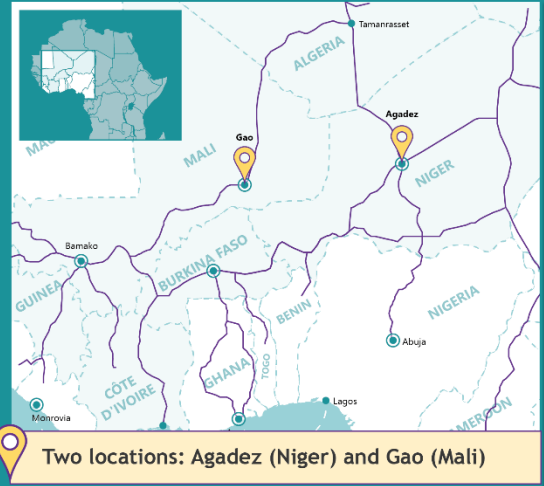


Exploring migrants' trust in humanitarian organisations – March 2021

- 90 qualitative in-depth phone-based interviews with transit migrants (including 30 women)
- 16 key informant interviews with field workers
- 39 sources reviewed



Migrants' levels of trust towards humanitarian organisations



Descriptions of trust

<p>Most migrants had low or limited levels of trust in humanitarian organisations.</p> <p>Fewer migrants in Agadez said they trusted organisations.</p> <p>Reasons for lacking trust differed by sex.</p>	<p>1/2 of migrants in the sample believe organisations' support will not meet their needs.</p> <p>"No matter the nature, quantity and quality of support, it is minimal if it does not help us continue our journeys."</p> <p>22-year-old Beninese woman, Agadez</p>	<p>1/3 of migrants in the sample believe organisations do not provide assistance fairly.</p> <p>"No, I don't think [organisations] treat all migrants the same. Some may benefit from something that other migrants have not had."</p> <p>22-year-old Beninese man, Gao</p>	<p>1/3 of migrant respondents believe there are risks in receiving support from organisations, including deportation.</p> <p>"Organisations tell the police where migrants are hidden, and that's how migrants end up being deported to their country of origin."</p> <p>33-year-old Cameroonian migrant, Gao</p>
---	--	---	---

Factors that shape trust in organisations among migrants

<p>Past experiences with organisations and the behaviour of field staff.</p>	<p>Access to reliable knowledge about available assistance.</p>	<p>Information from family, peers, and smugglers.</p>	<p>Perceived neutrality of organisations.</p>
--	---	---	---

Trust barriers to access

<p>Fear of deportation or being forced to return.</p>	<p>Fear of being dissuaded or prevented from continuing journey.</p>	<p>Fear of being treated poorly by humanitarian staff, especially for women.</p>	<p>Fear that organisations collaborate with the police or local authorities.</p>
---	--	--	--

Exploring migrants' trust in humanitarian organisations

The Independent Monitoring, Research and Evidence Facility (IMREF) wrote this report as part of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's Safety, Support, and Solutions Phase II (SSS II) programme. IMREF is delivered by a consortium, which is led by Integrity and includes Seefar, IMPACT Initiatives, and Danube University Krems.



Executive summary

Humanitarian organisations aiming to provide support to migrants in transit on the Central Mediterranean Route face significant challenges accessing potential beneficiaries. As transit migrants are usually focused on continuing their journey to North Africa and Europe, the window of time in which they can access humanitarian services in any given location is often limited. There is also evidence that migrants actively avoid detection, often making them an 'invisible' population who may not be willing to access services. Past IMREF research on access has shown that a lack of trust in humanitarian organisations affects migrants' willingness to seek available assistance. However, evidence on the factors shaping migrants' trust in humanitarian actors and how organisations can effectively mitigate this access barrier is limited.

This study seeks to inform migration programming in the Sahel by providing an improved understanding of how, when, and why migrants trust humanitarian organisations, and how this affects access to migrants. Findings are based on a desk review of 39 sources, 16 key informant interviews with field workers, and qualitative in-depth phone-based interviews with 90 transit migrants (including 30 women) in Agadez and Gao.

Trust in humanitarian and development organisations

- Out of 90 respondents, 30 said they have no trust in humanitarian organisations, 25 said they have high levels of trust, and 20 said they either had mixed trust or were unsure. Migrants who described themselves as having mixed levels of trust or as unsure often voiced negative perceptions of assistance, suggesting important limitations on their levels of trust. However, unlike the 30 migrants in the sample who report a complete lack of trust, these migrants are often willing to access organisations under specific circumstances. This suggests that organisations may be able to build trust with them.
- The extent to which migrants trusted organisations depended on the nature of the concerns they had in accessing assistance. Migrants who expressed a complete lack of trust linked it to perceptions that organisations work with the police to deport them or seek to prevent them from migrating, or concerns that accessing assistance would delay their journeys. Perceived collaboration between organisations and the police or the national government—who most migrants did not trust—amplified these concerns.
- Migrants who voiced negative perceptions of assistance and limitations on their trust in organisations generally felt support lacked relevance and that organisations do not treat aid recipients equitably. Migrants often assessed the relevance of assistance based on whether it met their needs against their priorities at different stages of their journey, with many highlighting a fundamental gap between their priority to travel safely to Europe and the types of services offered. A number of migrants who had previously accessed assistance in Agadez and Gao also felt that their trust was negatively affected by a perceived lack of responsiveness to their feedback, despite a stay long enough to receive a response. Migrants who believed organisations do not treat beneficiaries equitably felt that current criteria for beneficiary selection are arbitrary and not based on objective needs.

- More migrants in Agadez than in Gao expressed a lack of trust in organisations. While migrants in both locations voiced concerns around risks in receiving support from organisations, respondents in Agadez more frequently said they had negative experiences with humanitarian organisations or heard from other migrants that available assistance would not meet their needs.
- There was no clear difference in trust patterns between men and women. However, their reasons for (mis)trust differed: women tended to attribute low levels of trust to negative interactions with organisations' field staff, while men focused on the risk that their journey would be halted if they approached humanitarian organisations.

Factors that shape trust

- Past experiences with humanitarian organisations were a critical factor in shaping trust. For example, returnees often reported that they stopped believing that accessing organisations would lead to deportation after being in contact with them, as they had seen first-hand that organisations would not then hand them over to state authorities.
- The behaviour of field staff, who are often the main point of contact with migrants, was also critical in shaping trust. Migrants who generally trusted organisations often attributed their trust to positive personal relations with field staff. Some migrants in the sample who had accessed organisations and did not trust them spoke of inappropriate behaviour from field staff, including treatment of women, insults and visible anger against migrants. Two women in particular spoke of inappropriate conduct from field staff. It is unclear whether these reports are based on isolated incidents or more pervasive behaviours. This suggests that donors and organisations should quickly take steps at field level to assess the situation, adapt practices, and ensure that they effectively implement and monitor safeguarding standards.
- Information from families, other migrants, and smuggling actors, who are key sources of information, influenced migrants' trust in organisations at different stages of the journey. Before departure, relatives often warned migrants against trusting anyone while in transit, including humanitarian organisations. During their stay in Agadez and Gao, other migrants and smuggling facilitators were the main intermediaries informing migrants about organisations. Other migrants often provided negative feedback on the support, leading migrants to refrain from trusting and accessing organisations. Smuggling networks helped to either foster perceptions that engaging with organisations increases deportation risk, or refer migrants needing assistance to organisations.
- Organisations' efforts to share information appeared to be effective in promoting trust among some migrants. Greater knowledge about available assistance helped mitigate high or unrealistic expectations of the services that organisations can provide. More knowledge also often reassured migrants that accessing organisations would not create new risks to their journeys. However, uncoordinated visits and messages in ghettos and train stations may create suspicions among migrants in the context of criminalisation of migration in Niger.
- For most respondents, perceptions that organisations are not neutral and seek to actively discourage migration created concerns that engaging with organisations would lead to delays in their journeys. This was particularly true of organisations that engage in return and reintegration programming.

Impact of trust on access and vulnerabilities

- There is a clear link between migrants' trust in organisations and their willingness to access them. The latter depended on the specific reasons for distrust: Those who generally trusted organisations said that they would access them in times of need and when they trusted that organisations would not impede their travel plans. In contrast, migrants who believed there were additional risks associated with accessing organisations (fears of deportation, concerns that humanitarian staff would discourage them from migrating and fears of poor treatment) were unwilling to access assistance and actively avoided interaction with international organisations' staff.
- Limited trust and reticence to access organisations often meant that migrants waited until they had no alternative, and were extremely vulnerable, before seeking support. Key informants explained that this leaves little opportunity for organisations to help migrants prepare to cope with potential dangers in the desert after they leave Agadez or Gao.

Strategies to build trust

- **Review current safeguarding measures to ensure accountability to beneficiaries.** Some migrants IMREF interviewed reported inappropriate conduct and behaviour from humanitarian field staff in Agadez. In the

short term, implementers should review their own safeguarding mechanisms and practices, and ensure there are no gaps. Implementers should also consider jointly organising a more in-depth review of safeguarding practices through an independent entity. Given the concerning nature of the incidents and challenges highlighted in the study with feedback loops, donors should also consider ways to strengthen their role in ensuring oversight and accountability to beneficiaries. One option would be to conduct virtual (or in-person) field-level assessments of their partners' safeguarding practices or strengthen third-party monitoring of programming.

- **Implement safeguarding measures and processes at all levels.** The study reaffirms that interactions with field staff representing organisations, who are often the first and main point of contact with migrants, are critical in shaping trust. As such, organisations should invest in comprehensive training for 'first response' field staff. Training should cover safeguarding and effective communication on neutrality, migrants' rights to anonymity and confidentiality, and the voluntary nature of assistance. Staff should also be trained to provide clear messages on what organisations can and cannot do for migrants, criteria for beneficiary selection, and options for referrals. Refresher trainings can also be a space for field staff to report to management what works and what does not in current outreach programmes, and informally monitor the evolution of levels of trust among potential beneficiaries.
- **Take steps to reduce migrants' concerns around the neutrality of organisations.** Organisations should explore opportunities to publicly advocate or communicate positions against deportations and in favour of more pathways to regular migration. Organisations working in return and reintegration programming should also look for ways to ensure return and other forms of life-saving programming are seen as separate.
- **Design and roll out a multi-tiered information-sharing strategy** aimed at key sources of information—including families, other migrants, and smuggling actors—to reassure migrants that accessing organisations will not lead to additional risks. Organisations could consider strategies to build trust before migration journeys begin by providing information on available services to both potential migrants and their families, so that they are less likely to actively avoid services and messaging from organisations while traveling. In transit settings, organisations could work through intermediaries to pass on messages, including through migrants who have already received support, settled migrants, and migrant-led organisations.
- **Test and expand feedback mechanisms to better close feedback loops and build trust in the relevance of support.** Organisations should adapt mechanisms depending on the different migrant profiles in Agadez and Gao, with their varying lengths of stay and needs (i.e., short-term migrant, stranded migrant, returnee). Feedback loops appear particularly critical in moderating expectations and building trust with migrants: organisations should clearly tell migrants when and where they plan on providing responses to their feedback, whether they use personal messages, leaflets, or posters in offices that migrants visit.
- **Provide a safe space for migrants to report negative behaviour from humanitarian staff.** Organisations should systematically provide migrants with an anonymous phone line for complaints. They should also investigate and track allegations of misconduct and ensure there are internal resources to respond to allegations.