



# Exploring migrants' trust in humanitarian organisations

March 2021

Part of the **SSS II** programme





## What is IMREF?

This report was written by IMREF. IMREF is the Independent Monitoring, Rapid Research and Evidence Facility of the SSS Phase II programme commissioned by the Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office (FCDO). It is delivered by a consortium led by Integrity Global, which includes Seefar, IMPACT Initiatives, and the Danube University Krems.

IMREF aims to provide programme stakeholders with a better understanding of results, to improve accountability through monitoring and verification activities, and to identify gaps and areas where partners could strengthen delivery. IMREF will also facilitate adaptation and learning in SSS II by delivering and using evidence from research to inform programmatic and potentially policy decisions that support vulnerable people in mixed-migration flows.

## Safety, Support and Solutions Phase 2 (SSS II)

The FCDO's Safety, Support and Solutions Phase II (SSS II) programme is a migration programme that aims to make migration safer and provide critical humanitarian support, resulting in fewer deaths and less suffering along the Central Mediterranean Route. SSS II is implemented by IOM, UNICEF, British Red Cross, and a consortium led by the Danish Refugee Council. SSS II takes a route-based approach to when responding to the complex needs of mixed-migrant populations including refugees, asylum seekers, economic migrants and victims of trafficking, in a wide range of countries along the Central Mediterranean Route.

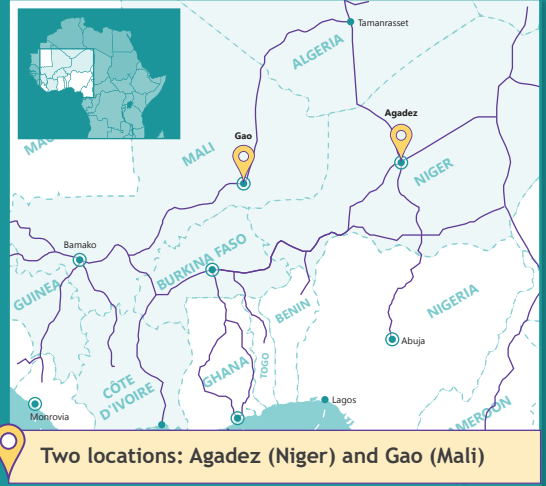


Shaping practices  
Influencing policies  
Impacting lives

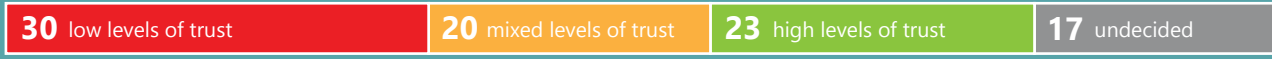


# Exploring migrants' trust in humanitarian organisations – March 2021

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



## Migrants' levels of trust towards humanitarian organisations



## Descriptions of trust

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

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

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

<b>ECAS</b>	Europe Conflict and Security
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>FCDO</b>	Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office
<b>IMREF</b>	Independent Monitoring, Research and Evidence Facility
<b>IOM</b>	International Organization for Migration
<b>MMC</b>	Mixed Migration Centre
<b>(I)NGO</b>	(International) Non-Governmental Organisation
<b>OECD</b>	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
<b>SSS II</b>	Safety, Support and Solutions Programme for Refugees and Migrants, Phase 2
<b>UNHCR</b>	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

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## Executive summary

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

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

### Trust in humanitarian and development organisations

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

### Factors that shape trust

- Past experiences with humanitarian organisations were a critical factor in shaping trust. For example, returnees often reported that they stopped believing that accessing organisations would lead to deportation after being in contact with them, as they had seen first-hand that organisations would not then hand them over to state authorities.
- The behaviour of field staff, who are often the main point of contact with migrants, was also critical in shaping trust. Migrants who generally trusted organisations often attributed their trust to positive personal relations with field staff. Some migrants in the sample who had accessed organisations and did not trust them spoke of inappropriate behaviour from field staff, including treatment of women, insults and visible anger against migrants. Two women in particular spoke of inappropriate conduct from field staff. It is unclear whether these reports are based on isolated incidents or more pervasive behaviours. This suggests that

donors and organisations should quickly take steps at field level to assess the situation, adapt practices, and ensure that they effectively implement and monitor safeguarding standards.

- Information from families, other migrants, and smuggling actors, who are key sources of information, influenced migrants' trust in organisations at different stages of the journey. Before departure, relatives often warned migrants against trusting anyone while in transit, including humanitarian organisations. During their stay in Agadez and Gao, other migrants and smuggling facilitators were the main intermediaries informing migrants about organisations. Other migrants often provided negative feedback on the support, leading migrants to refrain from trusting and accessing organisations. Smuggling networks helped to either foster perceptions that engaging with organisations increases deportation risk, or refer migrants needing assistance to organisations.
- Organisations' efforts to share information appeared to be effective in promoting trust among some migrants. Greater knowledge about available assistance helped mitigate high or unrealistic expectations of the services that organisations can provide. More knowledge also often reassured migrants that accessing organisations would not create new risks to their journeys. However, uncoordinated visits and messages in ghettos and train stations may create suspicions among migrants in the context of criminalisation of migration in Niger.
- For most respondents, perceptions that organisations are not neutral and seek to actively discourage migration created concerns that engaging with organisations would lead to delays in their journeys. This was particularly true of organisations that engage in return and reintegration programming.

### Impact of trust on access and vulnerabilities

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

### Strategies to build trust

- **Review current safeguarding measures to ensure accountability to beneficiaries.** Some migrants IMREF interviewed reported inappropriate conduct and behaviour from humanitarian field staff in Agadez. In the short term, implementers should review their own safeguarding mechanisms and practices, and ensure there are no gaps. Implementers should also consider jointly organising a more in-depth review of safeguarding practices through an independent entity. Given the concerning nature of the incidents and challenges highlighted in the study with feedback loops, donors should also consider ways to strengthen their role in ensuring oversight and accountability to beneficiaries. One option would be to conduct virtual (or in-person) field-level assessments of their partners' safeguarding practices or strengthen third-party monitoring of programming.
- **Implement safeguarding measures and processes at all levels.** The study reaffirms that interactions with field staff representing organisations, who are often the first and main point of contact with migrants, are critical in shaping trust. As such, organisations should invest in comprehensive training for 'first response' field staff. Training should cover safeguarding and effective communication on neutrality, migrants' rights to anonymity and confidentiality, and the voluntary nature of assistance. Staff should also be trained to provide clear messages on what organisations can and cannot do for migrants, criteria for beneficiary selection, and options for referrals. Refresher trainings can also be a space for field staff to report to management what works and what does not in current outreach programmes, and informally monitor the evolution of levels of trust among potential beneficiaries.
- **Take steps to reduce migrants' concerns around the neutrality of organisations.** Organisations should explore opportunities to publicly advocate or communicate positions against deportations and in favour of more pathways to regular migration. Organisations working in return and reintegration programming should also look for ways to ensure return and other forms of life-saving programming are seen as separate.

- **Design and roll out a multi-tiered information-sharing strategy** aimed at key sources of information—including families, other migrants, and smuggling actors—to reassure migrants that accessing organisations will not lead to additional risks. Organisations could consider strategies to build trust before migration journeys begin by providing information on available services to both potential migrants and their families, so that they are less likely to actively avoid services and messaging from organisations while traveling. In transit settings, organisations could work through intermediaries to pass on messages, including through migrants who have already received support, settled migrants, and migrant-led organisations.
- **Test and expand feedback mechanisms to better close feedback loops and build trust in the relevance of support.** Organisations should adapt mechanisms depending on the different migrant profiles in Agadez and Gao, with their varying lengths of stay and needs (i.e., short-term migrant, stranded migrant, returnee). Feedback loops appear particularly critical in moderating expectations and building trust with migrants: organisations should clearly tell migrants when and where they plan on providing responses to their feedback, whether they use personal messages, leaflets, or posters in offices that migrants visit.
- **Provide a safe space for migrants to report negative behaviour from humanitarian staff.** Organisations should systematically provide migrants with an anonymous phone line for complaints. They should also investigate and track allegations of misconduct and ensure there are internal resources to respond to allegations.



# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Background and objectives

In response to the higher number of migrant arrivals from West Africa into Europe, international organisations have significantly increased the scope and scale of migration programming in the Sahel since 2016. Through their programming, humanitarian actors seek to provide lifesaving assistance to migrants as they transit through key hubs before reaching the Sahara Desert, such as Agadez, Niger or Gao, Mali.

Humanitarian and development organisations in the Sahel face significant challenges accessing migrants travelling to North Africa and Europe. As transit migrants are usually focused on continuing their journey northbound, the window of time in which they can access humanitarian services in any given location is often limited. There is also evidence that migrants actively avoid detection, often making them an ‘invisible’ population who may not be willing to access services.<sup>1</sup> Past IMREF research on access has shown that a lack of trust in humanitarian organisations affects migrants’ willingness to seek available assistance.<sup>2</sup> However, despite the increasing recognition that trust is a key component of gaining access to vulnerable migrants, there is limited research on trust in transit settings. There is also a lack of operational guidance on how to adapt established strategies for building trust with aid beneficiaries to the situation of transit migrants.<sup>3</sup> For instance, while feedback mechanisms and loops with aid recipients are often seen as good practice in efforts to build trust, migrants’ mobility creates significant challenges to collecting feedback and communicating how it has been addressed.<sup>4</sup>

Further research is therefore needed to understand how, when, and why migrants trust humanitarian organisations and how this affects their access to humanitarian and development organisations. Insights generated through this research are intended to support actors in designing effective strategies to address barriers to increased humanitarian access due to a lack of trust with transit migrants.

To achieve this, the study asked the following research questions in Agadez and Gao:

1. How do migrants describe their trust in humanitarian organisations?
2. What factors appear to shape migrants’ trust in humanitarian organisations? What factors appear to decrease or increase trust?
3. How does trust affect migrants’ access to services provided by humanitarian organisations?
4. What strategies can humanitarian organisations use to build trust in migration settings?

## 1.2 Analytical framework

The analytical framework for this study was adapted from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) [Guidelines on Measuring Trust](#). Drawing from these guidelines, the study defines trust as “migrants’ belief that humanitarian organisations and their employees will act consistently with their expectations of positive behaviour.” The study is primarily concerned with trust in institutions, but also touches on elements of interpersonal trust (trust in other people, such as humanitarian field staff who have contact with migrants). Aspects of institutional trust examined in this study include:

- Beliefs that organisations provide appropriate and relevant support that meets migrants’ needs;
- Beliefs that organisations treat beneficiaries fairly;
- Beliefs that accessing services provided by humanitarian organisations will not increase the risks that migrants face (i.e., deportation, exploitation, safety risks).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> IMREF (2020b). [Accessing the Most Vulnerable Migrants in Agadez and Ouagadougou](#).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> IMREF (2019). Evidence Gap Analysis; Europe Conflict and Security (ECAS) Consulting (2020). Review of Protection Programming in the Mixed Migration Context | 3M Response Programme, May 2020; ECAS Consulting (2019). The British Red Cross Mid-Term Review: Action for Migrants: Route-Based Assistance (AMiRA) Programme Final Report, December 2019; Jayasinghe, S. (2011). [Erosion of trust in humanitarian agencies: what strategies might help?](#) Global Health Action, 4(1); Humanitarian Voice Index (2019). [Trust in humanitarian action](#); Van Praag, N. (2019). [Building and busting trust in humanitarian action](#). Ground Truth Solutions.

<sup>4</sup> Kahn, C. (2020). [Accountability, Feedback & Complaints Mechanisms in Humanitarian Responses to Migration](#), June 2020, START Network.

<sup>5</sup> These categories are adapted from: Cole, L. M., & Cohn, E. S. (2016). [Institutional Trust Across Cultures: Its Definitions, Conceptualizations, and Antecedents Across Eastern and Western European Nations](#). Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Trust; Van Praag, N. (2019). [Building and busting trust in humanitarian action](#). Ground Truth Solutions.

The study does not seek to examine migrants' trust in specific organisations. Rather, it seeks to understand trust in humanitarian and development organisations that provide assistance to transit migrants as a whole in Agadez and Gao (referred to as 'organisations' throughout this report). Figure 1 lists the range of main international and local organisations that provide services to migrants in these locations, including regarding: food and water, cash, non-food items, hygiene items, shelter, protection from gender-based violence, health services, return and reintegration, search and rescue, and awareness-raising on the risks of migration.

**Figure 1: Main organisations that provide assistance to transit migrants in Agadez and Gao**



### 1.3 Methodology

IMREF addressed the research questions through a qualitative methodology which explored trust between transit migrants and humanitarian organisations. Methods included:

1. A desk review of 39 sources ([Annex 2](#)). Little research has been conducted on this topic of migrants' trust in humanitarian organisations on the Central Mediterranean Route. While there is anecdotal evidence on the challenges of building trust with migrants in recent migration programme reviews in the Sahel,<sup>6</sup> more reliable literature on trust tends to focus on the humanitarian and aid sector as a whole, and examines trust between donors, implementers, local government and aid recipients.<sup>7</sup> These sources do not explicitly analyse how, when, and why migrants trust humanitarian organisations, and how this affects access to migrants and migration programming. IMREF used these sources and global guidelines on defining trust to set the parameters of the study,<sup>8</sup> and anecdotal evidence from programme reviews and recent IMREF studies to triangulate findings.<sup>9</sup>
2. Remote key informant interviews with 16 field workers in Agadez and Gao.
3. Qualitative in-depth phone-based interviews with 90 transit migrants equally divided between Agadez and Gao, including 30 women ([Annex 3](#)).

<sup>6</sup> "Migrants also lack trust towards NGOs and do not necessarily feel comfortable accessing humanitarian services", ECAS Consulting (2020). Review of Protection Programming in the Mixed Migration Context | 3M Response Programme, May 2020; ECAS Consulting (2019). The British Red Cross Mid-Term Review: Action for Migrants: Route-Based Assistance (AMiRA) Programme Final Report, December 2019.

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance: Bachelet, S. (2019). 'Wasting mbeng': Adventure and Trust Amongst sub-Saharan Migrants in Morocco. *Ethnos*, 84(5), 849-866; Dijkzeul, D., & Wakenge, C. I. (2010). *Doing good, but looking bad? Local perceptions of two humanitarian organisations in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo*. *Disasters*, 34(4), 1139-1170; Jo, A. (2019). *The Effect of Migration on Trust in Communities of Origin*. *Economics Bulletin* (39), 1571-1585; Lyytinen, E. (2017). *Refugees' 'journeys of trust': Creating an analytical framework to examine refugees' exilic journeys with a focus on trust*. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 30(4), 489-510.

<sup>8</sup> In particular: OECD (2017a). *OECD Guidelines on Measuring Trust*. OECD Publishing; Cole, L. M., & Cohn, E. S. (2016). *Institutional Trust Across Cultures: Its Definitions, Conceptualizations, and Antecedents Across Eastern and Western European Nations*. *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Trust*; Van Praag, N. (2019). *Building and busting trust in humanitarian action*. Ground Truth Solutions.

<sup>9</sup> See: IMREF (2020a). *Exploring the impact of COVID-19 on the vulnerabilities of migrants in Agadez, Gao and Ouagadougou*; IMREF (2020b). *Assessing the Most Vulnerable Migrants in Agadez and Ouagadougou*.

## 1.4 Limitations

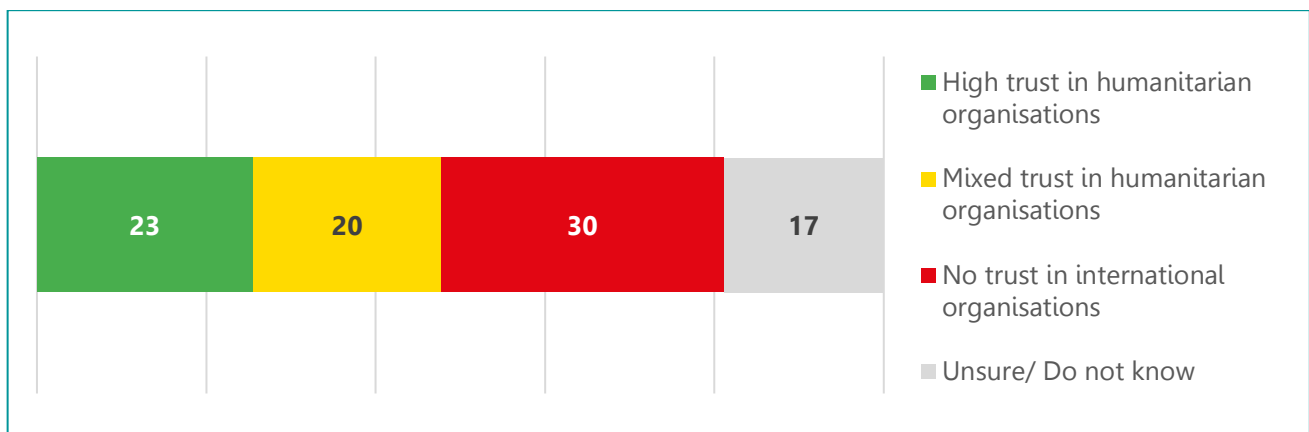
There are several limitations that affect the presented findings:

- The study used qualitative research methods. IMREF coded qualitative responses in order to identify trends among the qualitative sample. Findings provide insight on migrants' trust in organisations, however, the qualitative sample does not reflect the nationality, age, and gender breakdown of the migrant population in both locations. Findings are therefore not representative of the general migrant population.
- The study used a snowball sampling strategy to interview a range of migrants in ghettos,<sup>10</sup> migrants without shelter, and migrants who reside in the community. To mitigate potential biases in the sample, IMREF used several 'entry points' for snowballing, including local organisations, migrant associations, local community members, ghetto owners, bus station managers, personal networks in the community, and migrants themselves. Enumerators were also trained to clearly explain the independence of IMREF to interview participants, so that they could feel free to share their honest opinions about organisations.
- The study adopted a remote methodology due to COVID-19 safeguarding concerns, preventing the collection of supplementary contextual data. As all interviews took place over the phone, enumerators were unable to directly observe the living conditions of the migrants they interviewed, and identify vulnerabilities that research participants did not report directly. Moreover, the absence of visual cues due to remotely interviewing study participants over the telephone may have affected the interpretation of responses.

## 2 Migrants' trust in organisations

**There are significant limitations to migrants' trust in humanitarian and development organisations in Agadez and Gao.** Out of 90 respondents, 30 said they entirely lack trust in humanitarian organisations and 23 said they had high trust in organisations. The remaining 20 migrants said they had mixed trust in humanitarian organisations, either due to a lack of trust in specific organisations or due to generally negative opinions of humanitarian organisations, and would be willing to access their services as a last resort. A sizable share (17 out of 90), especially in Gao, said they did not have enough information about organisations to describe their levels of trust. Like those with mixed levels of trust towards organisations, these migrants who were 'unsure' often voiced negative opinions of organisations. This contrasts with migrants who said they had no trust in organisations and actively avoided them in their everyday life in transit. The large proportion of migrants with either limited or a complete lack of trust (50 out of 90) supports previous IMREF findings that the lack of trust in humanitarian organisations was a significant barrier to accessing assistance for migrants in Agadez and Ouagadougou.<sup>11</sup>

**Figure 2: Reported trust in humanitarian organisations in the qualitative sample**



<sup>10</sup> Ghettos are "compounds controlled by operators involved in the irregular migration industry." Clingendael (2018c), [A human rights and peace-building approach to migration governance in the Sahel](#).

<sup>11</sup> IMREF (2020b). [Accessing the Most Vulnerable Migrants in Agadez and Ouagadougou](#).

### Box 1: Examples of migrants' descriptions of their level of trust in organisations

#### High level of trust in humanitarian organisations:

"I trust their work and the support they give to migrants is huge and very important."  
(41-year-old Guinean migrant man, Gao)

#### Mixed trust in humanitarian organisations:

"While I still don't fully trust [organisations] because they try to discourage us from migrating, I have to recognise that some organisations have helped me."  
(19-year-old Nigerian migrant woman, Agadez)

#### No trust in humanitarian organisations:

"Organisations denounce you to the state. It is impossible to trust them in these conditions."  
(33-year-old Beninese migrant man, Agadez)

#### Unsure respondents:

"I can't describe my trust in organisations, because I have never received support from them, and I don't know anyone who has."  
(26-year-old Togolese migrant man, Gao)

**Interview locations and the stage of their journey that respondents were in at the time of the interview clearly shaped trust patterns in the qualitative sample.** There were differences in the way onward migrants, stranded migrants, and returnees assessed whether assistance was relevant to their needs and whether accessing organisations increased risks. There were also signs that respondents' sex influenced their beliefs, as explained in this section. However, there was no clear variation in migrants' levels of trust by age, length of stay, or nationality. To the extent possible, this report disaggregates findings by location, stage of journey, and sex; nonetheless, a more representative sample is needed to explore further variations in trust levels depending on migrant characteristics.

**Patterns of trust differed between the study locations, with fewer migrants in Agadez saying they trusted humanitarian organisations.** In both locations, the reasons migrants provided for trusting or lacking trust in organisations were similar. However, in Agadez, more respondents had previously accessed assistance and cited negative experiences or had heard from other migrants that assistance would not meet their needs. Far fewer respondents in Gao reported receiving support from an organisation or hearing negative feedback on organisations from other migrants.

**The reasons for lacking trust in organisations also differed by sex.** While there was no clear difference in trust patterns between men and women, women tended to attribute low levels of trust to negative interactions with organisations' field staff, while men focused more often on the risk that their journey would be halted if they approached humanitarian organisations.

**Reflecting patterns of trust, migrants generally look to families and friends for support during their journeys rather than humanitarian organisations.** When asked who they would trust most to support them, the vast majority of migrant respondents said they trusted either their families or friends. This reflects existing evidence that migrants who travel towards North Africa and Europe generally look to their relatives, friends, other migrants, and members of smuggling networks to support them and provide them with reliable information.<sup>12</sup> A large majority of migrants said they trust police and local authorities the least, recalling past negative encounters at border points and in transit hubs.<sup>13</sup>

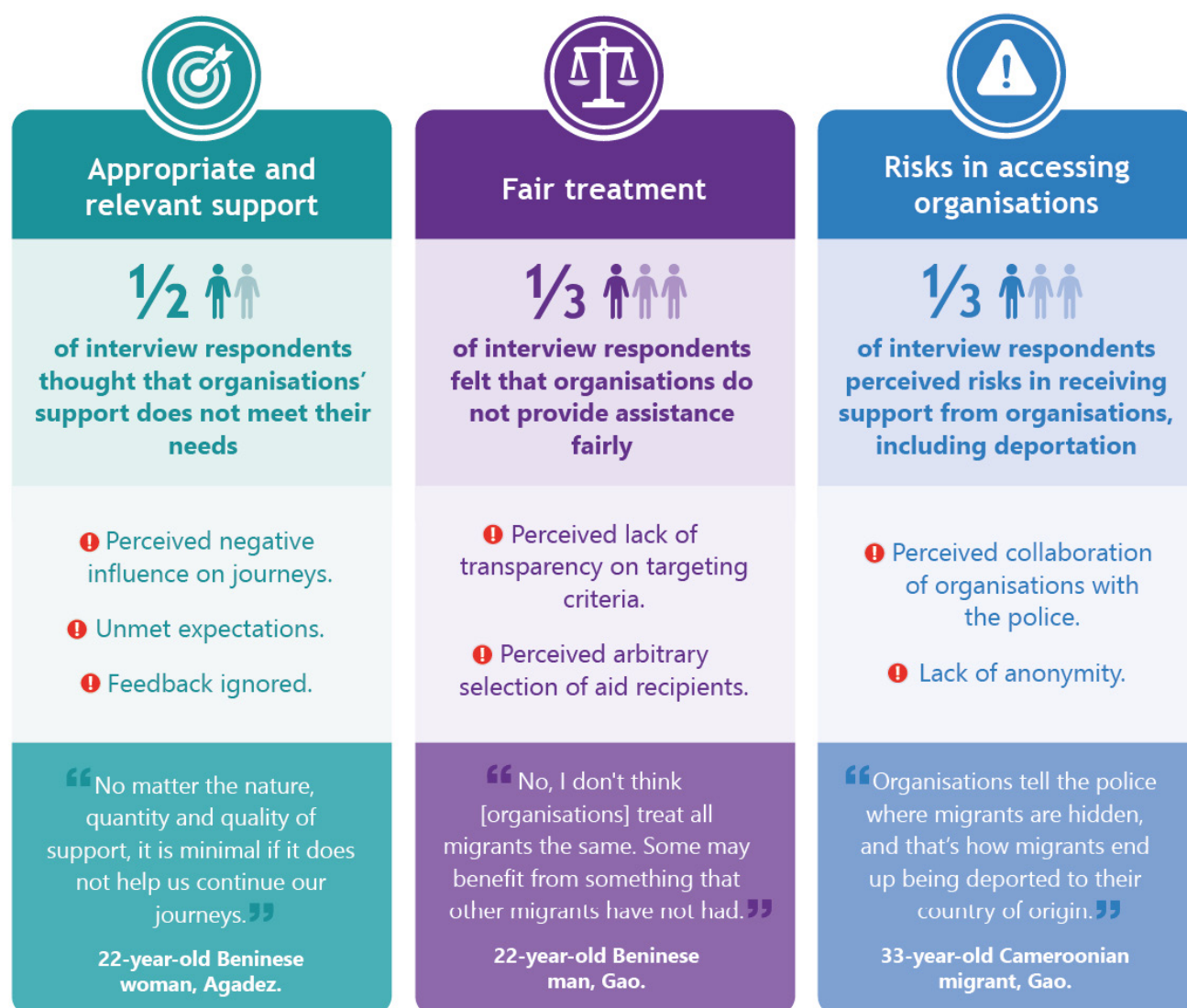
<sup>12</sup> See: Internews. (2018). [Information Needs Assessment: Agadez, Niger](#); Internews. (2018). [Information Needs Assessment: Gao, Mali](#).

<sup>13</sup> This reflects past research that law enforcement authorities abuse migrants on the Central Mediterranean Route. In past IMREF research, "migrants described the destruction or confiscation of travel documents, phones, or other belongings, strip searches, frisking, beating, torture and sexual assault." IMREF (2020b). [Accessing the Most Vulnerable Migrants in Agadez and Ouagadougou](#). See also: Molenaar, F. (2018). [Conflict-sensitive and humane migration management in the Sahel](#), Clingendael Institute; Mixed Migration Centre (2019). [Navigating borderlands in the Sahel Border security governance and mixed migration in Liptako-Gourma](#). MMC Research Report, November 2019.

**Migrants generally said they trusted international over local organisations to provide them with support, because the former had more resources to respond to their needs.** For instance, a 27-year-old female Cameroonian migrant in Gao explained that “the goal is to get help, no matter who it comes from. But for better chances, I will turn to an international organisation because they have more means to help than the local non-government organisations.” Migrants interviewed did not appear to believe that accessing local organisations would create fewer risks than accessing international organisations, unless these local organisations were managed and led by migrants themselves, such as the Maison des Migrants in Gao.

**The extent to which migrants trusted organisations depended on the nature of the concerns they had in accessing assistance.** To understand levels of institutional trust, the study examined 3 aspects of migrants’ perceptions of the assistance organisations offer: whether it would meet their needs; whether it would be fair and equitable; and whether it would lead to additional risks. In addition to the 30 migrants who expressed a complete lack of trust in organisations, migrants who described themselves as having mixed levels of trust or as being ‘unsure’ often voiced negative perceptions of assistance and important limitations on their levels of trust. Migrants who expressed a complete lack of trust linked it to the beliefs that accessing assistance carries risks, including forced return, and that assistance does not meet their needs. Migrants who expressed limited levels of trust in organisations generally linked it to the perceived lack of relevance of support and concerns around whether migrants receive fair treatment from humanitarian actors. A summary of how migrants responded to questions probing different aspects of institutional trust is provided in Figure 3 below.

**Figure 3: Aspects of institutional trust**



## 2.1 Appropriate and relevant support

**Beliefs about whether organisations provide appropriate and relevant assistance consistently influenced trust.** One of the main reasons migrants said they trusted organisations was that they appreciated the support available to them. For instance, a 27-year-old Cameroonian female migrant in Gao explained she trusted organisations because “they are doing their best to help migrants [...] and they do it for free.” Similarly, migrants who said they lacked trust in organisations frequently felt that assistance did not, or would not, meet their needs. This was especially the case when migrants had expressed specific needs to field-based staff that they felt had not been taken into consideration.

**Half of the migrants in the sample felt that assistance did not meet their needs, which they assessed against their priorities at different stages of travel.** Onward, stranded, and returnee migrants who felt that the assistance offered did not meet their needs consistently provided the following explanations:

- **Organisations do not provide support that helps onward migrants undertake their journeys.** For onward migrants, beliefs about the relevance of support were consistently linked to how the support related to travel plans. Those who felt assistance was not relevant often spoke of a fundamental gap between the support they wanted and what organisations offered, arguing that transport to Europe would be more appropriate than any other type of support (Box 2). Support activities that migrants thought would be most relevant included:

### Box 2: Gaps in expectations among onward migrants

“If organisations today can help us make it to North Africa or even to Europe, then I would say that it is appropriate. Certainly, they help us through their interventions, but to us it is just another hurdle on our journey.”

26-year-old Senegalese man, Agadez

- transportation to cross the desert safely; creation of safe and legal pathways to Europe, including support to get visas; direct protection from security forces at border stops; and advocacy against expulsions. Respondents were often aware of constraints organisations face in providing these types of support, and suggested that organisations instead provide them with short-term assistance that is accessed voluntarily and does not require travel plans to change—including cash, food and non-food items, and health services.
- **Assistance is not sufficient to help stranded migrants who are unable to earn money in the community.**<sup>14</sup> Most stranded migrants in the sample said that support was inappropriate because it was ‘one-off’,<sup>15</sup> did not respond to the needs of ‘those stuck for months’,<sup>16</sup> and did not help them find employment in the community where they were stranded.<sup>17</sup> Some also said organisations failed to respond to their basic needs, including clothing, food, cash, shelter, water, and health.
- **Reintegration assistance is described as not fulfilling expectations and is often linked to “broken promises”.**<sup>18</sup> Out of the 13 returnees IMREF interviewed, many said they had not received the support they were promised after entering the voluntary return process or being rescued in the desert. Specifically, returnees said that return and reintegration did not meet their needs as return processes took much longer than they were told<sup>19</sup> or food and sleeping arrangements in transit centres were poor.<sup>20</sup> They also often referred to previous returnees in communities of origin, saying that organisations and governments had not provided returnees with sufficient support to meet their needs back home. Beliefs that organisations misuse resources compounded this lack of trust: returnees in particular stated that organisations managed money badly, and did not provide the level of support they would expect.

<sup>14</sup> Drawing from the European Commission, International Organization for Migration (IOM), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and Save the Children, IMREF defines a stranded migrant as someone “who for reasons beyond their control has been unintentionally forced to stay in a country.” Migrants become stranded when they are unable or unwilling to return to their state of nationality or former residence, are unable or unwilling to integrate in the state in which they are physically present, and/or are unable to move to the next leg of their journeys due to lack of resources or legal constraints. It is unclear at what length of stay migrants typically become stranded. IMREF interviewed 49 migrants who had stayed less than 6 months in the community, and 41 migrants who had stayed more than 6 months. See [Annex 3](#) for a breakdown of respondents.

<sup>15</sup> 24-year-old Beninese migrant, Agadez.

<sup>16</sup> 31-year-old Nigerien migrant, Gao.

<sup>17</sup> 22-year-old Burkinabé migrant, Gao.

<sup>18</sup> 19-year-old Burkinabé returnee, Agadez.

<sup>19</sup> For instance, a 30-year-old Cameroonian woman in Agadez said that IOM told her that her return would take 2 weeks, but she stopped waiting after 3 months and left the centre.

<sup>20</sup> For instance, a 30-year-old Cameroonian woman in Agadez explained that food at the centre “was inedible and the migrants lived in bad conditions.”

**Migrants with previous experience accessing assistance also said their trust had been affected by a perceived lack of responsiveness to their feedback.** This was the

case for most onward migrants who had previously received support from organisations in Agadez, as well as most stranded migrants and returnees. Interview respondents explained that their requests for a change in the support they received, or for additional support, were not met, whether requests were shared formally or informally. Many felt that the time they spent talking to organisations did not effect change and had not been used to adapt activities to their needs (Box 3).

### Box 3: Feedback fatigue

“We have been questioned many times by organisations, but nothing has changed. I think if they want to be trusted more, they have to start with that.”

**25-year-old Beninese migrant, Agadez**

**There was some evidence that migrants saw assistance as less relevant to their needs because of delays in delivery linked to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on operations.** Some migrants said that COVID-19 led to longer processing times to get support, leading to frustration and distrust. A 37-year-old Gambian migrant in Agadez said that he “[doesn’t] really trust organisations because the COVID-19 outbreak led to slower support.” This was reflected in insights from other key informants who noted that beneficiaries who had to wait for services that were halted due to COVID-19 lost trust in organisations—particularly those waiting for return processes that were delayed because of border closures, and, in some cases, left the programme voluntarily.

## 2.2 Fair treatment

**While perceptions that organisations treat beneficiaries inequitably could also negatively affect trust, two-thirds of migrants in the sample expressed the belief that treatment of beneficiaries is fair and equitable.** Half of respondents argued that organisations’ services did not respond to their needs. Nonetheless, most believed that organisations treat beneficiaries equitably and do not discriminate between migrants when delivering assistance. For instance, a 22-year-old Cameroonian migrant in Agadez believed that “humanitarian organisations treat migrants fairly and equitably because, regardless of nationality, race, sex, language, religion, political or other opinions, wealth, physical or psychological disability, you are all treated equally without discrimination.”

**Among the one-third of migrants who believed that assistance from organisations is not equitable, the prevailing view was that support is ‘arbitrary’ and not based on need.** Interviews indicate that targeting criteria were unclear to some migrants, who pointed to instances where they did not understand why support was given to someone else over them. For example, a 27-year-old Cameroonian woman in Gao said that she received training from an organisation but felt that it was unfair that others in her group received further material support after the training.

Recurring views among migrants who said that distribution of aid was unfair included the perception that preference was given to:

- **Women:** Several male migrants felt that it was unfair that women received more assistance than men despite what they thought were similar challenges. This was more frequently raised in Agadez.
- **Migrants who accepted assistance to return:** It was often perceived as unfair that some organisations provide humanitarian support to migrants who have agreed to enter a return process but not to other migrants.
- **Nationals:** Several returnees found it unfair that they were not eligible to receive support to settle in Gao or Agadez, unlike national returnees (Maliens in Gao and Nigeriens in Agadez), alongside whom they had been expelled from North Africa.
- **Deported migrants:** Several migrants felt that it was unfair that those who had undergone deportation received more support than foreign migrants who had not yet failed in their migration journey.

## 2.3 Risks in accessing organisations

**The belief that accessing services would expose migrants to risks, most notably deportation to their countries of origin, played the most important role in shaping distrust.** A quarter of migrants in the sample believed that humanitarian actors play a role in deportation and consistently expressed very strong distrust of international organisations. Most of those respondents voiced concerns that accessing services would result in their forced return to their country of origin by the police because non-governmental organisations (NGOs) would denounce them to the state, thereby thwarting their migration plans.<sup>21</sup> Some also expressed specific concerns about the return assistance programme of the International Organization for Migration (IOM), voicing the misperception that they would be forcibly returned.

**Perceived collaboration between organisations and national police or governments shaped fears of deportation and distrust in organisations.** As noted in [Section 2](#), migrants often expressed strong distrust of police or local authorities, who past research has shown are often main perpetrators of extortion and harm against migrants in Mali and Niger.<sup>22</sup> In Agadez, migrants also drew a direct link between their lack of trust in authorities and the criminalisation of migration. As a result, perceived collaboration between organisations and the state was seen negatively and as a factor of distrust among some migrants. Several migrants in both Gao and Agadez believed organisations had given information about them to the police, leading to detention or deportation (Box 4). This was also linked to perceptions that organisations hide their true intentions.<sup>23</sup>

### Box 4: Perceived role of INGOs in deportations

“What makes me suspicious of organisations is that every year we see many migrants who are turned away by the authorities in the places where they are. And finally, one wonders if humanitarian organisations are not at the root of these expulsions; maybe humanitarian organisations that share our information with the local authorities.” **31-year-old Ivorian migrant, Gao**

“I believe that the police who come to chase us and catch us in our homes are complicit with the NGOs.” **52-year-old Cameroonian woman, Agadez**

“I personally think that NGOs have a share of responsibility in the deportations of migrants.” **22-year-old Cameroonian woman, Agadez**

**Several migrants did not trust organisations to respect their anonymity or use their data appropriately.** These migrants expressed concerns that their identity and images would be shared in the media, or with other migrants, without consent. Migrants who described these concerns believed that organisations made money from using their images (Box 5).

### Box 5: Anonymity concerns

“Migrants think that organisations make money from sharing images of migrants on TV. Even if I have to be supported by an organisation I will not accept to be photographed.” **32-year-old Burkinabé migrant, Gao**

“This is their way of doing things. For example, an organisation brings you help and films you and you know that one day your image may be made public even if they tell you that the video will not be broadcasted.” **33-year-old Beninese migrant, Agadez**

<sup>21</sup> This reflects past IMREF findings. IMREF (2020b). [Accessing the Most Vulnerable Migrants in Agadez and Ouagadougou](#).

<sup>22</sup> See for instance: IMREF (2020b). [Accessing the Most Vulnerable Migrants in Agadez and Ouagadougou](#); IMREF (2019b). Interim Evidence Review; Mixed Migration Centre (2019); Molenaar, F. (2018). [Conflict-sensitive and humane migration management in the Sahel](#), Clingendael Institute; Mixed Migration Centre (2019). [Navigating borderlands in the Sahel Border security governance and mixed migration in Liptako-Gourma](#). MMC Research Report, November 2019.

<sup>23</sup> For instance, a 27-year-old Cameroonian returnee in Agadez said that she felt that “organisations are pretending to work hard for the migrant population, while they are lining their pockets and getting rich on the backs of the migrants.”



### 3 Factors that affect trust in humanitarian organisations among migrants

In addition to the perceptions examined in the previous section, several institutional, programmatic, and personal factors appeared to shape trust in organisations. These factors, examined in detail in this section, include: past experiences with organisations, knowledge about organisations and their programmes, and the perceived neutrality of organisations.



#### Three factors that affect trust in organisations:



Past experiences with organisations



Knowledge about organisations and their programmes



The perceived neutrality of organisations

#### 3.1 Past experiences

Past experiences of receiving assistance played a clear role in shaping trust among migrant respondents. Trust levels either increased or decreased based on whether migrants felt their experiences of receiving assistance were positive or negative.

**For returnees, past experiences tended to dispel fears that accessing services creates a risk and that organisations support deportations, increasing levels of trust.** Returnees reported that they stopped believing that accessing organisations would lead to risks of deportation after being in contact with them. Those returnees said they no longer believed organisations would denounce them to the police, and had seen first-hand that organisations did not turn them in to the state after their expulsions. For instance, a 31-year-old Ivorian returnee in Gao explained that “migrants who had already been through the expulsion saw the proof that organisations assist them but do not turn them in to the authorities for deportation.” However, returnee respondents often prefaced their beliefs that organisations would not turn them in to the state with complaints over the scope and quality of services offered by organisations after they were rescued in the desert.

**Direct interactions with field staff representing organisations, who are often the main point of contact with migrants, were critical in shaping trust.** Migrants who generally trusted organisations often attributed their trust to positive interpersonal contact with field staff, who made efforts to get to know them and understand their story. For instance, a 37-year-old Gambian migrant in Agadez said that “the employees behave well towards the migrants, they are always available and listen to their grievances.” On the other hand, other migrants mentioned that inappropriate behaviour from field staff had significantly affected their trust. It is unclear whether these accounts illustrate isolated incidents or a wider institutional issue. Reports of inappropriate behaviours included:

- **Inappropriate conduct with women.** Two migrant women in Agadez reported that field staff behave inappropriately with women. One explained that women “are given preferential treatment if and only if one of the staff expects something in return. There are even some who make outright advances to migrant women.”<sup>24</sup>
- **Threatening behaviour, including insults and getting angry at aid recipients.** Some migrants reported instances where they felt that field staff had disrespected them. For instance, a 33-year-old Beninese woman in Agadez said that, “when [field workers] are angry, they speak badly to [migrants] and sometimes use foul language.”

**Experiences where support did not meet expectations often negatively impacted migrants’ trust in organisations.** Most migrants who had previously accessed assistance said support did not meet their needs. Many migrants in Agadez said they had asked for blankets and warmer clothes, but did not receive them despite assurances from organisations. Some migrants who received health services stated they had not received appropriate medication relevant to their needs or had to buy medication themselves. A 23-year-old Malian woman in Agadez said that she found it “unacceptable that the medical team of a structure that claims to support migrants can ask me to pay for medicines because if I had the money to do so, I would never have turned to them.”

<sup>24</sup> Data received on these reports was shared with the FCDO, who commissioned this report.

## 3.2 Knowledge of organisations

### **Organisations' efforts to share information about themselves appeared to be effective in helping further trust among migrants.**

Migrants appeared to have more limited access to information about the organisations and assistance they offered in Gao, compared to Agadez. According to key informants, this may reflect significant investment in communication campaigns and information sharing in Agadez in the last 3 years. Greater information about services reassured some migrants that accessing organisations would not bring additional risks to their journeys, assuaging concerns that approaching organisations was associated with risks of deportation (Box 6). Furthermore, migrants who had received clear information about an organisation's mandate and activities said this helped manage their expectations of support and increased their trust in the services provided. These migrants said they had received information from field staff, as part of current outreach campaigns, or after accessing them spontaneously to request assistance.

#### **Box 6: Communications and dispelling fears**

"Some of our migrant friends told us [...] there are organisations in complicity with certain people that make it impossible for migrants to continue migrating. But once at the station, I understood that it is far from what I had heard before. I saw that the organisations only want to do good and not harm the migrants."

**26-year-old Senegalese man, Agadez**

**However, current outreach campaigns appeared to pose risks to trust-building in Agadez.** Previous IMREF research found that some smuggling actors—in the current context of hostility towards migrant transport in Niger—were "increasingly suspicious" of organisations due to uncoordinated visits from a range of actors in the ghettos. Smugglers often communicated these concerns to migrants, raising fears of deportation.<sup>25</sup> Some migrants interviewed for this study echoed these concerns, saying they found it suspicious that organisations approached them in train stations and ghettos, and that they actively avoided field staff of these organisations.

**Migrants' families, other migrants, and smuggling actors shaped migrants' perceptions of and trust in organisations at different points in the journey.** Findings suggest that these actors are the main sources of information for migrants, corroborating past Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) findings about how migrants generally access information.<sup>26</sup> As key sources of information, the role of each actors in shaping trust was described as follows:

- **Families:** Several migrants told IMREF their families warned them against trusting anyone, including organisations, before their departures because of fears that they would be scammed, or that their journeys would be delayed. For instance, a 25-year-old Ivorian migrant in Gao explained that his parents told him that "most of the organisations who come to help us are looking for a way to rip us off. These people will try to take advantage of our ignorance of the area to take money from us or take us to a slave market."
- **Other migrants:** In some cases, other migrants played a role in building trust in organisations. For instance, a 37-year-old Gambian migrant explained that another migrant he knew had received support from an organisation and directly referred him to the same organisation. However, there were more cases in the sample where word-of-mouth negatively affected migrants' trust in organisations (Box 7).

#### **Box 7: Negative word-of-mouth communication among migrants and trust in organisations**

"My trust level is low because I know people who have gone to organisations but [the organisations'] employees humiliated them." **23-year-old Burkinabé migrant, Agadez**

"I have friends who have travelled many times. It is through them that I have received a lot of information about [anonymised organisation]. My friends made me understand that if I see a [worker from this organisation] in front of me, I should not listen to him because he will discourage me to migrate until I don't want to continue my adventure." **21-year-old Cameroonian man, Agadez**

- **Smuggling actors:** Migrants provided several examples where members of smuggling networks either fostered perceptions that engaging with organisations increases the risk of deportation, or referred migrants to organisations. Examples migrants provided also showed that some organisations appear to

<sup>25</sup> IMREF (2020b). Accessing the Most Vulnerable Migrants in Agadez and Ouagadougou.

<sup>26</sup> Research from MMC found that migrants most often cite friends and families as the main information sources on migration prior to departure. Other migrants become the main source of information in the country of destination. See: Mixed Migration Centre (2019). [Access to information of refugees and migrants on the move in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso](#). 4Mi Snapshot March 2019.

have built strong relationships with members of smuggling networks in both Agadez and Gao, helping to enable access to migrants. For instance, a 29-year-old Senegalese migrant in Agadez explained that he learned about organisations through his ghetto manager, explaining that “the ghetto chiefs collaborate with almost every organisation because they have their numbers, and they contact them as soon as a migrant crosses their doorstep.” Several organisations have piloted strategies to access migrants by approaching members of smuggling networks and encouraging them to work as focal points in case a migrant has protection needs.

### 3.3 Perceptions of neutrality

**Perceptions of whether organisations are neutral with respect to migration plans clearly shape trust.** As explained in [Section 2.1](#), the way that migrants perceived organisations’ intentions with respect to migration and travel plans influenced whether assistance was seen as relevant or drove fears of deportation. As shown in Box 8, migrants often linked a lack of trust to perceptions that organisations discourage migration or that seeking assistance would lead to delays to their journeys. This reflects recent findings from Internews (2018) that found that transit migrants in Agadez were sceptical towards humanitarians, “who were perceived to operate solely to prevent them from migrating”, leading migrants to see humanitarian organisations’ “so-called ‘propaganda to discourage migration’ as completely useless.”<sup>27</sup>

#### Box 8: Discouraging migration and lack of trust

“Organisations should respect migrants’ commitment to avoid wasting our time with awareness-raising on the risks of migration, because we are fully aware and responsible to assume our choices. If a migrant decides to leave his country, he knows from the beginning to the end what to expect and it is his final decision.”  
**29-year-old Senegalese migrant, Agadez**

“I don’t trust anyone who is going to dissuade me from travelling. This is something common in this area because today people are more likely to make you believe that leaving is not the best solution when we have all tried.” **40-year-old Cameroonian man, Agadez**

“I trust NGOs less because many NGOs try to discourage migrants in their migration projects.” **19-year-old Nigerian woman, Agadez**

**Migrants expressed stronger distrust towards organisations associated with return programming due to perceptions that these actors are involved in deportations in Agadez and Gao.** Several migrants questioned the voluntary nature of return schemes, saying that the true goal of the organisation is to take them back to their country of origin. This echoes concerns raised by migrants IMREF interviewed in November 2019.<sup>28</sup> Other recurring views included concerns that organisations are aiming to force migrants to return, work with the police to denounce them, or have secret agents among migrants and local community members to monitor their movements.

**Concerns that organisations would discourage migration were at times linked to the view that they have hidden agendas that follow European migration policy.** In both Agadez and Gao, several respondents believed that the European Union (EU) funded humanitarian organisations to stop respondents from migrating. Some also expressed doubts over the organisations’ intentions to help them while in transit because they were not seen as working to convince the EU to let more migrants in (Box 9).

#### Box 9: Lack of trust in European funding intentions

“Migrants are suspicious of humanitarian organisations because they are financed by the EU. Unanimously, we know that this structure is against irregular migration. Today, the EU is at the origin of all repatriation, it is the root of all our problems.” **22-year-old Cameroonian migrant, Agadez**

“I don’t trust organisations because I don’t know why they want to help us. If they really wanted to help us, they would pressure European countries to accept foreigners in their countries.” **33-year-old Burkinabé woman, Gao**

“Personally, I think it is a bit risky to go to humanitarian organisations because they are part of a system that fights against migration.” **25-year-old Beninese migrant, Gao**

<sup>27</sup> Internews. (2018). [Information Needs Assessment: Agadez, Niger](#); Internews. (2018). [Information Needs Assessment: Gao, Mali](#).

<sup>28</sup> IMREF (2020b). [Accessing the Most Vulnerable Migrants in Agadez and Ouagadougou](#).

## 4 Influence of trust on access to services



**There is a clear link between migrants' trust in organisations and their willingness to seek humanitarian assistance.** Those who said they generally trust organisations also said they would access them in times of need, while those who expressed strong distrust said they would not. For most migrants, limited levels of trust shaped when and under what conditions they would be willing to access assistance.

**Most migrants described their willingness to seek assistance from organisations as a trade-off between their level of need and perceived risks to their journeys.** As a result, many migrants said they only accessed, or would only access, organisations if they had no alternative. As explained by a 19-year-old Nigerian woman in Agadez, "If I find myself forced to [access organisations], I will do it because I don't have a choice."

**The fear that migrants would face increased risks if they access assistance appears to be the most significant access barrier related to trust.** Migrants with concerns over risks not only expressed the strongest distrust of organisations, but also most commonly said they would not seek support when needed. Migrants with concerns over the relevance and fairness of support said they were reticent to access humanitarian organisations. However, these concerns did not ultimately prevent them from seeking assistance when needed.

Three main perceived risks shaped migrants' willingness to access organisations:

- **Fear of deportation:** Migrants said a fear of deportation made them unwilling to access services and encouraged them to hide both from national authorities and humanitarian organisations. In some cases, fears led migrants to actively prevent humanitarian staff from entering ghettos and engaging with them. For instance, a 29-year-old Senegalese migrant in Agadez explained that, because he did not trust organisations involved in returns, he and other migrants "refused to receive [the organisation] when they came to visit [our ghetto]." Some respondents also linked organisations' agendas in discouraging migration to risks that return is not voluntary: a 20-year-old Guinean woman in Gao felt that "once organisations support you, you will not have the freedom to leave when you want."
- **Concerns that organisations would try to convince migrants to return:** While these migrants did not believe organisations would forcibly deport them, they were afraid organisations would manage to manipulate them out of migrating, losing the significant investments they had already made in their journeys (Box 10).
- **Fear of being treated poorly by humanitarian staff:** Migrants who reported facing inappropriate behaviour said they would avoid accessing organisations unless they received positive feedback on specific organisations from other migrants they trusted.

### Box 10: Role of organisations in discouraging migration

"It seems that there are organisations that will do everything they can to discourage you and make you give up your trip. That's why I don't even try to go because I have travelled thousands and thousands of kilometres before arriving in Niger."

27-year-old Ivorian migrant, Agadez

**Limited trust and reticence to access organisations often meant that migrants waited until they were extremely vulnerable before seeking support.** For instance, a 22-year-old Cameroonian female returnee in Agadez explained that she did not want to access "scattered and small distributions of aid" during her journey to North Africa, but she approached organisations "when she found herself in a situation of absolute despair" after being expelled from Algeria. Key informants agreed that returnees, who have often lost all their belongings and funds, were more likely to approach them than migrants on their first journey. As a result, they are unable to provide migrants with information on how to avoid harm as they travel northward, or with items to prepare for their journeys more safely (e.g., condoms, adequate clothes, hygiene kits).

## 5 Strategies to build trust with transit migrants

This study demonstrates that trust may affect an organisation’s ability to access migrants in need. The role of trust in shaping access suggests that building trust and countering misinformation should be a central component of organisations’ access strategies in transit contexts. Despite important limitations to their trust in organisations, migrants with mixed levels of trust and migrants who self-described as ‘unsure’ are willing to access organisations under specific circumstances. This suggests that organisations can take steps to build trust with them.

This section provides recommendations for humanitarian organisations and donors to work towards decreasing factors of distrust among these migrants. These recommendations draw on insights collected from migrants, field staff, and literature, which include:

- Most migrants recommended that organisations work with community-based intermediaries (in particular other migrants settled in the community) to build trust, and that organisations ensure their anonymity as beneficiaries.
- Field-based key informants generally recommended that organisations improve communication with beneficiaries and potential beneficiaries, including when closing loops once they have acted upon beneficiary feedback.
- Existing literature on building trust focuses on transparency and accountability with beneficiaries.<sup>29</sup> This includes meaningful engagement of people in designing, implementing and improving programmes that provide support to them, especially through strong feedback mechanisms.<sup>30</sup> The literature agrees that there are specific challenges to implementing strong feedback mechanisms in transit migration settings. Migrants are highly transient, which limits the time in which organisations can solicit or obtain feedback after beneficiaries receive services. Nevertheless, stranded migrants and returnees interviewed in Agadez often felt that they had provided feedback—but that their expectations were not met, and there was no adaptation as a result of their formal or informal feedback. This suggests that current strategies to gather feedback in Agadez and Gao are not well adapted to account for the differing situations of transit migrants.
- IMREF’s assessment of monitoring, evaluation and learning mechanisms for partners involved in the SSS II programme suggests that there may be gaps in how safeguarding mechanisms from headquarters are implemented at the field level. While SSS II implementing partners conducted training at the national level, many either did not implement suitable mechanisms to effectively monitor risks and address incidents, for instance through anonymous boxes or hotlines, or introduced them late into the SSS II programme.

The table below outlines key issues and the corresponding steps that donors and organisations should take to address the factors of mistrust identified among migrants in the study. Given current gaps in programming, IMREF recommends reinforcing existing practices to build trust with migrants.

Recommendation	Challenge	Steps
<p><b>Strengthen accountability to beneficiaries</b></p> <p>Audience: Donors</p>	<p>Migrants interviewed for this study highlighted inappropriate conduct and behaviour, especially with women.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consider ways to enhance donors’ roles in ensuring accountability to beneficiaries. Options could include: 1) increasing the use of third-party monitors in high-risk project locations. Third-party monitors can be commissioned in partnership with multiple donors for project locations or a wider response to share costs; 2) conduct an assessment of implementing partners’ gaps in safeguarding mechanisms in mixed migration programming, starting with Agadez. This could be done through virtual or in-person field assessments of partners’ safeguarding systems.</li> </ul>

<sup>29</sup> See for instance: Jayasinghe, S. (2011). [Erosion of trust in humanitarian agencies: what strategies might help?](#) Global Health Action, 4(1).

<sup>30</sup> IMREF (2020c). Beneficiary Feedback: SSS II and the Challenges of Listening, Responding and Adapting in a Migration Context.

Recommendation	Challenge	Steps
<p><b>Improve interactions with field staff</b></p> <p>Audience: Implementers</p>	<p>Interactions with field staff representing organisations, who are often the first and main point of contact with migrants, are critical in shaping trust. Experiences within the sample with field staff were mixed, with some migrants highlighting inappropriate conduct and behaviour.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conduct a review of safeguarding mechanisms used in mixed migration programming and address any gaps, starting with Agadez. This could be organised through inter-agency working group structures and conducted by an independent entity that can recommend improvements to current safeguarding practices at the field level, including in training staff, monitoring risks, increasing access to reporting channels and responding to incidents.</li> <li>• Invest in comprehensive and robust training (including inductions and refreshers) for 'first response' field staff. Training should cover safeguarding and ethical treatment and ensure staff are able to communicate effectively on the nature of assistance, neutrality, and migrants' rights to anonymity and confidentiality. This should also include training staff to clearly relay criteria for support and offer alternative support via referrals. Refresher trainings can also be a space for field staff to report to management what works and what does not in current outreach programmes, and to monitor the evolution of levels of trust among potential beneficiaries.</li> <li>• Systematically ensure anonymous complaints mechanisms are in place and accessible to migrants. Information about complaints mechanisms should be directly shared with migrants, easily found online, and included in programme leaflets. Donors should also provide clear expectations on accountability and feedback mechanisms to implementers and regularly follow up to ensure their functionality.</li> <li>• Investigate and track rumours and allegations about misconduct from staff in line with international safeguarding best practice.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Reduce fears of deportation</b></p> <p>Audience: Implementers</p>	<p>The fear of being deported or handed over to the police was a key reason why migrants would not access organisations. Migrants expressed stronger distrust towards organisations which implement return due to perceptions that these actors are involved in deportations.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explore opportunities to publicly advocate or communicate positions against deportations and in favour of more pathways to regular migration.</li> <li>• Ensure that these advocacy efforts are communicated to migrants in transit hubs and through the media.</li> <li>• Separate return assistance from other forms of life-saving assistance and protection programmes. This includes putting in place careful guidelines for referrals to return assistance to avoid creating misperceptions and ensuring there is separate branding or communications for return programmes.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Focus on verbal communications</b></p> <p>Audience: Implementers</p>	<p>The study found that the more migrants knew about organisations, the more they generally trusted them. Migrants also described word-of-mouth communication among themselves as an</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Design and roll out a multi-tiered information-sharing strategy aimed at different sources of information for migrants, including families, settled migrants, and smuggling actors. Migrants with positive experiences can act as multipliers and actively share their experiences with other migrants. Strategies should be tailored to different stages of migration routes, and, to the extent possible, include migrant-led organisations in transit hubs.</li> </ul>

Recommendation	Challenge	Steps
	important factor in their level of trust.	
<p><b>Strengthen feedback loops</b></p> <p>Audience: Implementers</p>	<p>Migrants often felt that they had provided feedback to organisations—but that their requests were not heard and their feedback did not result in any adaptations.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Test and expand feedback mechanisms, especially on how to close feedback loops with migrants in different situations (i.e., transit migrant, stranded migrant, returnee). If organisations decide to respond to feedback, they should do so quickly to benefit migrants on the move. If feedback cannot be addressed, this should be communicated in a timely and clear manner. In some cases where migrants have already moved on, organisations may ask migrants how they would like to be contacted once a decision or action has been taken by the organisation; this could include providing updates on feedback via WhatsApp messages or texts. Organisations can also advertise steps taken to address feedback from migrants (for instance, using messages in leaflets or on the wall of offices that migrants visit).<sup>31</sup></li> <li>• Enhance practices around gathering informal feedback. This should include training staff who interact regularly with migrants on how to record and follow up on informal feedback. Qualitative and regular unstructured insights not captured through formal mechanisms can avoid raising expectations while also providing useful feedback on assistance.<sup>32</sup></li> </ul>
<p><b>Ensure anonymity of beneficiaries</b></p> <p>Audience: Implementers</p>	<p>Migrants talked of concerns that their identity and images would be shared with the media, or with other migrants, without their consent.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review assistance forms and ensure only essential data is being collected. Avoid asking personal questions that are not needed to provide available services or conduct monitoring and evaluation. This was recommended by several migrants in the sample in both Agadez and Gao.</li> <li>• Provide migrants information on who to contact in case they have concerns about their data.</li> </ul>

<sup>31</sup> Kahn, C. (2020). [Accountability, Feedback & Complaints Mechanisms in Humanitarian Responses to Migration](#), June 2020, START Network.

<sup>32</sup> See also: IMREF (2020c). Beneficiary Feedback: SSS II and the Challenges of Listening, Responding and Adapting in a Migration Context.

## Annex 1: Glossary

<b>Access</b>	"Humanitarian access concerns humanitarian actors' ability to reach populations affected by crisis, as well as an affected population's ability to access humanitarian assistance and services." (UN OCHA) <sup>33</sup>
<b>Central Mediterranean Route</b>	The Central Mediterranean Route (CMR) refers to the collection of pathways taken by people in mixed migration journeys from West and Central Africa towards North Africa that can result in attempts to cross the sea towards Italy and Malta from Libya, Algeria, Egypt or Tunisia. (UNSMIL and OHCHR) <sup>34</sup>
<b>Forced migration</b>	"A migratory movement which, although the drivers can be diverse, involves force, compulsion, or coercion." (IOM) <sup>35</sup> Forced migrants may be seeking asylum or be recognised as refugees.
<b>Ghettos</b>	Ghettos are "compounds controlled by operators involved in the irregular migration industry." (Clingendael) <sup>36</sup>
<b>Mixed migration</b>	"Mixed migration refers to cross-border movements of people including refugees fleeing persecution and conflict, victims of trafficking and people seeking better lives and opportunities. Motivated to move by a multiplicity of factors, people in mixed flows have different legal statuses as well as a variety of vulnerabilities. Although entitled to protection under international human rights law, they are exposed to multiple rights violations along their journey. Those in mixed migration flows travel along similar routes, using similar means of travel—often travelling irregularly and wholly or partially assisted by migrant smugglers." (MMC) <sup>37</sup>
<b>Refugees</b>	A refugee is any person "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reason of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside of the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country." (Article 1 of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees)
<b>Returnees</b>	"Returning migrants are persons returning to their country of citizenship after having been international migrants (whether short-term or long-term) in another country." (OECD) <sup>38</sup> Return can be spontaneous and independent, forced by the authorities or assisted by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) via Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR). <sup>39</sup>
<b>Smuggling</b>	"The procurement, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit, of the illegal entry of a person into a State Party of which the person is not a national or permanent resident." (UNODC) <sup>40</sup> In practice, a "voluntary transaction takes place between the migrant and the smuggler, where the latter facilitates the former's irregular movement." (Clingendael) <sup>41</sup> Actors in the smuggling networks may include drivers, car owners, "coaxers" (intermediaries) and "ghetto" owners. <sup>42</sup>
<b>Stranded migrants</b>	A migrant who for "reasons beyond their control has been unintentionally forced to stay in a country" (European Commission). <sup>43</sup> Migrants become stranded when they are unable or unwilling to return to their state of nationality or former residence, are unable or unwilling to integrate in the state in which they are physically present, and/or

<sup>33</sup> OCHA (2010), [Humanitarian Access](#).

<sup>34</sup> UNSMIL and OHCHR (2018), [Desperate and Dangerous: Report on the human rights situation of migrants and refugees in Libya](#).

<sup>35</sup> IOM (2019a), [Glossary on Migration](#).

<sup>36</sup> Clingendael (2018c), [A human rights and peace-building approach to migration governance in the Sahel](#).

<sup>37,37</sup> MMC (undated), [What is Mixed Migration?](#)

<sup>38</sup> OECD (2001), [Glossary of statistical terms](#).

<sup>39</sup> Adapted from IOM (2019a), [Glossary on Migration](#).

<sup>40</sup> UNODC (2017). [The Concept of "Financial or Other Material Benefit" in the Smuggling of Migrants Protocol](#).

<sup>41</sup> Clingendael (2018d), Clingendael. 2018d. [Caught in the middle](#).

<sup>42</sup> Clingendael (2018b), [Multilateral Damage: The Impact of EU Migration Policies on Central Saharan Routes](#).

<sup>43</sup> European Migration Network (undated), [Stranded migrant](#).



<p><b>Transit migrants</b></p>	<p>are unable to move to the next leg of their journeys due to lack of resources or legal constraints.<sup>44</sup></p> <p>Individuals who have the intention of continuing their journey on the Central Mediterranean Route as soon as they are able to do so.</p>
<p><b>Trafficking in persons</b></p>	<p>The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. (Palermo Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons)<sup>45</sup></p> <p>Trafficked persons may be migrants and/or refugees, but people are also trafficked within their own country of origin. (Clingendael)<sup>46</sup></p>
<p><b>Vulnerability in mixed migration settings</b></p>	<p>The inability to avoid, cope with, and recover from exposure or experiences of harm (IOM).<sup>47</sup> Vulnerability is not “predetermined by personal characteristics (e.g. by describing persons with a physical disability as a vulnerable group), but as susceptibility to some type of harm under the influence of personal and situational factors.” (Vogel &amp; Kraher, 2017)<sup>48</sup></p>

<sup>44</sup> Adapted from IOM, UNHCR & Save the Children (2016), [Addressing the challenges of mixed migration: training guide](#).

<sup>45</sup> Article 3, paragraph (a) of the [Palermo Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons](#).

<sup>46</sup> Clingendael (2018d), Clingendael. 2018d. [Caught in the middle](#).

<sup>47</sup> IOM (2019), [IOM Handbook on Protection and Assistance for Migrants Vulnerable to Violence, Exploitation and Abuse](#); OHCHR (2017), [Principles and Guidelines migrants in vulnerable situations](#); ICRC (2017), [Approach to Migration](#).

<sup>48</sup> Vogel and Kraher. (2017), [Demand-side Interventions Against Trafficking in Human Beings: Towards an Integrated Theoretical Approach](#). DemandAT Working Paper No. 14.

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# Annex 3: Qualitative Sample



**Total number of migrants interviewed:**  
**90**

**Average Age: 28**

**Gender:**  
60 Male 30 Female

**Total number of nationalities interviewed:**  
**16**

**Total number of foreign returnees interviewed:**  
**13**

**Average length of stay:**  
**8 months**

### AGADEZ - NIGER

**Number of migrants interviewed: 45**

**Gender:**  
31 Male 14 Female

**Nationality:**

Cameroon	20	Benin	4	Senegal	4	Ivory Coast	3
		Burkina Faso	2	The Gambia	2	Gabon	1
		CAR	2	Chad	1	Ghana	1
		Mali	2	Congo	1	Guinea	1
						Nigeria	1

**Average length of stay:**  
6 months

**Returnees:**  
11

**Average Age:**  
27

### GAO - MALI

**Number of migrants interviewed: 45**

**Gender:**  
29 Male 16 Female

**Nationality:**

Guinea	11	Burkina Faso	7	Benin	4	Cameroon	4
Ivory Coast	8	Nigeria	4	Niger	3	Togo	3
				Senegal	1		

**Average length of stay:**  
9 months

**Returnees:**  
2

**Average Age:**  
29

#	Location	Age	Sex	Nationality	Time spent in Agadez/Gao	Expelled from Algeria/Libya
1.	Agadez	29	M	Senegal	18 months	
2.	Agadez	29	M	Senegal	7 months	
3.	Agadez	30	F	Cameroon	12 months	
4.	Agadez	33	F	Benin	20 months	
5.	Agadez	30	M	Cameroon	6 months	
6.	Agadez	21	M	Cameroon	2 weeks	
7.	Agadez	21	M	Ivory Coast	2 months	
8.	Agadez	22	M	Gabon	1 month	
9.	Agadez	23	M	Burkina Faso	5 months	
10.	Agadez	24	M	Mali	1 month	Yes
11.	Agadez	27	M	Democratic Republic of the Congo	1 month	
12.	Agadez	33	M	Central African Republic	12 months	
13.	Agadez	22	M	Cameroon	2 weeks	
14.	Agadez	52	F	Cameroon	5 months	
15.	Agadez	30	F	Cameroon	9 months	
16.	Agadez	24	F	Cameroon	2 months	
17.	Agadez	27	F	Cameroon	2 months	Yes
18.	Agadez	18	M	Central African Republic	11 months	Yes
19.	Agadez	40	M	Cameroon	10 days	
20.	Agadez	25	M	Cameroon	24 months	Yes
21.	Agadez	26	M	Cameroon	3 months	Yes
22.	Agadez	31	M	Ivory Coast	10 months	Yes
23.	Agadez	24	M	Cameroon	2 weeks	
24.	Agadez	33	M	Chad	2 months	
25.	Agadez	23	F	Mali	12 months	
26.	Agadez	26	M	Cameroon	3 months	
27.	Agadez	18	M	The Gambia	1 month	Yes
28.	Agadez	25	M	Cameroon	3 weeks	
29.	Agadez	26	M	Senegal	6 months	
30.	Agadez	30	M	Cameroon	12 months	Yes
31.	Agadez	19	M	Burkina Faso	6 months	Yes
32.	Agadez	28	F	Ivory Coast	1 week	Yes
33.	Agadez	35	M	Senegal	6 months	Yes
34.	Agadez	24	M	Benin	3 months	
35.	Agadez	25	M	Guinea	10 days	
36.	Agadez	37	M	The Gambia	9 months	

#	Location	Age	Sex	Nationality	Time spent in Agadez/Gao	Expelled from Algeria/Libya
37.	Agadez	19	F	Nigeria	11 days	
38.	Agadez	25	F	Benin	3 months	
39.	Agadez	22	F	Cameroon	12 months	
40.	Agadez	22	F	Benin	10 months	
41.	Agadez	34	M	Cameroon	4 months	
42.	Agadez	24	F	Cameroon	10 days	
43.	Agadez	26	F	Ghana	10 months	
44.	Agadez	22	M	Cameroon	2 months	
45.	Agadez	23	M	Cameroon	6 months	
46.	Gao	27	F	Cameroon	4 months	
47.	Gao	26	M	Togo	7 months	
48.	Gao	30	M	Nigeria	8 months	
49.	Gao	30	M	Guinea	9 months	
50.	Gao	30	F	Guinea	4 months	
51.	Gao	25	M	Ivory Coast	36 months	
52.	Gao	35	M	Burkina Faso	1.5 months	
53.	Gao	31	M	Ivory Coast	11 months	
54.	Gao	22	M	Benin	7 months	
55.	Gao	31	M	Niger	3 months	
56.	Gao	26	M	Nigeria	7 months	
57.	Gao	25	M	Benin	36 months	
58.	Gao	32	M	Togo	24 months	
59.	Gao	31	M	Ivory Coast	3 months	
60.	Gao	24	M	Guinea	12 months	
61.	Gao	33	M	Burkina Faso	6 months	
62.	Gao	25	M	Ivory Coast	1 month	
63.	Gao	32	M	Guinea	18 months	
64.	Gao	28	M	Ivory Coast	1 week	
65.	Gao	24	M	Guinea	18 months	
66.	Gao	27	M	Benin	8 months	
67.	Gao	33	F	Ivory Coast	5 months	
68.	Gao	27	F	Ivory Coast	4 months	
69.	Gao	30	M	Togo	4 months	Yes
70.	Gao	27	M	Niger	5 months	
71.	Gao	28	F	Guinea	16 months	
72.	Gao	34	F	Guinea	2 months	

#	Location	Age	Sex	Nationality	Time spent in Agadez/Gao	Expelled from Algeria/Libya
73.	Gao	33	F	Burkina Faso	9 months	
74.	Gao	29	F	Ivory Coast	21 months	
75.	Gao	22	M	Burkina Faso	7 months	
76.	Gao	31	F	Burkina Faso	11 months	
77.	Gao	21	F	Guinea	5 months	
78.	Gao	20	F	Guinea	24 months	
79.	Gao	33	F	Cameroon	9 months	
80.	Gao	37	F	Cameroon	6 months	
81.	Gao	33	F	Nigeria	8 months	
82.	Gao	36	F	Burkina Faso	3 months	
83.	Gao	37	F	Niger	1 month	
84.	Gao	28	M	Cameroon	11 months	
85.	Gao	28	M	Senegal	2 months	
86.	Gao	32	M	Burkina Faso	8 months	
87.	Gao	33	M	Nigeria	12 months	
88.	Gao	27	M	Guinea	9 months	
89.	Gao	32	M	Benin	6 months	
90.	Gao	41	M	Guinea	8 months	Yes