



MIGRATION AND GOVERNANCE IN NIGER:

A CRITICAL JUNCTURE

Migration and Governance in Niger: A Critical Juncture

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1225 Eye Street NW, Suite 800

Washington, DC 20005

info@iri.org

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Approach

- The International Republican Institute (IRI) designed and commissioned a series of interviews with 20 citizens in Agadez, Matamey, Say, Tillabéri, Filingué, Tahoua, and Niamey in Niger to better understand how migration impacts political representation and governance. The interviewees included returned migrants and government and nongovernmental actors.
- As is common in qualitative research, findings from these interviews do not necessarily represent the opinions of all Nigerien returnees or government and nongovernmental actors.

Findings

- Economic deprivation, climate variability, and societal norms — including pressure and expectations for individuals to migrate in order to improve their economic standing — are among the primary reasons why interviewees decided to migrate.
- At the core of Niger's challenging economic situation is the political instability and upheaval that has plagued the country for decades. Although poverty and resource insecurity are driven in part by environmental and population factors, they are exacerbated by governance issues such as low state capacity, economic inequality and corruption. As such, governance deficiencies and economic migration are inextricably linked, and lack of governance will continue to pose a threat to socioeconomic progress.
- In the wake of the passage of Law # 2015-36 on the Illicit Smuggling of Migrants, which shut down many of the previously legal businesses associated with migration, migration is increasingly marked by growing danger, human rights violations, and irregularity. Returnees noted traumatic experiences of kidnapping, assault and trafficking during their journeys.
- Popular support for democratic institutions is high in Niger, but government performance falls short on provision of basic services and migration management. Returnees mentioned that the national and local governments rarely engage or consider the opinions of citizens, let alone those of marginalized populations such as youth, women and migrants.
- Policies and programs that do not engage the local governance and political dynamics may not only fail to address the root causes of migration, but also inflame those causes inadvertently.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: International donors, national and local governments in Niger, and civil society actors should prioritize tailored governance programming to address issues of political exclusion. This includes enhancing direct citizen consultation, especially at the local level, in government decision-making to better understand the needs of youth, returnees and other marginalized populations.

Recommendation 2: Politicians — and particularly candidates in the 2020 general elections — should incorporate issues of migration and the specific perspective of the returnees in their campaign platforms and policies in order to foster political inclusion and address the growing irregularity of migration.

Recommendation 3: Civil society actors should amplify the voices of marginalized and returnee populations through digital and traditional media platforms in order to enable these individuals to advocate for their needs, shift public opinion and assist in their sociopolitical reintegration. This should include confidence-building measures with the objective of enhancing communication between returnees and local authorities.

Recommendation 4: International and local civil society actors should equip local government officials with policy formulation skills to meet the unique needs of a mobile population — including both migrants and their social networks.

Recommendation 5: Civil society actors should work alongside informal community leaders to bolster the locally led social cohesion project and sociopolitical reintegration for returning populations.

Recommendation 6: The national government should facilitate a participatory review process of the Law # 2015-36 on the Illicit Smuggling of Migrants to elicit local feedback from migrants and local stakeholders and inform potential reform or amendments.

Recommendation 7: Migration policies and programming should address variance in local gender migration patterns and the unique stigma women migrants face.

INTRODUCTION

Niger sits at the heart of an “arc of instability” that spans the Sahel region.¹ Despite its volatile neighborhood, Niger has demonstrated some resilience to the violent extremism and conflict that pervades its bordering countries, even as two separate waves of insurgency have permeated its borders and driven considerable population displacement within Niger.

Niger’s relative stability and geostrategic location have contributed to its emergence as a strategic U.S. ally in efforts to counterterrorism, promote stability and manage migration in the region.² Nevertheless, looming geopolitical, economic, and demographic dynamics — including the country’s rapidly growing population, illicit networks, and trafficking — could create further volatility and undermine the country’s development prospects.

Situated at the crossroads of migration routes, the arid expanses of Niger have acted as a transit hub for West African migrants for decades. Nigeriens have historically migrated as a way to cope with dire economic circumstances, especially to seek employment during the country’s long dry season. More recent migration trends, however, are characterized by increasing peril and uncertainty, as migrants are subjected to violence, assault and trafficking amid harsh conditions and dangerous routes, particularly in the wake of the passage of the Law # 2015-36 on the Illicit Smuggling of Migrants. These precarious dynamics have the potential to propel Niger further into fragility, especially as violent conflict in the region deteriorates and spills over into the country.

■ Niger’s relative stability and geostrategic location have contributed to its emergence as a strategic U.S. ally in efforts to counterterrorism, promote stability and manage migration in the region.

¹“Militancy and the Arc of Instability,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 6 June 2018, www.csis.org/analysis/militancy-and-arc-instability.

²Elischer, Sebastian, and Lisa Mueller. “Niger’s Protests Are Ramping Up. Here’s Why.” *Monkey Cage*, The Washington Post Company, 26 Mar. 2018, www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/03/26/nigers-protests-are-ramping-up-heres-why/; “U.S. Relations with Niger.” *U.S. Department of State*, www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-niger/.

Although migration from the African continent to Europe is well-documented,³ the highly localized political and governance issues that continue to drive *intra*-African migration have received little attention. Given that political volatility and exclusion most frequently corresponds with forced migration,⁴ the consideration of complex local governance and political dynamics is essential to managing migration. Policies and programs that do not engage these local dynamics may not only fail to comprehend the root causes of migration, but can also inflame those drivers inadvertently.⁵

The growing danger and irregularity⁶ of migration in the country necessitates a holistic response that entails better migration management and a concerted effort to improve democratic governance to secure Niger's stability.

Understanding the interaction between structural dynamics such as economic hardship, violence, and weak governance and individual agency is critical to developing effective governance responses to migration. Factors such as the means and the opportunity to leave; one's perception of economic prospects and living conditions abroad; and presence of support networks abroad, play a crucial role in conditioning one's responses to the context. Sufficient attention to these dynamics, which are often overlooked, is crucial when devising responses for migration, reintegration, and the governance challenges that animate the two.

■ Understanding the interaction between structural dynamics such as economic hardship, violence, and weak governance and individual agency is critical to developing effective governance responses to migration.

³ Hernández-Carretero, María, and Jørgen Carling. "Beyond Kamikaze Migrants: Risk Taking in West African Boat Migration to Europe." *Human Organization*, vol. 71, no. 4, Winter 2012, pp. 407-416; Flahaux, Marie-Laurence, and Hein De Haas. "African Migration: Trends, Patterns, Drivers." *Comparative Migration Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2016, p. 1; De Haas, Hein. "The Myth of Invasion: The Inconvenient Realities of African Migration to Europe." *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 29, no. 7, 2008, pp. 1305-1322; Kohnert, Dirk. "African Migration to Europe: Obscured Responsibilities and Common Misconceptions," 2007; Schapendonk, Joris. "Moving and Mediating: A Mobile View on Sub-Saharan African Migration towards Europe." *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, Jan. 2009; Hahn, Hans Peter, and Georg Klute, eds., *Cultures of Migration: African Perspectives*, vol. 32, LIT Verlag Münster, 2007.

⁴ Molenaar, Fransje, and Floor El Kamouni-Janssen. *Turning the Tide: The Politics of Irregular Migration in the Sahel and Libya*. Netherlands Institute of International Relations (Clingendael), Feb. 2017, www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/turning_the_tide.pdf. Citation within the text is Raleigh, Clionadh. "The Search for Safety: The Effects of Conflict, Poverty and Ecological Influences on Migration in the Developing World," *Global Environmental Change*, 21 Dec. 2011, p. 84; Davenport, Christian, et al. "Sometimes You Just Have to Leave: Domestic Threats and Forced Migration." *International Interactions*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2003, pp. 27-55; Moore, Will H., and Stephen M. Shellman. "Fear of Persecution: Forced Migration, 1952-1995." *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 48, no. 5, Oct. 2004, pp. 723-745; Hatton, Timothy J., and Jeffrey G. Williamson. "Demographic and Economic Pressure on Emigration Out of Africa," *Scandinavian Journal of Economics*, vol. 105, no. 3, Sept. 2003, pp. 465-486.

⁵ Molenaar and El Kamouni-Janssen. *Turning the Tide*.

⁶ As defined by the International Organization for Migration, "irregular migration" refers to the "movement of persons that takes place outside the laws, regulations, or international agreements governing the entry into or exit from the State of origin, transit or destination." See "Key Migration Terms." *International Organization for Migration*, www.iom.int/key-migration-terms. Accessed 23 Sept. 2019.

IRI's Approach to Migration

Unprecedented migration flows are one of the most pressing challenges facing the world today — straining resources, fomenting political instability, and presenting profound security challenges. Governments around the world are struggling to provide safety, basic services, and legal resources for the new arrivals while coping with attendant problems such as human trafficking and the drug trade, extremism and transnational crime, and the political instability that results from a large influx of migrants.

IRI approaches displacement and migration through the lens of democracy, human rights and governance. Recognizing that forced migration is both a driver and byproduct of instability, it is essential that governments and political actors — in conjunction with local community leaders — understand the perspectives and needs of refugees, migrants, as well as citizens in order to strengthen democratic societies and create a more stable and prosperous future.

IRI deploys the Institute's vast expertise in designing and implementing good governance programs to address and mitigate the challenges arising from migration, emphasizing three key elements: research, coordination and connection. IRI uses qualitative and quantitative research to provide objective information and analysis to better inform the responses of national and local governments and help the Institute to continually refine and improve our programs addressing migration. The Institute coordinates with key stakeholders to support them in strategic planning and resource allocation in response to migrant crises — enabling them to balance pressing humanitarian challenges with the needs of their own populations, while maintaining respect for the rule of law. IRI connects migrants to local government and civil society to address and

■ IRI connects migrants to local government and civil society to address and understand their needs in order to foster social cohesion and respect for the rule of law.

understand their needs in order to foster social cohesion and respect for the rule of law.

The purpose of this report is to understand the intersection of migration, governance and political representation. IRI contracted two Tillabéri-based youth representatives to conduct 20 interviews (15 men, five women) in or from Agadez, Matamey, Say, Tillabéri, Filingué, Tahoua and Niamey, Niger. IRI conducted supplemental research to ensure a holistic understanding of the topic. Throughout the report, IRI intertwines migrants' experiences in their own words with an examination of recent trends in migration and governance.

Governance, Economic and Security Challenges

Niger is one of the least developed countries in the world⁷ and struggles with extreme poverty, high rates of illiteracy, a rapidly burgeoning population, and significant risks of recurrent droughts and floods. Despite improvements in life expectancy, mean and expected years of schooling, and gross national income (GNI) per capita since 1990, Niger ranks 189 out of 189 on the Human Development Index.⁸ The local population faces dire economic strife, with a poverty rate of 44.1 percent and a gross national income per capita of \$380.⁹

⁷ "Niger." *Human Development Reports, UNDP*, hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/NER.

⁸ "Inequalities in Human Development in the 21st Century." *Human Development Report 2019, UNDP, 2019*, hdr.undp.org/sites/all/themes/hdr_theme/country-notes/NER.pdf.

⁹ "The World Bank in Niger: Overview." *World Bank*, www.worldbank.org/en/country/niger/overview#1.

■ Niger faces several governance barriers to its democratic development, including lack of resources, factionalism, impunity, low state capacity and corruption.

Surrounded by turbulent neighbors, violence, conflict and extremism have been on the rise over the last five years,¹⁰ particularly along the borders with Mali, Libya and Nigeria. In January 2020, suspected jihadists killed 89 Nigerien security forces in the Western town of Chinagodrar, on the border with Mali.¹¹ It was one of the latest in a series of attacks in the area and one of the deadliest in years.¹² Boko Haram has become more active in the Diffa region, conducting fatal attacks on refugee camps. Longstanding intercommunal tensions between pastoralists and sedentary farmers are exacerbated by growing competition over resources and offer readily exploitable divisions for Boko Haram and other transnational armed groups.¹³

Niger faces several governance barriers to its democratic development, including lack of resources, factionalism, impunity, low state capacity and corruption. After multiple military coups, the country returned to a democratic system in 2011 and is now working to consolidate

democratic gains. However, persistent political stalemates, pressure to respond to migration and the worsening security situation, which has sometimes served as a pretext to restricting human rights and civic space, remain challenges.¹⁴

The integrity of the Nigerien state is compromised by its reliance on volatile political arrangements between government and transnational and local actors such as armed and former rebel groups, and other nonstate actors.¹⁵ Niger has been caught in cycles of political upheaval for decades, which have significantly impeded socioeconomic development.

However, relative to other countries in the region, Niger has made significant progress toward decentralization, as well as managing the Tuareg insurgency and successfully incorporating former rebel groups into government. Despite its relative success, Niger's decentralization process is still very much a work in progress. Since this process began in the mid-1990s, Niger's two-tiered system of decentralization has aimed to improve service provision, security and political participation.¹⁶ However, decentralization has run into significant barriers in its implementation due to a dearth of resources, inefficiency and corruption. Additionally, the central government's policies, priorities and capacity often do not reflect the needs of local communities.

Despite shaky government performance and democratic development, polls indicate a high degree of pro-democratic sentiment in Niger.¹⁷

¹⁰ "Niger — Conflict Data." *Humanitarian Data Exchange*, data.humdata.org/dataset/acled-data-for-niger.

¹¹ Aksar, Moussa. "Niger Army Base Attack Death Toll Rises to at Least 89: Security Sources." *Reuters*, Thomson Reuters, 11 Jan. 2020, www.reuters.com/article/us-niger-security/niger-army-base-attack-death-toll-rises-to-at-least-89-security-sources-idUSKBN1ZA0TH.

¹² Aksar. "Niger Army Base Attack Death Toll Rises to at Least 89: Security Sources."

¹³ Gueret, Tristan. "Niger and the Fight against Violent Extremism in the Sahel." *RUSI*, 13 Apr. 2017, rusi.org/commentary/niger-and-fight-against-violent-extremism-sahel.

¹⁴ "Niger 2017/2018." *Amnesty International*, 2018, www.amnesty.org/en/countries/africa/niger/report-niger/. According to the U.S. State Department, "There were reports that the government and its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings. For example, the armed forces were accused of sometimes executing persons believed to be fighting with extremist groups in both Diffa and Tillabery Regions rather than holding them in detention." See "Niger." *2018 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices*. U.S. Department of State, 2018, www.state.gov/reports/2018-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/niger/.

¹⁵ Molenaar and El Kamouni-Janssen. "Introduction." *Turning the Tide*.

¹⁶ "Niger: Unitary Country." *United Cities and Local Governments*, Oct. 2016, www.uclg-localfinance.org/sites/default/files/NIGER-AFRICA-V3.pdf.

¹⁷ These numbers, however, need to be read with caution. It is unusual for a state that is unable to deliver on its social contract to enjoy high approval for democracy. A possible explanation for these numbers can be the aspirational value of democracy, i.e., for a citizenry that has experienced a number of authoritarian governments, democracy could be a declared preference, even as an imperfect alternative. Another possible explanation can be that the legacy of authoritarian rule is still intact, which makes people fearful of retribution while answering politically sensitive questions.

According to a 2016/2018 Afrobarometer poll, 69 percent of respondents prefer democracy over any other form of government.¹⁸ According to their 2015/2016 poll, 74 percent of respondents trust local government councilors and 73 percent trust parliament a lot or somewhat.¹⁹ Another promising trend in Niger's democratic trajectory is President Mahamadou Issoufou's recognition of the constitutional two-term limit. In sharp juxtaposition to leaders in neighboring Chad and Cameroon, Issoufou is planning to step down when his term expires in 2021. If this comes to pass as expected, it will be an unprecedented power transition in Niger's history.²⁰

Recent Migration Trends in Niger

West Africa accounts for the largest source of migrants in Africa, with 8.4 million individuals moving within their countries, the region, or around the world.²¹ Trans-Saharan migration has a deep historical legacy in the region, a consequence of its persistent economic and climatic challenges. Despite the conventional nature of migration, it was only recently that *irregular* migration — movement outside laws, regulations, or international agreements²² — increased significantly, according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM).²³ Although other factors are undoubtedly at play in Niger in particular, tracing back the origins of this spike requires consideration of two key developments: the fall of the Gaddafi regime and the Nigerien government's subsequent passage of the Law on the Illicit Smuggling of Migrants.

For decades, migration has been a regular phenomenon in Niger, with people on the move

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to, through and from the country. Located at a critical juncture in the region, Niger is a launch point for many West and Central African migrants and asylum seekers looking to escape violence or persecution or to improve their economic well-being in North Africa and Europe. The steady flow of migration accelerated after the 2011 fall of Libya's Gaddafi regime, which had acted as a gatekeeper between sub-Saharan Africa and Europe. This movement reached a peak in 2015-16 when an estimated 330,000 individuals²⁴ traveled north through Niger — 170,000 of whom traveled through the gateway town of Agadez, Niger.²⁵ These movements through the country became an economic boon for communities along the migratory routes; local economies flourished and migration was once the primary source of income in Agadez.²⁶

¹⁸ "Most Africans Still Want Democracy, but Fewer than One in Six Qualify as 'Dissatisfied Democrats.'" *Afrobarometer*, 26 Feb. 2019, afrobarometer.org/press/support-democracy-stays-strong-africa-dissatisfied-democrats-who-will-safeguard-its-future-are-few.

¹⁹ "Most Africans Still Want Democracy, but Fewer than One in Six Qualify as 'Dissatisfied Democrats.'" *Afrobarometer*.

²⁰ "Niger President Mahamadou Issoufou Rules Out Bid for Third Term." *Africanews*, 2 Apr. 2017, www.africanews.com/2017/04/02/niger-president-mahamadou-issoufou-rules-out-bid-for-third-term/.

²¹ "West and Central Africa." *International Organization for Migration*, 7 May 2015, www.iom.int/west-and-central-africa.

²² "Key Migration Terms." *International Organization for Migration*, 23 Sept. 2019, www.iom.int/key-migration-terms.

²³ "West and Central Africa." *International Organization for Migration*.

²⁴ Ruhfus, Juliana. "Niger: Europe Migration." *Al Jazeera*, 10 Jan. 2019, www.aljazeera.com/programmes/peopleandpower/2019/01/niger-europe-migration-190110051916545.html.

²⁵ Destrifjcker, Lucas. "Welcome to Agadez, Smuggling Capital of Africa." *POLITICO*, 22 Nov. 2016, www.politico.eu/article/the-smuggling-capital-of-africa-agadez-niger/.

²⁶ Carayol, Rémi. "What Happened When the EU Moved Its Fight to Stop Migration to Niger." *The Nation*, 5 July 2019, www.thenation.com/article/niger-agadez-migration/.

Concerned by the increasing number of African migrants to Europe, the European Union (EU) incentivized Niger (as well as Libya) to stem the flows of migrants, and promised significant amount of assistance in return.²⁷ In response to this pressure, the Nigerien government passed a Law on the Illicit Smuggling of Migrants (2015-36),²⁸ which criminalized many previously legitimate businesses associated with migration, including managers of migrant “ghettos”; ordered the confiscation of vehicles and arrest of individuals who drove migrants through the Sahara (most of whom had been operating within local laws²⁹); and imposed major restrictions to dissuade open and legal migration. In practice, this law represents a de facto ban on migration north of Agadez, according to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants, “... in violation of the principle of freedom of movement of ECOWAS [Economic Community of West African States] nationals within the region.”³⁰

Although these measures appeared to achieve the EU’s objectives of diminishing migration flows through Niger — dropping from 333,891 in 2016 to 43,380 in 2018³¹ — they have had unintended consequences, including deep adverse economic impact, as well as an increase in irregular migration.³² The Law on the Illicit Smuggling of Migrants has “pushed migrants into hiding, which renders them more vulnerable to abuse and human rights violations,” according to the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants.³³ Individuals seeking to migrate instead resort to more dangerous, expensive and illegal

means. The local economy along the migratory routes — such as stores previously patronized by migrants — has been severely damaged. Thousands of drivers are out of work and only a small number benefit from reintegration programs sponsored by the EU.

Left with few other employment options, young men previously employed as transporters are now more vulnerable to recruitment efforts by human or drug traffickers, or even violent extremist groups.³⁴ A returnee man from Niamey noted the danger in his community because smugglers are increasingly violent: “I do not feel very safe because, lately, smugglers stab you in the street and take away your goods, or they attack you at home.”

Another individual, who is a representative of a nongovernmental organization (NGO) that is focused on the integration of smugglers, noted:

We [former smugglers] used to work in full accordance with the laws. We even had legal papers in order to work in full compliance with the law. The government has passed this bill 036 and has forbidden us to work again without consulting us. We are now considered as criminals when we are not. ... [B]efore the law 036, following tourism, migration was the main source of revenue in Agadez.

Another NGO representative focused on youth empowerment further explained:

When we consider the current situation in

²⁷ “EU, African Leaders Back New Plan over Migrant Crisis.” *Al Jazeera*, 28 Aug. 2017, www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/08/eu-african-leaders-plan-migrant-crisis-170828193540666.html.

²⁸ Republic of Niger. “Statement on Illegal Migrants.” *United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime*, 26 May 2015, sherloc.unodc.org/res/cld/document/ner/2015/loi_relative_au_trafic_illicite_de_migrants_html/Loi_N2015-36_relative_au_trafic_illicite_de_migrants.pdf.

²⁹ Ruhfus. “Niger: Europe Migration.”

³⁰ “Niger: Human Rights Protection Must Be Central to Migration Policies, Says Expert.” *OHCHR*, 11 Oct. 2018, www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=23709&LangID=E.

³¹ According to the IOM data provided during the visit of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants and Based on Monitoring Trends Collected in Arlit and Séguédine. See Zandonini, Giacomo. “The Monday That Changed Migration in Niger.” *Open Migration*, 22 May 2018, openmigration.org/en/analyses/the-monday-that-changed-migration-in-niger/; *Visit to the Niger — Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants, UN*, 16 May 2019, documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G19/140/43/PDF/G1914043.pdf?OpenElement.

³² Zandonini. “The Monday That Changed Migration in Niger.”

³³ “End of Mission Statement of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants, Felipe González Morales, on His Visit to Niger (1-8 October 2018).” *OHCHR*, www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=23698&LangID=E.

³⁴ Taub, Ben. “The Desperate Journey of a Trafficked Girl.” *The New Yorker*, 10 April 2017, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/04/10/the-desperate-journey-of-a-trafficked-girl. This journalist reported that every smuggler that he met “expressed concern that the crackdown in Agadez would leave local young men vulnerable to recruitment by jihadi groups.”

Agadez, it is a time bomb. When we visit the prisons of Agadez, they are many former smugglers there who have no prospects. But given their past high financial incomes, compared to what they gain today following their reconversion, many of them fail to meet both ends and they become highway robbers.

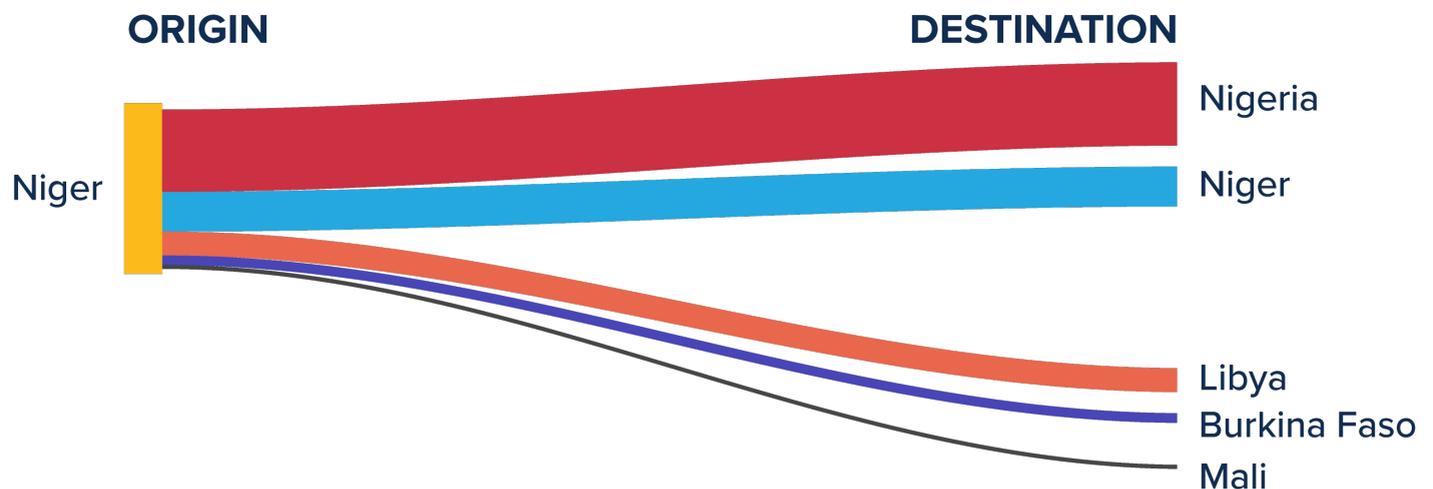
Returnee Perspectives on Migration

Drivers

Across West and Central Africa, migration is driven by a wide range of interplaying factors, including

increasingly dire environmental and economic circumstances, families seeking to reunite with members who have migrated, as well as violence and persecution.³⁵ From most to least frequently, Nigeriens most commonly migrate (or are forcibly displaced), to Nigeria, internally,³⁷ Libya, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Algeria (see Figure 1 below). As a country of origin, Niger's challenging economic situation has led to consistent outflows for more than half a century and seasonal migration is a societal norm.³⁸ Many interviewees named economic hardship as driving their migration. For example, one returnee from Filingué said, "The reason I left is that I thought I would earn more

Figure 1: Migration Flows from Niger, January 2017–September 2018



Source: International Organization for Migration.³⁹

³⁵ "Migration Flows in West & Central Africa." *Displacement. International Organization for Migration.*

³⁶ "Migration Flows in West & Central Africa." *Displacement. International Organization for Migration.*

³⁷ Niger ranks 30th on the list of countries with the most amount of internally displaced people and is rated even higher on the list of new displacements. See "Niger." Internal Displacement Monitoring Center, www.internal-displacement.org/countries/niger.

³⁸ "Niger." *The World Factbook*, CIA, www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ng.html.

³⁹ "Migration Flows in West & Central Africa." *Displacement. International Organization for Migration*, displacement.iom.int/data-stories/migration-flows-west-central-africa.

“ [The government could have prevented irregular migration] by fulfilling their responsibilities by creating alternatives solutions for us that could lead to having a job.”

- A returnee man, Filingue

money in Libya with the masonry that I was doing in Filingué ... which does not provide me enough.”

In Niger, where the majority of the population is reliant on agriculture for its livelihood,⁴⁰ many people migrate seasonally to escape the increasingly devastating periods of drought. Interviewees referenced losing their jobs after the rainy season ends and drought ensues. For some, it is impossible to sustain themselves and their families during a lapse in employment — some even find themselves on the verge of starvation.⁴¹ As one returnee woman from Yaoure put it, “After the rainy season, people become jobless. At some point, they do not even have enough to eat.” Migration enables individuals to send money back to their families or return with savings. This is consistent with research that shows that

environmental insecurity leads to migration in agrarian societies.⁴²

Niger remains vulnerable and highly exposed to risks, including violent extremism, demographic shifts, resource scarcity and climate variability. These trends have the potential to significantly impact migration trends and undermine the country’s stability. In December 2019 and January 2020, Niger suffered from some of the deadliest terrorist assaults in recent history, and according to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, attacks in Niger have grown four-fold.⁴³ While displacement from conflict-affected areas is on the rise,⁴⁴ perceptions of insecurity can also lead to more out-migration. As one NGO representative noted, “Terrorism is gaining ground. Many will tell you that it is much better to try one’s luck elsewhere than to stay here and die.” Population growth also impacts the drivers of migration; Niger has the highest birth rate in the world. The country’s rapidly growing population has accelerated competition over and strained the distribution of already-limited resources and land; the resulting spread of poverty and unrest is expected to give rise to migration.⁴⁵

Niger and the Sahel region as a whole are characterized by an increase in drought, desertification and flooding. Environmental damage and the lack of effective governance responses undermine people’s economic prospects and drive them to migrate in search of better opportunities.⁴⁶ Interviewees reported that droughts were increasingly harsh due to climate change, which creates ripple effects throughout the country — increasing poverty, presenting health and food security challenges, and leading to resource scarcity and conflict. As one NGO

⁴⁰ According to the CIA’s *World Factbook*, “Agriculture contributes approximately 40% of GDP and provides livelihood for over 80% of the population.” See “Niger.” *The World Factbook*, CIA.

⁴¹ “General Information on Niger.” *SOS Children’s Villages International*, www.sos-childrensvillages.org/where-we-help/africa/niger.

⁴² Shrestha, Sundar S., and Prem Bhandari. “Environmental Security and Labor Migration in Nepal.” *Population and Environment*, 29, no. 1, 2007, pp. 25-38.

⁴³ Aksar. “Niger Army Base Attack Death Toll Rises to at Least 89: Security Sources.”

⁴⁴ “Niger.” *UNHCR Operational Portal Refugee Situations*. UNHCR, data2.unhcr.org/en/country/ner.

⁴⁵ “High Birth Rates Are Causing Poverty in Niger.” *Deutsche Welle*, Oct. 25, 2011, www.dw.com/en/high-birth-rates-are-causing-poverty-in-niger/a-15486353.

⁴⁶ Afifi, Tamer. “Economic or Environmental Migration? The Push Factors in Niger.” *International Migration* vol. 49, 2011, pp. e95-e124.

representative noted, "Agriculture is weakened by the climatic hazards that dramatically reduces the harvest. Consequently, people are obliged to look for ways and means to fill the gaps."

Governance challenges such as low state capacity and support, economic inequality and corruption exacerbate poverty and resource insecurity.⁴⁷ For example, an NGO representative noted that individuals leave due to multifaceted, overlapping reasons, including "general frustration due to bad governance," explaining, "The lack of opportunity, poor governance, lack of hope, conflicts and especially climate change causing drought are the main push factors of young people' immigration to other countries." A returnee man from Filingue held the government responsible for many of the issues facing the country, saying, "[The government could have prevented irregular migration] by fulfilling their responsibilities by creating alternatives solutions for us that could lead to having a job. In addition, they [should] make us aware of the risks of irregular immigration."

The security and migration situations have also necessitated significant financial spending, which reduces resources for investment and aggravates economic problems that often drive migration.⁴⁸ At the core of Niger's challenging economic situation is the political instability and upheaval that has plagued the country for decades.⁴⁹ As such, governance deficiencies and economic migration are inextricably linked, and lack of governance will continue to pose a threat to socioeconomic progress. Not only are high-quality institutions necessary for growth and development, but both high- and low-skilled workers are more likely to leave countries with weak institutions.⁵⁰

“ Personally, if someone had informed me about all the risks associated with this trip before I left my village, I would not have taken the road, especially with my children.”

- A returnee woman, Yaoure

Although the drivers of migration in the region are widely recognized, societal pressures are frequently overlooked. Across West Africa, a culture of migration has developed as a strategy to cope with poverty, drought or conflict.⁵¹ Given Niger's long history of migration, the phenomenon is so deeply engrained in some communities that it has become an obligation for some youth — which, if unpursued, can even be a source of shame. Respondents from Tahoua remarked that fellow community members consider migration to be a rite of passage for adolescent men, as families are unable to care for youth after they become teens. One individual mentioned that if a young a man does not migrate, "... he will be the laughing stock ... for the rest of his life."

Migration is not only perceived as an obligation,

⁴⁷ Turner, Matthew, and Molly S. Teague. *Trans-Saharan Labour Emigration from Niger: Local Governance as Mediator of Its Underlying Causes and Consequences*, Working Paper No. 16, Swedish International Center for Local Democracy, 2019, www.localizingthesdgs.org/library/606/Trans-Saharan-labour-emigration-from-Niger-Local-governance-as-mediator-of-its-underlying-causes-and-consequences.pdf.

⁴⁸ "Niger: Overview." *World Bank*, www.worldbank.org/en/country/niger/overview.

⁴⁹ "Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index BTI 2018 Country Report Niger." *Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index*, 2018, www.bti-project.org/fileadmin/files/BTI/Downloads/Reports/2018/pdf/BTI_2018_Niger.pdf.

⁵⁰ Molenaar, Fransje, and Floor El Kamouni-Janssen. *Turning the Tide*.

⁵¹ "African Migration: Root Causes and Regulatory Dynamics (AMIREG)." *United Nations University*, unu.edu/projects/african-migration-root-causes-and-regulatory-dynamics-amireg.html.

■ Security and government officials often turn a blind eye or request bribes from migrants and smugglers at checkpoints. On many occasions, the state security forces, smugglers and criminal networks work in cahoots.

but also as a source of admiration. One returnee woman from Matamey said, “What motivated me to go [to Algeria] is the fact of hearing stories of people who had travelled there and who had come back with wealth. There is also the fact of seeing some examples of people who were there and who were sending money to their families.” Positive attitudes and opinions of migration reinforce aspirations to migrate, but high expectations have not yet aligned with some of the negative realities. For example, a returnee woman from Yaoure said, “Personally, if someone had informed me about all the risks associated with this trip, I would not have taken the road, especially with my children.”

These findings lay out the key challenges that create conditions that lead individuals to migrate — seasonally or permanently — from Niger. In order to develop informed policy and programmatic responses, it is critical to understand the drivers of migration and structural conditions that intersect with individual motivations. Although migration in the region is nothing new, there is a sharp divergence between its increasingly dangerous realities and the deeply

engrained societal norms that push individuals to migrate.

Dangerous Journeys through the Sahara

Although the push and pull factors described above have characterized migration in Niger for decades, the journey through the desert has increased in danger and risk due to the passage of the Law on the Illicit Smuggling of Migrants. In tacit agreement with the national government, these routes were previously co-opted by tribal elites — mainly the Tuareg — in order to maintain stability in the north.⁵²

Today, many aspects of migration have been criminalized or disincentivized due to the Law on the Illicit Smuggling of Migrants. For example, as a result of state intervention there are no longer any bus companies that travel north of Agadez and migrant ghettos and desert convoys are increasingly subject to government crackdown.⁵³ Individuals instead often resort to paying smugglers for transportation across the Sahara. As a returnee man from Filingué put it:

When I left Filingué, it took two weeks to arrive in Libya. We take the bus to go to Agadez. Once in Agadez, we enter large trucks that carry the migrants and we are escorted by the defense and security forces to the border at Madama. At the borders, there are smugglers from Libya who come to pick us up because they are the ones who know the fraudulent roads.

At each leg of the journey, Nigerien migrants are subjected to abuse, violence and exploitation. There are no reliable data on how many have died in the unforgiving environment and conditions. Armed militias, bandits, and traffickers run amok in the desert and attack the migrant caravans.

⁵² Turner and Teague. “Trans-Saharan Labour Emigration from Niger.”

⁵³ Turner and Teague. “Trans-Saharan Labour Emigration from Niger.”

WOMEN AS MIGRANTS: THE “FEMINIZATION” OF MIGRATION IN NIGER

Over the past 20 years, and particularly in central Niger, Nigerien women are more frequently migrating.⁵⁴ For example, in November 2019, women made up 20 percent of migrants, in comparison to 14 percent a year prior.⁵⁵ Some returnee women mentioned leaving Niger to join their family members who were already abroad, while others were single mothers in search of ways to provide for their children and send money back home. There are regional variations: one NGO representative noted, “In Tahoua, one of the migration regions par excellence, all men leave after the rainy season, but in Zinder, in the department of Kantché, women take children to go to Algeria or Libya to beg while men are at home and await the return of their women.”⁵⁶

Throughout all stages of migration, women are uniquely susceptible to potential harm. Returnee women reported that they or other migrant women they knew faced violence, harassment, forced prostitution and sexual exploitation on their journey. As one returnee woman from Niamey noted, “Other women with whom I travelled suffered from hunger because they were lacking provisions and money and were not able to communicate with their families. That’s why some of them were vulnerable to prostitution.”

If they are able to return home, women also face distinct challenges when attempting to socially and economically reintegrate. For example, one NGO representative noted, “In Kantché (Zinder), women who went to Alegira, when they return, people say they went there to be prostitutes, so they are rejected.” Another returnee woman from Yaoure was able to return to Agadez but lacked the funds to complete her journey home. While stuck in Agadez, she was homeless and unable to find employment. As she put it, “Since my return to Agadez, I have no place where to sleep. ... We do not even have anything to eat. Sometimes, the people who come to the mosque give us alms. ... I am also looking for a job. I am hoping that with the money we will be able to pay for our transport to return home to Yaoure.”

Another migrant woman from Yaoure mentioned that in Agadez, migrant women are often victims of sexual assault and rape. The UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants noted with concern that this vulnerability has exacerbated in the wake of the passage of the Law on the Illicit Smuggling of Migrants.⁵⁷ Consideration of these unique gender dynamics is not only critical to a holistic and human rights-based migration response in the country, but also imperative to ensuring respect of human rights and inclusive democracy in Niger.

⁵⁴ Notably, however, the majority of individuals migrating from Niger are men. See Turner and Teague. “Trans-Saharan Labour Emigration from Niger”; *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants*, OHCHR, 16 May 2019. A/HRC/41/38/Add.1. ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage_e.aspx?si=A/HRC/41/38/Add.1.

⁵⁵ *Niger – Flow Monitoring Report (November 2019)*. IOM, migration.iom.int/reports/niger-%E2%80%94-flow-monitoring-report-29-november-2019.

⁵⁶ Correspondingly, 76 percent of Nigeriens expelled from Algeria are women from the Zinder region. See *Visit to the Niger – Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants*, OHCHR, 16 May 2019, ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage_e.aspx?si=A/HRC/41/38/Add.1.

⁵⁷ *Visit to the Niger – Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants*, OHCHR, 16 May 2019.

A returnee man from Niamey mentioned that a militia attacked and extorted money from members of his caravan, taking their belongings and indiscriminately killing some individuals in front of the group. A returnee man from Say said:

I was sold as a commodity, tortured. One day, I was waiting for a taxi to go home when a car popped up and men got out and forced me to get in. (...). Our captors asked us for a ransom of 100,000 francs for our release. ... If you had something to pay or someone to contact to come and pay, you were safe. Otherwise, they would beat you, I even saw one killed, or they would hand you over to the police to repatriate you. I was able to call a friend of mine who was a tailor who agreed to pay for me. They sold me to a man for 75,000 francs and he brought me to town where my friend paid him 150 dinars to free me.

In addition to the risk of violence, migrants suffer harsh conditions and poor treatment at the hands of the smugglers or other malign actors. One returnee man from Filingué said, "Before reaching the capital city (Tripoli), the smugglers hid us in houses so that we did not go out and avoided causing them problems. ... The smugglers closed us in houses for three to four days without eating." A returnee man from Filingué recalled his journey: "Bandits ... attacked us barely 10 kilometers after we departed from Arlit. They took away our money and our provisions."

Security and government officials often turn a blind eye or request bribes from migrants and smugglers at checkpoints. On many occasions, the state security forces, smugglers and criminal networks work in cahoots. At the national level, criminal and smuggling networks collude with national political elites; politics can be funded through various forms of trafficking money.⁵⁸

■ Security challenges and risks do not end once migrants reach their final destination.

Returnees referenced xenophobia, racism and insecurity as shaping their experiences as migrants and compelling their return.

The state's complicity in irregular migration inadvertently drives migration by hollowing out institutions.⁵⁹

Migrant Interactions with Host Communities, Return and Reintegration

Security challenges and risks do not end once migrants reach their final destination. Interviewees most frequently referred to their time working in Libya, which has long been a destination for African migrants looking for work. Returnees referenced xenophobia, racism and insecurity as shaping their experiences as migrants and compelling their return. One returnee man from Niamey said, "[You] should also understand that the Arabs in Libya are really racists. They do not like black people at all and they consider [and call us] slaves." The treatment of migrants in Libya has worsened, especially for those who are caught in attempts to cross the Mediterranean Sea. These

⁵⁸ Turner and Teague. "Trans-Saharan Labour Emigration from Niger."

⁵⁹ Turner and Teague. "Trans-Saharan Labour Emigration from Niger."

⁶⁰ Raikes, Elinor. "What Migrants Face in Libya." Interview by Steve Inskeep, *Morning Edition, NPR*, 5 July 2019, www.npr.org/2019/07/05/738860232/what-migrants-face-in-libya.

■ The Law on the Illicit Smuggling of Migrants has a significant impact on migration management. Returnees have expressed frustration with this law, arguing that this was a hardline response that did not consider the realities associated with migration or the unintended consequences of the law.

individuals are detained and subject to violence, sexual assault and killings.⁶⁰

As such, tremendous dangers are associated with the journey and stay in host communities. Yet the desire for economic advancement and employment, combined with success stories shared in their home communities, appeared to drown out any previous warnings of potential perils. Such anecdotes illustrate both the immense risk some individuals are willing to undertake in order to find reprieve from their dire economic circumstances, and the dangerously low levels of awareness about the threats associated with the migratory journey and with some host communities.

When migrants return home they often face stigma and significant challenges to their economic and social reintegration. Some returnees are unable to find jobs or find themselves stuck during different legs of their travel because they cannot earn enough money to return to their communities of origin. Returnees lack the support structures or fora to heal from traumatic experience from their migration, and as a result feel excluded by their own communities and even families, believing that no one could or desires to understand their experiences.

Across the interviews, community perceptions – and stigma – of returnees depended on their success in obtaining additional wealth. While some migrants felt that they were lauded for their bravery, others felt that they are perceived as a burden because they returned empty-handed. One NGO representative noted, “Many have received financial help on their departure and who contributed are expecting a return of their funding. As a result, the returnees have this social shame and cannot stay in their own communities. This situation affects many young people in Niger”

Socio political integration, inclusion, and relations with key authorities also present challenges to returning migrants. One government official said, “Returnees have more negative than a positive impact. They [increase] sanitation problems; they increase the unemployment rate, and the need for public investment. ... Most of the returnees have been repatriated by force. A certain frustration results from this forced return. This is what causes us to some problems with returnees sometimes.” Returnees, in turn, often feel the government does little to help them reintegrate. As one NGO representative put it, “One of the biggest challenges is reintegration. There is ... [an] absence of a real reintegration policy.”

Migration and Governance

Popular support for democratic institutions is high in Niger. Government performance, however, falls short on provision of basic services and migration management. Returnees mentioned that the government rarely engages or considers the opinions of its citizens, let alone marginalized populations such as youth, women and migrants. Efficiency is lacking at the local level as well; given the slow-moving decentralization process, Nigeriens are unaware of local government mandates and thus unable to hold them to account.⁶¹ The decentralization process has also been plagued by power struggles among local authorities.

⁶¹ “BTI 2018 Country Report: Niger.” Bertelsmann Stiftung’s Transformation Index, 2018, www.bti-project.org/fileadmin/files/BTI/Downloads/Reports/2018/pdf/BTI_2018_Niger.pdf.

Regardless of the policy challenge, there is compelling evidence that gaps in governance affect people's likelihood to migrate. Weak or incapable governance provides the background conditions that then interact with individual motivations to produce migration as a response. Fleeing persecution or oppression and seeking a better life elsewhere are not necessarily mutually exclusive. To engage with and address migration, existing governance frameworks need to be expanded to manage new forms of human mobility, and enhance resilience of the migrants, as well as those who chose not to migrate.⁶²

Migration Management

Niger does not have national policy or strategy on migration,⁶³ but the Law on the Illicit Smuggling of Migrants has a significant impact on migration management. Returnees have expressed frustration with this law, arguing that this was a hardline response that did not consider the realities associated with migration or the unintended consequences of the law. A returnee man from Filingué said:

On the one hand, the government officials harm us. They harm us because on departure, they do not facilitate the trip. We cannot easily have the required legal documents that allow us to go to foreign countries. Furthermore, the police forces racket us too much on the way. On the other hand, they help us. When we returned or are repatriated, they bring us assistance to go home.

One NGO representative noted:

A certain number of measures have been taken [by the government] in order to manage [irregular migration]. However, these measures may have opposite consequences

depending on their orientation. Given that prohibiting the transport of migrants creates economic problems in some regions like Agadez, it increases the problem of unemployment, and poverty amongst the populations.

Additionally, there appear to be critically low levels of understanding of the law and emanating risks. Civil society and government actors highlighted successes they had seen with their sensitization campaigns. One respondent from a national government agency said, "[The agency] has carried out many sensitization and training campaigns for magistrates, judicial police officers and the population. There have also been radio and television debates, sketches to address the effects of migration."

While some initiatives — like those cited above — exist, many discussants believed that they were simply not enough. One returnee said, "The authorities do not communicate with the communities [about migration policies]." Other returnees noted that, prior to making the decision to leave, they were unaware of the dangers of irregular migration. Another NGO representative speculated that the lack of awareness of dangers associated with migration was due to "mistrust" in the state's public policies: "The state tries to give them a perspective, but many prefer to return to try their luck often at the cost of their lives."

Returnees expressed their willingness to share their experiences and warn others about the dangers and risks of irregular migration. Before leaving, some returnees knew the conditions would be dire, but believed that earning additional wealth would outweigh these troubles. Now they feel that if someone had informed them sufficiently of the dangers, they would not have migrated. As one returnee man from Filingué said:

⁶² Warner, Koko. "Global Environmental Change and Migration: Governance Challenges." *Global Environmental Change*, vol. 20, no. 3, 2010, pp. 402-413.

⁶³ "Niger: Human Rights Protection Must Be Central to Migration Policies, Says Expert." *OHCHR*, www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=23709&LangID=E.

SNAPSHOT: HOW IRI AMPLIFIES MIGRANT VOICES

The voices of migrants themselves are often overlooked in national and international discourse on migration. In partnership with the Azadi Project, IRI trained returnees from Niger in digital media and multimedia communications to equip them with the skills and provide a platform to share their stories.⁶⁴



During the training, Biba, a female participant, shared her story and explained that she had left her three-year-old son behind because she feared he would not survive the harsh journey. She was taken to the Libyan border in a car by a human trafficker, traveling nonstop for days in a packed car across the desert without food or water.

As a result of this workshop, participants improved their capacity to share their experiences and needs with local authorities. Equipped with their newly gained confidence and skills, several participants shared their experiences with key government actors after the workshop. According to one participant, "The project really helped me learn how to express my opinions. Since the workshop, the director of programs for the Ministry of Immigration in Tahoua invited me to share my experiences through a community dialogue and respond to the participants' questions."

Another participant has since met with the mayor of his village as well as the representative of the Minister of the Environment to share his experiences about his migration to Libya and offer recommendations about how the government can help Nigeriens remain in their country rather than leave to seek employment elsewhere. "I really appreciate the training," he said. "I feel important because I am involved in so many activities and I have been recently chosen as the chairman of the young people who have returned from Libya."

A third beneficiary organized and participated in a radio debate about migration, which broadcast out to Tahoua and the surrounding villages. Many people called into the radio station during the show to ask questions about his migration experience and the risks entailed with migration across the Sahara Desert. The project not only provided a safe space for migrants to share to speak openly about their migration experiences, but also helped connect returnees with their government representatives.

⁶⁴ Sadek, Dina, et al. "In Their Own Words: A Digital Media Project in Niger Amplifies Migrant Voices." *Democracy Speaks*, International Republican Institute, 20 Aug. 2019, www.democracyspeaks.org/blog/their-own-words-digital-media-project-niger-amplifies-migrant-voices.

Yes, I [have discussed my migration experience]. I even discussed it today with some friends who are planning to emigrate. I made them understand the risks because only the day before yesterday one of our friends was murdered there. I am interested in doing it to raise awareness because in a foreign country a migrant is not free to move, to express himself when he emigrates under irregular conditions. There are also the difficulties encountered during the trip. Sometimes you cannot even reach your destination, many die before arriving.

Awareness campaigns about the realities of migration — as well as the implications of the Law on the Illicit Smuggling of Migrants — are critical to amplify migrant experience and dispel any myths surrounding the journey. However, such efforts can only go so far. In some circumstances, migrants may be aware but still willing to take immense risks with hopes of improving the lives of themselves and their families — and may see such perils as worth facing because of the dire situation at home. As one returnee woman explains, “If there were opportunities and jobs here, I would never leave Niger and go to a new country to be treated as a slave. Why would anyone risk their life if it wasn’t out of dire necessity?”⁶⁵ Ultimately, effective, safe and democratic migration management must go beyond securitized measures and rest on respect for human rights and the rule of law, or risk exacerbating the problem.

Local Governance and Political Participation

Improved local governance could represent an opportunity to enhance resource management, service delivery and political participation. Undoubtedly, local government strongly affects

■ As the decentralization process continues, improved local governance could represent an opportunity to enhance resource management, service delivery and political participation.

and is affected by migration. One local authority, who was a member of the communal observatory for migration in Agadez, said, “The arrival of migrants in the city has an impact on resources, security, respect of the regulations, and the socioeconomic environment of the city. The conditions [do not] make their arrival a positive thing for the city.” The departure of individuals can also inhibit agricultural production and other forms of economic development in local communities.⁶⁶ Yet migration also yields positive impacts for local authorities, which indirectly benefit from migrant remittances and returnees’ additional income and skills.⁶⁷ Remittances can reduce poverty, foster entrepreneurship and stimulate the local economy. Returnees — especially those who found financial success abroad — often influence or participate in formal and informal political processes and development programs. As a consequence, emigration is generally perceived favorably among local authorities.⁶⁸

Local government can also play an instrumental role in mitigating irregular and dangerous

⁶⁵ “Meet Biba Souley, a Migrant Returnee in Niger,” *YouTube*, uploaded by the Azadi Project, 2 June 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=0MKUPbfpixE.

⁶⁶ Turner and Teague. “*Trans-Saharan Labour Emigration from Niger*.” 2019, www.localizingthesdgs.org/library/606/Trans-Saharan-labour-emigration-from-Niger-Local-governance-as-mediator-of-its-underlying-causes-and-consequences.pdf.

⁶⁷ Turner and Teague. “*Trans-Saharan Labour Emigration from Niger*.”

⁶⁸ Turner and Teague. *Trans-Saharan Labour Emigration from Niger*.

migration as well as reintegrating returned migrants through conducting outreach; resolving conflict and disputes; coordinating NGO and state assistance; and distributing land and other resources.⁶⁹ Returnees mentioned a strong desire to engage with the government and be involved with the decision-making process in their communities, whether through targeted advocacy or engagement through participatory structures. Returnees also want to help formulate solutions to some of the most pressing challenges, including migration. As a returnee man from Filingue explained:

I personally want to be involved in the decision-making processes to be able to give my opinions and express our needs in order to find solutions to our problems. ... To be involved, we need to have a formal organization through which we will designate our representatives to express our opinions and our needs in decision-making bodies.

There is significant opportunity to build on the momentum of positive attitudes about democracy to make progress toward bolstering responsive governance.

Returnees mentioned a range of ideas about how to get involved — one even mentioned that he would like to run for office. Beyond directly engaging the government, interviewees suggested the establishment of formal or informal participatory structures to amplify the voices of citizens and returnees, including through associations, policy discussions, and initiatives addressing irregular migration and reintegration. One NGO representative said, “There was a returnees’ management committee in each commune during the Libyan crisis that included a representative of returnees who had to make their voices heard.”

Interviewees also expressed interest in engaging in advocacy initiatives or linking with NGOs to ensure their voices are heard by the government. A returnee from Tahoua argued, “It is important to carry out advocacy activities, and influence the government’s policies on good governance, to create businesses, to facilitate access to guarantee funds, and to create and equip entertainment centers for young people where needed.” The voices of local communities must also be heard at the national level and strengthening national-local coordination is especially integral when tackling migration. As one NGO representative put it:

[Returnees are not heard because they] are not organized into an organization or association that is worthy listening to. Their relationship with the government can change, firstly through civil society organizations that represent the marginalized groups. They must play a very important role in terms of defending the interests of the returnees. They must also have projects that support for these returnees so that they can make their voices heard. Returnees should be involved in CSO’s activities so they can also from time to time, make their voices heard by themselves. In the development of migration policy, the government must discuss with returnees in order to consider their needs.

⁶⁹ Turner and Teague. *Trans-Saharan Labour Emigration from Niger*.

CONCLUSION

While Niger has a long record of experience with migration, in recent years, the situation of migrants has significantly deteriorated, with an increase in harassment, violence, abuse, trafficking and even murder. Governance deficiencies are a key underlying factor that create the conditions that motivate individuals to leave. Doing so is a pressing concern: If migration is not managed in a safe and democratic manner, Niger could descend into instability and violence.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations below are designed to offer program entry points and policy guidance for organizations, officials, and implementers working to address the significant challenges stemming from irregular migration in Niger. The recommendations represent a first step toward using the research findings in this report to develop evidence-based strategies to governance and migration issues. They focus specifically on how enhanced democratic governance can be leveraged to develop inclusive strategies to address the migration challenge.

Recommendation 1:

1 International donors, national and local governments in Niger, and civil society actors should prioritize tailored governance programming to address issues of political exclusion. This includes enhancing direct citizen consultation, especially at the local level, in government decision-making to better understand the needs of youth, returnees and other marginalized populations.

Sixty-eight percent of the Nigerien population are youth or children below the age of 25.⁷⁰ Given that youth are not only a key demographic in the country, but also a significant part of the migrating population, it is critical to place young people at the center of the decision-making process. Interviews indicated a lack of local ownership of the challenges that sustained and emerged as a result of migration. Community engagement initiatives should focus on collecting data in a systematic way about the migration experience, and facilitating conversation between migrants and the local authorities focused on the interaction between migration and governance. These initiatives should also seek to address the root causes and conditions that lead to departures.

⁷⁰ "Niger." *The World Factbook*, CIA, 1 Feb. 2018, www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ng.html.

Recommendation 2:

- 2** Politicians — and particularly candidates in the 2020 general elections — should incorporate issues of migration in their campaign platforms in order and policies to foster political inclusion and address the growing irregularity of migration.

As Niger prepares for a historic transition of power in 2020, it is essential to consider the voices of vulnerable populations, including returnees, as campaign platforms are developed in the runup to the political transition. A recurring undertone in the interviews was the perception among migrants about the indifference shown by politicians. Civil society actors should engage and train candidates running for office on best practices on developing effective and inclusive messaging to effectively address issues of migration. These actors should also serve as a link between politicians and returnees in order to open avenues of engagement and understanding.

Recommendation 3:

- 3** Civil society actors should amplify the voices of marginalized and returnee populations through digital and traditional media platforms in order to enable these individuals to advocate for their needs, shift public opinion and assist in their sociopolitical reintegration. This should include confidence-building measures with the objective of enhancing communication between returnees and local authorities.

Returnees noted that they were unaware of the increased risks associated with migration, especially after the passage of the Law on the Illicit Smuggling of Migrants. It is therefore imperative that civil society actors expand channels of communication through which information can be shared about the reality of migration. These initiatives would help returnees engage and process traumatic experiences, amplify their voices to local and international audiences, and open up opportunities for direct community engagement.

Recommendation 4:

- 4** International and local civil society actors should equip local government officials with policy formulation skills to meet the unique needs of a mobile population — including both migrants and their social networks.

Interviewees noted that government officials are currently ill-equipped to address the myriad of migrants' needs, including service provision. To this end, international and local civil society actors should provide trainings on topics such as strategic planning, scenario analysis, citizen outreach and resource management. These trainings should be carefully tailored to at-risk and returnee populations, as well as their families and friends and address the socioeconomic marginalization they face. This includes addressing the conditions that lead individuals to depart, mitigate danger during the journey, and assist in facilitating sociopolitical reintegration in order to foster social cohesion and political inclusion.

Recommendation 5:

- 5** | Civil society actors should work alongside informal community leaders to bolster the locally led social cohesion project and sociopolitical reintegration for returning populations.

During the reintegration process, returnees must adapt to the changed social context and grapple with varying levels of acceptance and willingness of the communities to accept these returnees. Given that effective reintegration projects often require high levels of trust, civil society actors should partner with influential informal and formal opinion makers at the community level to foster social cohesion and reintegrate returnees. These individuals are often in the best position to identify patterns within their communities, understand tensions and mobilize people in support of shared concerns.

Recommendation 6:

- 6** | The national government should facilitate a participatory review process of the Law # 2015-36 on the Illicit Smuggling of Migrants to elicit local feedback from migrants and local stakeholders and inform potential reform or amendments.

A number of insights from the interviews point to the effects of the Law on the Illicit Smuggling of Migrants, which has failed to address the drivers of migration. A participatory and consultative review process would enable the incorporation of feedback of those who are the target of legislation affecting migration, and those who feel its effects in an effort to develop more responsive policy that addresses the root causes of migration.

Recommendation 7:

- 7** | Migration policies and programming should address variance in local gender migration patterns and the unique stigma women migrants face.

Our research shed light on the wide range of local gender norms related to migration. In some cases, men are held responsible for migrating and earning income abroad, but in other cases vulnerable women who become the sole breadwinners and thus migrate to earn a living. Any gender-blind migration policies and programming are likely to fail given the wide regional variation in gender norms surrounding migration; as such, interventions should incorporate gender analyses and mainstreaming to determine their effects on migration and gender norms.

In addition to regional variation in gender norms, women migrants face additional layers of stigma associated with migration — as returnees shared that they were judged harshly by their communities, forced into prostitution, or fell prey to other vulnerable circumstances. Civil society, government and other actors should design programs aimed at deconstructing gender norms and stigma by supporting social cohesion, tolerance and inclusion.

International Republican Institute

IRI.org

@IRI_Polls

P: (202) 408-9450

E: info@iri.org

