

# Trans-Saharan labour emigration from Niger:

Local governance as mediator of its underlying causes and consequences

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Cover photo: Research team member, Omar Moumouni (back to camera), interviewing returned migrants in June 2017. Photo taken by Souleymane Adamou of the Groupe de Recherche, d'Etudes et d'Action pour le Développement, Niamey Niger

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## Abstract

This report reviews the existing literature of trans-Saharan labour emigration from Niger both conducted by Nigeriens but also by other West Africans, given Niger's importance as a country of transit. The literature on labour emigration from the Sahelian region, as in other parts of the world, is dominated by studies that emphasise particular causes (drought, poverty, climate change) and focus on particular consequences (economic impact, labour scarcity, cultural diffusion etc.). Such framings work to ignore the important role played by customary and formal authorities through their important roles in mediating conflict management, resource access, and government services. This review rejects singular causes and consequences and instead reviews what is known about emigration's history and the social complexity surrounding it. After outlining the historic role of labour emigration to the south as well as what is known about its causes and consequences, the review turns to existing information about the demography, management, migrant experience, and consequences of trans-Saharan emigration. By treating labour emigration and human mobility as historic phenomena while engaging with the social complexity surrounding its causes and consequences, we hope to reveal the potential roles played by governance in emigration's causation and consequence at multiple scales. Such roles will only be fully addressed by empirical research focused on the potential connections raised in this review.

## Preface

The mandate of the Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy (ICLD) is to contribute to poverty reduction by promoting local democracy in low and middle-income countries. In order to fulfil this mandate, we offer decentralised cooperation through our municipal partnership programme, capacity building programmes through our international training programmes, and exchange of knowledge through our Knowledge Centre. ICLD documents and publishes key lessons learned from our ongoing activities, initiates and funds relevant research, engages in scholarly networks, and organizes conferences and workshops. We also maintain a publications series. This working paper, “Trans-Saharan labour emigration from Niger: Local governance as mediator of its underlying causes and consequences”, by Matthew D. Turner and Molly S. Teague, is part of a series of four review papers that provide background for the research project “Political Representation under a Changing Sky”, financed by ICLD. This project aims to understand the multiple causes for climate-related migration from the Sahel towards Europe and the role of local political representation by local government in facilitating or moderating this migration.

Departing from previous literature that focuses on drought, poverty and climate change as key reasons behind labour emigration out of the Western Sahelian region, the authors instead delve into the social complexity of the history of emigration from Niger. The report offers fascinating insight which shows that contrary to popular narrative, emigration has overwhelmingly been ‘south-south’ in nature, with the majority of Nigerian emigrants heading to other West and Central African countries, with a small number having the Maghreb (Algeria and Libya) as their final destination. Those who do attempt to reach Europe do so only when conditions in the Maghreb become intolerable. It is the position of the authors that there is a clear role played by local level governance institutions on rural residents’ access to resources and levels of well-being, a role they contend is under-appreciated or ignored in the migration-specific literature. They call for greater focus on how local systems of governance are implicated in emigration decisions, experience and outcomes in Niger.

Visby, Sweden, October 2019



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## Introduction

Western media accounts often portray emigration from West Africa as driven by over-population, environmental degradation, violence, or poverty, and strongly oriented toward Europe where these problems, in contrast, are nonexistent (Friedman 2016; Sieff and Stanley-Becker 2017; Searcey and Barry 2017). These simple narratives, along with references to the unending flow of immigrants, flirt with longstanding depictions of Sub-Saharan Africa as the nonfunctional dark continent (e.g. Kaplan 1994). The problem with such accounts is not that African nations and their citizens don't face these and other problems. Instead these simplistic accounts of the drivers of emigration, sometimes mirrored in the academic literatures ignore the long history of mobility in the region; reduce the complex interplay of relational factors that lead to emigration; misleadingly suggest that reasons and forms for emigration are homogeneous across the region; and downplay the agency and experience of migrants (and thus are dehumanizing). One outcome of such framings is that we are often left with the notion that the emigration-poverty nexus in the Sahel is a natural outcome of the cultural and physical geography of the region and not something that can be addressed through policy and government action. As will be further developed in this review, the conditions that lead to emigration from Sahelian countries is more about local governance than about resource scarcity, culture, or drought. This paper reviews the available literature on emigration from Niger with particular attention on northerly emigration to North Africa and Europe. Both Senegal and Niger are Sahelian countries experiencing similar issues of soil degradation, population growth, climate change, and poverty. Still, they display quite different patterns of international migration with migration destinations for Niger dominated by other African countries (largely to the south), which is typical for the region (Ouedraogo 2009), while for Senegal, migration through North Africa to Europe is much more common. As these reviews will show, these differences are caused by a mix of historic, geographic, and economic factors. Still, these different forms of emigration have quite different motivations, risks and potential economic returns. The comparison that these two literature reviews provides is revealing.

This review first provides a general background on migration in Niger.<sup>1</sup> The history of emigration in Niger is first presented followed by a description of the diverse mobilities of Nigeriens and how these mobilities don't often fit with standard models of migration. Trends in international emigration and their causes are discussed. Prior work on the identity of emigrants, their relations to their families and the effect of the emigration on rural social structures is described. Following this general introduction of emigration in Niger, the specific case of Nigerien emigration toward North Africa and Europe will be reviewed. Trans-Saharan migration routes and the structure of human smuggling networks will be presented. The review will then discuss trans-Saharan migrants' experiences and challenges, and will touch briefly on the major nationalities that migrate through Niger. Finally, the report will present international and Nigerien efforts to curb trans-Saharan migration and the economic impact of migration through Niger. The review will conclude by presenting trends specific to trans-Saharan migration by Nigeriens.

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1. This review, as with any review, can only present prior work on the subject. Labour emigration from Niger, while an important political economic phenomenon, has not elicited significant in-depth academic attention (exceptions include Painter 1994; Rain 1999) especially over the past 15 years. This reflects the growing disinterest in Niger by the international development community and the tendency by academics and development practitioners to ignore the mobility of rural people as critical parts of their livelihood strategies. Each of these will be discussed more fully in this report. As a result, prior work is dominated by the short-term survey research, often conducted by NGOs or international development agencies which provides simple, decontextualized treatments of the causes for labor emigration; incomplete and sometimes inaccurate estimates of remittance income; very little historical context or insights into changes in emigration rates; and very little qualitative information about immigrant and immigrant family experience.

The roles of local governance in creating the situations that cause Nigeriens to emigrate to the north in search of work and that shape the consequences for rural households of these choices have not been the foci of prior research on labour emigration from the Sahel. The goal of this report is to address this gap by illustrating how a rejection of singular causes and greater engagement with the complexity of causation and consequence reveal the mediating role played by local governance. Invocations of climate variability, resource scarcity, and poverty as the causes of labour emigration raise two fundamental questions: 1. These conditions have existed for many decades and therefore they alone serve as insufficient explanations for current emigration rates; and 2. They alone do not address how these material conditions affect but do not determine the human experiences that shape emigration decisions. How are people affected by drought? How are people poor? These are questions that affect peoples' precarity and hopes for the future. Questions of land access, conflict management, agricultural extension support, senior-junior relations, corruption, experiences of social injustice, wealth inequalities, and options for remittance management are all factors that are strongly influenced by governance and that in turn influence the causes and consequences of labour emigration. Given the lack of empirical research of these connections, this review can point to their potential through an engagement of not only the "migration literature" but existing literatures on mobility, resource management and local governance. The hope is that this review will spur new avenues of empirical research on these questions.



## Brief history of labour emigration in Niger

The movements of people across the current boundaries of the country of Niger have a long history (Painter 1988). During the precolonial era, such movements were diverse ranging from seasonal to permanent. Seasonal and semi-permanent movements were associated with trade (Fugelstad 1983; Baier 1980; Kervan 1992; Quarles van Ufford 1999) and livelihood practices (Bonfiglioli 1988; Delehanty 1988) with both facilitated by the greater security provided by precolonial polities that transcended current international boundaries to the south (Kanem-Bornu, Sokoto, Bourgo) and north (Songhai and Kel Tamashek). These movements have historically had a strong north-south orientation reflecting the benefits to livelihood practices (e.g. herding) and to trade of moving across the steep north-south ecological gradient in the region (Vansina 1968). Seasonal movements could lead, over time, to the drift of a family's home base, particularly among pastoralists but also among farmers. This pattern, shaped by the social networks established through seasonal migration, is often referred to as migratory drift (Bassett and Turner 2007; Stenning 1960). The region that is now Niger has also received more permanent migratory flows of people along a more east-west orientation. For example, waves of migration by Djerma and FulBe to western Niger from the west occurred from 16th through 19th centuries (Lem 1943; Hama 1967; Gado 1980). These movements were driven by shifts in allegiances, clientage, and political power with migrants seeking more security and greater access to resources from where they came.

Thus, at the time of French conquest at the end of the 19th century, the movements of people, livestock and trade goods were common in the region. With the Franco-Anglo Accord of 1890 and a succession of treaties through 1906, the boundary between Niger and Nigeria was established (Abadie 1927; Thom 1971). The artificiality of this straight-line border is noteworthy with a major effect being the division of Hausaland – a cultural and politically coherent area tied to the urban centres of Kano and the Sokoto – between the French and British. Thus, the pre-existing trade and livelihood practices within Hausaland that crossed the new border became politicised by the two colonial governments.

The onset of colonial rule had a diverse set of effects that as a whole, increased the rate and changed the nature of the movement of people and goods in what is now Niger. First, colonialist settlements to the south increased demand for Sahelian goods, particularly for cattle (De Haan, Quarles van Ufford, and Zaal 1999; Quarles van Ufford and Zaal 2004), leading to an increase in the volume of regional trade toward the south (Nigeria and Benin). This continued the trend begun by the European-controlled Atlantic slave trade of shifting trade flows toward the south from historic trans-Saharan routes.<sup>2</sup> Second, colonial “pacification” led to greater security of new settlements and of the movements of people and trade goods (Sidikou 1974; Spittler 1977). The uneven elimination of slavery that began with the 1906 circular by the Governor of the Upper Senegal and Niger Colony (Fugelstad 1983, pg 68) was an additional factor increasing the dispersal of settlements as slaves left the settlements of their masters (Spittler 1977; Kimba 1981, pg 27).

2. Situated at the crossing of North-South and East-West axes of ancient caravan routes, the Nigerien city of Agadez, which figures prominently in this report, has a rich history as a centre of commercial and cultural exchange, peaking in importance in the 16th century. Beginning in the 18th century, declines in trans-Saharan trade and regional conflicts caused the city to decline economically. As will be discussed further below, the growth of trans-Saharan migration has led Agadez to rebound as a commercial centre over the last twenty-five years.

Colonial taxation and forced labour began by the French during the first decade of the 20th century. Initially, head taxes could be paid in kind, cowrie or French francs but by 1920, only French francs were accepted (Painter 1994).<sup>3</sup> This reflected the interest of the French to obtain revenue streams of interest to them (rather than simply millet). Higher levels of taxation in the French colony reportedly led to the movement of people to Nigeria. Painter (1988, pg 93) reports that, in 1903 alone, an estimated 10,000 people left south-western Niger, primarily to Nigeria, a pattern welcomed by the British (Thom 1971, pg 134). With little understanding of their cause or duration, the French attempted to control the movements of livestock and people throughout the early colonial period but with little success (Kervan 1992, pg 79). Still, their attempts have had lasting political effects. For example, French attempts to reduce the flow of livestock wealth out of their colony involved the reworking of village and canton-level authority in favour of livestock managers (Gamory-Dubourdeau 1924; Turner 2017).

The imposition of a tax in francs was an important mechanism through which the French attempted to incentivise if not coerce rural residents of the Niger colony to produce products of interest to French mercantile interests. The only way in which farmers and herders could obtain French currency to pay their taxes was to sell their labour or products of interest to the French. Livestock, the major store of wealth among rural inhabitants could be converted into French currency. Livestock populations were however decimated through a succession of rinderpest epidemics during the first 30 years of colonial rule (Aldige 1918; Malfroy 1926). Millet and sorghum, the major food crops of the region were not of interest to the French. Moreover, cash crops such as cotton or peanuts were never major agricultural products in Niger compared to other Sahelian countries. The taxation system very much increased the food insecurity of rural residents, recurrently reaching crisis proportions as triggered by drought and locust infestations (Gado 1993; Kimba 1981, 1991). Rigid extraction by the colonial state of the limited wealth generated by rural inhabitants exacerbated the problem and led to significant resentment and revolts by rural peoples – revolts that were violently

quashed (e.g. Olivier de Sardan 1984; Painter 1994; Taithe 2009).

This is how Niger as a colony and eventually an independent nation became a labour reserve to better resourced and favoured colonies and eventually nations to the south (Amin 1974; Painter 1994). Remittances from seasonal and semi-permanent labour emigration became, for most families, the major source of cash income to pay taxes and to replenish grain stores after harvest failure. Labour emigration is not a livelihood activity on which families depend only in crisis. For those families with young men, labour emigration became a consistent part of their livelihood strategies with most households in the region depending variously on some mix of farming, livestock, and labour migration every year (Rouch 1956). The destinations of international labour emigrants varied depending on the availability of low-skilled work and the strength of the destination's currency relative to that in Niger. Still, almost all international destinations were to other African nations to the south, particularly Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and since the 1970s, Nigeria (Adepoju 1995). Unlike Senegal and western Mali, there was no history of significant emigration to France and other European nations. Social networks facilitating labour emigration that have developed over time are oriented toward cities to the south not to the north.

3. There were continuous adjustments of the head tax throughout the early colonial period with the first full tax collection in 1900 of 2 francs payable in cash, millet or livestock (Kimba 1981, pg 107). In response to a loss of people and livestock from the colony, this tax was reduced to 50 centimes in 1903 (Kimba 1981, 107), but it was augmented in 1904, 1908 and again in 1914-15. By 1920, the tax was 3 francs payable only in cash.

## Human mobility in Niger

### Complex movements of people

In what currently is the country of Niger, the movements of people have varied, and continue to do so significantly by distance, duration, destination and motivation (Pedersen 1995; Painter, Sumberg, and Price 1994). Some of these movements are tied to rural livelihoods. For example, pastoralists have historically moved with their livestock over hundreds of kilometres in a southerly direction during the dry season and northerly direction during the rainy season (Malicki and et al. 1984; Turner, McPeak, and Ayantunde 2014). Merchants will move from market to market not only in cyclic fashion among weekly markets in a local area but in a directional fashion on a seasonal basis to follow shifts in the location of mobile wealth (e.g. livestock) and the wealthy who may have interests in their products/services. Koranic students will move to work for and study with a particular marabout (Rain 1999). Commerce in the region has long relied on movement – seeking to gain some profit not only by speculation cross the predictable seasonal changes in price but in price differentials over space due to the lack of market integration (Fafchamps and Gavian 1996). Movements of livelihood and commerce overlap significantly with movements that could be seen as more conventional labour migration. Farmers whose harvests have failed will often move to areas, sometimes quite nearby, to weed or bring in the harvests of other farmers.

Longer-distance seasonal movements to towns in Niger or to work opportunities (mines, plantations, cities) in other countries, such as Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, and Nigeria, are part of the same process of seeking work. Changes in the popularity of these destinations reflect their economic dynamism, exchange rates, and government migration policies (Adomako-Sarfoh 1974; Peil 1971). Within any time period, the rate of labour emigration and the importance of different international destinations vary from one area of Niger to another (Rouch 1956) with destinations to Nigeria long dominating emigration destinations in south-central Niger including Maradi, Tahoua, and Zinder (Rain 1999). Even nearby villages have been found to have quite different migration profiles (Faulkingham and Thorbahn 1975). Such longer-distance, seasonal movements entail greater transport costs and therefore are more

likely to be favoured by families with greater access to cash. It is not unusual for seasonal migrants to first attempt to make sufficient money in Niamey (in western Niger) or to other urban centres in Niger or Nigeria in south central Nigeria (Rain 1999) before continuing on to more distant destinations.

These seasonal movements most often involve not the whole family but only certain members of the family. Except for some WodaaBe, Kel Tamashek, and Bella, pastoral movements are most often conducted only by young men of the family with the remainder of the family farming at a home base. Likewise, seasonal labour migration generally involves only certain members of the family. Remittances from seasonal migration are highly variable depending on the destination, shifts in the regional economy, social connections held by migrants at destination, and luck (Batterbury 2001; Bolouvi 2009). In many cases, the sole economic benefit of labour migration proves to be one less mouth to feed (Malicki and et.al 1984; Rain 1999, pg 150). In other words, the provision of subsistence to the migrant is the sole benefit. In extreme cases, migrants are stuck at destinations since they are unable to earn more than a subsistence wage and therefore cannot pay the transport home.

More permanent migration, lasting from one to many years takes different forms. Certainly, seasonal labour emigration to the south can lead to semi-permanent migration. This is most likely when the migrant achieves some success at finding remunerative work. Still, under these conditions, the expectations from not only the family but others within the community can inhibit migrants returning to their home communities. A migrant can “make it” sufficiently to provide regular remittances to the family but not earn enough to return home where members of extended family, friends, and acquaintances will expect cash gifts as demonstrations of the wealth earned by the migrant. One cannot underestimate the importance of the social pressures faced by more successful, semi-permanent migrants. To come home empty handed will lead to discussions about why they remained away so long despite having failed to earn sufficient income.

More permanent migration also can involve whole families. Families may join the successful labour migrant. More commonly, whole families will move from rural areas to the city or between rural areas. There is a history of the movement of rural settlements in response to changing market opportunities, land access and bioclimatic conditions. During higher rainfall periods, movements of settlements to the north have occurred (Bonfiglioli 1988; Delehanty 1988). Since the early 1970s, more permanent movements of rural settlements have been dominated by those to areas to the south within and outside of Niger (Sidikou 1974; Mounkaila 2002; Stryker 1993). These movements have been more important in western Niger where land in southwestern Niger and northern Benin is more plentiful compared to northern Nigeria further east (Mounkaila 2004). While the numbers of migrants are higher during and after drought years such as 1973, 1984, 1987, 2005...etc. (Swinton 1988; Grolle 2015; Faulkingham and Thorbahn 1975; Dietz, Johannes, and Ruben 2001; Bailey 2008), migration has persisted throughout the period – in good years or bad (Hummel 2014). Moreover, a number of surveys have found that drought or rainfall deficit are not commonly cited by migrants as reasons for emigration (Rain 1999, pg 159; Coulibaly and Vaugelade 1981).

### Global models and local complexities

As briefly described above, there is a long history of migration in Niger. Moreover, the nature of migration in Niger has historically been highly variable – including movements of agriculturalists to new cultivation hamlets, pastoralists to dry-season pastures, seasonal labour migration to Niamey, and semi-permanent migration to Ghana, Côte d’Ivoire, and Nigeria. The purpose and underlying motivations for these movements are diverse with a long history of misinterpretation of these by outside observers (Turner 2017). Common variants of simple models, which assign causal primacy to the “bright lights syndrome” or benefit-cost decision-making (Harris and Todaro 1970), are misapplied to much of the Sahel, including Niger.

On one level, migration should not be seen as a singular decision based on crisis at home or opportunity afar. Migration and mobility are very much part of the

livelihood strategies of rural people in a region where the areas of productivity shift from year to year (Boulouvi 2009). Labour migration, along with livestock rearing and farming, represents the tripartite livelihood strategy of the rural Sahel. Remittances are invested into livestock wealth which is mobilised when harvests fail or to fund migration. The dominance of this strategy for all ethnic groups has only grown since the 1970s (Swinton 1988; Toulmin 1983; Reardon, Matlon, and Delgado 1988; Sutter 1982; Batterbury 2001). Research has found that in the Sahel, only the very poor and the rich may concentrate their activities and deviate from this three-pronged strategy – those with sufficient wealth can specialise while the poor have insufficient resources to diversify. Within the climate change literature, this mixed strategy has been portrayed as “diversification”, which, along with mobility, is described as increasing households’ resilience to climate/environmental change (UNEP 2001; Agrawal 2008). But it is important to note that “diversification” in the Sahel is driven more by limited options and the “bricolage” of the poor than by the choices made by a smallholder across her investment portfolio (Batterbury 2001). In fact, diversification can in some cases be best described as fragmentation – efforts dissipated across a wide range of productive activities (Trench, Rowley, and Diarra 2007).

Second, while the decision to migrate does involve some form of benefit-cost calculation on the part of the migrant and/or his family, differential remuneration between urban and rural areas explains little of the variation in the extent of and motivations behind migration because 1. the very high variation in remuneration at home or at the destination, making any prediction by anyone highly fallible; 2. the shifting locus of decision-making between migrant and his/her family before and during the emigration experience, leading to a series of decisions by different groups, with different interests and payoffs, culminating in emigration; and 3. the “push” of poverty is not one simply governed by choice and differential opportunities but by limited options and in many cases, hopelessness. A young man moving to the city during the long dry season may not be due to higher level of remuneration found there nor the “bright lights” of the city.

Unless the migrant benefits from being a voyeur of the good times enjoyed by some in the city, the migrant experience, while broadening one's experience, can be quite difficult, lonely and humiliating.<sup>4</sup> Given that the economic benefits are far from clear, the choice to leave can be just as much about doing something to improve one's prospects rather than doing nothing at home in the dry season under the direction of one's father.

In sum, to understand the reasons behind shifts in the motivations and destinations of emigration from Niger, one must move beyond singular causes. This call stems not from a knee-jerk embrace of complexity. Dominant models of "push" or "pull" factors overly dichotomise the incentives facing potential migrants and their families in the Sahel where the gains from emigration are highly uncertain, mobility is common, decision making is sequential and distributed, and decisions are as much about prospects for future then here-and-now triggers (Gebrewold and Bloom 2016). As we will see, the factors contributing in aggregate to labour emigration are deeply structural, shaped by the broader political economy of the region as well as local governance failures; migrants retain some agency in the sequence of decisions that result in them at a certain destination. These decisions are shaped as much or more by their assessment of their homeland futures as the potential gains as a migrant.

## Labour emigration in Niger

### Trends

We focus here on labour emigration from Niger. Situations where Nigeriens will move to another location to seek and possibly obtain work. Studies within rural communities highlight the high rates of labour emigration and households' dependence on it in Niger (e.g. Batterbury 2001; Faulkingham and Thorbahn 1975; Mounkaila 2002; Painter 1986; Rain 1999). The findings of a broader sampling of Nigerien citizens are consistent with these more localised studies. For example, a 2011 survey found that 82% of the surveyed households depend on migration to some degree (USAID 2011). Similarly, estimates that on average, 20-50% of the income of households within the Sahelian zone of Niger come from migrant remittances (Famine

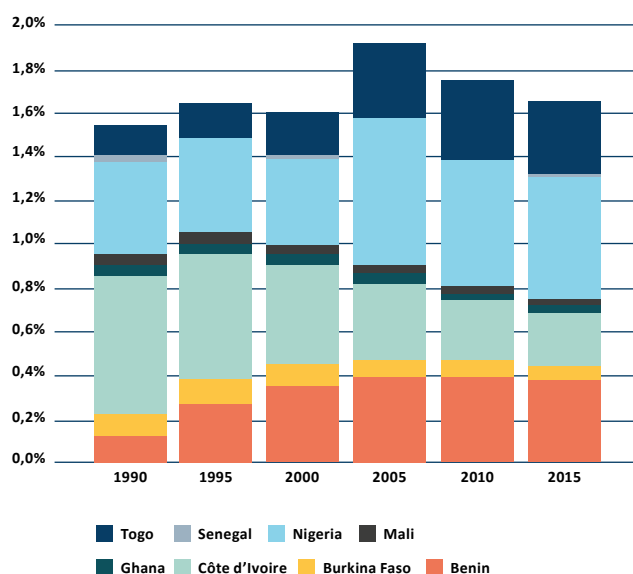
Early Warning System Network (FEWSNET) 2009).<sup>5</sup>

More ethnographic treatments of labour emigration point to the complexities of distinguishing labour migration from other forms of mobility. Labour emigration, by this definition, excludes the movements of people within a home district for work, the movement of pastoralists, the movement of agricultural settlements, and the regular movement of merchants. This said, we recognise the difficulties of making such distinctions. For example, young Fulani men may describe to friends and family their work to the south as the work of cattle merchants when in fact they are hired herders of the livestock owned by farmers to the south (Bassett 1994). In some cases, the distinction becomes more blurred when a herder may trek cattle to the south and once there, may take-up herding. Since many labour migrants work as petty merchants in cities, the distinction between labour migrants and regular merchants is also difficult to make. Those who move to another location before acquiring merchandise to sell could be seen as migrants. Still, small merchants will move by selling and buying different merchandise along the way. Such situations are difficult to classify.

4. In fact, for many seasonal or semi-permanent migrants, their motivations remain focused on their rural home with ideas of how their life will be different upon their return (Masquelier 2000). This is due as much to the difficulties of being a migrant as to being tradition- or family-bound (Djadi 1999; Youngstedt 2004).

5. Similarly, a World Bank study (2012, pg 80) reports that "poor" and "rich" households surveyed by the World Bank derived 52% and 31% of their household income from "salary work" (rather than crop agriculture or livestock husbandry).

These complexities coupled with limited ability by national or international institutions in the country and region to gather comprehensive data, result in limited availability of accurate data. Figure 1 shows UN estimates of the number of “migrant stock” (as % of total population of Niger) in different West African countries from 1990 through 2015 (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Population Division 2017). These are estimates of Niger-born citizens or migrants derived from a combination of national census data and immigration surveys in destination countries. Such data are likely to only capture migrants who are longer-term residents in other countries. As such, they do not reflect the large number of seasonal migrants within and outside of Niger upon which the Nigerien economy depends. Still, they are likely to underestimate even this subgroup of migrants given the fact that where and how migrants live in destination countries make them a difficult population to census. These numbers are consistent with other estimates of “migrant stock” from Niger in these countries (United Nations 2015) and certainly these numbers are more accurate than estimates of Nigerien migrants to the Maghreb and Europe since as ECOWAS citizens, they are legal in these West African countries (Ouedraogo 2009).<sup>6</sup>



**Figure 1.** Niger migrant stock in different West African countries expressed as a percentage of Niger’s population (adapted from United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Population Division 2017).

The data presented in Figure 1 show a fairly steady fraction of the Nigerien population as longer-term migrants in other West African countries over the past 25 years. We would expect this fraction of the emigrant population to fluctuate less from year-to-year than the total (which is largely made up of circular seasonal migrants). Still, given the limits of national-level data, it is difficult to use these data to point to changes (or lack of changes) in rates of labour emigration. In addition, there has been very little longitudinal or retrospective work done in more local studies. There is some work that points to an increase in the rates of labour emigration during the 1970s and 80s (Batterbury 2001). Moreover, there are recent studies that point to very high rates of labour emigration (McKune and Silva 2013) and predictions that international emigration will continue to increase in the Sahelian region (Adepoju 2000; Ouedraogo 2009). Therefore, the best we can conclude is that labour emigration (seasonal and longer-term) has increased or remained the same over the past 25 years.

Studies of the gender and age composition of emigrants have long noted the importance of young men as labour emigrants (Sudarkasa 1977; Diarra 1974). This is particularly true in western Niger but in the Hausa-dominated areas of central Niger (Maradi and Zinder), there is a history of greater involvement of women in emigration (Rain 1999; Roberts 1989). This reflects in part the cross-border kinship ties with northern Nigeria but also the long involvement of Hausa women in trade (Sudarkasa 1977). The rate of seasonal and longer-term emigration by women (with sometimes an expanding fraction of young women), both in absolute terms and as a fraction of all migrants, has increased over the past twenty years – particularly in central Niger (Oumarou 2015). There are reports that women are more successful than young men in finding work in urban areas pursuing “female work” as maids, cooks, traders, hair braiders, prostitutes, and nannies (Djadi 1999). These new trends also implicate a concentration of women emigration to Maghreb states which will be described more fully below.

6. In contrast, there have been large differences between estimates of Nigeriens in Libya (United Nations 2015).

While not particularly useful in providing a sense of the magnitude and changes in the composition and rates of emigration, Figure 1 does provide some useful information about changes in destinations. In 2009, it was estimated that the destinations for 89% of Nigerien emigrants were in other West African countries (Union European and Organisation internationale pour les migrations (OIM) 2009). As reported above, early Djerma migration from western Niger directed towards the Gold Coast (currently Ghana). Given strong kinship ties that transcended the Niger-Nigeria border, early circular emigration in central Niger has always involved northern Nigeria. Shifts in economic opportunities but also Ghanaian expulsions of migrants during the early 1970s (Adomako-Sarfoh 1974; Peil 1971), led to the growing importance of the Côte d'Ivoire as a destination during the 1970s (Adepoju 1995; Arthur 1991). In the 1970s and 80s, the growth of the petro-economies in Nigeria and Libya, led to the importance of these destinations to grow as well. Civil war and insecure conditions for labour migrants in Côte d'Ivoire led to its decline as a favoured destination by the early 2000s (Boyer 2005). This has led to a diversification of destinations in western Niger with Benin, Togo, Nigeria, and Cameroon becoming more important. Since the first civil war in 2011, conditions in Libya have declined markedly as have conditions in northern Niger (particularly to the east) due to the expanding activity of Boko Haram. This has created a destination crisis in central Niger where the two most important destinations have become exceedingly dangerous. The serious security problems in Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria, and Libya reportedly contributed to a reduction in emigration and a marked decline in the importance of remittances for Nigerien household incomes in 2011 (Famine Early Warning System Network (FEWSNET) 2011; McKune and Silva 2013). A discussion of this dilemma will be discussed more fully below in the context of trans-Saharan emigration.

### Underlying causes of labour emigration

Niger seems to be a perfect example of the commonly invoked “drivers” for labour emigration: population-driven land scarcity, poverty, and ecoclimatic change. It has one of the highest population growth rates on

the continent with a 2010-2015 growth rate of 4%/yr (United Nations Statistics Division 2017).<sup>7</sup> Since 1995, it has consistently been the country with the lowest human development index in the world (United Nations Development Programme 2017). And finally, it is the least resource-endowed country in the Sahel which itself is one of the least endowed regions of the world (e.g. compared to Senegal, Mali, and Burkina Faso). Thus, in this way, Niger can easily be used as an example of how one or more of these three negative stresses, drive labour emigration (Snorek 2016).

One would be hard-pressed to argue that poverty and resource scarcity do not play a role in the decisions made by individuals and families about labour emigration. The trouble with such diagnoses is that they focus on fundamental background variables that provide little guidance on how to address issues of labour emigration beyond widespread population control and hoping for drastically improved climate and economic conditions. It is almost a truism that if resources and livelihood opportunities were plentiful in Niger, labour emigration rates would decline. Moreover, these generic explanations provide little explanation for spatiotemporal and social variations that we see in labour emigration participation. Several general observations need to be made at this point before going into more detail about factors affecting the nature of labour emigration in Niger:

7. Please note as well that Niger has one of the highest total fertility rates in the world of 7.5 live births per woman on average (Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations 2017).

1. The reference to “drivers” connotes a stimulus-response type of relationship between the stressor and the emigration decision. It is true that labour emigration has been found to increase during and subsequent to droughts but these increases are not large with high rates of labour emigration evident during good or “normal” years as well. Instead, while accurate data are unavailable, more localised research shows a slower, more damped change in the rates of labour emigration and destinations over time (Batterbury 2001; Faulkingham and Thorbahn 1975). This is consistent with labour emigration as having become a common component of livelihood strategies in the Sahelian labour reserve and suggests multiple factors rather than singular drivers as influencing emigration decisions.

2. While rainfall is an important factor affecting crop yields and fodder production, it is important to recognise that rural communities have been living with rainfall variability for a long time with mobility (including seasonal migration) being an important livelihood “adaptation” by rural Sahelians. Rural residents have come to expect drought years and have long focused on maximising production during good years to cover future deficit years. Farmers and herders, when discussing the problems they face, are just as likely to point to factors limiting their crop and livestock production during good years than droughts (Coulibaly and Vaugelade 1981). The spectre of climate change is real – temperatures have and will continue to rise and rainfall variation will increase. Still, these changes are a matter of degree rather than a qualitative shift in the climate variability rural Sahelians have long experienced. In fact, one would say that annual rainfall since the early 2000s, while arguably more variable in distribution within the rainy season (more of annual rain falling within large events), has improved from rainfall over the previous three decades (Dardel et al. 2014; Fensholt et al. 2013; Herrmann, Anyamba, and Tucker 2005; Olsson, Eklundh, and Ardö 2005; Stith et al. 2016). To explain high rates of labour emigration since the late 1990s as climate-induced is somewhat misleading (Barrios, Bertinelli, and Strobl 2006; UNEP 2001).

3. Seasonal or permanent migrants from Niger and the Sahel as a whole have been described as “environ-

mental refugees” (Afifi 2011; Warner et al. 2009). Some of this work is problematic because it relies on simple notions of environmental change – making general reference to desertification, a concept that has long been discarded within the scientific community due to its confusion of ephemeral changes of vegetative cover due to rainfall with land degradation (Grote and Warner 2010). More defensible descriptions of environmental change highlight the declining productivity of the agricultural land in Niger – largely through nutrient exhaustion, driven by declines in fallowing and fertilisation (Afifi 2011). High rates of population growth are described as contributing to this neo-Malthusian spiral (Arthur 1991). Soil nutrient exhaustion is a real problem in rural Niger – largely stemming from the inherently low fertility of its soils. While relatively higher fertility levels were maintained in the past under very low population densities with long-term fallow, this has not been the case in most areas that received sufficient rainfall since the 1970s. Higher levels of fertility today are only obtained only through investments into soil largely through the application of manure and/or inorganic fertiliser (Bationo, Lompo, and Koala 1998; Powell and Mohamed-Saleem 1987; Schlecht et al. 2004; Turner and Hiernaux 2015). Yes, one could argue that the low productivity of Nigerien farmland is explained by the exceedance of the low carrying capacity of its soils – at this point this is more of a historically relevant point (unless one is advocating a halving of rural population densities). Even if land could be fallowed in long-term rotations (20-30 years), the inherently low fertility of soils would severely limit agricultural production. Instead, soil fertility has historically been increased to more productive levels through the transfer of nutrients from outlying pasture areas to cropped fields in the form of manure. More recently, nutrients have been imported through inorganic fertilisers. Access to both livestock and fertilisers is strongly affected by household wealth and government programmes. Thus, soil fertility issues are political and economic – soil fertility is maintained through regular investments, with richer families (in livestock or cash) controlling more fertile fields (Turner 2016). Higher access to livestock and to fertiliser plays an important role in sustaining agricultural productivity.





Nigerien family just outside the village of Tchigo Tegui in Dantioundou District, Niger. Photo taken by Matt Turner

4. Poverty plays a significant role in labour emigration from Niger. While non-economic factors affect emigration decisions, there is little evidence for emigration decisions in Niger as being explained by a “bright lights” syndrome. Yes, migrants appreciate seeing new things and escaping the sometimes-suffocating yoke of family life in rural villages. Still, emigration decisions are strongly driven by economic needs – either family needs or more individual needs (e.g. gaining sufficient resources to marry). This explains the observation that most emigration decisions in Niger are sanctioned by the family (Rain 1999). Conceptions of “poverty” when invoked in descriptions of poverty-induced emigration are often just as vague as the conceptions of environmental change invoked in discussions of environment-induced emigration (described above). Often implicitly, poverty is seen as simply a lack of wealth or income which ignores the importance of how people are poor. Vulnerability, a concept drawn from the food security and agrarian political economy traditions (Watts 2013; Sen 1981), has more potential as a concept since it addresses the issue of how people are poor as shaped by social relations (Ribot 2014; Ribot 2011). Vulnerability is not simply

an outcome of deficit but is a set of relationships that affects one’s access to productive resources and food under different conditions. As such, local institutions, markets, and government policies play roles in producing vulnerability. This was made quite clear when famine struck the Maradi area of Niger in 2004/2005 despite not a significant drop in aggregate grain production (Mousseau and Mittal 2006). While correlated, vulnerability can differ from poverty as a measure of the lack of income or wealth (Turner 2016). Emigration decisions are more likely to be made through a reading of these relationships into the future rather than simply a here-and-now recognition of a fall into poverty.

These observations point to a different reading of the Nigerien history of labour emigration. Rather than emigration being driven by singular causes of scarcity, labour emigration decisions are shaped by a more complex set of biophysical, political and institutional factors affecting not only current household budgets but a sense of the viability of one’s livelihood. Such a reading provides some explanation for the persistent if not increased levels of seasonal and semi-permanent emigration from Niger over the past two decades, despite the partial recovery of rainfall since the late 1990s and significant declines in attractiveness of historically important destinations of Côte d’Ivoire and Nigeria (Batterbury 2001).

In broad strokes, the post-colonial political history of Niger can be characterised by a long period of one-party or military rule from 1960 to 1992 followed by a period of highly imperfect democracy with elected national governments, military coups, and constitutional crises. Superimposed on this political history is the economic history of Niger’s uranium boom from the early 70s to the late 1980s, a period which coincides with the dictatorship of Seyni Kountché from 1974-1987. Certainly, among the Djerma in western Niger, the Kountché regime is often looked back with nostalgia despite the fact that it began with the drought of 1972-74 and included the major drought years of 1984 and 1987. Kountché, using the revenue generated by the uranium boom, invested heavily into rural Niger – agricultural extension, primary education, medical services – a level of state investment not seen prior or since.

Since the late 1980s, levels of state investment have declined significantly due to the drastic decline in uranium revenue but also due to a subsequent series of structural adjustment programmes required by international lenders (beginning with an IMF SAP in 1987). Moreover, there has been a rollback of development aid received by Niger following the influx associated with the drought of the early 1970s with further declines following the Baré coup of 1996 interpreted by donors as backsliding from democracy. Moreover, neo-liberal policies not only led to privatisation and a reduction of trade barriers but more generally led to broader divestment strategies by international institutions from resource-poor, land-locked countries such as Niger, whose “development potential” was low. Today, Niger is the poorest country in the world as measured by human development index, but is only 71st in terms of aid received per capita (Trench, Rowley, and Diarra 2007).

The devaluation of the West African CFA franc<sup>8</sup> in 1994, seen by proponents as a way to stimulate (agricultural) production in Niger and other Sahelian countries has had mixed effects – helping the livestock sector to some extent but having limited positive effects on the crop agricultural sector due to low inherent demand outside of the CFA zone for certain crops (e.g. millet) and the countervailing effect of depressed world prices for certain products (e.g. cotton, groundnut, milk etc.) due in part to agricultural subsidies in industrialised countries (Trench, Rowley, and Diarra 2007; Malmstrom 2016). Once one considers that urban and many rural producers are net buyers of grain (Trench, Rowley, and Diarra 2007) – grain that is often imported – devaluation has arguably increased food insecurity. It has also increased the value of international remittances in the local economy, thus increasing incentives for labour emigration out of the CFA zone.

Regional policies to liberalise grain prices (no price regulation, elimination of trade barriers) tied to ECOWAS were seen by free-market advocates as allowing grain to freely flow to areas of deficit thus lowering the price variability in local markets. This vision has not been realised for several reasons and in fact, the variability of grain prices has arguably increased with the decline

in government regulations.<sup>9</sup> The 2004/5 famine in the Maradi area of Niger was a classic example of entitlement failure (Sen 1981; Watts 2013) with less than dramatic production declines, grain present in the markets, but with high price increases (Mousseau and Mittal 2006). Small declines in production can lead to speculative actions, withdrawal of grain from local markets, limited imports from richer countries and the pricing of grain beyond the means of the rural poor (Mousseau and Mittal 2006).

The reduced capacity of the state and the embrace of development on the cheap by international donors has led, since the 1990s, to a situation where the rural development agenda in Niger has been dominated by an uncoordinated set of NGO-led small-scale rural development projects focused on village-scale management/zoning or climate-smart development. Their design is generally based on the premise that rural peoples’ livelihoods are solely dependent on resources found within village territories when in fact, livelihood strategies very much transcend the village (Painter, Sumberg, and Price 1994). This approach can be viewed as shaped by a combination of ignorance of rural peoples’ “action space” (Painter, Sumberg, and Price 1994) and efforts to keep rural Sahelians at home (not migrate). As a result, these efforts ignore how wider mobilities are part of rural peoples’ livelihood strategies, thus lowering these projects’ effectiveness for reducing vulnerability.

8. CFA franc refers to the franc de la Communauté Financière Africaine or the franc of the African Financial Community

9. First, markets work by providing grain to areas of highest demand with demand measured by ability/willingness to pay. In terms of economic power, Niger is dominated by Nigeria to the south and its effective demand for grain from the south is very low, not because of little need but because of economic poverty (Mousseau and Mittal 2006). Second, grain movements across borders during times of drought and famine have not been free with exporting countries placing restrictions on these movements at the border (Trench, Rowley, and Diarra 2007). Third, the rollback of the government with respect to food markets has expanded the latitude for large grain merchants to increase their control of local grain markets leading to the strategic removal of grain from markets (buying cheap and selling when prices are high).

10. In addition, much attention has been directed at under-reporting, late response and mismanagement by the Nigerien government and the international community (for summary see Mousseau and Mittal 2006). Stryker (1993) discusses the mixed success of government responses to drought and the movements of livestock and people in the context of the 1984 drought in Niger.

In fact, the approach tends to favour well-positioned village residents providing them with the means, in many cases, to enclose village resources from mobile people (migrants and pastoralists in particular) who previously may have held informal rights to these resources (Marty 1993). This is particular the case of small-scale irrigation projects that have led to a semi-privatisation of water access (Snorek, Renaud, and Kloos 2014), thereby increasing the vulnerabilities of certain social groups.

Even in this region where productive resources are physically scarce, scarcity in Niger is socially produced. Peoples' day-to-day subsistence struggles are affected by rainfall deficit and soil nutrient depletion but these physical constraints are exacerbated by fluctuations in food prices, near monopsony/monopoly conditions in local markets, withdrawal of government support (e.g. livestock vaccinations, agricultural extension, fertiliser, delayed famine assistance, etc.), restrictions on mobility, enclosures of key resources, and significant disparities of wealth. All these features are shaped, either directly or indirectly, by government, including local governments elected (commune) or otherwise (department) that play important roles in shaping rural peoples' access to productive resources.

### Who migrates?

Seasonal emigration or circular migration is the dominant form of labour migration in Niger. While most emigrations are eventually sanctioned in some way by the family, the initiative to emigrate comes from the migrant. Therefore, while emigration plays a key role in household livelihood strategies, it is hazardous to think of labour emigration decisions as orchestrated by the male head of household (Rain 1999). While the household benefits from emigration by at least reducing demand on its food reserves during the long dry season, the emigration of young people from the rural homestead is an act of independence from one's father or older brother (head of household).<sup>11</sup> In this way, labour emigration is more than an economic activity but also both symptom and cause of growing individualisation within the family and loosening of elder control. This trend is not independent from the environmental

changes experienced within the region that have led to rural cropland playing a smaller role in subsistence (Turner 1999). Elder control over youth has historically been leveraged through elder control over youth access to cropland. Labour emigration provides not only an income source that is less dependent on local environmental resources but also an independent source of income to youth.

Still, whether or not the household head sanctions labour emigration remains an important factor affecting a potential migrant's decision. If approved/accepted by the household head, a migrant may receive financial support. Moreover, if not approved by the household head, labour emigration can have lasting effects on the elder-junior relationship. This is most often the case if the household needs the potential migrant back home. The need of a household for a migrant's labour, management and/or leadership during the dry season explains variations in participation by gender, age, and family wealth/size. Those members of the family who hold important responsibilities at home, will more likely be discouraged to leave. This explains in part, the historic gendered nature of labour emigration in Niger with labour migrants dominated by young men. In agricultural communities, the rural work demands on women are year-round while they decline significantly for men during the dry season.<sup>12</sup> This gender bias is most strong in western Niger (Diarra 1974) while emigration from Hausaland in central Niger has historically been more balanced between males and females (Roberts 1989).

11. Given the economic hopelessness at home, labour emigration represents the only means by which young men (bride price) and women (dowry) can attempt to accumulate the wealth necessary to marry (De Haan, Brock, and Coulibaly 2002; Boyer 2005). In this way, labour emigration may hold the key for a young man to establish a household apart from his father or older brother.

12. Gendered bias also is associated with cultural norms against unaccompanied travel for especially young, unmarried women. Still, there are reports of an increase in emigration among young, married women (Oumarou 2015).

Labour needs at home also explain differences among ethnic groups who differ in their livelihood identities.<sup>13</sup> For example, pastoralists and agropastoralists, despite their greater mobility tied to livestock husbandry, have historically shown lower proclivity to seasonally emigrate to find work elsewhere than their farmer neighbours (Hampshire and Randall 1999). For example, the departure of Fulani young men during the dry season can often, depending on family size, create a labour deficit at home. For this reason, parents in especially smaller and poorer households will often resist departures by family members. In such cases, young men or women may leave in secret knowing full well that elders will disapprove if asked (with direct disobeying of elder directives difficult). Secret departures followed by little or no remittances can lead to lasting schisms between elders and youth.

Reflecting the importance of labour constraints at home, households that are larger tend to have more migrants. Poorer households tend to be smaller and this along with their limited ability to hire labour, results in their lower participation in labour emigration (Hampshire 2002). As households become richer, the economic benefits of labour emigration relative to their household budgets become lower. As a result, seasonal and semi-permanent migration of members of these families generally tend to become more related to commercial trade than labour emigration as defined above (World Bank 1996).

Over the last 10-20 years, a number of studies have noted an increase in the involvement of women in labour emigration (Adepoju 1995; Comoe 2005) resulting in a growing fraction of women among labour emigrants from Niger (Oumarou 2015). This is thought to reflect the growth of female occupations of cooks, maids, nannies, etc. at viable destinations. Given the year-round needs of female labour in rural households, this could also reflect an increased sense of hopelessness within rural communities, especially among the youth. Consistent with this is anecdotal evidence of a growing rate of labour emigration among pastoralist males (Snorek 2016).

### Effects of migration on rural households

The benefits of labour emigration can be seen as strictly economic, typically defined as remittances, and more broadly developmental, focusing on how migrants bring new ideas and perspectives (Diarra 1974).<sup>14</sup> The measurement of remittances is notoriously difficult largely due to the fact they are episodic with sometimes multiple individual recipients within and outside of the household. These characteristics, combined with the tendency of individual recipients to understate what they received, increase the likelihood for remittances to be under-reported. Remittances tend to be highly variable, not only because of these estimation problems but because migrants' level of success varies tremendously among migrants, destinations and years (Batterbury 2001; Boyer 2005; Famine Early Warning System Network (FEWSNET) 2011). Still, despite this variation, a number of studies point to the high fraction of household income generated by labour emigration (e.g. Famine Early Warning System Network (FEWSNET) 2011; World Bank 1996). One can say that the level of income achieved by most labour emigrants (but see section on trans-Saharan migration below), remittances are largely directed to family and friends. This is in contrast to the experience in Senegal and western Mali where remittances are also used to make community-level investments (schools, mosques...etc.). There remains much more to learn about emigrant remittances to family and rural communities more broadly, in Niger.

13. There is evidence for cultural factors independent of livelihood and labour demands as affecting the proclivity to emigrate. For example, Oumarou (2015) reports that within Kel Tamashek communities, shame inhibits noble women from emigrating.

14. One under-studied phenomenon, is the growing problem in rural areas in Niger of drug use and the potential role that seasonal labour migration may play in its spread.

How remittances are used is even less studied. Painter (1986) states that remittances are generally used to support immediate subsistence needs and are not used to make productive investments (see also Dietz, Johannes, and Ruben 2001). This is consistent with the fact that most emigrants are low-skilled and earn very little while away. In other cases, migrants are shown to make productive investments and introduce new agronomic implements such as ploughs (De Haan, Brock, and Coulibaly 2002). In periods of drought they may earn even less due to declines in wage rates at emigrant destinations (Bailey 2008). If there are remittances, the emigrant will first seek to buy grain to cover family needs during the next hungry season (*soudure*) in August-September with any remaining earnings invested into livestock, an investment that can cover future deficits but also grows in value. Arguably, the labour emigration/livestock investment linkage within tripartite strategy of emigration, livestock and crop agriculture, have become more dominant in rural Niger as per capita crop production has stagnated or declined in different parts of the country.

A cost of labour emigration is the loss of the emigrant's physical and mental labour back home. In contrast to the images attached to the "bright lights" syndrome, emigrants from rural Niger are not those who are seeking to escape work but are some of the most ambitious, educated, and entrepreneurial of their age class. This can be even more so for emigrants to more distant destinations with stays stretching beyond a single dry season. So, the loss of the personality and intellectual qualities of young migrants can be much more important for the prospects of rural households and communities than simply their labour power. These aspects have been poorly addressed in the existing literature.

As mentioned above, seasonal emigration is most commonly practiced by young male farmers given the high seasonality of labour demands for crop agriculture. While these departures may be acceptable to family elders due to the low demands for their labour during the dry season, their return in time for work tasks near the beginning of the rainy season is far from assured due to either success or failure at their destinations.

Labour scarcity may result, leading to incomplete field preparation, insufficient weeding, or reduced cultivated areas (Bailey 2008; Mounkaila 2002). Except for large families, labour scarcity is most likely to develop with the absence of family members for whom the family depends year-round. This is certainly true in the case of female emigrants with strains on the family with respect to childcare, small ruminant management, healthcare, firewood collection, water provision etc. Livestock managed by labour-deficient families has been shown to suffer nutritionally and to have more concentrated grazing patterns, increasing the potential for grazing-induced vegetative change (Malicki and et.al 1984; Turner and Hiernaux 2008). In addition, the loss of the male head of household to emigration may also increase the vulnerability of his family to losses in their access to productive resources such as land and water given the importance of the presence of the household head in political negotiations and conflicts. Given these costs, the decision to emigrate, even seasonally, can be seen as weighing the demands of short-term subsistence over the longer-term persistence let alone development.

As elsewhere in Sub-Saharan Africa, there is evidence for the public health effects of labour emigration with increased spread of HIV-AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases (World Bank 1996; Bailey 2008; Black and King 2004). While the rates of HIV-AIDS are lower in Niger than other countries<sup>15</sup>, these diseases can cause significant loss of life, reduce fertility (Hampshire and Randall 2000), increase dependency ratios, and exacerbate labour shortages.

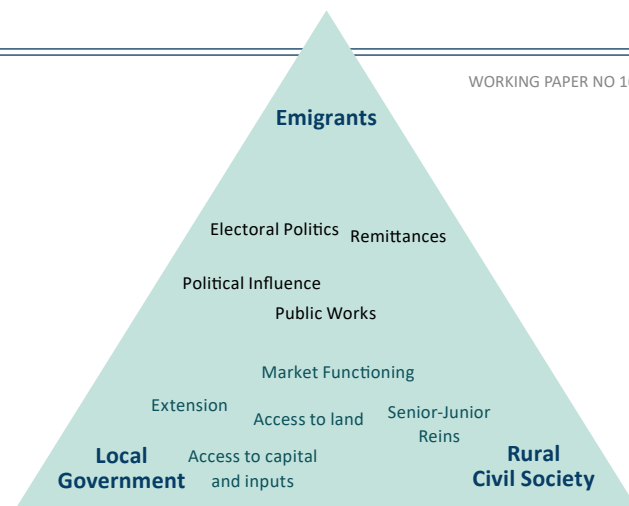
Labour emigration results in the separation of families – from several months to several years. Separation in situations of extreme hardship can affect relationships with important implications for household vulnerabilities.

15. It is estimated that the HIV prevalence for Niger is 0.4% of population aged 15-49 (<http://aidsinfo.unaids.org/>, accessed 2/4/2018)

As mentioned earlier, brothers within a single household may see labour emigration as providing the financial means to divide their households (De Haan, Brock, and Coulibaly 2002). At the same time, the decline in group work and the increased dependence on cash earnings that come from labour emigration can further increase the potential for household divisions. All else equal, divided households are necessarily smaller and more vulnerable given their lowered diversification and economies of scale with respect to certain labour investments. Research has shown that the physical separation of husbands and wives can lead to distrust and struggles over household economic obligations (Turner 2000; Roberts 1989). In these ways, labour emigration, while providing economic benefits and possibly for some families, providing some release through physical separation, does increase the potential for deepening individualism, within-family struggles, and household divisions (Boyer 2005).

### Emigration and local government

Local elected government and leadership (les conseillers municipaux, le maire, les chefs du village), while having few resources, do affect and are affected by emigration, no matter its destination (Figure 2). As has been developed earlier in this report, local government plays important roles in shaping access to resources of rural peoples. Village chiefs and commune-level authorities wield significant powers as interpreters of history and of customary/formal land law (Lund 1998; Ngaido 1996). Related to this, they act as mediators/managers of resource-related conflicts within their jurisdictions and thus contribute to the building of agreements/understandings within and between communities over time. Thus, they play major roles in shaping the distribution of access to land and other resources – distributions that are often highly unequal in Niger due in part to the actions of these local authorities (Turner and Moumouni in press). Local authorities also act as important mediators of the NGO- and state-provided food aid and development support. As mediators, local authorities strongly influence the beneficiaries of these programmes while excluding others. For example, small-scale irrigation projects have often effectively enclosed scarce resources (land, water, etc.) against the customary claims of others.



**Figure 2.** The relationships among local government, rural civil society, and emigrants. Conditions in black influence the proclivity for rural citizens to emigrate as differentially affected by civil society relations and local government actions. Emigrants, in turn affect local government and civil society back home via various influences and investments (in light blue).

Local authorities thus play important roles in affecting the viability of rural peoples' livelihood pursuits. Rain fall fluctuations are variable and are seen as such by rural people of the Sahel. Mobility has played an important response to the shifting mosaic of rural productivity. Particularly among the youth, social conditions can, on the other hand, be seen as more permanent barriers – less amenable to change. It is these barriers that are behind the views of youth of little future in the rural areas in which they grew up. Such expressions of hopelessness arguably reshape the calculus surrounding decisions to move from seasonal to more permanent emigration and to embark on more dangerous and risky journeys. If there is nothing to come home to, even the most risky and difficult journey can be seen as a preferable option.

Local leadership certainly benefits indirectly from remittances – the economic situations of the families of emigrants and their clients are improved and the infusions of cash within the local economy increases income of local merchants. While local leaders' ability to directly claim a fraction of remittance income has arguably declined due to the growth of cash transfer services in rural areas (Moneygram and Western Union), these leaders are aware of remittance flows and can take strategic actions to claim some of these flows.<sup>16</sup>

16. Such strategic actions could include new attempts to collect delinquent taxes from the emigrants' families/friends or demands for formal/informal payments to regulate new transgressions or to maintain access to resources. In addition, leaders, like others in rural communities, respond to the news of remittance by demands for gifts or repayments of debts. Given the web of indebtedness and clientage within rural communities, remittances if not quickly converted from cash by receiving family, will be quickly dispersed by demands from local authorities and community members.

Moreover, local authorities gain from any public works built through donations by emigrants. Emigrants who have achieved financial success may invest back into the community by building mosques, schools, pharmacies, wells, irrigation schemes, etc. The prestige tied to such gifts to the community rubs off in part on the local authorities who helped facilitate these public investments. Such monuments of emigrant success are very common in rural Senegal and western Mali where rural emigrants have long migrated to more distant and lucrative destinations. They are less common in rural Niger where less-lucrative seasonal migration to other West African countries predominates.

Due to these benefits, emigration, while it can be seen as inhibiting agricultural production, is generally viewed positively by local authorities. Despite this favourable view, there is little formal support of emigration by local authorities, most likely reflecting the limited resources that they control and the quite mixed view of labour emigration by the international NGOs with whom they work and depend. Emigrants, particularly those who have achieved some financial success, can strongly influence local customary and formal authority. In extreme cases, local authorities can arguably be described as the clients of rich émigrés. Emigrant associations (association des ressortissants) can play significant roles in local development programmes and electoral politics. They can also effectively intervene in the decisions and exercise of the power of local authorities by defending the interests of family and friends. These dynamics, while quite evident in rural areas, are poorly addressed in the existing literature on Nigerien emigration.

In sum, local authorities in Niger strongly shape and are shaped by labour emigration. Their actions affect the perceived viability of home life among the youth they govern. Moreover, they personally, as well as the economies of their jurisdictions, depend heavily on the revenues of labour emigration. This dependence may be downplayed to western NGOs and governments to match westerners' visions of African village life and their strong interests in keeping Africans at home. Still, these dependencies are real and cannot be ignored.

## Trans-Saharan emigration by Nigeriens

### Overview of migration patterns

As described above, like most West Africans, the vast majority of Nigerien migrants stay in the region. Those that do cross the Sahara are most commonly bound for Libya (Benattia, Armitano, and Robinson 2015) or Algeria (Molenaar and El-Kamouni-Janssen 2017). The relative popularity of these two destinations has fluctuated over the past several decades, in part because of changing political and economic circumstances. The oil boom of the 1960s and 1970s made Libya, Algeria and Nigeria popular destinations for Nigerien migrants (Benattia, Armitano, and Robinson 2015; Reitano et al. 2017). However, this migration pattern developed slowly and stayed relatively isolated until the end of 1980s when the image of North Africa as a source of wealth spread more widely across the Sahel (Brachet 2009, 2012). This perception, combined with the devaluation of the CFA franc in 1994 and Gaddafi's new policies encouraging immigration from Saharan countries (Bensaad 2001; Reitano et al. 2017; Malakooti and Benattia 2013; Perrin 2009), helped spur northern migration by Nigeriens, among others. This wasn't a new phenomenon, as it is sometimes described, but simply an increase in the rate of migration along previously established routes (Brachet 2009). Furthermore, it's important to recognise the limitations of any of these individual variables as a cause of migration. While these economic and political factors can influence and encourage migration to some extent, asserting causation to any one variable or combination thereof would be a simplification of an incredibly complex set of influences (Brachet 2012).

Despite Gaddafi's purported support for immigration, he sporadically conducted mass deportations, and in the mid-2000s began a system of quotas for immigrants from different countries. The largest mass expulsions of foreign nationals, many of whom were Nigeriens, took place during the early 2000s (Perrin 2009).

These deportations were part of a larger effort to reintegrate into the international community. In so doing, he abandoned his pan-African vision, signed an agreement with Italy to help combat irregular migration, and re-instated a visa policy for entry to Libya in 2007 (Malakooti and Benattia 2013; Brachet 2011; Perrin 2009). Algeria, meanwhile, toughened its stance against clandestine migration and began a policy of deportations in 1986 (Bredeloup 1995), which continued into the 2000s. Despite the policy of frequent repatriations, Nigeriens continued to be the most represented group among migrants to Algeria (Hammouda 2008). Each year, Nigeriens are repatriated from both Libya and Algeria, though the relative proportions fluctuate (Union European and Organisation internationale pour les migrations (OIM) 2009). In the early 2000s, there were more Nigeriens apprehended at the border with Algeria than Libya (Simon 2006), which reflects the shifting relative importance of migration destinations as a function of political circumstances among other factors. Today, migrants deported by the Libyan government's Department for Combatting Illegal Migration (DCIM) are returned by bus to major cities in their country of origin. However, some migrants are simply dropped at the border crossing out of Libya and left to get home themselves (Malakooti and Benattia 2013). Niger now receives many of the repatriated migrants from Libya and Algeria (Di Bartolomeo, Jaulin, and Perrin 2011), a pattern that goes back to the 1980s, when deported migrants were dropped at the Libyan border and picked up by Nigerien soldiers (Brachet 2012).

Though Libya and Algeria remain the most popular destinations, other Nigeriens engaging in trans-Saharan migration only go as far as northern Niger to work in mines (Tinti and Westcott 2016) or pan for gold in Djado (Friedman 2016). Nigeriens are unique in that unlike other West Africans they very rarely migrate to Europe (Bolouvi 2009; De Haas 2008; Molenaar and El-Kamouni-Janssen 2017). One notable exception was during the Libyan crisis, when over 20,000 people left Libya for Italy. Nigeriens were one of the most common nationalities among this group (Malakooti and Benattia 2013). Generally, however, Nigerien migrants very rarely intend to migrate across the Mediterranean (Darne and Benattia 2017).

Several factors could help explain this absence of Europe-bound migration. One source asserted that Nigeriens remain in Libya because it's geographically closer to Niger and easier to maintain family ties (Affi 2011). Migrants from Libya's neighbouring countries – Niger, Chad, Sudan, Egypt and Tunisia – commonly travel to Libya for economic reasons with no intention of departing for Europe (Darne and Benattia 2017). This is often a temporary migration, which is repeated several times (Darne and Benattia 2017) and mirrors the seasonal migrations traditional in the South. For example many Nigeriens (and Malians, Chadians and Sudanese) migrate to Libya to fill the “slack” time between the last harvest and next agricultural season (Bolouvi 2009). They typically stay close to the Libyan border and work in agriculture (Malakooti and Benattia 2013). Others are from rural areas and leave for Libya with the intention of earning enough to build a house, pay for a wedding or buy livestock, but have plans to return every couple of years (Bensaad 2003). This circular migration phenomenon is visible in migration monitoring data, which finds that Nigeriens are the most represented nationality in inflows back to Niger (International Organisation for Migration (IOM) 2016, 2017).

People may also choose to engage in circular migration to North Africa instead of going to Europe because as Nigeriens they have an easier time migrating through the region. Unlike the 99% of non-Nigerien migrants who report paying bribes during their journey, Nigeriens don't have to pay bribes along the routes in Niger and have more positive interactions with Nigerien officials. They're usually spared the harassment commonly experienced by other migrants (Hall 2016; Tinti and Westcott 2016; Westcott 2016). Some establish relationships with border guards over time after several repeated migrations back and forth (Malakooti and Benattia 2013). Others report feeling more secure crossing the desert than other migrants because the driver is a “Nigerien brother” (Hall 2016). Nigerien migrants also benefit from closer interactions with and charity from locals along the route (Hall 2016).



Once in Libya, Nigerien migrants continue to have a more positive experience than most. Nigeriens, Sudanese, Chadians and Malians are less vulnerable in Libya because they are supported by large migrant communities there as a result of repeat migrations (Benattia, Armitano, and Robinson 2015; Darne and Benattia 2017). While some West Africans find themselves pushed toward Europe by their negative experience in Libya, even if Europe wasn't their original intended destination, this is rarely the case for migrants from neighbouring countries like Niger who are better integrated (Benattia, Armitano, and Robinson 2015; Malakooti and Davin 2015; Malakooti and Benattia 2013; Darne and Benattia 2017; Hamood 2006).

### Regional & demographic migration patterns

As discussed above, migration patterns in Niger are regionally dependent and can evolve over time in light of shifting circumstances in destination countries. For example, migrants from the Zinder region of southern Niger historically went to Nigeria during the dry season, until the presence of Boko Haram redirected the movement of these migrants. Initially men worked in masonry and women as cleaners in large cities like Agadez and Arlit until an oversupply of workers drove another shift. As of 2014, migrants from Zinder are going instead to Algeria. These migrants are often women and children and, while they reportedly send significant remittances back home, many live in poor conditions and earn money through prostitution and begging (Benattia, Armitano, and Robinson 2015; Hall 2016). While people from Zinder commonly migrate to Algeria, migrants from nearby regions – Maradi and Tahoua – travel primarily to coastal countries to the South. Differences in migration patterns can also be observed at a finer, sub-regional scale. For example, even within the region of Zinder there are differences in destination between people living in the north, who more frequently go to North Africa, and those in the south (Benattia, Armitano, and Robinson 2015).

The Tuaregs in the Agadez region of Northern Niger, on the other hand, historically have travelled both to Algeria and to Libya. Migration to Algeria to sell and

trade goods was common among the Kel Air until the late 1960s. Then migration to Algeria shifted towards wage labour in agriculture and pastoralism, particularly among youths of the Kel Owey clan (Brachet 2012). Tuaregs also migrated to Libya both to work in the oil industry in the 1960s and 70s and to escape the government's brutal response to the Tuareg rebellions. Gaddafi further encouraged Tuareg migration from Northern Niger to Libya (Reitano et al. 2017; Brachet 2012). Toubou and Kanuri youths from Kowar and Djado in northeastern Niger have historically migrated to southern Libya. With the exception of small pockets of people from southern Niger – Hausa and Beri-Beri communities, and the Zinder region as described above – most Nigerien migrants to Maghreb countries come from the Northern regions (Brachet 2012). Today major migrant destinations vary across Niger in a regional patchwork, a result of the confluence of current political and economic circumstances and historic migration patterns.

There is a trend towards increased migration by women across Africa (Adepoju 2004), which is reflected in the increased feminisation of migration to Algeria from Niger (Hall 2016). The education level of Nigerien migrants varies by destination. Unlike trans-Saharan migrants from other countries who are generally well educated, many trans-Saharan migrants from Niger are illiterate (Bolouvi 2009). However, while few Nigeriens engaging in trans-Saharan migration are bound for Europe, over half of those that do reach Europe have either a medium or high level of education (Docquier and Marfouk 2000).

## Structure of trans-Saharan migration through Niger

### Historical overview

In addition to Niger's long tradition of southward migration, the country plays an important role in migration to the north, across the Sahara. Given its shared borders with several West African countries as well as Libya and Algeria, important migrant destinations, Niger is geographically positioned on a major path of transit (Bolouvi 2009; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2016; Di Bartolomeo, Jaulin, and Perrin 2011; Molenaar 2017). Its role as a migration hub is most visible in the city of Agadez, in northern Niger. The city re-primed its former position as a major transit centre in the 1970s, due to the discovery of mineral resources in the northern part of the region, which revitalised exchange with the Maghreb (Bensaad 2003; Hamani and Bontianti 2015). The Tuareg rebellions in Niger and Mali in the 1990s reduced movement through the area to some degree (Hamani and Bontianti 2015), but also increased Nigerien state involvement in trans-Saharan

migration. A conflict between Chad and Libya during the same period closed off transit through Chad, leaving routes through Niger as one of the only viable options (Brachet 2012).

Today, Agadez is a key transit point for trans-Saharan migrants (Hamani and Bontianti 2015; Malakooti and Benattia 2013; FRONTEX 2016). It has a reputation for being particularly welcoming to migrants (Bolouvi 2009; Hall 2016), and during the migration peak in 2015, several thousand migrants passed through Niger every week on their way to North Africa or Europe (Benattia, Armitano, and Robinson 2015; Reitano 2016).

### Routes through Niger

The bus station in Agadez makes it particularly accessible for migrants from all over West Africa and the Sahel, the majority of whom use buses to reach the city (Hall 2016; Bolouvi 2009; Malakooti and Benattia 2013; Munsch, Powell, and Joly 2017). From the hub of Agadez, migrants take different routes depending both on their destination and the available transportation infrastructure.

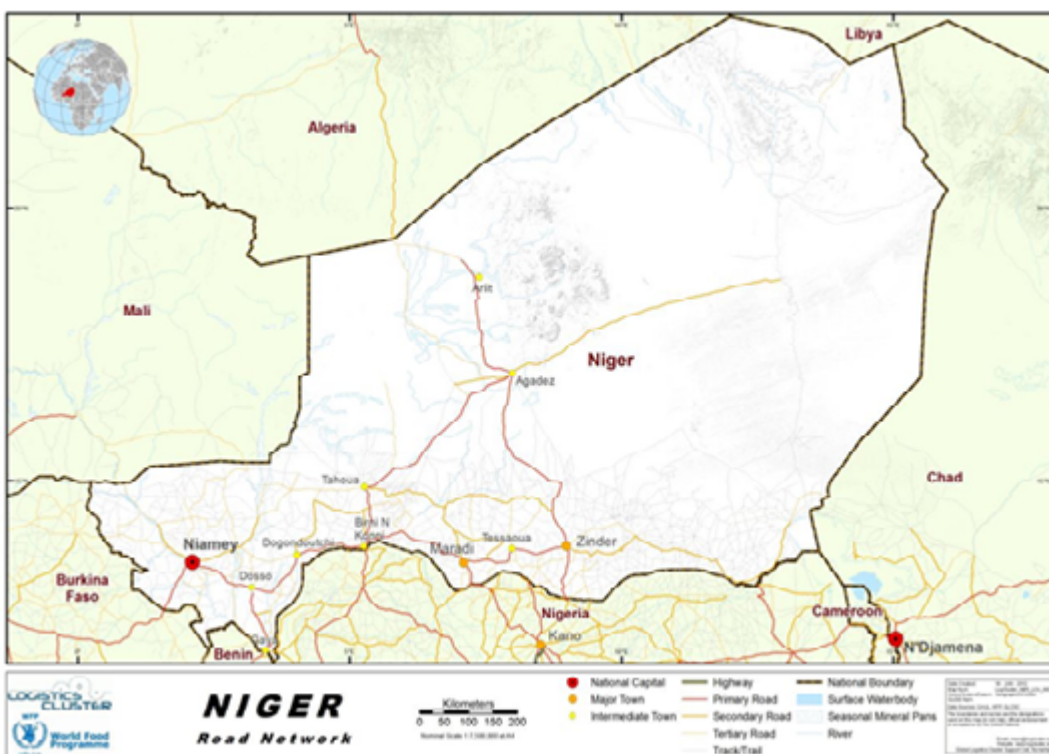


Figure 3. Road network in Niger. (Acquired from <http://dlca.logcluster.org/>)



Figure 4. Routes into Libya (Malakooti and Davin 2015)

Most migrants in northward transit through Niger are bound for North Africa, with only a small number intending to reach Europe. For example, in the first half of 2016 it's estimated that only 10% of migrants moving through Niger tried to reach Europe (Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat (RMMS) West Africa 2016). Libya, followed by Algeria, is the most popular destination for trans-Saharan migrants (Bolouvi 2009; Konan 2013; Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat (RMMS) West Africa 2016). However, the exact proportion of migrants traveling to each destination is difficult to quantify since some pass through Algeria on their way to Libya (Malakooti and Benattia 2013; Malakooti and Davin 2015; Munsch, Powell, and July 2017; Simon 2006).

There are several major routes through Niger for migrants bound for the Maghreb or the mines in Northern Niger. Most West African migrants travel to Agadez from Niamey, which they reach through Burkina Faso or Benin. Migrants from Niger, Nigeria and Central African countries, on the other hand, typically travel directly to Agadez via Nigerien towns to south such as Birnin Konni, Maradi, Zinder, and Diffa (Hamani and Bontianti 2015; Munsch, Powell, and July 2017; Benattia, Armitano, and Robinson 2015; Bolouvi 2009;

Malakooti and Benattia 2013). Most migrants departing Agadez for Algeria pass North through Arlit and then on to Tamanrasset, while those going to Libya travel via Dirkou or Séguédine on the way to Sebha in southern Libya (Benattia, Armitano, and Robinson 2015; Bolouvi 2009; Malakooti and Benattia 2013; Malakooti and Davin 2015). These routes are likely highly dependent on the existing road networks. As seen in Figure 3, the major roads leading North out of Agadez either go through Arlit towards Algeria, or towards Dirkou (not shown) to the northeast.

However, migration routes evolve in response to border closures, changing political climates, and ethnic conflicts, which can make migration trends challenging to analyse (Bolouvi 2009). For example, until the early 2000s, travel between Dirkou and Libya was occasionally interrupted by temporary Libyan border closures, which necessitated different routes (Brachet 2005; Bensaad 2001). Similarly, new routes into and out of Libya emerged after the revolution (Malakooti and Davin 2015). Indeed, many authors allege that the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011 has contributed to the popularity of northern migration through Niger, which is the easiest route into Libya.

The resulting political vacuum in Libya liberalised migrant smuggling and made it a favoured departure point for illegal crossings into Europe (Gaffey 2016; Reitano et al. 2017; Reitano and Shaw 2015; Hinshaw and Parkinson 2015; Malakooti and Davin 2015). Later, from 2014 to 2016, fighting between the Tuareg and Toubou disrupted human smuggling on the western route (see Figure 4) between Algeria and southwest Libya through Ghat (Micallef 2017; Reitano et al. 2017). And in 2016, a border wall was constructed between Algeria and Niger, tightening security and attempting to close the border to human smugglers (FRONTEX 2016). These political realities displaced migrants towards more eastern routes, including those through Niger (Reitano et al. 2017). Smugglers also shift their routes to bypass checkpoints or stopover towns if the tolls or “road taxes” charged by corrupt officials become too high (Molenaar 2017).

At a finer scale, routes through Niger can be further categorised into official routes and clandestine routes. “Official” routes through Agadez pass through the Agadez bus station and migrants are generally more visible to officials than those who take clandestine routes. Those without the requisite papers sometimes rely on fake documents provided by smugglers to enter countries at official border crossings. For example, migrants don’t need a visa to enter Algeria if they have a Malian passport (real or counterfeit), and can enter Libya more easily with a counterfeit Libyan ID card (Malakooti and Benattia 2013). Clandestine migrants, on the other hand, are hidden from authorities in ghettos, compounds where migrants are housed until the next leg of their journey, and usually take routes that bypass official checkpoints (Hamani and Bontianti 2015). However, the distinction between official and illicit transit is often blurred. For example, some bus companies stop before checkpoints to allow irregular migrants to get off and take taxis across the border at uncontrolled points. Once across the border, irregular migrants re-board the buses and continue on (Molenaar and El-Kamouni-Janssen 2017). While in other cases, buses pass directly through checkpoints and everyone pays a bribe, whether irregular or not, the price of which depends on an individual’s nationality and whether he/

she possesses documents (FRONTEX 2016). While free movement is permitted throughout the ECOWAS region,<sup>17</sup> some migrants circumvent official government-sanctioned border crossings in order to avoid harassment and paying of bribes that are expected at most checkpoints. They often employ smugglers to help them bypass checkpoints or negotiate passage across closed borders (Benattia, Armitano, and Robinson 2015; Malakooti and Benattia 2013). Other ECOWAS citizens view borders as an artificial construct of the colonial period and don’t feel obligated to use government-sanctioned crossings or are unfamiliar with migration policies that require crossing at border control points. While movement within the region is legal, by avoiding official border crossings, these migrants are technically engaging in “irregular migration” (Benattia, Armitano, and Robinson 2015). This distinction, often blurred, is relatively unimportant because both regular and irregular migrants can generally use the same routes and broadly have the same possibilities for mobility (Brachet 2009). In fact, Agadez hosts a number of travel agencies that provide migrants with information on smuggling and put them in contact with irregular transporters (Malakooti and Benattia 2013). Despite their ambiguous legal position, travel agencies that specialise in migrant transport can be officially registered with the mayor’s office in a matter of days. Travel agents, some of whom also operate ghettos (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) 2011), have vast social networks that include all actors involved in the movement of migrants, both smugglers and public officials alike (Brachet 2005).

17. Protocol A/P.1/5/79 Relating to Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment

18. ECOWAS countries include: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Ivory Coast, the Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Senegal and Togo.

### Structure of smuggling networks

Migrants typically take public transportation to Agadez, which is often the starting point at which they'll begin using smugglers in order to cross the desert into North Africa (Malakooti and Benattia 2013). Most migrants from Central and West Africa take a “pay-as-you-go” approach, using smugglers for specific parts of the journey that require specialised transport vehicles or specific, local knowledge, like the Sahara crossing. Less common is the “full-packet” solution wherein the entire journey is coordinated, and for which migrants must pay a premium (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) 2011). While the majority of migrants traveling irregularly to North Africa use smuggling networks, not all migrants do, particularly among labour migrants from Niger, Sudan and Chad (Darmer and Benattia 2017).

Recruiters, also known as “coxeurs” or “chasseurs,” deliver migrants from bus stations or money transfer locations, where new arrivals often congregate, to a ghetto “boss” who houses the migrants temporarily and oversees their transport (Bolouvi 2009). Some of these recruiters work for specific smugglers, while others are paid per migrant and work with a variety of ghetto bosses, who are at the top of the smuggler hierarchy (Tinti and Westcott 2016; Hamani and Bontianti 2015; FRONTTEX 2016). In addition to providing lodging and food, some ghetto owners have dual roles as “passeurs,” coordinating and facilitating the migrants’ entire journey. In these cases, migrants are put in touch with a ghetto boss before arriving in Niger, and pay part of the cost of their journey up front. The ghetto boss/passeur then puts them in touch with a local coxeur and ghetto owner for each stop of their journey, even before Agadez. (Molenaar 2017). Passeurs who don’t own their own ghettos rent space in ghettos to house the migrants whose trips they’re coordinating (Politzer 2016). Ghetto bosses also employ fixers, who travel with migrant transport caravans on a motorbike and pay off officials at checkpoints (FRONTTEX 2016). Migrants are held in ghettos until there are enough of them to justify the trip, so ghetto owners rely on recruiters to reach a critical mass (Reitano and Tinti 2015; Malakooti and Benattia 2013; FRONTTEX 2016). In the early 2000s, border police

would sometimes alert coxeurs when migrants arrived at borders and, like the coxeurs, were paid by smugglers to send them business (Brachet 2005). It’s important to note, however, that not all migrants stay in ghettos. Some stay in converted accommodations in the bus station (Malakooti and Benattia 2013). Nigerien migrants often stay elsewhere in Agadez with someone from their home village (Hamani and Bontianti 2015). Indeed, while nearly a quarter of non-Nigerien migrants interviewed in one study had found lodging in Agadez from someone at the bus station (i.e. a coxeur), only 9% of Nigeriens did so (Hall 2016). Migrants that stay in ghettos are housed by country of origin (Hamani and Bontianti 2015; Bolouvi 2009; Benattia, Armitano, and Robinson 2015). People from Mali, Burkina Faso, Senegal, Nigeria and Ghana stay in ghettos dedicated specifically to these countries. Migrants from other countries are divided among those ghettos, often along regional or linguistic lines. Ivoirians, for example, are typically housed with Burkinabe, Gambians with Senegalese (Hamani 2015). The jobs of smugglers themselves are also often drawn along national lines. The heads of travel agencies (Brachet 2005) and many ghetto owners are Nigerien, though ghettos are also owned by people from the same country of origin as the migrants they house. This can introduce some tension over who has the right to provide what services to which migrants (Hamani and Bontianti 2015). Passeurs and coxeurs are also typically the same nationality as the migrants they recruit (Malakooti and Davin 2015; Molenaar 2017).

Transport of migrants, however, is primarily a Nigerien and Libyan domain (Hamani and Bontianti 2015; FRONTTEX 2016), and is divided along ethnic lines (Tinti and Westcott 2016). Transporting migrants can be incredibly profitable, and there are two ethnic groups jockeying for control over routes and territory in Niger: the Tuareg and the Toubou (or Tebu) (Hamani and Bontianti 2015; FRONTTEX 2016). These nomadic groups have a long history of participation in trans-Saharan trade. Historically, limited geographic overlap – formalised by a political agreement signed by the tribes in 1875 – meant there was minimal competition between them (Reitano and Shaw 2015).

In recent years, however, tribal tensions over territory have escalated (Reitano and Shaw 2015; FRONTEX 2016). Both minority groups approached the fall of Gaddafi as an opportunity for liberation from Arab domination and economic marginalisation. However, the Toubou, who were actively oppressed by the Gaddafi regime, were more successful at solidifying their control over routes into Libya (Reitano and Shaw 2015; Reitano et al. 2017). As a result, the Toubou have expanded beyond their traditional influence and consolidated control over the smuggling routes from Northern Niger into Southern Libya (Tinti and Westcott 2016; Reitano et al. 2017; Micallef 2017; FRONTEX 2016). The Toubou have also actively sought a seat at the international table as a partner in the fight against irregular migration in order to gain strategic control, financial gain and legitimacy (Molenaar and El-Kamouni-Janssen 2017). The Tuaregs, on the other hand, who previously exerted greater control over trans-Saharan smuggling, are now primarily relegated to the less-popular western route through Algeria (FRONTEX 2016; Benattia, Armitano, and Robinson 2015; Malakooti and Benattia 2013; Reitano and Shaw 2015; Reitano et al. 2017; Tinti and Westcott 2016). Because the Algerian border is closed to migrants from Niger, this route is more dangerous and poses a higher risk to smugglers and migrants alike (FRONTEX 2016). The Toubou smugglers are able to avoid illegality on the Niger-Libya routes by handing off migrants to Libyan smugglers just south of the border, at which point migrants would leave the ECOWAS zone of free movement. These Libyan smugglers, typically also ethnic Toubou, are able to travel uninhibited because most of the checkpoints across southern Libya are under Toubou control (Reitano et al. 2017; Tinti and Westcott 2016; Westcott 2016; FRONTEX 2016). Just before Sebha, migrants are handed off once again to Arab Libyans who control smuggling in central and northern Libya (Reitano et al. 2017; Tinti and Westcott 2016). The Arab Libyans commonly transport both people and goods, and many have homes and families in Niger (Tinti and Westcott 2016). However, the handoff south of the Libyan border is reportedly becoming less common. Now the entire journey from Agadez into southern Libya is often managed by a single group of smugglers, typically Toubou originally from Libya (Micallef 2017; Tinti and Westcott 2016).

There is some debate as to the level of organisation of trans-Saharan human smuggling networks operating in Niger. In the early 2000s, groups that were involved in shorter, more local smuggling (e.g. crossing the Sahara) were less organised than the networks, often Nigerian, that coordinated richer migrants' entire journeys from West Africa to Europe (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) 2006, 2011). And whereas the smuggling industry in Libya has expanded and become increasingly organised in recent years (Darne and Benattia 2017), there is little evidence that smuggling in Niger has reached a similar level of professionalisation. One source described smuggling in Niger and Mali as "based on an intricate web of individuals and groups linked together by financial gain and deeply rooted business relationships" (FRONTEX 2016). The concept of associated but distinct actors is especially apt in the case of migrant transport. While some ghetto bosses also own their own trucks, and in rare cases drive the migrants themselves (FRONTEX 2016), more commonly ghetto owners or heads of travel agencies simply hire a truck and driver once they have enough migrants to justify the cost (Bensaad 2003). Indeed there does not appear to be any formal organisation of transport networks beyond tribal associations, which allow Toubou smugglers to travel more easily in Toubou-controlled areas. Each Toubou involved in smuggling from Niger to Libya claims to be independent and self-employed (Tinti and Westcott 2016). Though one Toubou militia leader has been known to give his support to the Libyan national army in exchange for control of a smuggling stopover town in southern Libya, this should be not be perceived as an action on behalf of any organised network (Reitano and Tinti 2015). Individual Toubou smugglers don't claim to be part of any larger network or political organisation (Tinti and Westcott 2016). One theory is that because of the free movement provision in the ECOWAS area there is less need for smugglers prior to entry into North Africa, which de-incentivises the development of large transnational criminal networks in the region (Munsch, Powell, and Joly 2017; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) 2011).<sup>19</sup>

19. The higher level of organisation in Nigeria, Senegal and several other countries most likely reflects that they have more potential clients who are able and willing to pay for these services. Richer migrants can pay for a "full packet" approach, where the whole journey is organised. Moreover, the trafficking of women to Europe is a lucrative market particularly in the case of Nigeria

However, while highly organised transnational people-smuggling networks feature less in Niger, this should not be taken to mean that major actors in human smuggling do not engage with other criminal networks or don't carry political influence. For example, there is ample evidence to suggest "collusive relationships" between the owners of bus companies involved in human smuggling, criminal groups linked to the trans-Saharan drug trade and national political figures (Molenaar and El-Kamouni-Janssen 2017). The complicated relationship between the Nigerien national government and the human smuggling industry, and the perverse incentive structure therein, will be discussed in depth below.

It is important to note that migrants are not the only "goods" being smuggled across the Sahara and that movement across the border between Niger and North Africa is not uni-directional. While most media and academic attention focuses exclusively on the flow of people from Niger northward, transport of livestock and subsidised goods like foodstuffs have long formed an important economic link between Maghreb and Sahelian countries (Reitano 2016; Reitano et al. 2017; Brachet 2012). Some transporters engage in "dual smuggling", where they move both people and licit goods like food and housewares between Niger and Libya (Reitano et al. 2017). Migrants also often bring goods back with them when they return across the Sahara. They pay smugglers both for their passage and per kilogram of items carried, which helps make the less-popular return trip more profitable for smugglers (Tinti and Westcott 2016; Westcott 2016). However, the simultaneous transport of licit goods and illicit people to Libya has become less common since the early 2000s, when Libya's migration policy became stricter. Now dual transporters avoid customs checks and use smuggling routes, though dual transport on the way back is generally permitted (Brachet 2012). Those engaged in the lucrative smuggling of illegal goods often transport drugs along with migrants from Agadez to Libya, and then bring weapons back to Agadez (Politzer 2016). The diversity of goods transported across the Sahara reflects how economically and historically entrenched trade and commercial exchange are in transit centres like Agadez.

## The trans-Saharan migrant experience

The trans-Saharan migrant's experience is almost universally a negative one: migrants can be physically and verbally abused, robbed, kidnapped and ransomed, extorted, stranded and even killed (Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat (RMMS) West Africa 2017; Konan 2013; Reitano and Tinti 2015; Munsch, Powell, and Joly 2017; Brachet 2011). These abuses happen in transit north of Agadez in Niger, in Algeria, and in Libya, which has become especially notorious for its poor treatment of sub-Saharan migrants. Though Agadez is reported to be welcoming to migrants (Bolouvi 2009; Hall 2016), and some report receiving help in the form of emergency lodging, financial help, or medical assistance (Konan 2013), their precarious position puts them at risk of abuse by smugglers and government officials alike (Konan 2013; Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat (RMMS) West Africa 2017; Reitano and Tinti 2015; Malakooti and Benattia 2013). Migrants are particularly vulnerable to exploitation in the transit hubs that link source and destination countries (Reitano, Adal, and Shaw 2014). People staying in ghettos are at the mercy of the ghetto "boss", and while a majority of migrants report having access to basic hygiene necessities and potable water, they also report having insufficient access to food (Konan 2013; Malakooti and Benattia 2013). Once they begin the desert crossing, conditions deteriorate further. While much international attention on the dangers of migration has focused on the Mediterranean Sea crossing, the Sahara Desert presents its own unique risks. Indeed many experts believe that more migrants die crossing the Sahara than the Mediterranean, but it is more difficult to recover bodies and document the number of deaths, given the minimal border security and vast geographic area (Benattia, Armitano, and Robinson 2015). Migrants are given very little food and water, and many become sick during the crossing. Sickness spreads quickly because as many as 100 migrants can be packed in a single vehicle, and some die from minor illnesses because they have no access to treatment (Malakooti and Benattia 2013; Benattia, Armitano, and Robinson 2015).

Some migrants that become ill are abandoned in the desert in order to prevent the sickness from spreading (Malakooti and Benattia 2013). Migrants risk facing bandits (Hinshaw and Parkinson 2015; Westcott 2016; Molenaar 2017), vehicle accidents or breakdowns (Searcey and Barry 2017; Gatti 2005; McCormick et al. 2017), physical violence (Searcey and Barry 2017; United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) 2016; UNICEF 2017; McCormick et al. 2017) and abandonment during the desert crossing (Meynial 2018; Brachet 2011; Gatti 2005; McCormick et al. 2017).

Libya, the major destination of trans-Saharan migrants, has gotten more dangerous in recent years, post-conflict. As smuggling in Libya has grown increasingly organised, violence against migrants has become increasingly institutionalised (Reitano et al. 2017; Lucht 2017). Migrants in Libya can be arbitrarily detained (Malakooti and Benattia 2013) and many find themselves “loaned out” by smugglers as forced labour (Reitano and Tinti 2015) or simply not paid by their Libyan employers (Malakooti and Davin 2015). Extortion of migrants serves as a source of income for Libyan militia groups (Reitano, Adal, and Shaw 2014). Increasingly, there are reports of smugglers driving migrants into the desert and demanding money, often forcing migrants to call family for ransom. In some cases, migrants are tortured while their family listens in and forced into labour or killed if the money doesn’t arrive. Some migrants report being forced into sexual servitude (Reitano et al. 2017).

It is important to recognise, however, that trans-Saharan migrants are not a homogenous group and that their experience is not universal. Many risks are demographic-specific and certain groups find themselves in a more precarious position than others. Sub-Saharan migrants are the most vulnerable (Malakooti and Davin 2015) and face worse treatment in Libya than migrants from Syria, for example (UNICEF 2017). Racism against sub-Saharan migrants is rampant in Libya, and to a lesser degree in Algeria (Brachet 2011), and treatment of black Africans is demeaning and often violent (Hall 2016; Reitano and Tinti 2015; Bensaad 2001). Some ill-treatment is specific to migrants of specific countries of origin.

Gambian migrants are often singled out and forced to pay more at border crossings, on the false basis that the Gambian president has authorised border guards to deny Gambians entry in order to curb emigration (Hall 2016)<sup>20</sup>.

Women are another group whose circumstances are unique. Many women experience some level of preferential treatment by transporters and help from other travelers because they are perceived as being weaker. However, women are at a high risk of sexual abuse and human trafficking (Hall 2016; Politzer 2016). Sex traffickers now use migration routes through Agadez, and many women are raped by their traffickers and forced to work for a pimp to pay off their “travel expenses” (Politzer 2016). There is little consensus on engagement in income-generating activities by trans-Saharan migrant women; the experience of Nigerien women differs considerably from that of non-Nigeriens in terms of employment prospects. One study found, for example, that over half of women migrants interviewed in Niger were earning money, primarily in low-skilled work, compared to only 8% of men. This was explained by the observed trend that women, most of whom are Nigerien, tend to undertake 1-2 year economic migration cycles within Niger. On the other hand, men, from various West African countries of origin, plan for longer-term migration either to North Africa or Europe. And female Nigeriens, particularly those from the Zinder region, are especially likely to report earning income in Agadez (Hall 2016). This may be a result of Nigerien women integrating more easily in Agadez than those from other countries of origin. Once in Libya, however, female economic migrants from Niger are less likely to find employment than Nigerien men (Malakooti and Benattia 2013). Another study reported that it is particularly difficult for women in general to find work while in transit, which leaves them unable to support the children they’ve often left with caregivers in their home village. These financial problems cause significant psychological stress among migrants whose journeys don’t align with their expectations (UNICEF 2017).

20. The newly elected president has spoken out about the need to provide jobs so that Gambians stop making the dangerous journey to Europe (Gaffey 2017), but has not given the authorisation described above.



Migrants struggle with financial as well as physical vulnerability. Some employ strategies to reduce risk and try to protect their money. For example, some migrants, who are often cited higher prices than non-migrants, avoid spending money on all but necessities to avoid appearing well off and increasing their risk of being robbed (Hall 2016). Others use a third party “guarantor” — typically a friend, family member, or employer — to pay their smuggler upon their arrival at the agreed-upon destination (Reitano et al. 2017). Given the hardships faced during trans-Saharan migration, a majority of returned migrants report that they wouldn’t do it again and recommend that their friends don’t try it (Hall 2016). Indeed, many migrants who originally intended to stay in Libya or go to Europe return to their countries of origin because the situation in Libya was so difficult (Friedman 2016).

### Cost of trans-Saharan migration

The costs of the trans-Saharan trip can vary based on the destination and method of transport (Brachet 2005). In the last three years, costs were reported from \$100-400 for the trip from Agadez to southern Libya (Gaffey 2016; Hinshaw and Parkinson 2015; Benattia, Armitano, and Robinson 2015; Reitano et al. 2017; Malakooti and Benattia 2013). However, the full cost of the journey from Agadez to the coast of Libya — for the minority continuing on to Europe — is reported to be \$2,000-3,000, when both the transport costs and bribes are totaled (Reitano, Adal, and Shaw 2014). The cost of the trip fluctuates to reflect the supply of transport vehicles and risks to smugglers. As the number of available smuggling vehicles increased, beginning in 2011 after the fall of Gaddafi, the price for migrants dropped (Hall 2016; Hinshaw and Parkinson 2015). Recently, however, prices have as much as tripled as a result of the political and financial crises in Libya and because of the EU-sponsored crackdown on migration, which increases the risk to those in the people-smuggling business (Diallo 2017; Darne and Benattia 2017; Reitano and Tinti 2015).

Migrants from Niger expect on average to spend \$237, while the annual gross national income (GNI) per capita is only \$410. In Senegal, Mali, Benin and Burkina Faso, the expected cost of trans-Saharan migration is even

higher than their respective GNIs. Migrants expect that their earnings at the destination will offset this enormous initial investment. This high relative cost is consistent with arguments that migrants undertaking this trip are typically not the “poorest of the poor” (Hall 2016; Reitano and Tinti 2015). Migrants report selling material assets, borrowing money, and using savings to fund their trip (Hall 2016; Konan 2013).

Even those that manage to raise enough money to finance one or more legs of their journey sometimes find themselves stranded in cities like Agadez or Dirkou when they run out of money and can neither continue on nor return home (Di Bartolomeo, Jaulin, and Perrin 2011). Many stranded migrants dread the shame of returning home without having succeeded (Bolouvi 2009). In these cases, migrants must either wait for family members to send them additional funds, or try to find work locally (Brachet 2005; Friedman 2016; Hall 2016; Bensaad 2001; Konan 2013; Malakooti and Benattia 2013; Bolouvi 2009). In reality, apart from those migrants who are forced to work in order to pay for the next leg of the journey, very few migrants, with the exception of Nigeriens, plan to work or are able to work along the way (Hall 2016). Generally, migrants looking for work are in the minority. Only 4% of those not working reported in one study that they wanted to engage in an “income-generating activity,” and most migrants that work do so for the family with whom they’re staying (Hall 2016).

### Nationalities crossing through Niger

Despite the high costs, financial as well as physical and emotional, people from across the region continue to engage in trans-Saharan migration. Recent data shows that Nigeriens represent the largest group of migrants on the transit routes through Niger<sup>21</sup> (Bolouvi 2009; Hamani and Bontianti 2015; International Organisation for Migration (IOM) 2017). Other major groups include migrants from Nigeria, Guinea, Mali, Cameroon, Burkina Faso, Chad, Côte d’Ivoire, Senegal and the Central African Republic (International Organisation for Migration (IOM) 2016, 2017; Bolouvi 2009). Most of these migrants are aiming for North Africa or Europe (Bolouvi 2009), but others see Niger as their final destination and have no intention of continuing further (Benattia, Armitano, and Robinson 2015). This is most common for migrants from Mali, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Togo and Benin, and the majority settle in Niamey. Some of these migrants, specifically those from Mali and Nigeria, are asylum seekers fleeing conflict (Benattia, Armitano, and Robinson 2015). Migrants from Asia are reportedly beginning to use trans-Saharan routes to reach Maghreb countries – by flying into West African capital cities and then travelling overland – but at nowhere near the rate by migrants from West Africa (De Haas 2008). While the major groups represented stay generally consistent, the relative proportion of different nationalities varies over time and across routes. Indeed data from different monitoring points in Niger report very different proportions of nationalities (International Organisation for Migration (IOM) 2016, 2017).

A number of factors present obstacles to quantifying migration through Niger. While some statistics are collected, there is little evidence that the data are robust as they only capture those on official transit routes (Brachet 2005; Bergmann et al. 2017; Brachet 2011). Tracking migrants this way is challenging because few transport vehicles stop at the official checkpoints. For example, of 60 trucks passing through Dirkou at a given time in 2004, it was estimated that only a third would stop at the bus terminal checkpoint (Brachet 2005), and corruption at checkpoints results in not all migrants being reported (Brachet 2009). It’s similarly difficult to be confident in estimates of migrants’ destinations,

because individual routes lead to multiple places. For example, many migrants that travel from Agadez to Algeria then travel onward to Libya (Malakooti and Benattia 2013). Furthermore, migrants’ intended destinations may change during the journey based on monetary constraints, experiences in a particular place, or information from other migrants. Some migrants give up any intention of migrating further, or become stranded due to tighter border controls (Bergmann et al. 2017). As a result, migrants are increasingly settling in transit towns (Bolouvi 2009; Di Bartolomeo, Jaulin, and Perrin 2011). While many migrants that don’t reach their intended destination or find it doesn’t conform to their expectations, choose a voluntary assisted return, a trip back to their country of origin financed by IOM, others refuse to return home and stay in places like Agadez (Bergmann et al. 2017).

One migration scholar highlights the difficulty of even distinguishing between transit migrants and those who are more settled, since often “transit migrants” end up staying in migration hubs without ever reaching their anticipated destination (De Haas 2008). These challenges highlight the poor quality of the limited migration data that is available for government officials and policy-makers.

21. This is noteworthy since transit through northern Niger has been the major trans-Saharan route for West African migrants. Still, one might expect that Nigerien migrant flows are observed at a higher rate since Nigeriens are less likely to move clandestinely in and north of Agadez than migrants of other nationalities. While all the cited sources identify Nigeriens as the most important migrant group, one cannot have high confidence in their accuracy. One source from the early 2000s did in fact report that migrants from Nigeria were the most common group in transit through Niger, with Nigeriens as the second most common at only 13% (Bensaad 2003).



Young wife and child in the concession of returned migrants in a small village in the Say Department. Photo taken by Souleymane Adamou

## Managing trans-Saharan migration

### International actions on trans-Saharan migration

The migrant crisis has garnered international concern, particularly in member countries of the European Union (EU). The growing proportion of West Africans arriving to Europe (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)) has inspired a variety of initiatives to curb trans-Saharan migration. However, despite high and somewhat sensational media attention (Brachet 2011), most West African migrants remain in the region (Devillard, Bacchi, and Noack 2015), and of those that do travel north through Niger, only a small proportion are bound for Europe (Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat (RMMS) West Africa 2016; Darne and Benattia 2017).

The EU is motivated to curb migration both by popular sentiment (Mackintosh 2017) and by the cost of refused asylum requests. Because asylum-seekers need to be on European soil to apply, this drives demand for smugglers' services (Reitano and Tinti 2015)<sup>22</sup>. However, less than 15% of asylum requests from West Africans are approved, and processing applications and financing return trips is labour intensive and costly for the EU (Reitano 2016).

European efforts to curb migration, both on the part of the EU and individual countries, however, signal a fundamental misunderstanding of the realities on the ground. Authors have emphasised that these initiatives are misguided and are certain to be ineffective and possibly overtly harmful (Molenaar and El-Kamouni-Janssen 2017; Reitano and Tinti 2015). For example, many programmes focus on offering development funding in exchange for national governments stopping migration at their borders. Research shows, however, that development funding is often correlated with increased migration by virtue of providing people the means to finance the costly trip (Belloc 2015). And scholars emphasise that policies targeting and criminalising smugglers are ineffective. The best way to combat smuggling networks is by convincing migrants not to make the journey, thereby reducing demand for smugglers' services (Tinti and Westcott 2016). There have been some efforts on this front, including initiatives by the IOM to demystify migration and publish information about the difficulties migrants are likely to encounter. However not all migrants are being exposed to this information and others actively avoid acknowledging the facts presented because they feel they have no alternative or would rather not know (Hall 2016). Italy and IOM launched a pilot programme in Niger to intercept migrants on the way to Europe and provide alternatives so that they abandon their initial plans. Migrants that chose to do so could either settle in a transit country or return home via a paid ticket and supported by community-level development initiatives to facilitate re-integration (Nielsen 2015). There is some evidence to suggest that providing accurate information to would-be migrants might help protect those migrants that do continue. But the effectiveness of these information campaigns at deterring migration is debatable at best (Munsch, Powell, and Joly 2017). As discussed above, the motivations driving migration are complex and highly heterogeneous across geographies, ethnicities, genders, age, and income levels.

22. At a summit in mid-2017, European and African leaders agreed to allow asylum seekers to apply while still in Africa (2017). Emmanuel Macron, the President of France, has spearheaded a programme where centres in Agadez and in Chad – called “hotspots” – can triage asylum-seeking migrants without them first crossing into Europe (Wirtz 2017).

### **Nigerien migration management**

Because of its important role in trans-Saharan transit, Niger is the target of much international attention in regard to migration management. Because of the instability and lack of governance in Libya, Niger faces increasing international pressure to control irregular migration and take action against migrant smugglers (Tinti 2017). This came to a head in late 2013, when the bodies of 92 migrants – most of whom were children – were found in the desert. Though Nigerien authorities vowed to take action, the initial “crackdown” was largely symbolic and the only smugglers punished were those who had gotten on the wrong side of authorities (Tinti and Westcott 2016), or were Toubou being targeted by the Tuareg-led local government (Molenaar and El-Kamouni-Janssen 2017). In 2015 the Nigerien government passed an anti-smuggling law (n° 2015-36), purportedly to protect migrants from human rights abuses, that gave authorities the right to take action against smugglers (Massalaki 2015). However, even in the wake of the law’s adoption, efforts to target smugglers remained cursory and the primary impact was slightly increased discretion on the part of smugglers (Tinti 2017; Politzer 2016).

In late 2015, Niger became the third largest recipient of funds through the newly launched “EU Emergency Trust Fund for Stability and Addressing Root Causes of Irregular Migration and Displaced Persons in Africa” (EUTF). The EUTF funds development, humanitarian aid, and security in the context of migration management (Bergmann et al. 2017; Tinti 2017). This “cash-for-migration” agreement encouraged Nigerien action (Micallef 2017), but it wasn’t until late 2016 when the EU offered it 610 million euros to fight smuggling that Niger began to crack down in earnest (Reitano et al. 2017; European Commission 2016). As a result, 100 people were arrested and 300 vehicles seized (Diallo 2017). Many ghettos were closed and those still operating were moved constantly to avoid detection (Diallo 2017; McCormick et al. 2017; Politzer 2016). The anti-smuggling law shifted quickly from being essentially un-enforced to being applied so broadly that it criminalised legal transporters and the migrants it was intended to protect (Bergmann et al. 2017; Darne and Benattia 2017).

It’s difficult to quantify the real impact of the EU-funded crackdown. For example, of the 100 smugglers arrested, almost all were low-level drivers (Reitano et al. 2017). And while the EU is celebrating its success at curbing trans-Saharan migration, decreases in the numbers of migrants reported are believed to be as much a result of inaccurate data than a real drop in the number of migrants (Nelsen 2016; International Organisation for Migration (IOM) 2016). While in 2017, the numbers of recorded migrants were one tenth of those in 2016, this is assumed to be because migrants and smugglers are avoiding checkpoints (Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat (RMMS) West Africa 2017). Indeed there is ample evidence that the crackdown has pushed migrants onto more diffuse, peripheral routes or through Mali (Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat (RMMS) West Africa 2017; International Organisation for Migration (IOM) 2016; Nelsen 2016; Micallef 2017; Lucht 2017; Reitano, Adal, and Shaw 2014). In a 2017 report on the migration partnership, the EU, too, acknowledged the evolution of migration routes as needing constant monitoring (European Commission 2017).

The shift of migrants onto more peripheral routes has consequences far beyond making them harder to record from a data collection perspective. This shift to more precarious routes makes migrants harder to track and therefore complicating the provision of services and assistance (Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat (RMMS) West Africa 2017). Arguably, this has placed migrants at higher risk and made them more vulnerable (Bergmann et al. 2017). For example, some migrant caravans now pass through old minefields. Said one coxeur, “They made it a crime, so now it follows the criminal routes” (McCormick et al. 2017). Instead of stopping migration, these efforts simply diverted migration and “pushed most of the profits toward smugglers with the highest appetite for risk” (McCormick et al. 2017). The criminalisation of smugglers comes at a cost to the migrants they transport. Some smugglers drive along unfamiliar routes at night without lights to avoid detection, which can lead to fatal vehicle accidents given the rugged terrain. Others drive away and abandon migrants in the desert to avoid being arrested by approaching patrols (McCormick et al. 2017).

As a result, the number of deaths reported in the desert has increased since the anti-smuggling policy has been enforced (Diallo 2017). Prior to the recent crackdown, military escorts accompanied migrant caravans into the desert, at least as far as Dirkou (Tinti and Westcott 2016; Hinshaw and Parkinson 2015; Westcott 2016). Since the enforcement of anti-smuggling efforts, these convoys have stopped (Reitano et al. 2017).

EU interventions have the alleged goal of not only curbing migration but also protecting migrants from abuses. However, despite trainings of law enforcement officials and border security forces in sensitivity and protection of migrants, there is little empirical evidence that this has been effective. On the contrary, there have been reports of Nigerien military personnel shooting caravans and abusing and raping the migrants they take into custody (McCormick et al. 2017). In short, there remains insufficient funding for and attention paid to the protection of migrants (Bergmann et al. 2017).

One thing that makes curbing migration in Niger more difficult than in Libya is the provision of free movement in the ECOWAS zone. Because migrants legally have the right to move through the zone without a visa for 90 days, there is no illegal activity being committed until the moment they cross into Libya or Algeria (Reitano 2016; Adepoju 2005; Hall 2016). Therefore, the onus is on the Nigerien government to prove that migrants and smugglers have the intention of crossing into Maghreb countries in order to prosecute (Reitano 2016). Therefore, migrants with valid ECOWAS travel documents should be able to travel unhindered throughout West Africa, including Niger (Benattia, Armitano, and Robinson 2015). However, while the large majority of non-Nigeriens entering Agadez are asked for their papers (Hall 2016), proper documentation does not spare them from harassment by Nigerien police (Konan 2013). In reality, nearly all non-Nigerien migrants must pay bribes to travel into and through Niger (Hall 2016). Furthermore, despite their right to travel through Niger, the 2015 anti-smuggling law has resulted in even legal migrants being portrayed as “illicit” (Hall 2016). Increased Nigerien border control along with an expanded definition of



The Mayor's building of the Commune of Gueladjo of the Say Department.  
Photo taken by Souleymane Adamou

irregular migration – to include even movement by legal ECOWAS migrants – has incited resentment among Niger's ECOWAS partners. There is concern that tightened control could impact seasonal migration not only to the North but among ECOWAS countries, upon which many people's livelihoods depend (Reitano 2016; Molenaar and El-Kamouni-Janssen 2017; Bergmann et al. 2017). In fact, the anti-smuggling law is being implemented such that the transport of migrants beyond Agadez is now a crime, though over 800 km separates the city and Libya's southern border (Meynial 2018). One report noted that ECOWAS nationals are driven back to Agadez if they're intercepted north of Séguédine, another stopover city in Northern Niger (FRONTEX 2016). Other ECOWAS countries view Niger as “taking all the money” from donor governments and damaging the provision of free movement in the process (Bergmann et al. 2017), though there is evidence to suggest that free movement is not applied universally or homogeneously across the ECOWAS zone (FRONTEX 2016). The Nigerien government is in a difficult position feeling Europe's pressure to stop the flow of migrants while also recognising that its neighbours could retaliate against any Nigerien measures targeting West African migrants. The Nigerien justice minister has described plans to open migrant welcome centres in Agadez to prevent migrants from falling prey to smugglers and to inform them of the risks, but also wants Europe to make legal immigration easier for Africans (Flynn 2015).

This fraught relationship with Europe and neighbouring countries is representative of a larger set of conflicting incentives, primarily financial, for curbing migration (Tinti and Westcott 2016; Hall 2016). Migration management was not a priority in Niger during the political transition in the aftermath of the 2010 military coup. However, there has been increasing recognition of out-migration as a poverty reduction strategy among rural populations (Di Bartolomeo, Jaulin, and Perrin 2011). This reliance on human movement further complicates Niger's position in trans-Saharan migration management. On the one hand, donors provide huge sums of development money. However, there is no evidence that the funding will provide sufficient livelihood alternatives to those that depend upon smuggling (Tinti and Westcott 2016). In fact, one group of former smugglers that applied for EU funds to launch an alternative commercial venture received no response and have grown skeptical of the EU's hollow promises (Zandonini 2018). And furthermore, the money received to curb smuggling is in direct competition with the money received at all levels of Nigerien society through the smuggling industry.

### **Economic impacts of the smuggling industry**

The municipality of Agadez used to receive taxes from migration before the ECOWAS provision of free movement; now officials generate their own income through less legal means (Hall 2016). Bribery of government officials is rampant in Niger (Brachet 2009; Bensaad 2001; Tinti and Westcott 2016; Benattia, Armitano, and Robinson 2015; Munsch, Powell, and July 2017). The Nigerien government implicitly encourages bribery by paying officials poorly, not controlling their work and not actively limiting or condemning abuses of power (Brachet 2005). Bribery and extortion is widespread both across government entities and geographically. And a confidential government memo acknowledged deep-rooted corruption in the police and security forces (Flynn 2015). Police officers are paid to protect smugglers' ghettos (Flynn 2015), and those that tax migrants passing through bus stations on the route to Agadez (Bensaad 2003; Flynn 2015) are easily able to double their monthly salaries in a single day (Hall 2016). The collection of "tolls" from undocumented migrants

passing through checkpoints by police and security officials has become so commonplace that bus drivers often collect the expected amounts from migrants up front, reflecting the institutionalisation of corruption in the police force (Molenaar and El-Kamouni-Janssen 2017). Of the "transportation tax" that smuggling vehicles are required to pay to police before leaving for Libya, only a portion goes to the city; the rest is taken by police agents (Politzer 2016). At military checkpoints north of Agadez, smugglers pay between \$150 and \$250 per car (Reitano et al. 2017), and in stopover towns along the route migrants are also forced to pay "visitor fees" to local councils (Bolouvi 2009). Indeed the system of profiting from the movement of people is so entrenched in the Nigerien government, that not only do individual government agents benefit, but the government itself also relies on bribery as a source of funding in order to function. It has been found that money extorted from migrants was listed as a source of funding earmarked in the military budget to pay for supplies like fuel (Flynn 2015; Molenaar and El-Kamouni-Janssen 2017). However, the lucrative nature of extracting payments from migrants can cause conflict between the government agencies and individuals that profit. For example, conflict over the distribution of proceeds among security forces was such that the mayor of Dirkou was forced to issue a formal decree detailing the division of funds between different groups (Molenaar 2017).

However, it's not only the government that profits from migrant smuggling. The movement of people is a huge industry – migrants pay 750,000 to 1.75 million euro per week to cross through Agadez (Loprete 2016) – and smuggling has become one of the few livelihood options in Niger's northern region (Bergmann et al. 2017; Westcott 2016). After the Tuareg uprisings in the late 2000s decimated the already waning tourism industry, the economic opportunities in Agadez were severely diminished and people were forced to look for alternative livelihoods (Hall 2016; Dambo, Mato, and Moutari 2014). People that were shopkeepers and tour guides became smugglers (Malakooti and Benattia 2013; Hall 2016; Hinshaw and Parkinson 2015). Drivers, specifically, are often former tour guides, as they're already familiar with routes through the desert (Molenaar 2017).

Others are former migrants that used their personal experience to become involved in smuggling people themselves (Politzer 2016; Tinti and Westcott 2016; Bensaad 2001; Reitano and Tinti 2015; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) 2011). Human smuggling has become the most profitable form of smuggling (Maunganidze 2016; Tinti and Westcott 2016); a smuggler can make \$5,000 with a Toyota 4x4 filled with 30 migrants (Flynn 2015). However, the economic impact of human smuggling extends far beyond the smugglers themselves. Indeed, half of locals are engaged in a migrant-related economic activity, and it represents a significant share of household income (Hall 2016). The economic importance of providing services for migrants can be observed in the rapid growth in the number of financial institutions in Agadez to meet demand in the last decade (Hall 2016; Hinshaw and Parkinson 2015). Migrants spend about \$32 on average during their stay in Agadez (Hall 2016), and the deputy secretary-general for the regional government of Agadez lauds migrants for revitalising the city and its economy by consuming goods and providing jobs (Hinshaw and Parkinson 2015). Smuggling carries no stigma in Agadez. Most local people and government officials don't see it as a problem; it's generally perceived as a legitimate economic enterprise (Tinti and Westcott 2016; Hall 2016). The populations of Agadez and Dirkou, another stopover town on the route to Libya, have grown significantly as a result of the smuggling industry (Bensaad 2001; Bredeloup and Pliez 2005). However, there is some evidence that due to the recent EU-funded crackdown on migration, smuggling is now undertaken by "small mafia groups" as opposed to the larger cross-section of society that participated – and benefitted – previously (McCormick et al. 2017).

One scholar, Samuel Hall, argues that the economic impact of smuggling in Agadez is more limited than many believe. Despite the high level of local engagement in migrant-related economic activities, there has been no visible increase in participation in these activities even as the number of people migrating through Agadez has increased over the past five years. Second, because migrants spend such a short period in the city – 70% of those interviewed intended to stay a month or less – they don't invest meaningfully in the local economy.

Their impact is limited to sectors directly related to migration, including transportation, lodging and money transfers. And while some people involved in the smuggling industry make good money, many don't. Migrants participate very little in the labour market, which further limits their impact on the economy (Hall 2016). This all could change, however, if the trend towards increased settling by migrants continues (Bolouvi 2009; Di Bartolomeo, Jaulin, and Perrin 2011). As migrants grow less transient and participate more actively in the local labour market, their impact on the economy may increase (Hall 2016; Bergmann et al. 2017).

Regardless of the exact impact of human smuggling on the economy of Agadez, several reports note that recently the industry has gone underground and that Agadez has become a "ghost town" since the crackdown on irregular migration (Diallo 2017; Reitano et al. 2017). This breeds concern not only from an economic perspective but also from the standpoint of security and regional stability. Many fear the consequences if the smuggling industry is no longer a viable livelihood option (Lucht 2017; Maunganidze 2016; Tinti and Westcott 2016; Reitano et al. 2017). Many young people who had jobs transporting people now find themselves in prison (Diallo 2017). There is fear youths who are unable to find jobs will be recruited by extremist groups (Tinti 2017). One smuggler said that without migrants to transport, they'd likely go back to war or would kidnap white people for ransom (Tinti and Westcott 2016). This is particularly noteworthy given that Niger has long been an ally in fighting extremism in the Sahel (Reitano 2016) and the seat of hard won stability in a fraught region (Tinti 2017; Molenaar and El-Kamouni-Janssen 2017). While there is much evidence to suggest that efforts to curb migration have been ineffective at reducing the volume of migrants in transit and have only succeeded in altering the routes that migrants take (FILL), recent reports of a decline in activity in Agadez (Diallo 2017; Reitano et al. 2017) may indicate a larger shift. Migratory patterns are incredibly dynamic and changes can be difficult to predict. Migration through Niger and particularly Agadez should both be actively monitored in order to better understand the evolution of trans-Saharan migration in response to government initiatives, and the economic consequences thereof.

## Conclusions

Sahelian households face a range of environmental and governance barriers to achieving economic and social well-being. Because of these barriers, Nigeriens' economic activities greatly transcend the territory of their home village with labour emigration often needed to supplement their incomes. In many parts of Niger, labour emigration dates back to the colonial era although evidence suggests that rates of emigration across Niger as a whole have increased over the past 20 years. Emigration destinations are often the result of the succession of decisions made by migrants as they travel, with the length of their time away from home shaped not only by their economic success but by the degree to which the emigrant's community and family sanctioned and supported his/her departure. In short, the migrant's relationships within his/her family and community strongly shape not only decisions to leave but destinations and length of stays.

Labour emigration by Nigeriens does not generally fit standard migration models. Emigration does not necessarily result from the pull of bright lights or from benefit-cost deliberation. Instead, emigration is a response to severe social and economic constraint. Families will send young men to the city not necessarily with an expectation of measurable remittances but to reduce the demand on the household's granary. If the migrant safely returns at the beginning of the next rainy season in good health, emigration is often seen as successful. In contrast, the migrant himself is responding to what can seem as a hopeless future.

In a very real sense, Sen's idea of "development as freedom" holds true here (Sen 1999). A migrant may see little future not only because of here-and-now economic hardship but because of seeing little chance of improved well-being at home. The young herder who finds that the livestock of the family herd are not owned by his father but by outside investors. The young man who sees little chance of gaining access to farmland controlled by his father or older brother to farm for himself. The young woman who sees the future

laid out for her at the age of thirteen once she has been promised as a wife to an old man. The young father who sees little prospect for enlarging his cropped lands, not necessarily due to the physical scarcity of land but because of chieftaincy refusals. Migrants may seek to go elsewhere as a result of the accumulation of small injustices not out of a naïve belief that injustices do not exist elsewhere but with the hope that they can better avoid their consequences outside of the social structures within which they have grown up.

The migration literature speaks of the "brain drain" in reference to the loss of the educated from countries of the developing world. But a far more widespread development tragedy is the loss of the enterprising spirit and ambition of the young migrant from labour reserves such as Niger. Many of the most "entrepreneurial" youth leave their homes. If one accepts that Sahelian livelihoods necessarily involve movements to sustain and in rare cases, prosper, there is nothing inherently wrong with this. What is wrong is that these young people, driven not by bright lights but by an interest to improve their lot, find themselves in less than remunerative situations and in the case of the Maghreb, dangerous situations. That their quest for "freedom" and economic opportunity has a high chance of failure with significant risks to physical and emotional well-being of migrants is truly a tragedy.

The quests taken by Nigeriens are different than more celebrated West African emigration experiences such as those in Senegal and western Mali. The international destinations of the vast majority of Nigerien migrants are other West and Central African countries. Of the small numbers who go elsewhere, a very high proportion travel to the Maghreb (Algeria and Libya) with it intended as their final destination. As discussed above, those Nigeriens who do attempt to reach Europe generally only do so when conditions in the Maghreb become intolerable and prospects for returning to Niger are limited. While standard UN data, derived from census information, suggest that these flows are small (e.g. Figure 1), other data, such as those collected at border crossings, find that Nigeriens are the major national group crossing from Niger into Algeria or Libya.



This would seem to be expected except for the fact that other West African nationalities commonly cite northern Niger as their nationalities' major embarkation point for traversing the Sahara. Still, dominance of Nigeriens in the foreigner entrance into Algeria and Libya may overestimate their numbers in the Maghreb since Nigeriens may be more likely to follow accepted routes (less vulnerable to harassment by Nigerien police and border guards) and are more commonly involved in shorter-term cyclic migration compared to other nationalities.

Governance at the national to village levels is shaped by and shapes labour emigration. Not only are national ministries, district officers, and village chiefs major actors affecting the functioning of key institutions for (rural) development (e.g. land tenure, credit provision, agricultural extension, conflict management), but they also serve as mediators between local communities and development NGOs/donors. Through our engagement with a diverse set of literatures, this review has shown the clear role played by governance institutions on rural residents' access to resources and their levels of well-being. This role, particularly for local governance actors (district to village), is underappreciated or ignored in the migration-specific literature despite its references to poverty-driven emigration.

In the case of Niger, the emphasis in the literature has been on the national government's unusual positionality with respect to stemming the flow of migrants north. Migration generates benefits both to the national economy and to individuals within the government through remittances by Nigeriens and expenditures by foreign migrants passing through the country. Local governments in particular, benefit from the informal payments required of migrants to successfully pass through and/or exit Niger to Algeria or Libya. At the same time, Niger receives large amounts of EU funding to reduce migration flows. Thus, the formal and customary authorities in Niger face mixed incentives. EU funding has greatest sway at the level of the national government and among various police authorities, while the economic incentives to maintain northbound flows of migrants are most felt at local levels. This not only potentially creates tension within the government structures but limits enforcement efforts.

In many ways, the policing approach can be seen as a cynical policy stemming from both a misguided understanding of what "drives" labour emigration and a view that development prospects in the Sahel region are not only limited but nil. To naturalise Sahelian poverty as stemming solely from innate deficiencies in resources or people runs counter to the evidence that the Sahel's ills are strongly affected by governance problems and anthropogenic climate change. While there are significant barriers to economic development, the history of development failure in the region is as much associated with profound misunderstandings of these barriers by outsiders. The policing approach is thus the culmination of a succession of development approaches taken by donor and development agencies in the region. These approaches are "on the cheap" and are less focused on sustained improvements in human welfare and more on simply maintaining economic activity and stabilising social conditions to avoid political insurgency, terrorism, and emigration.<sup>23</sup> Current events since the 2000s have revealed the limitations of these "keep the lid on" approaches.

The policing approach is an attempt to enclose Sahelian people within a region of poverty and growing hopelessness. The literature reviewed in this report reveals that even if enforcement efforts were more systematic, the policing approach's prospects to stem migrant flows are low. If the complex set of conditions that lead Nigeriens to embark on hazardous journeys in search of work persist, migrants and their smugglers will always find a way to circumvent policy and border patrols. To better understand these conditions will require greater engagement by researchers with emigrants and their family members to understand views of the possibility of change (hope) as influenced by social relations within and between households. As discussed in this report, these views of the future are likely to be very much shaped by local governance institutions. While more research is needed, our review strongly suggests that local systems of governance are strongly implicated in emigration decisions, experience and outcomes in Niger.

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23. Limited development assistance from the international community to the Sahelian region and Niger in particular, persists despite widespread acceptance of the need to assist countries who have differentially been negatively impacted by climate change.

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# **THE GLOBAL GOALS**

For Sustainable Development