

# Before the Desert

Conditions and Risks on Mixed Migration Routes through West Africa

Insights from the Mixed Migration Monitoring Mechanism initiative (4Mi) in Mali and Niger





This report was written by Thomas Munsch, William Powell and Sonia Joly for the Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat (RMMS) West Africa. The authors would like to thank the Global Disaster Preparedness Center and Response 2 Resilience for their financial support, their continued interest and their flexibility.

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## Executive Summary

- The Mixed Migration Monitoring Mechanism initiative (4Mi) collects data on the conditions of mixed migration movements across various regions. It is implemented by the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) and the Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat.
- The pilot phase of 4Mi in Niger and Mali, on which the present report is based, illustrates the conditions and protection risks faced by people moving north from West Africa before they cross the Sahara Desert towards North Africa.
- While the data presented in this report is not representative of the overall movement of people north from West Africa through Niger and Mali, it does give a preliminary insight into the conditions of movements and highlights some of the protection risks faced by people on the move. A number of areas have been raised that will benefit from further examination as more data is collected and 4Mi expands to other areas in West Africa.
- In line with the existing literature, the majority of respondents reported moving for economic reasons primarily related to increasing employment opportunities. This points to the lack, or perceived lack, of secure income as a significant factor in people's decisions to move. However, movements across the region occur in a context of contemporary forms of persecution and exclusion, including deteriorating livelihood opportunities due to conflicts in certain areas, prolonged marginalization and relative poverty. People touched by such issues may nevertheless express their motivations for moving as primarily economic.
- The specific influence of forced displacement on the wider dynamics of mobility in the region is difficult to estimate. It is possible that, as insecurity in Northern Mali and the Lake Chad region becomes more protracted and continues to prevent returns, secondary movement may become more significant.
- Despite the ECOWAS free movement policies in force, people interviewed by 4Mi reported hindrances in crossing borders in the region, often for attempting to enter or exit a country illegally. In many cases, relatively small bribes had to be paid to facilitate onward movement.
- The number of severe protection incidents reported is relatively low compared to other mixed migration routes, particularly the western route out of the Horn of Africa through Sudan, but also in Libya, towards which many of the respondents continue their journey from West Africa.
- Authorities and security officers play a central role in a large number of incidents. In addition to the involvement of authorities in bribery and detention at borders, the largest percentage of mild physical and verbal abuse recorded by 4Mi was carried out by security officers or police, followed by smugglers.
- The border between Niger and Burkina Faso emerged as an area with a comparatively high number of protection incidents. Multiple accounts of abuse and detention were reported to take place here, highlighting Burkina Faso as an under examined country of transit.
- The continuation and potential expansion of 4Mi in the region, as well as in Libya, will be informed by these preliminary insights and will continue to provide in-depth and timely information on mixed migration movements through crucial transit locations in the region. Comparative analysis with 4Mi data from Libya/the Maghreb, Eastern, Northern and Southern Africa will provide further insight.

## Introduction

The current debates on migration to Europe have placed a significant focus on mixed migration journeys across the Sahara Desert and the Mediterranean Sea. This has inspired an extensive and growing body of literature exploring migration journeys from Africa, with a particular focus on Libya, as well as on the routes from the East and Horn of Africa towards the North.<sup>1</sup> These movements are ‘mixed’ in nature, comprising people of various legal status travelling along similar routes with similar protection concerns.

A significant and increasing proportion of the people travelling through the Sahara to leave the Libyan coast for Europe are of West African origin. Indeed, while the numbers of migrants and refugees arriving in Italy over the past several years has remained relatively steady, the percentage of West Africans in these flows has doubled, from 22% in 2014 to over 50% in 2016.<sup>2</sup> In January and February 2017, nationals from West Africa made up 64% of arrivals and six out of the top 10 nationalities arriving in Italy by sea via the Central-Mediterranean route.<sup>3</sup>

However, the specific conditions along mixed migration routes within West Africa have received relatively little attention up to now. Supporting evidence-based research on West African mixed migration routes is therefore key to deepening our knowledge about the initial phase of West Africans’ journeys north, leading up to their crossing of the Sahara Desert.

Due to the free mobility policies of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS),<sup>4</sup> holders of ECOWAS member state passports can travel freely across borders within the regional zone. As such, movements taking place within West Africa are often understood as relatively unproblematic. However, migratory movements inherently generate vulnerabilities, as people leave their known surroundings and support networks to take on journeys into the largely unknown. The extensive borders of some of the countries in the region, coupled with a lack of human and financial resources, means that effective policing of borders is challenging for many states. Migrants thus face a range of administrative hindrances and harassment at numerous border points along the common migratory routes within the region, even when in possession of valid travel documents.<sup>5</sup> This is particularly true on routes towards the north from West Africa, where rapidly changing and insecure environments have the potential to make people’s journeys dangerous and difficult, as is the case in Niger and Mali.

While attempts have been made to begin to estimate the scope and size of movements from West to North Africa,<sup>6</sup> and despite the high interest and concern around the phenomenon from policy makers and governments, there are no systems in place that produce in-depth qualitative information on mixed migration movements from West Africa. A lack of investment in mechanisms to gather such data perpetuates this situation. Policy formation, political debate and programming are thus taking place in a context that is largely devoid of information from the perspective of the migrants and refugees who are traveling in the region. Producing reliable qualitative data is a considerable challenge, however, given the disparate routes and methods of movement, the clandestine nature of some of the routes and the insecure contexts through which these movements take place.

Strengthening protection needs of people on the move requires a broader understanding of the conditions of movement. A number of reports published during the last five years provide a starting point to analyse West African mixed migration trends and the conditions people face on these journeys in more detail.<sup>7</sup> The Mixed Migration Monitoring Mechanism initiative (4Mi), which forms the basis for this report, is an innovative approach to gathering relevant data on mixed migration movements, and aims to strengthen this evidence base, and enable a deeper and more substantial understanding of the mixed migration trends and conditions in the region through a user-friendly platform fed by a growing data set.

The present report is based on a pilot phase of 4Mi data collection in West Africa, running from December 2016 until March 2017.<sup>8</sup> Data collection will continue past this date, aiming at cumulating further evidence over time.

The project was implemented under the framework of the research programme “Forced Migration and Humanitarian Assistance: Critical Implications and Integral Solutions” funded by the Global Disaster Preparedness Center and administered by Response 2 Resilience.

# Methodology

4Mi seeks to address the need for data about mixed migration movements by collecting data directly from people on the move. The data is comprehensive and covers motivations for movement, the routes and methods people use and the protection risks they face on route.

## Background

The 4Mi methodology is based on an innovative low cost approach where local individuals, called “monitors”, in strategic migration hubs in the region conduct face-to-face interviews with people on the move on issues related to their journey. The monitors use standardised interviews which take an average of one to two hours to complete and contain 150 questions. The questions touch on many aspects of the migration journey, including, but not limited to, the profiles and backgrounds of the interviewees, their reasons for leaving and choosing certain destinations, the routes, costs, means of transport, duration of travel, protection-related incidents and vulnerabilities encountered on route, as well as sources of information and assistance while traveling. Monitors conduct interviews through questionnaires on a customised smartphone application, which automatically uploads the completed survey to the 4Mi database in real-time via cellular networks. The database feeds an interactive online platform presenting a user-friendly aggregate data set.

## The Sample

For this pilot project, 4Mi deployed 2-3 monitors per location in Niger and Mali, with interviews taking place in Niamey and Agadez in Niger, and Timbuktu, Mopti and Gao in Mali. The sites were chosen due to their strategic location as important transit hubs for people heading north from West Africa. The interviews covered people’s journeys up until the borders of the West African region, aiming to shed light on an underreported section of these routes.

The present report is based on 4Mi’s aggregate data from a sample of 235 interviews, which occurred between December 2016 and March 2017, with 123 interviews conducted in Niger and 112 conducted in Mali. The monitors interviewed nationals from every country in the ECOWAS region during the pilot period, save for Sierra Leone. The sample also includes people from Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Cameroon. Although the findings from this study illustrate serious protection deficits in the region, a high number of violations experienced by West African migrants (both in severity and in volume) occur while crossing the most remote sections of the Sahara and inside Libya.

## Limitations

The purposive nature of the sampling in 4Mi means that it cannot be considered representative in terms of the gender, age, origin and personal profiles of people moving north in mixed migration movements from West Africa. Since movements through the places where monitors work are fluid, largely clandestine and take place in insecure or uncontrolled areas, the interaction with people encountered by the monitors depends largely on the ability of monitors to access people on the move, as well as the willingness of individuals to be interviewed and share information about their journeys. In practice, this means that the sample number may change for some questions given the possible refusal of interviewees to respond to some questions. While monitors are trained in interview techniques to minimise potential biases in the sample, 4Mi does not attempt to be statistically representative. Rather, it aims to provide in-depth qualitative information about the experiences of people on the move in West Africa in order to inform more effective protection and solution strategies.

The scale and scope of mixed migration movements means that a project like 4Mi can only illuminate certain parts of the mixed migration phenomenon in the region. Agencies and authorities have other capacities and information, which, when viewed in coordination with 4Mi data, will allow us to understand the mixed migration phenomena better. The findings presented in this report should be considered as a preliminary analysis that, nevertheless, gives valuable insight into areas and topics of specific concern needing further attention by researchers, practitioners in the protection domain and policy makers. The continuation of the 4Mi project will allow for the development and corroboration of the insights presented here.

## Mixed Migration

Mixed migration includes irregular migrants (those dislodged by a real or perceived inability to thrive or motivated by aspirations or a desire to unite with other family members etc., but who travel without the sanction of states), refugees and asylum-seekers, victims of trafficking, stateless persons, unaccompanied minors and separated children and other vulnerable persons on the move.<sup>9</sup>

The concept of mixed migration has arisen in the context of a questioning of the conceptual distinction between ‘forced’ and ‘voluntary’ migration as mutually exclusive categories lying at the heart of the refugee regime and underlining the policy framework addressing human mobility.<sup>10</sup> As has been pointed out by a number of scholars, most migrants exercise some choice within structural, political and economic constraints over which they have little control.<sup>11</sup> Thus, it may be the violence causing life to be intolerable that triggers a family’s decision to move, but ‘economic factors may also play an important role in the timing of the move and the choice of the destination’.<sup>12</sup> Contemporary forms of mobility have exposed the porous nature of the policy categories separating refugees and other displaced persons from other migrants, as increasing numbers of people on the move shift between legal and policy categories, or occupy multiple categories at the same time.<sup>13</sup>

Partly in response to this complexity, since the 1990s states have increasingly implemented measures to restrict asylum space, including through frontier controls, reduced resettlement places and a restrictive interpretation of the 1951 convention. This has led an increasing number of asylum seekers to bypass refugee processing channels and refugee camps, and, using migrant smugglers arrive directly in Europe to apply for asylum.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, states in traditional destination countries, particularly in Europe, but increasingly in North Africa, have reduced legal pathways for labour migration and increased their focus on border enforcement.<sup>15</sup> This has displaced traditional mobility patterns, and resulted in people with various motivations and legal status crossing borders together, along increasingly limited, dangerous and clandestine routes.

The acknowledgement of the complexity of contemporary movements, particularly those considered by states as ‘irregular’, has presented a significant challenge for states and international organisations concerned with displacement and migration. Contemporary migratory movements from the global South to the global North have also highlighted significant protection gaps for people on the move. Some argue that, large groups of these people, while they do not meet the refugee criteria under the 1951 convention, are fleeing a variety of contemporary forms of persecution, including prolonged exclusion from socio-economic activities and the processes of globalisation, failing states, warlord economies, environmental degradation, disasters, and internal displacement.<sup>16</sup>

Rather than a purely analytical category, mixed migration is a category of practice, helping organisations and agencies to manage their assistance to certain target groups. It recognises that people may have mixed motivations, but are traveling the same routes, often using the same smugglers, and, while they may occupy different policy categories at different times and stages of their journey, face similar risks while on route.

## Migration and Displacement Context in West Africa

The West African region has traditionally experienced particularly high levels of intra-regional mobility. Intra-regional migration is a traditional practice in a large number of West African communities and ethnic groups, and these movements are often an important economic resource, as well as an important strategy to support communities' resilience during seasonal droughts and shocks to people's livelihoods. While types of intra-regional migration vary greatly among countries in the region they can be broadly characterised as: labour migration towards urban or coastal economic centres; seasonal employment and transhumance; movement of people along tribal and pastoral society lines; and displacement in response to climatic challenges, conflict or persecution.

Intra-regional migration in West Africa can be considered mixed in the sense that people with various and changing legal statuses are moving for a variety of reasons and facing many of the same protection risks. While trans-Saharan or extra-regional migration forms an important part of wider regional labour mobility patterns, these movements are low in number when compared with intra-regional mobility. According to OECD estimates, some 80% of West African migration is intra-regional, four times greater than movements to areas outside the region.<sup>17</sup> Over time, intra-regional migration has diversified, with traditional countries of emigration becoming countries of destination, and countries of destinations shifting due to economic crisis and conflict. Countries in the Sahel region, such as Niger and Mali, but also Burkina Faso, are primarily countries of transit for people traveling through West Africa, and, especially in the case of Niger, have become de-facto countries of (temporary) destination as migrants work in locations like Agadez to fund their onward migration.<sup>18</sup>

In some areas, particularly in the Sahara regions, intra- and extra-regional mobility are blurred categories as tightly interwoven tribes, clans and ethnic groups with a long history of mobility migrate and trade across borders.<sup>19</sup> Libya in particular, with its large oil reserves, relative wealth and visa free travel for West Africans between 1997 and 2007, has long been a significant country of destination for West Africa labour migrants.<sup>20</sup> Although circumstances have shifted heavily since the beginning of the civil war in Libya, it continues to be an important destination country. Algeria has also traditionally been an important country of destination for West African migrants, particularly for Malian traders and seasonal workers, supported by bilateral agreements between Mali and Algeria permitting the free movement of people between the two countries. More recently, however, Algeria has pursued punitive policies against West African migrants in Algeria, including the rounding up and mass deportation to Niger.<sup>21</sup> These developments take place in the context of increased focus on border controls in Europe.<sup>22</sup>

Intra-regional displacement also forms an important part of the mobility context in West Africa, with past and ongoing conflicts and insecurity generating significant historical and contemporary displacement in the region. Estimates suggest that during the civil war in Liberia, almost half of the population was displaced by conflict.<sup>23</sup> The current conflict in northern Nigeria has displaced up to 2.1 million people, including some 200,000 refugees currently sheltering in neighbouring countries in the region.<sup>24</sup> Beyond those directly displaced by conflicts, violence has also deflected common labour migration patterns away from certain areas, as exemplified by Cote d'Ivoire. However, due to a lack of specific data, it is difficult to estimate the influence of displacement on dynamics of wider mobility in the region. It is possible to surmise however, that as displacement becomes more protracted in the ongoing crises in northern Mali and in the Lake Chad region, secondary movements out of the region might become more important. Similar developments have been witnessed with Eritreans out of Ethiopia, and Syrians out of Turkey.

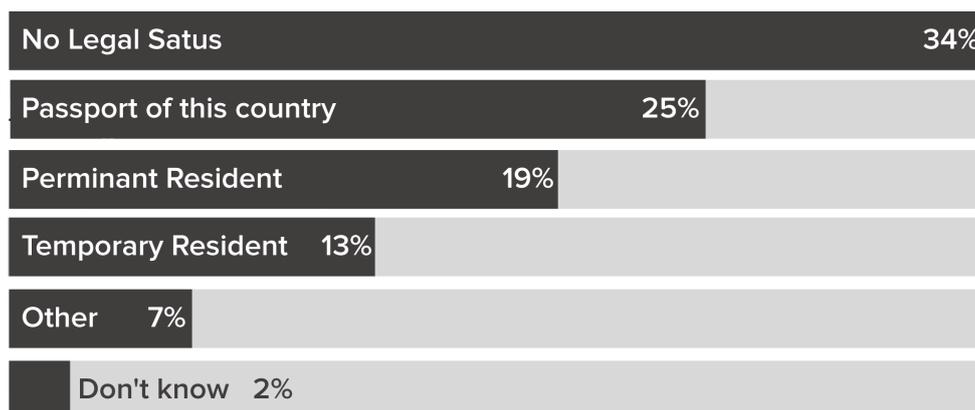
While intra-, and to some extent extra-regional migration is often classified as primarily economically motivated, and 4Mi data would appear to corroborate this, there are some limitations to this classification. While violence or persecution may make life intolerable and trigger movement, the choice of route, timing and destination may be influenced by economic factors, with motivations and destinations also often shifting along the route. For instance, while several Nigerians surveyed by 4Mi reported being from areas in northern Nigeria associated with displacement and ongoing conflict, they indicated that they were migrating for primarily economic reasons. This might not preclude people from being entitled to international protection pending Refugee Status Determination.

Finally, migration journeys, particularly those to North Africa involving smugglers, require significant investment, and this may make migration prohibitively expensive for the most vulnerable, resulting in vulnerable displaced people staying in camps or camp-like situations in the region.

### ECOWAS free movement policies

The West African migration context has to be understood through the ECOWAS legal framework relating to the free movement of people in the region. ECOWAS was created in 1975 with the objective of building a common socio-economic space in West Africa. The ECOWAS Treaty, as well as the 1979 Protocol relating the Free Movement of Persons, the Right of Residence and Establishment and supplementary protocols, guarantee the right of ECOWAS citizens to free entry, without visa requirements, to the territory of another member state for a duration of 90 days.<sup>25</sup> ECOWAS notion of free movement includes three components: the right of entry, the right of residence and salaried employment on the territory of another member state and the right of establishment.

However, the implementation of these policies remains uneven across the region, and the ECOWAS Commission and Member States have indicated that they are aware of challenges still restricting entry to states, such as harassment at border crossing points.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, in practice obstacles to free movement in the ECOWAS territory remain. Illicit roadblocks and the corruption of state security officers are key issues in this context and continue to represent threats to the protection of migrants.

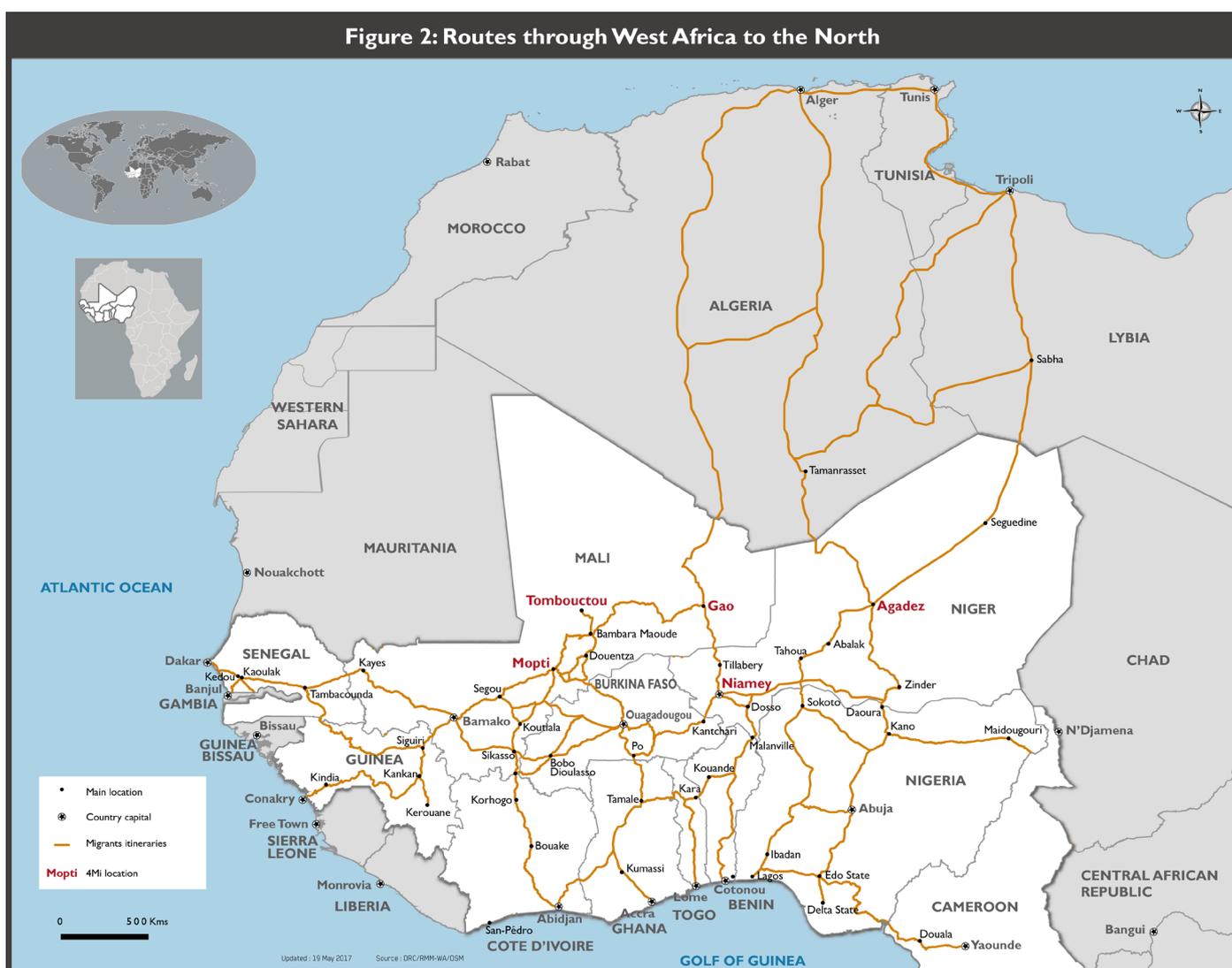


**Figure 1: Legal Status**

The ECOWAS free movement regulation is often seen as a deterrent for transnational organized crime networks to engage in smuggling, as such networks have smaller incentives to launch a business in a free movement community. Within West Africa, people on the move have little incentive to engage smugglers, as in theory they can cross borders easily. However, it should be noted that this situation could change quickly in response to strengthened border controls, giving more incentive for people to engage smugglers and take more difficult or clandestine routes across borders, as presumably has been the case in northern Niger during 2016. 4Mi data seems to indicate that 34% of interviewees managed to reach their destination point in Niger and Mali without legal documentation (figure 1), which could point to the ease of crossing borders within the ECOWAS community, or to a lack of border management capacities (or willingness) of state authorities

## From West Africa to Northern Africa and beyond

Current trends in migration routes suggest that the majority of migrants from West Africa travel through either Mali, Niger or both, before crossing the Sahara (see map below). When crossing Mali, migrants usually travel through Bamako to reach Timbuktu or Gao before making arrangements to head to either Algeria or Niger and on to Libya. While Gao remains an important transit point, preferred by some because of the access of its routes to Algeria,<sup>27</sup> latest reports show that a majority of migrants have been shifting their routes to enter Libya or Algeria through Niger, instead of travelling through Northern Mali, often attributed to the increased insecurity in Mali. This shift in routes puts Burkina Faso and particularly its capital Ouagadougou at the centre of various converging routes, bringing together people originating from the western (Senegal, Gambia, Guinea) and the southern-central (Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana) ECOWAS countries. However, routes may shift in response to changes in context.



Four main routes are used to enter Niger, from Mali, Burkina Faso, Benin and Nigeria, with Niamey and Agadez representing the main hubs for migration towards the north. Since September, the Government of Niger, with the support of the EU, has increased security along this route and has been implementing coercive measures in an attempt to reduce the movements across the northern borders with Libya and Algeria.<sup>28</sup> IOM data suggests that movements decreased in September and November 2016 when compared to previous months, although, as of yet, it is not clear if this represents a sustained trend.<sup>29</sup> While the tighter security controls in Séguédine and Arlit, the main transit cities before the borders of Niger and Algeria, may have resulted in fewer direct departures through these cities, there is evidence that routes may shift to avoid places where security measures are in place.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, in these geographical areas, travelling is primarily done with the help of smugglers and therefore the diminution the IOM figures might be a result of shifting routes in the desert, as smugglers and their clients try to avoid being detected by border management officials.<sup>31</sup>

## Documentation requirements

Due to the ECOWAS Free Movement Protocols, migrant journeys to Mopti, Gao, Timbuktu and Agadez from locations within West Africa are generally lawful for those in possession of the necessary documentation.<sup>32</sup> According to information collected through 4Mi, before arriving to the northern cities of Niger and Mali, migrants predominantly use public buses and cars for their journey, as shown in figure 3, aligning with IOM data from the region.<sup>33</sup>

However, for those who do not hold the necessary identification, crossing borders can be challenging. According to a recent report from Clingendael, bus companies operating in West Africa have become very adept at transporting migrants across borders in the region, in some cases offering separate services for migrants. Eyewitness accounts indicate, for instance, that bus companies may unload undocumented migrants on one side of the border, directing them to private vehicles to transport them around the border posts, before meeting them again on the other side.<sup>34</sup> While migrant smuggling is, due to prevailing narratives, often associated with (violent) exploitation of migrants, this way of facilitating border crossings is one of many forms that migrant smuggling can take.<sup>35</sup>

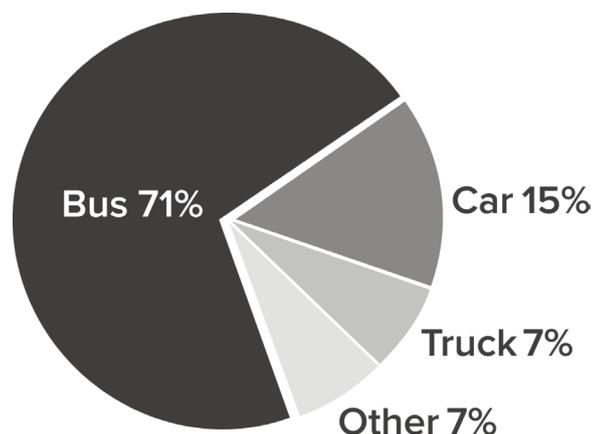


Figure 3: Means of transport

4Mi data, (figure 4), indicates that 11% of interviewees used a broker or a smuggler to facilitate travels from their place of origin, while 25% of those interviewed indicated that they had engaged a smuggler to facilitate one or more parts of the rest of their journey. This could be an indication that smuggling services within West Africa are generally ad hoc, with migrants traveling on their own and occasionally using smuggling services to cross a border if they are lacking adequate documentation.<sup>36</sup>

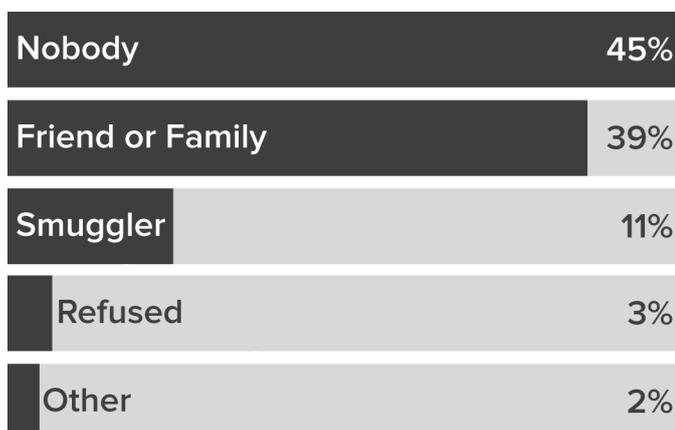


Figure 4: Facilitation of departure

it confiscated by authorities, or they may be unaware of their rights.<sup>38</sup> Authorities' efforts to strengthen border controls and movements of foreigners might create such situations more often, pushing people into the hands of smugglers of various kinds. As outlined below, a case in point according to the 4Mi dataset is the town of Kantchari in Burkina Faso on the road to the Nigerien border, where a significant number of respondents reported to have been detained.

## Levels of information

An important question, and recurring theme in programmatic interventions, is whether people on the move have accurate information at their disposal. 4Mi data suggests that, while a majority of respondents chose to travel to Mali and Niger by their own means, their prior knowledge of the routes was incomplete. 50% of res-

pondents whose facilitators or smugglers had provided them with information before they departed from their place of origin, indicated that their trip was not as they had expected it to be. Most of these however believed that they were not intentionally misled, but that circumstances changed unexpectedly. While this might be understood to reflect the difficulties of gaining accurate information in largely informal, and sometimes insecure, environments, given the low sample size for this question this assumption will have to be reviewed in upcoming months when a larger sample is available.

This initially supports the notion that the sharing of accurate information on migration routes, conditions of travel, costs, dangers, etc. could strengthen the protection of people on the move. However, the practicalities of such information sharing remain highly contested. A mix of strong aspirations, objective facts, peer information, values and social relations shape people’s ideas, and who they are likely to trust in providing information about their journeys.<sup>39</sup> This might be at the core of the widely held view that classical information campaigns based on telling people that “migration is dangerous and they should rather stay at home” seem to have little impact.

### Mixed migration in Mali and Niger

As shown in figure 2, the most commonly used itineraries to cross the Sahara pass through Mali and Niger. The migration routes towards Libya from Mali and Niger are the most widely cited examples of West African mixed migration. The majority of those traveling express their main reasons for migrating in economic terms. This is supported by the 4Mi data on migrant profiles discussed in the upcoming chapters.

With continuing conflict in northern Mali and the Lake Chad region and related displacement, it is difficult to foresee whether migration routes to Mali and Niger will continue to be mainly used by those primarily seeking economic betterment.

IOM Mali’s flow monitoring report from December 2016 observed 184 Syrian nationals travelling through Gao, reporting that they had flown to Mauritania to travel to Libya and onwards to Europe.<sup>40</sup> However, the 4Mi dataset did not identify any Syrian nationals or others originating from outside of Sub-Saharan or North Africa and all three monitors working in Gao had described this as a temporary phenomenon and indicated that since the beginning of 2017 they had not heard of any Syrians passing through Mali.

### Smuggling and collusion of authorities

Due the increasingly difficult security conditions on the routes from Niger and Mali to Algeria and Libya, people predominantly use networks of smugglers to cross the Sahara. The first contact migrants make with smugglers is often in one of the migration hubs in Mali and Niger, although the information network of the smugglers reaches far upstream, sometimes as far as the places of origin of migrants.<sup>41</sup> The movements of migrants through

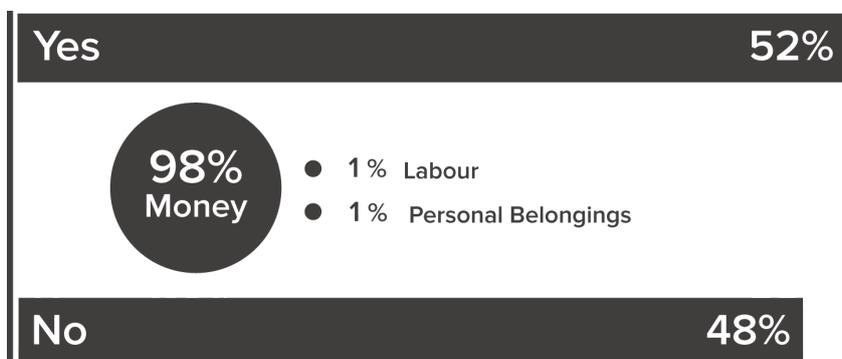


Figure 5: Bribes or gifts to officials

these towns, Gao and Timbuktu in Mali, and Agadez in Niger, result in large inflows of money, with important implications for the local socio-economic dynamics, including possible collusion of officials.<sup>42</sup>

A number of recent reports on the political economy of migration and smuggling in the Sahel have examined how human smuggling networks form part of larger political economies.<sup>43</sup> These reports have drawn attention to how the irregular movement of people and smuggling activities exist both within the purview of state authorities, and in regions where state authority is severely limited. They show how in many contexts illegal and legal trade are inherently linked as people transport a variety of goods and contraband, as well as people across borders, often with the knowledge, and sometimes the active involvement, of state authorities.<sup>44</sup>

As shown in figure 5, according to the interviews conducted by 4Mi, 52% of the sample had to bribe a Government official at one point of the journey. The overwhelming majority indicated having given bribes of money and on average respondents reported bribing an official three times. The average smallest bribes given to officials was 8,500 CFA (14 USD). Among those who indicated that they had been detained by security forces of police, often at border crossings, the average smallest bribe was significantly higher; 17,000 CFA (28 USD). Although this is only a limited sample, it points to the involvement of representatives of the state in the economy of migration in the region.

The necessity to bribe officials within the ECOWAS regional block, especially at border crossings, highlights the uneven implementation of the free movement policies, as well as the vulnerability of people on the move to exploitation. Perpetrators might be officials, criminal networks or others taking advantage of vulnerable people on an ad-hoc basis.<sup>45</sup>

### Profiles of people on the move in Niger and Mali

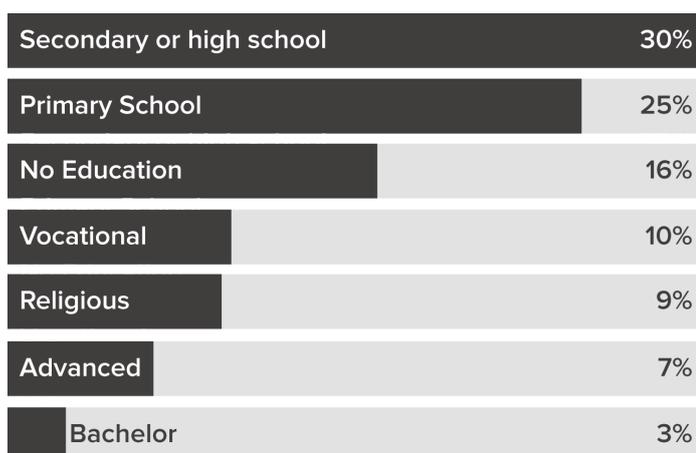
4Mi data supports the common understanding that young men constitute the majority of migrants leaving West Africa, with 82% of the sample being male. IOM reports state that 88% of movements from West Africa to Libya and Algeria through Niger are composed of men, with women only representing 12% of the flow.<sup>46</sup>



Figure 6: Profiles of the 4Mi sample

With regard to the nationalities of the 4Mi sample, Ivorians account for 23% of the migrants interviewed in Niger, while in Mali 23% of the migrants come from Burkina Faso. Overall 31% of migrants interviewed by 4Mi came from one of those two countries. While countries in the region are represented almost equivalently in Niger and in Mali, Nigerians and Cameroonians seem to favour the migration routes through Niger. When compared with IOM reports, the data collected with 4Mi seems to confirm the main migration nationality tendencies, with Guinea-Conakry, Cote d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso and Senegal accounting for the highest numbers.<sup>47</sup> The number of Nigerians in the 4Mi sample was noticeably low however, given that in 2016 they accounted for the highest percentage of arrivals to Europe, and the highest number recorded by IOM leaving Niger for Libya.<sup>48</sup> However, given the trend in 2016, with Nigerian arrivals to Europe peaking from June to October, before declining over winter, it is possible the number of Nigerians will increase over time.<sup>49</sup>

Economic migration using the trans-Saharan route seems to attract or be accessible to a specific profile of migrants. Aggregated UNICEF data shows a global percentage of 42% of attendance for secondary school in West and Central Africa for 2009-2015.<sup>50</sup> Among the 4Mi caseload, 40% of interviewees have at least a secondary school level of education (figure 7). Additionally, 91% of interviewees come from urban areas, strongly contrasting with the global West African urban population rate of 42%.<sup>51</sup> As stated by Bredeloup and Pliez and corroborated by different surveys in Mali, Niger and Northern African countries,<sup>52</sup> 'rather than being from the poorest sectors of society, quite a few irregular migrants traveling from West Africa to Europe are relatively well



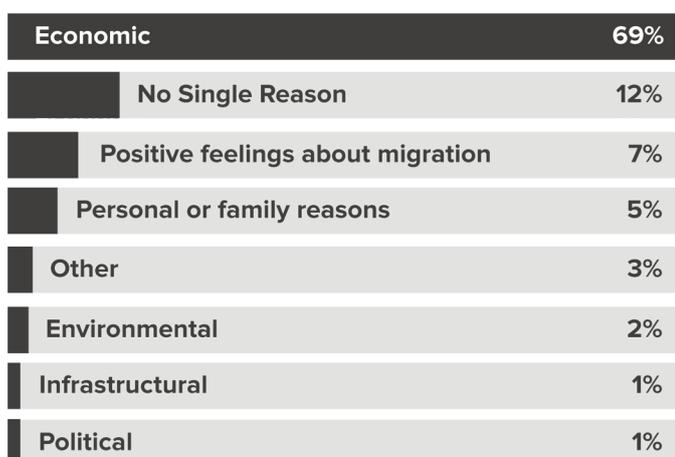
**Figure 7: Levels of education**

were labourers or farmworkers. This reflects the profiles of migrants from the countries of origin most represented in the sample from both locations. The majority of those from Cote d'Ivoire (the largest percentage of those interviewed in Niger) indicated that they were employed in the service industry or were students (59%) before leaving. Those from Burkina Faso (the largest percentage of those interviewed traveling through Mali) indicated they were either labourers or farm workers (66%). This may also reflect the mobility patterns through Niger and Mali. As the 4Mi data shows, the majority of those traveling through Niger indicated that their destination was in Europe, which contrasts with Mali, where the majority indicated that their destination was in West or North Africa.

More data is needed to reflect whether people on the move through northern Mali and Niger represent an educated fraction of the West African population originating largely from urban areas, and whether international migration is more accessible to a certain segment of the population; for instance, relatively educated men aged between 20 and 40 years old leaving from urban areas.

### Reasons for migrating and destinations

Data from 4Mi supports previous reports arguing that the majority of the people migrating through Mali and Niger are doing so for primarily economic reasons (figure 8). Indeed, 69% of those interviewed in Mali and



**Figure 8: Reasons for leaving**

educated, and some even had salaried jobs before their departure.<sup>153</sup> The 4Mi sample cannot statistically confirm these patterns, however, it seems to suggest that a large portion of the interviewees have received some amount of formal training and education.

The 4Mi data also reveals some difference in the profiles of migrants passing through the different countries. The majority of those interviewed in Mali indicated that they were working as labourers or farm workers (57%) prior to leaving their country, while only 23% indicated they worked in the service industry or were students. By contrast in Niger, the majority indicated that they were students or working in the service industry prior to leaving (53%), with only 22% indicating that they

Niger indicated that they had migrated for economic reasons, with little variation in the sample when filtered by country of origin. 75% of those interviewed reported that employment prospects were the most important factor in choosing their country of destination. Given that the vast majority of interviewees were from urban areas, this indicates that a lack, or perceived lack, of secure employment opportunities even in urban areas of West Africa is a significant factor in people's decision to move. However, this may be viewed in the context of people suffering a range of contemporary forms of persecution and/or exclusion, including deteriorating livelihood and income opportunities due to conflicts in their areas, prolonged marginalization and relative poverty.

While the direct influence of displacement on the wider dynamics of mobility in the region is difficult to estimate, of those interviewed by 4Mi, 14 were either refugees or had a pending asylum application. A further 5% indicated that they intended to apply for asylum in their country of destination and 42% did not yet know whether they would apply for asylum. It is possible that, as conflict and insecurity in Northern Mali and the Lake Chad region become more protracted, and continue to prevent returns, secondary movement may become more significant.

Employment prospects	75%
No single reason	9%
Better living standards	8%
Courtship	3%
Great security and freedom	3%
Education	2%

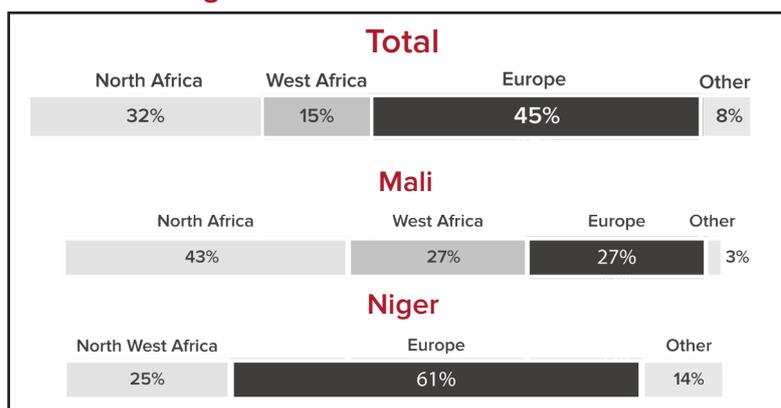
In the West African context, migration is often not an individual decision, but involves migrants' social and familial context at the departure point. Of those interviewed, 39% indicated that they had received support from their family or friends to facilitate their departure.

32% of migrants interviewed indicated that their final destination when they left home was within the North Africa region, 45% indicated that it was in Europe, while 15% were traveling to other destinations in West Africa and 8% were aiming for destinations outside of Africa and Europe, most commonly in North America.

**Figure 9: Reasons for choosing destination**

Between Mali and Niger, the intended destinations of migrants varied, possibly reflecting the mobility patterns through these areas. Of those who responded in Mali, 70% indicated that they were moving to a destination in North or West Africa, while 27% indicated they were aiming for a destination within Europe. In Niger, by contrast, 61% of those who responded indicated they were heading to a destination in Europe, and 14% were aiming for other countries outside Africa and Europe, most often North America.

**Figure 10: Intended destination**



### Leaving ECOWAS territory: Crossing the Sahara

This report examines the routes to the Malian and Nigerien key migration hubs before the Sahara from the perspective of people on the move. It does not examine in detail the conditions and routes of the trans-Saharan journey, this route having received much recent attention in the literature. However, the trans-Saharan migration route does provide a crucial context for transit migration between West and North Africa through Mali and Niger.

The trans-Saharan migration routes linking West and North Africa through Mali and Niger are embedded in the historical, cultural, and political context of the wider Sahel/Sahara region.<sup>54</sup> There is a long history of facilitated movement of both people and goods in the region, with migrants, pilgrims, traders and slaves transported alongside goods such as fuel, money, cigarettes, narcotics and small arms.<sup>55</sup> Smuggling networks have emerged from ethnic and kinship ties stretching across borders as communities have spread and travelled within the region and have remained an important source of economic opportunity and trade.<sup>56</sup> These networks cross borders from Mali, Niger, Algeria, Libya, Chad and Sudan, and support trade in both licit and illicit goods, as well as facilitating the movement and employment of migrants with and without documentation.

According to UNODC, an estimated 20% of migrants crossing the Sahara from Niger and Mali will ultimately attempt a journey through the Mediterranean Sea to reach Europe.<sup>57</sup> As discussed above, Northern Africa has long been an economic destination for West African populations, and Libya is estimated to be the North African country with the largest number of sub-Saharan African nationals. This suggests that an important part of the trans-Saharan migration constitutes (temporary) migration for employment, transhumance patterns or livelihood protection strategies.<sup>58</sup>

## Child Migration in West Africa

Child migration is an important phenomenon in West African, with many children migrating both with others and alone, as part of seasonal and rural to urban labour flows, and as a result of conflict, persecution or trafficking. Regardless of the means or reasons for movements, children on the move, especially those moving on their own, are a vulnerable and largely hidden population. Indeed, although data remains incomplete, evidence suggests that the majority of identified victims of trafficking in sub-Saharan Africa are children, mostly boys trafficked for the purposes of forced labour.<sup>59</sup>

4Mi does not interview children, as this would require additional training for the monitors to guarantee child safeguarding measures. However, monitors ask whether respondents have witnessed children migrating. 49 people on the move in Niger and Mali interviewed by 4Mi indicated that they had seen children traveling in the region both alone and in groups, and nine reported seeing children detained, in eight cases in the same location as adults.

Although the number of children captured by 4Mi is low, other sources observe large numbers of children amongst those transiting through Niger and Mali and making their way to North Africa and Europe. In 2016, IOM recorded some 8,000 children transiting through northern Niger. However, this cannot be said to represent all movements through these areas.<sup>60</sup> The most accurate data concerns arrivals of people by sea to Europe and these figures give some indication of the scale of movements of children along the central Mediterranean route through Niger and Mali. In 2016, the number of unaccompanied children arriving in Italy via the central Mediterranean route nearly doubled when compared with 2015. In addition, in 2016, some 92% of 28,223 children who arrived in Italy by sea were unaccompanied.<sup>61</sup> The number of women and girls in arrivals to Europe has also increased in recent years, with Save the Children reporting that the number of Nigerian women and girls arriving in Italy increased by 300% between 2014 and 2015.<sup>62</sup> According to Save the Children the majority of Nigerian women are between 15 and 17 years old, and many are trafficked into Europe for the purposes of sexual exploitation.<sup>63</sup>

The low number of children represented in the 4Mi data could be a reflection that in some cases the minimum age given by interviewees in the 4Mi data might be false, as respondents' awareness of the different general legal frameworks, as well as security concerns, might lead them to claim being adults while on route before arriving at countries where specific child protection systems are in place, for example in Europe.

## Protection risks on the West African journey

Malian and Nigerien state authorities face a common challenge. Their security apparatus and administrations are unable to control their territory in its entirety and both countries have long, poorly controlled and demarcated borders. In addition, their justice and rule of law systems lack efficiency, transparency and, in many cases, effectiveness. Locally, this translates into hybrid forms of governance with armed groups or local actors de facto controlling significant portions of territory. This situation both facilitates the irregular movement of people and weakens their protection, as state support systems are largely absent and the rule of law is poorly enforced, particularly in the northern parts of both countries.



The number of serious protection related incidents remains relatively small compared to other mixed migration routes in Africa and especially once the borders to Libya or Algeria are crossed. Nevertheless, in total, 18 people (8%) witnessed 32 deaths while on the move. The majority of deaths (69%) were caused by sickness, lack of medicine or starvation and dehydration. Several cases of excessive physical abuse leading to death were also reported in locations along the route.

12% of respondents reported having been detained while on the move in the region, some of them multiple times. The majority were detained by immigration officials or border guards at a police or immigration post (63%), and indicated they were detained for entering or exiting a country illegally. A significant number of detentions took place in Kantchari, on the border between Burkina Faso and Niger. The majority of those detained by immigration officials or border guards in Kantchari indicated they were being held for ransom, meaning in this case they had to pay an average of 30 USD to be released. These amounts bear no comparison to the sums reportedly extorted in incidences along routes from East to North African countries.<sup>64</sup>

36 people (16%) reported a total of 82 incidences of abuse, ranging from the deprivation of food, water or sleep, to confinement and extreme physical abuse. The most common form of abuse reported was mild physical or verbal abuse (83%), however, there were also four cases of extreme physical abuse by groups of thugs or gangs. The majority of incidents took place in Agadez in Niger, and Kantchari in Burkina Faso. Overall, the majority of perpetrators were security forces or police (38%) and smugglers (20%). 5% of those interviewed indicated they had experienced or witnessed sexual assault. One woman reported having been raped, another the victim of sexual assault and one man indicated he had been subject to sexual assault without giving further details. In total, six other incidents of rape were witnessed by men, as well as one of indecent assault or touching.

Out of the 235 interviews conducted, a total of 209 protection related incidents were recorded. However, only 15% of the victims received assistance, with 62% of this assistance coming from NGOs, 16% from local population, 16% from smugglers and 6% from others. As the majority of deaths witnessed by the interviewees were reportedly linked to the lack of access to healthcare during the journey, this could suggest that there is a need for strengthened support by the concerned states and the local and international NGOs, so that such deaths might be avoided. More generally, this could point to access to healthcare being a concern for people on the move, with deaths being only the extreme consequence of a general lack of healthcare.

Figure 11: Incidents

The 4Mi data also suggests that certain areas along the routes to Niger and Mali are particularly challenging for people to pass through. Of 141 incidents for which a location was given, 21% took place in Agadez. The data also indicates that the border crossing from Burkina to Niger, which sits at a central point on the way towards the Sahara, involves a higher than usual level of protection risks for migrants, particularly with regard to being detained or held for ransom by security forces or police while crossing the border. Overall, 10% of incidents were reported taking place around Kantchari in Burkina Faso, close to the border to Niger, and a further 10%

were reported around Niamey in Niger.

There are several possible reasons as to why this crossing seems to involve a high level of risks for people on the move. Firstly, as control and monitoring at the northern Nigerien border intensify under a general push to hinder the movement of people, attempts to stop movement might begin earlier along the route, shifting protection risks downstream as well. Secondly, with the intensification of the conflict in northern Mali, migrants are adapting their routes privileging the route through Burkina Faso to Niger to reach the Sahara. This could imply that the incidents numbers are due to an increased traffic at the border. Thirdly, according to NGO workers on the ground, recent violent attacks by armed groups reportedly based in Mali in the east of Burkina Faso have heightened tensions in the country as a whole. This might result in security officials across the country being more suspicious of foreigners, which in turn could result in protection risks for people crossing borders. It is also possible that, as this is a major transit point for migrants traveling, and given the increasing numbers of migrants doing so, officials at border posts may use the opportunity to exploit migrants as they pass through. Finally, the concentration of reported incidents might be due to the methodology of 4Mi, specifically the location of monitors. People interviewed in a specific location might be less prone to disclose incidents closer to their current location, as they might fear repercussions from individuals (e.g. smugglers, authorities) there.

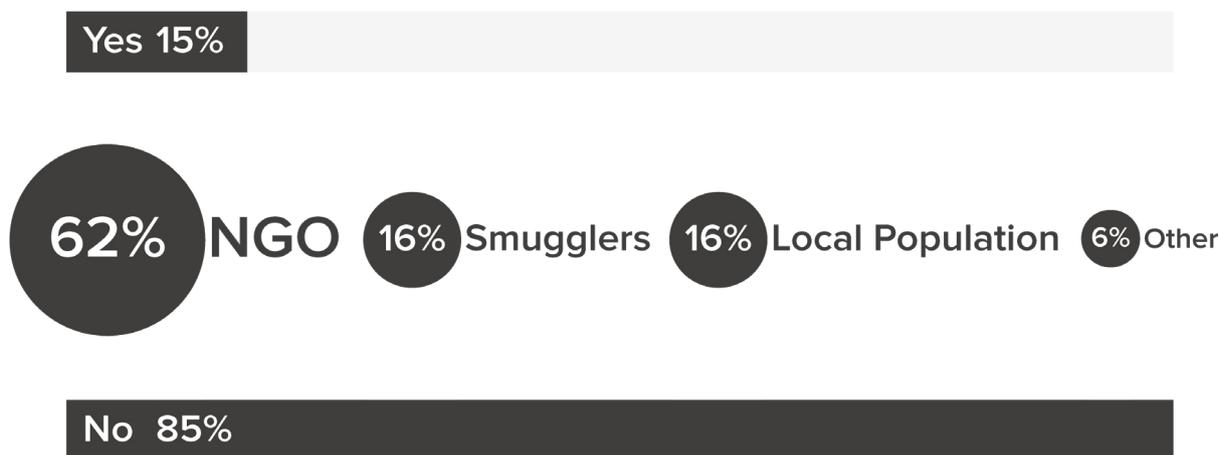


Figure 12: Assistance along the route

## Conclusion and outlook

The findings of this report are the result of a pilot phase of 4Mi in West Africa, with a limited number of monitors placed in Gao, Mopti and Timbuktu in Mali as well as Agadez and Niamey in Niger. The monitors collected information on the routes from all over West Africa towards these locations. A significant number of people interviewed by monitors were bound for a crossing of the Sahara Desert towards Algeria and/or Libya.

As the monitors in Mali and Niger continue to collect data, 4Mi monitors have also begun to work in Libya. With increased investment, 4Mi could also start to monitor other routes in the region, such as those between Mauritania and Mali, to and from the Lake Chad region, or in the south of Burkina Faso.

Together with the well-established networks of monitors in East Africa, on the routes through Sudan towards North Africa as well as towards the south, 4Mi hopes to develop more comprehensive and comparative analysis on conditions and risks of people's journeys along mixed migration routes.

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Mixed Migration Monitoring Mechanism Initiative



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