

Transit Migration in Niger

Stemming the Flows of Migrants, but at What Cost?

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■ **ABSTRACT:** Since 2015, the European Union has stepped up its efforts to curb irregular migration from sub-Saharan Africa through increasingly restrictive measures targeting transit countries along migratory routes, including Niger. While the EU has heralded the success of its policies to limit migration through Niger, EU migration policies have disrupted the economic system in Agadez, where transit migration has been one of the main sources of income and a factor of stability since the end of the Tuareg rebellions in 2009. This article discusses the impact that EU migration policies may have at the local level in countries of transit, and highlights the potential for these policies to fuel tensions between local and national authorities. The Agadez case study illustrates the importance of a multilevel approach to migration governance that takes into full consideration the role of local authorities and local communities in countries of transit.

■ **KEYWORDS:** ECOWAS, local authorities, migration, Niger, smuggling, transit

Introduction

Confronted with the arrival of over one million migrants and refugees in Europe in 2015 alone, the European Union (EU) reacted by adopting increasingly restrictive measures, including the closure of borders into many European countries, and by negotiating an agreement with Turkey in March 2016 aimed at stemming the arrival of irregular migrants through Turkey to Europe. With the number of people traveling through the Eastern Mediterranean route via Turkey to Greece and onward to Europe diminishing drastically as a result of those measures, attention subsequently turned to the Central Mediterranean route from North African countries to Italy, a migratory trail used by a large number of people from sub-Saharan Africa.

According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), an estimated 153,842 people arrived on Italian shores after crossing the Mediterranean in 2015, 181,400 in 2016, 119,400 in 2017, and 23,400 in 2018.¹ The response of EU policy makers to such movements has been an increasing externalization of their restrictive migration policies to stem the movements of people and to shift the responsibility for preventing irregular immigration to so-called transit states. As the most significant transit country between West and North Africa, Niger has attracted the attention of the EU as a “laboratory” (Maurice 2016) for the implementation of its efforts aimed at curbing the movement of migrants and refugees toward Europe and increasing the number of returns. While there is some evidence that these efforts have borne fruit, with the number of arrivals in Italy declining drastically from September 2016 on, the priorities of the EU may be at odds with the interests of its partners.



What have been the consequences of such measures in Niger? And what lessons can we learn from this experience? Some five years after the so-called migration crisis in Europe was declared, this contribution discusses the disruptive impact that the recent EU migration policies aimed at stemming the flows of migrants have had on Niger, and more specifically on Agadez, the region most affected by migratory movements. To do so, the article draws on the increasing academic and policy-based literature on the topic (Andersson 2016; Brachet 2018; Bredeloup 2012; Lavenex 2006) and is informed by my in-depth knowledge of Niger and the West African region more broadly—including on the basis of my capacity as the former coordinator of the Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat for West Africa. In particular, I demonstrate how the EU policies focusing almost exclusively on border controls and law enforcement have not only put migrants in an even more precarious situation, with people risking their lives in attempts to circumvent the controls, but have also jeopardized the economy and the stability of a region that has become heavily dependent on the phenomenon of “transit migration.” In turn, this situation has created tension between authorities at the national level, who have been accused of pursuing an EU-driven agenda, and authorities at the local level, who are trying to mitigate the effects of these policies over the local population.

While the state has traditionally represented the main level of analysis in the field of international migration, recently more attention has been paid to other levels of migration governance, including the role of the local authorities and cities (Ahouga 2017). This “local turn” in migration management builds on the idea that “the drivers and impact of migration are often most strongly felt at the local level” and that the local authorities are “at the forefront in confronting the transformation and opportunities that migration brings about” (JMDI 2013). However, the main focus of the discussions in this regard have been on the role of cities in countries of destination, notably in regard to the integration of migrants and the linkages between migration and urbanization (IOM 2015, 2016). In comparison, the city of Agadez represents a particularly interesting case to highlight the role of local authorities in the context of a transit state. The case of Agadez not only points to the importance of considering the social and economic impact of such policies on host communities in transit countries, but also illustrates the significance of a multilevel approach to migration governance that fully takes into consideration the role and situation of local communities and local authorities in transit states.

Niger as a “Proactive and Constructive Partner” of the EU: Reality or Duplicity?

As one of the world’s poorest countries, Niger has been a transit country for almost two decades, with hundreds of thousands of migrants transiting each year through Agadez, in the center of the country, on their way to North Africa and, for some, onward to Europe. Given its key position between West Africa and Libya, Niger has been considered by the EU as a priority country in its fight against irregular migration.

Before 2015, international migration was not considered a problem to be solved in Niger, and no policy had been adopted with regard to people smuggling (Brachet 2018). However, under increased pressure from the EU, the government of Niger has strengthened security along the route and implemented new restrictive measures to stem the movement of migrants across its northern borders. Authorities in Niamey have generally been praised as particularly cooperative in the implementation of the EU agenda, with the EU describing Niger as “a proactive and constructive partner” that has put in place “a coherent migration policy, with a clear strategic

framework which facilitates cooperation with EU and Member states” (European Commission 2017c: 3).

As an additional sign of its commitment, Niger has been the first country within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to adopt a law against the smuggling of migrants, drafted with the support of the United Nations Office against Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) (République du Niger 2015). Prior to that, departures from Agadez to both Libya and Algeria were organized openly and took place regularly, even under official military escort, for example, to Dirkou (on the way to Libya) (Tinti and Westcott 2016). From the point of view of both the authorities and those organizing these movements, there was nothing wrong in accompanying migrants to the border, as long as the movements remained within the ECOWAS space.² Based on the new law, however, tougher measures have been taken in Agadez to counter migrant smugglers’ networks, leading to an increase in the number of arrests, convictions, and confiscations of vehicles used for smuggling.

The Nigerien authorities are well aware that the EU is willing to invest significant funding and resources in Niger in exchange for increased cooperation in migration management. In 2016, Niger requested over €1 billion from the EU to stop migrants on their way to Libya and the Mediterranean (Malm 2016). It has, since then, benefited from millions of euros of financial support, including through the so-called EU Trust Fund (EUTF),³ with Niger being one of the main recipients.⁴ Against this backdrop, many observers consider that the authorities in Niamey are implementing the antimigration measures requested by the EU to keep European money flowing (Brachet 2018).

Behind this appearance of constructive collaboration, however, there is increasing evidence that EU migration policies have had adverse effects on Niger, raising concerns about the potential duplicity of the government of Niger and the degree of political goodwill when it comes to implementing the measures aimed at curbing migration through the region. It is clear, at the very least, that the EU policies and the pressure exerted on the Nigerien government to implement those measures have exposed important differences in perspective between the authorities at the national level and at the regional/local level in Agadez.

The Socioeconomic Importance of Transit Migration in Agadez

Whatever the reasons behind the official endorsement of the EU migration agenda by the authorities in Niamey, the extent to which the government will be able to pursue the EU agenda remains to be seen given the resistance at the local level. Indeed, the implementation of the 2015 antismuggling law from the second half of 2016 on has caused a huge outcry in Agadez. Overnight, what had long been an informal and largely tolerated business became a crime punishable by up to 10 years imprisonment, leaving thousands of people in a state of uncertainty about their livelihoods. As the president of the Regional Council of Agadez put it, “Niger has a knife at its throat. The city’s only functioning economy was the movement of people and goods . . . Each smuggler supports a hundred families,” adding that, if the crackdown were to continue, “these families won’t eat anymore” (quoted in Taub 2017). Interestingly, local authorities have been at the forefront opposing the directives from Niamey, either bringing their concerns to higher levels or using the media to raise their concerns about the social and economic consequences of the newly adopted measures. A closer analysis of the situation in Agadez, the region most exposed to the phenomenon of transit migration, reveals that the local authorities also benefit considerably from transit migration in the region and confirms that they may have little incentive to crack down on smuggling networks and stop the movement of migrants.

Transit migration between Niger and North Africa had long been an alternative source of income for many people in the region alongside other informal activities such as gold mining and the trafficking of drugs or weapons—a phenomenon that goes some way toward explaining the population growth in Agadez, from 100,000 to 500,000 according to some estimates in just a few years since the end of the Tuareg rebellion (Molenaar 2017). To cross the desert, migrants must resort to the services of people who know and can navigate territory that is controlled by a nebula of militias, armed groups, and criminals. The Tuareg, in particular, some of whom are former combatants, have taken advantage of this situation and have been using their networks and unique knowledge of the environment to organize the movement of migrants. The smuggling of migrants thus became “a large and thriving” industry in Agadez, deeply rooted in the political economy of the region (Altai Consulting 2015). According to estimates, people involved in smuggling earn as much as €6,000–8,000 (between USD 6,700 and 9,000) for a single trip carrying 25–30 migrants (Molenaar 2017). The smuggling industry provides economic opportunities for young people and many others with no other alternatives and, in doing so, “contributes to stability through its mitigation of sources of radicalisation and political conflict” (Molenaar 2017).

A large part of the population—close to half of the working population according to some estimates—has made a living from the lucrative business associated with migration (Hall 2017). As soon as they arrive in town, brokers take charge of migrants, organizing their stay and their subsequent departures. In the meantime, migrants are hosted in accommodation, known as “ghettoes,” rented and organized for that purpose. Small businesses and local merchants have mushroomed in the city to provide services as well as the materials necessary for organizing a long trip across the desert, from water and food to sunglasses, backpacks, or money transfers. A report published in early 2017 found that migrants spent on average CFAF 18,993 (more than USD 30) on goods and services only, with much more money paid in bribes along the migratory route (Hall 2017). This represents a considerable source of income in a country where half of the population lives below the poverty line (World Bank 2017). When the author asked a young man to comment on the rapid development of Agadez, he compared the city to New York to emphasize its impressive growth of the city, which is largely due to the continuous passage of migrants and the money it generates.

The income generated by transit migration has been a significant factor in stabilizing the region, as individuals, communities, as well as the authorities in Agadez and smaller cities along the routes benefited from the economic boom brought by transit migration through a well-established system of informal payments (Nossiter 2015). Indeed, the security and military officials in the region have been involved in a large-scale system of bribes worth millions of dollars a year, collecting money not only from migrant convoys but also from the smugglers. According to Niger’s anticorruption agency (as quoted in Flynn 2015), security forces and local authorities could receive as much as USD 450 per vehicle and USD 30 per foreign migrant on the route between Agadez and the Libyan border. It has been surmised that the security forces in the region “would not be able to function if they did not take bribes paid by smugglers, and would otherwise be unable to purchase basic necessities such as fuel, spare parts for vehicles and food” (Tinti and Westcott 2016).

From time to time, usually in response to the discovery of the bodies of migrants abandoned in the desert, the authorities have tried to clamp down in apparent attempts to eradicate the smuggling industry, but these actions have been rather short-lived, not least because there are too many economic interests at stake for the authorities (Andersson 2016; Tinti and Westcott 2016).

The Negative Impacts of EU Migration Policies in Agadez

Since August 2016, the Nigerien government has been implementing the antismuggling law with a focus on those organizing the transportation of migrants from Agadez to Algeria or Libya. While the EU considered that Niger “has continued to deploy important efforts to prevent irregular migration and fight smugglers” (European Commission 2017b: 3), local authorities have requested the national government to “temper” the application of the law, which they perceived as brutal (Diallo 2016). While the effectiveness of these measures needs to be seen over the long term, they have already had serious adverse consequences in the short term, increasing the vulnerability of migrants, affecting the economic situation of many people in the region, and fueling tensions between communities. Local authorities have on many occasions warned the central government about the adverse effects of the measures, in an effort to mitigate their consequences for the population (Diallo 2017).

There is, indeed, increasing evidence of the negative impact that the EU migration policies have had on migrants stranded in transit countries. As noted by Melissa Phillips and Antje Missbach (2017: 141), the longer those people “linger in limbo, the more vulnerable they become to economic and other forms of exploitation.” Moreover, the 2015 antismuggling law has been heavily criticized for “forcing the smuggling industry to go further underground” (Altai Consulting 2015). Because of the many arrests and the confiscation of cars used to transport migrants by the authorities, the services of smugglers have become more expensive, increasing the risk of migrants falling into debt bondage or of engaging in more dangerous activities, such as prostitution, pimping, and theft, to raise the funds they need.

The fact that smugglers and brokers tend to circumvent controls by using other, more dangerous routes, thereby putting the lives and well-being of migrants further at risk, has been noted by many observers also for other routes (Hansen and Papademetriou 2014) as well as by the EU itself (European Commission 2017c). Unsurprisingly, the number of incidents in the desert have multiplied along the migratory routes in the north of Niger, with an increasing number of migrants abandoned in the middle of the desert by smugglers afraid of being detected. Between January and August 2017 alone, IOM reported that at least one thousand people were found abandoned in the desert (IOM 2017b).

When it comes to local communities, however, the most visible impact of the antismuggling policies in Agadez has been a considerable decrease in the income of many people living in the city and in other villages along the migratory routes who were running businesses in relation to the continuous influx of migrants in and through Agadez (Hall 2017). The local authorities have also seen their revenue drastically reduced. For instance, the mayor of Dirkou (quoted in IOM 2017a) complained in July 2017 that the community’s revenue had decreased from USD 6 million per week to USD 120,000 following the crackdown on smuggling rings and the decrease in the number of people transiting through the area.

Not only has the fight against smuggling and migration in the region increased the risks for migrants and deprived the population and the local authorities of a large part of their income; it has also fueled tensions between migrants and host communities. While traditionally the presence of migrants in Agadez was temporary, many of the migrants transiting through Agadez more recently have become stranded as they await opportunities to continue onward. At the same time, Agadez has been receiving many returned migrants, including some from third states who cannot or are unwilling to return to their countries of origin. While, in principle, they have access to one of the transit centers for returned migrants run by IOM in Agadez, the lengthening of the transit period for both outgoing and returned migrants has created tensions

with the host population, who fear that they will settle permanently and increase the competition for work (Hoffmann et al. 2017).

Finally, beyond the immediate impact that the EU policies have had on migrants and host communities, many commentators have highlighted the risk that disrupting the migratory flow could contribute to destabilizing the Sahel, where the relative prosperity over the past decades has been built on the economic boom derived from migration-related sources. As Peter Tinti and Tom Westcott (2016) noted, on the European side, there has been a failure to realize that the economics of migrant smuggling is one of the few things holding northern Niger together, that migration and the free movement of people is intrinsic to the region, and that haphazard efforts to cut off the migrant smuggling industry may actually work against the long-term goal of stability and development in northern Niger.

Engaging with Local Authorities and Investing in Local Communities

The divergence of interests between the national and local level raises questions regarding the effectiveness of the EU policies in Agadez, as implementing the EU agenda in the region will be much more difficult without the full support of the local authorities. In this context, one could question whether the local authorities have been implementing measures to curb migration in good faith, or whether they have, in practice, been trying to undermine their implementation given the important economic benefits derived from transit migration.

Some commentators consider that the authorities in Agadez have only paid lip service to efforts intended to curtail smuggling networks in the region and have in practice turned a blind eye to the networks' operations (Molenaar 2017). For others, the increasing number of arrests and confiscations so far are only a token gesture to show Niger's determination to its European partners (Olivier 2015). It could also be, as Tinti and Westcott (2016) suggest, that "the only people who can expect to be punished are those who are not paying the requisite bribes or have drawn the ire of local officials for reasons that might have nothing to do with smuggling." Or even that officers want to take advantage of the situation and keep some of the vehicles (Brachet 2018).

While the negative consequences of their policies have been identified, EU policy makers have started to recognize the need to support viable economic alternatives for the people in Agadez and along the transit route "to offset decreased revenues" from what the EU refers to as "illegal activities" (European Commission 2017c: 4). While recognizing the key role of Agadez and calling for some concrete steps to further limit movements through the border with Libya, a report published by the European Commission in early 2017 stated that efforts to control the flow of migrants and to assist with voluntary returns needed "to take account of the potential impacts on communities in Northern Niger that are economically sustained by migrant smuggling" and "to ensure adequate livelihoods and access to viable and legal markets to replace migrant smuggling" (European Commission 2017a: 13).

However, despite the available funding, investment in economic alternatives in Agadez has been minimal compared with investment in border controls and security. The first project under the EUTF aimed at creating alternative economic opportunities for those working in the migration industry to mitigate the adverse consequences of the recent migration policies was approved in December 2016 in response to growing resentment in the region. With a budget of €8 million, roughly 5.7 percent of the funding attributed to Niger under the EUTF at the time, the project aimed at initiating dialogue with the main actors in the transit migration industry in Agadez, to study and formulate options for their reconversion, and to offer employment opportunities and

socioprofessional integration to people who had benefited directly or indirectly from the movements of migrants across the region (European Commission 2017a). Yet, the number of beneficiaries has been extremely limited, raising protests from those left behind (Molenaar et al. 2017).

Conclusion

In response to the so-called European migration crisis, the EU adopted a broad range of measures to stop the movements of people from sub-Saharan Africa toward North Africa and to keep migrants and refugees closer to source countries. Although presented as an effort to build meaningful partnerships with transit countries, these measures were not based on a sound understanding of the situation in those countries, nor on any comprehensive assessment of the dynamics on the ground or the local interest and capacity. The imperative was, rather, to ensure a significant reduction in the number of people arriving in Europe in the shortest possible time.

The example of Agadez, Niger, illustrates the fundamental disconnect between the EU and some of its African partners because of their diverging priorities in terms of migration management. In the case of Niger, the pressure exerted by the EU has highlighted the potential mismatch between the interests of the central government, such as attracting aid funding, and those of local authorities who benefit from irregular migration in different ways. If the interests of EU countries and their African counterparts are not aligned, it is likely that some of the actions taken in the countries concerned will only be a pretence that allows their governments to continue to receive EU funding.

More research is needed to understand the complex roles of local authorities in situations of irregular migration, especially in the context of transit migration. As this article demonstrates, an entire region of Niger that is heavily dependent on the resources generated by transit migration has now been affected by the EU migration policies. The challenge for the EU and Niger is to find ways to address irregular migration without undermining people's livelihoods and disrupting the political situation in Niger's north. To be more effective, the EU will need to balance its short-term objectives with other aspects that address the adverse impact of its policies on host communities. On the one hand, the example of Niger highlights the need for a comprehensive assessment of the importance of the migration and smuggling economy in areas likely to be affected by any policies aimed at stemming the movements of migrants. On the other hand, agreements with transit countries on border control and readmission should go hand in hand with measures that strengthen the protection of migrants. The case of Agadez has made clear that the EU's current efforts will not be sustainable without a more development-oriented strategy that seeks to provide alternative economic opportunities to the host communities and to those who benefit in different ways from the phenomenon of transit migration. Any attempt to do otherwise will just fuel resentment against the authorities, against the EU, and against the organizations associated with the EU agenda, such as the IOM.

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NOTES

1. All figures from UNHCR's Operational Portal: Refugee Situations—Mediterranean Situation at http://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean_
2. Under the ECOWAS regime, citizens of ECOWAS states in possession of valid travel documents and an international health certificate can enter any of the other member states without a visa for up to 90 days.
3. Established at the Valletta Summit on Migration in November 2015, the EUTF for Africa was created to address the root causes of instability, forced displacement, and irregular migration from Africa and to contribute to better migration management.
4. See “EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa—Niger,” www.ec.europa.eu/trustfundforafrica/region/sahel-lake-chad/niger.

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