

Climate change and migration

Case study from Mali

Climate change is increasingly shaping livelihoods and mobility dynamics in the Ségou region of Mali. Faced with recurrent climatic shocks and evolving environmental conditions, communities are adapting through a range of strategies, including seasonal, circular, and increasingly longer-term mobility. In this context, mobility can enhance resilience by diversifying income sources, while also exposing migrants and their families to new vulnerabilities and risks.

Background

The data presented in this case study were collected in 2022 through a desk review, interviews with local project staff, focus group discussions (Bla, Tominion, San), and six in-depth individual testimonials. The data collected is qualitative and does not represent the overall situation in the Ségou region, but rather aims at shedding light and providing a human face on climate change and mobility dynamics, both on the local as well as on the policy level.

- A **climate resilience project (“Nyèsigi” – building our future)** aiming to strengthen the resilience and adaptive capacities of communities and agroforestry ecosystems for young farmers in the Sahelian zone of Mali. The project facilitates access to agro-meteorological information and advice in combination with adapted and innovative practices, as well as the creation of employment opportunities in the green economy. The project puts emphasis on building capacities of young people in rural communities, who are expected to play a key role in the future of this region.

“At present, due to climate change, there are more problems without clear solution . All our sources of income are affected by the effects of climate change. As the saying goes, when the weather changes, so must man...” (Mme Mallé Maïmouna Dao, 74 years, municipality of San)

Key messages

- The Ségou region is strongly affected by climate variability and environmental change.
- The vulnerability of the population is accentuated by its heavy dependence on climate-sensitive sectors such as agriculture and farming.
- Households have long diversified their livelihoods through a range of income-generating activities beyond farming.
- Seasonal and circular mobility is one of these off-farm activities
- Mobility patterns tend to evolve due to climate change, with some movements less predictable and less seasonal
- Mobility patterns are shaped by multiple, interrelated factors – including climatic stresses – with climate change acting primarily as a risk multiplier rather than a sole driver.
- Mobility brings both opportunities (income diversification, remittances, skills) and challenges (protection risks, social impacts, lack of decent work)
- Policy and programmatic actions are needed to ensure safe and planned mobility and reduce risks for migrants, families and host communities

Climate-related shocks, stresses, and impacts

The primary sector employs over 80% of the working population and is thus the region's main economic sector. Considering the importance of rural activities (agriculture, farming) which are strongly influenced by climatic conditions, it makes the Ségou region particularly vulnerable to climatic hazards and to the impact of climate change.

Main climate-related trends observed in this region:

- Decreasing and irregular rainfall with a shortened rainy season and a disruption of agricultural calendars;
- Temperature increases, including extreme temperatures;
- Increase in floods, droughts and stronger winds

These trends have the following consequences:

- Loss of agricultural land, loss of harvest, increasing food insecurity
- Disappearance of plant and animal and animal species
- Diversification of livelihoods (market gardening, trade, mobility)

“Conditions imposed by unprecedented situations have changed our lives, forcing us to look for alternatives to make up for losses in agricultural production caused by the adverse effects of climate change”. (Traditional leader, village of Penesso)

Aspects of mobility

In a context where populations have always adapted to constraints of the Sahelian zone, the populations are used to diversify their sources of income through the development of income-generating activities. Among these off-farm activities is circular mobility, which is mainly seasonal, towards urban centers, gold mining sites or neighboring countries. This mobility pattern is based on the alternation between dry and rainy seasons. Departures take place after agricultural work and returns before the start of the next season. Mobility thus follows the seasonal rhythms of agricultural activities.

Migration as an adaptation strategy

However, this situation is characterized by the growing inability of local production systems to meet the needs of their communities, due to a combination of factors (climate change, demographics, human pressure on natural resources). Hence, even if this seasonal mobility still dominates, this is increasingly combined with movements whose temporalities are more random, with departures and returns not necessarily following this classic pattern. Women are increasingly participating in mobility. Most of this mobility takes place in the informal sector in conditions that are often difficult and marked by a lack of decent work (e.g. domestic work, sex work, gold panning).

While climate change plays a significant role in shaping livelihoods and mobility patterns in the Ségou region, it is not the sole driver of population movements. Mobility decisions result from the interaction of multiple structural factors, including demographic growth, limited economic opportunities, pressure on natural resources, and evolving security conditions. In this context, climate change acts primarily as a risk multiplier, exacerbating existing vulnerabilities and constraints rather than triggering mobility on its own.

According to the observations gathered, the main impacts of mobility in the region are manifested in the absence of “able-bodied” workers or young people, particularly during the dry season, and so-called changes in mentality or local customs, with consequences for social and community ties.

Mobility patterns are also evolving as a result of security conditions in some areas of departure and in the traditional places of destination. Insecurity affects where and how people move, the risks they face during migration, and their ability to return or circulate seasonally. The Ségou region increasingly hosts migrants and displaced populations from other regions, adding another layer of complexity to local adaptation and resilience strategies.

“Migration (rural exodus) has become the second nature of the people of our area. However, over the last two decades, it has grown, making it a recent phenomenon”. (Participant Focus Group Discussion)

Implications for future projects

The following points can be considered to improve the understanding and developing of the relevant climate change and migration policies and actions.

- Continue to build evidence on migration in the context of climate change to deconstruct fearful narratives and influence decision-makers;
- Integrate mobility aspects into climate change policies, and vice versa.
- Integrate climate-linked mobility in urban planning and policies
- Support policy and institutional frameworks that enable safe, voluntary, and well-informed mobility as a potential climate adaptation strategy.
- Promote the agency of the populations, including the right to stay and to move
- Apply a human-rights based approach to ensure people are supported in their individual and context-specific needs and ensuring full respect for their human rights, regardless of their administrative status
- Adopt a gendered and conflict sensitivity analysis to develop specific gender-responsive measures and actions taking into account social cohesion

“Out of ten households, around eight receive remittances from migrants. Migration is seen as an option for mitigating the impacts of change, and while it has its advantages, it also has major drawbacks.” (Participant Focus Group Discussion)

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The [Swiss NGO DRR Platform](#) is a network of NGO professionals dedicated to increasing the resilience of women and men, communities and governments to all aspects of disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation. It strives for enhanced quality of Swiss NGO services related to disaster risk and climate change, promotes the diversity of know-how experience, provides guidance for increased effectiveness and advocates for the importance of risk-informed development, disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation.

A working group on migration and climate change of the Swiss NGO DRR Platform has been operating since 2020, with the aim of guiding the platform's learning journey on migration and climate change. This case study is an output of that learning journey.