IMREF

Understanding Relations between Local Communities and Transit Migrants in Gao and Agadez - February 2021

- 480 quantitative surveys with community members and migrants
- 60 in-depth interviews with community members and migrants
- 30 key informant interviews with researchers and implementers
- 30 key informant interviews with community stakeholders

Two locations: Agadez, Gao

58 sources reviewed

Interactions between migrants and local communities

- **Agadez / Gao** — More negative interactions reported by migrants in Agadez (22%) than in Gao (3%).
- Regular interactions between migrants and local communities in both locations.
- Closeness of ties more important than frequency of interactions in shaping attitudes.
- Some places of interactions linked to closer ties (religious places, grins, fadas and football games).

Local community attitudes towards migrants

- **Agadez / Gao** — More negative attitudes towards migrants reported by community members in Agadez (44%) than in Gao (16%).
- More negative attitudes towards female than male migrants attributed to their perceived participation in sex work.
- More negative attitudes towards asylum seekers than economic migrants attributed to their limited contribution to the local economy.
- More negative attitudes towards nationalities with less cultural proximity attributed to incompatible values with the local community.

Factors that affect more negative attitudes in Agadez

- Decreased economic gains that resulted from the criminalisation of migrant transportation.
- Greater volume of flows and a higher number of stranded migrants.
- Perceptions that aid is not fairly distributed between migrants and local communities.
- Limited impact of COVID-19 and of competition for public services on determining attitudes.

Effects on the vulnerabilities of migrants

- Community is an important source of support and assistance for migrants.
- Community members play a key role in referring migrants to humanitarian organisations.
- Infrequent reports of direct harm and abuse from local communities, but common reports of verbal insults.
- More negative attitudes linked with more vulnerabilities.

Part of the **SSS II** programme

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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

This study examines the relations between local communities and transit migrants in Agadez, Niger and Gao, Mali. Agadez and Gao are two important migration transit hubs in the Sahel where the scale of development and humanitarian programming has increased significantly in the past five years. Existing research demonstrates that the changing political-economic context, including increased insecurity and strengthened efforts to limit migration flows, have had an impact on relations between transit migrations and local communities. Existing research also demonstrates that communities' attitudes towards migrants or other displaced populations can play a significant role in shaping the latter's vulnerability, with implications for effective assistance strategies. To date, however, there has been limited evidence from the Sahel looking at how local communities perceive and interact with transit migrants, and how migration programming influences these perceptions and interactions.

This study seeks to improve the evidence base on local community perceptions and attitudes towards migrants and the factors that shape them. Findings draw on a desk review of 58 sources, semi-structured interviews with 30 humanitarian and development workers and 30 community stakeholders, 480 remote quantitative surveys with migrants and community members, and 60 remote in-depth interviews with migrants and community members in both locations. The study's findings provide insight into the experiences of study participants but are not statistically representative.

Community perceptions of migrants varied greatly among respondents and suggested relations between local communities and migrants in Agadez are under greater strain compared to Gao. In Gao, most community respondents (82%) perceived migrants either positively or neutrally. In Agadez, however, close to half of community respondents (44%) said perceptions of migrants were negative or very negative, compared to 16% in Gao. Similar trends across the study's quantitative indicators and qualitative interviews suggest that negative attitudes towards migrants are more prevalent in Agadez. Migrant and community quantitative respondents consistently reported more negative interactions and fewer instances of mutual support in Agadez. In Gao, only 3% of community members described their interactions with migrants as 'bad' or 'very bad', compared to 22% of those interviewed in Agadez.

In both locations, community members often expressed negative attitudes towards specific segments within the migrant population, including women and migrants of certain nationalities. Female migrants were commonly perceived to engage in sex work and seen as a threat to traditional gender roles. Similarly, community members often stereotyped migrants of certain nationalities with less cultural, religious and linguistic overlap, describing their behaviour as incompatible with the cultural and religious norms and values of the community.

The nature of past interactions and strength of socio-economic ties between migrants and community members played a significant role in shaping attitudes. Although most migrants and local community members interact frequently, these interactions generally take place in the neighbourhood, the street, or the market. As a result, data suggests the two groups generally have weak social and economic ties in both study locations. Interactions that suggested stronger social or economic ties, and reinforced positive attitudes, between migrants and local communities, included those in mosques and churches, grins and fadas,[1] and football games. Migrants with weaker social or economic ties to community members – including women

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[1] Public meeting places where groups of men drink tea and talk, usually in the evenings.

excluded from male-dominated places of positive interactions, migrants living in ghettos, and migrants living in centres run by humanitarian actors – generally felt local communities viewed them negatively.

Community members often attributed their attitudes to the perceived impact of migrants on the local economy, values and security. Most community members who said they perceived migrants positively believe that the latter play an important role in the local economy due to their spending power and did not think migrants competed with the community for jobs. On the other hand, negative attitudes were linked with concerns over how migrants with perceived cultural and religious differences affect local values or their perceived role in increasing local crime. Few local community members thought that the presence of migrants created competition over access to services, suggesting it does not play a significant role in shaping attitudes in these contexts.

Several contextual factors in the two study locations appeared to influence how local communities perceived migrants' impact on their community. These factors also help to explain diverging perspectives in Agadez and Gao. Factors that emerged clearly from the data include:

- **Higher volume of flows and number of stranded migrants.** Key informants suggested that a greater volume of flows and a higher number of stranded migrants were associated with more negative attitudes in Agadez. The visibility of flows, coupled with the political-economic implications of migration policy in Niger, was a major factor fuelling perceptions among community members that migrants are an economic, social and security burden.

- **Political-economic implications of migration policy in Niger.** There are notable differences in the politics of migration and corresponding economic implications in the two study locations. In 2015, Niger passed a law on "illegal trafficking of migrants" (Law 2015-36) that criminalised the activities of people involved in the transportation of migrants. This had significant negative economic consequences and contributed to a loss of livelihoods in migration hubs. Several community respondents attributed negative attitudes towards migrants to the economic losses that resulted from the criminalisation of migration.

- **Discontent with migrant-targeted programming in Agadez.** Community members in Agadez often had the perception that migrant-targeted programming excludes local communities and assistance is not fairly distributed. This discontent is likely to partially explain the higher prevalence of negative attitudes towards migrants in the sample in Agadez than in Gao. Discontent with migrant-targeted programming also made some local community members more reticent to support migrants. Key informants suggested that this discontent may pose risks to migrants over time, including community retaliation against humanitarian organisations, or increased levels of violence against migrants. Despite these frustrations, community respondents acknowledged migrants' needs and most did not want humanitarian support taken away from migrants, but instead called for more equitable support.

- **Visibility of migrant-targeted programming in Agadez.** Data also suggests migrant-targeted programming is more visible in Agadez than in Gao, where community members are more aware of humanitarian and development programmes working to support the local population. However, in both locations, many local community members remained ill-informed about the activities of programmes, which contributed to misconceptions, and ultimately negative attitudes towards migrants.

Data does not suggest that the COVID-19 outbreak, and its socio-economic consequences, has significantly amplified tensions between migrants and local communities. Findings suggest this is because community members are often ambivalent to COVID-19 and do not believe migrants increase the risk of transmission. The only discernible impact that COVID-19 has had on relations between migrants and local communities is that measures to contain the virus appear to have reduced the quality and frequency of interactions between them. This may potentially limit contact and ties, leading to more negative attitudes over time and a more difficult operating environment.

Migrants confirmed that the local community is often an important source of support and assistance, supporting their ability to avoid and recover from harm. In the quantitative sample, almost half of migrant respondents said that the community had provided them with assistance. Local communities also played a key role in referring migrants to humanitarian organisations, indicating that community members can play an important role in facilitating access to migrants. Migrants more frequently reported receiving support from the local community in Gao than Agadez, suggesting perceptions have an impact on communities' willingness to support and assist migrants.

Reported incidents of harm and abuse towards migrants from local community members were relatively infrequent, though not absent. The most prevalent incidents were verbal insults, followed by robbery. A small

share of migrants reported negative effects that resulted from relations with the local community. These negative effects included decreased financial resources and access to employment due to local employers' mistrust, higher prices for goods and shelter and stress due to verbal insults and fears of bad treatment. For women, those who reported local community attitudes negatively affected them said they found it harder to access work, other than sex work, and faced more verbal abuse than men, which was a significant source of psychosocial distress.

Recommendations to donors

1. Consider adopting an area-based development programme in key migration hubs that contributes to humanitarian, stabilisation and development outcomes in the Sahel. Steps for adopting an area-based development programme that supports migrants and local communities include:

   a. Undertake a needs and capacity-based assessment that draws on community consultation to understand priority areas for a mix of shorter-term humanitarian and longer-term development programming. This could explore options to improve the availability and quality of local government services to both migrants and local communities.

   b. Conduct an updated mapping exercise of development, humanitarian, and stabilisation programming in key areas. Consider existing vulnerabilities, gaps in programming, and the political economy setting when deciding to what degree programmes will target both migrants and the local community.

2. Advocate for the inclusion of migrants as beneficiaries of existing development programmes. Explore opportunities with other donors to integrate migration objectives into existing development programmes.

3. Commission periodic surveys in key migration hubs with other key donors to monitor the relationships between migrants and local communities.

4. Commission a review of existing social cohesion initiatives and practices relevant to migration programming to better understand what works and could be scaled up. This could build on and analyse individual reviews by implementing partners but should likely be done as independent research.

5. Organise an event for donors and implementers to share lessons learned of what works on social cohesion in migration hubs ahead of future migration programmes. The event could also be used to shape the commissioning of recommendations 2 and 3 above.

Recommendations to implementers

1. Consolidate lessons learned on social cohesion from migration programming and develop a broader strategy. Although research suggests social cohesion should be an integral part of migration programming, the literature review for this study finds there is limited evidence on what works in these contexts.

2. Prioritise social cohesion activities that could counter negative attitudes expressed towards women and migrants of specific nationalities, who are perceived as not sharing common values and traditions.

3. Enhance communication strategies to ensure the objectives and results of programmes are shared with local communities. This can help to mitigate perceptions of unfair resource distribution by creating more awareness about the activities and objectives of programming. Strategies could include regular town halls or consultations with local community members in locations close to project activities or factsheets in local newspapers or social media commonly used by local communities.

4. Consult local community leaders and members in the design of programme activities and social cohesion approaches. Ensure that actions taken in response to consultations are communicated back to community members to support trust.

5. Identify key indicators of migrant–community tensions and monitor them. Based on the findings of this study, implementers should consider monitoring perceptions around the equity of assistance and fluctuations in the number of stranded migrants in key hubs.

6. Fund community-based services to promote positive interactions and more sustained social ties between migrants and local communities. Organisations could explore community-based housing options for less vulnerable migrants instead of housing them in reception centres.

7. Identify opportunities to include community members in assistance and/ or in recreational events organised for migrant beneficiaries.

8. Explore joint livelihoods programming for female migrants and community members. Findings show that negative perceptions make it harder for women to partake in income-generating activities outside of sex work, raising protection concerns. Programming could include joint trainings for local and migrant women, and engaging community women who would be willing to act as mentors in relevant sectors of the economy (i.e. hairdressing, sewing).

9. Mainstream risk mitigation by ensuring that risk registers include risks in specific higher-risk locations related to relationships with local communities, access and managing tensions between migrants and local communities. Ensure mitigation strategies are meaningful activities regularly undertaken by teams and included in narrative reporting.