Though the four-by-fours with migrants still leave regularly for Libya, there's little doubt that EU driven anti-migration efforts in the Agadez region of Niger has been a blow to the local cross-border economy. Official discourse claims that migration to Libya from Niger has dropped by 90 percent, following the 2016 crackdown on the migration business in Agadez. These statistics are difficult to back up given that drivers now leave at night and under the radar. They drive without lights on and take more dangerous routes and rough backroads into Libya. “There’s not just one way to Libya. There are a thousand ways to Libya,” as one driver in Agadez explained on one of our numerous field trips to the Agadez region.

**EU PRESSURE ON NIGER TO STOP MIGRANTS IS RESHAPING CROSS-BORDER ECONOMIES**

**POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

- EU interventions in Niger have had an unintended negative effect on the safety of migrants. It’s therefore important to maintain focus on rescue missions in the desert.
- Europe must ensure that conflict and context sensitivity remain paramount as well as promoting alternative development opportunities and good governance.
- National, local and traditional authorities should continue to avoid conflicts linked to natural resources, including gold, uranium, pasturelands and water, by promoting transparency and participatory decision-making.
Yet, EUs border externalization is clearly having an effect on the region, and many observers had predicted a breakdown in the historically turbulent relationship between the Tuareg-dominated northern region and the Nigerien capital of Niamey, following president Issoufou’s recent deals with the EU. But though threats of rebellion are often heard in Agadez, the most immediate result of the pressure on the region’s livelihood has been an opportunistic reshaping of cross-border economies.

Driving migrants still forms a core activity to many young men in the region, either directly or indirectly, but it has been pushed underground. Mirroring the development in the Mediterranean Sea, the numbers may have dropped but the journey has become more dangerous.

The iconic fully loaded trucks of migrants have disappeared from the streets. Drivers now leave alone, one jeep at time, under cover of the night. As one migrant driver explained, that meant he was more reliant on his toolbox. Before he could call on help from the caravan but now he and the passengers are exposed to great danger if the car breaks down in the desert. Since 2016, the UN has assisted 20,000 migrants lost in the desert, yet drivers are wary of making distress calls because rescue operations often entail law enforcement.

The drivers’ fear of being caught, and spending years in jail, has thus had a negative effect on the safety of migrants. At the sight of a police jeep, or what they would assume to be military or police, drivers drop the migrants in the Sahara, a fatal situation given the extreme weather conditions. Moreover, according to the UN, drivers sometimes desert the migrants for no other reason than to steal their money.

On the backroads of the southern Central Sahara, migrants and drivers risk being ambushed or running into arbitrary check points. It’s not unusual that migrants who can’t pay an extortion fee risk having to pay with their lives. Border insecurity is also gendered. It’s well documented that armed bandits in the desert subject women to sexual violence. The number of migrant deaths in the desert are unknown, but some humanitarian actors estimate that the crossing of the desert may yield even more fatalities than the crossing of the sea.

Gold rush

Not only have maps been redrawn, routes displaced, and the migration business driven underground, but migrants have also been substituted with commodities less directly related to the immediate concerns of European constituencies. For instance trade in drugs, gold, and rare animals. This development is important to understand the resilience of Niger’s semi-nomadic region and how the people of Agadez respond to outside pressure whether posed by the harsh climate, the central government, or European interventions.

The gold rush in Niger took off in 2014, coinciding with increased attention and pressure on smuggling and trafficking routes by first Mali-based French regional anti-terror Operation Serval and later the expanded Sahelian Operation Barkhane, and from 2012, the EUCAP Sahel Niger mission that gathered pace after the 2015 European migration crisis. To many, the discovery of gold was seen as a blessing that would alleviate pressure on the region after first tourism and the migration economy had been curtailed.

Artisanal gold mining in Agadez primarily takes place in three sites: Djado in the North, Tchibarakaten on the border with Algeria, and in the Air Mountains just north of the capital Niamey. The discovery of gold in the area has led to increased migration, with many people moving to the region to seek their fortune. The gold rush has been fueled by the lack of law enforcement and the desire for a better life.

Some humanitarian actors estimate that the crossing of the desert may yield even more fatalities than the crossing of the sea.
of the city of Agadez in Central Niger. Remote and inaccessible places suddenly boomed with young treasure hunters from all over Africa, especially from Sudan, Chad and other countries with a mining tradition.

Towns with thousands of inhabitants, Nigeriens as well as foreigners, arose in the desert, and the trucks that used to ship migrants to Libya are now filled with improvised miners in search of fortune. Businesses soon followed, selling food, water, alcohol and mining equipment. Everything paid for in gold dust.

The sudden impact of gold wealth is easily noticeable in Agadez. Luxury villas are popping, rumored to be built in order to invest (and launder) gold money. Gold is smuggled to Mali, Benin or Libya, usually for onward shipment to global gold markets such as Dubai and India. Yet this lucrative activity is taking a toll on local communities, with the mercury and cyanide used to refine gold irreversibly contaminating the already scant natural resources of the region.

The gold mines also led to an increase in arms trafficking and banditry, according to a recent Small Arms Survey report. In the remote desert encamp-ments, it is difficult to protect one’s gold, and weapons surge in from Libya, mostly AK47’s and the Turkish converted blank-firing pistol that can be seen on display in the markets in Tripoli.

In 2017, the Nigerien government closed Djado citing security fears, whereas Tchibarakaten and Aïr remain open. This ‘double standard’ has raised speculations and controversies, leading to the removal of the traditional leaders of the Tebu ethnic group overseeing the Djado plateau. But, according to Small Arms Survey, the time of local amateurs finding gold on the surface or in shallow open pit mines might be over, and it’s unclear what future promise gold holds to the local population.

**Pills don’t die in the desert**

Another increasingly important avenue of resources comes from driving synthetic opioids. Especially Tramadol which is produced in India, bought in Nigeria, and driven to the border with Libya and supplied to the North African market. Some smugglers claim that Tramadol is now a bigger business than migrants. As one smuggler explained, “The pills don’t need water, they don’t get tired, and they don’t die in the desert.”
Off the record, local Agadez authorities confirmed the growing importance of Tramadol, and to looking the other way and taking a bribe, as the opioids were smuggled to Libya via Agadez. “Tramadol is on the rise,” one policeman explained, “Many of the human smugglers are into that now. But the EU don’t see it”.

In UN’s 2019 World Drug Report, Tramadol consumption in Africa is termed “a crisis” that calls for “urgent international attention”. At the same time, the north of Niger remains a fertile ground for the international trafficking of hashish and cocaine moving from the Atlantic coast to the Middle East. Members of the local elite are suspected of protecting drug trafficking, and in March 2019 a spokesman to the speaker in Niger’s parliament was arrested in relation to the seizure of nearly 800 kg of cocaine.

Parrots in great demand
Another less reported trend, is substituting migrants with rare animals. Several operations out of Agadez specialized in the African Grey Parrot. The bird which is desired on the black market for its intelligence and ability to copy human speech, fetches big prizes in Libya, one former migrant smuggler explained. He now drove to Nigeria once a month to buy the birds on a market, and then transported them to Agadez, and from there to Libya. The parrots hail from Ivory Coast and Cameroon, he explained. The African Grey Parrot has been on UN’s list of endangered species since 2016, banning global trade.

Finally, whereas driving migrants to Libya used to be big business, driving migrants the other way, to Niamey and beyond for repatriation, is now a booming enterprise. The majority of returning migrants in Agadez have been expelled from Algeria, whereas a smaller contingent of migrant workers arrive from Libya. In 2018, according to Amnesty International, Algeria deported 13,000 Nigerien nationals and 12,000 West African and Central African migrants.

Large bus companies, which used to profit enormously from the shipment of prospective migrants to the North, now provide the infrastructure to manage large-scale return flows. Well connected to the Nigerien ruling class, the powerful owners of transport companies have thus seized on return migration as a strategy of coping with the changing political environment, and the EU driven anti-migrations efforts.