



**KONRAD
ADENAUER
STIFTUNG**

**Migration Trends with
Artisanal Gold Mining
in Northern Niger**



Programme Régional
Sahel

www.kas.de/sahel

Policy Brief by D.Goxho for Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Bamako

Map 1 Goldfields of northern Niger



Source: Pellerin 2017

Table of Contents

1. Introduction: rhetoric versus reality
2. Methodology
3. Genesis and legend: the Nigerien Gold Rush
4. Environmental implications of artisanal gold mining
5. Insecurity around the mines: a risky business
6. Migration: resource or curse in the Nigerien north?
7. Migration paths & Mining Paths: intersections
8. Recommendations: risks and opportunities
9. Bibliography

Executive Summary – Main findings

- ◇ A series of concurring events, both internal to Niger and external, made artisanal goldmining a *vital* source of revenues for local populations in Northern Niger. However, the influx of foreign miners into Niger is overall perceived as problematic by the local population, who find that criticalities far outweigh the benefits.
- ◇ Gold mining in Northern Niger partially serves to manage tensions deriving from a lack of economic opportunity for locals and migrants alike and diversifying work opportunities. Protests in Agadez after the regional government decided to close off a refugee camp and the death of a Sudanese protester show how, if left unchecked or unappeased, tensions with migration might easily flare up in the region.¹
- ◇ While the phenomenon of artisanal gold mining in northern Niger is rather *niche*, and one for which there still is scant data and research, it has important consequences for the region at large, not just related to national and regional migration, but also with regard to insecurity, problematic diplomatic relations with neighbouring countries and serious human and environmental implications.
- ◇ Lack of state/regional regulation in northern mines depends on strain relations between the central transition government in Niamey, now managed by a military junta, and the regional government in Agadez.
- ◇ In the past few years, a new equilibrium has been reached in northern mines, which primarily depends on rudimental self-organised security, as well as self-organised labour law. This has partially improved relations with the Nigerien Security Forces .
- ◇ Goldmining migrants in the region tend to be seasonal, and gold mining is viewed as a temporary safety net rather than a permanent pull factor for migrants. Mining is most often undertaken as a complementary activity to agriculture, with alternating dry and rainy seasons: most miners come temporarily from other locations before returning to agriculture.
- ◇ Migration in and around the mines is also problematic due to a 'possession' issue: much like in other historical gold rushes, in Niger we are currently moving from a "claim system" to a "concession system": the principle of appropriation of the resource by the first occupant is being replaced by that of the first applicant for exploitation rights.
- ◇ Mobility, including cross-border mobility, across the Sahara, including in and out of the

¹ <https://www.aa.com.tr/fr/afrique/niger-un-ressortissant-soudanais-tué-lors-dune-manifestation-à-agadez/2599349>

mines, is rarely conceived as migration, and the decision to migrate is more complex than might appear at a first glance, as relations of social and financial indebtedness blur the notions of “voluntary or autonomous choice” in migration decision-making.

1. Intro: rhetoric versus reality

The rhetoric around artisanal gold mining in the Sahel and elsewhere² is one often centered around insecurity and unwanted waves of migration next to the mines:³ artisanal gold mining is described by states as illegal (CSIS 2021),⁴ as engendering nefarious collaborations between miners and armed groups (ICG 2019),⁵ as fueling human trafficking (AP News 2021),⁶ ruining ecological spaces,⁷ and as providing some revenues for the state and miners at a very high human security cost (Ros-Tonen et al. 2021).⁸ In countries such as Mali, artisanal gold mining is also linked to prostitution and abuses against the most vulnerable groups within the mine, such as women, minors and migrants.⁹

This vision hinders a more complex set of dynamics within the mines, not just pertaining to internal and regional migration, but also regarding the potential value and opportunities of gold mines and artisanal gold mining for the wider population. In addition, it fuels a narrative of mines as completely external to state control, contributing to the erroneous vision of the state and regional/local authorities as spaces of order and of gold mines as spaces of *disorder*, thwarting any comprehension of informal, fluid and often mutually beneficial relations between illegal miners, migrants and official authorities.

2. Methodology

This research is the result of a series of visits to the Agadez region in Niger, between 2021 and 2023, while I was based in Niamey, and interviews with gold miners, mine workers, regional and state administrators, and international organizations representatives in both Niamey and Agadez. Representatives from the regional Observatories for the Administrative Monitoring of Gold Mining Sites (ORSASO), the

2

3

4 <https://www.csis.org/analysis/closer-look-colombias-illegal-artisanal-and-small-scale-mining>

5 <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/burkina-faso-mali-niger/repandre-en-main-la-ree-vers-lor-au-sahel-central>

6 <https://apnews.com/article/united-nations-burkina-faso-africa-human-trafficking-government-and-politics-b945a64f01c56bb575f0bc12ac514bd6>

7 <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/247195>

8 <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2214790X21001131>

9 <https://issafrica.org/fr/iss-today/lor-ne-brille-pas-pour-les-femmes-dans-les-mines-du-senegal-et-du-mali>, discussions during the Atelier on Artisanal Gold Mining, organized by KAS Bamako, Bamako, February 2022

Women's Association of the Extractive Industries of Niger (AFSIEN), the Ministry of Mines, the Niger Mining Heritage Company (SOPAMIN), which is involved in the supervision, marketing, and certification of gold to be exported from Niger, and the Ministry of Finance (CENTIF) were also interviewed. While in the Agadez region, I was able to visit two artisanal gold-mining sites although, as most gold miners I interviewed were based there, I will not name the sites.

Even though this research is purely qualitative in nature, some numbers were offered by previous research conducted by the International Organisation for Migration research department in Niamey. However, as I will clarify below, methodological problems with that particular research mean that I will use their data with a certain reasonable doubt.

Finally, while previous research in this domain might appear scant at a first glance, especially as few researchers specialize on the issue of artisanal gold mining in Niger specifically, there has been an uptick in interest in recent years, on the part for example of Raineri (2020) and Pellerin (2017), which have added to the work carried out by Gagnol et al. (2022), Afane and Gagnol (2020), Gagnol(2019), Gregoire and Gagnol (2017).

3. Genesis and legend: the Nigerien Gold Rush

How gold was discovered in norther Niger back in 2014 is now assuming legendary contours: some in the region mention a Toubou camel herder from Libya who found a gold stone near Chirfa (Pellerin, 2017) and called all his family to start digging; others describe a car accident that had stranded passengers find gold in the desert (Nigerdiaspora, 2015). Afane and Gagnol (2020), who have been researching the phenomenon in Niger for several years, describe it as "unexpected and sudden, a gold rush of unanticipated significance was triggered as of 2014 in the north of Niger".¹⁰

The timing might have contributed to the myth: the traditional trafficking and transport routes between Libyan and Nigerien borders were in the process of being hampered by the arrival of the European Union's civilian mission EUCAP Niger, launched in 2012, whose objective was that of controlling and essentially limiting a flow in people and materials - and training Nigerien civilian security forces in better controlling such flow. The infamous 2015 law voted by the Nigerien parliament, under the auspices of a deal with the EU,¹¹ eventually criminalized the transport of people in the area, preventing not just migrants coming from the region from continuing their journey towards Libya and Algeria,

10 "Inattendue et soudaine, une ruée vers l'or d'une ampleur sans précédent s'est déclenchée à partir d'avril 2014 au nord du Niger" (Afane & Gagnol, 2020). My translation.

11 The law was hailed as a success in Brussels at the time: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2015/05/13/eucap-sahel-niger/>

but essentially curtailing sources of revenue for Agadez transporters. Algeria's closure of its borders in early 2014 had a similarly restrictive effect on what used to be called 'transportation', and is now called 'trafficking'. As if that were not enough, the 2014 shut down of the SOPAMIN-Areva uranium mining enterprise in Imouraren contributed to eliminating yet another relevant source of revenue for the Agadez region and leaving more than 3.000 employees in search of an alternative occupation (Pellerin 2017). It is thus understandable how finding gold in such circumstances appeared to be almost God-sent.

None of this is better illustration that the legend of a man who is to some extent seen as the Robin Hood of Agadez, Ibrahim Saley, the man who 'works outside the system'.¹² Saley Boss, as Nigeriens call him, turned from drug smuggler to gold miner after the discovery of gold in Tchibarakaten and provided to area with mining infrastructure that would allow extraction, such as power units, fuel cargoes, water tanks and a health clinic (Tubiana and Gramizzi, 2018). He was also the first man to bring essentially "praetorian" units to this remote area of Niger: by paying a military garrison to protect him and his entourage, he *de facto* used public service to his own personal advantage, essentially coopting defense and security forces under his own patronage (Raineri 2020).

The Nigerien gold-mining sites stretch from the Chadian to the Algerian border. This area was home to at least 15,000 miners at the beginning of 2017 and Northern Niger had two main mining areas: the first was around the Djado, which contained about 11,000 miners, extended over a huge area, covering some 350 km north to south and 180 km east to west.¹³ The second main area lies near Tchibarakaten, north of Adrar Bous, close to the Algerian border in Agadez Region and around 4,000 miners continue to work there.

Just to give an idea of the proportions of the phenomenon, in just a year the Tchibarakaten area population, which was about 800 before the discovery of gold, grew to 40,000, and the number of vehicles increased from just a handful to nearly 12,000 (Pellerin 2017). These numbers have not particularly changed in the past few years, according to informal accounts.¹⁴ In addition, the money that circulates around the mines is also often considered to be much more than reported, and it has a huge impact on the local economy. Following the coup d'état in July 2023, the Ministry of Mines, now managed by the military junta in power, formally asked the Agadez regional government to suspend mining activities in Tchibarakaten and demanded the payment of overdue taxes to the Ministry.¹⁵ The chief miners provide material for digging and working the land, but they also provide water and food (which the miners must pay for with the gold they dig). 1 Kg of gold is worth about 33 million and miners get about 825 thousand.¹⁶

This overpopulation has not just taken place in the north. In the Liptako area bordering Mali, Komabangu, a village that sits between Téra and Tillabéri, and is next to the larger mining site in the region, is a good example. Komabangu's population has skyrocketed, jumping from just 200 inhabitants in

12 Several interviews in Agadez, October 2022, March 2023

13 Pellerin 2017

14 Series of interviews in Agadez, March 2023

15 Lettre N.0089/GRAZ/2023, 30th August 2023

16 Ibid.

1999, when mining started, to 25,000 in 2004. Thus, the experience of the gold rush did not just take place in the north of Niger, but because of the concurring factors mentioned above, it had a particular weight in the north, as it was seen as extremely serendipitous given the hardships people in Agadez were facing at the time. And focusing on the movement of people is particularly significant in the case of artisanal gold mining, as it adds another layer of informality and complexity to an already hard-to-analyse phenomenon. Bolay (2021) reports that:

the Birimian belt in the southern Sahel and tended to overlap with rural areas of 'migration departure' as formulated by the IOM, these new mining areas overlap with what migration research calls 'transit places' along the central Mediterranean route, such as Kidal in Mali or Agadez in Niger".

All in all in the whole of Niger, according to the Ministry of Mines, more than 230 sites have been censused. Mines give work to more than 800 000 people, around 11 % of the active population.¹⁷ However measuring migratory flows around the mines is much more complex, especially as most migrants are only seasonal workers.

4. Environmental implications of artisanal gold mining

The impacts of artisanal gold mining in the Nigerien ecosystem are many and varied, ranging from water pollution to public health concerns. However, what is most problematic in Northern Niger is the lack of state administration control. Generally, one of the most significant environmental impacts of artisanal gold mining is deforestation. This is not a serious problem for Northern Niger given that most of the region is desertic, however there are other consequences that are severely damaging livelihoods in the region. One example is that the mining process requires the use of chemicals such as mercury and cyanide for gold to be extracted. These chemicals are highly toxic and can leach into the soil and waterways, contaminating the water sources used by local populations, which in turn may cause public health problems.¹⁸ Additionally, artisanal gold mining leads to soil degradation. The use of heavy machinery in some mining areas (as not all mining zones include the use of heavy machinery) and the constant digging and excavation of the soil can alter the soil structure. The de-

¹⁷ Gagnol L. (2022), Enjeux territoriaux et éthiques de la régulation de la ruée vers l'or au nord du Niger, <https://journals.openedition.org/ried/1123>

¹⁸ <http://geoconfluences.ens-lyon.fr/doc/transv/DevDur/DevdurDoc3.htm>

struction of vegetation also leads to soil erosion, which can cause further desertification, thus making the land unusable for agriculture. Furthermore, the mining process requires a significant amount of water, which is a scarce resource in Northern Niger: the high demand for water for mining activities often leads to competition for water resources with local communities, who use the water for domestic purposes and agriculture. The depletion of water resources also leads to the drying up of Nigerien oases, which negatively impacts the biodiversity of the region.

Most gold miners in the region do not hold a mining license, thus they operate completely independently from the state. However, even in cases where the Ministry of Mines does accord licenses, "once you get your piece of paper you can do whatever you want, there is no attention on the part of Niamey of what we do with the territory", one miner from Tchinkarakaten mentioned.¹⁹ Most miners, even those who hold licenses, do not respect depth levels for digging, which varies according to the type of territory, use mercury illegally and without a true understanding of what impacts such mineral has on the environment and local populations and carry out the "crushing phase" manually, which releases silica dust into the environment and is then breathed by the worker who is doing the crushing.

As Niamey is believed not to have a solid grip on what happens in the mines, both legal and illegal sites, it is ultimately up to the Agadez regional government (Conseil Regional de la Region d'Agadez, or CRAZ) and its leader Mohammed Anacko to ensure environmental standards in the mines. This is problematic for several reasons: CRAZ wants to avoid tensions in a region where many sources of revenue (such as the abovementioned tourism, transportation and uranium) were recently cut off and, in addition to this, it rarely has the resources to have administration officials travel to these areas, and then to enforce regulations in cases of mismanagement. There is another pressing issue: the mines are not just places where pollution damages both the ecosystem and the health of workers and local communities, but also areas of increased insecurity. Having state officials show up to reinforce environmental regulations', without at the same time providing basic services such as water and sanitation or basic security for workers risks exacerbating tensions. The Agadez regional government, and transition officials in Niamey alike, are very aware of this.

19 Interview, Agadez, December 2022

5. Insecurity around the mines: a risky business

"We have a transportation problem – it happens with salt, imagine with gold – our infrastructure is not good enough, so we can't drive quickly enough to avoid bandits. We need the government to build us better roads, so we can drive faster."

*Mahamat Boubacar Djaram
Mayor of Bilma, September 2022*

Incidents around mining sites are commonplace. Already in 2017, Pellerin reports that "there was a murder every 48 hours at the sites"²⁰ (although this information could not be triangulated at the time). Since then, things have changed, but incidents still take place both in Tchinarakaten and around the Djado mining sites. In the past few years, many interviewees mentioned that there has been a decrease in murder rate, as "a new equilibrium has been found", which I will further explain below.²¹ One type of occurrence is routine and mirrors Mr Djaram's complaint: on the 1st of February 2022, 125 KG of gold worth nearly 4 billion FCFA disappeared on the way from the Djado into the city of Agadez.²² The gold was being escorted by the Nigerien National Guard, whose members apparently escaped. Some of the miners involved believed the National Guard had cut a deal with bandits to receive a percentage of the gold, others blamed the "lack of courage" of the Guard members, which were being paid by miners themselves for the escort.²³ A few months later, on the 15th of April 2022, 4 members of the National Guard were killed by armed bandits on one of the Djado gold sites.²⁴ Several interviewees reported that "the Zagawa from Chad keep making incursions here... stealing gold and vehicles from the mines".²⁵ And while it is often said by people in Agadez that profits from gold are on the rise – even though there are few numbers to confirm, as most gold is not traced by state structures – so does the fear of working in the mines or setting up shop there: "It is true that we get more profit out of Tchinarakaten now, but we also get more insecurity, it is becoming a risky business" one

20 Pellerin, 2017

21 "Il y a des accords en place pour ne pas se tirer dessus...bon, ils ne sont pas des accords écrits, mais tout le monde qui a passé un peu de temps dans les mines les connaît...et pour les nouveaux venus, ils sont vite informés ». Focus group with 6 miners on their way back from Tchinarakaten, October 2022.

22 <http://www.anp.ne/article/niger-retro-actualites-securite-accalmie-sur-les-differents-fronts-avec-des-succes-des>

23 Interviews, September 2022

24 <http://www.anp.ne/article/niger-retro-actualites-securite-accalmie-sur-les-differents-fronts-avec-des-succes-des>

25 August 2022

interviewee in Ingall said.²⁶

As for this newfound equilibrium, it primarily depends on rudimentary self-organised security, as well as self-organised labour law: “we organize security around small committees: in case there is a dispute within the site, the implicated parties go to a secretary general, who has a list of *petites lois*, small rules, and decides on the dispute”.²⁷ Given the number of different ethnic groups and influx of migrant communities from the region, the *comités* also have ethnic representatives. In case this does not work, then the miner in charge, he who manages the site, intervenes. In *extrema ratio* cases, of which there have only been a few in the Djado and Tchinarakaten, the gendarmerie is called. This mostly tends to happen in “legitimate” cases, that is where the miner has a license.²⁸

Perhaps the rate of murders has decreased since a sort of dispute regulation set of mechanisms has been put in place, but conflict among miners more in general has significantly increased since official licenses have started to be granted, as many miners fight over mining sites, *strictu sensu* around access, rights to mine and breaches of contract. Specifically, breaches of contract have to do with licenses: most miners have in place *oral* agreements or contracts with local administrations in the mining area. The granting of licenses however is done in Niamey, through the Ministry of Mines. These miners pay for a license and obtain in turn written proof of this. However, it is often the case that when they show up at the site, other miners have already been occupying it, sometimes as early as 2019. It is ultimately an issue of lack of communication on who manages what, but at the same time it cannot be excluded that there is malicious intent on the part of the Ministry in Niamey, which does not carry out the necessary assessments, but leaves the burden of liberating the area to the newly licensed miner.

The Nigerien state has been managing diplomatic tensions with Algeria, as some miners working in Nigerien territory bordering Algeria have allegedly entered Algerian soil, thus prompting a reaction on the part of the Algerian military and a counter-reaction by the Nigerien defence and security forces.²⁹ Relations between Algiers and Niamey are particularly tense in recent months due to migrant evictions from Algerian soil into Nigerien territory at Assamaka,³⁰ which does not help the situation of miners, be they Nigerien or foreign.

26 Interview, Ingall, September 2022

27 Interviews in Agadez and Niamey, September and October 2022

28 Interviews with one gold miner in Agadez, December 2022 and one gendarme in Niamey, January 2023

29 <https://kibaru.ml/fr/art/frontière-niger-algérie-des-orpailleurs-nigériens-pris-par-une-pa-trouille-algérienne>

30 <https://alarmephonesahara.info/en/blog/posts/assamaka-niger-algeria-border-more-than-10-000-people-deported-in-3-months-amidst-a-humanitarian-crisis>

In June 2022 Air Info Agadez, arguably the most reliable source of information on the Agadez region, mentioned a paramilitary group operating around the mines who perpetrated an attack on Nigerien security forces in Chirfa (a commune in the Djado, within the Bilma department). They claimed to be the fighters of the *Union des Forces Patriotiques pour la Refondation* (UFPR)³¹ on their Facebook page. This political-military movement was created a few years ago by Mahmoud Sallah, a Nigerian formerly based in Libya. There was no reaction to this from the Nigerien authorities, who spoke in an official communiqué of “an attack by unidentified armed individuals”.³²

Finally, the biggest security threat are the mines themselves: some sites are particularly deep and insecure, and the lack of equipment or medical support on the mines means that the biggest concern for the miners is surviving these perilous working conditions. For other categories of workers, such as women, they are vulnerable to violence perpetrated by miners or health related issues. In most cases they are seasonal sex workers, from Niger, Nigeria and Cameroon on their way to Libya or Algeria who stay in the mines for a few months. Most interviewees in the mines denied the presence of women, but more high-level miners confirmed that there are there for parts of the year, although they stressed that most of them are “migrants from other countries” and not Nigeriens. Other interviews (mainly with transition government officials in Niamey) confirm the presence of Nigerien women as well, but data is insufficient to be able to give percentages.

6. Migration: resource or curse in the Nigerien north?

West Africa is considered to have the most mobile population in the world, with intra-regional mobility accounting for 70% of all cross-border movements.³³ Intense mobility in West Africa has deep historical roots (De Bruijn, van Dijk, & Foeken, 2001) involving interwoven migration cultures of kinship and labour specialization with an ethnic component (Bolay, Hahn & Klute, 2007), which is present to this day. One such example is gold refineries managed mostly by Sudanese workers in Tabelot, Agadez. Mobility, rather than sedentariness, is the norm in the region (Bilger and Kraler, 2005). Mines in both the Djado and Tchibarakaten are viewed as enclaves, and very large ones in the case of the Djado, disconnected entirely from the rest of the community. The last time gold miners were socialized with the outside world was during the mobility phase, as they were reaching the mine, or when they finally

31 The UFPR, which brings together mainly fighters from the Toubou community in Agadez, was born in 2020 on the border between Niger and Libya. It had emerged in the political debate before the presidential elections of 2021. Its young founder Mahmoud Sallah, a former student unionist and opposition activist, called this particular attack a warning to Niger's security forces. In a video posted on social networks he asks the defence and security forces of Niger to “take action” against the regime in power. A more precise account, in French, is available here <https://mondafrique.com/lattaque-dun-groupe-politico-militaire-dans-le-nord-du-niger/>

32 <https://airinfoagadez.com/2022/06/17/chirfa-bilma-les-combattants-de-lufpr-de-mahmoud-sallah-revendiquent-lattaque/>

33 https://eea.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl666/files/documents/a-region-on-the-move_2021_v2.1_0.pdf

leave it at the end of their mining season. Bolay 2021 explains this: "whereas Eurocentric sedentary epistemologies define space by its limits materialised by borders (Molland, 2018), West African epistemologies define space by its core, in this context the place of dwelling or *fabara* (literally the place of the father), and its expansion by mobility practices which do not question the centrality of the *fabara*. Mobility, including cross-border mobility, across the Sahara or the Mediterranean is, from this point of view, rarely conceived as migration, in the sense of resettlement towards the creation of a new core. However, the expansion of the mobility regime of Europe's borders in Africa is an empirical reality that contributes to the migrantisation (Dahinden, 2016) of people, routes and places, and thus shapes mobilities in Africa and beyond". To miners in Agadez, gold mining is just a short-term activity that would be unsustainable in the longer term. When asked whether they would like to install themselves next to the mines should there be better service provision, the majority laughed. Tabelot was a notable exception.

As for the decision to migrate in the first place, the phenomenon is more complex than previously believed and the Nigerien north is a classic example of such complexity. Such situations echo Van der Velde and van Naerssen's (2011) argument that decisions to undertake (cross-border) travels are highly volatile and depend on specific situations along the trajectories. With regard to informal gold mining, the social organization of work is strongly structured by what Panella has called 'worlds of debts' (2010), in which access to work, housing and gold itself is intertwined with supportive and dependent relationships based on the principles of friendship and patronage (Bolay, 2016b). In their quest for financial autonomy and freedom of movement away from the *fabara*, young men who engage in mining work inevitably link themselves, to varying degrees, to such types of relationships which, if carefully managed, can enable them to support their mobile lifestyle, or otherwise can immobilize them against their will. These relations of social and financial indebtedness blur the notions of "voluntary or autonomous choice" in migration decision-making (O'Connell Davidson, 2013, p. 177).

While largely contributing to economic and cultural exchanges, migration also appears to be linked to insecurity, at least in the way it is reported by people in the Djado. The Chief of the Chirfa canton (one of the 4 cantons within the Bilma department), a very relevant political figure in the region, even mentioned migration as breeding inter-ethnic war: "when the Chadian government started cracking down on rebels in 2019, many came to us. And they find things to do in the mines here...they end up staying. Some of them are Tebou Zaghawa, who are sometimes attacked by Muhammad Arabs, causing mayhem...but their rivalry is not our business, we do not want these foreigners to solve their disputes on our territory". In other words, conflicts that belong elsewhere are seen as being transported within Nigerien borders due to migration for economic opportunity, as is the goldmining migration. Despite an increase in mobility/migration from Niger itself and surrounding countries and a presence of arms within the mines, but also with the towns which work with miners such as Tabelot, Chirfa and Tchibarakaten, which went through a huge influx of people and weapons, there is no indication as of now of armed group infiltrations from Mali. The Zaghawa from Chad on the other hand are present in eastern Niger.³⁴

The state actor with the most robust presence in the region are the Nigerien Defense and Security

34 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep31464.5.pdf>

Forces (FDS), especially the army (FAN), represented by a single commander overseeing both mining areas, even though they are over 300 km apart.³⁵As reported by Pellerin (2017), in 2016 soldiers were alleged to have imposed a 'tax' on the use of metal detectors: XOF 100,000 (USD 167) for Nigeriens and XOF 200,000– 300,000 (USD 335–502) for foreigners, to be paid in gold. In addition, in the past there have been pre-existing tensions amongst the Toubou ethnic group and Nigerien FAN, which appear to have now dissipated, but which may once again increase in case of incidents around the mines.

In the case of Sudanese workers in Tabelot, most of them have implanted their business and live in Niger, but in most cases, goldmining migrants in the region tend to be seasonal, and gold mining is viewed as a temporary safety net rather than a permanent pull factor for migrants. In March 2022, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) in Niamey presented their findings following a few weeks of data collection in the Djado. Despite this being an interesting effort, especially from the point of view of the collection of photographic evidence in the mines, the research is too limited in time and scope to account for a trustworthy collection of numbers. Many Chadian miners for example are believed to hold Nigerien documents acquired illegally, which means that Chadian miners are hardly accounted for as foreigners. For example, the IOM report shows that:

Concerning the migratory flows characterizing the gold rushes in Niger, the results of the study confirmed that it is mainly an internal mobility with a population of gold miners originating from the regions of Maradi (29%), Zinder (22%), Dosso (20%) and Tillabéri (12%). These regions, already affected by high poverty rates and food insecurity, have recently suffered from both climate change and security incidents, particularly in Tillabéri and Maradi, which have disrupted their socio-economic balance.

However, conversations with gold miners operating in the Djado and Tchibarakaten areas give a more diversified picture, and visits into mines confirm the presence of migrants from other countries in the region. A few weeks of fieldwork are not enough to account for seasonal changes in migration patterns in the region, nor are they enough to confirm or deny whether an increase in violence around the mines is only correlated or it is caused by migration.

The seasonal nature of work in the mines however is confirmed, as most interviewees mentioned wanting to leave as soon as they gather enough money:

Gold miners have short-term migration plans; indeed 52% of them said they wanted to leave the sites and 48% wanted to stay on site at the time of the survey. Of the latter, 19% of the miners wanted to stay and work on the sites for between one and three months, and 23% for between three and six months. On average, of the gold miners wishing to leave the site, 92% of the gold miners stated that they wanted to return to their usual place of residence, confirming that migration to the gold mines takes the form of seasonal mobility.³⁶

The influx of foreign miners into Niger is overall perceived as problematic by the local population, who

35 Pellerin 2017

36 My translation, from « Etude sur la migration interne autour des mines d'or dans la région d'Agadez », IOM Migration, Boukaré et al., 2022

find that criticalities far outweigh the benefits. This is not just linked to the Nigerien/Saharan experience: the arrival of gold-seekers to California affected the makeup of the state's population. Those who had lived in the region previously saw their influence erode, as new people were progressively coming in. In the case of Niger, foreigners cannot obtain mining licenses unless they partner up with Nigeriens, but as we have seen, this type of business is rarely out in the open, thus there are non-Nigeriens who completely control certain mines without having even sought a license.

What Kuhn (2017) writes on Mande in Mali can easily be applied to Niger as well, where the Agadez population (including those foreigners that have been in Niger for years) say that alcohol and prostitution are brought by foreigners only:

"When we arrived here, at the time there were too many foreigners. They came from everywhere; Burkina, Guinea. People were scared. There were criminals, things were stolen. The villagers decided to create a new neighbourhood and to forbid villagers to have foreigners stay in their houses. Everybody was given a piece of land where they would construct a temporary house [...] to deal with foreigners they tried to make them live separately".

Dosama Coulibaly, December 27, 2011, Balan-Mansala³⁷

Mining is most often undertaken as a complementary activity to agriculture, with alternating dry and rainy seasons (Cartier & Bu rge, 2011). In such configurations, most miners come temporarily from other locations before returning to agriculture (Bolay 2021). It is also relevant to mention that in villages where miners come from, part of the livelihood for families is provided by remittances from the miner. This is currently only anecdotal for Niger, and based on interviews in Maradi and Niamey,³⁸ but there is research on this for other cases, such as for example South Africa or Lesotho.³⁹ And from a security point of view, more risks exist for migrants: the well-structured customary authorities, exemplified in Mali by the *Tomboloma*, made up of men responsible for security issues, are insufficient to protect the rights of migrants.⁴⁰

Migration in and around the mines is also problematic due to a 'possession' issue: much like in other historical gold rushes (McDowell, 2012), in Niger we are currently moving from a "claim system" to a "concession system": the principle of appropriation of the resource by the first occupant is being replaced by that of the first applicant for exploitation rights, which means the holder of a mining permit.⁴¹ While migrants are allowed to work in the mines, they are not allowed by Nigerien law to hold a permit, which means that the first foreign miners, often from Mali, Burkina Faso and Sudan – who came to Niger bringing with them mining experiences from countries which had gone through the

37 Mining for the Future: Dynamics of Artisanal Gold Mining Practice and Governance in the Balan-Bakama (Mande, Mali), Esther Elisabeth Margretha Kuhn (2017)

38 Interviews, September 2022

39 Harington J.S. et al. (2004), A century of migrant labour in the gold mines of South Africa, Journal of the South African Institute of Mining and Metallurgy.

40 <https://www.migrationdataportal.org/blog/understanding-migration-west-african-artisanal-mines>

41 A license is renewable and lasts 5 years and it implies that 1 square km costs approximately 2 million CFA. If the digging is limited to 40mt, then it is considered to be artisanal, otherwise below a certain depth (60mt) it becomes semi-mechanic. In addition, miners who hold licenses pay yearly taxes, depending on how much they declare, and they are allowed to have an international partner, but it is Nigeriens who must hold the permit.

gold rush before Niger, cannot legally exploit mines. And this is an issue even amongst Nigeriens: Gagnol (2022) reports that a dispute over “site 23” in Tchibarakaten took on national proportions. This deposit was initially discovered in 2016 by Toubou prospectors who carried out only superficial research and in 2021, M., a Nigerien miner resumed work on the abandoned site and began digging several wells, which proved to be very promising. News of the discovery quickly spread, and a rush was unleashed, attracting hundreds of miners from Niger and surrounding countries. The discoverer then reserved for himself the part that he was able to exploit (seven very prolific pits), then applied for a semi-mechanized license from the regional customary mining authority in Agadez and demanded that all other miners pay him a small tax. In the meantime, H., from Tabelot, went directly to the Ministry of Mines in Niamey. By speeding up the process with well-placed agents, he managed to obtain the permit in a matter of weeks, using the same GPS coordinates and he then went to site 23, leading to a few violent incidents between mining teams. The two camps were supported by the big bosses of the Tchibarakaten area; the rivalries between lineage groups and between social categories within Touareg society were replayed. Each camp alerted the local and regional authorities: the Tchibarakaten site management committee, Iférouane town hall, Agadez governorate and regional council.⁴² This does not happen with foreign miners, as they do not often have such close support from higher up authorities, but violent incidents often take place without escalating any further.

A constant depiction of mines as chaotic spaces of insecurity and uncontrolled migration will allow for indiscriminate and arbitrary state actions within mines, which could range from closing off mines officially (thus justifying lack of state services), as it happened in the Djado back in 2014 and 2017, to the actual bombing of sites, suspected of hosting terrorist armed groups, with no external independent oversight, as was the case with the recent strike in Tamou, south of the capital Niamey.⁴³ But this rhetoric may also lead to a progressive selling off of these spaces, as “the Nigerien state appears to be preparing the terrain for international companies to come in”. Many interviewees were weary of licenses also because they believed that keeping gold barons “onsite” could help the government ease the transition from small-scale mining to industrial extraction. The July 2023 military coup d’état could accelerate such developments, as Russian mercenary firm Wagner and its business affiliates have exploited mining sites in other African contexts in exchange for military support to junta leaders.⁴⁴

7. Migration paths & Mining paths: intersections

While migration from the region into the mines in northern Niger is a growing phenomenon, people that intend to proceed on their journey further north towards Libya, Algeria or Europe very rarely are miners. However, what is particularly interesting for the scope of this study, is to analyse how the paths of miners and migrants intersect, both physically and throughout time.

It is important to mention that cross-border mobility within and outside Africa does not necessarily result from a migration project, nor is it necessarily conceived as ‘migration’ by those undertaking those cross-border movements.⁴⁵ In the case of gold miners in northern Niger are described more

42 <https://journals.openedition.org/ried/1123>

43 <https://www.dw.com/fr/niger-incertitudes-attaques-tamou-enquête/a-64223444>

44 More specifically, “In 2017, Wagner deployed hundreds of its men to put down local uprisings against the government of Sudan’s dictator Omar al-Bashir. In exchange, the Prigozhin-controlled M-Invest received exclusive rights to gold mining in Sudan. <https://qz.com/wagner-group-us-treasury-sanctions-illegal-gold-mining-1850585049>

45 Bolay 2021

by miners as seasonal mobility or seasonal labor rather than a true migration project, whereas plans to move further north into Libya and Algeria is called migration by those undertaking it.⁴⁶ This may depend not just on the timespan of such movement, but also on the perception that Northern Africa is more “foreign”, it is another region altogether.

As mentioned above, mine workers tend to come mainly from Niger, Chad and Sudan—where this new ‘pioneer front’ originated (Chevrillon-Guibert et al., 2019). Similarly, in the Nigerian sites in the Djado, Grégoire and Gagnol (2017) also observed that workers also included many ‘repatriates’ from Libya. However, with the repression of overseas migration to Algerian and Libyan authorities (Brachet, 2018), a growing number of sub-Saharan Africans have been expelled from Algeria and Libya to the Nigerian and Malian borders, notably the site of Assamaka in Niger. This trend was reinforced by the stricter enforcement of borders’ closure due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which led to the confinement of deported populations in IOM camps, from which many have escaped. In the absence of economic relief opportunities, the current situation also raises the question of whether the deportees might not end up looking for livelihoods in the nearby mines (Afane, 2020). Although there is currently not enough information to support this hypothesis, research in the region of Kidal (Mali) and Agadez (Niger), suggests that the local migration industry has already begun to adapt to this overlap of mines and migration routes. For example, transporters in Kidal and in Agadez (Pellerin, 2017) have started to serve the routes to the Saharan artisanal mines, in addition to their usual transport of goods and irregular migrants across the borders. And transportation routes are the most reliable way to gather information on what happens in the Djado and Tchinbarakaten mining sites.

Migration into gold mines might also be viewed as a way to unite the region. The previously-mentioned California Gold Rush was the decisive influence in bringing together the east with the newly acquired western extensions of the American empire, especially California. The Gold Rush didn’t separate the nation by creating an east and a west, but it united the nation by bringing the west into the rest of the nation.”⁴⁷ In this case, by being the contributing factor to maintaining migration ties within the wider region and within Niger more specifically, the Northern Nigerien gold rush contributes to uniting the entire Sub-Saharan region.

8. Conclusions

1. In other areas of the region (including in Mali, Burkina Faso, Sudan, but also Tillabéri), communes where gold was found have gone through a higher degree of economic development compared to other communes in the same regions. While it is true that the distribution of wealth remains unequal, it is wealth nonetheless, as an increased urbanization means more services in areas touched by gold mining. In Tabelot, which has become a mining town in just a few years (Gagnol & Afane, 2019), thanks to the many taxes levied on gold mining and related activities, the town council was able to build a wide range of infrastructure (a health center, runway, well, flying pump and dyke, etc.). A development plan for a new district (Takawat) made it possible to relocate the bus terminal, the weekly market, the livestock market and the abattoir from the town center. In addition, permit holders are required to carry out social ini-

46 Series of interviews, Niamey and Ingall, June -September 2022

47 After the Gold Rush, Short article on the aftermath of the California Gold Rush, National Geographic, 28 November 2022

tiatives (health, food, etc.), which they publicize on social networks as development projects, somewhat making up for the negative environmental repercussions.

2. The rate of murders in the mines, between Nigeriens and migrants alike, has decreased since a sort of dispute regulation set of mechanisms has been put in place. However conflict among miners more in general has significantly increased since official licenses have started to be granted, as many miners fight over mining sites, around access, rights to mine and breaches of contract. Niamey should clarify the legal status of miners and conduct assessment in the mines before giving out new licenses.
3. The biggest security threat are the mines themselves: some sites are particularly deep and insecure, and the lack of equipment or medical support on the mines means that the biggest concern for the miners is surviving these perilous working conditions. For other categories of workers, such as women, often migrants from neighboring countries, they are vulnerable to violence perpetrated by miners or health related issues. The Nigerien transition government and its international partners should ensure worker safety in the mines.
4. It is also possible to argue that relations with defense and security forces have improved as miners now pay members of the FDS to transport the gold, which means that relations have been established even in remote areas of the Agadez region. However, having state officials show up to reinforce environmental regulations' in the mines, without at the same time providing basic services such as water and sanitation or basic security for workers, risks exacerbating tensions. Both Agadez and Niamey should be aware of this.
5. Miners do not consider themselves as migrants, even when they are not Nigeriens. Since the criminalization of migration in Niger in 2015, the word migrant has become commonplace, however when asking interviewees whether they would wish to change their core location, i.e. have their close family move closer to the mines, the majority said no, as the point for them is not reaching a specific destination but finding work. Migrants in norther Niger are mobile, not sedentary.
6. Mines are both viewed as a gambling space and a safe haven: they represent a legal void and a space where meritocracy works, as exemplified by the figure of Saley Boss. For some migrants who had been expelled from other locations, most notably Algeria, the mines are a safe haven from state authority and control.
7. Mining has increased transnational and transregional mobility, and coercion within the mines increases further mobility: after an initial "romanticization of the travel" phase, miners have gone through severe situations, which has pushed them to migrate further to escape. Thus, the decision to migrate may be a voluntary choice as well as an obligatory one.
8. Uncertainty breeds movement: gold miners are particularly mobile, as many of them rush to other sites when there are rumours of prolific discoveries. They are also mobile because of legal insecurity, as they know that they can be forced to leave at any time if a new permit is granted.
9. It would be possible to view the gold mining phenomenon in Norther Niger as another way to unite both the Nigerien nation and as another factor contributing to the survival of migration ties within

the entire region. Such ties must be encouraged with the Nigerien transition government.

9. Bibliography

IOM Research Brief, Migration Dynamics to Gold Mining Sites in Burkina Faso: Cases of Warwéogo and Gargouli, November 2019

Andersson, R. (2014). *Illegality, Inc.: Clandestine migration and the business of bordering Europe*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Alliance for Responsible Mining. (2020). Estimated number of artisanal and small-scale miners per country. *Alliance for Responsible Mining*. Retrieved from <http://artisanalmining.org/Inventory>

Bolay, M. (2016b). "Il faut être là où l'or sort!" De l'itinérance temporaire au maintien d'un mode de vie mobile chez les orpailleurs de Haute Guinée [From temporary itinerancies to full time mobile livelihoods among artisanal miners in Upper Guinea]. *Stichproben: Vienna Journal of African Studies*, 30(1), 111–135.

Brachet, J. (2018). Manufacturing smugglers: From irregular to clandestine mobility in the Sahara. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 676(1), 16–35.

Gra tz, T. (2004). Gold trading networks and the creation of trust: A case study from northern Benin. *Africa*, 74(2), 146–172.

Dessertine, A. (2016). From pickaxes to metal detectors: Gold mining mobility and space in Upper Guinea, Guinea Conakry. *The Extractive Industries and Society*, 3(2), 435–441.

Dessertine, A. (2019). Une justice foncièrement autre? Pouvoir et foncier en contexte minier aurifère (Guinée) [And justice for all land? Power and land in the context of gold mining (Guinea)]. *Revue Internationale des Études du Développement*, 2, 141–164.

Crawley, H., Du vell, F., Jones, K., McMahon, S., & Sigona, N. (2018). *Unravelling Europe's migration crisis: Journeys over land and sea*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Conrad, D. C., & Frank, B. E. (Eds.). (1995). *Status and identity in West Africa: Nyamakalaw of Mande*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Grégoire, E., & Gagnol, L. (2017). Ruées vers l'or au Sahara: L'orpaillage dans le désert du Ténéré et le massif de l'Aïr (Niger) [Gold rushes in the Sahara: Artisanal mining in the Tenere desert and the Aï r moun- tains (Niger)]. *EchoGéo*. <https://doi.org/10.4000/echogeo.14933>

Hilson, G. (2016). *Artisanal and small-scale mining and agriculture: Exploring their links in rural sub-Saharan Africa*. London: IIED.

Pellerin, M. (2017). *Beyond the 'wild West': The gold rush in Northern Niger*. Geneva: Small Arms Survey.

Yonlihinza, I. A. (2017, May 15). As more people flock to Niger's gold mines, economic boon may become a new migration risk. *The Conversation*. Retrieved from <https://theconversation.com/>



Programme Régional Sahel Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V.

-  Badalabougou - Est / Route Magnambougou Faso Karu
Derrière la Station ORYX & la Station SHELL
-  B.P E 1274 -Bamako Mali
-  (223) 20 23 00 36
-  info.bamako@kas.de
-  kas.de/sahel

