



ISOE Policy Brief No. 2/2015

Migration in the West African Sahel – more than a response to climate change

Debates about climate-induced migratory movements – and their possible links to instability and conflict – along with the discussion on migration flows across the Mediterranean Sea frequently highlight the West African Sahel as a region of concern. However, findings from recent empirical research on Sahelian regions in Mali and Senegal suggest no evidence for increasing population movements towards Europe as a direct result of environmental stress and climate change. It is the patterns of migration that are changing and not so much the volume. A closer look at the social-ecological conditions of migration in the Sahel allows for an alternative characterization of the problem dynamics. It reveals a rich and comprehensive picture of mobility and the importance of climate and environment in this respect, and identifies starting points for policy options.

Findings and recommendations

- ▶ **Mobility in the West African Sahel is multi-faceted. Population movements are hard to steer but can be indirectly regulated. Coherent political strategies should consider different levels of institutional regulation (from local to international) and the interplay between different policy domains (e.g., migration, agriculture, environmental protection). Forward-looking policies are vital in paving the way for better legislation and institutions and for avoiding any increase in dynamics that entail adverse social risks.**
- ▶ **Seeking to hamper migration is neither an appropriate nor a conducive political goal. In the West African Sahel, migration is deeply rooted in history and culture. It is part of people's everyday life and livelihood strategies, and the majority of people move voluntarily.**
- ▶ **Integrated policies should strengthen the benefits of migration for sustainable development. Social networks and translocal relationships between migrants and their home community can favour the transfer of remittances, knowledge and skills, and migrants' investments in the regions of origin. With regard to international migration, the EU can play a pioneering role in the handling of migration by devising a coherent policy that includes new legal and safe ways to enter Europe.**
- ▶ **In the West African Sahel, migration is predominantly regional, and most people move from rural to urban areas within the same country. Development strategies must therefore consider linkages between rural and urban development. For example, policy responses should combine infrastructure development with the promotion of sustainable land and water resources management which includes preventing land degradation and biodiversity loss. In rural areas, policies must recognise the specific needs of small-scale farmers, both in arable farming and livestock breeding, e.g., by providing insurances for the compensation of crop loss and access to fertile land. Investments in sustainable agriculture are needed, but also stimuli for employment and job creation in other economic sectors.**
- ▶ **Education is a critical factor for migration and policies must recognize the right of the young generation for better opportunities and chances. Considerable effort is needed to promote and improve formal and higher education. Investments in education are of paramount importance for reducing vulnerability not only to climatic but also to social and economic stressors.**





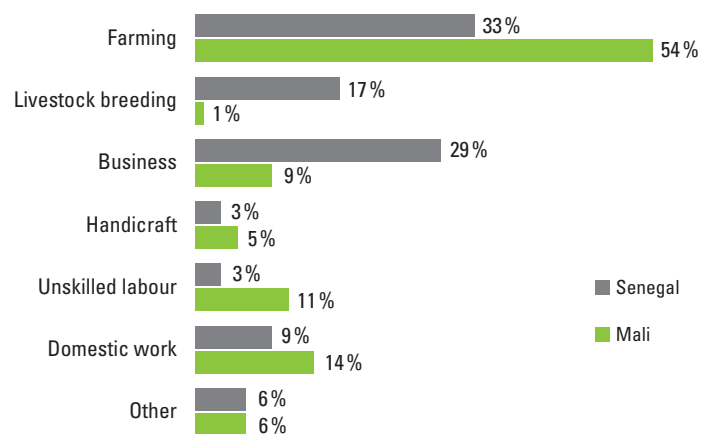
Figure 1: Location of study areas Linguère in Senegal and Bandiagara in Mali (red rectangles). Cartography: Lukas Drees

Migration in response to natural hazards

Evidence shows that changing and unsteady environmental conditions lead to changing migration patterns in the Sahel region. However, environmental stress is not usually the major factor that causes people to move. Moreover, climate change on its own does not directly trigger population movements; it does, however, produce environmental effects and can exacerbate existing vulnerabilities. The West African Sahel is one of the regions most affected by climate change. Semi-arid areas such as Linguère in Senegal and Bandiagara in Mali (see Fig. 1) have always suffered from periods of drought and, in part, from land degradation. Climatic changes and human activities have contributed to massive changes in the flora, fauna and soils. Effects of climate change such as higher temperatures and extremely vari-

able rainfall have contributed to a decreasing diversity of woody species and have favoured an increase in more robust and more drought-resistant species. Some areas register a spread of land degradation resulting from overgrazing, expansion of agricultural areas and deforestation. Migration can be one possible societal response to natural hazards. However, whether it constitutes an adaptation strategy to mitigate the risks of climate variability and uncertain agricultural production, a livelihood diversification strategy, or just the search for a better life depends on the specific social-ecological conditions in each case; these conditions influence the different actions and strategies followed by individuals, groups and societies to deal with changes of their natural environment.

Figure 2: Most important income sources of survey participants. Source: micle survey 2012 (n = 847, excluding students and inactive respondents)



Migration as a means of risk reduction

Agriculture is the most important economic activity and source of income in the rural areas. The majority of villagers and their families are engaged in subsistence and small-scale farming or livestock breeding. The education level in Bandiagara and Linguère is fairly low, with a high percentage of individuals having no formal education at all. The lower the education level in rural areas, the more likely it is that agriculture will be the main source of income. Households that are highly dependent on agriculture are particularly vulnerable to rainfall variability and ecosystem degradation. Insufficient precipitation can directly compromise the income basis of rural households, because it affects agricultural production, crop yields and returns. Under these conditions, migration can be an adaptation strategy for reducing the risks of uncertain agricultural returns.



- ▶ Migration decisions are particularly influenced by climatic changes and land degradation under the following conditions:
- ▶ When people are highly dependent on agriculture and thus on local agro-ecological conditions and rainfall patterns
- ▶ When opportunities for income diversification and non-farm activities are rare
- ▶ If access to social capital and financial capital (e.g., education or credits) is low

And yet migration is only one of several ways to minimise risks and compensate for climate variability. In Bandiagara and Linguère, people adopt different strategies to cope with the negative effects of environmental changes such as crop failures: they might sell cattle, carbon or wild fruits, take up credits, or practice mutual aid among neighbours.

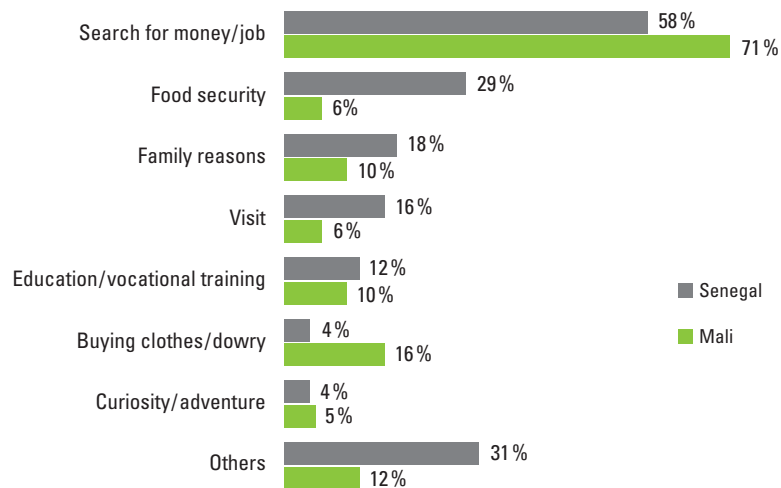


Motives for migration are versatile

Motives behind the decision to migrate are manifold. They overlap and can change during an individual's biography. The objectives behind migration, such as education, family visits and curiosity, reflect specific socio-cultural characteristics of migration in West Africa. Economic factors represent the main reasons for moving. Employment, food security and sustenance are amongst the most important incentives for migration and stand in close relation to environmental conditions in rural agricultural societies. Shifting rainfall patterns and insufficient yields often lead people to migrate during the dry season. However, the phenomenon cannot be understood merely as an immediate response to climatic conditions, since people also move in times of favourable rainfall patterns and successful harvests. This in-

dicates that there is no single reason behind the decision to migrate. Moreover, motives for migration depend on gender, age, ethnic affiliation and education level. Data derived from in-depth interviews, participant observation and a standardised survey with more than 900 individuals in Mali and Senegal confirm the important cultural role of migration: the great majority have personal experience of migration and regard it as something positive. Migration within the countries is prevalent, particularly in larger urban areas, while international migration to Europe is rare. Temporary movements, and circular and seasonal migration patterns are the most dominant temporal migration patterns. Social relations and migrant networks are important factors for decision-making and the choice of destination.

Figure 3: Motives for migration
(multiple answers possible).
Source: micle survey 2012
(Senegal n=388; Mali n=398)



Relevant policies – multilevel governance is required

People's mobility in Mali and Senegal in the context of social-ecological transformations depends on different international, regional and national policies in the areas of migration, development and environment. Starting points for political strategies and regulation require a multi-level perspective.

► At the *international level*, West African countries such as Senegal and Mali seek to embed migration in development strategies, and have intensified their efforts to cooperate internationally, mainly with the European Union and several European countries. For example, 'mobility partnerships' involve the granting of increased access to the EU labour market in exchange for cooperation on irregular migration. However, European migration policy is contradictory and fragmented: restrictive and control-oriented policies aimed at curtailing immigration to Europe still prevail. Preventive measures in bi-lateral programmes between Mali and Senegal and France, Spain and Italy seek to combat the root causes of migration such as poverty via policies of 'co-development'. By concentrating on employment, investments and infrastructure, they can use the positive potential of migration.

► At the *regional level*, different (sub-)regional initiatives, treaties and regulations are significant for the regulation of migration in the West African Region. The ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) Common Approach on Migration (similar to Europe) is among the most advanced examples of free movement of people. ECOWAS citizens are entitled to enter freely, reside and settle in member states. Notwithstanding obstacles to implementation, Malian migrants from Bandiagara, for example, are formally entitled to move to Ivory Coast for labour purposes.

► At the *national level*, Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) are one key instrument for drawing up national development policy. These mid-term political strategies refer to different policy fields relevant for the environment/migration nexus, such as education policy, the health sector, rural development policies, and environment. The Malian and Senegalese PRSPs in particular mention positive elements of migration in terms of development and poverty reduction. Furthermore, they propose rural development initiatives to address internal migration by better integrating young people into social life and developing the skills required for job-seeking.

The research project micle

The transdisciplinary research project "Migration, climate change and environment" (micle) investigated the relationship between climate change, land degradation and migration in selected areas of the West African

Sahel. It was funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) and conducted by the Institute for Social-Ecological Research in cooperation with the Institute for Geography at Bayreuth University.

References

- Hummel, Diana (2015): Climate change, land degradation and migration in Mali and Senegal – some policy implications. *Migration and Development*.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21632324.2015.1022972>
- van der Land, Victoria/Diana Hummel (2013): Vulnerability and the role of education in environmentally induced migration in Mali and Senegal. *Ecology and Society* 18(4): 14.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.5751/ES-05830-180414>
- Hummel, Diana/Martin Doevenspeck/Cyrus Samimi (eds.) (2012): *Climate Change, Environment and Migration in the Sahel. Selected Issues with a Focus on Senegal and Mali*. Micle Working Paper No.1. Frankfurt/Main

Citation

Hummel, Diana/Stefan Liehr (2015): Migration in the West African Sahel – more than a response to climate change. *ISOE Policy Brief No. 2/2015*. ISOE – Institute for Social-Ecological Research (ed.). Frankfurt/Main, Germany

Keywords

Mobility, Mali, Senegal, land degradation, social-ecological conditions, policy, multi-level governance

ISOE – Institute for Social-Ecological Research

ISOE is one of the leading non-university institutes for sustainability research. For 25 years, the institute has been developing the scientific foundation for decision making, as well as future-orientated concepts for policy makers, civil society and economy on a regional, national, and international level. Among the research foci are water, energy, climate protection, mobility and urban spaces, as well as biodiversity and people.

ISOE Policy Briefs are published by ISOE several times a year to highlight new and practical approaches to sustainable development professionals.

The Policy Briefs are available online free of charge at <http://www.isoe.de/en/publications/isoe-policy-briefs/>

Credits

Editing: Nicola Schuldt-Baumgart

Design & Layout: Harry Kleespies

Photo credits: © V. van der Land

Comments and questions are welcome. Please contact us at:

ISOE – Institute for Social-Ecological Research

Hamburger Allee 45, 60486 Frankfurt/Main, Germany

Fon: +49(0)69 707 69 19-0

E-mail: info@isoe.de

<http://www.isoe.de/en/isoe/>

<https://twitter.com/isoewikom>

ISSN: 2365-1148

