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Roadmap for sustainable migration management in the Sahel: lessons from Agadez

An evaluation of the consequences that European Union (EU) migration policies have had for Agadez shows that the drive to stop migration has resulted in the implementation of policies that are not context- and conflict-sensitive and which thereby harm local stability and development. A related problem with the dominant focus on stopping migration is that the reduction of migratory flows has become the sole indicator of the effectiveness of migration policies. This unilateral focus misses migration's larger challenges for stability and local development in the region, as migration industries have beneficial and harmful effects that fall outside of the scope of current regulations and international policies. Therefore, as well as putting forward practical recommendations to increase economic development, the legitimacy of authorities, and security in transit regions, this policy brief advocates for the adoption of more sustainable migration policies driven by a holistic and long-term development agenda that works towards inclusive development and stability for these regions.

Introduction

Current European Union (EU) migration policies have a strong focus on border externalisation through securitised approaches. This policy strategy consists of forging agreements that reduce irregular migration to Europe by setting up virtual walls or physical barriers in countries of origin or transit. The Khartoum Process (November 2014), the Valetta Agreement (November 2015), and the recent EU-Turkey refugee deal (March 2016) are all examples of this approach. These agreements are based on an understanding that partner countries will prevent irregular migration through the construction of border walls, the refurbishing of detention centres, and the acceptance of failed asylum seekers via readmission agreements. In return, origin

and transit countries receive perks, such as development funding and visa liberalisation.

Border externalisation policies have important consequences for Sahel desert towns such as Gao in Mali, Agadez in Niger, Tamanrasset in Algeria and Sebha in Libya. These towns have become major transit points for trans-Saharan mixed migration flows and are therefore increasingly targeted by EU policy makers who wish to stem irregular migration.[1] A transit city 'is not only a space that is crossed," however, "it's also

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1   Mixed migration flows are integrated by 'temporary and reversible movements' [circular migration], 'long-term migration', and 'forced migration'. Guilmoto, C.Z. and F. Sandron. 2003. *Migration et développement*, Paris: La Documentation Française.

a place that is worked on, urbanized by the passage and residence of generations of migrants'.[2] Buoyed by the economic opportunities that mixed migration flows provide, many Sahel desert towns have been revitalised[3] – only to be subsequently targeted by EU migration policies that seek to stop irregular migration.

To date, the European migration agenda largely ignores the links that have been forged between migration and local economies, governance dynamics and security – with major implications for regional (in)stability and development. Building on the findings of a large research project in Agadez – where EU interventions have shut down the irregular migration industry to a large extent – this policy brief offers policy recommendations to work towards more sustainable migration management in the Sahel.[4]

The economic dimension[5]

A dominant frame within the migration debate erroneously equates all economic activities related to irregular migration to human smuggling. In practice, however, the facilitation of irregular migration spurs a range of more regular economic activities as well, ranging from boys who run errands for migrants in transit towns, to water suppliers who sell migrants gallon jugs of water to take with them into the desert, to operators of the call shops and money transfer agencies that foresee in migrants' direct needs. These economic activities foster growth in secondary sectors and, in turn, drive up additional demand for goods and services. In addition, convoys transporting migrants across borders are tightly linked to the informal cross-border trade. More pick-up trucks driving northwards generally means more trucks returning southwards, filled with goods and wares that are subsequently sold in the transit hubs.

Through the support of this range of economic activities, the migration industry provides an economic buffer for transit towns and allows residents to diversify their earnings. Indeed, in our survey research in Agadez, one-third of respondents noted that they made an income from the migration industry. This income is important, moreover, because many of the region's other economic sectors have gone into decline over the past decades. Tourism suffered from Tuareg rebellions, the extremist threat in the region, and the labelling of Agadez as a red zone;[6] uranium mining took a hit after a drop in world uranium prices; and the government closed informal gold mining sites after it sold concessions to big foreign companies and/or as a way of addressing the security threat of armed Sudanese and Chadian gold miners in the region. Agricultural earnings fluctuate with seasonal and climatic change and do not constitute a reliable source of

2   Bredeloup, S. 2012. 'Sahara Transit: Times, Spaces, People', *Population, Space and Place*, 18(4), 457.

3   Pliez, O. 2004. 'De l'immigration au transit? La Libye dans l'espace migratoire Euro-Africain,' in: *La Nouvelle Libye: Sociétés, espaces et géopolitique au lendemain de l'embargo*, ed. Pliez, O., Paris: Editions Karthala, 89-104; De Haas, H. 2008. 'Migration irrégulière d'Afrique Occidentale en Afrique du nord et en Union Européenne. Une vue d'ensemble des tendances générales,' *Série Migration Research de l'OIM*, no. 32; Brachet, J. 2009. *Migrations transsahariennes: Vers un désert cosmopolite et morcelé (Niger)*. Bellecombe-en-Bauges: Croquant; Brachet, J. 2012. 'Movement of People and Goods: Local Impacts and Dynamics of Migration to and through the Central Sahara,' in: *Saharan Frontiers: Space and Mobility in Northwest Africa*, ed. Scheele, S. and J. McDougall, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press; Bredeloup, S. 2012. 'Sahara Transit: Times, Spaces, People', *Population, Space and Place*, 18(4), 457-467.

4   This policy brief builds on the findings from the Clingendael research project 'A line in the sand. Roadmap for sustainable migration management in Agadez'. Molenaar, F. et al. 2017. *A line in the sand. Roadmap for sustainable migration management in Agadez.* The Hague: Conflict Research Unit, The Clingendael Institute.

5   Hoffmann, A. et al. 2017. Migration and Markets in Agadez: Economic alternatives to the migration industry . The Hague: Conflict Research Unit, The Clingendael Institute.

6   The same applies to northern Mali, southern Algeria and Libya.

income due to recurring periods of drought. It follows that sustainable migration policies suppressing irregular migration would need to ensure that the local population has access to alternative livelihoods – particularly given this larger pattern of regional economic decline.

Our research shows that the migration policies currently being implemented in Agadez do not recognise the vital economic importance of the migration industry and have been implemented without putting into place substantial economic alternatives. The European Union Trust Fund (EUTF) does reserve a substantial sum of money for long-term socioeconomic development, such as through agricultural projects, but these projects have not yet been implemented to date – leaving the Agadez population worse off than before the migration interventions were implemented. In our research, two-thirds of the respondents therefore noted that the Agadez community does not benefit at all from migration-mitigating measures, whereas a similar proportion noted that the Agadez community does benefit a lot from migration. The question remains how sustainable it is in the long rung to undermine an important economic sector without putting any real economic alternatives into place.

Building on the lessons from Agadez, three sets of recommendations apply to leverage the Sahel's existing economic potential when addressing irregular migration flows:

1. It is crucial to promote the creation of income-generating activities and businesses in the short term. Concrete measures include conducting participatory market assessments, supporting business plan competitions, deploying road construction and maintenance, and ensuring that international actors commit to sourcing locally.
2. Working towards an enabling business environment in the longer term is essential. Key elements in this area include developing entrepreneurial thinking in the region, removing obstacles preventing access to markets, promoting greater transparency and accountability

among the larger companies, investing in infrastructure, and potentially exempting safe cities from the 'zone rouge' travel warning.
3. It is crucial to design support measures in a conflict-sensitive way. That is, any engagements in the area should avoid targeting actors involved exclusively in the migration economy, should manage local perceptions as well as outputs of the engagement, and should avoid creating distortions in existing markets.

The governance dimension[7]

The quality of political institutions, and of governance more generally, has been found to affect migratory streams as *high-quality institutions* are deemed 'essential for a country's growth and development prospects and affect the population's sense of well-being'.[8] Both high-skilled and low-skilled workers are more likely to leave countries with lower levels of institutional quality, for example.[9] In a similar vein, studies report that corruption acts as a push factor of migration 'arguably because it contributes to worse and unpredictable economic conditions, more insecurity and a lower quality of life'.[10] The absence of good governance therefore is one of the root causes of migration. At the very least, irregular migration policies should capitalise on the resources that have been made available through policies targeting

7 Molenaar, F. et al. 2017. Local governance opportunities for sustainable migration management in Agadez. The Hague: Conflict Research Unit, The Clingendael Institute.
8 Dutta, N. and Roy, S. 2011. 'Do Potential Skilled Emigrants Care about Political Stability at Home?', *Review of Development Economics*, 15(3), 443.
9 Ariu, A., Docquier, F. and Squicciarini, M. 2016. 'Governance Quality and Net Migration Flows', *Regional Science and Urban Economics*, 60, 238-248.
10 Poprawe, M. 2015. 'On the Relationship between Corruption and Migration: Empirical Evidence from a Gravity Model of Migration', *Public Choice*, 163, 337-354; also see Uys, T. and Senekal, A. 2015. '"Do We Stay or Do We Leave?" The Role of Trust and Engagement in Students' decision Whether to Remain in South Africa', *Journal of Sociology and Social Anthropology*, 6(1), 87-98.

migrant origin and transit regions in order to invest in good governance as a way to counter irregular migration in the mid to long term.[11]

Our research in Agadez shows, however, that an opposite dynamic is taking place. Authorities note that EU-supported migration policies, which are mainly coordinated with authorities in Niger's capital, Niamey, rather than the region itself, have pitted local authorities against their populations: 'They ask us why we work for the EU rather than for them, the people that got us elected'. To date, very few (inter)national efforts have been made to strengthen the legitimacy of local authorities amidst such concerns. This is unfortunate because our survey data also reveal that state authorities in Agadez are generally awarded low trust levels and are not generally seen as helpful in times of need – especially when compared to more traditional authorities such as community elders, traditional chiefs and imams. Current interventions in the region create a window of opportunity to work with local authorities and strengthen practices of good governance.

At the same time, such efforts should recognise that state authorities are often involved directly or indirectly in the facilitation of irregular migration – meaning that they should not be regarded as *neutral interlocutors* per se. Indeed, although irregular migration defies state regulation, it is not necessarily out of the reach of the state, nor is state engagement with the

irregular migration industry necessarily antagonistic in nature. Formal state actors are often ready and willing participants in the irregular migration industry, implying that 'what is irregular is not always strictly informal'.[12] To the extent that these actors contribute to the further hollowing-out of existing state institutions, they are thereby contributing to the root causes of migration and should be targeted as such.

In the case of Agadez, the involvement of state security forces in the facilitation of migration is the most obvious example of the hand–in–glove relationship between state actors and the more shady side of the irregular migration industry. The Agadez security forces have a long history of benefiting financially from the taxation of irregular migration at roadblocks along the main migration routes.[13] EU-supported police training and the criminalisation of the facilitation of irregular migration only seem to have exacerbated this latter issue, as the price of bribes has gone up to match the increased police actions against human smugglers. A large concern of Agadez political authorities is that the increase in police corruption has further undermined the local population's trust in the police forces.

Based on these lessons from Agadez, three sets of policy recommendations can be formulated to ensure that irregular migration policies do not undermine good governance and/or contribute to the hollowing out of the state from within:

1. Policy makers could boost the legitimacy of state authorities by working with local consultative mechanisms to plan interventions in the region. Such a strategy would allow for the bottom-up identification of regional priorities and

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11 Indeed, a recent study on the relationship between foreign aid and international migration found that governance aid – such as investments in aid to government and civil society, as well as support to non-governmental organisations – is the most effective type of aid in terms of driving down migration. Gamso, J. and Yuldashev, F. 2016. 'Targeted Foreign Aid and International Migration: Is Development-Promotion an Effective Immigration Policy?', Conference paper presented at the *American Political Science Association*, January 2016. Also see: Gamso, J. and Yuldashev, F. 2016. 'Development Aid May not Deter Migration, But Governance Aid Will', *Refugees Deeply*, op-ed posted 30 November 2016.

12 Schoofs, S. 2015. Making Sense of Informal Economies in Fragile Contexts. Issues, Dilemmas and Questions. The Hague: Conflict Research Unit, The Clingendael Institute.

13 Molenaar, F. and El Kamouni-Janssen, F. 2017. Turning the Tide. The Politics of Irregular Migration in the Sahel and Libya. The Hague: Conflict Research Unit, The Clingendael Institute.

grievances and could strengthen local authorities' ability to address these.

2. The case of Agadez underlines the importance of working with key partners, such as radio stations and traditional authorities, to inform local populations about upcoming interventions. Failure to do so has resulted in wild speculations and accusations that the local state authorities are deviating funds, which – in reality – have never been dispersed to the region.

3. Any investment in securitised approaches should incorporate lessons from previous security sector reforms and programming efforts and should ensure that the securitisation of migration management does not result in higher levels of corruption and human rights abuses.

The security dimension[14]

The migration industry that existed before EU-supported interventions in the region was not entirely benign. Many migrants did not survive the harsh journey through the desert and/or were delivered into the hands of Libyan smugglers who have taken human exploitation and mistreatment to entirely new levels. Smuggling empowered a group of young men who were increasingly in conflict with the Agadez population and with members of other ethnic groups.[15] The regulation of migration and the creation of safe legal pathways to alternative (African) destinations form important tools to address such concerns. Unfortunately, however, the dominant policy paradigm of criminalising irregular migration without putting into place any legal alternatives only fuels the shady side of the migration industry. This makes it much harder to monitor the situation on the

ground and exposes migrants to even more human rights abuses.[16]

The latter dynamic is visible in Agadez, where the criminalisation of irregular migration has transformed the shape of the migration industry. Before the wave of arrests and confiscations of the smugglers' pick-up trucks that began in late 2016 – buoyed by EU pressure for action – the facilitation of migration was a relatively low-barrier industry. As discussed above, the number of migrants passing through the region created economic opportunities for many Agadez residents. It also resulted in a degree of competition between different smugglers that kept prices relatively stable and that ensured that migrant 'customers' were treated with a certain level of decency. The police arrests and truck confiscations raised the barrier for entry into the migration industry. As it was mainly the young truck drivers and other small fish who were arrested, the industry has been consolidated in the hands of more criminal and exploitative actors.

The majority of respondents in our study note that these developments have resulted in greater insecurity for migrants, Agadez residents and the Agadez region more generally. Migrants' stay in Agadez and their journeys through the desert have become more clandestine, more expensive and more prone to hardship and human rights violations and hardship. Insecurity also extends to the Agadez population, because many armed young men have taken to banditry to meet their immediate economic needs. Despite the historic prevalence of banditry, respondents noted that this practice has become much more prevalent of late and they blamed this on the simultaneous closure of local gold mining sites and the crackdown on the migration industry. These events have left many young men unemployed – young men with access to guns and means of transport.

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14 Molenaar, F. et al. 2017. Local governance opportunities for sustainable migration management in Agadez. The Hague: Conflict Research Unit, The Clingendael Institute.

15 Ibid.

16 For a more extended elaboration of this argument, see The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (2017) *Understanding Contemporary Human Smuggling as a vector in migration: A field guide for practitioners*, Geneva, GI.

Increased insecurity across the Agadez region as a whole is closely linked to the region's location amidst violent conflict. Moreover, armed groups from northern Mali, southern Algeria and southern Libya are affiliated to the main ethnic groups in Agadez through trade and kinship connections. On the one hand, the criminalisation of the migration industry has disenfranchised some of the ethnic groups that dominated the facilitation of irregular migration, such as is the case for the Toubou drivers who control the route between Agadez and Libya. The lack of economic alternatives to address this latest form of economic hardship has left the Toubou particularly aggrieved – leading some regional elites to speculate that they may not be able to appease the Toubou community indefinitely.

On the other hand, the criminalisation of the migration industry has fortified hard-core smugglers' control over the industry. In previous research, we showed that these smugglers were untouchable due to their connections to local and national political authorities.[17] In the long run, the criminalisation of migration thereby contributes to the strengthening of *lucrative local smuggling fiefdoms* that undermine local governance actors' commitment to national laws and policies – thereby jeopardising the stability and efficacy of decentralised governance systems[18] and potentially resulting in more migration in the long run.

These lessons from Agadez suggest three sets of policy recommendations for the larger Sahel to ensure that migration management does not contribute to insecurity, instability and conflict:

1. Preferably, migration should be regulated and legalised rather than criminalised in order to prevent any of the excesses outlined above. As long as that is not a politically viable policy alternative, security interventions should be designed to at least contain a migrant and communal security component part. This would ensure that migrant and local populations are not worse off because of local authorities' cooperation with the international community on issues of migration management.
2. All policies should derive from local conflict analyses to ensure that interventions do not create or exacerbate conflict lines in society.
3. Recognising the instability of the larger Sahel region, any intervention should contain an awareness of the need to prevent and counter violent extremism. This is particularly relevant given that the key focus of migration management is on hard security measures, which research from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) shows may become prominent accelerators of recruitment if conducted in a manner perceived to be abusive.[19]

The road ahead – conflict-sensitive migration management

Moving beyond concrete recommendations, the case of Agadez presents several important lessons for the development of migration policies targeting transit and origin countries more generally. First, it is important to adopt a holistic approach towards migration and to take into account the context within which these policies are implemented. For Agadez, these policies are unsustainable in the long run because of the failure to address existing practices of police corruption and low state legitimacy, the larger patterns of economic decline across sectors, and the fact that regional stability depends on agreements with elites who are linked to the cross-border smuggling trade. As convenient as short-term securitised fixes might seem, more sustainable migration policies should be driven by a holistic and long-term development agenda that works

17 Ibid.
18 Ballentine, K. and Sherman, J. 2003. *The Political Economy of Armed Conflict: Beyond Greed and Grievance*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

19 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). 2017. Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives and the Tipping Point for Recruitment, New York, Regional Bureau for Africa. 5.

towards inclusive development and stability for the region. At the very least, local populations should be better off because of their government's collaboration with the EU migration agenda.

Second, and relatedly, the EU migration agenda will have to move beyond the main goal of bringing migration down to zero *today* if it hopes to be sustainable in the long run. More sustainable migration management would depart from an analysis of the positive and negative consequences that migration has for origin and transit regions and would develop policies that foster the former while addressing the latter. This would mean zooming in on those locations where the migration industry shows signs of becoming particularly collusive and abusive and using the EU's sticks and carrots to press for change. In this sense, the failure to connect police training in Agadez to a larger process of security sector reform aimed at addressing police corruption and insecurity in the region is a clear case of a missed opportunity. Sustainable migration management would also mean zooming in on those locations where (intra-African) migration has clear benefits for host, transit and origin countries alike and investing in migration's further regularisation and normalisation.[20] This would require a paradigm shift in which the EU stops seeing migration as an absolute negative phenomenon but that values migration based on its merits and evils – both in Africa and at home.[21]

20 Agadez artisans who used to travel back and forth between Niger and Europe to sell their wares at markets and fairs are a case in point. Now that migration policies are increasingly tightened, these artisans can no longer get the visas that are so vital to their livelihoods.

21 A more proactive vision would take stock, for example, of how legal migration could foresee in Europe's diverse future labour needs.

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