

Colloquy

EU-DRIVEN BORDER CONTROL IN NIGER: From Migrants to Gold, Drugs, and Rare Animals

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In recent years, the Niger-Libya migration route has become a cornerstone in the European Union's (EU) anti-migration efforts. Under such large-scale policy instruments as the Emergency Trust Fund and the EU Partnership Framework under the European Agenda for Migration, Niger collaborates on a broad spectrum of interventions aimed at curbing migration to Europe, ranging from implementing export border-control measures to addressing jobs and the lack of local development. Most interventions center on Agadez, the city at the edge of the southern central Sahara from where the migrants set off toward Libya. Migrants provide a vital source of income to the impoverished region, benefiting local drivers and related businesses. As a consequence, some researchers had predicted a breakdown in the historically turbulent relationship between the Tuareg-dominated Agadez region and the capital of Niamey (Tinti 2017; Raineri 2018; Lucht 2017). Instead, local cross-border economies are reshaped by local entrepreneurs who are substituting migrants with less sensitive commodities, such as drugs and rare animals (Lucht and Raineri 2019). In a bioeconomic sense, we can see how lives on the move intersect with various competing economies that extract value from the mobility, or the arrested mobility, of those lives, with sometimes fatal results. Indeed,

migrant abjection often seems to result directly from EU border practices, constituting the precursor for further exploitative practices.

Between 2014 and 2020 Niger received more than 1 billion euros in aid, including support for security and governance, and Europe remains its major donor. Aid comes primarily from the European Development Fund, but also from the Trust Fund for Africa, designed to address “root causes of irregular migration.” Since 2015, African cooperation on migration control and readmissions has become an explicit condition of continued EU support and cooperation. The EU also functions as a key security operator in the Sahel region and has set up three Common Security and Defense Policy Missions that supply equipment and training to counter “irregular migration and trafficking,” as well as terrorism, drugs and arms smuggling. The EUCAP (European Union Capacity Building Mission) presence in Agadez has become the target of much local anger and is generally speculated to be behind the government’s recent move to confiscate hundreds of private vehicles and imprison local drivers. As the drivers at the bus station angrily argue, driving people to Libya was a lawful and respected business until the EU got involved, and they have the stamped paperwork to prove it. The Nigerien government, though, maintains that the measures taken against smuggling had nothing to do with Europe. As the Agadez deputy governor explained to me, “The law [against smuggling] was put in place prior to the migration crisis in Europe; it’s for the safety of Nigeriens. Migration is a normal way of life, but after the collapse in Libya in 2014, everything changed. Arms started flowing into our country, migrants rushed to Libya, and died in the desert. There was no control and we needed to do something.”¹

In peak years, more than 300,000 people a year traveled through Agadez toward Libya to find work or to attempt the risky Mediterranean passage. Although jeeps carrying migrants still leave for the desert, EU efforts in the Agadez region have clearly severely impacted the local economy. Official EU discourse claims that migration to Libya from Niger has dropped dramatically following the intervention, from 70,000 to 1,500 in May 2016 (EC 2016). These statistics, however, are difficult to confirm given that drivers now depart at night, drive without lights on, and take rough backroads into Libya. Political leaders in Agadez must walk a tightrope when commenting on the growing securitization, even if the region’s economy has been hit hard. Since a transition from military to civilian rule in 2011, the government of President Issoufou (and from 2021 onward, of his former interior minister and chosen successor Mohamed Bazoum) has become increasingly authoritarian (Elischer 2020). Local leaders therefore have few options

but to embrace government collaboration with the EU while at the same time facing growing discontent among their own people, whose work and lives have long centered on mobility. As the mayor of Agadez told me during fieldwork in 2019, migration, in his community's view, is "normal," and the law against the smuggling of migrants, adopted by parliament in 2015 and implemented the following year, appears "sudden and harsh," a form of "violence against Agadez." Other leaders in the region expressed their critique in less moderate terms and warned that armed conflict could flare up at any moment or that the country could lose the youth to militant jihadism. One senior Tuareg told me, "IOM [International Organization for Migration] and EUCAP should leave here and don't come back. They think they are safe, but they have to leave their camp to eat, to find a girl. You see what I mean?" Although threats against international actors, and especially France, are not unusual in Agadez, the pressure on the region's migrant economy has not resulted in a new rebellion, but rather led to a reorganization of local cross-border economies (Lucht and Raineri 2019).

Under pressure, clandestine economies of mobility seem only to multiply and provide new avenues for profit accumulation, ones more hazardous for migrants and mobility entrepreneurs alike. To be sure, migrant driving remains a principal activity among young men in Agadez, but now they leave one jeep at a time, under cover of the night. Before, drivers left in caravans that could support each other in the desert if something went wrong, whereas now migrant drivers are on their own if the vehicle breaks down. The fear of meeting a patrol and subsequently facing jail time for smuggling makes the journey even more perilous. Reports indicate that drivers are now quick to dump their passengers if a situation develops—or is perceived to develop—that could involve law enforcement. As a result, thousands of migrants have been left to their own devices in the desert in the past five years, a situation that can be fatal. The UN's rescue mission has picked up 20,000 people in the desert since 2015; how many have died is unknown. The crackdown on migration has led to fewer desert journeys, but those that continue have become more dangerous. Competing mobility regimes, and the profit they extract from either facilitating or arresting migrant mobility, create new risks and rewards for migrants and migrant facilitators with often fatal outcomes that, in turn, produce a "necropolitical" dimension (Mbembe 2019) that works as deterrence. As Marthe Achtnich (2022, this issue) argues, in many instances, "vulnerability or fragility are the preconditions to predation."

In Agadez, the pressure on migrant facilitators has also led to substituting for migrant "cargo" commodities less sensitive to the concerns of the European

constituencies. Drugs, gold, and rare animals have taken the place of migrants in the cross-border economy. Artisanal small-scale gold mining in Agadez took off in 2014, coinciding with the collapse of Libya's government and increasing EU pressure on smuggling routes. One anecdote told to me by Ibrahim, a former migrant driver turned gold digger, links the two businesses. According to Ibrahim, a migrant truck got stuck in the desert sand near Djado Plateau, necessitating that the drivers get out and dig. While digging, they came upon gold nuggets, and when the jeep's wheels spun in the sand, gold nuggets sprayed up from the ground. Ibrahim's anecdote illustrates how when the migration business literally got stuck, gold appeared as "a blessing and a gift from God," as he put it. A regular gold rush followed, and many of the men who formerly drove migrants switched to driving gold diggers from all over West Africa to the remote and deserted areas. Like so many other young men, Ibrahim has a rusty pickaxe resting against the wall in his house, and jerry cans filled with mercury. Most make little to nothing, however. Ibrahim explains that it is expensive to live in the desert shanty towns, so the miners sometimes end up using their money for water, food, and cigarettes, as well as for drugs and gambling. Some traders in town are making money, however, evident in the luxury homes constructed in some quarters of Agadez. From Agadez gold is redirected to Dubai and Delhi via regional markets in Libya, Benin, and Mali (Lucht and Raineri 2019).

Driving synthetic opioids to the militias in Libya has become another source of income cushioning the loss of the migrant business (Micallef 2019; Lucht and Raineri 2019). Former migrant drivers now head to Nigeria and buy Tramadol and then move it to the border with Libya, where the pills are handed over to the Libyan militias and supplied to the wider North African market. The synthetic opioid is widely reported to fuel the Boko Haram insurgency in the Nigerian North East. Former soldiers, including abducted children, report that they took or were forced to take the drug ahead of attacks, which may go some way toward explaining the brutality of the atrocities committed (Obaji 2019). Tramadol is a painkiller, but like other opioids it not only blocks pain but can, like morphine, also produce a euphoric sensation and is highly addictive. Libyan militias also take the drug. One militia leader whose men control the southern border area with Niger suggested that about 80 percent of his men were taking Tramadol, adding, "I would be lying if I said I wasn't taking it myself."

The popularity of the drug should not be underestimated: not only to boost fighters before attacks but also as a substitute for health services. Informally, the police in Agadez confirmed the drug's growing importance to the local cross-bor-

der economy. “Tramadol is on the rise,” one policeman explained off the record. “Many of the human smugglers are into that now. But the EU don’t see it” (Lucht and Raineri 2019). The 2019 World Drug Report describes Tramadol consumption in West Africa as “a crisis” that calls for “urgent international attention” (UNODC 2019, 1). Here, two otherwise separate bioeconomic spheres intersect in sinister ways: the well-established global pharmaceutical industry, the original focus of many bioeconomical studies (Andersson 2022, this issue), and the emerging transnational border-control industry I scrutinize in this essay. Painkillers long ago substituted by stronger drugs in Europe and the United States are dumped in Africa to alleviate suffering—physical, social, and psychological—when little or no health care is available, in the process creating docile and narcotized African youth going nowhere. The economization of human vitality thus simultaneously serves to “manage, regulate, and profit” from mobility (Achnich 2022, this issue). In other words, the border now comes in the shape of a pill.

A less reported trend in Agadez is substituting migrants with rare animals. Several operations out of Agadez specialize in the African grey parrot. The bird, desired on the black market for its intelligence and ability to mimic human speech, fetches high prices in Libya, one former migrant smuggler explained to me. He drove to Nigeria once a month to buy the birds, then transported them to Agadez, and from there to Libya. The parrots, hailing from dense forests in Central Africa, had at first given him a headache. The intelligent and fragile bird is sensitive to the harsh desert climate, so the smuggler lost his first shipments. Now he makes regular stops along the route to allow the birds to rest and drink. The rare African grey parrot has been on United Nation’s list of endangered species since 2016, with a global trade ban in place. This trade and substitution of one life form over another constitutes an example of a more literal bioeconomy that interestingly creates new mobility patterns and forms of accumulation (see also Green 2022, this issue) as drivers learn and adapt journeys to the physical limitations of one living commodity over another.

The global struggle either to control or to facilitate human mobility plays out in multiple locations and on multiple scales around the world, from drivers in the Agadez province playing cat and mouse with local police to diplomats in Brussels negotiating readmission agreements with reluctant African counterparts. These forms of struggle over mobility often create new social worlds and economic opportunities from which local actors and state agents seek to profit. In that respect, human mobility constitutes a resource form that competing actors seek to appropriate (Andersson 2018, 414). Put more plainly, as one Tuareg leader in Agadez said

about the EU-driven crackdown on migration and how it squeezed them out of the business, it was not “correct,” since “everywhere else people ‘eat’ from the migrants.” This ongoing struggle, however, has unintended consequences for migrant safety, often accelerating abjection, as well as for local and regional development.

ABSTRACT

The Agadez province in northern Niger, a nucleus for trans-Saharan migration to Libya, has in recent years been at the forefront of Europe’s interventions to curb migration movements on the African continent. This essay discusses the transmutations of the cross-border economy in the wake of EU pressure and its implications for local lifeworlds. Trade and smuggling networks have shown resilience and adaptability in the face of the EU-driven crackdown on migration, but often at the cost of migrant safety. Border practices of the EU create situations where migrants are increasingly subject to predatory economic practices that consequently serve as necropolitical deterrence. At the same time, the cross-border economy is increasingly turning to other commodities to which Libya’s European partners are less sensitive, such as gold, synthetic opioids, and rare animals. [Niger; migration; border control; human smuggling; drugs]

NOTES

1. In discussion with the author, April 2019, Agadez.

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