

SAHEL

Pushed To The Brink?

The impact of COVID-19 on
environmental migration in
the Sahel

January 2021

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About REACH

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SUMMARY

The Sahel region has been described as a hotspot for human-made climate change,¹ facing both slow-onset temperature warming and a rise in sudden, extreme weather shocks, such as floodings and droughts.² Migration has long been a hallmark of Sahelian populations, with people migrating to mitigate the impacts of environmental degradation caused, among others, by the impact of climate change, and diversify access to livelihoods sources which remain predominantly based on agricultural activities and natural resources.³ The first confirmed cases of COVID-19 emerged in the region in March 2020.⁴ Governments were prompt to take action, imposing movement restrictions, closing international borders and implementing localised lockdowns, all in view of limiting the spread of the virus. However, with the spread of the virus, long-held seasonal migration patterns were limited, putting on hold an important source of supplementary revenue for millions of Sahelians across the region. This report aims to gauge the impact of these restrictions on environmental migrants' lives in the immediate, mid- and longer term.

The present study, conducted by [REACH](#), in partnership with the [Start Network](#) as part of its Migration Emergency Response Fund (MERF), aims to increase understanding of the interlinkages between migration, climate change and COVID-19 in the Sahel, with the aim to improve Start Network member agencies' and the donor community's ability to respond to this crisis. The study's findings draw on an extensive secondary data review, the knowledge of migration experts, humanitarian and development practitioners in the region. Most importantly, the findings draw on **135 individual in-person interviews with migrants engaged in seasonal migration patterns in the region**, conducted in Burkina Faso, Nigeria and Niger, with Burkinabé, Nigerian and Nigerien migrants and non-migrants.

The research questions the reports aims to answer are as follows:

1. How are migration, climate change and COVID-19 in the Sahel linked?
2. How does the emergence of COVID-19 in the region impact in the short-term (March - September 2020) (a) the livelihoods and overall situation of environmental migrants in the destination and families back home? And (b) mobility⁶ patterns?
3. What is the expected impact of COVID-19 in the mid-term (October 2020 – October 2021) and longer term (after October 2021) on (a) the livelihoods and overall situation of environmental migrants in the destination and families back home and (b) mobility patterns?
4. What are the findings' implications for humanitarian programming and policy making?

To compare impacts on different types of migration patterns, three different population groups were included in the study: 1) internal rural-to-urban migrants in Niger, 2) the cross-border rural-to-urban migration of Nigerians to Niger, and cross-border rural-to-rural migration from Burkina Faso to Côte d'Ivoire. The study was conducted between September and December 2020, with primary data collection taking place in November 2020.

Key Findings

Overall, the study finds that already prior to the outbreak of COVID-19 seasonal environmental migrants' livelihoods were based on a fine balance between ever increasing unpredictable harvest yields and seasonal migration patterns to complement otherwise insufficient agricultural outputs. Already before the virus outbreak, seasonal migration patterns were more akin to distress migration – migration done out of necessity to meet the most basic needs – as opposed to supplementing livelihoods at origin. COVID-19, and associated movement restrictions, has tipped this fine balance over. The disruption of migration patterns has had an immediate impact on environmental migrants' lives, which will continue to permeate their lives in the mid- and, possibly, longer term.

¹ Defined as: "The change of climate which is attributed directly or indirectly to human activity that alters the composition of the global atmosphere and which is in addition to natural climate variability observed over comparable time periods." Source: [Foresight \(2011\)](#).

² Crawford, A., [Climate change and state fragility in the Sahel](#), June 2015.

³ Vigil, S., [Climate Change and Migration: Insights from the Sahel](#), 2017.

⁴ CSIS, [No Time for Complacency: The Covid-19 Pandemic in West Africa's Sahel Region](#), July 2020.

⁵ Environmental migrants are persons or groups of persons who, for compelling reasons of sudden or progressive changes in the environment that adversely affect their lives or living conditions, are obliged to leave their homes or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, and who move either within their country or abroad. Source: IOM, [Migration and the Environment. Discussion Note: MC/INF/288](#), 2007.

⁶ The term 'mobility' is used in this instance to account for the possibility of 'immobility', a situation where an individual cannot or does not move, because they either do not have the means or capacity to do so. We use this wider term to acknowledge the important reality of 'trapped populations' in environmental migration trends, i.e. people who cannot move despite the urgent climate-induced need to do so. For more information, please see: Flavell, A. et al for IOM/GMDAC, [Migration, environment and climate change: Literature review](#), 2020.

In the short-term:

Impact on mobility patterns

1. Both internal and cross-border seasonal migration patterns were impacted in the short-term, with travel taking longer, while being more expensive, or delayed, compared to respondents' plans.
2. With the official closure of borders between Sahelian countries, cross-border migration has not stopped. It has, however, become more expensive, with less transport available and a rise in the use of irregular routes.

Impact on livelihoods

3. COVID-19 has had an immediate impact on seasonal migrants' livelihoods in areas of origin and destination. At origin, the impact was felt in terms of less demand for produce and less household members able to support the harvest, due to movement restrictions, limiting the season's yields.
4. In destination areas, both rural and urban, demand-driven, informal jobs – those traditionally done by migrant workers – appear particularly affected by COVID-19.
5. The disruption of habitual migration patterns and more limited access to livelihoods sources lead to both a rise in expenditures and reduced income. To cope, seasonal migrants borrow money, spend savings and search for supplementary work.
6. Those who decided not to migrate due to the restrictions implemented, appeared to be worse impacted than seasonal migrants who chose to migrate anyway. This illustrates the particular vulnerability of those too poor to migrate and their particular exposure to climate change, as 'trapped populations'.

In the mid-term:

Impact on livelihoods

7. While the short-term impacts of the virus were felt by environmental migrants engaged in all seasonal migration patterns studied, in the mid-term respondents anticipate that seasonal migrants engaged in cross-border migration – should movement restrictions remain in place - will be particularly affected.
8. The most commonly reported worries about the impact of COVID-19 in the mid-term relate to the coping strategies seasonal migrants had to employ to deal with the short-term impacts of COVID-19, such as taking on debt, spending savings, and forcibly delaying the season's harvest.

Impact on mobility patterns

9. Despite the challenges faced and anticipated, the majority of interviewed environmental migrants reported planning to engage in their habitual seasonal migration in the year to come.
10. The self-reported impact of COVID-19 on environmental migrants' migration plans for the year to come was mixed. While one third of respondents planned to migrate for longer than usual – to make up for the gains lost during the year – others reported that COVID-19 had not impacted their plans, as the reasons for their migration were deemed more pressing than COVID-19, and hence remained the key factor in their decision-making.

In relation to the longer term impacts of COVID-19 on environmental migrants in the Sahel, the study determined that, at the time of writing, there were too many variables – unknown how they will develop – to make meaningful projections. The key determinants that were identified for future monitoring were: (1) the evolution of climate change and its impacts on livelihood sources at origin; (2) the implementation of mobility restrictions (be they COVID-19 motivated or not); (3) the economic impact of the virus in origin and destinations; (4) environmental migrants' ability to cope and respond to shock – already weakened by the coping strategies employed to deal with the short-term impacts of the virus - and (5) the development of other threat multipliers in the region, notably violent conflict, which has seen a rapid deterioration over the course of 2020, and wider political instability.

Finally, while recent events have emphasized the emergence of COVID-19 and its impact on the fragility of environmental migrants' livelihoods in the Sahel, the more complex, underlying drivers of this fragility will continue to impact the situation in the background. The virus in and of itself is a trend accelerator, rather than a unique occurrence. This means that COVID-19 may have been accelerating and bringing up and front challenges, but has not created new ones which will disappear, should the virus be overcome. As such, the impact of COVID-19 on environmental migrants, and the impacts anticipated to come in the mid- and longer-term, call for a close monitoring of the situation - and prompt support to the populations affected.

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List of Acronyms

COVID-19	SARS Coronavirus
DTM	Displacement Tracking Matrix
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
II	Individual Interview
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
KI	Key Informant
MERF	Migration Emergency Response Fund
MMC	Mixed Migration Centre
RQ	Research Question

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INTRODUCTION

Climate change and COVID-19 are global phenomena which impact the human population as a whole. And yet, researchers converge that the extent to which people's lives are impacted and threatened by both fundamentally differs depending on socio-economic, geographic and socio-political factors. The Sahel has been described as Ground Zero for climate change.⁷ It also hosts some of the most vulnerable populations in the world, with all Sahelian countries figuring among the top 50 least developed countries worldwide.⁸ Climate change is just one of the many challenges people face in the region, such as conflict, food insecurity and political instability. As the Sahelian population already faces immense threats coming from this combination of several, often interlinked and mutually reinforcing, risks, COVID-19 has become one further threat to contend with.

Human mobility - migration - whatever its motivations, has long been a hallmark of Sahelian populations. Amongst the many drivers of migration, environmental changes in the region have historically led to a variety of migration patterns, as populations adapt to rainfall's seasonality and the effects of periodic droughts through movement. People predominantly move over short distances, in circular or regional movements, and frequently from rural to urban areas. In other contexts decried as a problem, migration in the region is deemed part of people's lives, one in a toolkit set to supplement and diversify often precarious livelihoods sources.⁹

The first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in the region in March 2020.¹⁰ Governments were prompt to take action, imposing movement restrictions, closing international borders and implementing localised lockdowns, all in view of limiting the spread of the virus. However, with the spread of the virus, long-held seasonal migration patterns were limited, putting on hold an important source of supplementary revenue for millions of Sahelians across the region. How environmental migrants were impacted by these restrictions, and what it means for their livelihoods and mobility patterns, has previously been unknown. This report aims to gauge the impact of such measures on the lives of the regions' environmental migrants in the immediate, mid- and longer term.

The present study, conducted by [REACH](#), in partnership with the [Start Network](#) as part of its Migration Emergency Response Fund (MERF), aims to increase understanding of the interlinkages between migration, climate change and COVID-19 in the Sahel, in turn to improve Start Network member agencies' and the donor community's ability to respond to this crisis. Conducted in several phases, the study's findings draw on **an extensive secondary data review**, as well as the **knowledge of migration experts and humanitarian and development practitioners** present in the region. Most importantly, the findings draw on **135 individual in-person interviews with migrants engaged in seasonal migration patterns in the region**, which were conducted in Burkina Faso and Niger, with Nigerien, Burkinabe and Nigerian migrants and non-migrants respectively. To compare impacts between different migration patterns, three different types of population groups were included in the study: 1) internal rural-to-urban migrants in Niger, 2) the cross-border rural-to-urban migration of Nigerians to Niger, and cross-border rural-to-rural migration from Burkina Faso to Côte d'Ivoire. The study was conducted between September and December 2020, with primary data collection taking place in the Sahel in November 2020.

Considering the breadth of mobility patterns in the region, findings in this report should be treated as illustrative only of wider, diverse trends in the region. The three case studies presented in this report shall therefore be seen as exemplary of the variety of seasonal migration patterns in the region, but are by no means providing an exhaustive picture of the impact of COVID-19 on seasonal migration in the Sahel region.

This report starts with a short literature analysis of the links between climate change and migration in the Sahel. It then presents the assessment's main findings, in the form of an analysis of primary data collected on the impact of COVID-19 on livelihoods, living situation and mobility patterns of environmental migrants interviewed, in the short (first six months since the start of the pandemic), mid- (12 months) and longer term. The report ends with a conclusion section, which includes recommendations. A detailed methodology, analytical approach and key definitions employed can be accessed in the [annex](#) to the report.

⁷ UN News, [Sahel stands at 'ground zero' of climate change, top UN adviser warns](#), June 2008.

⁸ UNCTAD, [UN list of least developed countries](#), last accessed 09 December 2020.

⁹ For a detailed overview, see Vigil, S., [Climate Change and Migration: Insights from the Sahel](#), 2017.

¹⁰ CSIS, [No Time for Complacency: The COVID-19 Pandemic in West Africa's Sahel Region](#), July 2020.

CONTEXT

On climate change and migration in the Sahel

The Sahel: one of the most affected regions by climate change in the world

The Sahel is one of the world's most affected regions by climate change. Human-made climate change is reportedly the source of widespread warming and increasing mean and extreme temperatures in the region: between 1970 and 2010 alone, near surface temperatures in West Africa and the Sahel increased by 0.5° to 0.8°C, with greater magnitude of change in the latter 20 years of the period compared to the former.^{11,12,13}

Increasingly irregular, extreme and unpredictable intra- and inter-seasonal climate variability and extreme weather events, such as recurrent droughts and floods, have also been characterised as the consequences of human-made climate change.¹⁴ While the semi-arid climate of the Sahel is traditionally characterised by annual alternation of wet and dry periods, over the 20th century, the Sahel experienced an overall reduction of rainfall, with a large number of droughts during the 1970s and 1980s followed by a recovery towards the last 20 years of the century.¹⁵ In addition, since the 1990s, following the dry years, the region has faced extreme rainfall events that have resulted in devastating floods. These floods have been occurring almost on an annual basis, although with varying magnitude,¹⁶ with the resulting destruction of homes and, to varying degrees, livelihoods.

By all estimates, temperature increases and extreme weather events are expected to accelerate in the years to come

As climate projections remain difficult to make, all available data suggests that the situation is set to deteriorate in the years to come: climate projections show significant temperature increases for the end of the 21st century with an increase between 3°C and 6°C higher than the late 20th century baseline in West Africa.¹⁷ Entirely unprecedented extreme climates are projected to occur earliest (late 2030s to early 2040s) in the Sahel and tropical West Africa.¹⁸ The number of heatwave days per year is also projected to increase significantly by 2050, especially in western Sahel.¹⁹

Beyond temperature increases, climate variability and the frequency of extreme weather events, including natural disasters, are also set to increase.²⁰ Already over the past decade, natural disasters such as droughts, floods and landslides affected more than 40 million people in West Africa in the past decade.²¹ While the higher uncertainty and spatial and seasonal dependence of precipitation predictive models limits the capacity to anticipate which regions in West Africa will witness drying or wetter trends in the near future,^{22,23} regional model studies suggest an increase in the number of extreme rainfall days over West Africa and the Sahel during the rainy season months,²⁴ which would point to an increase in the extent and/or severity of flooding.

¹¹ The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) defines climate change as “a change in the state of the climate that can be identified (e.g., by using statistical tests) by changes in the mean and/or the variability of its properties and that persists for an extended period, typically decades or longer. Climate change may be due to natural internal processes or external forcings such as modulations of the solar cycles, volcanic eruptions and persistent anthropogenic changes in the composition of the atmosphere or in land use.” IPCC, *Climate Change 2014: Synthesis Report. Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*. Geneva, Switzerland, 2014, p.118.

¹² Sultan, B., *What are the future climate scenarios in North and West Africa?* In IOM. *Migration in West and North Africa and across the Mediterranean*, September 2020

¹³ Niang, I., et al., *Africa*. In *Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability. Part B: Regional Aspects. Contribution of Working Group II to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*. Barros, V.R., et al. (eds.). Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, United Kingdom and New York, NY, USA, 2014, pp. 1199-1265.

¹⁴ Niang, I. et al, *Africa*, 2014.

¹⁵ Ibid. After some severe droughts in the 1970s and 1980s, between 1990 and 2010 relatively few severe droughts were recorded in the region.

¹⁶ Tschakert, P., Sagoe, R., Ofori-Darko, G. & Codjoe, S.N., Floods in the Sahel: an analysis of anomalies, memory, and anticipatory learning. *Climatic Change*, vo. 103, no. 3-4, pp.471-502, 2010.

¹⁷ Niang, I. et al, *Africa*, 2014.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Bendandi, B., *Migration induced by climate change and environmental degradation in the Central Mediterranean Route*. In IOM. *Migration in West and North Africa and across the Mediterranean*, September 2020.

²⁰ Bendandi, B., *Migration induced by climate change and environmental degradation in the Central Mediterranean Route*, September 2020.

²¹ CRED, *EM-DAT. The International Disaster Database*, visited on 27 November 2020.

²² Niang, I. et al, *Africa*, 2014.

²³ Tschakert, P., Sagoe, R., Ofori-Darko, G. & Codjoe, S.N., Floods in the Sahel: an analysis of anomalies, memory, and anticipatory learning, 2010.

²⁴ Niang, I. et al, *Africa*, 2014.

Despite the harsh climate, Sahelians' main livelihoods remain based on natural resources

Natural resources play a fundamental role in the livelihoods and food security of the region, which is almost entirely reliant on basic rural activities, for subsistence and income generating activities alike.^{25,26}

All the Sahelian countries, except Senegal, present serious levels of hunger, according to the 2020 Global Hunger Index.²⁷ The results from the food security analysis of the Cadre Harmonisé²⁸ for 2020 show that more than 12 million people will experience crisis or emergency levels of food insecurity during the next lean season, the highest figures in a decade.²⁹ Furthermore, the high poverty rates in the region are also worrisome: the proportion of people living below the poverty line (\$3.10/day) is estimated at more than 80% in Niger and Burkina Faso, 77% in Mali, 64% in Chad and 60% in Nigeria.³⁰ At the same time, the role of natural resources as income generating activity are significant: Rain-fed agriculture employs more than 70% of the labour force in Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Chad, and around 50% in Mauritania, and contributes 40% of the combined Sahelian gross domestic product (GDP).³¹ The livestock sector, which includes pastoralists and agro-pastoralists, is also of major importance to the drylands economy of the Sahel.³² Livestock herding represents up to 15% of the GDP, with the exception of Mauritania, where the share is larger.³³

Climate change: only one of several mutually reinforcing threats in the Sahel

Of course, climate change is just one of several threats Sahelians contend with, others including (extreme) poverty, conflict, political instability and economic insecurity. However, these threats mutually reinforce each other, leading to a culmination of risk and vulnerability. First, it is clear that the persistent poverty in these countries undermines the capacity of local populations to adapt to climate shocks and respond to them.³⁴ The 2014 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Fifth Assessment Report – the reference document in the field – warns that climate change will amplify existing risks and create new ones globally. Among these, the impacts of climate change are projected to undermine food security and hinder poverty reduction efforts, while prolonging existing poverty traps and creating new ones, in turn increasing displacement. Second, research suggests that resource scarcity in the region plays a significant role in fuelling conflict and political instability.³⁵ This is because climate change amplifies conflict drivers such as poverty and economic shocks, thereby indirectly contributing to the risk of conflict.³⁶

Indeed, a number of respected resilience models point to the limited ability of Sahelian populations to deal with climate change's anticipated impacts: Examples of these measures are the Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative (ND-GAIN) Country Index³⁷ and the Ecological Threat Register (ETR)³⁸ developed by the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP). Both the ND-GAIN index and the ETR 2020 for the Sahelian countries show the extreme vulnerability of this region to climatic shocks. The ETR 2020 specifically identifies the Sahel-Horn of Africa belt as a 'hotspot' for ecological stress, that is, a region exposed to a high number of threats but where resilience is unlikely

²⁵ Sartori, N. & Fattibene, D., [Human Security and Climate Change. Vulnerabilities in the Sahel](#), Euromesco Policy Brief No. 94, 1, March 2019.

²⁶ Zickgraf, C. et al, [The Impact of Vulnerability and Resilience to Environmental Change on Mobility Patterns in West Africa](#). Working Paper 14. Global Knowledge Partnership on Migration and Development (KNOMAD), World Bank, Washington DC, April 2016.

²⁷ The Global Hunger Index bases its score on four indicators: undernourishment, child wasting, child stunting, and child mortality. Global Hunger Index, [2020 Global Hunger Index by Severity: Interactive World Map](#), visited 27 November 2020.

²⁸ The Cadre Harmonisé (Harmonised Framework in English) is "a comprehensive analytical framework that takes into account various indicators of food and nutrition security outcomes and the inference of contributing factors." It has been developed and tested by the Permanent Interstate Committee for Drought Control in the Sahel with the aim to analyse and identify areas at risk and vulnerable groups in the Sahel. Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, [IPC & Cadre Harmonisé in West Africa and the Sahel](#), visited 3 December 2020.

²⁹ OCHA, [Overview of Humanitarian Needs and Requirements. The Sahel Crisis](#), May 2020.

³⁰ Torelli, S.M., [Climate-driven migration in Africa](#). European Council of Foreign Relations, December 2017.

³¹ Ibid.

³² De Haan, C. (ed.). *Prospects for Livestock-Based Livelihoods in Africa's Drylands*. World Bank Studies. Washington, DC: World Bank, 2016.

³³ Sartori, N. & Fattibene, D., [Human Security and Climate Change. Vulnerabilities in the Sahel](#), March 2019.

³⁴ Niang, I. et al, [Africa](#), 2014.

³⁵ International Crisis Group, [The Central Sahel: Scene of New Climate Wars?](#), 24 April 2020.

³⁶ IPCC, [Climate Change 2014: Synthesis Report](#), 2014.

³⁷ The ND-GAIN index assesses a country's exposure, sensitivity and adaptive capacity to climate disruptions in six life-supporting sectors (health, food, ecosystems, habitat, water, and infrastructure) as well as the country's economic, governance and social readiness to leverage investments to adaptation actions. University of Notre Dame, [ND-GAIN](#), visited 7 December 2020.

³⁸ The ETR focuses on the problem of resource scarcity and natural disasters threats, their impact on peacefulness and the role of resilience in limiting the impact of such shocks. To assess the ecological risk facing countries from now to 2050, the ETR considers eight ecological threats (water stress, food insecurity, droughts, floods, cyclones, temperature rise, sea level rise and population growth) in combination with a measure of socio-economic resilience to these ecological threats, the Positive Peace, which is defined as the attitudes, institutions and structures that create and sustain peaceful societies. IEP, [Ecological Threat Register 2020](#), September 2020.

to be strong enough to adapt or cope with these future shocks.³⁹ In this context, the geographical clustering of vulnerable countries in the Sahel is particularly concerning, as ecological and humanitarian crises tend to spill over to adjacent countries, putting the region at large at risk.

As of the time of writing this report (December 2020), even though the scale of projected impacts related to climate change is uncertain, negative impacts on agriculture and water resources are likely to occur even under the most optimistic scenarios.⁴⁰ An increase in climate variability means that more droughts and heavy rainfall events are expected, leading to disrupted planting and cropping seasons, hence lower yields and falling household income.⁴¹

Climate change and migration: related, but no linear causal relation

Researchers agree that environmental change will affect migration, now and in the future, whether it is directly or through its influence on the underlying economic, social, and political systems which shape migration patterns.³¹ Given the impossibility to isolate climatic or environmental drivers from other factors that influence mobility, however, it may be more accurate to say that climatic events modify or exacerbate existing migration dynamics rather than uniquely causing them.⁴² While there are cases where environmental factors are clearly the compelling drivers, such in the case of displacement by sudden onset disasters ('flight' for survival), there are always multiple factors at play which influence the type and possibility of movement, and whether movement is the most viable option.⁴³

In the case of slow-onset hazard events, such as drought or desertification, it is even more difficult to attribute human mobility to climate change, due to the complexity and interrelatedness of environmental degradation with other political, social, economic, and demographic pressures.⁴⁴ Because of the incremental nature of the impact of deteriorating environmental conditions on people's lives, (potential) migrants may be unaware of, or unable to directly identify the role that changes in the environment may have had in their decisions to move.⁴⁵ Indeed, even when environmental factors influence their mobility decisions, individuals do not generally identify themselves as 'environmental migrants'.⁴⁶

Climate change as a stress multiplier that exacerbates other migration drivers

Climate change is thus usually framed as a "stress multiplier", which can exacerbate a wide range of existing, interrelated, non-climate threats and impact the political, demographic, economic, social, and environmental factors, which can eventually drive migration.⁴⁷ Recognising migration as a multi-causal phenomenon, the Foresight report (the flagship report on climate change in recent years) presents a conceptual approach on how global environmental change affects migration drivers. It identifies macro-level drivers within the demographic, economic, environmental, political and social dimensions; intervening obstacles and facilitators; and micro-level characteristics, such as the household composition or the age and gender of the (potential) migrant (see Figure 1).⁴⁸ According to this model, even when local populations are affected by the same environmental threats, their vulnerability and likelihood to migrate will be influenced by their socioeconomic status, their dependence on natural resources, and their demographic characteristics.⁴⁹ The different mobility outcomes will also depend on the complex interactions of drivers and influencing factors, which may lead to migration, including displacement, but also to involuntary immobility.⁵⁰

³⁹ IEP, [Ecological Threat Register 2020](#), September 2020.

⁴⁰ Sultan, B., [What are the future climate scenarios in North and West Africa?](#) September 2020

⁴¹ Bendandi, B., [Migration induced by climate change and environmental degradation in the Central Mediterranean Route](#), September 2020.

⁴² Vigil, S., [Climate Change and Migration: Insights from the Sahel](#), 2017.

⁴³ Flavell, A., Milan, A. & Melde, S., [Migration, environment and climate change: Literature review](#), Global Migration Data Analysis Centre (GMDAC), International Organization for Migration (IOM), Berlin, March 2020.

⁴⁴ Stapleton, S.O., Nadin, R., Watson, C. & Kellett, J., [Climate change, migration and displacement. The need for a risk-informed and coherent approach](#), ODI & UNDP, November 2020.

⁴⁵ Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) [Weak links: challenging the climate & mixed migration paradigm in the Horn of Africa & Yemen](#), 2020.

⁴⁶ Flavell, A., et al., [Migration, environment and climate change: Literature review](#), March 2020.

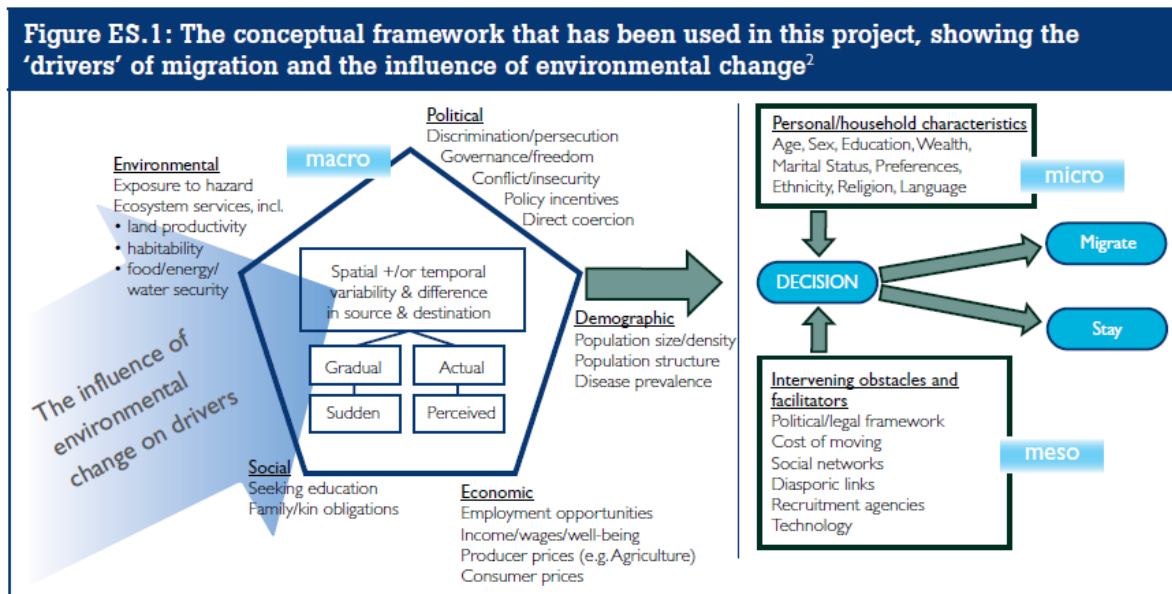
⁴⁷ MMC, [Weak links: challenging the climate & mixed migration paradigm in the Horn of Africa & Yemen](#), 2020.

⁴⁸ Foresight, [Migration and Global Environmental Change Environmental Change: Future Challenges and Opportunities](#). Final Project Report. The Government Office for Science, London, 2011.

⁴⁹ Zickgraf, C. et al., [The Impact of Vulnerability and Resilience to Environmental Change on Mobility Patterns in West Africa](#), April 2016.

⁵⁰ Foresight, [Migration and Global Environmental Change Environmental Change: Future Challenges and Opportunities](#), 2011.

Figure 1: Foresight (2011) Conceptual framework of migration drivers in the context of climate change



Source: Foresight (2011)

Box 1: Climate change, conflict and migration

There is an increasing interest in the relation between climate change, migration and conflict.⁵¹ Yet, the general lack of understanding of the complex linkages between these three phenomena remains a challenge⁵² and there exists little grounding in empirical evidence that climate change directly causes conflict or external movement.⁵³ In an attempt to disentangle causal effects between climate variability, conflict and migration, Abel et al. (2019) conceptualise these relationships in two sequences. One describes how climate change and poor management of natural resource exacerbates instability and human conflict due to the competition over scarce resources, which, in turn, triggers displacement and outmigration. The other sequence presents the reverse causation whereby climate change drives migration, which then contributes to an increase in tensions and potential conflict in the destination area as a result of migrant pressure.⁵⁴ Different studies have looked into these relationships in West Africa. For example, some authors have analysed the worsening of relationships between farmers and pastoralists and the conflicts for farming and grazing land in Nigeria resulting from drought and land degradation.⁵⁵ However, it is also acknowledged in the literature that the potential for conflict is influenced by a range of contextual factors, such as pre-existing violence, political instability or demographic pressure.⁵⁶ In this light, and similarly to the understanding of the relation between environmental changes and migration, climate change is increasingly seen as a 'threat multiplier' or destabilising factor that can exacerbate existing tensions, rather than a direct cause of conflicts.⁵⁷

Box 1: Climate change, conflict and migration

⁵¹ Flavell, A., et al., [Migration, environment and climate change: Literature review](#), March 2020.

⁵² Bendandi, B., [Migration induced by climate change and environmental degradation in the Central Mediterranean Route](#), September 2020.

⁵³ MMC, [Weak links: challenging the climate & mixed migration paradigm in the Horn of Africa & Yemen](#), 2020.

⁵⁴ Abel, G.J. et al, Climate, conflict and forced migration. *Global Environmental Change*, 54:239-249, 2019.

⁵⁵ Bendandi, B., [Migration induced by climate change and environmental degradation in the Central Mediterranean Route](#), September 2020.

⁵⁶ Flavell, A., et al., [Migration, environment and climate change: Literature review](#), March 2020.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

Migration is a livelihoods diversification strategy, mostly internal, regional and seasonal

The Sahel presents high levels of internal, intra-regional, and international migration, while it is also a zone of transit for migrants.⁵⁸ Yet, evidence shows that the majority of African migration, considering all drivers including those related to climate, occurs internal, intra-regional, and south-south.^{59,60} Mobility dynamics in the Sahel build on long-standing migration patterns developed over generations, often part of livelihood strategies adopted by households to cope with the seasonality of the climate. For example, transhumance mobility⁶¹ is particularly important in the region and linked to seasonal changes.⁶² Seasonal rural-to-urban migration⁶³ is also common among rural communities, where young adults are sent to the cities during the dry season with the aim to diversify livelihoods sources and reduce the food demands on the household.⁶⁴ These forms of seasonal migration have been recognised as effective adaptations to environmental stress, but rarely picked up in migration data collection.⁶⁵

It is important to note, however, that the effects of climate change in the Sahel may not (only) be prompting migration, but could also undermine existing migration strategies.⁶⁹ It may lead to transforming these adaptation strategies into distress migration, when vulnerable populations have no other option but to migrate seasonally to ensure their household's survival in the face of environmental change, as has been observed in Niger.⁷⁰ Long-term and permanent migration may also become more frequent as environmental conditions deteriorate, leaving the population with no choice but to migrate elsewhere to live and work.⁷¹

Vulnerability as key factor in determining the impact of environmental migration on households

The level of impact of climate change and other environmental changes on populations and on resulting population movements depends on a combination of exposure to risk, pre-existing vulnerabilities, and the capacity to cope.⁷² Therefore, to analyse climate-induced migration it is essential to consider the underlying socio-economic, cultural, political and environmental processes that may enable or constrain people's ability to cope with climate-related hazards and allow them to have the capability to choose whether to stay or to migrate.⁷³ It is also necessary to take into account the ecological threats that are to be expected in the coming decades (related or not to climate change), such as population growth, water stress, food insecurity, droughts, floods and rising temperature.⁷⁴ The interaction of these challenges will compound the pressures on many countries, affecting existing social and political structures.⁷⁵ In the case of some African regions, the combination of high geographic exposure to environmental hazards, pre-existing economic and socio-political vulnerabilities, and high population growth make them prone to be hardly hit by the effects of climate change.⁷⁶

The IPCC defines *vulnerability* as “[t]he propensity or predisposition to be adversely affected”, which “encompasses a variety of concepts and elements including sensitivity or susceptibility to harm and lack of capacity to cope and adapt”.⁶⁶ It also provides a definition of *adaptation*, as “[t]he process of adjustment to actual or expected climate and its effects” that “seeks to moderate or avoid harm or exploit beneficial opportunities”⁶⁷ and of *resilience*, as the “capacity of social, economic and environmental systems to cope with a hazardous event or trend or disturbance, responding or reorganizing in ways that maintain their essential function, identity and structure, while also maintaining the capacity for adaptation, learning and transformation.”⁶⁸

⁵⁸ Vigil, S., [Climate Change and Migration: Insights from the Sahel](#), 2017.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Mberu, B.U. & Sidze, E.M., The Hidden Side of the Story: Intra-African Migration. In Carbone, G. (Ed.) [Out of Africa. Why People Migrate](#). ISPI, 2017.

⁶¹ Transhumance is the practice of moving livestock between pastures in a seasonal cycle, often over long distances, and sometimes across borders (IOM, [Glossary on Migration](#), 2019). The major cross-border transhumance routes in West and Central Africa correspond to north to south dry-season movements. South-north routes are less numerous, indicating wet-season transhumance movements (ECOWAS – SWAC/OECD, [Livestock and regional market in the Sahel and West Africa](#), 2008).

⁶² Vigil, S., [Climate Change and Migration: Insights from the Sahel](#), 2017.

⁶³ Seasonal migrant workers are those who migrate for employment and whose work is by its character dependent on seasonal conditions and carried out only during that period of the year (IOM, [Glossary on Migration](#), 2019).

⁶⁴ Bendandi, B., [Migration induced by climate change and environmental degradation in the Central Mediterranean Route](#), September 2020.

⁶⁵ Flavell, A., et al., [Migration, environment and climate change: Literature review](#), March 2020.

⁶⁶ IPCC, [Climate Change 2014: Synthesis Report](#), 2014, p. 128.

⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 118.

⁶⁸ Ibid, p. 127.

⁶⁹ Vigil, S., [Climate Change and Migration: Insights from the Sahel](#), 2017.

⁷⁰ IDMC, [They Call it Exodus. Breaking the cycle of distress migration in Niger](#), September 2019.

⁷¹ Bendandi, B., [Migration induced by climate change and environmental degradation in the Central Mediterranean Route](#), September 2020.

⁷² Vigil, S., [Climate Change and Migration: Insights from the Sahel](#), 2017.

⁷³ Stapleton, et al, [Climate change, migration and displacement. The need for a risk-informed and coherent approach](#), November 2020.

⁷⁴ Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP), [Ecological Threat Register 2020](#), September 2020.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

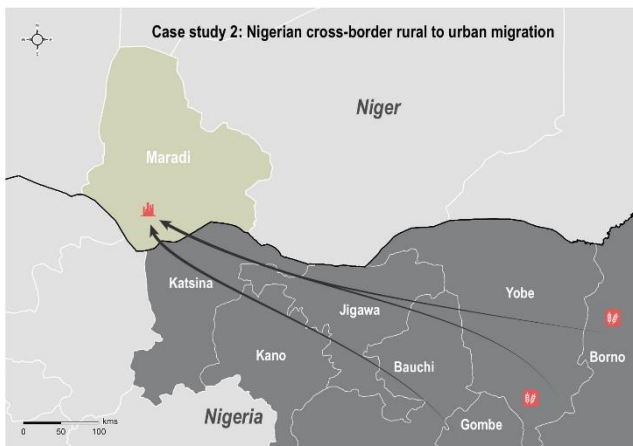
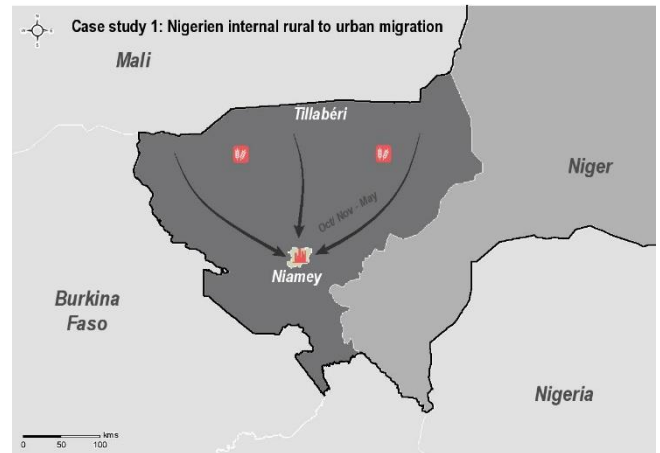
⁷⁶ Vigil, S., [Climate Change and Migration: Insights from the Sahel](#), 2017.

FINDINGS

1. The impact of COVID-19 on environmental migration in the short-term⁷⁷

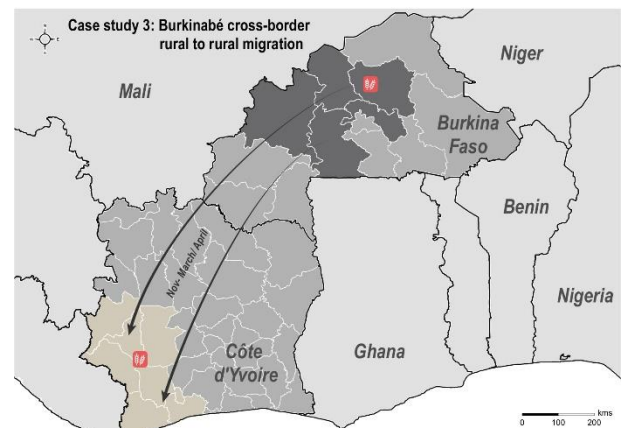
Respondents' habitual migration patterns

As part of the study, three distinct population groups and migration patterns were explored. First, **Nigerien internal migrants**, who habitually migrate during the lean season (October/November to May) from their rural areas of origin in the Tillabéri region to work in the city of Niamey, either in casual labour (working on building sites, working as walking street vendors or other types of manual labour) or, for women and girls, as maids. The second case study are **Nigerien seasonal workers** originating from the North-West of Nigeria who migrate from rural, predominantly agriculture-based areas to the city of Maradi in Niger, engaging in cross-border rural-urban migration. The third and final population group are **Burkinabé migrant workers** who originate from rural areas in the western regions of Burkina Faso and migrate during the lean season (between November and March/April) to Côte d'Ivoire to work in cocoa farms in the west of the country.



For all population groups, the main driver behind the migration patterns explored is to supplement existing agriculture-based livelihood sources in the area of origin, which are highly exposed to climate-induced shocks. The line between acting as an additional livelihood source (to supplement resources otherwise sufficient to secure basic needs) and distress migration⁷⁸ (migration as a *sina qua non* to cover basic needs) is thin. Among Nigerien internal migrants all respondents reported that they migrated out of urgent necessity, specifying that their crops delivered too little to cover the household's basic needs for the year.⁷⁹ Locally, this form of seasonal migration is known as *exode*, French for 'exodus'. Also Burkinabé and Nigerian respondents cited periodic reduced crop yields and livestock losses as increasing the pressure to migrate.

Across all three population groups, it was most commonly the male head of household who migrated, followed by his sons or brothers. Women and girls were cited as migrating among Burkinabé and Nigerien respondents, albeit to a much lesser extent than male members of the household. To note, it is not uncommon for one household to engage in several migration patterns. For the purposes of this study, however, findings pertain only to the migration patterns outlined above.



⁷⁷ Defined in this context as the first six months since the emergence of the virus in the region in March 2020, hence March- September 2020.

⁷⁸ Definition: "Conceptual distinctions can be made between distress migration, in which household decisions are largely ad hoc responses to external environmental processes and events; and economic migration, which suggests the existence of forward and strategic planning on the part of the household. Where economic migration has been shown to create new opportunities and income sources, distress migration has often been accompanied by new risks and vulnerabilities". In: Johnson, C.A. and Krishnamurthy, K. (2010) Dealing with displacement: Can "social protection" facilitate long-term adaptation to climate change? *Global Environmental Change*, 20, pp. 648–655

⁷⁹ See also: IDMC, No matter of choice: displacement in a changing climate, 2019.

1.1. Impact of COVID-19 on seasonal environmental migration patterns in the short-term

Finding 1. All types of seasonal migration patterns were impacted in the short-term, with travel being longer, more expensive, or delayed, compared to respondents' plans

Most respondents' migration patterns between January and October 2020 were impacted by COVID-19, as reported by 104 out of 135 respondents. No difference in the level of impact was found between the three different population groups and migration patterns studied, suggesting that both rural-rural/rural-urban and internal and cross-border migration was impacted by COVID-19 in the short-term. How migration patterns were impacted differed by the time of migration, as well as the type of migration.

Differences by the time of migration

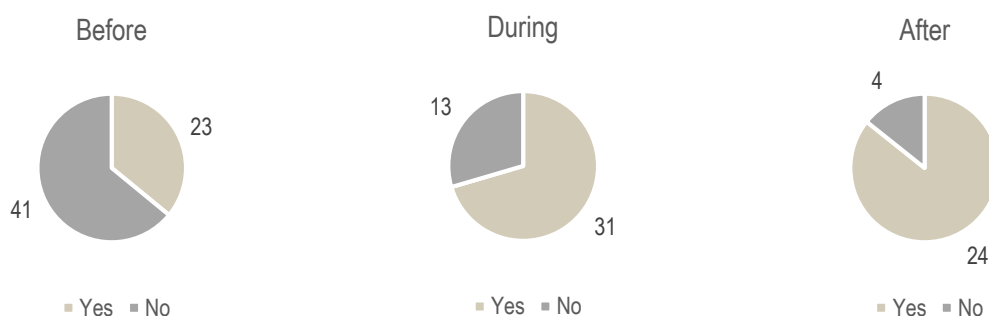
Depending on when respondents migrated, the way their mobility patterns were impacted differed. Of the 96 respondents who migrated between January and October 2020, despite the rise of COVID-19 in March 2020, the relative majority (64) migrated before the peak in virus infections in March/April, compared to almost half (44) and one third (28) of respondents who migrated in either March/April (during) or after the peak.

Generally, those who migrated before the emergence of the virus less commonly reported having been impacted (23 out of 64) than those who were on the move during (31 out of 44) or after the immediate rise in March/ April (24 out of 28).

'I migrate because it's me who sends money home to the village to my brothers, so they have something to eat and can work in the fields. Our harvest savings end before the rainy season, so there is no other way than for someone leaving to find money elsewhere.'

Nigerien man from Say, oldest son, interviewed in Niamey

Figure 2: Number of respondents reporting the emergence of COVID-19 impacted their planned/anticipated migration, by timing of migration (before, during, of after the peak)



The most commonly reported way migration patterns were disrupted – before, during and after – was that the journey took longer than planned, as respondents had to deal with rapidly imposed restrictions and adapt travel plans accordingly. For those who migrated **before** the outbreak of COVID-19 in particular, this reportedly led to unexpectedly extended journeys (11 out of 23) and a delay in the return to the area of origin (8 out of 23), impacting the upcoming planting season. Other challenges for those who were on the move prior to the outbreak included higher transport costs, tied to heightened demand for transport to return home (8 out of 23). Burkinabé respondents who had been working in cocoa farms in neighbouring Côte d'Ivoire were particularly impacted by the unexpected closure of borders, with respondents stranded at the border, unable to return as planned. A similar situation was reported in April 2020 at the border between Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, affecting Nigerien seasonal migrants.⁸⁰

Overall, the more time progressed since the first case of COVID-19 in the region, the higher the proportion of respondents who reported having been negatively impacted by the virus and movement restrictions implemented. While among those who had left home before March 2020 one third reported having been impacted negatively (23 out of 64), this figure rose to three out of four among those who migrated during the virus' peak in March/April (31 out of 44), to a total 24 out of 28 respondents who migrated from May onwards reporting being negatively impacted. The reason for this appeared to be two-fold: first, cross-border migrants reported that, with time, border controls

⁸⁰ REACH, [Impact du COVID-19 sur les Migrants en Transit et de Retour au Mali](#), May 2020.

were stepped up. With this, the price of travel increased, as irregular routes had to be sought with, eventually, the aid of smugglers also. Second, migrants working in the urban economy reported that, as time progressed, they were able to accumulate less earnings, reportedly feeling increasingly impacted by a decreased demand for their labour.

Table 1: Impact of COVID-19 on migration patterns in the short-term, by time of travel (before/during/after)

	Before	During	After
Journey longer than planned	11/23	18/31	6/24
Journey shorter than planned	2/23	0	2/24
Delay in departure	5/23	5/31	7/24
Delay in return	8/23	9/31	2/24
Unable to migrate	3/23	0	1/24
Less work than usual	2/23	9/31	4/24
Less transport than usual	6/23	15/31	4/24
Transport more expensive than usual	8/23	16/31	9/24
Faced discrimination	0	0	2/24

For those who decided to migrate **during** the outbreak of COVID-19 (March/April; despite of the restrictions implemented), reported challenges included: the journey taking longer than expected (18 out of 31), higher transport costs (16 out of 31), more limited transport, less work at the destination than usual, and delays in the subsequent return. To deal with the more limited availability of transport, in some cases respondents reportedly had to pay more for irregular travel to reach their intended destination. This was most commonly reported by Burkinabé respondents who had to cross the land border with Côte d'Ivoire. More limited work opportunities were mostly reported by Nigerien and Nigerian rural-urban migrants, as, due to the restrictions and partial lockdown implemented in urban areas, such as curfews in Niamey and Maradi, work opportunities were more limited. This was also found in an assessment on the impact of COVID-19 on migrants in Bamako, Mali, conducted in May 2020.⁸¹

Among those who had planned to migrate **after** the emergence of COVID-19, the vast majority reported having been impacted by COVID-19 (24 out of 28) along their journey, mostly in relation to transport being more expensive than usual (9 out of 24), followed by delays in departure (7 out of 24) and the journey taking longer than planned (6 out of 24).

Finding 2. With the official closure of borders between Sahelian countries, cross-border migration has not stopped. It has, however, become more expensive, with less transport available and a reported rise in the use of irregular routes.

For respondents engaged in cross-border migration, the most commonly reported immediate impact of COVID-19 was a rise in transportation costs and a limited availability of transport options. Indeed, as evidenced in academic literature on migration, migration can rarely be put completely to a halt through government-imposed movement restrictions. Three key informants interviewed noted that the official closure of borders between Sahelian countries has given rise to the use of informal routes.⁸² In such cases, new routes are identified which avoid official border crossing points, with seasonal migrants engaging the help of people who know the local area well to bypass official regulations. Costs for this route are higher, as reported by both Burkinabé and Nigerian cross-border migrants interviewed for this study, with less transport options available overall. In these cases, respondents did not frequently speak of 'irregular' migration per se, however key informants qualified it as such, as no official border points were crossed in the process (and no entry formally recorded). Compared to the border between Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire, the border between Nigeria and Niger appeared more porous with less respondents facing challenges in leaving or returning (reported by respectively only three and two respondents).

⁸¹ REACH, [Impact du COVID-19 sur les Migrants en Transit et de Retour au Mali](#), May 2020.

⁸² This development was anticipated by an IOM report and was confirmed in this instance. See: IOM, [COVID-19 and migration in West and North Africa and across the Mediterranean](#) in [Migration in West and North Africa and across the Mediterranean](#), September, 2020

Table 2: Impact of COVID-19 on migration patterns in the short-term, by migration pattern

Short-term impact	Niger	Burkina Faso	Nigeria
Journey longer than planned	20/29	10/21	5/28
Journey shorter than planned	1/29	0	3/28
Delay in departure	11/29	3/21	3/28
Delay in return	9/29	8/21	2/28
Unable to migrate	1/29	2/21	1/28
Less work than usual	2/29	6/21	7/28
Less transport than usual	5/29	6/21	14/28
Transport more expensive than usual	8/29	9/21	16/28

Among Nigerien migrants engaged in internal rural to urban migration, the most reported short-term impact of COVID-19 on their migration patterns was the extension of the journey, as respondents had to stay in the city waiting for lockdown and government restrictions to be lifted, before being able to return to their fields. As will be seen below, this delay in return posed significant challenges in the preparation and harvest of respondents' fields, as many missed the right moment to return home and support the household in the harvest.

1.2. Impact of COVID-19 on access to livelihoods and overall living situation in the short-term

All key informants interviewed reported that COVID-19 has had an impact on the livelihoods sources of seasonal migrants in the Sahel region. Among environmental migrants engaged in seasonal migration interviewed, the vast majority confirmed that the virus had had an immediate impact on their livelihoods sources and overall living situation, reported by 100 out of 135 respondents with regard to livelihoods in the area of origin and by 112 out of 135 respondents in terms of livelihoods in their habitual destination areas.

Finding 3. COVID-19 has had an immediate impact on seasonal migrants' livelihoods in areas of origin and destination. At origin, the impact was felt in terms of less demand for produce and less household members able to support the harvest due to movement restrictions, limiting the season's yields

The majority of respondents reported that COVID-19 had impacted their livelihood sources in their area of origin (100 out of 135). This was particularly the case for Nigerian (29 out of 30) and Burkinabé respondents (55 out of 74) and slightly less so for Nigerien respondents (16 out of 31). No difference was found between those who migrated and those had been unable to do so, illustrating how both groups likely rely on the same livelihood sources which were equally affected for both groups at origin.

Livelihood sources that were reportedly impacted by COVID-19 appeared to largely mirror respondents' overall primary livelihood sources at origin, including agriculture (58 out of 100), small business (31 out of 100) and manual labour (26 out of 100). The impact was particularly felt in terms of less demand for produce, services and manual labour, as movement was restricted for potential clients. Several respondents also raised that, with the restrictions on movement, less workers were able to join them in working in the fields, leading to delays in agricultural work and more limited capacity. The mid- and longer-term impacts of reported delays will further be explored in following sections.

Finding 4. In destination areas, both rural and urban, demand-driven, informal jobs – those traditionally done by migrant workers – were reported to be particularly affected.

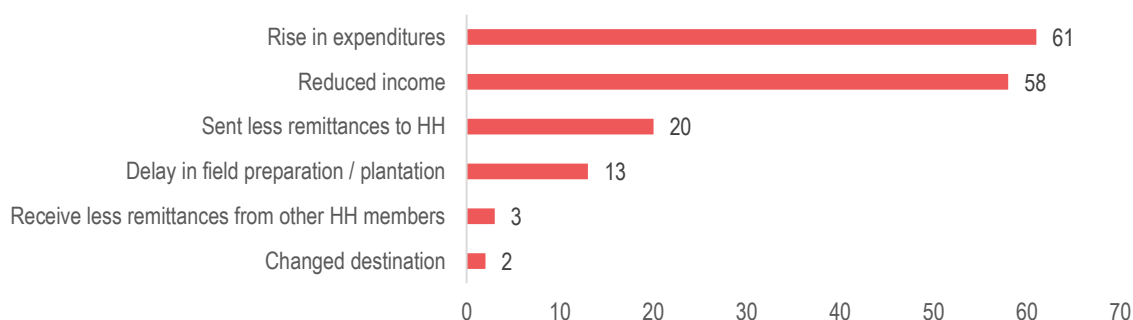
In destination areas, the proportion of respondents reporting that their livelihoods sources had been negatively impacted by COVID-19 were higher still than in areas of origin (112 out of 135). No particular differences were found among population groups/ mobility patterns explored (Nigeriens: 24 out of 31; Burkinabé: 65 out of 74; Nigerians: 23 out of 30). This might be because in areas of destination respondents primarily worked in similar, demand-driven jobs, including the service sector, manual labour or, in the case of agricultural labour, as workers on plantations.

As was the case in origin areas; those livelihood sources that were reportedly most impacted by the virus mirrored respondents' respective primary livelihood source in the destination area. Among Nigerian respondents who migrated cross-border to Maradi, small jobs and manual labour were the most commonly reported livelihood sources thought to be impacted (mentioned by all Nigerian respondents), mirroring their primary activity in the area of destination. For Burkinabé respondents, impacts were particularly felt in relation to their agricultural activities in Côte d'Ivoire (reported by 34 out of 65) or manual labour (12 out of 65).

Finding 5. The disruption of habitual migration patterns and more limited access to livelihoods sources seems to lead to increased expenditures as well as reduced income. To cope with this situation, seasonal migrants reportedly borrow money, spend savings and search for supplementary work.

The disruption of mobility patterns, and decrease in accessible livelihoods sources, impacted respondents' migration plans and, thereby, livelihood strategies adopted vis-à-vis a changing climate. The most immediate impacts, felt by respondents of all three migration patterns studied (be that internal, cross-border, rural-rural or rural-urban), were: 1) increased expenditures (61 out of 78) due to higher transport costs and unexpected extension of respondents' travel; 2) reduced income (58 out of 78), and 3) a decreased ability to send remittances home (20 out of 78). Other impacts cited were 4) unexpected delays in plantation of the fields (13 out of 78) and 5) receiving less remittances from other household members (3 out of 78).

Figure 3: Most commonly reported impacts of COVID-19 induced reduced mobility

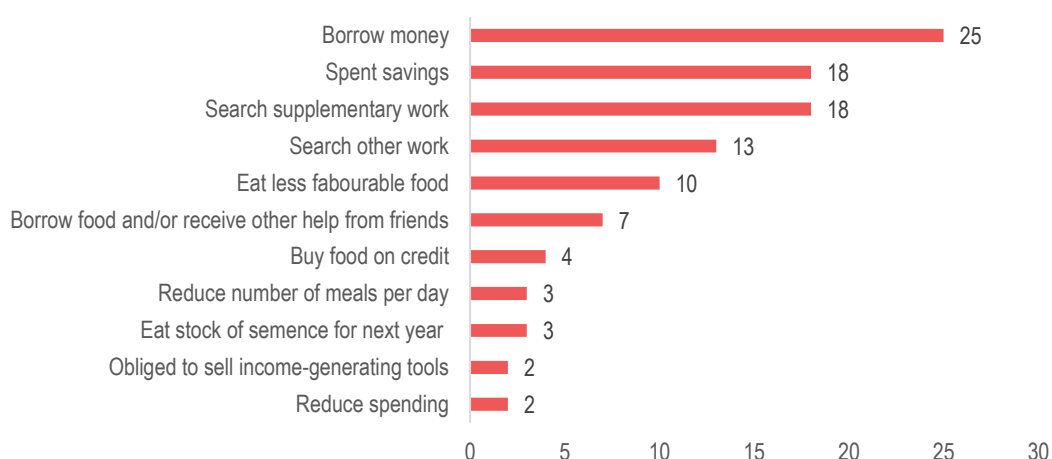


N= 78

No differences were identified among the different population groups and migration patterns, illustrating the immediacy of the impact felt across groups. High reporting of rising expenditures and reduced income hint at the critical impact the restrictions have had on respondents (and ensuing impacts), as their mobility had been primarily driven by the need to increase income.

To respond to the rise in expenditures and, at the same time, a reduced income, respondents most commonly reported resorting to 1) borrowing money, reported by one in three respondents (25 out of 78); 2) spending savings (18 out of 78), and 3) searching for supplementary work (18 out of 78). The type of coping strategies employed illustrate the limited leeway people engaged in these migration patterns in the region have to respond to and absorb shocks. The reported coping strategies employed appeared to be comparable across the three population groups studied.

Figure 4: Most commonly reported coping strategies employed to respond to the short-term impacts of COVID-19



N= 78

Findings also illustrate that short-term mobility restrictions (in all three countries internal restrictions only lasted for two months) can still have mid- to long-term effects on the population affected. Borrowing money, as well as spending savings, are a concerning response to shock as they have both potentially long-term, erosive effects for those who engage in them. Ultimately, **short-term impacts and coping strategies cited illustrate the fragility within which migration as livelihood strategy is used among respondents.**

Besides the coping strategies cited, it is also worth noting which strategies respondents did not cite to be employed at the time of data collection. These included asking for money from other household members abroad, indicative of a limited safety net for migrants in these contexts. But also, only few respondents cited severe negative food coping strategies, such as reducing the number of meals per day, sending household members begging or reducing food intake for some household members on behalf of others. This illustrates that, while respondents were facing a difficult situation, they were not yet engaging in the most severe life-saving coping strategies.

Finding 6. Those who decided not to migrate due to the restrictions implemented, appeared to be impacted more than seasonal migrants who chose to migrate anyway

While most respondents had reportedly migrated despite COVID-19, 39 out of 135 decided not to migrate between January and October 2020, contrary to their usual migration patterns. Of them, 29 reported that the decision not to migrate was directly tied to COVID-19, due to the movement restrictions implemented (28 out of 29) and, to a lesser extent, out of fear of getting infected (14 out of 29). When asked about any consequences of not migrating (of being involuntarily immobile), all respondents cited the **loss of an important livelihoods source (27 out of 29), followed by the inability to send money home to support the family (8 out of 29).** Some respondents also reported this meant they were not able to send their children to school anymore (3) or put food on the table (2).

‘Of course, we are women, but we migrate to help our parents to manage the household after the harvest. Because most years we have problems, because the harvest isn’t good and not enough to feed everyone.’

Woman from Oullam, Tillaberi, working as a maid, interviewed in Niamey

When comparing to the coping strategies employed by those who decided to migrate despite the difficult circumstances, it appears that **those who decided to stay put had to engage in more and more severe coping strategies.** More than half of those who decided to stay put had to search for another job (16 out of 29), and almost

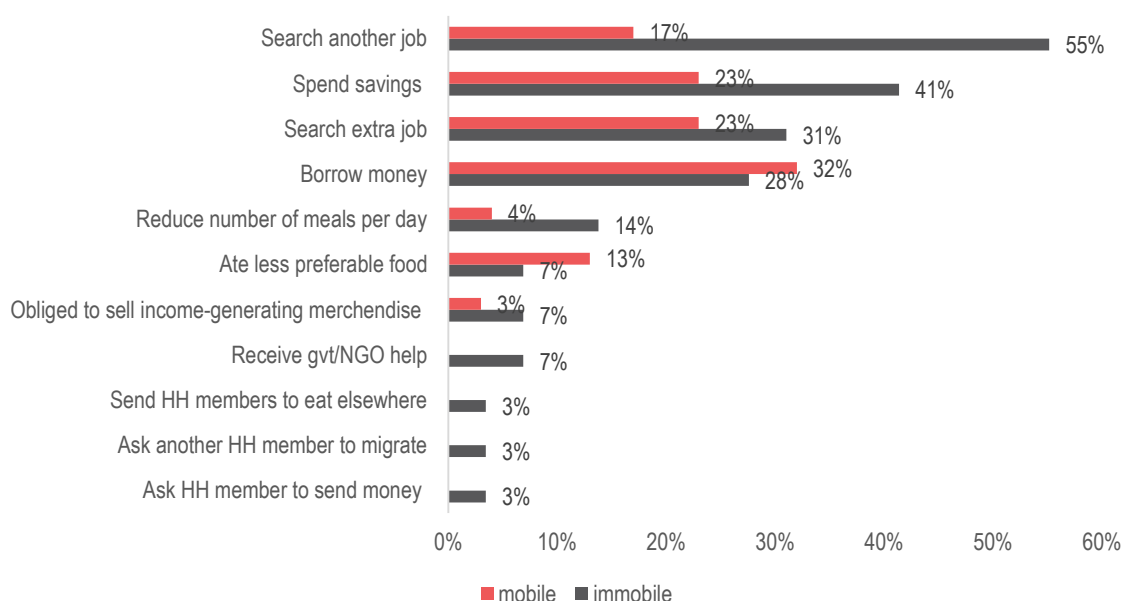
half had to spend savings (12 out of 29), compared to only one in three among those who migrated. Respondents who decided to stay in the area of origin further had to engage in particularly severe coping strategies, including reducing the number of meals per day (4 out of 29) and selling income-generating merchandise (2 out of 29).

At the same time, it needs to be acknowledged that the decision not to migrate among respondents who stayed was likely based on a cost/benefit calculation of the risks of migrating versus staying. As such, the households likely determined that sending one member to migrate and the consequences, should they not succeed in gathering the expected resources at destination, were too risky, sparing both the migrants and the household potentially even higher vulnerabilities, should they not succeed.

'I prefer to concentrate on my business this year. It isn't always easy to migrate, you know?'

Burkinabé man from Centre-Ouest region, interviewed in Bobo Dioulasso.

Figure 5: Most commonly reported coping strategies employed, by % of mobile and immobile respondents



Please note that this graph presents proportions based on an overall different subset sizes. Sample sizes per population group are as follows: mobile n=78; immobile n=29. As such findings are indicative only.

Similar to the challenges faced following COVID-19, these findings are in line with recent academic literature on involuntary immobility and the particularly negative impacts for environmental migrants who are unable to migrate in the face of climate change.⁸³ Climate stressors do not necessarily lead to migration. This is because some people chose to stay (voluntarily immobile) or because they are unable to move (involuntarily immobile, or 'trapped').⁸⁴ As mentioned earlier, migration requires capital in the form of financial; social (e.g. networks in potential destinations); human (necessary skills, knowledge and information for migration); and physical (state of health).⁸⁵ Therefore, those with greater capital will likely be more able to move, while people that lack these assets, will be more likely to be left behind.⁸⁶ At the same time, those that have limited capital are also more likely to be most vulnerable to the effects of climate change and less able to protect themselves.⁸⁷ This results in double jeopardy; a lack of assets limits their ability to move away from environmental hazards while further exacerbating their vulnerability to environmental shocks.⁸⁸

While the literature on the topic generally highlights the importance of migration to escape from sudden-onset climate change, findings here illustrate the importance of migration in the face of slow-onset climate change. The concept of involuntary immobility puts into question the framing of migration as a problem, illustrating that the inability to migrate may in some cases be worse than migrating albeit in difficult conditions.

⁸³ For an overview, see: Flavell, A., et al., [Migration, environment and climate change: Literature review](#), March 2020.

⁸⁴ Carling, J. (2002) 'Migration in the age of involuntary immobility: Theoretical reflections and Cape Verdean experiences.' *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 28(1):5-42.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Vigil, S., [Climate Change and Migration: Insights from the Sahel](#), 2017.

⁸⁷ Foresight, [Migration and Global Environmental Change Environmental Change: Future Challenges and Opportunities](#), 2011.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

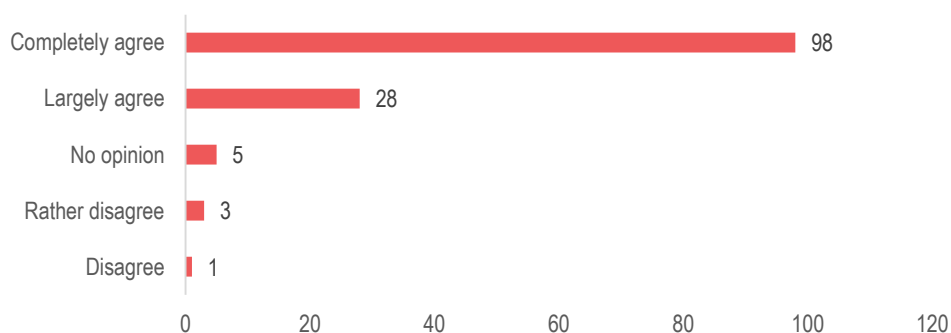
2. The impact of COVID-19 on environmental migration in the mid-term⁸⁹

2.1. Impact of COVID-19 on access to livelihoods and overall living situation in the mid-term

Finding 7. While the short-term impacts of the virus were reportedly felt by interviewed environmental migrants engaged in all seasonal migration patterns studied, respondents commonly anticipated that seasonal migrants engaged in cross-border migration – should border restrictions remain in place – will be particularly affected in the mid-term.

Respondents were asked to what extent the COVID-19 pandemic was an important issue for them when looking at the future. **In this regard, almost three out of four reported that the pandemic was an important issue to them (98 out of 135), with a further 28 people largely agreeing with the statement.** Overall, respondents engaged in cross-border movement reported more frequently that the pandemic was an important issue to them compared to internal migrants. Among Nigerian respondents (traveling to Maradi, Niger), 26 out of 30 held that the pandemic was important to them, as did 56 of 74 Burkinabé respondents, engaged in migration towards Côte d'Ivoire. In comparison, only slightly more than half of Nigerien respondents (16 out of 31) completely agreed with the statement. The sense that the mid-term impact would be larger for seasonal migrants engaged in cross-border movements was shared by several key informants, who pointed out that, while internal migration restrictions were lifted within a month or two of the emergence of the virus, as of December 2020, border closures were still in place in the Sahel.

Figure 6: To what extent do you agree with the statement 'the COVID-19 pandemic is an important issue for me'?



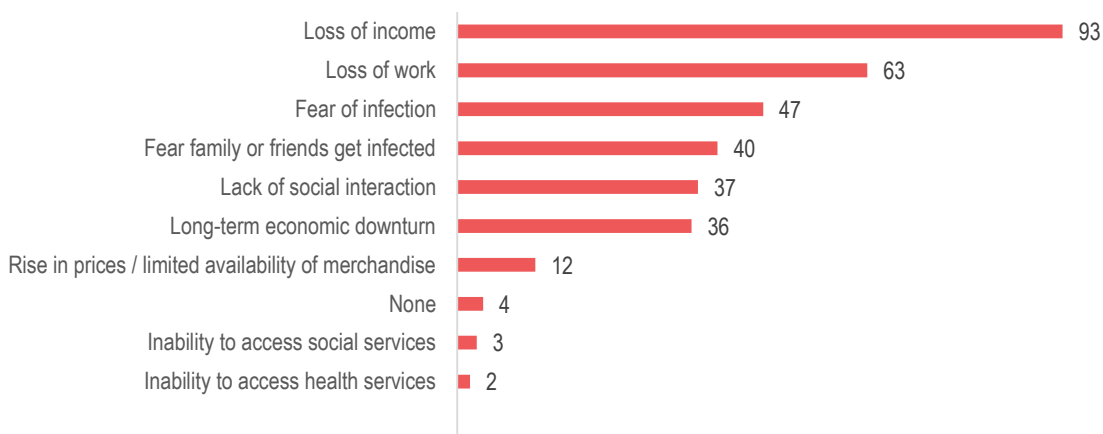
While it was found that all mobility types studied were impacted by COVID-19 in the short-term, this finding suggests that **the impact and ensuing worries in the mid-term for respondents depending on crossing borders were still larger than for those who moved internally.** While the immediacy of the impact was felt across groups, respondents felt that measures implemented which impacted internal migrants were less likely to last, compared to the closure of international borders.

Finding 8. Main worries about the impact of COVID-19 in the mid-term relate to the coping strategies seasonal migrants had to employ to deal with the short-term impacts of COVID-19, such as taking on debt, spending savings and forcibly delaying the season's harvest.

When respondents were asked about their main worries on the mid-term impact of COVID-19, their responses mirrored the commonly reported primary impacts, including loss of income, loss of work, and the fear of infection. No differences were found among respondents engaged in different migration patterns, nor between those who had moved compared to those who had not.

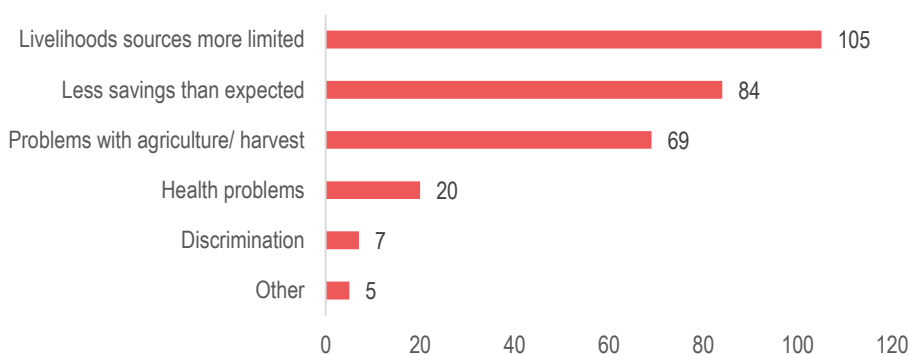
⁸⁹ Mid-term is defined in this context as spanning a one-year timeframe, from October 2020 to October 2021.

Figure 7: Most commonly reported top three worries in relation to COVID-19 in the year to come⁹⁰



The vast majority of respondents reported that they expected the challenges they had faced in the past six months to impact them in the year to come (113 out of 135, while 10 reported ‘no’, 12 ‘do not know’). This was reported particularly frequently in relation to more limited livelihood sources (105 out of 135), having less savings than expected (84 out of 135) and problems related to delayed sowing or harvest (69 out of 135). When asked how respondents would cope with the problems anticipated, the general response was to search for supplementary labour and to make it work somehow.

Figure 8: Most commonly reported problems anticipated for the coming year



‘The income we lost during the height of COVID-19 has meant we have been able to send less money home than usual. This means more problems for the year to come.’

Nigerien woman from Ouallam, interviewed in Niamey.

‘I decided to stay here in Bobo Dioulasso, as the borders with the Côte d’Ivoire are closed. But this significantly impacts my income, because what I earn here is nowhere close to what I earned in Côte d’Ivoire. The income we lost during the height of COVID-19 has meant we have been able to send less money home than usual. This means more problems for the year to come, of course.’

Burkinabé man from Boucle du Mouhoun, interviewed in Bobo Dioulasso.

⁹⁰ Please note reporting here is based on actual numbers and not percentages.

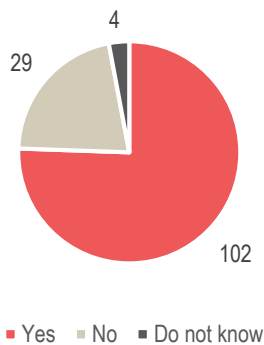
2.2. Impact of COVID-19 on seasonal environmental migration patterns in the mid-term

Finding 9. Despite the challenges faced and anticipated, the majority of environmental migrants plan to engage in their habitual seasonal migration in the year to come.

Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic was not found to have had a major impact on migration patterns planned for the year to come. This illustrates both the deep-rootedness of the migration patterns, as well as respondents' reliance on them, despite potential future disruptions and more limited resources to engage in them.

Figure 9: Environmental migrants' reporting their plans to migrate between October 2020 and October 2021

Do you expect to migrate between October 2020 and October 2021?



'Of course, it is likely that the virus hurts the economy, but whatever the situation, I will be forced to migrate, to meet my needs and those of my family'

Nigerien head of household from Tillabéri, interviewed in Niamey.

The majority of respondents expected to migrate between October 2020 and October 2021 (102 out of 135), with most of them expecting to migrate to their **habitual destination** (84 out of 102). Those who planned to travel elsewhere primarily anticipated to migrate to another country in the region (11 out of 102), most commonly Côte d'Ivoire (4) or Mali (2), or another destination within their country of origin (6 out of 102). Those who reportedly did not plan to migrate, did so either because they did not have the resources to do so, or because the year had felt very difficult to them and they felt they did not have the energy to migrate again.

Finding 10. Reporting on the foreseen impact of COVID-19 on migration plans for the year to come appeared mixed. While one third of respondents planned to migrate for longer than usual – to make up for the gains lost during the year – many others reported that COVID-19 had not impacted their plans, as the reasons for their migration were deemed more pressing than the impact of COVID-19, and hence remained the key factor in their decision-making.

While two-thirds of respondents who expected to migrate, expected to do so within the usual seasonal migration patterns of a duration of six months maximum, **one third of respondents expected to migrate more long term** – hinting at a considerable change to usual patterns. This was motivated by the anticipated need to stay longer in the destination to gather the usual/necessary income. In these cases, respondents cited the anticipated risk of not having enough support to take care of the harvest in the area of origin, however, the need to migrate overrode the risk of labour shortage on the fields.

When asked whether respondents considered COVID-19 an important factor in their decision, responses were mixed. Those for whom it reportedly was an important factor considered mostly the closure of borders and how this would, once more, restrict their ability to travel. For those who reported that it did not impact their plans, the response was simple: they had to migrate, no matter what – including COVID-19.

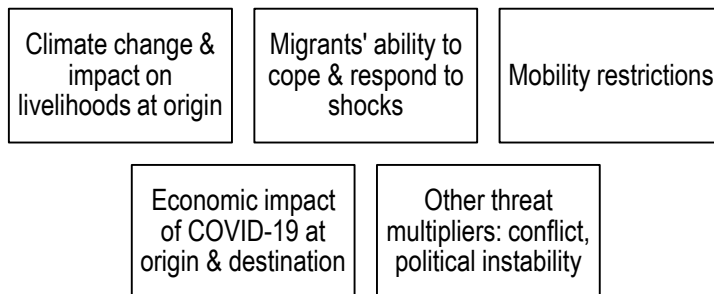
3. The impact of COVID-19 on seasonal migration in the longer term⁹¹

Key determinants to monitor to gauge the longer term impacts on seasonal migration

The analysis of individual interviews with migrants and key informants confirmed that, at the time of data collection, the situation in the region in relation to COVID-19 and mobility patterns was still too fluid to give a clear indication of the longer-term impacts of the virus on the populations and mobility patterns studied. However, five central elements emerged that will be critical to monitor, to allow identification of the impact on mobility patterns and the population of interest's needs in the longer term.

To note, while these are presented as five distinct elements, each has an impact and can be impacted by another. This interconnectedness illustrates the need for an integrated approach to supporting the population of interest, as well as the layered vulnerabilities and risks seasonal migrants in the Sahel – as the population at large – are exposed to.

Figure 10: Key determinants affecting the longer term impact of COVID-19 on environmental seasonal migrants in the Sahel



1- Climate change evolution and its impacts on livelihood sources at origin

For most respondents, already at the time of data collection, **agriculture-based livelihood sources** did not yield sufficient outputs to meet the household's needs. As slow-onset climate change is predicted to continue and further exacerbate intra- and inter-seasonal climate variability, as well as sudden shocks, it is likely that livelihood sources at origin will gradually erode further.

2- Mobility restrictions

The most immediate impact of COVID-19 in the Sahel region has been the **limitation of movement**, in particular movement across borders. To what extent internal and regional movement will be restricted in the longer term, thereby limiting habitual migration patterns, will remain a critical element to monitor when assessing the impact of the virus on local populations in the longer term. While restrictions on internal movement were lifted within few months of the virus' surge, at the time of writing of the report (January 2021), restrictions on cross-border movement were still in place. If this trend continues, it is likely that those engaged in cross-border migration will be more severely impacted than those migrating within a country's borders.

3- Economic impact of the global pandemic in areas of origin and destination

In areas of origin, as COVID-19 is set to impact local and global economies, **demand for produce** – beyond subsistence production – will further be jeopardised, meaning that populations in the region may face both increasingly limited livelihood sources at origin, as well as reduced demand for produce. This is likely to lead to more distress migration, with people needing to migrate out of necessity to meet basic needs away from home.

In areas of destination, a critical element to monitor will be the **demand for migrant labour**. While some key informants reported that migrants in cities in particular tend to be flexible in adapting to changing demands for labour (be that moving from working in a restaurant to working as a street vendor), those engaged in agricultural

⁹¹ Beyond October 2021.

work may face a decreased demand for their labour. In this context, it is possible that **seasonal migration patterns may increasingly change from rural-to-rural to rural-to-urban**, contributing to the increasing urbanisation the region – and continent as a whole – has faced in recent years.

4- Environmental seasonal migrants' ability to cope with, and respond to, shock

Previous research (see section 1) suggests that populations in the Sahel region are poorly equipped to deal with the impact of climate change in the longer term. The coping strategies employed by respondents to this study to respond to the short- and mid-term impacts of COVID-19 in the region tend to confirm the view that **ability to respond to and deal with shocks in the region (be they climate or COVID-19 related) is low**: most reported coping strategies were borrowing money and spending savings, reported by one third of respondents each. Both strategies have longer-term negative impacts for households, rendering the situation concerning now, but possibly even worse so in the future.

Particularly concerning in this view are populations unable to move, the **involuntary immobile**, who, among respondents to this study, were identified as most likely to be employing the most severe coping strategies, at the highest rates.

5- Wider threat multipliers in the region

As outlined in the context section of this report, the Sahelian population faces a variety of threats, beyond climate change, food insecurity and poverty. The role and evolution of conflict in the region – and its knock-on effects on other risk factors- requires particular mention here. The Sahel has faced a serious deterioration of violence over the course of 2020: as of September 2020, a total of 3,530,175 people were displaced throughout the Central Sahel, according to the UNHCR,⁹² compared to 434,000 in 2019.⁹³ With high population movements, competition for scarce resources can increase, which in turn can fuel further violence and displacement. Further, political instability – a threat in its own right – can contribute to the exacerbation of climate change-related risks, as weak governments may lack the capacity to put in place anticipatory measures to mitigate the impacts of climate change, as well as provide for a much needed safety net for people in need.

Overall, it seems that, already before the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, most communities had to engage in a precarious balancing act to make ends meet between increasingly limited yields in agriculture in the area of origin and seasonal migration in the region. COVID-19 has tipped this fine balance over.

⁹² UNHCR (11 November 2020). [UNHCR Sahel Crisis Response – Progress report January – September 2020](#).

⁹³ UN OCHA, [Humanitarian crisis in the Sahel](#), May 2019. Displacement grew particularly rapidly in Burkina Faso, from 87,000 in January 2019 to 1,050,000 in November 2020, source: UNHCR (10 November 2020) [Operational portal refugee situations: Burkina Faso](#).

CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to increase understanding of the impact of COVID-19 on environmental migration in the Sahel, with a particular focus on Niger and Burkina Faso. As the Sahel has long been and remains among the world's regions most affected by climate change, migration is a traditional hallmark of the Sahelian population. While patterns and motivations of environmental migration in the region are varied, most center around accessing additional livelihoods sources to complement agriculture-based revenues in areas of origin, which have become largely insufficient to meet people's needs, due to the unpredictable climate.

The present study, conducted by REACH, in partnership with the Start Network as part of its Migration Emergency Response Fund (MERF), drew on 1) an extensive secondary data review, 2) the knowledge of migration experts and humanitarian and development practitioners present in the region, and, most importantly 3) interviews with 135 environmental migrants in Burkina Faso and Niger. To compare impacts between different migration patterns, three different types of population groups were included in the study: 1) internal rural-to-urban migrants in Niger, 2) the cross-border rural-to-urban migration of Nigerians to Niger, and 3) cross-border rural-to-rural migration from Burkina Faso to Côte d'Ivoire. The study was conducted between September and December 2020. Primary data collection took place in the Sahel in November 2020.

Key findings

Already in precarious conditions before, COVID-19 appears to have pushed environmental migrants to the brink

Overall, the study found that, already prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, seasonal environmental migrants' livelihoods were based on a fine balance between ever increasing unpredictable harvest yields and seasonal migration patterns to complement otherwise insufficient agricultural outputs. Already before the virus outbreak, seasonal migration patterns were more akin to distress migration – migration done out of necessity to meet the most basic needs – as opposed to supplementing livelihoods at origin. As a result, the disruption of habitual migration patterns appears to have had an immediate impact on environmental migrants' lives. In the short-term, a change in migration plans seemed to have translated into less income and increased expenditures. Given the limited security cushion respondents had to fall back on, spending of savings and taking on debt were the most commonly reported coping strategies to deal with this disruption, indicative of an eroded resilience to future shocks.

COVID-19 and ensuing mobility restrictions seem to have pushed environmental migrants to the brink. In the short-term all environmental migration patterns studied were impacted by the restrictions on movement (albeit in different ways), however, interviewed migrants were generally still able to cope and make ends meet somehow. In the mid-term, however, the extent of a possible continuation of movement restrictions and economic downturn anticipated will be key to determine whether environmental migrants will still be able to cope or not. If border restrictions are to continue, it is anticipated that, in the mid- and longer-term, those who traditionally engaged in cross-border migration will be hit the hardest. At the same time, as all respondents had to engage in negative coping strategies to deal with the initial shock, all will have this additional vulnerability to contend with in the coming year, including paying back debts, refurbishing savings, and making do with reduced harvests. Finally, the economic impact of the virus in the region is still to be fully felt. When it is, it is likely that migrants across the board will be impacted, whether they rely on internal or cross-border migration.

Increased need to migrate, but less ability to do so

Agriculture-based livelihoods – at present still the predominant livelihoods source at origin for most environmental migrants – are expected to continue to be negatively affected by climate change. With this, the need to move will, if anything, further increase. However, **while the need to migrate will continue to rise and resources to meet basic needs will diminish, the ability to migrate might decrease as migration requires resources to do so.** As a result, migration patterns may become more longer-term, as households separate for longer periods of time, keeping some members at home to look after the fields, with others staying in destination areas – likely cities – for more extended periods of time. **This will likely contribute to the already ongoing urbanisation across the region, adding to the number of urban poor in Sahelian cities and increase pressure on urban services and infrastructures.**

On the other end of the spectrum, it is likely that the number of people living in extremely vulnerable conditions in climate-prone areas, unable to move, will increase. Those who will have depleted their resources to migrate, or households for whom migration will have become too risky to attempt,⁹⁴ will likely stay in their areas of origin and become reliant on agricultural outputs, which already at present are largely insufficient. This will put large populations at the risk of chronic food insecurity and unable to respond to shock – both unable to meet most basic needs at home, and subsequently, to move away in search of opportunities elsewhere.

Implications for humanitarian programming and policy in the region

Migration, urbanisation and climate change are likely to be among the defining issues of the 21st century. In few places is this so apparent as it is in the Sahel. How the links between these phenomena are likely to play out, will for a large part depend on national and international government responses. In the case of Sahelian populations, migration has been an important component in a toolbox of resilience strategies developed to respond to environmental shocks over centuries. To support such strategies should hence be integral to future action in the region. For humanitarian programming and policy, this means putting the capabilities of people at the centre of all action, as already done in much resilience programming in the region.

Finally, while recent events have emphasized the emergence of COVID-19 and its impact on the fragility of environmental migrants' livelihoods in the Sahel, the more complex, underlying drivers of this fragility will continue to impact the situation in the background. The virus in and of itself is a threat accelerator, rather than a unique occurrence. This means that COVID-19 may have been accelerating and bringing up and front challenges, but has not created new ones which can be overcome, should the virus be. As such, the impact of COVID-19 on environmental migrants presented in this study, and the impacts anticipated to come in the mid- and longer-term, should serve as an alarming future scenario.

Recommendations

The interconnectedness of the challenges faced by populations in the Sahel call for a comprehensive response that extends beyond the scope of the present study. With regard to environmental migration, the short-, mid- and longer term impacts of COVID-19 and how to address these, the following general points can be made:

1. Support population resilience

COVID-19, as any abrupt, unexpected crisis, has put into focus the centrality of resilience, and people's ability to face and cope with unexpected shocks. Given the complexity of interlinked challenges in the Sahel, it is likely that there are few areas in the world where people are so used to responding to unexpected shocks. Strengthening this resilience, as challenges are likely to continue in the mid-term, with a new one – COVID-19, and the potential of future pandemics – having been added, should be central to humanitarian and policy programming in the region. This can be done by building on the already significant body of resilience programming in the region, taking into account the conflict and security context in the region and how this interplays with resource scarcity, populations' ability to cope with shock and climate change.

2. Reframe mobility as a livelihoods strategy, rather than a problem

An important part of increasing the local population's resilience will be to reframe mobility as a livelihoods strategy, which forms an integral part of people's livelihoods sources, and should be facilitated. The (temporary) movement restrictions in response to COVID-19 in the region have illuminated how the disruption of mobility patterns can have immediate negative, and potentially long-term, impacts on the populations affected. The policy discourse on migration as a problem, which could spur further restrictions on mobility, should therefore be questioned, as, beside problematising a phenomenon that has always been an integral part of the human experience, the (unintended) negative consequences can be severe.

3. Look out for the involuntary immobile

A clear finding emerging from this study is the need to identify and support populations living in climate vulnerable areas of origin and who do not have the capacity to migrate. The so-called 'involuntary immobile', those who would like to migrate, but are unable to do so – or those for whom sending a household member to migrate would present

⁹⁴ As, if they tried and failed, the household would be unable to absorb the shock.

such a risk (if the person fails) that they decide not to – are frequently among the most vulnerable, yet, under common assumptions, are not regularly identified as such. Unlike households that can rely on migrating members, their ability to distribute risk across livelihoods sources is more limited, as they are geographically confined to their area of origin. In places where the primary source of livelihoods is agriculture, but which face significant climate vulnerability, this means that populations are both highly exposed to shocks, but have an extremely limited ability to cope and respond to the shock.

ANNEXES

Annex 1: Methodology

The present section outlines the methodology that was used to carry out this study. It starts with an overview of the analytical framework applied, definitions and overall framing of the research questions. Then, it proceeds with a detailed overview of the assessment's methodology, including an overview of secondary and primary data collection methods and potential limitations.

Analytical framework

The study aimed to increase understanding of the interlinkages between migration, climate change and COVID-19 in the Sahel, with the aim to improve Start Network member agencies and the donor community's ability to respond to this crisis.

Research questions

The following research questions were used to guide the study:

5. How are migration, climate change and COVID-19 in the Sahel linked?
6. How does the emergence of COVID-19 in the region impact in the short-term (March - September 2020):
 - a. The livelihoods and overall situation of environmental migrants in the destination and families back home?
 - b. Mobility⁹⁵ patterns?
7. What is the expected impact of COVID-19 in the mid-term (October 2020 – October 2021) and longer term (after October 2021) on:
 - a. The livelihoods and overall situation of environmental migrants in the destination and families back home?
 - b. Mobility patterns?
8. What are the findings' implications for:
 - a. Programming
 - b. Policy making

Analytical approach

The following key definitions and theoretical concepts form the basis of the design of the methodology and conceptualization of research questions:

Key definitions

Migration

"The movement of a person or a group of persons, either across an international border, or within a State. It is a population movement, encompassing any kind of movement of people, whatever its length, composition and causes; it includes migration of refugees, displaced persons, economic migrants, and persons moving for other purposes, including family reunification." Source: IOM, 2011, Glossary on Migration, 2nd Edition. *International Migration Law* No. 25, IOM, Geneva. Available at <http://publications.iom.int/>

Climate change

"The change of climate which is attributed directly or indirectly to human activity that alters the composition of the global atmosphere and which is in addition to natural climate variability observed over comparable time periods." Source: Foresight. (2011). *Migration and Global Environmental Change: Future Challenges and Opportunities*. Final Project Report. The Government Office for Science, London. Available from

⁹⁵ The term 'mobility' is used in this instance to account for the possibility of 'immobility', a situation where an individual cannot or does not move, because they either do not have the means or capacity to do so. We use this wider term to acknowledge the important reality of 'trapped populations in environmental migration trends, i.e. people who cannot move despite the urgent climate-induced need to do so. For more information, please see: Flavell, A. et al for IOM/GMDAC, [Migration, environment and climate change: Literature review](#), 2020.

www.gov.uk/government/publications/migration-and-global-environmental-change-future-challenges-and-opportunities

Environmental migrant:

Environmental migrants are persons or groups of persons who, for compelling reasons of sudden or progressive changes in the environment that adversely affect their lives or living conditions, are obliged to leave their homes or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, and who move either within their country or abroad. Source: IOM, [Migration and the Environment. Discussion Note: MC/INF/288](#), prepared for the Ninety-fourth Session of the IOM Council, 27–30 November 2007, Geneva.

Please note the full list of definitions used in this study can be accessed in Annex 3: Key definitions.

Delineating impact

Assessing the impact of COVID-19 on access to livelihoods and overall living situation

To determine the impact of COVID-19 on environmental migrants' access to livelihoods – and ask the right questions, a thorough secondary data review (SDR) was conducted on the main livelihoods in the region and the links between climate change and such livelihoods. Likely impacts resulting from COVID-19 and related movement restrictions were jointly developed in consultation with field teams in Burkina Faso and Mali, who have a particular knowledge of the situation and acted as informal key informants. On this basis, a first version of likely impacts was developed, which was then further fine-tuned during a group consultation with NGO practitioners working in the countries of intervention, during the second part of phase one of the methodology (see methodology section for further information). Impacts anticipated included:

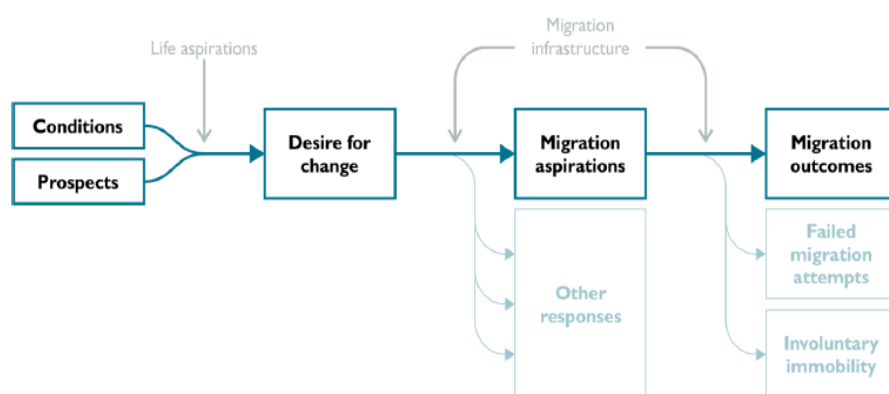
- Primary economic impacts (loss of livelihoods source, income, rise in expenditures)
- Primary impacts on the migrant' living situation (discrimination, access to health services)
- Secondary impacts on household's needs (reducing food intake, reducing spending on basic needs, begging)
- Secondary impacts on household's living situation (access to school for school-aged children)

Assessing the impact of COVID-19 in mobility patterns and migration decision making

To assess the impact of COVID-19 on mobility patterns, two courses of action were developed:

- 1- The impact of COVID-19 and government restrictions implemented in the first six months of the emergence of the virus was anticipated through a review of recent news items, discussions with field teams and the consultation with NGO practitioners (see above). These included:
 - a. Unexpected changes to intended migration pattern
 - i. Journey longer/shorter than expected
 - ii. Delays in departure and/or return
 - iii. Increased costs for transport/ accommodation/ covering basic needs
 - iv. Inability to migrate
 - b. Unexpected challenges on the journey
 - i. Less work than anticipated
 - ii. Less transport options available
 - iii. More discrimination by host community
- 2- The impact of COVID-19 on mid-term and longer term environmental migrants' decision-making was determined based on migration scholar Carling's aspirations and capabilities framework. According this framework (see figure 10), migration arises from a combination of conditions and prospects in the area of origin, the desire to change, the 'migration infrastructure' facilitating or hindering movement, which shape migration aspirations, which, finally lead to migration outcomes (which can lead to migration or the decision not to migrate).

Figure 11: Analytical model on migration arises (Carling & Talleraas, 2016)



Source: Carling, Jørgen & Cathrine Talleraas (2016) *Root Causes and Drivers of Migration: Implications for Humanitarian Efforts and Development Cooperation*, PRIO Paper. Oslo: Peace Research Institute Oslo.

Factors included in model:

- **Conditions** = root causes, systemic inequalities, corruption etc
- **Prospects** = likelihood of conditions changing in the foreseeable future (ie. Leading to feeling of 'no hope' / inescapable stagnation)
- **Life aspirations** = Whether or not certain conditions and prospects create a desire for change depends on peoples' *life aspirations*. In simple terms, if people are poor, and believe they are likely to remain poor, it is decisive whether or not they can imagine, and actively seek, a better life.
- **Desire for change** = individual wanting to bring about an improvement to their currently expected future. When people develop a desire for change in their lives, directing this desire towards migration is only one possibility
- **Migration aspirations** = Conditions, prospects, and aspirations can combine to produce a desire for change—be it a matter of seeking security in the short term, or a higher standard of living in the long term. Such desires can produce the desire to improve one's situation through migration (= *migration aspirations*).
- **Migration infrastructure** = migration infrastructure, ie. smugglers, diaspora, technology, affects migration processes in two ways. First, it affects how people perceive the possibility of migration, compared to other responses, and whether or not they develop migration aspirations. Second, migration infrastructure affects whether or not such aspirations are realized.
- **Migration outcomes** = For people who have developed migration aspirations, there are essentially three outcomes: (1) succeed in migrating (≠ migration is a success for the individual); (2) migration fails (= potential burden for migrants family and individual); (3) involuntary immobility (want to move, but doesn't have the resources to, can lead to severe humanitarian needs, eg. Stuck in Libya/ Niger). Possibilities for converting migration aspirations into actual migration depend on migration regulations, access to information, availability of commercial migrations services, and other dimensions of migration infrastructure.

COVID-19 and related impacts in the area of origin were included in the 'conditions' respondents faced in the area of origin, as was climate change. Mobility restrictions were included in the analytical framework as falling under the 'migration infrastructure'. In preparation of the data analysis plan and environmental migrants' questionnaires, this framework was hence populated with relevant elements, and subsequently translated in the final questionnaire to respondents.

Detailed methodological approach

The study employed a mixed methods approach, based on a thorough SDR and primary data collection, including key informant interviews (KIIs) with migration and climate experts, group consultations with practitioners in the field, KIIs with non-governmental organisation (NGO) and government actors responding to environmental migration and individual interviews (IIs) with migrants. Different data collection methods were used for each research question (RQ), mirroring differing levels of information gaps, determined during the inception phase of the project. Data collection methods per research question (RQ) are outlined in table 3 below.

Table 3: Research questions by data collection method

Research questions	Data collection method				
	SDR	Expert KIIs	Practitioner group consultations ⁹⁶	Practitioner KIIs ⁹⁷	Migrant IIs ⁹⁸
1. How are migration, climate change and COVID-19 in the Sahel linked?	X	X			
2. How does the emergence of COVID-19 in the region impact in the short term (March - September 2020): a. The livelihoods and overall situation of environmental migrants in the destination and families back home? b. Mobility patterns?			X	X	X
3. What is the expected impact of COVID-19 in the mid-term (October 2020 – October 2021) and longer term (after October 2021) on: a. The livelihoods and overall situation of environmental migrants in the destination and families back home? b. Mobility patterns?			X	X	X
4. What are the implications for (a) policy and (b) programming?		X	X		

Geographical scope

The overall geographical scope of the present study was the Sahel, defined in the present context as including the following countries: Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali and Niger.

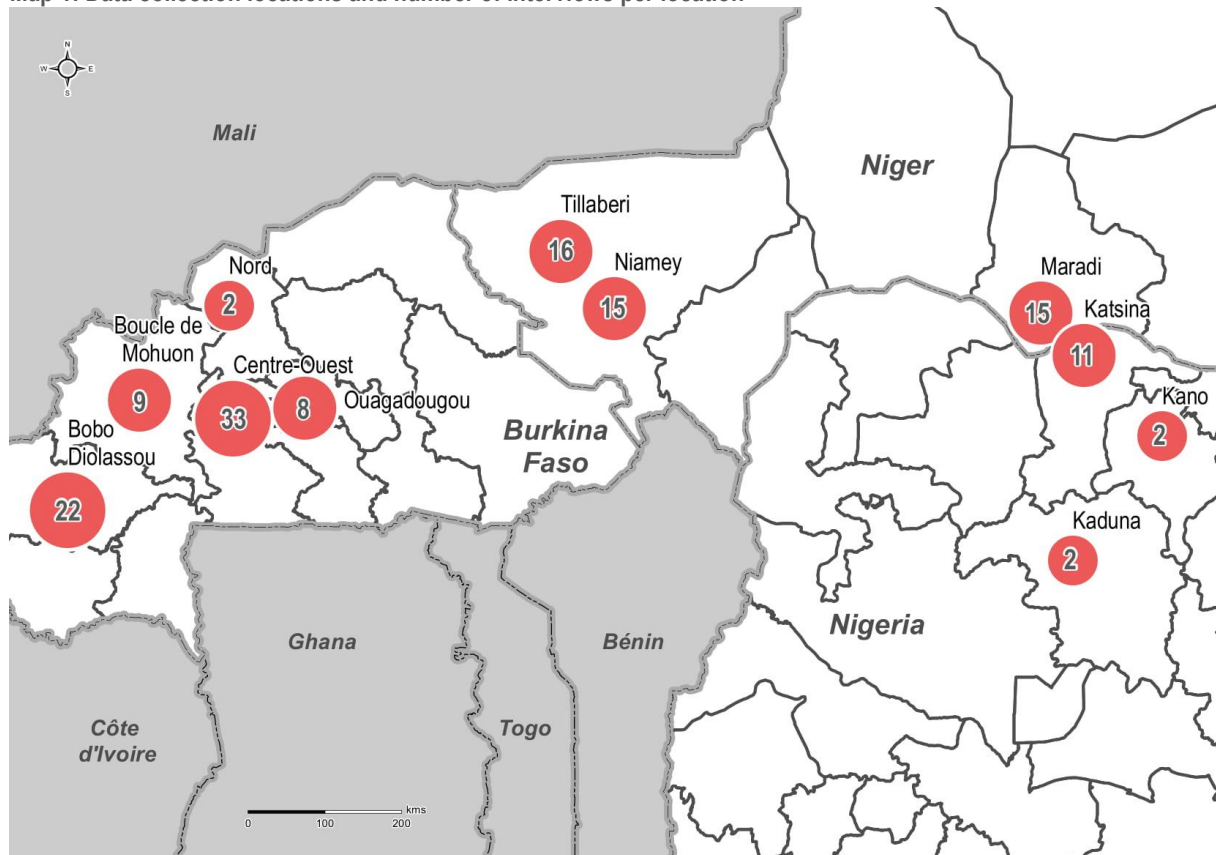
From the onset of the study, it was determined that primary data collection would only take place in two countries, selected purposively based on the presence of migration patterns fitting the definition of 'environmental migration' and representing different types of migration, including internal, cross-border, seasonal, rural-to-rural and rural to urban migration. The selection was based on a preliminary SDR and several discussions with REACH field teams in the countries under study, to draw on local teams' knowledge and expertise of migration patterns and population groups affected by the emergence of COVID-19. Data collection took place in Niger and Burkina Faso. In Niger, in-person primary data collection took place in Niamey and Maradi. In Burkina Faso, in-person data collection took place in Ouagadougou and Bobo Dioulasso. Remote data collection further took place with respondents based in the regions of Centre-Ouest, Boucle du Mouhoun and Nord in Burkina Faso, in the region of Tillaberi in Niger and the regions of Kaduna, Kano and Katsina in Nigeria.

⁹⁶ Sahel/ regional level.

⁹⁷ Country-level.

⁹⁸ Country-level.

Map 1: Data collection locations and number of interviews per location



Population of interest

The population of interest comprised environmental migrants originating from rural areas in Burkina Faso and Niger, who predominantly rely on agriculture as main livelihood source in the area of origin, and whose traditional migration patterns fell into the period of the first outbreak of the pandemic in March / April 2020.

To gauge the differential decision-making on migration and impact of COVID-19 on our population of interest, we conducted data collection in two sets of locations: first, in the population of interest's destination areas, the areas they would habitually migrate to, or, where migration to those locations was limited due to COVID-19 measures implemented (notably in the case of Burkinabé migrants to Côte d'Ivoire in transit locations, known to host this population, as they wait to reach their intended destination). The second set of locations were the population of interest's areas of origin.

By interviewing people both in origin and destination areas, the study aimed to capture the different ways in which environmental (would-be) migrants have been impacted by COVID-19, such as: (1) not being able to leave the rural area for the destination; (2) not wanting to leave the rural area; (3) not being able to leave the destination to return to the area of origin; (4) not wanting to leave the destination for the area of origin, due to the emergence of COVID-19. In this context, two distinct respondent groups were purposively sampled:

- 1- Environmental migrants, who emigrated from their area of origin between January and September 2020 for work
- 2- Environmental migrants, who habitually migrate between January and September 2020, but, in the face of COVID-19, decided to stay put in their areas of origin since March 2020

The study focused on three distinct case studies, exploring the impact of COVID-19 on three distinct population groups and migration patterns, namely:

Table 4: Overview of case study, population groups and habitual migration patterns

	Origin/destination	Location	Internal/cross-border	Rural/urban	Timeline	Predominant livelihood source
Case study 1: internal Nigerien migration	Origin	Villages in Tillaberi region	internal	rural	Oct/Nov to May	Agriculture
	Destination	Niamey city		urban		Casual labour, housework
Case study 2: cross-border rural-urban Nigerian migration	Origin	North-east Nigeria: Katsina, Kaduna, Kano	cross-border	rural	February - May; secondary: October - January	Agriculture
	Destination	Maradi city		urban		Casual labour
Case study 3: cross-border rural- rural Burkinabe migration	Origin	Villages in Western Burkina Faso ⁹⁹	cross-border	rural	Nov-March/April	Agriculture
	Destination	Western Côte d'Ivoire ¹⁰⁰		rural		Agriculture

For a more detailed description of each population group, please consult annex 2 below.

Data collection methods

In line with the four RQs, the study was conducted in three consecutive phases, with each step feeding into the development of the subsequent phase and using distinct data collection methods:

Phase 1: Secondary data review, supplemented by a preliminary round of expert KIIs and group consultations

To respond to RQ 1 and guide the development of primary data collection tools, SDR and KIIs with experts, as well as one set of group consultations with field-based NGO practitioners were used to build a set of hypotheses on the links between COVID-19, climate change and migration and future developments. These formed the basis for refinement during phase 2 (field level data collection) and were tested during phase 3 (analysis).

2.3. SDR

SDR was used to (1) understand the context and current state of knowledge and, as such, as base to respond to RQ 1; (2) inform research design, in terms of RQ development, information gaps, field level data collection location and (3) jointly with KIIs with migration and climate experts, to develop scenario hypotheses to be tested during primary data collection and respond to RQ 3. It also served to outline key definitions used in the study.

2.4. Group consultations with field based INGO practitioners

To capture the field-level reality of the links between the study topics and determine a first set of hypotheses of the links between migration, climate change and COVID-19 in the Sahel, one group consultation was organised with Start Network NGO practitioners working on climate and migration in the Sahel. This consultation, bringing together a total of six participants from four Sahelian countries and four different agencies, was conducted remotely via a web-based application. Participants were selected purposively based on (1) working for a Start Network member NGO, (2) working at programme level in humanitarian / development response to migration broadly defined and (3)

⁹⁹ : Centre-Nord, Centre-Ouest, Boucle du Mouhoun, Nord, Plateau Central.

¹⁰⁰ Meagui, Soubre, San Pedro, Sassandra, Fresco, Grand Iahou, Iakota, Divo, Gagnoa, Duekoue, Guiglo, Man, Blolequin, Danane Daloa, Issia, Vavoua

being physically based in the Sahel. The webinar consultation was co-hosted by the Start Network to ensure institutional buy-in and carried out in French, the preferred language of participants.

2.5. KIIs with migration and climate experts

During the first phase of the study, three KIIs with migration and climate experts were conducted to provide additional insights into the theoretical and practical links between climate, migration and COVID-19 (RQ 1) and to guide the development of hypothesis of future developments (RQ 3). KIIs were selected purposively during the SDR, among the authors of the most relevant literature on the topic. Tools were semi-structured, including some close ended and more open ended questions, with interviews conducted remotely via a web-based application.

Phase 2: Primary data collection with environmental migrants in areas of origin and destination

Primary data collection with migrants in areas of origin and destination and KIIs with NGO and government actors responding to environmental migration in the field study locations were conducted to respond to RQ 2. This second phase also served to capture field-level perspectives on hypotheses developed in phase 1 in relation to RQ 3 to feed into subsequent analysis in phase 3.

2.1. Individual interviews (IIs) with environmental migrants in areas of origin and destination

Data collection in Burkina Faso and Niger took place between 9 and 16 November 2020. A total of 135 interviews with migrants were conducted, of which 74 in Burkina Faso and 61 in Niger. For each case study, a minimum of half of interviews were conducted in the area of destination, with the other half conducted in the area of origin.

For each case study, the following number of IIs was conducted:

Table 5: Number of IIs by case study and data collection location (origin/destination)

	Data collection location	# of IIs	Total
Case study 1: Internal Nigerien migration	origin	16	31
	destination	15	
Case study 2: cross-border rural-urban Nigerian migration	origin	15	30
	destination	15	
Case study 3: cross-border rural- rural Burkinabe migration	origin	44	74
	destination	30	

Respondents in destination areas were sampled purposively based on discussions with field teams, drawing on their expert knowledge of where the population group could be found in the location of interest. Respondents were migrants who originated from rural areas, previously engaged in agricultural labour and who migrated to where the interviews were conducted, for work. In line with the definition of environmental migration outlined above, respondents were asked for the reason they moved to the destination, to ensure they fit the criteria of the population of interest – noting that there is rarely a unilateral causal relationship between slow-onset climate change and population movements.

Access to **respondents in areas of origin** was facilitated by the first set of respondents, who, at the end of each interview, were asked if they were willing to introduce the field team to a member of the population of interest in the area of origin and facilitate contact accordingly. The personal referral was important to ensure trust between the remote respondent and the enumerator. This second set of interviews was conducted remotely via phone.

Tools were semi-structured interviews and conducted over KOBO.

2.2. KIIs with with NGO and government actors responding to climate-related migration in the field study locations

A total of eight KIIs were conducted across the two countries with practitioners and government stakeholders involved in the response to environmental migration, four in Burkina Faso and Niger respectively. The aim of these KIIs was to tap into local humanitarian / development response perspectives on the main challenges faced by the population group and to triangulate and further contextualize findings. KIIs were purposively selected based on their organization conducting activities aiming to support the population of interest or, in the case of government stakeholders, departments working specifically on climate-related migration. KIIs were conducted either remotely or in-person, depending on the KII's availability and personal preference.

Phase 3: Analysis of primary data, triangulation and validation of findings

During phase 3, data gathered during phases 1 and 2 was aggregated and analysed with a view to respond to RQs 3 and 4. Several debriefs were conducted with field teams and field managers to triangulate findings and validate assumptions. Policy and programming implications resulting from RQs 1 to 3 were drawn out from a consolidated analysis of all data collected, in response to RQ 4.

Analysis

Disaggregation among migrant respondents was sought with country analysis teams to reflect the broad population of interest's breakdown. Considering the lack of data on environmental migrants' age and gender breakdowns, the vast majority of respondents were young adults, in line with the general profile of migrants in the region.¹⁰¹ No children were interviewed as part of this assessment. KIIs were conducted via Kobo, with data analysed on excel (pivot tables for multi select questions, manual coding of common and diverging themes for open ended questions) and SPSS. KIIs were conducted on paper based on question routes, with responses later transcribed on Word. KII data was analysed using qualitative data analysis software Atlas Ti, through coding of coming and diverging themes. A data saturation and analysis grid was also used for KII datasets. For more information, please refer to IMPACT's [Qualitative Analysis Minimum Standards Checklist](#).

Challenges and Limitations

- **Field teams faced some challenges in applying the definition of 'environmental migrants' to the selection of the population of interest/ respondents.** This is because (as outlined in the first part of the main findings section), migration drivers are always multi-varied and interlinked, which is why respondents will rarely cite slow-onset climate change as the primary motivation for their seasonal migration. To facilitate the selection of respondents, they were hence selected as originating from areas of origin known to face significant impacts of climate change, with the respondent's household primarily relying on agriculture as the main livelihood source at origin.
- **Seasonal migration patterns in the Sahel are very diverse and rooted (in many cases) in long standing traditions going beyond most recent changes in climate.** The three case studies presented here shall therefore be seen as exemplary of the variety of seasonal migration patterns in the region, but by no means as providing an exhaustive picture of the impact of COVID-19 on seasonal migration in the Sahel region.
- This study concerns itself with seasonal migration patterns in response to slow-onset climate change in the Sahel. **While we know that sudden-onset climate related occurrences also lead to significant movements in the region, this type of mobility was not the focus of this report and is such not represented here.**
- **More male environmental migrants were interviewed in this study than female environmental migrants.** While this mirrors the set-up of migration flows in the region, it does mean that the perspective of female respondents is underrepresented. Where possible, experiences of female respondents in particular were highlighted throughout the report, with quotes originating from women prioritised where possible.

¹⁰¹ IOM DTM, [West and Central Africa](#), last accessed 09 December 2020.

Annex 2: Environmental migrants interviewed' personal profiles

The vast majority of respondents were male (126 out of 135), with a majority being the head of household or son (or daughter) of the household (81 and 29 respectively). Areas of origin mirrored the areas of origin identified as primary hotspots for environmental migration the countries of the study, as respondents were purposively sampled on this basis. The most frequent highest level of education achieved was none (41), followed by primary education (40).

Figure 12: Respondents' position within the household

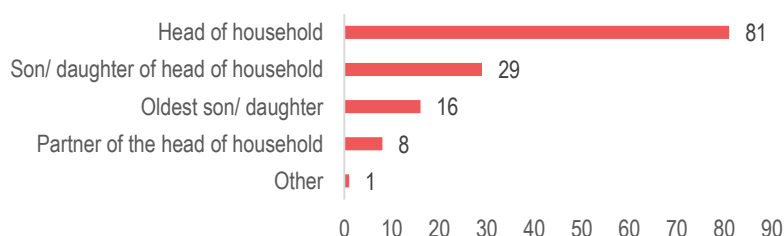
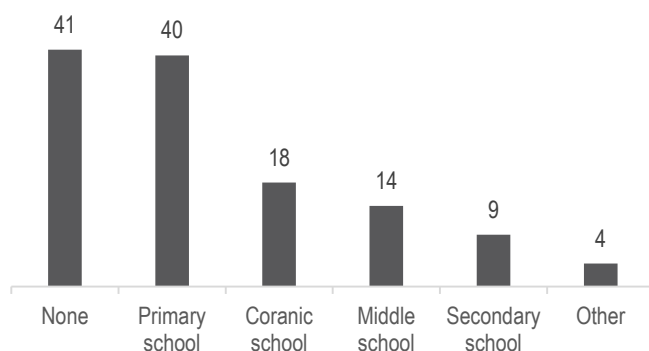


Figure 13: Highest level of education completed



Respondents' primary professions in areas of origin and destination matched traditional migration patterns with regard to each population group. Nigerien internal migrants migrating seasonally to the city were engaged in agricultural work at home, while working in manual labour and other small jobs in the city. Burkinabé respondents engaged in rural-to-rural migration towards Côte d'Ivoire were mostly working in agriculture at both origin and destination. Nigerian respondents, whose primary livelihoods base at origin was also agricultural work engaged in manual labour and other small jobs in their destination, the city of Maradi, Niger.

Figure 14: Respondents' employment by population group and location

Population groups	Origin	#	Destination	#
Nigerien rural-urban internal migrants	1. Agricultural worker	27	Manual labour	18
	2. Animal breeder	2	Merchant	8
	3. Unemployed	1	Other	3
	4. Other	1	Private sector employee	2
Burkinabé rural-rural cross-border migrants	1. Agricultural worker	57	Agricultural worker	45
	2. Merchant	11	Manual labour	19
	3. Manual labour	4	Merchant	5
	4. Private sector employee	1	Driver	5
	5. Unemployed	1		
Nigerian rural-urban cross-border migrants	1. Agricultural worker	27	Manual labour	27
	2. Manual labour	2	Other	2
	3. Animal breeder	1	Merchant	2

Annex 3: Key definitions

This study adopts the following key definitions:

Climate change

“The change of climate which is attributed directly or indirectly to human activity that alters the composition of the global atmosphere and which is in addition to natural climate variability observed over comparable time periods.” Source: Foresight. (2011). *Migration and Global Environmental Change: Future Challenges and Opportunities*. Final Project Report. The Government Office for Science, London. Available from www.gov.uk/government/publications/migration-and-global-environmental-change/future-challenges-and-opportunities

Environmental change

“comprises changes in the physical and biogeochemical (chemical, geological, and biological) environment, over a large scale, either caused naturally or influenced by human activities” Source: Foresight. (2011). *Migration and Global Environmental Change: Future Challenges and Opportunities*. Final Project Report. The Government Office for Science, London. Available from www.gov.uk/government/publications/migration-and-global-environmental-change/future-challenges-and-opportunities

Environmental migrant:

Environmental migrants are persons or groups of persons who, for compelling reasons of sudden or progressive changes in the environment that adversely affect their lives or living conditions, are obliged to leave their homes or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, and who move either within their country or abroad. Source: IOM, [Migration and the Environment. Discussion Note: MC/INF/288](#), prepared for the Ninety-fourth Session of the IOM Council, 27–30 November 2007, Geneva.

Involuntary immobility

Involuntary immobility describes the situation of individuals who have an aspiration to migrate but not the ability to do so. For instance, many prospective migrants in low-income countries have neither the possibilities of legally obtaining a visa, nor the financial means to migrate by means of migrant smugglers. The concept is an integral part of the aspiration/ability model of migration.¹⁰² It can apply to people who seek to escape insecurity or conflict – but are unable to do so – as well as to people who want to migrate for other reasons. Source: Carling, J. (2019) *Key concepts in the migration–development nexus*, MIGNEX Handbook Chapter 2 (v2). Oslo: Peace Research Institute Oslo. Available at www.mignex.org/d021.

Migrant

International Organisation for Migration’s (IOM) definition: IOM defines a migrant as any person who is moving or has moved across an international border or within a State away from his/her habitual place of residence, regardless of (1) the person’s legal status; (2) whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary; (3) what the causes for the movement are; or (4) what the length of the stay is. Source: www.iom.int/who-is-a-migrant. Migration is defined accordingly, to include all types of movement, including within countries and across borders, with no distinction made as to the reason and temporality of movement.

Migration

“The movement of a person or a group of persons, either across an international border, or within a State. It is a population movement, encompassing any kind of movement of people, whatever its length, composition and causes; it includes migration of refugees, displaced persons, economic migrants, and persons moving for other purposes, including family reunification.” Source: IOM, 2011, *Glossary on Migration*, 2nd Edition. *International Migration Law* No. 25, IOM, Geneva. Available at <http://publications.iom.int/>

¹⁰² Carling, J. (2002) 'Migration in the age of involuntary immobility: Theoretical reflections and Cape Verdean experiences.' *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 28(1):5-42.

Mobility

The term 'mobility' is used in this instance to account for the possibility of 'immobility', a situation where an individual cannot or does not move, because they either do not have the means or capacity to do so. We use this wider term to acknowledge the important reality of 'trapped populations' in environmental migration trends, i.e. people who cannot move despite the urgent climate-induced need to do so. For more information, please see: Flavell, A. et al for IOM/GMDAC, [Migration, environment and climate change: Literature review](#), 2020.

Vulnerability

"The propensity or predisposition to be adversely affected. Vulnerability encompasses a variety of concepts including sensitivity or susceptibility to harm and lack of capacity to cope and adapt." (IPCC, 2014b: 28)

Resilience

"The ability of a system and its component parts to anticipate, absorb, accommodate, or recover from the effects of a hazardous event in a timely and efficient manner, including through ensuring the preservation, restoration, or improvement of its essential basic structures, identity and functions, while also maintaining the capacity for adaptation, learning and transformation." (IPCC, 2014b: 23; Arctic Council, 2013: viii)
Resilience thus defined can be applied to both natural and human systems. This review is primarily concerned with the resilience of communities, households and individuals to hazards.

Coping capacity

"The ability of people, institutions, organizations, and systems, using available skills, values, beliefs, resources, and opportunities, to address, manage, and overcome adverse conditions in the short to medium term" (IPCC, 2013:8).