other important actors include the ministries of interior, economy, defense, foreign affairs and transport. As well as political guidance, international partners such as UNDP, the African Union (AU), ECOWAS, UEMOA and GIZ provide technical and financial support to the implementation of the PNF.⁵⁴

Border controls in Mali

Mali shares 7,561 km of border with its seven neighbors: Mauritania, Senegal, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Niger and Algeria. These are monitored by 14 border posts, whose management and density vary significantly across the country.⁵⁵ Most posts are concentrated in the southern part of the country, while state controls are almost entirely absent in large parts of the desert borderlands in the north. The widespread insecurity in northern and central regions since 2012 is further aggravating this uneven distribution of control. With a view to filling these gaps, in 2014 IOM

launched an Integrated Border Management (IBM) project, harnessing along the way funding from the government of Japan and assistance from EUCAP Sahel Mali. The project led to the (re-)establishment of five border posts: Gogui (on the border with Mauritania), Sona (Burkina Faso), Kouremal (Guinea), Zégoua (Côte d'Ivoire), and Diboli (Senegal).⁵⁶ These posts aim to help improve monitoring of cross-border flows, and migration in particular, and to this end they are equipped with IOM's MIDAS system of data gathering, collection, and sharing. However, lack of security, electricity, training and appropriate protocols have reportedly undermined the transmission of data to the capital.⁵⁷

Security at border posts is entrusted to a variety of different actors. Border police (police des frontières) are essentially tasked with monitoring entries and exits, performing identity and document checks, issuing visas, and combatting customs fraud and banditry. The gendarmerie normally ensures the second line of protection, and focuses more on rural border patrols.⁵⁸ Customs officers control the import and export of goods and related taxes. Where security is particularly volatile, the Malian army (Forces Armées Maliennes – FAMA) supports other SDF and protects border areas against external threats. Individual officers are generally rotated from one post to another every week or two.⁵⁹ This measure is meant to reduce opportunities for corruption by breaking informal relations. At the same time, however, the rotation system inhibits trust between SDF and border communities, complicates knowledge transfer and risks seriously undermining the training provided to security officials.⁶⁰

Border controls in the region of Gao⁶¹

Border controls in Malian areas of Liptako-Gourma are characterized by several vulnerabilities. A study carried out in 2014, before the dramatic rise of violence in central Mali, noted that none of the border posts along the 300 kilometers between Koro and Labezzanga (adjacent to Burkina Faso and Niger) were operational.⁶² Five years later, in spite of a conspicuous focus of local and international actors on border security, the situation on the ground has barely improved. On the almost 1,000 kilometer long border with Burkina Faso, only three

53 Ministère de l'administration territoriale, Direction nationale des frontières (2017) Politique nationale des frontières, République du Mali, décembre 2017.

54 Ministère de l'administration territoriale, Direction nationale des frontières (2017) Politique nationale des frontières, République du Mali, décembre 2017.

55 Interview with border security expert, Bamako, February 2019.

56 Interview with border security expert, Bamako, February 2019.

57 Interview with international security officer, Bamako, February 2019.

58 Interview with DDG Sahel, April 2019.

59 Interview with a security officer in Bamako, February 2019.

60 Interview with EUCAP Sahel Mali, Bamako, February 2019.

61 The situation at the borders is fluid and prior to publication of this study there was a deadly attack in Indelimane on 1 November 2019 with more than 50 victims among Malian soldiers. As a result, the Malian Armed Forces decided to regroup its forces further away from the border; the troops at the Labezzanga post retreated to Ansongo and those at Andéroukane and Indelimane retreated to Menaka. This was reported on the site of the Malian Armed Forces on 9 November 2019: [Stratégie de lutte contre les groupes terroristes : les FAMA réajustent leur dispositif](#).

62 Danish Demining Group (2014), 'Evaluations des Risques Sécuritaires aux Frontières. Région du Liptako-Gourma: Mali, Burkina et Niger', Copenhagen.

border control posts are operational: in Sona (in the Koutiala district of Sikasso region), in Bénéna (in the Tominiam district of Segou region), and Bih (in the Koro district of the Mopti region).⁶³

The only border post on the frontier between Mali and Niger, which is also the only official border post currently functioning in the vast Gao Region, is located in Labezzanga, in the district of Ansongo. Re-established after the multidimensional crisis of 2012, it is positioned along the main route between Gao and Niamey.⁶⁴

Image 1 (see below) illustrates the distribution of various state agents at the Labezzanga border crossing. Coming from Niger, the first checkpoint is manned by FAMA tasked with protecting the border and the other SDF behind it against external aggressors. Some 200 metres further down the road lies a Border Police (Police des Frontières) station. The Border Police are mandated to control migratory flows by performing checks on identities, documents and vehicles, but inadequate equipment undermines their activities. In spite of improvement efforts, the monitoring and registration of flows is not computerized, and information is transmitted to the capital on paper registers leading to frequent gaps and overlaps.⁶⁵ One kilometer beyond the police there is a gendarme brigade, which also controls migratory flows. A customs post is located a little further on. Its task is

to control only the registration of vehicles carrying goods (livestock, fuel etc.),⁶⁶ while public transport vehicles are generally overlooked.⁶⁷

Border security governance beyond the state

While Malian authorities have the primary responsibility for ensuring border security governance, in practice other actors, including foreign interveners, multilateral military missions, and non-governmental armed groups provide a crucial contribution to the governance of security in the region as a result of the limited presence of the Malian state in Liptako-Gourma after 2012.

The French military operations Serval and Barkhane were consecutively deployed to Mali from early 2013 with a mandate to fight terrorism. While Serval focused only on northern Mali, Barkhane has a more encompassing regional mandate. However, approximately one third of Barkhane's contingent is deployed in Mali, and more specifically in Gao, with assets including attack helicopters and armoured vehicles. Although it has no specific border enforcement mandate, Barkhane is meant to contribute to the fight against the cross-border threat of terrorism, and to the broader protection of Liptako-Gourma's borderlands.⁶⁸

Image 1: Labezzanga border post, location of state agents



Courtesy of DDG Sahel

63 Information obtained through several interviews with border security experts, Bamako, February 2019.

64 Ibid.

65 Interview with security officer, Bamako, February 2019.

66 However, there are some reports that the smuggling of licit goods is tolerated by both SDF and local authorities. See: Raineri L., Galletti C. (2016), 'Organized crime in Mali: why it matters for a peaceful transition from conflict', *International Alert Policy Brief 09/2016*, London: April 2016.

67 Interview with DDG Sahel, March 2019, remote. According to DDG Sahel, however, the customs has begun to check the luggage compartments of public transport buses since March 2019.

68 <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/operations/barkhane/dossier-de-presentation/operation-barkhane>.

MINUSMA is a 12,600-strong peacekeeping operation launched in April 2013.⁶⁹ Its primary mandate is to support the implementation of the 2015 Algiers Peace Agreement signed by some of Mali's warring factions and the Malian state, while ensuring the protection of civilians. Its main activities include protecting population centres and lines of communication, monitoring of human rights violations, and creating conditions for the provision of humanitarian assistance and the return of IDPs. In light of the deterioration of security in Liptako-Gourma, since June 2018 a UN Security Council resolution has extended MINUSMA's mandate to the central regions of Mali, with a view to contributing to the restoration of state authority across the entire territory, including the borderlands. While MINUSMA's troops are scattered across the entire country, the Gao region harbours the main concentration of forces and logistical bases, most notably in Gao, but also in Ansongo and Ménaka (where Nigerien troops are stationed).⁷⁰ MINUSMA also actively supported the deployment of mixed patrols in collaboration with Barkhane, FAMA, Plateforme and CMA (Coordination des Mouvements de l'Azawad) that started in early 2017 in Gao Region.⁷¹

The European Union also contributes to the governance of security in Mali through a variety of measures and an increasing emphasis on borders.⁷² Established in 2013, the European Union Training Mission (EUTM) in Mali is mandated to provide support and training to the FAMA. It also supports the operationalization of G5S JF through dedicated advice and training.⁷³ In 2015, the EU launched the European Union Capacity Building Mission in Mali (EUCAP Sahel Mali) to support the reform of Mali's internal security forces, including the police, gendarmerie and national guard, in view of their re-deployment across the entire country.⁷⁴ Since 2017, new priorities have been added to this mission's mandate: supporting Mali in ensuring border controls, better migration management, and the fight against insurgents and criminal groups. The renewed emphasis of the EU's missions on border management has paved the way for a new project focusing on border regions and the area of Liptako-Gourma: the Security Enhancement Support Program (PARSEC) harnesses the resources of the EU Trust Fund for Africa and the expertise of EUTM and EUCAP Sahel Mali in order to support the restoration of state authority and rule of law in Mopti Region, with a

particular emphasis on border controls and borderland stabilization.⁷⁵

Mali is also home to the G5S JF command. This used to be located in the military base at Sévaré, near Mopti, until a devastating armed attack in June 2018 forced it to relocate to Bamako. Malian borderlands are the theatre of most military operations carried out by the G5S JF, in coordination with the armed forces of neighboring countries. However, local observers report that the deployment of the G5S JF, far from reassuring the population, is often seen as a source of abuse and a magnet for insurgent attacks.⁷⁶

The limited penetration of Malian SDF in large parts of the country, and most notably in Liptako-Gourma, has led state authorities to tolerate the informal outsourcing of sovereign functions such as governance and security provision to non-state actors, including militias, customary leaders and smuggling networks. Local perceptions often place such groups in alignment with Bamako's agenda and as capable of balancing the secessionist ambitions of state challengers and insurgents. While this hybrid approach combining state and non-state actors is not new to Mali, the progressive erosion of state authority since 2012 has reinforced the trend.⁷⁷

Mali is increasingly cooperating with selected political-military groups that signed the 2015 Algiers Peace Agreement, such as Imghad Tuareg Self-Defense Group and Allies (Groupe Armé Touareg Imghad et Alliés, GATIA) and Movement for the Salvation of Azawad (Mouvement du Salut de l'Azawad, MSA), in order to project a shadow of state authority and fight terrorist organizations in the remote borderlands of Mali's Liptako-Gourma. As an illustration of this, MSA and GATIA are reported to de facto control the Malian side of the border with Niger, especially the border checkpoint of Anderamboukane, on the route connecting Ménaka and Abala.⁷⁸ The pretext of "counter-terrorist" operations, though, is fuelling inter-communal fighting in the area, leading to major episodes of human rights abuses and massive displacement of populations.⁷⁹

Border communities and security

Security perceptions vary significantly across different segments of the Malian population in the Liptako-Gourma.

69 Karlsrud J. (2015), 'The UN at war: examining the consequences of peace enforcement mandates for the UN peacekeeping operations in the CAR, the DRC and Mali', *Third World Quarterly*, 36(1).

70 See: <https://www.un.org/Depts/Cartographic/map/dpko/MINUSMA.pdf>

71 <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/note-correspondents/2017-03-08/joint-declaration-african-union-united-nations-economic>.

72 For a broader overview of EU action in Mali, see: Bøås M., Diallo A., Drange B., Kvamme F., Stambøl E. (2018), 'The implementation of EU crisis response in Mali', EUNPACK Working Paper D.7.4., Brussels.

73 See: http://eutmmali.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/190106-EUTM_Mission_Factsheet_JAN19_EN-website-1.pdf.

74 Interview with EUCAP Sahel Mali, Bamako, February 2019.

75 <https://www.expertisefrance.fr/fiche-projet?id=404281>.

76 Interview with international security expert, Bamako, February 2019.

77 Guichaoua Y., Pellerin M. (2017), 'Faire la paix et construire l'Etat. Les relations entre pouvoir central et périphéries sahéniennes au Mali et au Niger', *Etudes de l'IRSEM* 51, Paris.

78 ICG (2018), 'Frontière Niger-Mali: mettre l'outil militaire au service d'une approche politique', *Rapport Afrique* 261, Brussels/Dakar: June 2018.

79 <https://minusma.unmissions.org/point-de-presse-de-la-minusma-du-12-avril-2018>.

The importance that authorities and communities attribute to security or development respectively is diametrically opposed. According to a survey carried out in 2014, for instance, security is the top priority for state representatives, while it is ranked eighth among communities (with only 17% of them citing it among their major concerns). Cross-border traffic, including of people and goods, is hardly viewed by the population of Liptako-Gourma as a significant threat: less than 2% of the respondents consider smuggling and trafficking among the top ten security threats. Instead, they cite poverty, lack of development and access to natural resources among the most pressing needs threatening their security.⁸⁰ A more recent survey confirmed that, although the overall security situation and the relationships among communities were widely seen as deteriorating, lack of revenue and unemployment remained the primary source of concern for Malians, particularly those living in Liptako-Gourma.⁸¹

This divergence of needs and priorities has the potential to undermine cooperation between communities and state authorities. Moreover, SDF are criticized by human rights organizations for being prone to committing abuses against the population, including racketeering, solicitation of bribes, violence against civilians and extrajudicial killings.⁸² With state abuses and protection gaps being among the key drivers of radicalization and violent extremism in Mali,⁸³ the mutual mistrust between SDF and local populations runs the risk of spiralling.⁸⁴ Both Malian SDF and local interveners have reportedly become increasingly aware of this situation and are trying to address it. Trust-building measures including dialogues, consultations, and facilitations are being carried out by various actors, including IOM, DDG, GIZ, Malian SDF themselves, as well as the dedicated civil-military cooperation unit of the G5S JF, yet there is little evidence of progress so far.⁸⁵

80 Danish Demining Group (2014), 'Evaluations des Risques Sécuritaires aux Frontières. Région du Liptako-Gourma: Mali, Burkina et Niger', Copenhagen: July 2014.

81 Tobie A. (2017), 'A fresh perspective on security concerns among Malian civil society', SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security 2/2017, Stockholm: July 2017.

82 Human Rights Watch (2015), 'Mali: Lawlessness, abuses imperil population', New York: April 2015; MINUSMA (2018), t, Bamako: February 2018.

83 Institute for Security Studies (2016), 'Mali's young 'jihadists': Fueled by faith or circumstance?', Policy Brief 89, Dakar: August 2016; International Alert (2018) 'If victims become perpetrators. Factors contributing to vulnerability and resilience to violent extremism in the Central Sahel', London.

84 Interviews with an INGO, Bamako, February 2019.

85 Information collected during several interviews with Malian SDF, PNF Directorate and G5S members, Bamako, February 2019.



Niger

Towards a national border policy

Niger is a landlocked country surrounded by hotbeds of instability, including in neighboring Mali, Libya and Burkina Faso. Unsurprisingly, Nigerien authorities have devoted growing attention to the development of a national border policy.

Historically, border control has represented one of the most tangible manifestations of the construction of a state that is otherwise barely present in Nigeriens' daily lives. More importantly, the right to levy customs duties could be said to have contributed to the establishment of a neo-patrimonial system of rule.⁸⁶ Border checkpoints and outposts may have established an informal system of resource capture, redistribution, and access to power, through these informal practices of tax collection. Researchers have argued that the protection of cross-border trade has thus helped cement patronage networks linking politicians, security forces and traders.⁸⁷

The institutional struggle to capture lucrative positions goes some way to explaining the persistent

fragmentation of Niger border security governance. Currently, responsibility for securing Niger borders is shared by four different ministries and their respective security forces: the Ministry of Defense, with the army and the gendarmerie; the Ministry of Interior, with the police (and most notably the *Direction de la Surveillance du Territoire - DST*), the national guard and the civil protection service (DGPC); the Ministry of Finance with the customs officers (douaniers); and the Ministry of Environment with the rangers (agent des eaux et des forêts). In theory, these forces have different mandates and roles in border governance: the military protects Niger's sovereignty against foreign aggression; the police carry out identity checks; the gendarmerie ensures the security of populations especially in rural areas; and customs officers are in charge of controlling economic flows and goods in transit. In the most insecure areas, where the police have only limited access, the army also performs police functions, including in the domain of migration. In practice, however, there are significant overlaps, and cooperation is not always easy,⁸⁸ leading foreign observers to contend: "border management in Niger is a case in point of intentional institutional fragmentation and opaque management".⁸⁹

86 Tidjani Alou M. (2012), 'Monitoring the neopatrimonial state on a day-by-day basis. Politicians, customs officials and traders in Niger', in *Neopatrimonialism in Africa and Beyond* (Bach D., Gazibo M. eds.), New York: Routledge.

87 Olivier de Sardan J.-P. (2015), 'Les quatre prisons du pouvoir au Niger', *Le Républicain*, 31/12/2015.

88 Interview with Nigerien police officer, Niamey, November 2018.

89 Interview with international security officer, Niamey, November 2018.

With a view to fostering coordination and policy coherence, since February 2017 the government of Niger has put in place a technical committee in charge of drafting a National Border Policy and a plan of action, under the aegis of the Ministry of Interior. The committee benefited from the support and expertise of international partners, such as EUCAP Sahel Niger, the German (GIZ) and French (AFD) cooperation agencies, the Liptako-Gourma authority, as well as humanitarian organizations such as IOM and DDG. The committee held consultations with a wide range of national stakeholders, including in all the seven regions, 39 departments and 75 municipalities situated at Niger's borders, and eventually submitted its report in January 2019.⁹⁰

Border controls in Niger

Niger shares 5,688 km of border with its neighbors. These are monitored by 23 border posts, 16 of which lie along the almost 2,000-kilometer long southern border with Nigeria. Border posts are tasked with fulfilling a variety of different functions, the priority of which varies depending on the challenges specific to each locality. As a result, the actual capacity and needs of existing border posts vary considerably. Reportedly, one of the best equipped is the post of Gaya, at the border with Benin, through which most of the goods transit into Niger. In Gaya, all Nigerien SDF share the same office, which is juxtaposed to that of their Beninese colleagues just across the border. ECOWAS is encouraging such consolidation as a way to smooth border formalities, ease regional trade and foster mutual control so as to reduce the opportunities for misconduct and bribery.⁹¹ Border posts in Tillabéry Region recently underwent similar upgrades so as to better address local priorities, including ensuring steady cross-border trade and migration control. However, insecurity is severely constraining their ability to operate. In the north only two posts, at Assamaka and Dirkou, are in place to monitor the 1,300-kilometer borderlines with Algeria and Libya, and their capacity to deter informal crossings remains questionable.

Niger's international partners, particularly the EU, as well as German and Dutch development agencies, are sponsoring the construction of new border posts in all regions, including mobile border checkpoints which are supposed to provide a more flexible response to the challenges of a vast and porous country. In practice, however, the needs of cross-border trade (smooth and streamlined procedures) are not always easy to balance with those of security (meticulous and sometimes lengthy

checks). The emphasis on security priorities imposes more burdensome controls, which SDF may use as a pretext to increase the racket targeting migrants at borders.⁹² As a result, experts fear that the construction of new border posts will only increase the number of agencies fostering further corruption", unless the problem of SDF corruption is addressed".⁹³

Border controls in the region of Tillabéry

By the end of 2018, three border posts were operational on the Nigerien side of the Liptako-Gourma: Ayorou on the border with Mali, and Makalondi and Petel Koli on the border with Burkina Faso. Coming from Mali via the route of Gao and Labezzanga, one first finds the post of Yassane. In December 2016 IOM renewed the police equipment to facilitate identity checks, but a terrorist attack in December 2017 forced the DST to leave Yassane, which now remains a military outpost. The DST therefore pulled its frontline back to the north entrance of Ayorou, 30 km away from the border, where appropriate detection and registration tools are lacking. The gendarmerie and the national guard oversee further checkpoints at the southern entrance of the town. Further east, two military posts are located in In-Ates and Tiloa, while no internal security forces are to be found until Tahoua Region. Given the poor equipment and rough terrain, the few SDF in the area tend to remain confined to their barracks, prompting local observers to contend that the Mali-Niger border is "completely unprotected"⁹⁴ and provides "an open door to migratory flows".⁹⁵

On the border with Burkina Faso, the post of Petel Koli is manned by the DST, and the deployment of customs officers is reportedly also planned. This should be a juxtaposed position, but Burkinabé counterparts have so far failed to implement the necessary steps. A lack of adequate tools and high turnover of personnel also undermine the post's ability to operate.⁹⁶ Further south, the post of Makalondi is overseen by the DST, the gendarmerie and customs officers. Makalondi exemplifies integrated border security cooperation: GIZ supported the physical reconstruction of the post's facilities, IOM supplied it with migration management tools, and EUCAP Sahel Niger trained the relevant security forces at local and central level.⁹⁷ On 16 November 2018 insurgents attacked the gendarmerie position in Makalondi, prompting the government to extend the state of emergency to the department of Torodi.⁹⁸

90 <http://www.lesahel.org/index.php/component/k2/item/16866-remise-du-projet-des-documents-de-politique-nationale-des-frontières-du-niger-2019-2035--pour-une-meilleure-gestion-sécuritaire-des-frontières>.

91 Interviews with a customs officer, and a Niger's Chamber of Commerce officer, Niamey, November 2018.

92 Interview with Nigerien trader, Niamey, November 2018.

93 Interview with international officer, Niamey, November 2018.

94 Interview with humanitarian worker from Tillabéry Region, Niamey, November 2018.

95 Interview with Nigerien security officer, Niamey, November 2018.

96 Interviews with local security forces, Tillabéry Region, January 2019.

97 Interview with international security officer, Niamey, November 2018.

98 Jeune Afrique, 2018. "Attaques terroristes : le Niger décrète l'état d'urgence près de la frontière avec le Burkina Faso", 1 December 2018, online edition.

Further inside Niger, the national guard and the gendarmerie provide the first-line protection for the towns of Bankilaré and Téra respectively. However, insecurity and limited resources require them to remove checkpoints at night and replace them with mixed mobile patrols whose effectiveness is contested.⁹⁹ At the same time, surrounding villages remain completely unprotected. As a result, local sources suggest that the most effective and trusted SDF providing security along the Niger-Burkina Faso border is the military quartered in Bankilaré in the framework of the G5 Sahel Joint Force and Operation Dongo, jointly conducted by troops from Niger's army and France's Operation Barkhane.¹⁰⁰

Border security governance beyond the state

Nigerien authorities seem to have capitalized on the lessons learnt by their neighbors about border security governance. In particular, there are indications that they want to distance themselves from the hybrid model of security provision that prevailed in Libya and Mali.¹⁰¹ With a view to preventing "militarization", Niamey refuses to informally outsource border control and security to non-state security providers, such as municipal vigilante groups, communal militias and parastatal armed actors.¹⁰²

In the same vein, Niamey demonstrates a strong commitment to support the reestablishment of governmental authority in neighboring countries plagued by insurgencies. In particular, Niger provides a military contribution to MINUSMA, including a logistical rear-base to foreign peace-keepers, and is sponsoring talks with Malian Tuareg armed actors, trying to assuage tensions among the Malian armed groups responsible for the insecurity along the Niger-Mali border.¹⁰³ Yet the ambition of Nigerien authorities contrasts with their limited resources to project state forces not only abroad, but also across the entire national territory, including in remote borderlands where heavily armed non-state actors thrive. Niger is largely relying on its international partners' support, both direct and indirect. Foreign political and economic support has contributed to the dramatic growth of Niger's domestic security sector,

which in the past ten years has registered an impressive six-fold budget increase.¹⁰⁴

At the same time, Niger readily hosts international projects to bolster its security. The EU civilian operation EUCAP Sahel Niger has been deployed in Niger since 2011 with a mandate to support the reform of the security sector. It has reportedly contributed to the training of 12,000 members of the country's security forces, especially on cross-cutting organizational issues such as judicialization, human rights, technical and scientific police, intelligence and forensic capabilities, and inter-force cooperation.¹⁰⁵ It has also provided advice during the drafting of Niger's overarching security strategies, such as the Internal Security Strategy, the National Border Policy, and the National Security Strategy (the latter was still ongoing at the time of writing). Yet EUCAP Sahel Niger's technical approach has limited the mission's capacity to address the political constraints that structurally undermine Niger's security sector, and the governance of border security in particular, including in terms of transparency and accountability.¹⁰⁶

Niger is also hosting foreign military operations authorized on a bilateral basis to fight armed insurgency in the region. These include the Operation Barkhane, which has bases in Niamey and Aguelal in the central Agadez Region, and US troops headquartered in Niamey and Arlit.¹⁰⁷ Both undertake air surveillance of Niger's borderlands, including in Liptako-Gourma, while their ground deployment is limited to occasional operations. Niger is also part of the G5S JF, but because France and the EU strongly encouraged the launch of a joint force, and closely supervise its operations, local ownership over the initiative has been called into question,¹⁰⁸ prompting some local observers to contend that "from a security perspective, the state simply gave up".¹⁰⁹

Border communities and security

The historically shallow penetration of state institutions in the Tillabéry Region leaves room for a plurality of non-state security providers, including those both backed by the state and those who challenge it. As border communities have been left to their own devices, people's

99 Interviews with local security forces, Tillabéry Region, January 2019.

100 Focus groups, Petel Koli, January 2019.

101 Bagayoko N., Hutchful E., Luckham R. (2016), 'Hybrid security governance in Africa: rethinking the foundations of security, justice and legitimate public authority', *Conflict, Security & Development* 16(1); Akl Z. (2017), 'Militia Institutionalisation and Security Sector Reform in Libya', *leMed Euromesco Paper* 35, Barcelona: June 2017; Shaw M., Mangan F. (2015), 'Enforcing "Our Law" When the State Breaks Down: The Case of Protection Economies in Libya and Their Political Consequences', *Hague Journal of Rule of Law* 7/2015.

102 Interviews with international border experts, Niamey, November 2018.

103 Interview with Nigerien politician, Niamey, November 2018.

104 De Tessières S. (2018), 'At the crossroads of Sahelian conflicts. Insecurity, Terrorism, and Arms Trafficking in Niger', *Small Arms Survey*, Geneva: January 2018. According to this report, security represented the 11.48% of the state budget in 2016. However, sources within the Ministry of Interior claim that this figure could be almost double. Interview with Nigerien security officer, Niamey, November 2018.

105 EEAS, European External Action Service (2018), 'Civilian Mission EUCAP Sahel Niger, fact-sheet', Niamey.

106 De Tessières S. (2018), 'At the crossroads of Sahelian conflicts. Insecurity, Terrorism, and Arms Trafficking in Niger', *Small Arms Survey*, Geneva; Raineri L. & Baldaro E. (2020, forthcoming), 'Resilience to what? EU capacity-building missions in the Sahel', in Cusumano E. (ed.) *Projecting Resilience Across the Mediterranean*, Palgrave, London.

107 For an extensive discussion of foreign military presence in Niger, see Berghezan G. (2016), 'Militaires occidentaux au Niger : présence contestée, utilité à démontrer', *Note d'analyse du Grip*, Bruxelles.

108 Interview with Niger security officers, Niamey, November 2018.

109 Interview with humanitarian actor from the Tillabéry region, Niamey, November 2018.

allegiances and interactions with state actors are not to be taken for granted. Today, however, all stakeholders seem fully aware that an integrated and effective approach to border security governance is intrinsically connected with the quality of the relationships between border communities and SDF, especially in a context of scant state presence and rampant radicalization.¹¹⁰ Reports of systematic patterns of abuse perpetrated by various Nigerien SDF in Tillabéry Region are rare.¹¹¹ This is a remarkable departure from the reported patterns involving some SDF elements in other regions of Liptako-Gourma, but could be explained by the relative absence of security forces in Tillabéry Region.¹¹²

Limited contact with state actors and lack of knowledge are seen as the main obstacles preventing the exchange of information by border communities. This, in turn, risks generating mistrust among the SDF vis-à-vis border communities, fuelling the perception that pastoralist and nomadic groups are closed and little inclined to cooperate with the state.¹¹³ The politicization of tribal chieftaincies further exacerbates this tendency.¹¹⁴

Various humanitarian organizations, both national and international, have fostered the creation of community-based committees or focal points to share information on different topics of concern. Security officers acknowledge that mutual mistrust used to prevail, but they are also eager to point out that recent awareness-raising activities and shared trainings have helped assuage tensions and enhance cooperation. Communication about commonly perceived threats, such as terrorism, banditry and radicalization, is now said to be effective. This is less true when threat perceptions differ, as may be the case for drug trafficking or migrant smuggling.¹¹⁵

Despite this improved dialogue, SDF react hesitantly to civilian alerts. The inability of state actors to follow up contrasts with the swift responses of jihadi insurgents, who have a demonstrated capacity to provide incentives and apply sanctions, including targeted killings of alleged spies, in order to coerce compliance with their rule and deter defection. As a result, the involvement of local communities in border security governance is much harder to achieve in areas where the state control is weaker, such as along the Niger-Mali border in the north of Tillabéry Region.

110 View reiterated in several interviews with national and international security and humanitarian officers working in and Tillabery Region, conducted in Niamey and Tillabery Region, November 2018 and January 2019.

111 ICG (2018), 'Frontière Niger-Mali: mettre l'outil militaire au service d'une approche politique', Rapport Afrique 261, Brussels/Dakar: June 2018; Raineri L. (2018), When victims become perpetrators. Factors contributing to vulnerability and resilience to violent extremism in the central Sahel, International Alert, London: June 2018.

112 MINUSMA-OHCHR (2018), 'Rapport sur les abus des droits de l'homme commis dans le village de Koumaga, Cercle de Djenne, Région de Mopti, 23-25 Juin 2018', Bamako; Human Rights Watch (2019), By Day We Fear the Army, By Night the Jihadists, Ouagadougou/New York: March 2019.

113 Interview with international officer working on integrated border management in Niger, Niamey, November 2018.

114 Interview with Niger security officer, Niamey, November 2018.

115 Ibid.



Burkina Faso

Towards a national border policy

Border security governance has long represented a crucial issue in Burkina Faso. In the process of decolonization, the lack of a clear demarcation of the more than 1,000-kilometre long border between Burkina Faso and Mali led to repeated armed confrontations between the two countries, most notably in 1974 and 1985, which only the arbitration of the International Court of Justice and the involvement of regional powers could eventually halt.¹¹⁶ During his presidency (from 1987 to 2014), Blaise Compaoré fostered an informal approach to border security governance. Leading members of his entourage reportedly managed to forge relationships with cross-border jihadist groups, other non-state armed actors and criminal networks thriving in the Liptako-Gourma region, leading to a situation of tacit truce.¹¹⁷ While this may have helped shield Burkina Faso from attacks, it exacerbated the regime's vulnerability to corruption.¹¹⁸

When Compaoré was ousted from power by a popular uprising in 2014, the informal network binding together high-level bureaucrats, security forces, traditional leaders and non-state armed actors collapsed alongside its authoritarian leader. As a result, from 2015 onwards,

Burkina Faso has been increasingly targeted by insurgent jihadist attacks, both in its porous northern borderlands and in its capital city, Ouagadougou. In a context where non-state armed groups may have a better command of borders than SDF, the shallow penetration of formal state structures in large parts of the most northern regions has led conflict dynamics in Mali and Niger to spill over into Burkina Faso, thereby calling into question the very sovereignty of Burkina Faso over these contested territories.¹¹⁹

Consequently, security has become a top priority of border management in Burkina Faso. In 2015, the government launched its National Border Management Strategy (SNGF) and the related Action Plan for 2016-2025.¹²⁰ The SNGF shifts the focus away from the priority of regional integration and cross-border mobility put forward by regional organizations such as ECOWAS, UEMOA and the African Union in the 2000s, to emphasize fostering peace, security and prosperity across the entire sovereign space of Burkina Faso, including in the borderlands.¹²¹ In this sense, the SNGF de facto subsumes the work of the National Border Commission created in 2013, whose primary task was to help demarcate national borders and resolve border-related disputes in coordination with all administrative and security stakeholders.¹²² The SNGF articulates a different set of priorities that broaden

116 ICJ (1986), 'Frontier Dispute (Burk. Faso v. Mali)', 1986/554, The Hague: 22 December 1986.

117 Daniel S. (2012), AQMI. *L'industrie de l'enlèvement*, Paris: Fayard; Lacher W. (2012), *Organized Crime and Conflict in the Sahel-Sahara Region*, The Carnegie Papers, Washington D.C.: September 2012.

118 Interview with regional security expert, Niamey, November 2018.

119 Interview with border management expert, Ouagadougou, February 2019.

120 Interview with border management officer, Ouagadougou, February 2019.

121 Commission Nationale des Frontières (2015), *Stratégie nationale de gestion des frontières 2016-2025*, Ouagadougou: October 2015.

122 IOM (2017), *Gestion de la migration et des frontières au Burkina Faso*, Geneva.

the focus from borderlines to borderlands, including: controlling the country's territorial limits; securing borders and border areas; improving the presence and image of the state in the border areas; enhancing cross-border cooperation; supporting the integrated management of natural resources; improving socio-economic conditions and capabilities of border actors.¹²³

Three different ministries share the main responsibility for the implementation of the SNGF. The Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization oversees the monitoring and evaluation of the SNGF; the Ministry of Security has the mandate to control cross-border mobility and its relevant documents, a task primarily performed by the Directorate of Border Police; and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs promotes international cooperation on border issues.¹²⁴

Beyond state actors, a variety of international stakeholders support the implementation of the SNGF. Drawing on the resources of the EU Trust Fund for Africa, in 2016 the EU launched a Support Program for Integrated Border Management in Burkina Faso (PAGIF) to support the implementation of the SNGF Plan of Action. However, the PAGIF only targets three out of ten border regions in Burkina Faso: Boucle de Mouhoun, Est and Sahel.¹²⁵ In 2017 GIZ, also with EUTF funding, launched the Integrated Management of Border Regions in Burkina Faso programme (ProGEF) to strengthen the presence of the Burkinabé state and the provision of basic social services, with the aim of improving the living conditions of border populations, stabilizing the country and preventing radicalization in the border areas between Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger.¹²⁶ ProGEF also supports the demarcation of the borders with Mali and Niger.¹²⁷ IOM is also an active SNGF partner, especially through its border management unit, which supplies training and equipment to strengthen Burkinabé authorities' capacity to effectively address the various border challenges, including monitoring and managing migratory flows, and to set up appropriate governance frameworks for migration.¹²⁸

Border controls in Burkina Faso

Burkina Faso is a landlocked country sharing 3,611 kilometers of borders with Benin, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, Niger and Togo. The most intense flows of people and goods are observed at the borders with Côte d'Ivoire, and on the road connecting Lomé seaport with Niger via Burkina Faso.¹²⁹

A mapping exercise conducted in 2015 identified 21 border posts in the country manned by approximately 400 agents.¹³⁰ Since 2005, UEMOA has promoted the construction of juxtaposed border checkpoints as part of an interstate road transit facilitation program with the aim of improving traffic flow, and ensuring effective, rapid and uniform control of border crossing operations. In Burkina Faso, the border crossings at Petel Koli and Kantchari (Burkina Faso/Niger) and at Cinkansé (Burkina Faso/Togo) were identified for the establishment of such juxtaposed posts. However, the effectiveness of border control mechanisms is undermined by patchy distribution and poor equipment. Border posts are scattered and situated in isolated areas, which has made them easy targets for attacks by non-state armed actors, especially since 2015.¹³¹

Poor working conditions limit capacity to adequately monitor cross-border flows. For instance, until IOM started to introduce MIDAS in 2016, the collection of migration data at border police stations was carried out manually on paper registers, which were transmitted from time to time to Ouagadougou. In the current climate of extreme security volatility, it is hard to ascertain which border posts are operational. Since 2016, border posts have suffered numerous attacks causing destruction and damage of equipment.¹³²

Border controls in the region of Dori

Situated at the center of the Liptako-Gourma, Burkina Faso shares two long borders with Mali and Niger. The border with Mali is Burkina Faso's longest, with approximately 1,300 kilometers punctuated by six border posts. The border posts in Hauts-Bassins Region are of particular significance for the flow of people and goods between Burkina Faso and Mali (although significant flows may also take place in more northern regions, where monitoring is more difficult due to the absence of controls). Mixed migration flows in this area have grown substantially since 2015, most likely as a result of the combination of long-range interregional migration from West to North Africa and forced displacement linked to the conflict in Mali. Data compiled by the border police at the post of Faramana indicate a threefold increase of recorded movements between the first quarter of 2014 (14,805 movements) and that of 2015 (40,395).¹³³

123 Commission Nationale des Frontières (2015), *Strategie nationale de gestion des frontières 2016-2025*, Ouagadougou: October 2015.

124 IOM (2017), *Gestion de la migration et des frontières au Burkina Faso*, Geneva.

125 Interview with border management official, Ouagadougou, February 2019.

126 GIZ website: <https://www.giz.de/en/worldwide/59821.html>.

127 Interview with ProGEF officer, Ouagadougou, February 2019.

128 IOM (2016), *Cartographie et présentation de la gestion des frontières au Burkina Faso*, Geneva.

129 Ibid

130 Ibid

131 IOM (2017), *Gestion de la migration et des frontières au Burkina Faso*, Geneva.

132 Interview with border management official, Ouagadougou, February 2019.

133 IOM (2016), *Cartographie et présentation de la gestion des frontières au Burkina Faso*, Geneva.

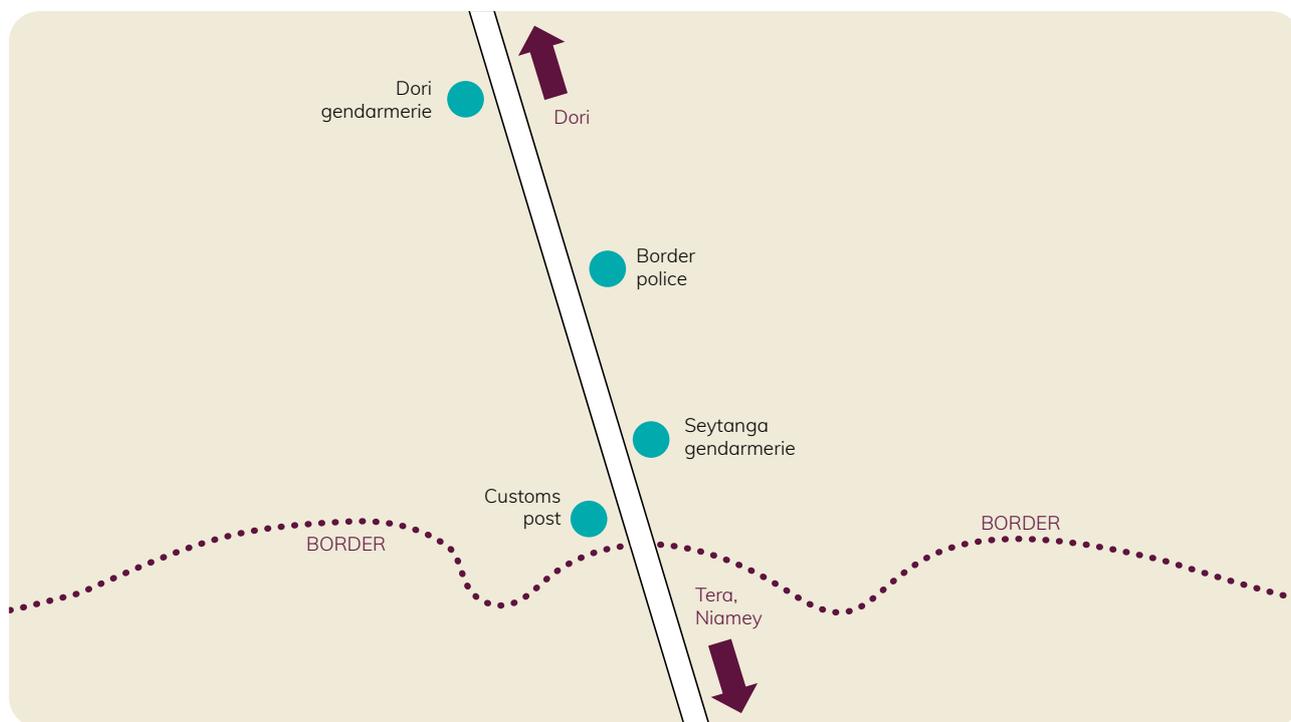
The border between Burkina Faso and Niger is approximately 600 kilometers long with main crossing points at Kantchari and Seytenga. Kantchari is located on the Ouagadougou-Niamey road and is a waypoint for most of Niger's imports, especially those arriving via the main ports of West Africa: Accra, Lomé and Abidjan. It also used to be one of the main entry points to Niger for migrants and asylum-seekers from the whole of West Africa. Mixed migratory flows here peaked during 2015 and 2016, leading IOM to enhance Burkinabé border and migration control capabilities at Kantchari: it installed the MIDAS system and launched an awareness-raising campaign to discourage local communities from helping migrants to circumvent border controls.¹³⁴ However, the crackdown on migration by Nigerien authorities since late 2016 and the rise of armed attacks by jihadist and criminal organizations since 2018 have significantly reduced flows through Kantchari.¹³⁵

Parallel to this decline, the road through Seytenga has become more popular and more frequently used by public transport vehicles travelling from Ouagadougou to Niamey. The border post at Seytenga was erected in April 2015 when it was found that the route connecting the towns of Dori and Téra had become very busy after

it was tarmacked (and as the Fada-Kantchari route deteriorated). In 2016 Seytenga saw monthly flows of about 10,000 people (admissions and exits combined) including Burkinabe, Nigerien, Malian, Mauritanian, Ivorian, Beninese, Togolese, Chadian and Pakistani citizens.¹³⁶ Consequently, UEMOA sponsored the construction of a juxtaposed border post in Seytenga that was supposed to host both police and gendarmes.¹³⁷

The juxtaposed post was not in use at the time of writing, when different security forces occupied separate posts (see Image 2). Coming from Niger, one first finds a small customs office at the border. Its role is to control goods and register vehicles. It is followed by the Seytenga gendarmerie brigade, tasked with migration control and judicial police roles. The first border police station is located further inside Burkina Faso, approximately five kilometers from the border. Its officers perform identity checks and migration control. Lastly, one finds a checkpoint manned by the gendarmerie of Dori, tasked with checking the interior of vehicles and the identity of passengers travelling with public transport.¹³⁸ Three gendarmes were wounded when the checkpoint was attacked in December 2018.¹³⁹

Image 2: Seytenga border post, location of state agents



Courtesy of DDG Sahel.

134 Interview with a border management expert, Ouagadougou, February 2019.

135 Ibid.

136 IOM (2017), [Gestion de la migration et des frontières au Burkina Faso](#), Geneva.

137 Interview with a border security expert, Ouagadougou, February 2019.

138 Interview with DDG, remote, March 2019.

139 Voafrique, [Trois gendarmes blessés dans une nouvelle attaque au Burkina](#), 5 décembre 2018.

Border security governance beyond the state

State agents are not the only armed actors contributing to the governance of border security in Burkina Faso, especially in Liptako-Gourma. French military forces have long contributed to the protection of Burkina Faso's sovereign space. French Special Forces have been deployed in Ouagadougou since at least 2010. Burkina Faso has also become one of the areas of deployment of Operation Barkhane. French forces have participated in several joint military operations with national armies in the region, including in Burkina Faso. In 2016, for instance, Barkhane supported Malian and Burkinabé armies in their mission to secure the border between the two countries. In October 2018, Barkhane intervened in Burkina Faso to assist Burkinabé soldiers in the forest of Pama, in the Est Region, said to harbour jihadist cells.¹⁴⁰ And since November 2018, Barkhane has reportedly started to use a temporary operating base in Dori, where it carries out community work to gain local acceptance.¹⁴¹

Governance of security in Burkina Faso is also strongly influenced by the presence of self-defense militia groups, the most well-known of which are the Koglweogo "bush guardians". The Koglweogo is an association customarily tasked with protecting rural farming communities from bandits and looters. Its influence rose dramatically in 2015-16, when the vacuum left by the formal security apparatus enabled the progressive legitimization of such community self-defense initiatives.¹⁴² The Koglweogo are present in most parts of the east and center of the country. They portray themselves as a grassroots initiative close to local populations and able to meet the protection needs of communities frustrated by the rise of banditry and terrorism. In particular, they claim to fight the prevailing impunity around numerous cases of theft or armed robbery that anger the population. However, reports concerning their alleged abuses, including torture and sequestration of suspected criminals, has stirred controversies about the capacity of state authorities to enforce the rule of law.¹⁴³

While the Koglweogo criticize the state and its SDF as ineffective, they risk being seen as an integral part of a state-sponsored hybrid security system. For instance, emerging evidence seems to suggest that at the Kantchari border post, Burkinabé SDF abandon their positions every evening at 8 pm for fear of attack and are replaced overnight by the Koglweogo, who are each reportedly paid 5,000 CFA francs (\$8.50) per shift.¹⁴⁴ Such 'collaboration', however sporadic and localized it may be,

illustrates the non-state armed actors' contribution to border security governance in Burkina Faso.

Border communities and security

In recent years, security in Burkina Faso has deteriorated significantly, especially in the north of the country, with numerous attacks on border posts, schools and other symbols of the state. To improve its control of the territory and address borderland communities' feelings of insecurity, abandonment and lack of protection, in 2015 the government created the Unité Spéciale d'intervention de la Gendarmerie Nationale (Special Intervention Unit of the National Gendarmerie - USIGN), an elite counter-terrorism force. USIGN is present in the North for special missions and specialized in the release of hostages, the fight against organized crime and terrorism in all its forms.¹⁴⁵ Additionally, on 31 December 2018 a state of emergency was declared in six border regions, prohibiting movements at night and authorizing searches including in private homes.¹⁴⁶

This predominantly security-focused response has proven to be somewhat counterproductive: human rights activists have accused poorly trained Burkinabé SDF of committing serious crimes such as extrajudicial killings, summary executions, mass arrests, ill-treatment and deaths in custody.¹⁴⁷ While this may be seen as the legacy of more than 25 years of authoritarian rule, the heavy-handedness of Burkina Faso's counter-terrorism policies has worsened relations between border communities and the state, and the SDF in particular. Fear and mistrust are on the rise, while non-state armed actors such as the Koglweogo are sometimes seen as more reliable providers of protection. In the east of the country, for instance, self-defense militias have reportedly managed to establish more successful relations with local communities who often reject the SDF.¹⁴⁸

Concerned that the situation could spiral out of control, several international actors are helping their Burkinabé partners build greater trust and confidence between border communities and the SDF. Most such projects are not exclusive to Burkina Faso but also cover border areas of Mali and Niger. Community engagement is for instance a priority of IOM's IBM project, which works to build the capacity of local communities to identify and report threats and share information with the SDF. The overall logic is to see border communities not only as beneficiaries but also as potential partners in the provision of border security.¹⁴⁹

140 <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20181010-barkhane-operation-burkina-faso>.

141 Interview with border security expert, Niamey, November 2018.

142 Sahel 2r3s (2018), 'Les kogl-wéogo du Burkina-Faso', Le Carnet du Sahel, Medium.com, 18 February 2018.

143 Da Cunha Dupuy R., Quidelleur T. (2018), *Self-Defense Movements in Burkina Faso Diffusion and Structuration of Koglweogo Groups*, Noria Research.

144 Interview with a security expert, Ouagadougou, February 2019.

145 <http://gendarmerienationale.bf/unite-speciale/>.

146 RFI (2018) *Burkina Faso: le président décrète l'état d'urgence dans six régions*.

147 Human Rights Watch (2019), *By Day We Fear the Army, By Night the Jihadists*, Ouagadougou/New York: March 2019.

148 Interview with security expert, Ouagadougou, February 2019.

149 Ibid.

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April 2011

Tuareg villagers in Mali using a donkey to pull water from a well.



Section 2: Migration governance

Key findings:

- Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger are all countries that have demonstrated significant emigration in recent decades.
- While Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger have all ratified the ECOWAS Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment, giving their citizens the right to visa-free entry and residence in their respective states, the porous borders and weak state presence of Liptako-Gourma has meant that regulation of mobility in the region has traditionally depended more on customary schemes than on legal frameworks.
- The Sahel has become a testing ground for the EU's approach to the external dimension of migration governance, with development aid increasingly tied to reduction of migratory flows and the EU Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel adjusted to reflect "EU mobilization against irregular migration and related trafficking."
- The emphasis on law enforcement and security measures to fight irregular migration, supported by the EU and taken up by other actors, including local states and international agencies, has contributed to reduced migratory flows reaching Libya. At the same time, voluntary return programs and expulsions by state actors (eg Algeria and Morocco) have contributed to reverse flows.
- In July 2012, Mali adopted Loi 2012-023 relative à la lutte contre la traite des personnes et les pratiques assimilées, designed to combat human trafficking and "similar practices". The law is due to be reviewed, but its implementation thus far has been inconsistent with few investigations and convictions, and a worrying conflation of migrant smuggling and human trafficking.
- Local observers report that smuggling in Gao has gone underground and migration there is undergoing a criminal reorganization, while new routes are also being carved out in less controlled areas such as north of Timbuktu.

Mali

- At least four million Malians are estimated to live abroad, and three quarters of those live on the African continent. At the same time, Mali has increasingly become a transit hub for northward migratory flows from West Africa, making Gao an important smuggling hub.
- Mali has traditionally framed migration as a development opportunity rather than as a security threat. In 2014 it adopted a national migration policy that supports this orientation, the Politique Nationale de Migration du Mali (PONAM).

Niger

- By the end of the 1990s, approximately 100,000 migrants were estimated to travel each year from sub-Saharan Africa to Libya and Algeria via the central Niger city of Agadez, mostly in the context of short-term, circular migratory flows. With changing dynamics in Libya, it was estimated that more than 330,000 people transited through Agadez in 2016.
- Niger's international partners have reframed their engagement with Niger to support and encourage authorities there to tackle irregular migration, and the Nigerien government has adopted a law (Loi 2015-36) to tackle smuggling in 2015, a strategy to fight irregular migration in 2016 and a related plan of action in 2018. However, Niger was the only country in the Sahel that lacked a national migration policy at the time of writing.
- Mobility data and anecdotal evidence suggest a decline in mixed migratory flows through Agadez in recent years, and this has largely been attributed to these measures, particularly the 2015 law. However, Loi 2015-36 has been applied unevenly both in terms of time and geographic scope

Burkina Faso

- In 2013 an estimated 9.6% of Burkina Faso's population (1.6 million people) lived abroad.
- Burkina Faso saw peaks of northbound transit in 2015 and 2016, but these became less visible following Niger's migration crackdown, and since 2017 return flows have become increasingly prominent. Most returns now originate from Libya, Niger and Algeria; previously returns from Côte d'Ivoire had predominated.

- While migration policies in Burkina Faso have traditionally focused primarily on the nexus between migration and development, in 2008 Burkina Faso adopted Loi 029-2008, which classifies human smuggling as a "similar practice" to trafficking. Prosecutions and convictions in trafficking cases are relatively higher than in neighboring countries; at the same time, there have been no reported arrests or convictions related to migrant smuggling in Burkina Faso.
- Burkina Faso adopted a National Migration Strategy (SNMig) in 2017 in order to promote coordination and cooperation among a variety of stakeholders

Regional overview

Until recently, cross-border mobility in the area of Liptako-Gourma was subject to limited regulation. Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger have all ratified the 1979 ECOWAS Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment. As a result, Malian, Burkinabé and Nigerien citizens have the right to visa-free entry and residence in the territory of other member states. However, in a region characterized by porous borders and weak state presence, the regulation of mobility has traditionally depended more on customary schemes than on legal frameworks. Family networks spread across national borders have developed strong connections and communication flows. At the same time, mobility has come to represent a crucial aspect of livelihoods in the region: the rhythmic pattern of regional rainfall determines the sequencing of the short-range circular movements of nomads and transhumant pastoralists (and their cattle) across the borders of Liptako-Gourma.¹⁵⁰ Laborers and traders have become accustomed to transiting through migration hubs in the region for the purpose of seasonal migration to neighboring countries, such as Algeria, Libya, Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire.

A combination of informal recognition, sensitivity to local needs, and weak enforcement capacity have generally led local governments to pay little attention to these mixed flows. If migration was on the agenda of Sahelian states,

it was mainly to harness the remittances of nationals settled abroad for local development.¹⁵¹ And as long as migration remained largely confined within the African continent, external actors felt little incentive to intervene and impose more stringent regulatory frameworks.¹⁵²

The Libya effect

The situation radically changed as a result of the destabilization brought to the region by the 2011 fall of the Gaddafi regime in Libya. Traditional migratory routes (for instance through Mali and Algeria) became less viable, while new ones (across Libya to Europe) opened up. The intensification of migratory flows directed to Europe fueled among EU policy-makers, public opinion and media the perception of a migration "crisis" in need of an urgent response. This prompted the EU to hastily promote a range of measures to tackle migration (largely framed as "irregular" or "economic") in countries of transit and origin. Most of these measures are enshrined in, or stem from, the EU Agenda on Migration, a multi-level and multi-actor strategy adopted in May 2015, in the aftermath of a major shipwreck off the coast of the Italian island of Lampedusa which cost the lives of at least 800 refugees and migrants.¹⁵³

Policy guinea pig

The Sahel, as a region of both longstanding EU engagement and increasing migratory flows, soon became a testing ground for the EU's approach to

150 Raineri L., Ba Y. (2019), 'Hybrid governance and mobility in the Sahel: stabilization practices put to the test', in Governance and Security in the Sahel: tackling mobility, demography and climate change, Rome: IAI.

151 Betts A., Kainz L. (2017), 'The history of global migration governance', Refugee Studies Centre Working Paper 122, Oxford: July 2017.

152 Benattia A., Armitano F., Robinson H. (2015), 'Irregular Migration between West Africa, North Africa and the Mediterranean', Altai Consulting, Tunis.

153 European Commission (2015), 'A European Agenda on Migration', Communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of Regions, Brussels.

(the external dimension of) migration governance.¹⁵⁴ The bloc's overarching blueprint for the region, the EU Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel, was adjusted to the new political priorities, "notably following the EU mobilization against irregular migration and related trafficking".¹⁵⁵ As of 2016, its focus on tackling irregular migration led the EU to repurpose its most important initiatives in the Sahel, including its Common Security and Defense Policy missions, with mandate revisions to EUCAP Sahel Niger and EUCAP Sahel Mali. EU development aid also evolved, with new funding schemes of the EU Trust Fund for Africa and several framework partnerships with regional states. And while development aid increased in volume, its allocation became increasingly tied to the objective of reducing migratory flows.¹⁵⁶

As discussed below, these efforts to curb irregular migration have significantly influenced other actors, including local states and international agencies, and contributed to shaping the overall governance of migration in the Sahel. Sahelian countries have adopted – or are on the verge of adopting – new domestic laws to transpose the provisions of the UN Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air to criminalize human smuggling. At the same time, international organizations such as the World Customs Organization (WCO), IOM and Interpol, support the enhancement of border controls across the Sahel by constructing and equipping new border posts and by training border security officers so as to better monitor migratory flows, detect document fraud, and disrupt human smuggling networks. Supported by the EU, the emphasis on law enforcement and security measures to fight irregular migration has boosted the clout of Sahelian interior ministries as key partners in the governance of migration, and as prominent interlocutors of foreign donors.

These measures have contributed to reduced migratory flows reaching Libya and divert and constrain those within Africa, with a noticeable impact on the Sahel.¹⁵⁷ And while the business model of migration and smuggling struggles to adapt to the new normal,¹⁵⁸ significant resources are being mobilized to return former migrants to their countries of origin (through assisted voluntary returns and humanitarian evacuations)¹⁵⁹

and stabilize them with the provision of economic and psycho-social assistance. The EU-IOM Joint Initiative for Migrant Protection and Reintegration provides a clear illustration of this approach.¹⁶⁰ The EU legitimization of repatriation schemes may also have reduced the level of criticism against expulsions of foreign nationals by other countries neighboring the Sahel. Algeria is a case in point, with approximately 9,000 refugees and migrants expelled in 2017 and 28,000 in 2018.¹⁶¹ The disregard for legal norms and humanitarian standards demonstrated by Algerian authorities has prompted observers to liken these "repatriations" to veritable deportations.¹⁶² In the meantime, Morocco, too, has started to carry out expulsions of non-nationals.¹⁶³ As a result of these changes, migratory flows in the region have become multi-directional and more volatile.

154 Lopez-Lucia E. (2017), 'Performing EU agency by experimenting the 'Comprehensive Approach': the European Union Sahel Strategy', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 35(4).

155 As stated in the 2016 Annual Report of the Sahel Regional Action Plan, cited in: Venturi B. (2017), 'The EU and the Sahel: A Laboratory of Experimentation for the Security–Migration–Development Nexus', IAI Working Papers 17/38, Rome: December 2017.

156 Lebovich A. (2018), 'Halting ambitions. EU migration and security policy in the Sahel', ECFR Policy Brief 266, London.

157 Tubiana J., Warin C., Saeneen G. (2018), 'Multilateral Damage. The impact of EU migration policies on central Saharan routes', Clingendael CRU Report, The Hague.

158 Micallef M., Horsley R., Bish A. (2019), *The Human Conveyor Belt Broken. Assessing the collapse of the human-smuggling industry in Libya and the central Sahel*, The Global Initiative and Clingendael, Geneva.

159 Between late 2017 and December 2018 IOM had reportedly assisted the voluntary humanitarian return of 16,120 migrants trapped in Libya to their countries of origin, the majority of them being in West Africa. See: <http://migration.iom.int/reports/libya---voluntary-humanitarian-return-update-1-15-december-2018-arabic>.

160 See: <https://rodakar.iom.int/eu-iom-joint-initiative-migrant-protection-and-reintegration>

161 Amnesty International (2018), *Forced to Leave. Stories of Injustice against migrants in Algeria, Tunis/London*.

162 Ibid.

163 Ibid.

Mali

Mali, a history of migration

Mali is a landlocked country with a very long tradition of emigration, immigration and transit migration. Emigration was also driven by the droughts of the 1970s and 1980s, the conflicts of the 1990s and the economic crisis at the beginning of the 21st century. The populations of Kayes Region pioneered long-range migration to Europe, in particular to the Paris suburb of Montreuil and to Spain. Natives of other regions have turned mainly to countries in North and sub-Saharan Africa. At least four million Malians are estimated to live abroad and three fourths of those live on the African continent.¹⁶⁴ The most popular destinations include: Algeria, Libya and Morocco (from the Malian regions of Gao, Timbuktu, Kidal, and Kayes); Côte d'Ivoire (from the Sikasso region); Central African countries such as Gabon and the Democratic Republic of Congo (from Mopti and Kayes); and Ghana (including Songhai people from Gao region). At the same time, Mali has increasingly become a transit hub for migratory flows from West Africa to North Africa, and in some cases to Europe since the 2000s, making Gao a hub of northbound smuggling of primary importance.¹⁶⁵

The multi-dimensional crisis that has affected Mali since 2012 has had a significant impact on mobility patterns in the country. During the most intense phases of conflict, especially in 2012 and 2013, forced displacement, both internal and international, predominated, while the volatility of the context prompted a provisional downturn of trans-regional migration along Malian transit routes. In the subsequent years however, migratory flows across Mali have been re-established, regardless of the fact that violence in the region remains widespread.¹⁶⁶ The popularity of Gao as a regional migratory hub may be due not only to its location but also to the resilience of a well-oiled smuggling infrastructure in the town. Counterfeit Malian passports – for which Algerian visas are not needed – are reportedly easily available in Gao, including to foreigners,¹⁶⁷ and some reports suggest that there may be cases of complicity among the police.¹⁶⁸

As reported by IOM, for the period from 30 June 2016 to 31 October 2018 the majority of outgoing refugees and migrants (51%) transiting through Gao travelled to Algeria, Mauritania or Libya, while approximately one third (34%) intended to travel to Europe, particularly to Italy and Spain. The monthly average number of incoming and outgoing refugees and migrants was around 3,000 until July 2017 when it rose to 5,000.¹⁶⁹ Since data collection began mid-2016, it seems that the flows remain relatively stable over time as compared to neighboring countries, with some fluctuations depending mostly on the situation outside of Mali.

Migration governance

Mali has traditionally framed migration more as a development opportunity than as a security threat. As a result, the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Ministry of Solidarity and Humanitarian Action, and Ministry of Foreign Affairs have more sway in governing migration in Mali than the Ministry of Interior. For instance, the important role of the Délégation Générale des Maliens de l'Extérieur (General Delegation for Malians Abroad - DGME) illustrates Malian authorities' ambition to harness the potential of migration to deliver socio-economic development. Placed under the authority of the Ministry of Malians Abroad, the DGME is tasked with attracting the skills, resources and remittances of Malian migrants, be they settled abroad or returnees, and to support reintegration and community development projects.

In general, efforts in Mali to promote a good governance framework for migration and to harness its potential for the country started much earlier than in neighboring Niger or Burkina Faso. In 2008, the EU supported the creation of the Centre d'Information et de Gestion des Migration (Centre of Migration Information and Management - CIGEM), a programme within the Ministry of Malians Abroad mandated to promote evidence-based policy, including adopting an appropriate national migration policy and laws in line with existing international conventions ratified by Mali. Furthermore, the CIGEM supports co-development projects with the Malian diaspora, with a particular focus on Kayes Region.¹⁷⁰

In July 2012, Mali adopted Loi 2012-023 relative à la lutte contre la traite des personnes et les pratiques assimilées, legislation designed to combat human trafficking and "similar practices". Although the law prescribes stringent penalties of five to ten years of imprisonment for offenders, its implementation has been weak and inconsistent, with very few investigations and convictions, and those that

164 Keita S. (2016), 'Notes sur les stratégies d'engagement de la diaspora malienne', Réunion Thématique du Processus de Rabat, Bamako.

165 UNODC (2011), The Role of Organized Crime in the Smuggling of Migrants from West Africa to the European Union, Wien.

166 Molenaar F., Van Damme T. (2017), 'Irregular migration and human smuggling networks in Mali' Clingendael CRU Report, The Hague.

167 Raineri L., Galletti C. (2016), 2016, 'Organized crime in Mali: why it matters for a peaceful transition from conflict', International Alert Policy Brief 09/2016.

168 UNODC (2013), Transnational Organized Crime in West Africa: A Threat Assessment, Wien: February 2013; UNSC (2018), Report of the Panel of Experts established pursuant to resolution 2374 (2017) on Mali, S/2018/581, New York: August 2018.

169 IOM (2018), 'DTM, Flow Monitoring, Results Snapshot # 33, 30 June 2016 to 31 October 2018', Geneva.

170 Interview with CIGEM officer, Bamako, February 2019.

occur largely related to children forced into begging. This may be due to an overall lack of awareness about the law, poor training of judges and prosecutors, the general lack of resources of the justice system, and also the informal protection enjoyed by leaders of the armed groups involved in trafficking.¹⁷¹

The law refers to migrant smuggling as a practice “similar” to human trafficking, although these are distinct crimes under international law. This conflation is problematic because it risks hampering the protection of trafficking victims,¹⁷² as these two offense provisions warrant specific protection measures as set out in the respective international protocols. To address this issue, UNODC and EUCAP Sahel Mali are currently supporting the Malian government to review the 2012 law and make it more consistent with international standards. A drafting committee has already been appointed to this end.¹⁷³

In the meantime, the law remains the only legal instrument in Mali to prosecute migrant smugglers. Its implementation raises questions, however: although the smuggling of migrants is widely reported in the country, there are no reports of smugglers ever being prosecuted, let alone convicted, under the law’s provisions.¹⁷⁴ And while police operations led to the arrest of a handful of alleged smugglers in Gao in early 2018, these were reportedly “small fish” who were never prosecuted, and were released a few months later.¹⁷⁵ However, local observers report that since then smuggling in town has gone underground, and while migration is undergoing a criminal reorganization in Gao, new routes are being carved out in less controlled areas, such as across the desert north of Timbuktu.¹⁷⁶

In 2014, Mali adopted a national migration policy, the *Politique Nationale de Migration du Mali* (PONAM). PONAM reiterates Mali’s vision to make migration “a real asset for the development of the country, a factor of economic growth and social promotion to sustainably reduce poverty”.¹⁷⁷ To this end, PONAM emphasizes: the need to address the root causes of migration through development; better organizing legal migration; promoting the reintegration of returnees; enhancing the capacity of diasporas to contribute to national development; and fostering an inclusive approach with the participation of

the diaspora, migrant associations, the authorities and populations concerned by migration. The implementation of PONAM is structured around a national steering committee, regional implementation committees, and a monitoring mechanism.¹⁷⁸ Theoretically, PONAM has a budget of 120 billion CFA francs (€183 million),¹⁷⁹ but international donors are demonstrating a certain reluctance to fund its activities, which have consequently faced delays.¹⁸⁰

International partners, and the EU in particular, are also urging Mali to facilitate the return of undocumented Malians identified in third countries, including in Europe.¹⁸¹ This issue, however, is not attuned with Mali’s own priorities, nor with the general framing of migration prevailing in the country, and is therefore politically sensitive. As an illustration of this, the negotiation of the Migration Partnership Framework with the EU initiated by Mali in late 2016, which also included a provision on returns, fueled popular discontent that turned into a riot.¹⁸²

Protection of refugees, asylum seekers and IDPs

The 2012 multidimensional crisis triggered a large-scale displacement of populations from Mali’s three northern regions of Kidal, Timbuktu and Gao towards central and southern parts of Mali as well as into neighboring countries. Nearly half a million people were displaced at the end of April 2013, 301,027 (62%) internally and 185,144 (38%) to neighboring countries, including 176,144 as refugees.¹⁸³ As of 31 July 2019, there were 74,087 refugee returnees in Mali, 56,343 Malian refugees in Niger, 25,754 in Burkina Faso, and 56,923 in Mauritania.¹⁸⁴

While the number of Malian refugees in neighboring countries may have declined in recent years, the number of IDPs within Mali is growing apace, with an important rise since early 2019. Areas of and reasons for displacement have significantly changed since 2012; the latest wave of displacements is the result of the rapid escalation of violence and the intensification of inter-communal fighting in the central regions of Mali, including Mopti and Ségou. In Liptako-Gourma, porous borders and family networks facilitate cross-border

171 US Department of State (2018), *Trafficking in Persons Report 2018*, Washington D.C.

172 Interview with a protection officer in an international organization, remotely, April 2019.

173 Interview with a criminal justice expert, April 2019.

174 UNSC (2018), Report of the Panel of Experts established pursuant to resolution 2374 (2017) on Mali, S/2018/581, New York: August 2018.

175 Information collected in interviews with national and international security officers and migration experts based in Bamako, Gao and Dakar (some of them remotely), in February and March 2019.

176 Interviews with migration experts, NGOs and UN officers in Gao and Bamako, January and February 2019.

177 PONAM (2014), p. 21.

178 Interview with officer at the Ministry of Malians Abroad, Bamako, February 2019.

179 Molenaar F., Van Damme T. (2017), ‘Irregular migration and human smuggling networks in Mali’ *Clingendael CRU Report*, The Hague.

180 Interview with Malian migration expert, Bamako, February 2019.

181 Slagter J. (2019), ‘An “Informal” Turn in the European Union’s Migrant Returns Policy towards Sub-Saharan Africa’, Migration Policy Institute, Brussels.

182 See for instance: http://malijet.com/a_la_une_du_mali/173596-accord-mali---union-européenne-sur-la-migration-le-mensonge-d-et.html

183 IOM (2013), *Mali Crisis: A Migration Perspective*. Geneva.

184 <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/countries/> accessed on 20 August 2019.

mobility, including repeated back and forth movements, of people forcibly evicted by the conflicts, including, most notably, Fulani herders and other pastoralist groups. As of 31 July 2019, the number of officially registered IDPs in Mali reached 168,515 – a figure which escalated rapidly since the beginning of the year.¹⁸⁵

Algerian expulsions

Mass expulsions from Algeria represent another source of humanitarian concern in the north of Mali. In 2018, an estimated 3,000 refugees and migrants were deported from Algeria by local authorities, often in breach of national and international law, and abandoned in the desert on the border with Mali.¹⁸⁶ While the scale of expulsions is smaller here than at the Algeria-Niger border, the specific conditions of the Algeria-Mali border expose refugees, migrants and asylum-seekers to greater vulnerabilities. Mali does not have a repatriation agreement with Algeria akin to that with Niger. The Malian government is unable to oversee operations in the north and international humanitarian agencies have a very limited presence on the ground, which leaves local humanitarian actors feeling abandoned and overwhelmed.¹⁸⁷

Niger

Niger, a history of migration

Migration is not a new phenomenon in Niger. Political persecutions in the 1960s and 1970s, environmental disasters and famines in the 1970s and 1980s, and political upheavals in the 1990s and 2000s triggered major migratory flows from Sahelian countries, including Niger, towards relatively wealthier neighboring countries, including in North Africa and in the Gulf of Guinea. Here, the consolidation of a Nigerien diaspora laid the foundation of a cross-border regional mobility infrastructure, facilitating the informal transportation of people and goods from, to, and across Niger.¹⁸⁸ By the end of the 1990s, approximately 100,000 migrants were estimated to travel each year from sub-Saharan Africa to Libya and Algeria via the central Niger city of Agadez, mostly in the context of short-term, circular migratory flows.¹⁸⁹ As these flows generated income and were socially accepted, state authorities were not inclined to interfere.¹⁹⁰ This led to the adoption of unsystematic and ambivalent measures, such as a working group on

migration in 2007 (which was discontinued for lack of funding, showing little evidence of meaningful results), a weakly implemented law against human trafficking in 2010, and the temporary closure in Agadez of “ghettoes” — walled compounds and houses used to accommodate transiting migrants — in 2013.¹⁹¹

The fight against irregular migration, and its limits

These dynamics have now changed radically. As the Libyan civil war escalated, the entrenchment of irregular migration to and across Libya made Agadez a continental hub of northbound mixed migratory flows. When official estimates of such flows across Niger started to surface, it was reported that more than 330,000 people had transited through Agadez in 2016.¹⁹² More than half of all the refugees and migrants who reached European shores during the so-called “global migration crisis” were said to have passed through Agadez, fuelling mounting perceptions in Europe of a global ‘migration crisis’.¹⁹³ EU leaders thus urged their Nigerien partners to ensure a more rigorous governance of migration.

Such pressure led Niger’s government to quickly adopt a series of interrelated measures to clamp down on irregular migration. These included, most notably, Loi 2015-36 relative au trafic illicite de migrants, a law passed in May 2015 to tackle the illegal smuggling of migrants. The law introduced very harsh penalties for a range of activities related to smuggling, which thus became one of the most serious crimes in Niger’s penal code.¹⁹⁴

Loi 2015-36 was followed by a national strategy to fight irregular migration in July 2016, and a related plan of action in March 2018. Meanwhile, Niger’s international partners, especially the EU, have reframed their engagement with Niger to support and encourage authorities there to tackle irregular migration. In July 2016, the EU renewed the civilian operation EUCAP Sahel Niger, deployed since 2011, with an additional objective of helping Nigerien authorities and security forces better control migration flows and combat irregular migration and associated criminal activity. To this end, the mission saw its budget grow significantly, and opened a permanent field office in Agadez. In pursuit of an integrated approach, the EU has also tailored new aid policies and tools such as the EU Trust Fund for Africa and the EU Partnership

185 <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/countries/> accessed on 20 August 2019.

186 Amnesty International (2018), *Forced to Leave. Stories of Injustice against migrants in Algeria*. Tunis/London.

187 Interview with Malian humanitarian organization in Gao (remotely), March 2019.

188 Scheele J. (2012), *Smugglers and Saints of the Sahara: Regional Connectivity in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

189 Brachet J. (2018), ‘Manufacturing Smugglers: From Irregular to Clandestine Mobility in the Sahara’, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 676(1).

190 Tidjani Alou M. (2012), ‘Monitoring the neopatrimonial state on a day-by-day basis. Politicians, customs officials and traders in Niger’, in *Neopatrimonialism in Africa and Beyond* (Bach D., Gazibo M. eds.), New York: Routledge.

191 Interviews with migration experts at the Ministry of Interior and civil society organisations, Niamey, November 2018.

192 IOM, [Displacement Tracking Matrix. Population Flow Monitoring](#).

193 IOM, cited in Tinti P., Westcott T. (2016), ‘The Niger-Libya corridor: smugglers’ perspectives’, ISS Paper 299, Dakar: November 2016. Evidence suggests that the largest majority of mixed migratory flows in transit in West Africa were not towards Europe. See Benattia A., Armitano F., Robinson H. (2015), ‘Irregular Migration between West Africa, North Africa and the Mediterranean’, Altai Consulting, Tunis.

194 Interview with Nigerien legal expert, Niamey, November 2018.

Framework on Migration to help Niger address the root causes of migration, its humanitarian consequences, and its enabling factors (including poor border controls).¹⁹⁵

These measures, and in particular Loi 2015-36, are largely credited with helping reduce irregular migration across Niger. Both mobility data and anecdotal evidence suggest that mixed migratory flows through Agadez have markedly declined in the last few years.¹⁹⁶ Yet a closer look invites a more cautious assessment. The application of the law has been uneven and limited in scope, both geographically and time-wise. Adopted in May 2015, the law was not implemented until late 2016, and only intermittently thereafter.¹⁹⁷ The 2016 presidential election may have played a role in this delay, given that the law stands in the way of powerful interests vying to intercept dividends from smuggling, and is therefore seen as widely unpopular.¹⁹⁸ And while several smuggling kingpins have been jailed or are on the run following the implementation of the law, prison sentences are generally much shorter than foreseen by the legislation,¹⁹⁹ while some well-connected smugglers have managed to avoid prosecution altogether.²⁰⁰

The law appears to apply mostly to the Agadez Region. In other regions of Niger, implementation is sparse and only a very limited number of interceptions, seizures and arrests have been reported. The need to satisfy the competing priorities of the EU (prevent northbound irregular migration) and of ECOWAS (respect the commitment to regional freedom of movement) may contribute to explaining this ambivalence. Be that as it may, the situation has the potential to fuel accusations of discrimination and to exacerbate underlying regional tensions. There are many reports about rising discontent in the Agadez Region, where the “business of migration” was estimated to contribute to the livelihoods of half of the population, including former rebels turned drivers.²⁰¹

Given that EU-sponsored plans to provide other kinds of work to migrant smugglers are considered inadequate, several former migrant smugglers have reportedly turned to smuggling goods such as drugs and gold.²⁰² As a result, organized crime, protection rackets and armed banditry seem to be on the rise in the Agadez Region.²⁰³

Migration governance

The enactment of measures to fight irregular migration and human smuggling in Niger has preceded the adoption of a broader, strategic framework of migration governance. Niger is the only country in the Sahel which still lacks a national migration policy (at the time of writing). The precedence given to the particular over the general may suggest an influence of foreign priorities driven by quick stabilization ambitions.

Nigerien authorities and their international partners have launched several initiatives to rectify this. Since May 2016, the EU has sponsored a national framework for consultations on migration (Cadre National de Concertation sur la Migration) under the aegis of the Ministry of Interior, with a view to fostering coordination among the various actors involved in migration governance at national, international and regional levels. Key stakeholders include the Ministry of Interior and its relevant general directorates, such as those of the *Etat Civil et Réfugiés*,²⁰⁴ the *Police Nationale*, and the DST; the Ministry of Justice and its dependent counter-trafficking bodies, the *Commission Nationale de Coordination de Lutte contre la Traite des Personnes* and the *Agence Nationale de Lutte contre la Traite des Personnes*; and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, together with its general directorate for Nigeriens living abroad, and Niger’s embassies.²⁰⁵ The leading role of the Ministry of Interior illustrates the importance given to security aspects of migration governance. In this framework, IOM is working with the Ministry of Interior to train officials

195 See: Lopez-Lucia E. (2017), ‘Performing EU agency by experimenting the ‘Comprehensive Approach’: the European Union Sahel Strategy’, *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 35(4); Lebovich A. (2018), ‘Halting ambitions. EU migration and security policy in the Sahel’, ECFR Policy Brief 266, London: September 2018; Venturi B. (2019), ‘An EU Integrated Approach in the Sahel: The Role for Governance’, IAI Papers 19(03), Rome: February 2019.

196 Molenaar F., Tubiana J., Warin C. (2018), ‘Caught in the middle. A human rights and peace-building approach to migration governance in the Sahel’, *Clingendael CRU Report*, The Hague: December 2018.

197 Raineri L. (2018), ‘Human smuggling across Niger: state-sponsored protection rackets and contradictory security imperatives’, *Journal of Modern African Studies* 56(1). Since Law 2015-36 came into effect, the criminalization of human smuggling is reportedly aggravating the vulnerability of refugees and migrants. Fearing interception by law enforcement or bandits, smugglers increasingly resort to unsafe routes and may abandon refugees and migrants on the road if they are chased.

198 Raineri L. (2018), ‘Human smuggling across Niger: state-sponsored protection rackets and contradictory security imperatives’, *Journal of Modern African Studies* 56(1). Parliament adopted the law ahead of the 2016 presidential election but it was only implemented after Niger’s president was returned to office.

199 As suggested in media reports: <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Africa/2018/1119/In-high-stakes-experiment-EU-migration-policy-moves-front-lines-to-Niger> (Accessed in April 2019).

200 Interviews with smugglers and former smugglers, Niger (different localities), November 2018.

201 Molenaar F., Ursu A., Tinni B., Hoffmann A., Meester J. (2017), ‘A Line in the Sand Roadmap for sustainable migration management in Agadez’, *Clingendael CRU Reports*, The Hague.

202 Molenaar F. (2018), ‘Why the EU should help former smugglers get a job. An integrated approach for Agadez (and beyond)’, *Clingendael CRU Policy Brief*, The Hague.

203 De Tessières S. (2018), ‘At the crossroads of Sahelian conflicts. Insecurity, Terrorism, and Arms Trafficking in Niger’, *Small Arms Survey*, Geneva.

204 The *Etat Civil et Réfugiés* general directorate was created in 2015 by combining the issues of migration and refugees, so as to focus on mixed migration. The director general is also the head of the national refugee status determination commission, working closely with UNHCR. Interview with staff member, Niamey, November 2018.

205 Interview with member of the National Consultation Framework on Migration, Niamey, November 2018.

how to detect document fraud and to develop new tools for data collection on migration into, across, and out of Niger. In 2018 GIZ began supporting the drafting of a comprehensive national migration policy, starting with a preliminary assessment and research phase.²⁰⁶

Protection of refugees, asylum-seekers and IDPs

The growing numbers of forcibly displaced people in Niger, including refugees and asylum-seekers from neighboring countries, as well as IDPs, add to the challenges of mixed migration governance. Protection needs cluster in three areas of concern: the Lake Chad basin and the Diffa Region, where the conflict with Boko Haram has triggered large-scale displacement; the Agadez Region, where mass deportations from Algeria arrive; and the Tillabéry Region, where the number of refugees and IDPs is on the rise due to the impact of cross-border and regional conflicts. This section focuses on the latter, which is the most closely connected to the Liptako-Gourma dynamics.

Mobility in Tillabéry Region stems variously from forced displacement, resilience strategies and specialized livelihoods. Mixed migration flows here include refugees fleeing conflict in Mali, Nigerien returnees, cross-border populations, dual-nationals, nomads, stateless people and job-seeking migrants from West Africa. There are also local IDPs. On the ground these categories are not always easy to distinguish among, not least because many individuals are undocumented. This complexity makes it harder to assess the specific needs of those on the move, and coupled with volatile security and limited access has hampered adequate humanitarian response.²⁰⁷

There were some 76,600 IDPs in Tillabéry and Tahoua regions at the end of June 2019.²⁰⁸ Refugees registered in Tillabéry Region in late 2018 were housed in three camps: 16,000 in Abala, 12,000 in Ayorou, and 8,000 in Mangaizé. These figures are in constant flux: since the camps were set up in 2012, some 12,000 refugees have been resettled to their homes in Mali, and 10,000 have simply left in a spontaneous and unorganized way, while new arrivals occur on an ongoing basis.²⁰⁹

A fourth refugee camp, in Tazalit, was closed after an attack on its military garrison in October 2016, which left 22 soldiers dead. The camp's residents reportedly moved to Intikou, a nearby open area lacking adequate facilities. Jihadist and rebel groups also attacked camp garrisons at Mangaize (October 2014) and Abala (May 2017), prompting the departure of state security forces. Since then, no further attacks on refugee camps have been reported. UNHCR and the Niger government are working to close the camps in Tillabéry and Tahoua by the end of 2019 and to integrate their populations into adjacent towns.²¹⁰ The hope is that the closures will reduce security risks, the social stigma associated with being a refugee, and the camps' unsustainable environmental footprint.²¹¹ The cross-border habits and dual national status of many of those who are set to be urbanized is expected to mitigate potential integration problems.²¹² However, it is unclear to what extent the challenges of "sedentarizing" mobile populations have been anticipated.

Burkina Faso

A history of migration

Burkina Faso has always been a country of emigration. In 2013 an estimated 1.6 million people (9.6% of the population) born in the country lived abroad.²¹³ Migration in Burkina Faso is a social phenomenon that affects many regions and ethnic groups. Since the 1960s, neighboring Côte d'Ivoire has been by far the leading country of destination and is still where the largest stock of Burkinabés abroad reside, even though many returned to Burkina Faso during the violent political crisis that broke out in Côte d'Ivoire in 2012.²¹⁴ More than 80% of emigrants who left Burkina Faso between 2002 and 2006 lived in Côte d'Ivoire in 2006.²¹⁵ According to the World Bank, among all Burkina Faso citizens living abroad in 2013, 89% were living in Côte d'Ivoire.²¹⁶

Since 2017, Burkina Faso has also become an important country of transit and of return. It is a transit country for many refugees and migrants aiming to reach Libya, Algeria and the Mediterranean. While peaks of transit through Burkina Faso were observed in 2015 and 2016, after the crackdown on migration in Niger northbound flows reduced or became less visible.²¹⁷ Among those still determined to leave, the share of younger migrants,

206 Interviews with humanitarian organizations and security officers working on border enhancement, Niamey, November 2018.

207 Interviews with different humanitarian workers, Niamey, November 2018.

208 <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/country/ner>, accessed on 20 August 2019.

209 Interviews with several humanitarian workers, Niamey, November 2018.

210 UNHCR (2019) [Niger: Country Operation Update, February 2019](#). In late 2019 UNHCR has adjusted its planning to 2020.

211 Interviews with several humanitarian workers, Niamey, November 2018.

212 Ibid.

213 OCDE/ISSP (2017), *Interactions entre politiques publiques, migrations et développement au Burkina Faso*, Les voies de développement, Éditions OCDE, Paris.

214 IOM (2016) *Migration au Burkina Faso, Profil migratoire 2016*.

215 OCDE/ISSP (2017), *Interactions entre politiques publiques, migrations et développement au Burkina Faso*, Les voies de développement, Éditions OCDE, Paris.

216 World Bank (2017), [Bilateral Migration Matrix 2013](#) (database), Washington D.C.

217 Interview with a protection officer, Ouagadougou, February 2019.

including minors, has reportedly increased.²¹⁸ This is linked to the perception of migration as a rite of passage encouraged by society.²¹⁹

At the same time, the spread of information on migrants' conditions in Libya and expulsions from Algeria have contributed to the rise of return migration from countries of transit and of destination in Africa.²²⁰ While return flows are not an entirely new phenomenon in Burkina Faso, the points of origin have changed. Between 1996 and 2006, an average of 62,642 returnees per year were observed in Burkina Faso, the overwhelming majority of whom came back from Côte d'Ivoire (88.6%) with a peak in 2002 due to the Ivorian political crisis.²²¹ Today, most return flows originate from Libya, Niger and Algeria.²²²

Migration governance

As emigration to neighboring countries has long represented a means of resilience for Burkinabé people, migration policies in Burkina Faso have predominantly focused on the nexus between migration and development. While a party to the ECOWAS free movement protocol, Burkina Faso has also entered into bilateral agreements with Burkinabé nationals' main countries of destination, including Côte d'Ivoire (in 1960), Mali (1969), and Gabon (1973), in order to ensure smooth migration management. It has also signed a memorandum of understanding with France to regulate the emigration there of Burkinabé nationals according to the needs of the French labor market.²²³

In 2008 Burkina Faso adopted Loi 029-2008, a law that criminalizes human trafficking and similar practices. Like Mali's Loi 2012-023, this law classifies human smuggling as a "similar practice" to trafficking even though in practice the two activities attract different levels of sentencing and law enforcement. Prosecutions and convictions of human trafficking cases are relatively higher than in neighboring countries (although sentencing is usually much lighter than the law prescribes).²²⁴ Further demonstrating the government's resolve to tackle the issue, Burkina Faso has established several shelters for victims of human trafficking and runs a hotline to report cases of abuse.²²⁵

Little official action is reportedly taken against human smuggling. Law enforcement officers tend to dismiss the significance of the phenomenon, arguing that while refugee and migrant smuggling in and across Burkina Faso may have risen in intensity, it remains poorly coordinated and is not criminalized.²²⁶ There have been no reported arrests, let alone convictions, related to migrant smuggling in Burkina Faso. 4Mi data corroborate these claims, and since 4Mi started gathering data in Burkina Faso in 2017, monitors do not report encountering human smugglers.²²⁷

National strategy

Burkina Faso adopted a National Migration Strategy (SNMig) in 2017. This stems from the national population policy and is the result of a nine-year participatory process supported by several international agencies, including IOM and UNDP. The process was coordinated by the Population Policy Directorate of the Ministry of Economy, and involves the ministries of Foreign Affairs (and its section dealing with Burkinabés living abroad); Security (and its migration division); Territorial Administration; Economy; Public Service; Justice; Social Action and National Solidarity, as well as many civil society organizations (CSOs).

The SNMig intends to promote coordination and cooperation among a variety of stakeholders. It sets out that by 2025 Burkina Faso will have to ensure the effective protection and guarantee of migrants' rights to be leveraged towards development, the consolidation of peace and social cohesion, promoting regional and sub-regional integration and international cooperation. The SNMig also envisages the creation of a migration observatory to enhance the collection and analysis of data on migration and support evidence-based policy making. Funding for the strategy is provided by the state, local authorities, CSOs, the private sector, international donors, and migrant organizations.²²⁸

The National Commission for Refugees (CONAREF) is part of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and is responsible for coordinating, advising and monitoring refugee issues. CONAREF collaborates with the Migration Division of the General Directorate of the National Police, whose main mandate is issuing travel documents and documents for refugees.²²⁹

218 Interview with an international NGO, Ouagadougou, February 2019.

219 Interview with a national NGO, Ouagadougou, February 2019.

220 Interview with a national NGO, Ouagadougou, February 2019.

221 IOM (2016) Migration au Burkina Faso. Profil migratoire 2016. (p. 17)

222 Interview with a national NGO, Ouagadougou, February 2019, February 2019.

223 IOM (2016) Migration au Burkina Faso. Profil migratoire 2016. (p. 8)

224 US Department of State (2018), *Trafficking in Persons Report 2018*, Washington D.C.

225 Ibid.

226 Interview with police officer, Ouagadougou, February 2019.

227 Golovko, E., (2019), *Players of Many Parts. The evolving role of smugglers in West Africa's migration economy*, MMC West Africa, Dakar.

228 Most of the information for this paragraph comes from : Ministère de l'économie, des finances et du développement (2015) *Stratégie nationale de migration 2016-2025*, Ouagadougou.

229 Interview with police officer, Ouagadougou, February 2019.

Protection of refugees, asylum seekers and IDPs

Burkina Faso hosts refugees from its immediate neighbors and other countries in the region. In the 1990s it hosted about 40,000 Tuareg refugees.²³⁰ Apart from this cohort, before 2012, refugees in Burkina Faso came mainly from Burundi, Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Togo, and, to a lesser extent, Côte d'Ivoire.²³¹ The escalation of unrest in Mali in 2012-13 prompted a wave of refugees and asylum-seekers to flee to neighboring countries. In July 2013, UNHCR was assisting almost 50,000 Malian refugees in Burkina Faso.²³² Since then, the figure has fallen steadily, to 33,700 in mid-2015 and 25,000 in July 2019.²³³

This decline may be less due to any improvement of conditions in Mali than to worsening security in Burkina Faso, notably in the border regions of Nord, Sahel and Boucle du Mouhoun, where many Malian refugees used to settle. Refugee camps, too, have been targeted. For instance, on 10 April 2019, armed individuals on motorcycles attacked the gendarmerie at the entrance to the Goudebou refugee camp 15 kilometers from the city of Dori, the capital of Sahel Region. In September 2017, armed men wounded four soldiers, burned motorcycles and stole weapons at the police station in the Mentao refugee camp in Soum Province, also in Sahel Region. The insecurity not only prompts Malian refugees to relocate again but has also caused waves of Burkinabé citizens to leave their homes: in July 2019, almost 220,000 were internally displaced; a year earlier there were fewer than 17,000 IDPs.²³⁴

230 IOM (2016) Migration au Burkina Faso. Profil migratoire 2016.

231 IOM (2016) Migration au Burkina Faso. Profil migratoire 2016.

232 <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/33687>, accessed on 20 August 2019.

233 <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/48413>; <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/country/bfa..>, accessed on 20 August 2019.

234 <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/country/bfa>, accessed on 20 August 2019.

Photo credit:

Pascal Mannaerts / Alamy Stock Photo / November 2009

People waiting at bus stand in Dori, Burkina Faso.



Section 3: Mixed migration flows in detail

Key findings:

- Accurate, reliable and comparable information on mixed migratory flows in the Sahel, and in Liptako-Gourma more specifically, is limited.
- Migratory flows in Liptako-Gourma have significantly declined compared to the peak of the so-called migration 'crisis' in 2015. This is in line with trends in the broader Sahel.
- Looking at the causes of such a reduction of flows, the deterrence of restrictive measures implemented further along migratory routes – such as measures criminalizing smugglers implemented predominantly in Agadez- have a greater impact than law enforcement and border control measures within Liptako-Gourma itself.
- Factors relating to access, costs, as well as presence of law enforcement, play a more determining role in influencing the choice of migration routes and destinations, than security considerations.
- Reliance on smugglers is limited: approximately two thirds of 4Mi respondents (64%) said they did not use smugglers. Among those who did, most perceive them as service providers to meet a demand for mobility.
- Most refugees and migrants interviewed by 4Mi tend to see the security and defense personnel deployed in the Liptako-Gourma more as a source of threat and abuse than of protection,

This paper will now explore the extent to which the array of policies designed to govern security and cross- border movements in Liptako-Gourma – discussed in the first two sections – have affected the scope and nature of mixed migration flows across the region.

Weak monitoring

Effective monitoring and analysis of flows has often been critically absent from these security and border management policies. Even where monitoring mechanisms have been introduced to better align policies with needs, knowledge gaps resulting in large part from the absence of the state have undermined their utility.

The adoption of more stringent regulations against migrant smuggling – albeit, as previously illustrated, haphazardly implemented – has pushed irregular migration underground, with those on the move and crossing borders increasingly avoiding established transport companies and routes in order to escape detection.²³⁵ Local law enforcement agents deployed in Liptako-Gourma, meanwhile, say they are ill-equipped to carry out their mandate. As a law enforcement official in Gao reported, “our means to fulfill this mission [of monitoring migration] are derisory and inappropriate. We do not have enough staff on the ground here.”²³⁶

*“Migration is not well controlled because of a serious lack of equipment and staffing. This is especially the case on the Niger river, which has now become a well-established transit route for smugglers and undocumented migrants”.*²³⁷

Gendarme in Niger

In addition to this shortfall of capacity and tools to adequately monitor migratory flows, there also seems to be a lack of willingness to do so. As discussions below will highlight, in Liptako-Gourma, cross-border movements of local communities continue to be seen as a socially legitimate, economically useful, and politically sensitive. Local state authorities are often sceptical about the need to monitor migratory flows in areas characterized by freedom of movement as it seems to jar with humanitarian and security priorities on the ground. Nevertheless, foreign donors continue to urge Sahelian states to adopt stricter monitoring measures.²³⁸ As the priorities of such donors appear to diverge from those of the region's aid-dependent states and groupings,

235 Bish, A. (2019) Niger: [Has Securitisation Stopped Traffickers?](#), ISPI Commentary.

236 Interview with law enforcement officer, Gao, January 2019.

237 Interview with Gendarme in Niger, January 2019.

238 Interview with SDF and political authorities, Niamey, Ouagadougou and Bamako, November 2018 – February 2019.

foot-dragging, lack of responsiveness and uneven policy implementation are arguably among the resources available to Sahelian states conflicted between regional alliances and high dependence on foreign assistance.²³⁹

To address these challenges, IOM is working to improve and adapt its Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) methodology. It is only recently, however, that changing policy priorities led IOM to start collecting systematic data on migratory flows in the Sahel, including in the Agadez Region in June 2016, one month later in Gao, and in March 2017 in Ouagadougou. An initial focus on northbound flows, however, proved unable to capture the complexity of mixed migratory flows in the region.²⁴⁰ This prompted IOM to add new flow monitoring points (FMP) at known transit locations. Yet, the lack of resources and security have limited IOM's capacity to collect data in Liptako-Gourma. As of March 2019, there was one FMP in Gao (established in July 2016), one in Ménaka (December 2017), one in Dori/Seytenga (January 2018), one in Kantchari (January 2018) and one in Tahoua (August 2018).²⁴¹

The MMC's 4Mi data collection project continuously collects data in Gao, Tillabéry, and Dori in Liptako-Gourma. This includes information on nationalities of refugees and migrants in transit, their gender, legal status, socio-economic conditions in the country of origin, family situation, risk awareness, access to information, reasons for departure, factors influencing the choice of route and destination, and protection needs. However, as highlighted in the caveats to the methodology, while the data provides reliable indications of trends, it is not representative of all mixed migration flows throughout the region.

In an area where mobility patterns are subject to rapid changes, the fragmentation and asymmetries of data collection makes available data poorly suited for comparative analysis. The inherent mobility of Liptako-Gourma's populations, and the entanglement of longer-range mobility patterns across the broader Sahel, also poses a challenge to effective monitoring of these flows in the region. As a result, data collection on mixed migration in Liptako-Gourma remains incomplete, scattered and only partly reliable.

Snapshots of mixed migration flows in the Liptako-Gourma

Are mixed migration flows increasing or reducing?

(Poor) quantitative data concur with (widespread) local perceptions that migratory flows in the Liptako-Gourma, just like in the broader Sahel, have drastically declined in the last few years. Almost all the law enforcement officers, smugglers, transporters, migrants, and border communities interviewed for this paper across the Malian, Burkina Faso and Nigerien regions of Liptako-Gourma share this view. Some of them further highlight that while north-bound migratory flows from and across the Sahel have considerably reduced, this decline has been partly offset by a sharp rise of return flows, both voluntary and involuntary, from North African countries to the Sahel.

"Currently, migrants transit by here in dribs and drabs... There are more returns of migrants from Libya than departures these days".²⁴²

Gendarme in Seytenga

There are various explanations, but generally different stakeholders interviewed tend to share the same understanding of why the transit of refugees and migrants have dropped depending on the specific leg of the migratory route. Along the route to Niger from Burkina Faso, and from further west in Africa, the prevalent view is that the clampdown on migrant smuggling by Nigerien authorities in the Agadez Region has discouraged migrants from attempting to reach Agadez in the first place.²⁴³ On the buses from Ouagadougou to Niamey, today one finds only a tiny portion of the West African migrants who used to pack the transport lines connecting Burkina Faso to Niger during the peak of the migration "crisis" in 2015 and 2016.²⁴⁴ Border communities and former smugglers concur that the demand for migrant smuggling into Niger has dried up in the last couple of years.²⁴⁵ This suggests that migratory pressure from other West African states to Niger may have indeed declined rather than merely becoming less visible because of border control evasion.

On the route between Gao and Ayorou, some stakeholders interviewed attribute the reduction in migratory flows (especially the long-range ones, directed to North Africa

239 Bergamaschi I. (2017), '[Aid in the Sahel in the 2000s: Tales of Dependence and Appropriation](#)'. Conference paper.

240 IOM provides an explicit disclaimer to its periodic reports: "This data does not reflect overall entries or exits to and from Niger. [...] With increased security controls in the towns of Séguédine and Arlit, it is clear from discussions with migrants that new and or alternative routes are being used more". See: IOM (2016), *Compilation of available data and information. Mixed Migration Flows in the Mediterranean and Beyond*, Geneva: December 2016.

241 Information about the locations of FMPs and temporality of data collection, as well as on IOM DTM more generally, can be found in the periodic Flow Monitoring Reports published by IOM country offices in Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso.

242 Interview with gendarme, Seytenga, January 2019.

243 Interviews with police and gendarmerie officers, Dori and Seytenga, January 2019.

244 Interviews with bus drivers and bus station managers, Dori, Téra, Ayorou, December 2018 and January 2019.

245 Interviews with former smugglers and border community members, regions of Dori and Tillabéry, January 2019.

and Europe) more to local insecurity than to the deterrent effect of law enforcement in subsequent legs of migratory routes, such as in the Agadez Region. According to law enforcement officers, smugglers and migrants, the growing intensity of attacks against civilian convoys crossing the poorly controlled borderlands between Gao and Labezzanga contributes to explaining the sharp reduction of long-range migratory flows in the area.²⁴⁶ While circular cross-border mobility still exists because of family and trading bonds, passengers acknowledge that “there are now many bandits [coupeurs de route] on the Malian territory who intercept vehicles and rob passengers”.²⁴⁷ Migrants are not the only ones dissuaded from attempting the crossing. Overall, data points to the perception that enhanced border controls increase frustrations (and often informal taxes) for cross-border traders, as well as risks for smugglers. In a context of heightened tensions, local SDF may be ready to use lethal violence against all unidentified vehicles attempting to cross the border irregularly.²⁴⁸

Migratory flows from Gao to Algeria have also reportedly declined. Local actors suggest that this is largely the outcome of arrests of alleged migrant smugglers by SDF in Gao in January 2018.²⁴⁹ In fact, the clampdown against migrant smuggling in Gao proved rather symbolic, with few arrests targeting secondary actors who were quickly released without being prosecuted.²⁵⁰ However, this was apparently enough to prompt a swift reorganization of migrant smuggling in the north of Mali. In Gao, efforts to stamp out smuggling have led to greater criminal organization by smugglers, collusion with corrupt law enforcement officers, and increased vulnerability for migrants.²⁵¹ At the same time, these developments appear to have contributed to diverting some northbound migratory flows, namely to Timbuktu, in order to evade detection and control.²⁵² As Timbuktu is reportedly becoming a new hub of irregular migration from West to North Africa, the westward trend from Agadez to Gao, and from Gao to Timbuktu suggests that migrant smuggling tends to cluster wherever (poor) law enforcement so allows, irrespective of destination and risk.

How is migration affected by enhanced border controls?

Very few interviewed for this paper attributed reduced flows to enhanced migration control and border security in Liptako-Gourma itself. This contrasts sharply with evidence about the impact of irregular migration control policies in contiguous regions, where law enforcement efforts against migrant smuggling and enhanced border controls are said to be the primary cause of a drastic drop of migratory flows.²⁵³ It is telling that those interviewed for this paper mentioned only one case of arrest between Niger and Burkina Faso, involving three alleged human smugglers in Niger’s Téra department. And just like in the case of Gao, discussed above, detentions lasted for a few weeks only, and led to no convictions or further investigations.²⁵⁴

Similarly, two thirds (66%) of the refugees and migrants interviewed by 4Mi survey said they had not changed their migration route to avoid security forces. This casts doubt on how systematic the repression of irregular migration in the region actually is, irrespective of the priorities spelt out in Sahelian states’ migration and border security governance strategies. The impression of a certain laxity in local law enforcement responses to human smuggling is common to all three countries’ sectors of Liptako-Gourma. Here, too, explanations vary for the respective regions of the three countries:

In Tillabéry region, widespread insecurity has widened the gap between available means and stated ambitions. Although border SDF may be genuinely motivated to perform scrupulous controls, including on migrants in transit, they remain confined to their bases to avoid attack by non-state armed actors. Insecurity has forced Nigerien police and gendarmes to withdraw from the border, abandon the advance border posts in Yassane, Petel Koli and Makalondi, and leave border protection entirely to military actors who have no mandate for migration control.²⁵⁵ While all vehicles and buses in transit on major roads are checked on entering Nigerien towns (where law enforcement officers are positioned) this distribution of personnel lacks the capacity to inhibit the proliferation of clandestine transit and smuggling initiatives that rely on more flexible infrastructure, including minor roads and motorbikes.²⁵⁶

246 Interviews with border police officer, former smuggler and migrant, Ayorou, January 2019.

247 Interview with a circular migrant, Tillabéry, January 2019.

248 Interview with smuggler, Ayorou, January 2019.

249 Interviews with migrant smugglers and migration experts, Gao, January 2019.

250 Interview with migration expert in Gao, remotely, March 2019.

251 Interviews with migrants and migrant smugglers, Gao, January 2019.

252 Several sources have substantiated this claim, including migrants interviewed in Gao in January 2019, but also 4Mi monitors based in Gao and Timbuktu, interviewed remotely in February 2019.

253 See for instance: Molenaar F., Ursu A., Tinni B., Hoffmann A., Meester J. (2017), ‘A Line in the Sand Roadmap for sustainable migration management in Agadez’, *Clingendael CRU Reports*, The Hague: October 2017.

254 Interview with law enforcement officers, smugglers and local dwellers, Tillabéry, January 2019.

255 Interviews with police and gendarmerie officers in Tillabéry Region, January 2019.

256 Interview with border experts and police high officers, Niamey, November 2018.

In Dori region, evidence suggests that a lack of means and prevailing insecurity are compounded by a reluctance to actually tackle irregular migration. Law enforcement officers in Seytenga were reportedly aware that a local group of small-scale passeurs embedded in border communities helped undocumented migrants to evade border controls, but there is no indication that the officers took active measures to disrupt this activity.²⁵⁷ In contrast, anecdotal evidence suggests that in some cases local SDF may even have benefited from irregular migration by turning a blind eye on the transit of undocumented migrants in exchange for significant bribes.²⁵⁸

In Gao region, the limited effectiveness of border controls in reducing mixed migratory flows may be the result of lack of determination and structural constraints, and also, in some cases, of an ambivalent attitude by local SDF. If Gao has become a prominent hub of northbound migratory flows, it is reportedly also because of the ease with which fake Malian papers allowing access to Algeria could be obtained, including at times with the complicity of some local SDF.²⁵⁹ According to a migrant smuggler from Gao: “we help those without papers to get the documents they need from the police. We help non-Malians, such as Ivorians, Ghanaians and Burkinabés, to have a Malian identity card, and for that we pay 15,000 CFA francs [\$25] to the police officer for each ID”.²⁶⁰

Similarly, law enforcement agents acknowledge that “in Wabaria [the checkpoint at the entrance of Gao] everyone has a stake in migration, even the police. For if you see a Guinean with Malian national ID, you know that this was issued by the police... Yet no one is willing to take action against the lack of transparency in Gao”.²⁶¹ Furthermore, interviewees claim that some SDF officers in Gao can establish a racket targeting smuggling routes.

*“The SDF are our accomplices. We work with them. Whenever we have migrants, we give some money to the SDF to facilitate their passage at the checkpoints. When we give them the money, they will let the migrants cross without checking the documents. The better a smuggler’s relations with the SDF are, the more customers he will have”.*²⁶²

Migrant smuggler in Gao

While these claims are very difficult to confirm. They match local perceptions voiced in focus groups that some migrants choose the route through Gao because some Malian SDF are easy to corrupt. Participants suggested that it's easy to bribe some of them because everyone thinks about his own interest.²⁶³

At the same time, structural constraints contribute to inhibiting law enforcement in Gao. Some studies demonstrate that the smuggling of a variety of goods makes up a significant share of Gao’s regional economy.²⁶⁴ As a result, smugglers enjoy significant social legitimacy,²⁶⁵ and, by some accounts, protection from powerful actors at local and national levels.²⁶⁶ Smugglers are known to be among the richest businessmen in Gao, and it is likely that they have managed to forge alliances with powerful state and non-state actors to protect their interests.²⁶⁷ This partly explains why, according to local perceptions, SDF do not actively seek out migrant smugglers, but merely stop those caught while committing a crime.²⁶⁸

These observations suggest that the decline of irregular migration and human smuggling across Liptako-Gourma may have more to do with the changing cost-benefit ratio regarding the easiest and safest way to reach the desired destination rather than law enforcement efforts in the region. Insecurity inside Liptako-Gourma, as well as limited opportunities beyond it (in the region of Agadez

257 Interviews with law enforcement and border communities in Seytenga, January 2019.

258 Information corroborated in several interviews, including with law enforcement officers in Dori, border communities in Seytenga, border experts in Ouagadougou, conducted in Dori and Ouagadougou in January and February 2019.

259 The production of fake Malian documents has however become more complicated since the law No. 06-040 of 11 August 2006 introduced the National Identification Number (NINA). The purpose of the National Identification Number is to identify each natural or legal person by a unique number. The NINA card is an “identification card” which contains the holder’s national identification number (NINA) and which can be considered as a voter’s card, but also as an identity card.

260 Interview with Gao-based migrant smuggler, Gao, January 2019.

261 Interviews with local SDF, Gao, January 2019.

262 Interview with Gao-based migrant smuggler, Gao, January 2019.

263 Focus group in Gao, January 2019.

264 Scheele J. (2012), ‘Smugglers and Saints of the Sahara: Regional Connectivity in the Twentieth Century’, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

265 Reitano T., Shaw M. (2014), ‘People’s perspectives of organized crime in West Africa and the Sahel’, ISS Paper 254, Dakar: April 2014.

266 Interview with community leader and gendarmerie officer, Gao, January 2019.

267 This resonates with the findings of the UN Panel of Experts on Mali, see UNSC (2018), Report of the Panel of Experts established pursuant to resolution 2374 (2017) on Mali, S/2018/581, New York: August 2018.

268 Interview with local researcher, remotely, February 2019.

and in Libya) are contributing to orienting prospective migrants elsewhere, and to carving out alternative migration routes. The increasing popularity of Timbuktu, in the Sahel, and of the Western Mediterranean route, in North Africa, are an illustration of this trend.²⁶⁹

Localized disruption

Although enhanced border controls in Liptako-Gourma have not had a noticeable impact on long-range migration to North Africa and Europe, they have influenced patterns of intra-regional mobility and local cross-border movements, especially where border militarization is more pronounced, such as on the frontier between Mali and Niger. While cross-border commerce of livestock and other goods used to thrive here (thanks to border-straddling family networks), traders are now more reluctant to cross borders to reach regional markets because of general insecurity – particularly fear of attack by insurgents and bandits – and because of the frustrations linked to the growing number of controls and road checkpoints manned by SDF.²⁷⁰ As a self-employed transporter in Ayorou put it: “Customs officers take advantage of the security situation to severely tax the traders we transport. The gendarmerie, too, robs traders and transporters without mercy. They abuse them, which is why many traders have eventually halted their transactions in the area: they just cannot get by any longer”.²⁷¹

Friends or foes?

In a context of enhanced border controls, SDF are sometimes seen more as a source of abuse than of protection. Whether accurate or not, these perceptions can significantly affect local communities. Non-state armed groups, including violent extremists, exploit existing dissatisfactions to portray themselves as community guardians against SDF harassment. At the same time, the economic clout of such actors, coupled with their need to move across borders, can foster ambiguous ties with populations severely affected by the drying up of cross-border trade. As one local transporter put it: “many carriers prefer to collaborate with MUJAO. They come regularly to the markets, and defend the interests of traders and transporters”.²⁷² From this perspective, the impact of enhanced border controls on local communities’ livelihoods and security concerns corroborates existing findings that (perceptions of) state abuses provide fertile ground for the rise of violent extremism in Africa.²⁷³ Unless relationships with border communities improve, the detrimental effects securitizing border flows risk outpacing their expected benefits.

269 Mixed Migration Centre (2019), [Quarterly Mixed Migration Update West Africa, Quarter 1](#).

270 Information corroborated in several interviews with traders, transporters and border specialists in Dori, Gao and Tillabéry, December 2018 and January 2019.

271 Interview with transporter from Ayorou, January 2019.

272 Interview with transporter from Ayorou, January 2019.

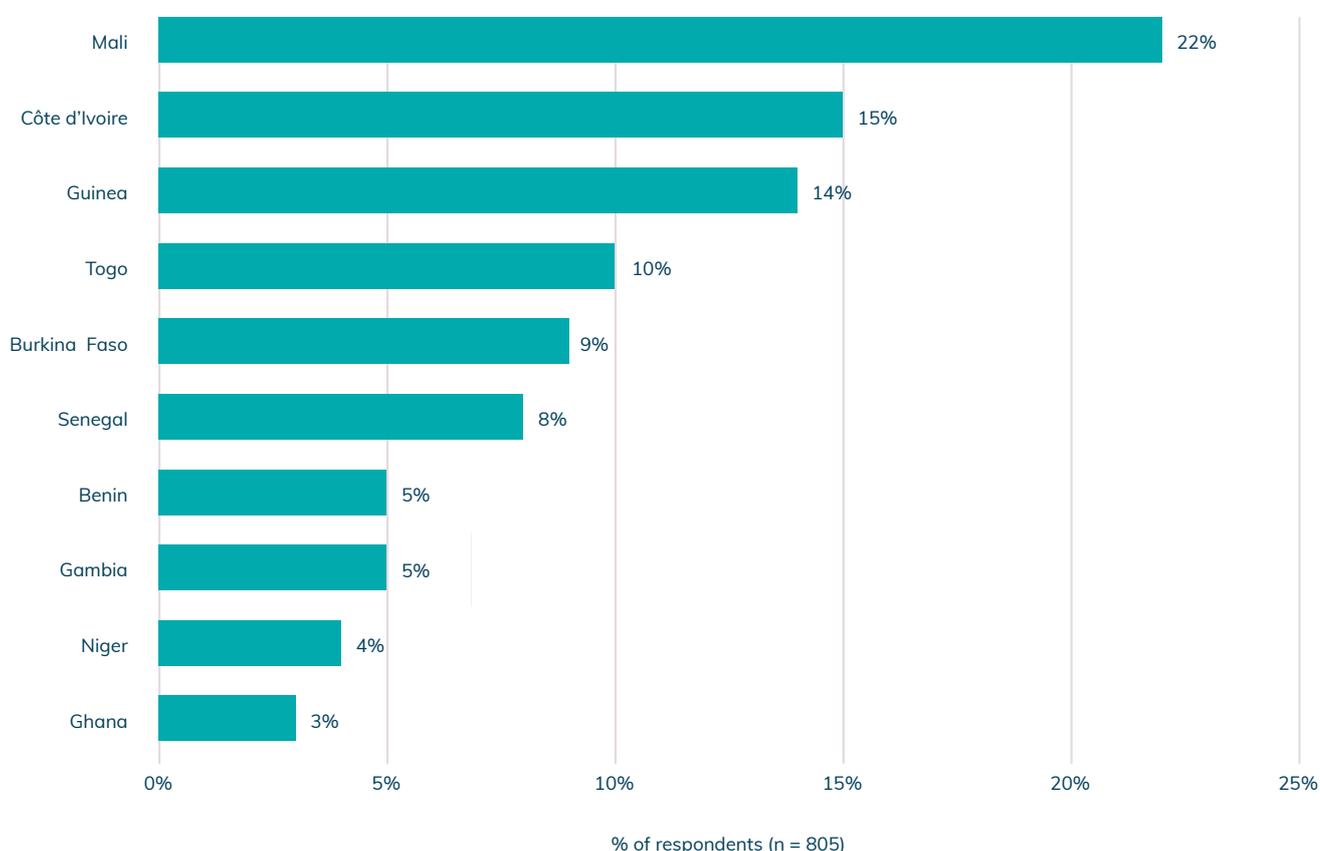
273 ISS (2016), ‘Mali’s Young Jihadists’, Institute for Security Studies Policy Brief 89, Pretoria/Dakar: August 2016; Pellerin M. (2017), ‘Les trajectoires de radicalisation religieuse au Sahel’, Notes de l’IFRI. Paris: February 2017; UNDP (2017), *Journey to extremism in Africa*, New York: September 2017; Raineri L. (2018), ‘When victims become perpetrators. Factors contributing to vulnerability and resilience to violent extremism in the central Sahel’, International Alert, London.

Who's travelling? The demography of mixed migration flows in Liptako-Gourma

A variety of factors contribute to a reduction in mixed migration flows across Liptako-Gourma. The next sections explore questions about the identities, needs and travel motivations of refugees and migrants in transit in the region.

Points of origin

Graph 1: Top 10 countries of origin



Most of the 805 refugees and migrants surveyed by 4Mi while in transit across Liptako-Gourma came from West African countries, with more than half of them from only three countries, including Mali (22% of the overall respondents), Côte d'Ivoire (15%), Guinea (14%). Other sizeable groups come from regional states such as Togo (10%), Burkina Faso (9%) and Senegal (8%). There is a very small share of respondents from beyond West Africa, including from Cameroon, Chad, Central African

Republic and Mauritania. None originated from outside Africa. Compared to DTM estimates of migratory flows in the region, the proportion of Togolese respondents is surprisingly high, while that of Nigerians is considerably lower than one would expect. This could be explained by a selection bias due to 4Mi interviewers' language skills but may equally indicate that Liptako-Gourma is outside of the preferred itineraries of Nigerian refugees and migrants, whose journeys are increasingly organized to

avoid detection, and are therefore less easily captured by monitoring efforts.²⁷⁴

Ethnicity and religion identifiers are more or less equally distributed among the most prevalent groups in the region, suggesting that these are not significant predictors of an inclination to migrate in, to or across Liptako-Gourma; about 40% of respondents said they were Sunni Muslims and 37% indicated they were Roman Catholics. In terms of self-reported ethnicity, a large diversity was seen. Fulani were the most prevalent group (14% of all respondents), followed by Malinké (7%), Bambara (6%), and Wolof (6%).

According to 4Mi data, the nationalities of those on the move tend to cluster according to the town where interviews took place. For instance, in Dori more than 40% of respondents came from just two countries, Côte d'Ivoire (21%) and Togo (21%). This corresponds to local perceptions that "migrants generally move in groups, and groups are often defined by the country of origin".²⁷⁵

Age brackets

Almost three quarters (72%) of 4Mi respondents were aged between 20 and 29, and 23% between 30 and 39. The average age was 27.²⁷⁶ Anecdotal evidence suggests that the proportion of youth and children migrating to North Africa and Europe is increasing apace, owing to the effect of locally rooted sociocultural rites of passage and to a growing awareness of the hardships involved in migrating through Niger and Libya by older migrants.²⁷⁷

Marital and parental status

Some 72% of male and 76% of female respondents were single. Other statuses varied greatly by gender: 19% of male respondents were married, with only 4% divorced, compared to 8% and 17% respectively for female respondents.

Most 4Mi interviewees said they were childless (69% of the men and 50% of the women). About a third of the women (32%) and one fifth of the men (19%) said they had one child. This suggests that both men and women may decide to start a migration journey even if they have a family and children, including through highly insecure regions such as Liptako-Gourma.

Town and country

The vast majority (83%) of 4Mi interviewees said they came from urban, not rural settings. This proportion may seem striking given that less than half (40%) of Africa's population live in towns or cities.²⁷⁸ It also jars with a widespread perception that rural poverty and marginalization are significant migration drivers.²⁷⁹ The figure is perhaps less surprising when considering that most respondents (61%) had already migrated within their country of origin before leaving it, suggesting that long-range international migration is often preceded by domestic, rural-to-urban migration.

274 See for instance Plambech S. (2017), 'Sex, Deportation and Rescue: Economies of Migration among Nigerian Sex Workers', *Feminist Economics* 23(3).

275 Focus group discussion, Gao, December 2018.

276 This is close to the average age of 28.6 indicated in IOM's Regional Mobility Mapping. See: IOM (2018), [Regional Mobility Mapping West and Central Africa](#), Geneva: November 2018.

277 Interview with a national migration NGO, Ouagadougou, February 2019.

278 Mo Ibrahim Foundation (2015). Facts and Figures. African Urban Dynamics.

279 Information corroborated in several interviews with humanitarian workers, Sahelian authorities and local communities.

Why travel? Migration drivers and motivations

Money matters

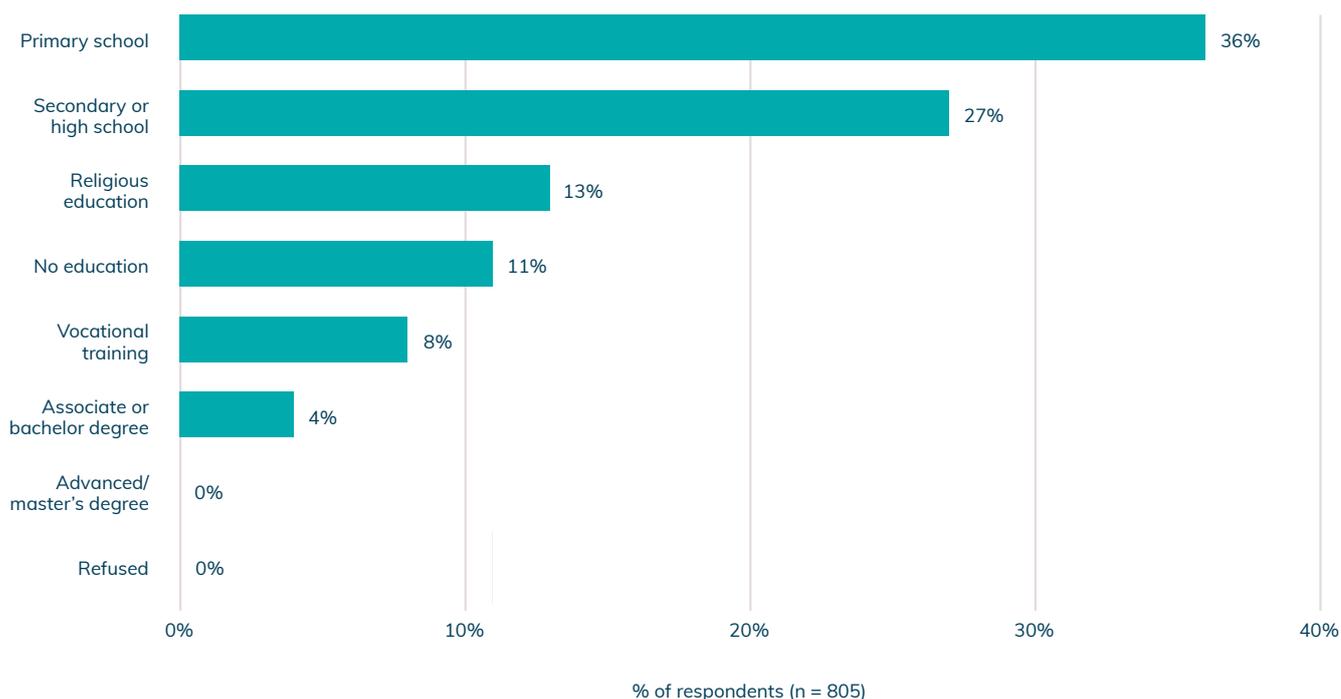
Ninety-one percent of 4Mi respondents cited “economic reasons” as one of the main reasons for departure,²⁸⁰ reaffirming local perceptions that “migration is linked to poverty and lack of work”.²⁸¹

Among those citing economic reasons for migrating, less than half were unemployed or could not find work (41%). Most were indeed employed but considered their wages insufficient (53%, with a significant discrepancy between men (57%) and women (39%)), or their activity no longer profitable (29%). While all those who said they had been unemployed cited economic reasons for their decision to leave, it is clear that issues of job quality

and remuneration compound the problem of limited availability and accessibility of jobs. In any case, the difference between being employed and unemployed is often vague in West Africa, where the labor market is dominated by the informal sector and low-quality jobs that foster a generalized situation of underemployment.²⁸²

Education plays a role in this gap between employment expectations and opportunities: more than a quarter of respondents (27%) reported having completed secondary or higher education, more than the combined proportions of those reporting no education (11%) or only religious education (13%). In spite of this, the largest categories of overall respondents were employed in low-skilled and low-paying professions such as laborers (33% of all, 40% of male and 6% of female respondents), vendors (11% of all, 10% of male and 15% of female respondents) and service industry (10% of all, 9% of male, and 20% of female respondents).²⁸³

Graph 2: Educational attainment



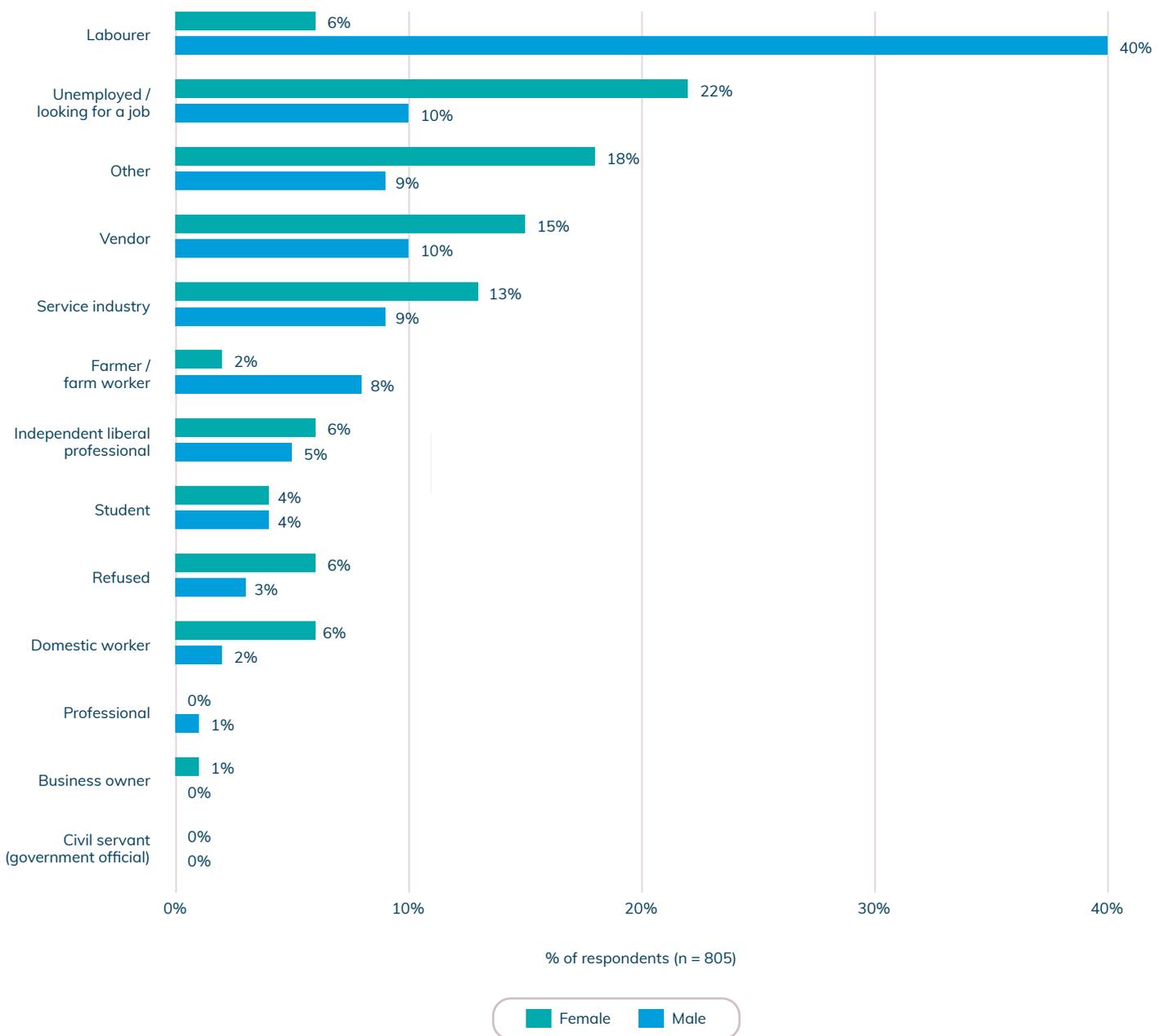
280 The question “Why did you leave your home country?” allowed respondents to choose multiple answers, so the total of the preferences exceeds 100%. Half of the respondents (51%) provided only one reason for departure, while 43% listed two reasons of departure. As a result, the majority of the entries available come from multiple answers.

281 Interview with a smuggler in Gao, January 2019.

282 Mbaye A. M., Gueye F. (2018), [Labor Markets and Jobs in West Africa](#), Working Paper Series 297, African Development Bank, Abidjan.

283 IOM provides a similar picture, although the categories employed are different. According to IOM data, 49% of their respondents are self-employed, 31% are unemployed and looking for a job, 8% are employed, 6% are student and other 6% are unemployed and not looking for a job. See: IOM (2018), *Regional Mobility Mapping West and Central Africa*, Geneva.

Graph 3: Main area of occupation in home country

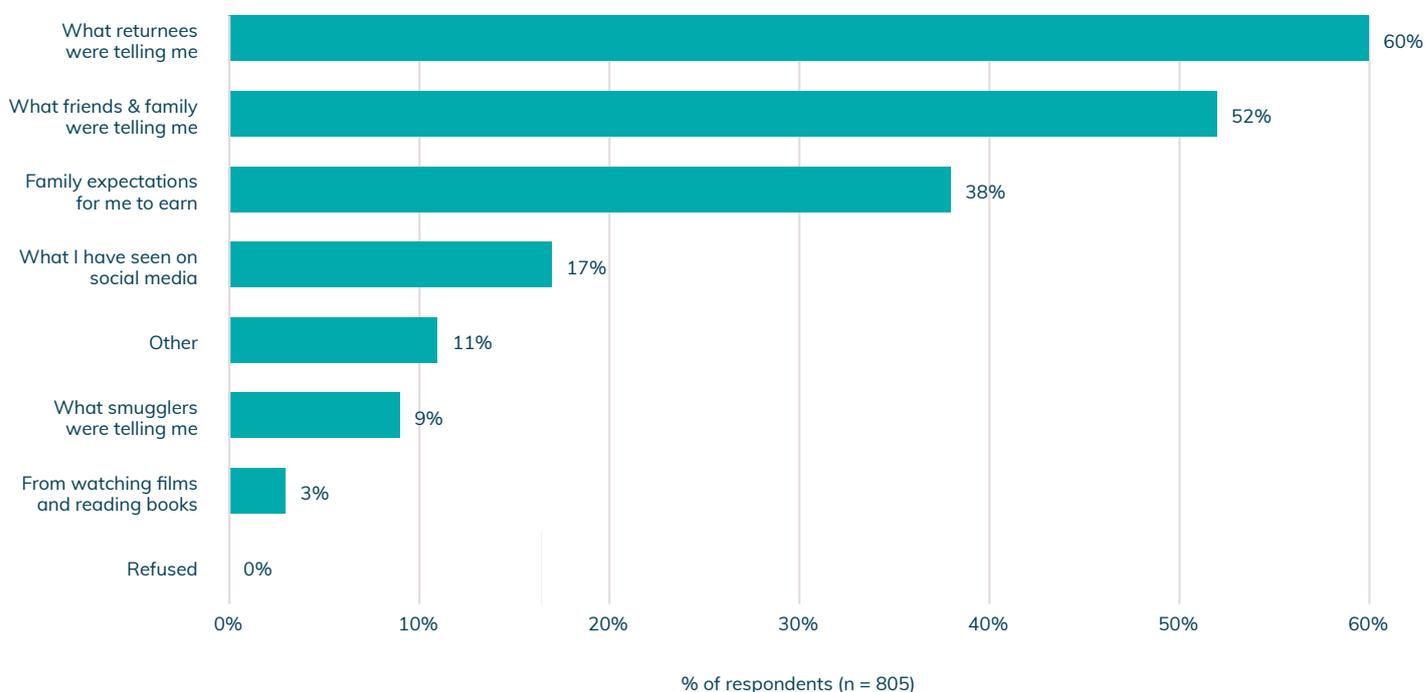


Spheres of influence

Overall, these observations suggest that the fulfilment of life ambitions is a major migration driver. It is in this light that one should interpret the large influence of emulation and peer-pressure. Survey data highlights the crucial influence of: reports from former migrants and returnees (mentioned by 60% of respondents as a reason for departure) and friends and family members abroad (52%); family expectations in the country of origin (38%); and information obtained from social media (17%). Additionally, when asked to give reasons why they had left their country of origin, 11% of respondents mentioned that “everybody around me was leaving, so I also wanted to migrate,” indicating that group choice dynamics also can serve as an motivating factor. This is consistent with other survey findings: in the respondents’ communities of origin, migration is a widespread phenomenon, reportedly very common (64% of respondents) or at least quite common (34%). In most cases respondents were encouraged to migrate by someone, either by friends (41% of respondents), members of extended family (22%), siblings (15%) or parents (12%).

“Personal and/or family reasons” is another common motivation for migrating, cited by 34% of respondents, with considerable variations by country of origin: more common among Togolese (62%) and Guineans (47%), and rarer among Burkinabés (22%) and Malians (17%). Overall, the proportion of those citing family reasons is much higher for women (63%), especially for divorced women (77%). However, divorce is only cited specifically by 7% of those reporting to migrate for personal and/or family reasons, suggesting that this factor may often be combined with other socio-economic reasons. Joining a family member abroad (21%) is far more represented among family-related reasons than more disruptive events such as the death of a family member (11%), fleeing a forced marriage (5%), or domestic violence (3%).

Graph 4: Influences on migration decision-making



Few flee violence or disaster

Political considerations did not appear to be a primary factor contributing to migration through the Liptako-Gourma. Only 11% of respondents cited “violence or general insecurity” among the most important reasons for departure. However, the percentage is much higher among respondents from Mali (34%). The specific sources of insecurity identified as triggers of displacement and departure mainly include the “presence and attacks by terrorist groups” (indicated by 77% of those citing violence and insecurity) and a generalized situation of insecurity, including crime (57%). 11% stated that an improvement in their country of origin’s stability would have led them to reconsider their decision to leave. Overall very few respondents (2%) identified a lack of civil and political rights in their country of origin, including persecution and discrimination, as a reason for leaving. Only 2% of respondents, considered that an improvement of their personal freedom, would have led them to reconsider their decision to leave.

Just 14 respondents, all but one of them men, mentioned “environmental factors and natural disasters” as a reason for leaving, and none of these were farmers. Furthermore, no respondents mentioned environmental factors as the only reason for migrating; this response was always coupled with other drivers, including economic ones. These observations suggest that while environmental factors may affect migrants’ economic status in the long run, the immediate trigger to leave (loss of revenue, incapacity to feed oneself and one’s family, which may or may not be related to environmental reasons) is generally the last step in a long, complex process whose causal chains are hard to unpick in a quantitative survey. Qualitative interviews suggest that of those who cited environmental factors, more referred to clearly identifiable events such as natural hazards (floods, drought, etc) than to more subtle developments such as soil degradation or changing rainfall patterns.

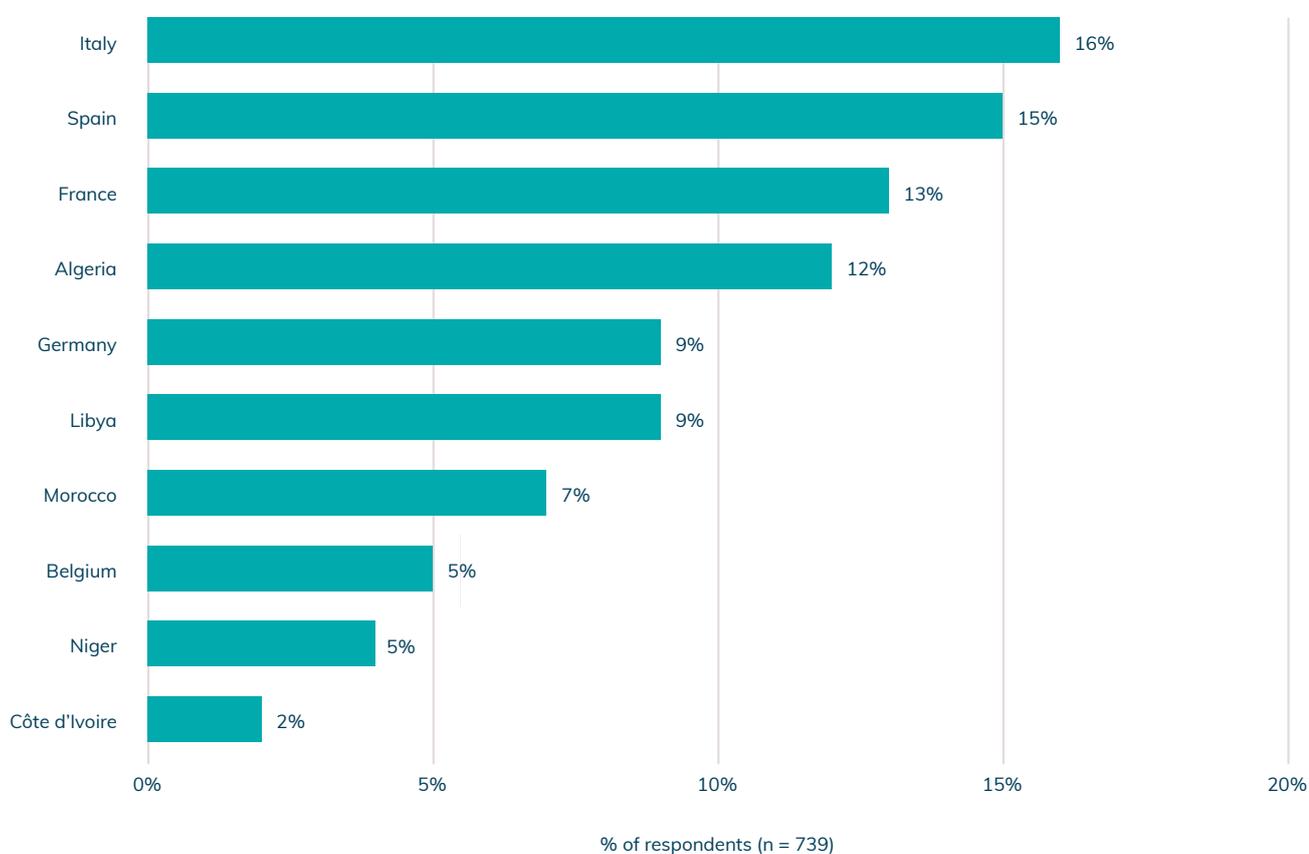
Which way? Choosing routes and destinations

Long haul journeys

Most of the people interviewed in Liptako-Gourma defined themselves as international migrants in transit to their country of destination. Two related considerations stem from this observation. First, the local understanding of international migration entails more than merely crossing national borders and encompasses inter-regional journeys of long-range mobility targeting

North Africa or Europe. Local patterns of intra-regional mobility within ECOWAS countries tend to be seen as everyday, unremarkable practices. As a civil servant in Ouagadougou put it: “Can we really talk about ‘migration’ in a region where UEMOA and ECOWAS are fostering a process of integration? This migration should not be difficult and should only be subject to routine controls”,²⁸⁴ Second, Sahelian countries and regions were rarely among the preferred destinations of those survey respondents who answered this question, who rather had their sights set on Italy (16%), Spain (15%), France (13%), Algeria (12%), Germany (9%) and Libya (9%).

Graph 5. Final preferred destination



Source: 4Mi survey.

284 Interview with a Burkinabé civil servant, Ouagadougou, February 2019.

Decision factors

Respondents' choice of route was largely determined by material considerations, including accessibility (68%) and affordability (49%). The safety of the route only comes next, mentioned by 40% of the respondents. This ranking varied little according to respondents' gender or final destination. Women tended to rely far more on existing family networks (64%) than men (38%). Many male respondents said they were trying "an adventure" rather than following established paths.

These findings are consistent with responses about factors that might have deterred migration. They include material obstacles, such as enhanced border controls (cited by 43% of respondents) and lack of funds (50%), far more than perceptions about risks of death (22%) or sanctions resulting from legislation aimed at curbing migration (26%). Cultural and social factors, such as fear of discrimination (4%) and family pressure (17%), have a significantly lower impact on discouraging migration. Altogether, it seems that migration occurs wherever it is practicable, irrespective of the risks. The analysis of migratory flows (see above) further corroborates this view; increased controls and risks on the main transit routes, such as those through Agadez, have not deterred migration but simply shifted routes to areas where border enforcement is less stringent, such as in Gao and Timbuktu.²⁸⁵

Immaterial risks

These findings also shed some light on the limited deterrent effect of awareness-raising campaigns on the risks of migration. 4Mi responses suggest risk factors have a limited effect on people's decision to migrate along a given route: a large majority (74%) set off despite reportedly being aware of the risks on the route; a few (4%) even said that they were aware of the risks and the situation on the road was not as bad as they expected; and almost all interviewees who responded to this question (98%) indicated that they would migrate again knowing what they know now. It should be mentioned that respondents were interviewed relatively early on in their journey. Were respondents to have been interviewed further along the CMR, these findings might have varied. Most respondents who reported to be unaware of the risks of migration before starting the journey, particularly young men from Senegal, Guinea and The Gambia, were interviewed in Gao. Security has significantly deteriorated

there, with roadblocks and robbery very common, and abuses against migrants on the rise.²⁸⁶ This suggests that, while a weak state presence and poor border enforcement can in theory increase the accessibility of a migration route, the related unpredictable security exposes refugees and migrants to higher risks of abuse. From this one could conclude that state-sponsored protection rackets facilitate mobility by ensuring both stability and poor anti-smuggling enforcement.²⁸⁷

Threat perceptions of migration

Migration as a security threat

This research has put forward some initial indications about the extent to which different actors consider migration to be a security threat. These preliminary findings provide a basis that more specific surveys could further ascertain and refine. Threat perceptions about migration phenomena, in fact, can contribute to explaining the unequal degrees of law enforcement that irregular migration and human smuggling face in the Liptako-Gourma.

Few of the SDF personnel interviewed for this paper, whatever their country or affiliation, regard migration as a major source of concern, even if it is irregular and undocumented. Rather, they consistently cited terrorism, banditry and drug trafficking as the top security threats. Still, the interviews revealed country-based nuances. At one end of the spectrum, Burkinabé interviewees mostly disagreed with the contention that migration poses a security threat to the region or its population.²⁸⁸ One Burkinabé SDF argued that "migration has no relationship whatsoever with terrorism".²⁸⁹ Another said, "we never caught a migrant we suspected of being a terrorist".²⁹⁰ These individual opinions align with Burkina Faso's national security strategy, which does not include migration in its priority areas.²⁹¹

At the opposite end of the spectrum, even if the Malian SDF officers interviewed too did not see migration as a threat per se, some did emphasize its potential links to other security priorities, such as terrorism and banditry. A number of Gao-based personnel said that terrorists or other armed groups may recruit stranded migrants, or use the infrastructure of irregular migration to infiltrate

285 Focus group discussion, Gao, January 2019.

286 Information corroborated in interviews with migrants, smugglers and transporters, Gao, January 2019.

287 Niger could be equated to a case of state-sponsored protection racket of human smuggling, building on the influential conceptualization by Richard Snyder and Angelica Duran-Martinez: "informal institutions through which public officials refrain from enforcing the law or, alternatively, enforce it selectively against the rivals of a criminal organization, in exchange for a share of the profits generated by the organization". See Raineri L. (2018), 'Human smuggling across Niger: state-sponsored protection rackets and contradictory security imperatives', *Journal of Modern African Studies* 56(1); and Snyder R., Duran-Martinez A. (2009), 'Does illegality breed violence? Drug trafficking and state-sponsored protection rackets', *Crime Law and Social Change* 52(3).

288 Interviews with police and gendarmerie officers in Seytenga and Dori, January 2019.

289 Interview with high-ranking police officer, Ouagadougou, February 2019.

290 Interview with police officer, Seytenga, January 2019.

291 Interview with Ministry of Security officer, Ouagadougou, February 2019.

members into Mali.²⁹² For instance, according to a police officer in the border town of Labezzanga “migration can be a threat to security, because everywhere there is the movement of men, there is a threat; among the migrants there are terrorists, terrorists do not have borders”.²⁹³

Nigerien SDF perceptions seem to lie somewhere between these two positions. Interviews with police, gendarmes, and national guard officers barely touched upon migration as a security threat. However, some security officers, and especially those stationed in larger towns, said that migration can be linked to more dangerous forms of trafficking, including that of drugs, weapons, and human beings, which in turn, they argued, has the potential to fuel armed insurgencies in the borderlands.²⁹⁴

Focus group discussions with border communities revealed great complexity and ambivalence in perceptions of migration. The view that migration can be beneficial, because it contributes to trade and resilience, surfaced quite often.²⁹⁵ This seems to be more common among communities living in larger towns not far from national borders, such as Gao and Dori, where migrants can settle and contribute to the local economy, if only for a short period. At the same time, some participants said they thought transiting migrants and the businesses that depend on them fuel corruption, prostitution and slavery.²⁹⁶

These views tend to differ from those of communities living in smaller villages at the border. Here, on the one hand, migration is generally viewed positively, to the extent that it provides a traditional source of livelihood. In many cases, villagers have either been migrants themselves, or have contributed to small-scale irregular migration schemes if the demand was there.²⁹⁷ On the other, deteriorating security has fueled a climate of suspicion and xenophobia.²⁹⁸

Smuggling as a security threat

EU-sponsored external migration policies repeatedly emphasize the ambition to “disrupt the business model of human smuggling”.²⁹⁹ EU action in the Sahel is an illustration of this determination.³⁰⁰ While smuggling

migrants amounts to an international criminal offence transposed into the domestic legislations of Sahelian states (with the limitations discussed above), available reports have highlighted that perceptions held by local Sahelian communities towards smugglers may significantly diverge from those held by international actors.³⁰¹

Bit parts

4Mi survey data provides some insight into the minimal role smugglers play in mixed migration across Liptako-Gourma. Overall, the reliance on smugglers was limited: approximately two thirds of respondents (64%) said they did not use smugglers, while 30% resorted to one smuggler, and only 6% to more than one smuggler. This is unsurprising, as most of the respondents were nationals of ECOWAS, interviewed in the ECOWAS space, and therefore enjoying a relative degree of freedom of movement. Smugglers do not appear to play a significant role in triggering migration or prompting departures: only 1% of respondents were encouraged to migrate by smugglers, a very small proportion compared to friends (41%) and family (22%). Similarly, when compared to family and friends, smugglers hardly figure as a primary source of information on migration (mentioned by only 7% of respondents) or as supporters to organize the migration journey from the outset (5%). Smugglers are rather seen as providers of facilitation during migration journeys, and even then taking a distant second place (cited by 21% of respondents) to family and friends (66%).

Specific jobs

The specific types of support offered by smugglers, according to those respondents who answered the question, included providing accommodation (60%), safe transit across a border (52%), and provision of documents (25%). “Recruiting clients to migrate” appears to be a very marginal activity in the smugglers’ portfolio, with only four mentions overall. These findings suggest that, at least in Liptako-Gourma, smugglers are not stimulating demand for migration, least of all by luring vulnerable individuals with deception or fraud, but rather supplying a service to meet a demand for mobility.

It is interesting to compare this finding with migrants’ perception of the SDF role in the context of mixed migration. 4Mi respondents tended to see law enforcement agents

292 Interviews with police officers in Gao, Wabaria and Labezzanga, January 2019.

293 Interview with police officer, Labezzanga, January 2019.

294 Information from several interviews with police, gendarmerie and national guard officers in Niamey, Ayorou and Téra, November and December 2018.

295 Opinion reported in focus group discussions in Dori and Gao, January 2019.

296 Focus group discussion in Gao, January 2019.

297 Focus group discussion in Seytenga and Petel Koli, January 2019.

298 Opinion reported in focus group discussions in Petel Koli and Seytenga, January 2019.

299 See for instance European External Action Service (2017), Strategic Review on EUBAM Libya, EUNAVFOR MED Op Sophia & EU Liaison and Planning Cell, Brussels.

300 Lebovich A. (2018), ‘Halting ambitions. EU migration and security policy in the Sahel’, ECFR Policy Brief 266, London.

301 Scheele J. (2012), *Smugglers and Saints of the Sahara: Regional Connectivity in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Reitano T., Shaw M. (2014), ‘People’s perspectives of organized crime in West Africa and the Sahel’, ISS Paper 254, Dakar: April 2014; Tinti P., Reitano T. (2016), *Migrant, Refugee, Smuggler, Saviour*, New York: Hurst Publisher. Frouws, B. & Horwood, C. (2018), [Both angels and demons? The role and nature of migrant smugglers](#), Mixed Migration Centre.

much less as providers of security and protection (2% of respondents) than as inhibitors of mobility (the most frequent answer with 34%). Law enforcement reportedly inspired much more fear (89% of respondents report to have been afraid of the SDF at least once in their journey) than trust (75% declared they did not trust the SDF, while 17% opted for a cautious “don’t know”). A possible interpretation of this data could be that smugglers tend to enjoy a greater degree of legitimacy and trust than the law enforcement apparatuses tasked with repressing them.

Need for nuance

Still, smuggling is a complex phenomenon that warrants nuanced interpretations. Anecdotal evidence suggests that cases of abuse, mistreatment, cheating and deliberate violence perpetrated by smugglers against refugees and migrants are occurring. This seems to be particularly the case where law enforcement action and the reduction of legitimate migration pathways has prompted human smuggling to adopt a criminal organizational model (see fertile ground for exploitation below).

Section 4: Protection issues

Key findings:

- The most prevalent form of protection incidents reported by migrants and refugees interviewed by 4Mi in transit in Liptako-Gourma is the extortion of bribes, gifts or other services. Other protection incidents include robbery (10% of total reported incidents) and physical abuse or harassment (10%). Security and defense forces are mentioned by 4Mi respondents as the main perpetrators of protection incidents.
- Extortion targeting refugees and migrants does not only occur at border posts during identity checks, but also at internal checkpoints. The racket on migrants is also an enabler of a multiplicity of serious violations, including discrimination based on national identity, and leads to refugees and migrants opting for more illicit routes to avoid checkpoints.

- While the extortion of bribes is reported in equal proportions by men and women, 4Mi data suggests that women are more exposed than men to very serious abuses, including physical violence, robberies, sexual assaults and harassment.
- The constraining of migration opportunities appears to be prompting a shift from smuggling to trafficking which heavily affects women, many of whom run the risk of eventually being trapped in situations of labor and sexual exploitation in transit countries.

The protection needs and vulnerabilities of people transiting Liptako-Gourma vary depending on the different categories and statuses of the individuals in mixed migration flows. At the same time, needs and vulnerabilities are highly sensitive to changes in the policy framework governing migration and border security.

Protection incidents across Liptako-Gourma

In a context of poor state control, accurately assessing protection needs and recording cases of abuse is challenging. 4Mi survey data on self-reported protection incidents provides some insight on protection concerns, including information on the types, frequency, locations and alleged perpetrators of protection incidents experienced or witnessed by refugees and migrants in Liptako-Gourma.³⁰²

The 805 survey respondents reported 999 protection incidents in all, indicating that some interviewees suffered multiple violations. Extortion of bribes, gifts or other services by the SDF account for two thirds of all protection incidents. At least half of the respondents were victims of such abuses during their journey at least once, and in most cases more than once.³⁰³

Beyond extortion, twenty percent of respondents reported at least one protection incident of a different sort. More specifically, other protection incidents

include robbery (10% of total reported incidents) and physical abuse or harassment (10%). In both cases, approximately one in ten respondents experienced these incidents at least once (12% in the case of robbery and 9% for physical abuses). The gender imbalance of these incidents was much greater than with extortion: 25% of women and 5% of men reported physical abuse; 23% of women and 9% of men reported being robbed. Robberies were mentioned to a greater extent by respondents from Burkina Faso (42% of whom reported such incidents) and Mali (27%), than other nationalities.

Very few respondents reported having experienced or witnessed detention (2%), kidnapping (2%), death (4%) or sexual assault or harassment (6%).³⁰⁴ Here too, significant gender differences were observed: for example 1% of men and 20% of women witnessed or experienced sexual assault. These findings suggest that women are far more vulnerable than men to abuses and protection incidents during their migration journey. At the same time, the relatively low level of reported kidnapping of refugees and migrants contrasts sharply with the

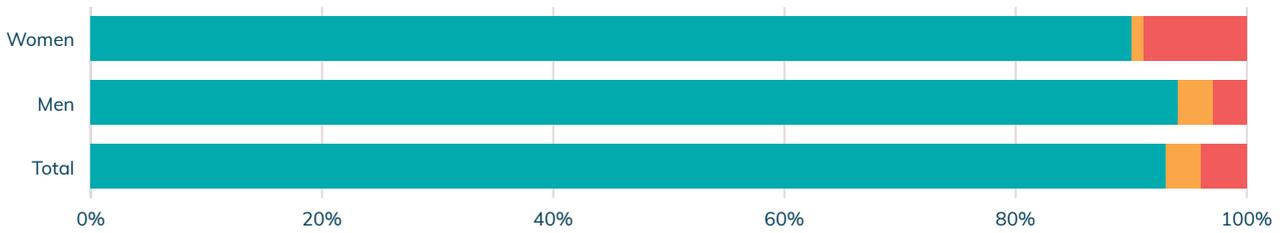
302 4Mi monitors collected the self-reported experiences of refugees and migrants up to the time of interview, and were not in a position to verify the accuracy of such reports. Reports of direct experiences are solicited for incidents such as physical abuse, kidnapping, detention, robbery and gifts/bribes to government officials. Reports of incidents witnessed but not directly experienced by migrants have been accepted for cases of sexual violence and death.

303 The actual frequency of these incidents could be higher, given that 10% of the respondents declined to answer this question (a proportion which is much higher compared to other protection incidents).

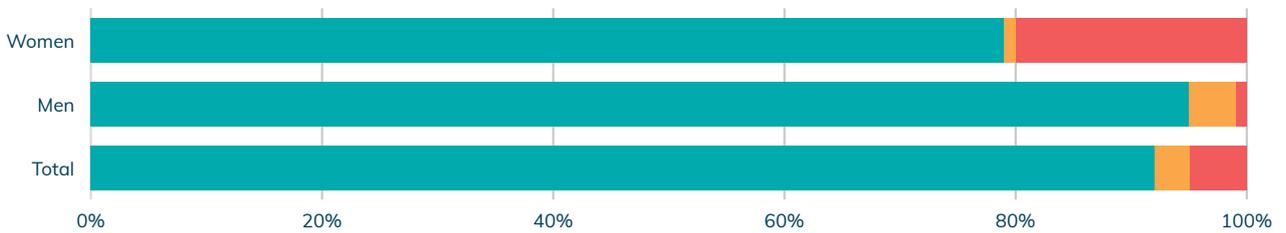
304 The low number of kidnapping contrasts sharply with the prevalence of the crime in Libya. See for instance: UNSMIL and OHCHR (2016), 'Detained and dehumanized. Report on human rights abuses against migrants in Libya', Geneva; El Kamouni-Janssen F. (2017), 'Only God can stop the smugglers. Understanding human smuggling networks in Libya', *Clingendael CRU Report*, The Hague; Amnesty International (2017), *Libya's dark web of collusion. Abuses against Europe-bound refugees and migrants*, London; Micallef M., Reitano T. (2017), 'The anti-human smuggling business and Libya's political end game', ISS and Global Initiative against TOC, North Africa Report 2, Geneva: December 2017; Women Refugee Commission (2019), *More Than One Million Pains: Sexual Violence Against Men and Boys on the Central Mediterranean Route to Italy*, Washington D.C.

Graph 6. Reported protection incidents in Liptako-Gourma.

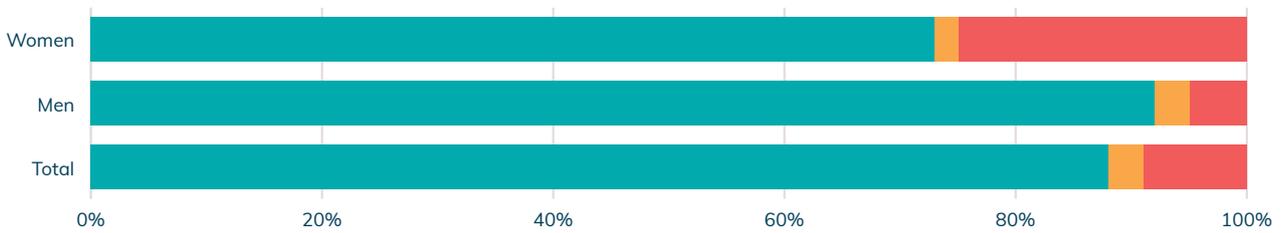
Did you witness any migrant deaths during your journey?



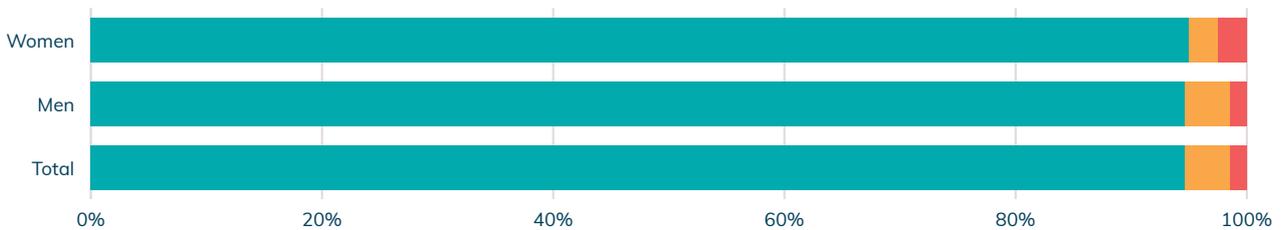
Did you witness or experience any sexual assault or harrasment during your journey?



Did you experience any physical abuse or harrasment (of a non-sexual nature) during your journey?



Have you been kidnapped or otherwise held against your will during your journey?

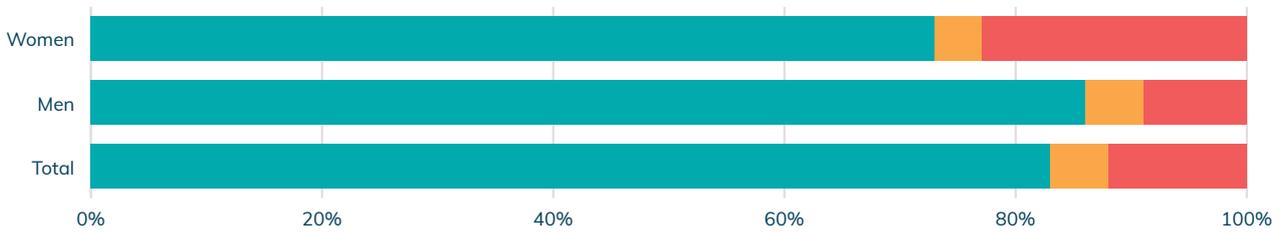


Source: 4Mi survey.

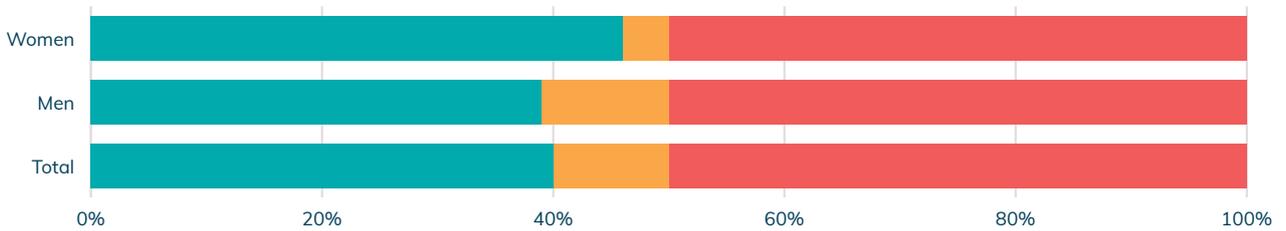


Graph 6. Reported protection incidents in Liptako-Gourma.

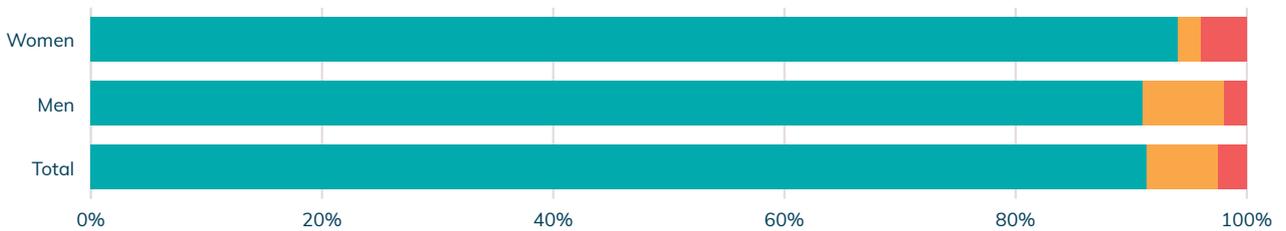
Have you ever been robbed during your journey?



Did you have to give government officials gifts, services or bribes during your journey?



Have you been detained by the police, military, militia or immigration officials during your journey?



Source: 4Mi survey.

pervasiveness of these criminal practices observed further along the Central Mediterranean Route in North Africa, and often linked to brutal schemes of systematic kidnapping-for-ransom of refugees and migrants in transit.³⁰⁵

An anatomy of extortion

As illustrated in previous sections, the extortion of bribes, gifts or services by SDF represents the most prevalent form of incident reported by 4Mi respondents in Liptako-Gourma.³⁰⁶ At least half reported to have been subject to this type of offense. Unlike other types of incidents, extortion affects men and women indiscriminately (50% in each case), whether in Mali, Niger or Burkina Faso (with roughly one third of the cases reported having taken place in each country).³⁰⁷ These findings reflect the pervasive nature of this type of misconduct across Liptako Gourma.

Modalities of extraction

Interviews with migrants, smugglers and border communities provide further insight into these incidents. All persons in transit at checkpoints are subject to identity checks by SDF. These can occur at border posts, as part of routine migration control measures, but also within each country, as part of increased surveillance meant to tackle violent extremism and banditry. While such identity checks are perfectly lawful, interviews suggest that it is not uncommon for some SDF personnel to solicit from those in transit the payment of an informal tax in order to proceed smoothly and avoid annoyances.³⁰⁸

The amount requested varies depending on a number of factors (as discussed below), but it is generally small, usually between 500 and 2,000 CFA francs (about \$1-4). Those who refuse to pay bribes may be subject to enhanced controls, forced to abandon their vehicle (and lose their ticket, if they travel by public transport), interrupt their journey and be arbitrarily held for a prolonged time. In the most serious cases, this can lead to the use of violence, including verbal or physical abuse, and seizure of possessions.³⁰⁹

Migrants and refugees more vulnerable

While anyone passing through checkpoints is in theory susceptible to such offenses, migrants and refugees seem to be especially vulnerable to abuses. This is because they often lack the resources to understand and defend their rights, are less likely to speak local languages, and, being far from home, are cut off from the social networks that often provide a first avenue of informal protection. Furthermore, refugees and migrants pass through SDF-operated border posts during their journeys, which increases the likelihood of experiencing extortion. From this perspective, a sort of “identity differential” appears to set the informal tariff extorted from travellers at checkpoints, especially at border posts. As a general rule, citizens of neighboring countries from Liptako Gourma are reportedly requested to pay double the amount charged to nationals in transit at checkpoints.³¹⁰ For instance, at the entry points in Niger, Nigeriens entering from abroad are expected to pay 1,000 CFA francs, and Burkinabés 2,000 CFA francs. At entry points in Burkina Faso, it is the reverse.³¹¹ For migrants coming from non-neighboring, non-Francophone, and non-ECOWAS countries, informal transit fees may progressively increase.³¹² These variations may explain refugees and migrants’ recourse to fake or forged national IDs, as a sort of travel insurance meant to reduce one’s exposure to the risk of extortion.

The highest fees are reportedly requested from undocumented refugees and migrants. In principle, border security forces should not let undocumented migrants in. For instance, as a high-ranking security officer in Ouagadougou put it: “To cross the border with Burkina Faso one needs to hold a valid ID of an ECOWAS country. Otherwise, the person is turned away and there is a fine to pay”.³¹³ Yet in practice, local observers contend that “cases of pushbacks occur only very rarely.”³¹⁴ This suggests that in some cases the right of transit depends less on the rule of law than on informal negotiations. According to various sources interviewed some local SDF turn a blind eye to the migrants’ lack of documentation in exchange for compensation.³¹⁵

While several SDF personnel concede that money changes hands at border points, some portrayed such incidents as acts intended to help undocumented migrants, rather than

305 Ibid.

306 This phenomenon has been documented by a France 24 journalist traveling between Bamako and Dakar, 8 November 2018, [De Bamako à Dakar, le racket des forces de l'ordre filmé en caméra cachée](#).

307 Out of 657 reported cases of extortion, 35% were reported to have taken place in Mali, 31% in Niger and 29% in Burkina Faso.

308 Information corroborated in several interviews with refugees and migrants, border experts and security personnel and international officers across the region.

309 Interviews with migrants, human rights organizations and high-ranking police officer, Niamey, November 2018.

310 Interviews with migrants in Gao, and transporters in Dori, January 2019.

311 Interview with transporter in Tillabéry, and focus group discussion in Seytenga, January 2019.

312 Information corroborated in interviews with migrants in Gao, and border expert in Dori, January 2019.

313 Interview with high-ranking security officer, Ouagadougou, February 2019. This rule, however, has stirred controversies because its implementation increased the risk of refoulement of refugees and asylum-seekers with legitimate protection claims. With a view of addressing these challenges, IOM has helped Burkinabé authorities implement a system of controls and referrals in line with international legal standards.

314 Interview with migrant, Téra, January 2019.

315 Interviews with migrants, traders, human rights organisations, border experts and focus groups with local communities, in Niamey, Tillabéry, Seytenga, Gao, Bamako, between November 2018 and February 2019.

extortion. Some also highlight that this is not systematic,³¹⁶ One police officer at Seytenga said: “Lack of transparency may occur in our mission because law enforcement agents are also humans and they are often tempted to give in to bribery solicitations to let the migrants or any other person without papers pass”.³¹⁷

*“In principle we must turn down any individual who does not have identity documents, but we are all humans and sometimes we let the person continue their way”.*³¹⁸

Police officer at Seytenga

On the other hand, interviews with refugees and migrants suggest that they perceive bribing less as a kind of generous concession by sympathetic SDF than as a systematic abuse targeting the most vulnerable. According to one long-term migrant in Gao: “The behaviour of border SDF is utterly unprofessional. They do not respect travellers; they just extort because the only thing they care for is money. That’s why I say that SDF are also smugglers. They are not there for the security of migrants but just to extort money from them”.³¹⁹

Varying rates

A local observer adds that “at police or gendarmerie stations there are small fees to pay, especially for those who have no papers. Undocumented migrants pay larger sums, up to 5,000 or even 10,000 CFA francs, but even if your papers are in order you must pay at least 1,000 CFA francs at the checkpoint”.³²⁰ “The real risk at the borders is the lack of papers. The SDF relationship with migrants is simple; if you have papers, you are hassled less; you pay 1,000 or 2,000 CFA francs and you go; but if you do not have all the required papers you expose yourself to abuse and you can pay up to 10,000 CFA francs”.³²¹ As these “prices” vary subject to individual negotiations, there are reports of even higher fees imposed on undocumented migrants to “buy” their transit: up to 15,000 or 20,000 CFA francs.³²²

Beyond the borders

These ‘rules’ reportedly apply not only at border posts, where identity checks for migration control are the norm, but also at internal checkpoints set up for security

reasons in unstable areas. This is for instance the case of the checkpoints created on the route between Mopti and Gao. Staffed by gendarmes and FAMA, these are tasked with protecting the population against the disruption of communication lines brought about by attacks by non-state armed groups. Yet migrants in Gao report having suffered frequent extortion at the hands of security forces along the route. According to a Guinean migrant in Gao: “on the way from Bamako to here [Gao], the security forces at each checkpoint forced us off the bus and charged some money... At one checkpoint, they wanted us to pay 25,000 CFA francs. We told them we did not have that money, so they kept us until the bus left. Then they searched our pockets and took away everything we had”.³²³

*“On the road, SDF are the most trouble. The Malian SDF want your money even if you have all your documents... To make a trip like that, one does not need contacts nor documents: you just need to have money with you.”*³²⁴

A female migrant from Côte d'Ivoire

In Burkina Faso the deterioration of internal security has led to the establishment of several checkpoints within the country. As a result, people in transit, and migrants in particular, are now facing multiple checks not only at the borders, but also inside the country.³²⁵

Perpetrators

4Mi data suggests that among SDF, police are those most frequently accused of racketeering, accounting for 90% (or more) of alleged bribery cases.³²⁶ Gendarmes were also blamed by a significant number of respondents, especially in Burkina Faso (mentioned in 20% of reported cases) and in Mali (13%), while customs officers were mentioned to a significant extent only in Burkina Faso. Very few cases involving the army or other types of SDF across Liptako-Gourma were reported, which may be because such personnel rarely come into direct contact with civilians.

More than two thirds of 4Mi respondents said they thought the main impact of SDF was to undermine migration, including by blocking or preventing migration

316 Information corroborated in several interviews with a variety of SDF, including police, gendarmerie and customs, from Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali.

317 Interview with police officer, Seytenga, January 2019.

318 Interview with police officer, Seytenga, January 2019.

319 Interview with migrant, Gao, January 2019.

320 Interview with transporter, Dori, January 2019.

321 Interview with community leader, Dori, January 2019.

322 Information corroborated in interviews with Ivorian migrant in Gao, transporter in Téra, and focus group discussion in Seytenga, January and February 2019.

323 Interview with Guinean migrant, Gao, January 2019.

324 Interview with Ivorian migrant, Gao, January 2019.

325 Interviews with international officers and civil society organization officers, Ouagadougou, February 2019.

326 This information could be partly biased by the limited capacity of the respondents to discriminate between different SDF, which fuels the tendency of conflating different agencies in the general category of ‘the police’.

journeys (34%), committing human rights violations (21%) or displaying discrimination (13%).

Stakeholder interviews and 4Mi survey responses offered little evidence of the use or threat of violence associated with bribery and extortion. Travellers are accustomed to this type of behaviour, which is widespread across West Africa. In most cases, refugees and migrants agree to pay in order to move on and avoid further complications along a journey which is often arduous.³²⁷ Anecdotal evidence suggests that migrants often factor this cost in to their travel budgets.³²⁸ Various local community members reported: “you must have at least 150,000 CFA francs if you want to go to Libya. This amount covers transportation costs, food expenses and racketeering”; “you need money for transportation and road fees. By road fees I mean what you give to the police to let you go”.³²⁹ “Rackets have become just like a rule of law. For if you try to understand, you are either threatened or told that this is how things work everywhere”.³³⁰

Racket towards migrants, an enabler of multiple violations

Such practices of extortion are reported to have limited associations to violence, and may appear to be generally accepted by migrants. However, while they may be seen as a lesser evil in comparison to other protection incidents, they can relate to or help to enable further (human rights) violations.

The racket targeting migrants exposes a clear pattern of discrimination based on national or ethnic origin. Nationality affects the extent of extortion, and therefore the severity of the abuses suffered by refugees and migrants. Migrants can reportedly be forced to pay bribes at least twice as high as those imposed on locals, even if they have a valid ECOWAS identity card which should grant them free movement across borders.³³¹ Among the survey respondents who felt discriminated against by the SDF (13% of the overall sample), the largest majority (85%) mentioned nationality as the fundamental ground of discrimination.

Extorting from refugees and migrants can lead them

to resort to illegality, which in turn increases their vulnerability to other forms of abuses. As non-Saharan refugees and migrants – such as Senegalese, Gambians or Guineans – can be subject to exorbitant “fees” even if they travel with valid papers, many of them resort to using smugglers to circumvent border checkpoints, including within ECOWAS.³³² This reliance on smugglers rather than on licit travel companies increases the risk of abuse, as explored below.³³³

Some interviewed refugees and migrants indicated that they sometimes hide or abandon their documents to conceal their nationality at border checkpoints and to evade the higher rates applied to foreigners. Extorting from migrants thus risks fuelling undocumented migration.

*“At the border checkpoint office you can see many IDs piled up. They belong to the migrants who abandoned them and fled because the money they were asked to pay for the transit was too much. Those who cannot afford it ask permission to go out of the office to call home and ask for money. But once they are allowed to leave the post, they do not come back”.*³³⁴

Focus group participant in Burkina Faso

The alleged pervasiveness of refugee and migrant extortion runs the risk of fuelling a system of widespread corruption and impunity. The proceeds of the racket are reportedly high, and some studies contend that in some cases they were necessary for the very functioning of under-resourced and over-stretched SDF.³³⁵ And while some SDF officers have acknowledged wrongdoings, collusion and political interference reduce the likelihood of sanctions against indiscipline.³³⁶ Those interviewed for this paper reported very few cases where disciplinary action was taken against security officers accused of extorting migrants in Liptako-Gourma.³³⁷ At the same time, international actors contributing to the governance of migration and border security in the Sahel have been reserved about supporting politically sensitive reforms.

327 Interviews with migrants and their organizations in Bamako, Gao, Ayorou, December 2018-January 2019.

328 See for instance: Molenaar F., Tubiana J., Warin C. (2018), ‘Caught in the middle. A human rights and peace-building approach to migration governance in the Sahel’, *Clingendael CRU Report*, The Hague: December 2018; Raineri L. (2018), ‘Human smuggling across Niger: state-sponsored protection rackets and contradictory security imperatives’, *Journal of Modern African Studies* 56(1).

329 Focus group discussion, Seytenga and Dori, January 2019.

330 Focus group discussion, Dori, January 2019.

331 Interviews with civil society organizations, Niamey and Bamako, November 2018 – February 2019.

332 Information corroborated in interviews with security officers in Seytenga, Niamey, Ayorou, Gao, migrants in Gao and focus group discussion in Seytenga, January 2019.

333 Interviews with migrants in Gao and Tillabéry, January 2019.

334 Focus group discussion, Seytenga, January 2019.

335 See for instance; Tinti P., Westcott T. (2016), ‘The Niger-Libya corridor: smugglers’ perspectives’, *ISS Paper 299*, Dakar.

336 Information confirmed in interviews with security officers in Seytenga, Niamey, Ayorou, Gao.

337 According to interviewees among the SDF and human rights officers in Niger (carried out in Niamey in November 2018), sanctions against police misconduct are on the rise, while “much feared” inspections led to the replacement of two regional heads of police in Niger. However, there is little evidence that these developments have had any impact on the racket on migrants in the Liptako-Gourma, including in Niger. The same interviewee acknowledged in fact that “the solicitation of small bribes at checkpoints remains widespread and is difficult to eradicate”. According to the interviews in Burkina Faso in 2017 the Police Commission has registered 82 complaints from bus drivers and concerning racketeering and corruption. In 2018 there were only 38 complaints recorded. Burkinabé media have recorded some cases of corruption and allegedly police officers who committed these crimes were sanctioned.

They may even have indirectly and inadvertently exacerbated corruption by sponsoring the construction of new border posts that critics equate to “corruption agencies”.³³⁸ Most of the transporters interviewed for this paper, whether of people or goods, formal or informal, complained that border hassles and harassment by SDF increased in the last months (referring to the last months up to January 2019).³³⁹

Extortion at borders: individual misconducts or informal governance?

The observations above seem to indicate that the extortion of refugees and migrants is widespread, systematic and normalized across the Liptako-Gourma. Building on existing reports,³⁴⁰ one could therefore explore the hypothesis that the racket targeting transit across Sahelian borders, including goods and people, should be looked at as a structuring rule of local governance rather than individual cases of SDF engaging in extortion.

As custom duties provide one of the most important sources of income for Sahelian countries, the control over these resources and their redistribution represents a crucial strategic asset. In this context, local sources contend that it is on the basis of one’s political loyalty that SDF officials are deployed to specific border posts known for the ‘informal’ enrichment opportunities they offer; in exchange, border officers are reportedly expected to return the favour by sharing (at least) part of the revenues accruing to the racket with their bosses, who in turn can use these resources to buy political influence.³⁴¹ From this perspective, racketeering, albeit formally illegal, could be seen as a practice that is not only tolerated, but informally encouraged, and sometimes even required as part of an under-the-table agreement of reciprocity. A regional observer, who reported having spent a lot of time with local SDF, said: “If an officer doesn’t make money [out of racketeering], it’s a serious problem. Because at the end of each working day you have to report your proceeds, and the dividends are redistributed. The payment of commissions is a normal part of the system”.³⁴² Malian sources have reported similar accounts about the redistribution of racketeering revenues.³⁴³

One law enforcement officer in Niger summarised the situation thus: “Misconduct and indiscipline are widespread, especially among the younger recruits. Many of them in fact don’t join the SDF out of vocation, but out of political favouritism. The state is largely responsible for this state of affairs. Disciplinary sanctions are imposed on offenders, although the influence of high-level personalities and protectors contributes a great deal to undermining the ethics of our organization”.³⁴⁴

These reports are not easy to independently confirm, even if they corroborate findings of existing research on border management in African states characterized by patronage politics, referring to a politically-backed “system” of extortion amounting to a veritable racket.³⁴⁵ This stimulates distrust not only in the low-ranking personnel operating border checkpoints, but also in the broader security systems of Sahelian countries. Looking at the extortion of migrants not just as a matter of individual greed and unethical conduct, but as also a broader social practice illuminates the failure of some border assistance projects that focus on capacity-building, which include human rights training modules.³⁴⁶

338 Interview with international migration expert, Niamey, November 2018.

339 Interviews with transporters from Ayorou, Téra, Dori, January 2019.

340 See for instance: Scheele J. (2012), *Smugglers and Saints of the Sahara: Regional Connectivity in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Strategic Capacity Group (2016), ‘Border Security in the Sahel: Building a Regional Platform for Dialogue and Action. An Assessment of Mali’s Border Security Capacity and Capabilities’, SCG Report, Bamako: February 2016.

341 Interviews with SDF and border experts and focus group discussions in Dori, Tillabéry, Ayorou, Ouagadougou and Gao, January and February 2019.

342 Personal communication, border security expert from Tillabéry region, January 2019.

343 Personal communication, Malian border expert, January 2019.

344 Interview with law enforcement officer, Niger, January 2019.

345 See for instance: Soderbaum F., Taylor I. (2008) eds., *Afro-Regions, the dynamics of cross-border micro-regionalism in Africa*, Stockholm: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet Press; Tidjani Alou M. (2012), ‘Monitoring the neopatrimonial state on a day-by-day basis. Politicians, customs officials and traders in Niger’, in *Neopatrimonialism in Africa and Beyond* (Bach D., Gazibo M. eds.), New York: Routledge; Englebert P. (2014), ‘Separatism in Africa’, *Routledge Handbook of African Security Studies* (Hentz J. eds.), London: Routledge.

346 Ibid.

Fertile ground for exploitation

Efforts to curtail northbound irregular migration have brought about two parallel phenomena which may be contributing to the expansion of human trafficking in West Africa, and in Liptako-Gourma in particular: the reduction of legitimate migration pathways, and the criminal organization of irregular migration. The former implies that refugees and migrants face increasing challenges to reach their countries of destination in North Africa and Europe, while smugglers are left with fewer customers and need to find alternative sources of income.

The rise in the physical and financial costs of clandestine crossings has spurred the criminal organization of irregular migration, which risks driving small-scale, homespun migrant smuggling out of business. Yet the more smuggling becomes organized, the less refugees' and migrants' agency and mutual trust relationships matter. This inevitably increases susceptibility to deception, abuse and exploitation.

For instance, following the clampdown on migration in Gao, short-term accommodation facilities, or ghettos, have become places where smuggling can turn into trafficking. Migrants are victimized with the seizure of their papers, the extortion of exorbitant sums to pay for their "accommodation" and the systematic postponement of their departure.³⁴⁷

An Ivorian female migrant interviewed in Gao reported: "I have heard that women are raped in the houses where smugglers shut migrants. I did not go through that personally. However, the smugglers took my money away by force, they took everything I had". She added: "Even if we complain to the police, there will be no follow-up, because the smugglers work with the security forces".³⁴⁸

Some anecdotal evidence points to the cases of trafficking of women across the borders of Liptako-Gourma for the purpose of forced housework and prostitution. Interviews suggest that networks of local smugglers are increasingly resorting to luring women with the promise of a safe passage to the north, or even the provision of a local job as domestic worker or waitress, and instead eventually selling women in transit countries or forcing them into prostitution to "buy" their onward passage. As a West African female migrant in Gao reported:

"I travelled through Côte d'Ivoire and then Mali to reach Gao. I intended to continue to Algeria and then Libya to go to Italy. I thought I could easily arrive in Algeria and work there to fund my trip to Europe. But the experience made me discover other realities. Here in Gao, for instance, the smugglers lock us in a house. They come to tell us every day you will leave in two days. One day I understood everything they tell us is false. Now my money is over, I am discouraged, I have decided to work here, and I do not intend to continue. I found a sister here in Gao and she helped me find a job in a restaurant, where I work as a waitress".³⁴⁹

Female migrant in Gao

That these trends are on the rise is a widely-shared perception in Gao, including by smugglers, migrants and local communities.³⁵⁰ Local observers in Gao report: "Today the town of Gao is filled with girls from Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso who have failed at migration. They work in Gao in the restaurants as waitresses and others engage in prostitution".³⁵¹ Local smugglers confirm that, while migration flows from Gao to Tillabéry and Niamey have substantially reduced, this is partly compensated by the flow of female refugees and migrants from Burkina Faso and Nigeria, heading to Gao.³⁵²

There is very little evidence of similar abuses occurring elsewhere in the region. In Dori, for instance, human smuggling is reportedly not a full-time activity, but more of an opportunistic response to a contingent demand. When the demand dries up, smuggling simply fades away, only to resurface in special circumstances, such as during regional markets that people may want to reach even if they lack the requested documents.³⁵³ This may be linked to specific geographical features, as Burkina Faso is entirely surrounded by ECOWAS countries and alternative options are available to migrants, but also to the limited measures to counter irregular migration, which makes the consolidation of structured human smuggling criminal cartels unnecessary. Nevertheless, there were some instances brought up in interviews in which the distinction between trafficking and mobility freely chosen by women was blurred.

347 See also: UNSC (2018), Report of the Panel of Experts established pursuant to resolution 2374 (2017) on Mali, S/2018/581, New York: August 2018.

348 Ibid.

349 Interview with female migrant, Gao, January 2019.

350 Interviews with smuggler, migrants and focus group discussion, Gao, January 2019.

351 Focus group, Gao, December 2019.

352 Interview with smuggler, Ayorou, January 2019.

353 Information corroborated in several interviews with a variety of actors in Dori.

As a transporter from Dori pointed out: “We often have Ivorian girls who come here and then remain in Dori to become prostitutes. I do not know if it's for lack of money to continue their journey, or if it is the job they decided to do here, looking for new customers”.³⁵⁴ A human rights worker in Ouagadougou explained:

“We helped dismantle a women's trafficking network in Houndé [a city in Hauts-Bassins region]. It was the network that provided the ‘waitresses’, which is a widespread phenomenon across the country and especially in large towns. There are also voluntary cases of women who have decided to join a network and engage in prostitution. Very often the leaders of these networks are from Nigeria. In prostitution, one mainly finds Ivorian and Nigerian women. When the network was dismantled, some of them decided to continue prostitution and moved to the gold mining sites where the demand for such services is very high”.³⁵⁵

Human rights organization in Ouagadougou

There is anecdotal evidence of exploitation and trafficking of both men and women also occurring in artisanal goldmining sites, where local states' control is limited.³⁵⁶ Artisanal goldmining is growing in Liptako-Gourma, attracting workers from all the surrounding countries and, according to local authorities from Niger and Burkina Faso, offering youths an alternative to northbound migration.³⁵⁷ These observations concur with the findings of existing reports focusing on contiguous regions – including those where counter-smuggling measures are more systematic.³⁵⁸

Smugglers are also accused of conspiring with drivers to rob migrants in the desert. A Malian returnee reported that “smugglers lock migrants into ghettos before departure. On the day of departure, they put them in trucks. With the complicity of the drivers, they stop the migrants in the middle of nowhere to rob all their valuables: mobile phones, watches and even the shoes”.³⁵⁹

While more research would be necessary to better understand the complex relationships between prevention measures, criminalization and vulnerability in the field of human smuggling and trafficking, an examination of perceptions suggests that migrants tend to attribute to SDF the hindrances to their migration projects, the criminal drift of smuggling, and the impunity thereof. On the other hand, smugglers continue to be seen as – usually honest – service providers and therefore allies, in spite of the rising awareness of abuses and violations.

Wariness towards humanitarians

4Mi respondents reported very little interaction with humanitarian actors working on migration issues in Liptako-Gourma: just 1% said they had received assistance from UN agencies, and 6% from NGOs. Far more common sources of assistance were family and friends (41%), local populations (21%), other migrants (14%) and smugglers (13%). In the same vein, both UN agencies and NGOs ranked last among those approached by respondents for information during their journey. This suggests that refugees and migrants seem to have a very limited degree of trust in, access to and/or familiarity with humanitarian actors, which appear as an option of last resort.

While this calls for further study, one could hypothesise that humanitarian actors enjoy a limited trust because they are seen as working in partnership with state authorities, including with the sponsorship of the EU which, in turn, is perceived as determined to stop migration. As a result, refugees and migrants – but also local communities, SDF, etc. – may fail to discriminate between different mandates (which, in turn, could also be arguably attributed to the rise of donor-driven humanitarianism in the field of migration).

For instance, in Dori Region, participants in focus group discussions with local communities and interviews with SDF perceived IOM as an agency mandated to constrain migration.³⁶⁰ Similarly, a number of transporters in Gao, including licensed ones, said they no longer engaged with NGOs for fear of being spied on and investigated, possibly leading to criminal prosecution:

“Since the smugglers were arrested in Gao, we categorically refuse to speak with NGO workers because we see them as people who do investigations on us”.³⁶¹

Member of transporters' union in Gao

354 Interview with a transporter, Dori, January 2019.

355 Interview with a human rights organization, Ouagadougou, February 2019.

356 Interviews with international consultant and with civil society officer, Ouagadougou, February 2019.

357 Interviews with local authorities from Dori and Bankilaré, January 2019.

358 Tubiana J., Warin C., Saeneen G. (2018), 'Multilateral Damage. The impact of EU migration policies on central Saharan routes', Clingendael CRU Report, The Hague.

359 Interview with a migrant, Gao, January 2019.

360 Interviews with several SDF officers and focus group discussion, Dori and Seytenga, January 2019.

361 Interview with member of transporters' union, Gao, January 2019.

Human rights and NGO workers acknowledge the challenges in approaching refugees and migrants transiting Liptako-Gourma.³⁶² UN- and NGO-sponsored awareness-raising projects emphasizing the risks of migration are sometimes met with scepticism by their intended beneficiaries.³⁶³ In a context of generalized criminalization of migration practices, in fact, awareness-raising programs risk being seen as mere attempts to deter would-be migrants from leaving by spreading sensationalistic yet inaccurate news, i.e. as a psychological weapon in the arsenal of those waging a war against irregular migration.³⁶⁴

At the same time, it is reportedly hard to persuade migrant returnees, who have personal experience of the adversities of migrating across dangerous borderlands, to share their experience by joining these awareness raising programs, because of the fear of interfering with powerful interests, including smugglers and the SDF.³⁶⁵

362 Interviews with human rights and NGO officers, Niamey and Bamako, November 2018, February 2019.

363 Interviews with presenters on NGO-run radio stations, Dori and Gao, January 2019.

364 Horwood C. (2019), 'The new 'public enemy number one'. Comparing and contrasting the war on drugs and the emerging war on migrant smugglers', Mixed Migration Centre

365 Interview with Malian NGO officer in Gao, remotely, March 2019.

Conclusion

This research aims to provide a better understanding of the mutual relationships between border management, security governance and mixed migration in the Liptako-Gourma region. Building on primary data, including 4Mi surveys and qualitative interviews, it has addressed interrelated questions with a view to providing a more nuanced understanding of the profiles, perceptions and protection concerns of individuals in transit across Liptako-Gourma's borderlands.

Monitoring mixed migration in Liptako-Gourma

In spite of the proliferation of programs related to migration and border controls, accurate, reliable and comparable information on mixed migratory flows in the Sahel, and in Liptako-Gourma more specifically, is limited. The fast-evolving nature of mixed migration flows and the inherent limitations of data collection methods impact on the reliability of available data. This is compounded by the well-known challenges of properly monitoring mixed migration flows in areas characterized by poor state presence and major insecurity, as well as a shortfall of capacity and tools to adequately monitor migratory flows. There is also a marked divergence of priorities and interests with regard to collecting data on mixemigration, owing to how different actors at national, regional and international level perceive migration as a "threat" or as a part of social and economic life in the region. At local level, where migration is seen as a normal phenomenon and part of a strategy of resilience, collecting data on migration may not be seen as a high priority by some local state authorities.

Border security governance and mixed migration

This study discusses how mixed migration flows across Liptako-Gourma have significantly declined as compared to the peak of the so-called migration 'crisis' in 2015. Yet it is unclear whether and how this has to do with increased border controls and the clampdown on irregular migration in the region.

Several sources concur that the implementation of repressive legislation against human smuggling in Niger has considerably constrained long-range migration opportunities from West to North Africa. While these measures are implemented predominantly (if not exclusively) in Agadez, their deterrent impact is visible well beyond the region, and repercussions are felt across Liptako-Gourma.

In Liptako-Gourma, however, border governance per se does not seem to have had a decisive impact on mixed

migratory flows, most likely as a result of the lack of willingness and capacity to implement law enforcement and border controls. For instance, on the axis between Gao (Mali) and Ayorou (Niger), the most significant factor explaining the reduction of mixed migration flows is insecurity on the roads and banditry. Only one third of those interviewed in Liptako-Gourma have felt the need to change their migratory routes in order to avoid SDF controls.

At the same time, while increased border control measures have not been systematically implemented and therefore have not had a decisive effect on migratory flows, they have nonetheless impacted border communities who traditionally rely on cross-border mobility for commercial and family reasons.

Security and destination choice

Security considerations only have a very limited influence in determining migrants' and refugees' preferred routes and destinations. As a general rule, migration occurs wherever accessibility and affordability make it materially possible. Similarly, migrant smuggling tends to cluster wherever (poor) law enforcement allows. These considerations appear to trump safety and risk concerns.

As an illustration of this, increased controls on the main transit routes, such as in Agadez, have led to a shift to areas where border enforcement is weaker, even if the route is more risky, prompting a westward trend from Agadez to Gao, and from Gao to Timbuktu. 4Mi survey data highlight that most refugees and migrants left their countries of origin in spite of being aware of the risks of the migration journey, and most stated that awareness of risks would not have changed their decision to migrate.

Role of smugglers

Internationally-sponsored migration policies tend to emphasize the important role of smugglers in regional migration dynamics. Smugglers are often considered among the main instigators of migrants' decision to leave their countries of origin, facilitators of their journeys, and perpetrators of human rights abuses against migrants.³⁶⁶ This study provides nuance to this narrative. In Liptako-Gourma, only one third of refugees and migrants interviewed by 4Mi reported to have used a smuggler.

Even in cases where smugglers do play a role, they are usually not seen as stimulating the demand for migration but rather as facilitators and providers of assistance to meet a pre-existing demand for mobility by migrants. Cases of abuses have been documented, particularly in the area of Gao. However, migrant perceptions

366 https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/central_med_route_may2018.pdf

suggest that smugglers tend to enjoy a greater degree of legitimacy and trust than the law enforcement apparatuses tasked with repressing smuggling activities.

Border security governance and protection

While assessing protection needs and concerns in the context of weak state control is challenging, according to 4Mi data, the extortion of bribes, gifts or other services is the most prevalent form of protection incident reported by migrants and asylum-seekers in transit in Liptako-Gourma. These represent two thirds of the overall incidents recorded in the survey, with 50% of the interviewees reporting to have suffered or witnessed these abuses at least once (but in the majority of cases more than one time). SDF are mentioned as perpetrators to the greatest extent by respondents to the 4Mi survey and are perceived more as a threat even for those travelling regularly.

The racket targeting migrants could be seen as resulting in other human rights violations, including discrimination based on nationality, and encouraging refugees and migrants to steer towards undocumented migration and smuggling, and increased resort to riskier routes. As a result, even the extortion of relatively modest bribes can contribute to eroding migrants' trust not only in the low-ranking personnel operating border checkpoints, but also in the overall security system of Sahelian countries.

Border security governance and women

Women represent around 20% of the population in transit in Liptako-Gourma, according to 4Mi data. Although gender sensitivity is hardly factored in to border security governance policies, 4Mi data suggests that women are overall more vulnerable to protection incidents. While the extortion of bribes, discussed above, remains the most frequently reported incident, and was reported to have been experienced in equal proportions by men and women, women are more vulnerable to serious abuses, with between one in four and one in five among surveyed women reporting to have suffered (or witnessed) physical violence, robberies, sexual assaults and harassment.

At the same time, while this calls for further research, there is some evidence that the constraining of migration opportunities may be prompting a shift from smuggling to trafficking. In some cases, women are reported to be trapped in situations of labor and sexual exploitation in transit countries. The research therefore suggests a gendered dimension to vulnerability in transit. Gender security should be more carefully factored into border management and migration governance.

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Frans Lemmens / Alamy Stock Photo / January 2011

View of Niger River from Dune Rose near Gao, Mali.



Back cover photo credit:

Pascal Mannaerts / Alamy Stock Photo / November 2009

People waiting at bus stand in Dori, Burkina Faso.



The Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) is a global network consisting of six regional hubs (Asia, East Africa and Yemen, Europe, Middle East, North Africa & West Africa) and a central unit in Geneva. The MMC is a leading source for independent and high-quality data, research, analysis and expertise on mixed migration. The MMC aims to increase understanding of mixed migration, to positively impact global and regional migration policies, to inform evidence-based protection responses for people on the move and to stimulate forward thinking in public and policy debates on mixed migration. The MMC's overarching focus is on human rights and protection for all people on the move.

The MMC is part of, and governed by, the Danish Refugee Council (DRC). While its institutional link to DRC ensures MMC's work is grounded in operational reality, it acts as an independent source of data, research, analysis and policy development on mixed migration for policy makers, practitioners, journalists, and the broader humanitarian sector. The position of the MMC does not necessarily reflect the position of DRC.

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