

**230**  
MARCH  
2020

## THE SAHEL: Europe's other border

**Oriol Puig**, researcher, CIDOB

*This is a July 2020 update of an earlier discussion paper published in March.*

**Fortress Europe, as the EU institutions' containment strategy is commonly known, extends into the Sahara desert via promises of official development aid and vast security outlays.**

**States at the very bottom of the Human Development Index, such as Niger and Mali, are charged with acting as Europe's gendarmes, as countries like Morocco, Mauritania and, above all, Gaddafi's Libya have in the past.**

**Around 90% of migrations from West Africa stay on the continent compared to 10% that goes to more distant destinations - Europe, the United States or China.**

**The border outsourcing strategy is presented as a "success" due to the fall in arrivals on European soil, but this ignores the economic and human costs, the counterproductive effects – in terms of both return on investment and objectives pursued – and the mechanism's long-term ineffectiveness.**

**"T**he sea expels bodies to the shore, but the sand engulfs them, leaving no trace," says Professor Bréma Dicko of Bamako University in Mali. The Sahara Desert has become the world's largest open-air cemetery, ahead even of the Mediterranean Sea, according to the **UN**, although death figures remain unreliable. European retinas have been seared in recent years by the images of little Aylan Kurdi drowned on a Turkish beach, boatfuls of migrants attempting to reach Italian and Greek shores, and the people injured on the fences of Ceuta and Melilla. These are some of the consequences of armour-plating Europe's borders, but what about beyond the Mediterranean? What are the EU's policies for curbing mobility at other latitudes? And what are their effects and what lessons can be drawn from them?

The EU's High Representative for the Sahel, **Ángel Losada**, calls the region Europe's new forward border. The area between the Sahara Desert and the African savannah is home to some of the world's poorest countries, such as Niger and Mali. Using a mechanism based on security, deterrence and international development cooperation, the EU has been seeking to stem the flow of people from Africa to Europe since the 2015 Valletta Summit. But despite these efforts, migration continues and human rights violations are increasing, according to **Oxfam**. The border outsourcing strategy is presented as a "success" due to the fall in arrivals on European soil, which are **92% down compared to 2015**, according to Frontex data. But this ignores the economic and

human costs, the counterproductive effects – in terms of both return on investment and objectives pursued – and the mechanism’s long-term ineffectiveness.

## Outsourcing borders

“The more barriers they put up, the more people will try to get over them to see what’s on the other side. It’s like the Berlin Wall”, says Hassan, a Burkinabe migrant who tried unsuccessfully to jump the fence in Ceuta. Building a fort takes time, is expensive and history shows that breaches are inevitable. And yet the EU seems determined to pay the price. Fortress Europe, as the EU institutions’ containment strategy is commonly known, extends into the Sahara Desert via

**It is not those with fewest resources who migrate and they do not tend to move from the most fragile territories. In fact, increased capacities are associated, in the short and medium term, with more displacement rather than the opposite.**

promises of official development aid and vast security outlays. States at the very bottom of the **Human Development Index**, such as Niger and Mali, are charged with acting as Europe’s gendarmes, as countries like Morocco, Mauritania and, above all, Gaddafi’s Libya have in the past. The border goes up and instability bursts the seams of these vulnerable territories. Proliferating armed groups, poverty and famine, the effects of climate change, and weak institutions are used to legitimise the spread of military missions, million-euro investments and humanitarian interventions that in principle target development but are more focused on immigration control, **according to reports**.

The **Africa Emergency Trust Fund for Africa** is the primary tool for this engagement and Niger and Mali are its main beneficiaries. The strategy is based on a push-pull vision that simplistically and erroneously believes more development will produce less movement. Greater investment is therefore proposed to stem the flows, something academic studies have systematically refuted in recent decades: it is not those with fewest resources who migrate and they do not tend to move from the most fragile territories. In fact, increased capacities are associated, in the short and medium term, with more displacement rather than the opposite (Faist, 2011). Niger provides an example of this. Considered the world’s poorest country, it has very low rates of migration to Europe, with most movement towards the south, to countries in the Gulf of Guinea, Nigeria, Ghana and the Ivory Coast, or to the north, towards Libya and Algeria. These are intraregional movements, forms of adaptation in an

arid environment, mainly embarked upon by those with resources. The migration and development paradigm behind European activity should therefore be revised.

## Desert in motion

International organisations confirm the far greater numbers engaged in internal African migration compared to the negligible percentage that reaches – or seeks to reach – Europe. The figures speak for themselves. According to the UN in Africa as a whole around 75% stay on the continent while 25% move to more far-flung destinations, such as Europe, the United States and China. As for West Africa, the figures are 90%:10%. In this sense, the sensation that thousands or millions of Africans are crouched somewhere behind the southern border fences or in Libya just waiting to jump – and storm – the European El Dorado, is biased and does not reflect the reality. Most African movement stays in Africa.

The Sahel has a long history as a space through which all kinds of goods, ideas and values have passed. More recently, people have been moving from sub-Saharan Africa towards the north. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimates that between 70% and 90% of people arriving in **Italy in 2015–2016 had been through Niger**, specifically the Saharan gateway city, Agadez. That is when international spotlight fell on what became known as the “uranium route” (due to the important mineral in its subsoil), which is the heir to the caravans of the Middle Ages and prior stage on the central Mediterranean route. In 2013, the international community was alerted after the bodies of **92 women and children** who died of thirst in the desert gained widespread global press coverage. That contrasted with the meagre impact of the countless people swallowed by the dunes in previous years. In 2015, Europe’s desire to block the route became clear at the **Valletta Summit**. That same year, Niger criminalised human smuggling and trafficking, which directly affected the nomadic peoples of the desert, particularly the Tuaregs and Toubous who had run the trade for centuries.

Niger opened its doors wide to European funding, becoming the world’s largest recipient of EU aid per capita, and in return for official development aid was to close its borders and police irregular migration. Under the pretext of preventing migrants from “taking trips that lead to hell in Libya or directly to death”, in the words of Alessandra Morelli, head of the UNHCR in Niger, international organisations and the European Union increased their protection measures for vulnerable people, but also border surveillance and control. The **IOM** plays a dual role that is humanitarian on the one hand and the executive arm of European policies

on the other. Ever since it joined the United Nations system in 2016, the IOM has led the containment mechanism with “voluntary return” programmes, deterrence campaigns and population sedentism projects, according to **Migreurop**. The plan appears to be working, according to figures provided by the same organisation. Flows through Niger had a 90% drop in 2018, according to the former President of the European Parliament, Antonio Tajani: down from 330,000 people transiting in 2016 to between 10,000 and 5,000 in 2018, as confirmed by the country’s president, **Mahamadou Issoufou**. At what price was this achieved? What have its consequences been?

### Counterproductive effects

Frontex is the official border control agency in the Mediterranean Sea, but in the Sahara Desert the task falls to European and African armies, and international organisations such as the IOM. Frontex merely has liaison staff in the area. The strategy in the Sahel is based on several pillars: educating and training local police officers to dismantle trafficking networks through civilian-military missions such as **EUCAP Sahel**; strengthening border control with more **checkpoints and biometric data**, handled by national troops and IOM programmes; and, finally, development programmes constrained by the migration brake, in accordance with **Concord**. The fight against terrorism in the region overlaps with the blocking of people and vice versa, making it difficult to discern which resources are allocated where.

The **border externalisation**, which is recognised by IOM officials in the country, has concrete results that often run counter to the established objectives. Rerouting, clandestinisation and more informal traffic are some examples. Transit through Niger seems to have decreased but nevertheless continues in a more hidden, dangerous way for those who embark on it, according to NGOs in the field such as **Médecins Sans Frontières**. To avoid controls journeys divert to routes without water sources and the so-called mafias raise the prices migrants must pay. More obstacles, newer routes and more informal networks. Demand remains and the obstacles set up by the EU and African governments increase migrants’ vulnerability and are in turn central to the proliferation of the mafias they claim to be fighting against. Brachet (2018) sums it up as follows: “smugglers, as a particular category of actors, appear as directly manufactured by the migration policies that were drafted to control them”.

In this sense, when one door closes another opens, as the European and international authorities recognise. Migration is not stopping and the routes are diverting to northern Mali, where armed groups of all kinds roam uncontrolled. Despite the insecurity, La Maison des Migrants in Gao, for example, recorded a notable rise in movement through the city, from 7,000 people in 2017 to 100,000 in 2018. The migrants are therefore being led into a no man’s land in which smugglers, the military, local authorities and other actors violate human rights out of sight. Social organisations such as Niger’s **Alternative Espaces Citoyens** has reported on armed groups’ physical abuse of women and men, the pregnancies that may result, and mistreatment, torture, extortion and kidnapping. EU and Nigerien institutions seem either to be ignoring the situation or treating

**Under the pretext of preventing migrants from “taking trips that lead to hell in Libya or directly to death”, in the words of Alessandra Morelli, head of the UNHCR in Niger, international organisations and the European Union increased their protection measures for vulnerable people, but also border surveillance and control.**

it as collateral damage as they enact the policy agreed in Valletta of addressing the root causes of migration – a policy that effectively criminalises migration.

### Local populations and mobility

“Niger has become Europe’s dumping ground, where everything the old continent rejects is left,” says Ibrahim Manzo Diallo, a Nigerien journalist in Agadez. The effort to block the route through Niger has led to the country hosting thousands of people **expelled from Algeria** in deplorable conditions; receiving returnees fleeing **exploitation and abuse in Libya**; and accommodating all those blocked on their way north. The result is that Niger is obliged to process the requests of thousands of people for asylum and refuge. This situation is a product of the containment policy. Added to the obstruction of local citizens’ regional mobility and the curbing of the income from the migration business, discontent and affliction flourish.

The checkpoints that have proliferated on Saharan roads and at the vast and porous state borders hamper traditional ways of life in the area such as nomadism, transhumance and, since independence, smuggling. The hard line on migration is seeing the reintroduction of policies of modernisation and sedentism that favoured more stationary farming populations during the colonial era. Herder groups, especially Fula, Tuareg and Toubou peoples insist on their place and threaten to take up arms

again if their economic livelihood is destroyed. Their elites cooperate with the EU but continue trafficking, while condemning the country's central administration for hoarding subsidies. The migration income from Europe, as the anthropologist Olivier de Sardan (2005) has called it, may therefore help reactivate ethno-territorial conflicts that threaten the country's stability.

In fact, European funding across northern Niger already includes assuaging potential discontent among local populations over the migration brake within its objectives. Millions will be spent, but unless it is han-

## The avalanche of European money, far from sowing contentment, exacerbates historical quarrels or creates new ones – between local and foreign populations – as well as deepening neocolonialist ways of thinking and maintaining rentier institutions and states.

dled better, the goals will not be achieved. Because despite the repression, trafficking remains, just more hidden. The avalanche of European money, far from sowing contentment, exacerbates historical quarrels or creates new ones – between local and foreign populations – as well as deepening neocolonialist ways of thinking and maintaining rentier institutions and states. Hence, France retains its political and economic influence over Niger's greatest resource, uranium, among other things. The difference is that it now faces more competition: both European, with Italy, Spain and Germany striving to highlight how they were the first to support the immigration containment systems (in Spain's case during the 2005 *crisis of the canoes*), and from other international actors such as China, Turkey and the USA, which are competing to expand their interests in the military and oil industries, among others.

### The border business

Despite the consequences mentioned above, European institutions plan to maintain and extend their restrictive policies during the mandate of Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen. The new president revealed some of her ideology when she initially proposed a portfolio for "Promoting our European way of life", an allusion to the purported threat posed by migration to satisfy the most radical right-wing positions. She was eventually forced to rectify, but her diagnosis – probably correct, despite the unfortunate wording – was that border closure was among the people's main demands. Along the same lines, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs, Josep Borrell, says Africa "needs guns" to solve

the insecurity on the continent which, from his point of view, threatens Europe. His support for the migration and development paradigm is also known, convinced that international cooperation and trade agreements – albeit unequal ones – can and should serve to reduce the flows. So where are the supposedly European values of solidarity, tolerance and inclusion in all this, given the policies have the opposite effect? Why is the emphasis on fortification instead of openness?

Parts of civil society and academia have long denounced these "necropolitics", as the human rights activist Helena Maleno has called them, which puts activists like her and the Open Arms at risk of persecution or of being accused of human trafficking. They condemn the European withdrawal into itself, led by the far right, but also the lukewarm nominally progressive visions of those who, even after holding the EU reins for years, have implemented restrictive policies without compunction. The rise of the far right is used to justify these positions, but the lack of determination to fight such measure and propose alternatives has allowed xenophobic and racist views to be consolidated. As always, the weakest are the worst affected. Migrants, who have already suffered significantly from the effects of the economic crisis, are meant to be kept from view behind barbed wire fences, in detention centres or by police patrols in the sea and desert.

But the fact that people keep coming shows that repression has not worked. It can only be understood as a way of defending geopolitical interests and consolidating the interests of business sectors with mouthwatering growth rates, such as security, in which public and semi-public organisations and private corporations participate. According to *Expanding the Fortress* by Stop Wapenhandel and the Transnational Institute, among those that benefit are giant arms manufacturers such as Thales, Airbus and the Spanish company Indra, and biometric security firms such as Veridos, OT Morpho and Gemalto. So while the militarisation and securitisation of borders may fail to comply with fundamental rights, such as article 13 of the Declaration of Human Rights, it is a fruitful business for some.

### Changing course

All of the above makes it clear that the most reasonable thing would be for the EU to stop its war on migration: first, because it violates human rights and, second, because it will lose. Migration will not end and people who want to move will continue to do so. In fact, today's societies are eminently sedentary, with migrants making up just 3% of the world's population. Rather than fearing

those who move, it is the border policies and their dire consequences that should be revised. EU institutions are spending huge sums on reducing migration flows based on a security and development rationale. In both cases it has adverse effects. The security situation **worsens day by day** despite the military interventions and the rearming of local institutions. This is largely due to the multiplicity of actors, the lack of coherence between international strategies, including the European, and above all because interests are being prioritised that, far from wanting to end insecurity, allow it to be perpetuated.

With regard to development, the starting point is erroneous and ineffective and its implementation is questionable. It is deployed as a *sine qua non* condition for maintaining power relations that belong to past historical eras without addressing the complexity of migration as a phenomenon and neglecting sociocultural aspects that are also ultimately political. Rather than repression, the solution is to promote legal, safe channels. The more the regulatory channels are tightened, the more irregular the flows become, not because the number of people moving increases, but because the possibility of doing so while abiding by the law is reduced. Immigration containment thereby promotes irregularity. To prevent this, mechanisms for regular migration should be promoted. These could take the form of temporary work programmes or genuine exchanges of workers – qualified or not – between countries of the North and South; humanitarian corridors for asylum seekers and refugees (many of those transiting through the desert would meet Geneva Convention requirements for those statuses); and looser entry and visas requirements for those from vulnerable countries. The **Global Compact for Migration** signed in 2018, which underpins the IOM's official discourse, already includes all of this, but for now remains a paper tiger, as the punitive prevails over the promotion of regular channels for movement.

In line with its defence of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCTA) promoted by the African Union (AU), the EU should respect the existing free movement protocols in the Sahel area, such as that of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). To do this, it must realise that imposing border reinforcement on the states in the area is in contradiction with that principle, hinders traditional mobility and, as a result, may encourage flows to Europe. In other words, if movement towards historical African destinations is hindered, migrants may choose to join the routes going north, considering that the two routes pose similar difficulties, but Europe offers potentially greater economic benefits. Finally, European public authorities must emphasise the positive contributions of mobility and avoid making connections between migration, terrorism and crime. Ultimately, the EU needs to understand,

accept and apply – and not just advocate in writing – that: 1) not all Africans want to come to Europe; 2) the repressive and development path has failed and must be reversed; and 3) migration is positive and an intrinsic part of being human and, in this sense, its limitation is counterproductive, as well as impossible.

The Covid-19 crisis may represent a window of opportunity to reverse this type of policy (if you will), although there is also a well-founded fear of intensifying them by using the virus as a pretext to legitimize the perverse consequences of spurious borders.

**Rather than fearing those who move, it is the border policies and their dire consequences that should be revised.**

## References

Faist, Thomas, Fauser, Margit, Kivisto, Peter, *The migration-development nexus. A transnational perspective*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

Brachet, Julien. *Manufacturing Smugglers: From Irregular to Clandestine Mobility in the Sahara*. *Annals*, vol. 676 (2018), pp. 16–35.

Olivier de Sardan, Jean-Pierre. *Anthropology and Development. Understanding Contemporary Social Change*. London: Zed Books, 2005.