

The Displaced People and the Urbanisation : Analysis of the consequences of population displacement on accelerated urbanisation of secondary cities in the Sahel

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INTRODUCTION

This policy brief aims to analyse the consequences of recent years' population displacement on urbanization processes in secondary cities in the Sahel, particularly Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. It analyses "the truths in figures" in relation to ethnographic examples to understand the impact on housing and land tenure, the precariousness of basic public services, the transformation of gender relations within families, and insecurity. The policy brief primarily concerns these three Sahelian countries, which, since September 2023, have been part of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES). The policy brief identifies avenues for in-depth analysis and future action. To do this, and drawing on decades of research in Burkina Faso and Mali, we draw on three main sources of information. First, we analyse existing statistics and figures on population movements, with particular attention paid to internally displaced persons (IDPs) and, to a lesser extent, to the migratory movements of Burkinabe, Malian and Nigerian people to coastal countries and to refugee flows. Second, we summarise recent studies (theses, books and scientific articles) and, especially to illustrate our points, articles from the Sahelian media (dailies, weeklies, online newspapers). Third, we refer to interviews with resource persons (Ouagadougou, Bamako, Banfora and Mopti), as well as Burkinabe and Malian researchers who have recently worked in secondary cities. The data collection and analysis work was carried out between October 2024 and January 2025¹.

Before embarking on the analysis, two conceptual clarifications are needed. First, the concept of secondary cities deserves clarification. Indeed, given the fluidity between rural and urban, we would like to emphasise that secondary cities are secondary in a demographic, administrative, economic, cultural, etc. hierarchy between cities of the same country. Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger are highly centralised, secondary cities depend on important decisions taken in Ouagadougou, Bamako or Niamey. Second, population mobility is one of the characteristics of Sahelian societies, including transhumance, migration to large cities and coastal countries. So, even if not all ongoing population movements are necessarily linked to present-day security crises, the massive displacements currently underway are of a different magnitude. Nowadays, accelerated urbanisation, particularly in secondary cities, is largely linked to insecurity and violence.

¹ This policy brief is an attempt to identify avenues for research and action, and is collectively based on the experiences within the Laboratory of Comparative, Engaged and Transnational Anthropology (LACET, <https://www.lacet.org/>). More generally, it is also based on field research that we have conducted in Burkina Faso and Mali for decades. As for the work with this policy brief, we would particularly like to thank Bintou Koné with whom we maintain ongoing discussions on insecurity, population displacement and their consequences on Sahelian societies. A preliminary version of this brief received relevant comments from Laurent Vidal, Mariame Sidibé and Raphael Malejac.

1 - STATISTICS OF SAHELIAN POPULATION MOVEMENTS

Despite the fact that statistics on population movements are updated by humanitarian organisations and state institutions in the three countries, it is difficult to establish with certainty the number of internally and externally displaced persons in the Sahel. On 30 December 2024, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) published the following figures for Burkina Faso, Mali, and western Niger: 2.6 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and 329,500 refugees during the period October-December 2024 (OCHA 30 December 2024). According to the OCHA, these figures indicate a three percent decrease for IDPs and a three percent increase for refugees when comparing the figures for July to September 2024. A week earlier, the OCHA published a risk model for the central Sahel (OCHA 23 December 2024), according to which the risk indices were very high (Fig. 1). These figures are, of course, estimates of the displacement of these two categories of people. Thus, it should be clear that there is a risk of making generalisations.

Let us take Burkina Faso as an example. This country has the largest number of displaced persons, and we note that the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) is reportedly declining: as of 31 March 2023, there were 2,062,534 Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), according to the National Council for Emergency Relief and Rehabilitation (CONASUR, 31 December 2023).

Since then, new displacements have been reported due to security shocks, but official data is not available. The main cause of these displacements is linked to armed attacks.² (Humanitarian Action 13 December 2024)

However, during an ordinary session of the CONASUR in January 2025, the Burkinabe Minister of Humanitarian Action and National Solidarity informed the public that one million displaced people have returned home; as of 31 December 2024, "the return of 1,010,136 people from 165,375 households in 397 localities of origin has been recorded," according to the minister (APA News, 21 January 2025). In the same vein, Prime Minister Rimtalba Jean Emmanuel Ouédraogo indicated before the Transitional Legislative Assembly³ that 70.59% of the national territory is under state control and that one million displaced people have returned to their respective localities (Lefaso.net 29 December 2024). From this example, it should be noted that estimates of the number of displaced people have become a major political issue. But the number of displaced people—beyond the concepts of "internally displaced persons" and "refugees"—is impossible to know with certainty. People who fled their villages to be hosted by their relatives in the city did not necessarily declare themselves to public authorities or humanitarian organisations.

² All citations from French are those of the author of this report.

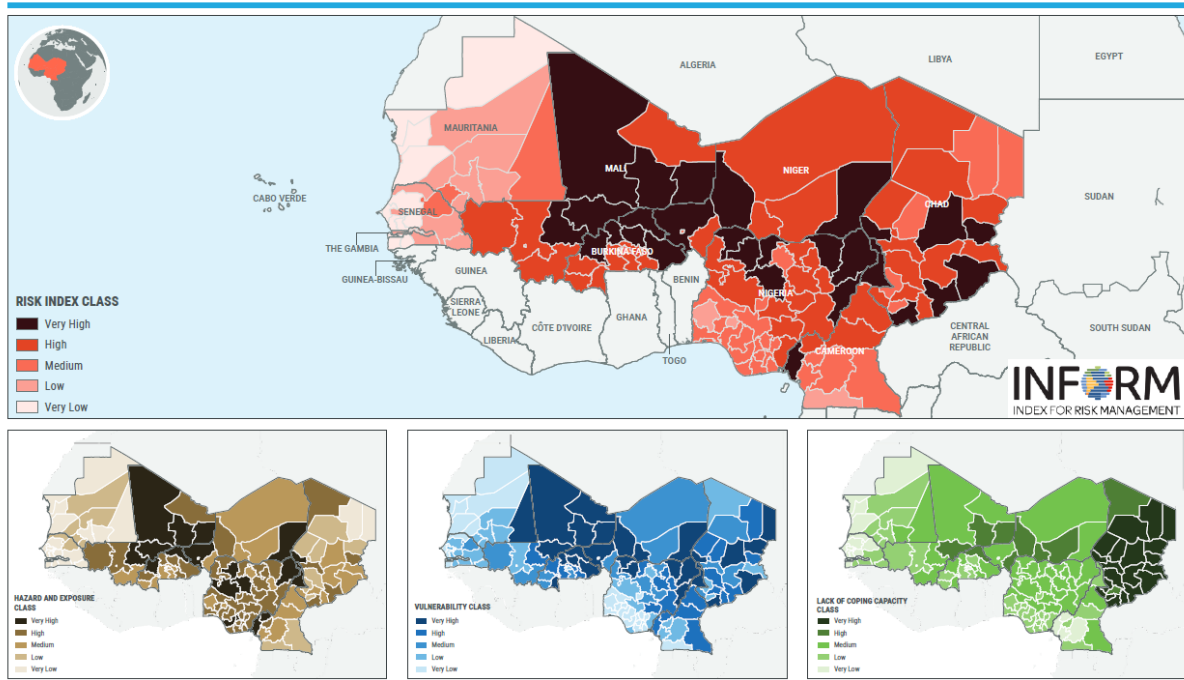
³ The Transitional Legislative Assembly (le Conseil National de la Transition) was put in place after the military coup on 22 January 2022.

DISPLACED PEOPLE AND THE URBANISATION :
ANALYSIS OF THE CONSEQUENCES OF POPULATION DISPLACEMENT ON ACCELERATED URBANISATION OF
SECONDARY CITIES IN THE SAHEL



INFORM RISK MODEL 2024
Subnational risk model for Sahel

As of 23 December 2024



The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.
Sources: OCHA. Feedback: ocharowcaimujun.org www.unocha.org www.reliefweb.int

Source : OCHA 23/12/2024

In a recent study of displaced people in Ouagadougou, Alice Degorce et al. (2024) avoid using the concept of “Internally Displaced Persons” (IDPs), and simply prefer the concept of “displaced”. The term “IDP” does indeed pose a problem, as illustrated by an interview they conducted with a non-displaced resident in the Pazani neighborhood of Ouagadougou: “Even if you ask a child, if we say the displaced people’s site, everyone knows, even in Mooré, we can say *zoetba* [fugies]” (Degorce et al. 2024: 33). Indeed, the notion of *zoetba* in Mooré comes from *zoe*, which means “to run,” “to escape,” or “to flee” (Degorce et al. 2024: 36). Thus, to avoid negative connotations of “the fugitive” and the institutional connotations of “the IDP” defined “from above”, the concept of “displaced” is, at least provisionally, to be preferred, leaving the technical-institutional concept of “IDP” to the discourses of humanitarians and politicians. For example, a person who has gone with his family to a regional town to escape violence in his village is certainly “displaced” without being defined either as an “IDP” or as a “fugitive”.

The problem of definition also touches on the concept of “refugee”, as for example in Mali. UNHCR (31 December 2024) estimates that there are currently 307,474 Malian refugees: in Mauritania (144,981), Niger (122,786) and Burkina Faso (39,540). However, according to figures from the Malian government, there are 378,000 IDPs, and 855,000 former IDPs who have been able to return home (UNHCR 31 December 2024). Once again, we see the political dimension of the concepts, because seen “from below” such a massive return home would definitely have been noticed by people.

Similarly, people who temporarily left the national territory did not necessarily register as “refugees.” For example, at the time when attacks against alleged “terrorists” were raging in the Cascades region of Burkina Faso, many Fulani agro-pastoralists left their villages to escape the exactions of the Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland (VDPs). Indeed, in 2023, VDPs—

previously organised in Dozo hunters' associations (Hagberg 2004, 2006)—drove Fulani populations from almost all rural villages in a number of municipalities. Many of them found refuge in Côte d'Ivoire. By August 2024, 428,238 people, mostly from Mali and Burkina Faso, had crossed the borders of the coastal countries (UNICEF December 2024). According to UNICEF, Côte d'Ivoire has welcomed 67,081 refugees and asylum seekers, among whom women predominate (55%); school-aged children represent 40% of them.

It should be noted that the figures and statistics presented above are also political, because "the truths in figures" are part of the information war. This involves the control of information, which is particularly systematic in Burkina Faso, in a context where public authorities do not accept that the displaced themselves communicate on this issue. The control of information does hide situations that would present the army's actions in bad light. In Mali, the information war is at a different level. In Niono, for example, displaced sites are often described as potential "jihadist nests." This is why public authorities seek instead to "hide" or "make invisible" the displaced. In general, representatives of the regime often repeat that "the army is gaining strength", even though information from the field indicates much more complex situations, as shown by the battle of Tinjaouatine in July 2024 where the Malian army and the Wagner group suffered heavy losses (see *La Grand Continent* 31 July 2024; *Le Monde* 29 July 2024). In Burkina Faso, the situation is comparable, despite repeated attacks, such as those in Barsalogo at the end of August 2024 where hundreds of civilians were killed when they were digging, on the orders of the army, a trench around their village, supposed to protect them from the attacks that had become recurrent (see RFI 29 August 2024).

It seems that many people in Mali have taken refuge in cities, most often in regional or provincial capitals. The figures on displacement at the municipal level are interesting to analyse. Mali has experienced a decade of significant population displacement. However, currently, the situation of displaced people is particularly dire in Bandiagara (VOA 4 December 2024). In Burkina Faso, the CONASUR published a document concerning the registration of "IDPs" by commune in September 2022. Apart from Ouagadougou, whose figures are contested and questionable with barely 5,000 displaced people (Degorce et al. 2024), the CONASUR figures show that Djibo (269,439 displaced people), Ouahigouya (143,391 displaced people), Kaya (109,919 displaced people), Fada N'Gourma (102,534 displaced people), Dori (64,988 displaced people), Pissila (59,724 displaced people) and Titao (58,028 displaced people) are the cities and towns with the largest number of displaced people (CONASUR 30/9/2022). Moreover, women (22.89%) and children (60.40%) dominate among the displaced, as is often the case.

The movement of displaced people to regional and provincial capitals presents particular challenges. Large Burkinabe cities such as Ouagadougou, Bobo-Dioulasso, and Koudougou reportedly have very few displaced people, while regional cities in the attacked areas reportedly have large numbers. The town of Djibo, which had a resident population of over 83,000, according to the 2019 General Population and Housing Census (RGPH 2022), has hosted nearly 270,000 displaced people; Ouahigouya, with a population of 200,000, is home to over 143,000 displaced people; Fada N'Gourma, with a resident population of 188,000, is home to 102,000 displaced people.

2 - CONSEQUENCES ON THE ACCELERATED URBANISATION IN SECONDARY CITIES (AND CAPITALS)

In this section we propose an analysis of the consequences of the accelerated urbanisation of secondary cities. In addition to the documentation analysed, some interviews we were able to have with resource persons provide examples of the experience of the following cities: Banfora, Fada N'Gourma, Kaya, Mopti and Niono. In addition, in July-August 2021, we conducted field research with displaced people from Panzani (Ouagadougou), Faladié and Sénou (Bamako) and some displaced people sites in Niamey (Hagberg et al. 2022).

Housing and land tenure

In Sahelian cities, urbanisation was already high, due to migration to major urban centers, before the arrival of displaced people. In Burkina Faso, the cities of Ouagadougou and Bobo-Dioulasso received 60% of migrations in 1996 and 53.7% of migrations in 2006 (Séré 2021; INSD 1996, 2009). In the country's 14 main cities, the non-zoned neighborhoods represent, on average, a quarter of the urban area, while the demographic weight of residents in these neighborhoods is on average 40% compared to the entire urban population (Guigma 2022). Similarly, urban migration to Bamako accelerated well before the current crisis (Bertrand 2021; Hagberg and Körling 2016). At the time of the 2009 population census, Bamako had more than 1.8 million inhabitants and at the time of the general population census of 2022, the Malian capital had a resident population of 4,227,569 inhabitants, or 18.9% of the entire Malian population (INSTAT November 2023). The vulnerabilities of the populations of these two Sahelian capitals are evident, as, for example, the frequent floods following natural events have a significant human and economic impact. :

Thus, in 2020, several Sahelian cities were victims. Several neighborhoods of Niamey, the capital of Niger, were submerged during the month of August, resulting in a toll of nearly 9,000 collapsed houses, 50,000 victims and around ten deaths. In Burkina Faso, the rains that fell almost continuously every day during the first week of September 2020 destroyed thousands of homes and caused nearly 41 deaths, 112 injuries and more than 100,000 victims. (Da 2021: 2)

Such floods particularly affect marginal areas, outside urbanised areas, at least with largely precarious urban developments.

At the heart of urbanisation are the non-zoned areas (*non-loti*); these areas exist in informality and invisibility. They surround large cities and many studies have been carried out on the unplanned areas of Sahelian cities (e.g. Bertrand 2021; Bjarnesen 2013, 2023; Hagberg 2001; Hagberg and Körling 2016; Jaglin 1995; Körling 2011; Körling and Hassane 2019; Meyer 2021; Robineau 2014). Robineau analyses the non-zoned areas of Bobo-Dioulasso, noting that they are "blank" spaces on maps:

Located on the edge of legal building areas, or sometimes even within them, no information about these areas appeared in the cartographic documents. But beyond the maps, the reality on the ground is quite different. (Robineau 2014: 3)

Non-zoned areas exist around large cities and are temporarily inhabited by people looking for a "home". For Robineau, non-zoned areas are in-between spaces:

The designation of 'non-zoned' areas [zones non-loties] reflects this transitional nature: they 'are not' the legal, nor the city as the planning documents envisage them. They are no longer rural, but are not yet the city. They are a transitional in-between, and it is through this singularity that they exist. They are at once a socio-spatial in-between of the rural and the urban, a temporal in-between of the informal urbanisation and the formal urbanisation, and

a legal and political in-between of the informal procedure for accessing housing in the non-zoned areas, and the formal procedure for allocating plots of land. (Robineau 2014: 10)

In these in-between spaces, the displaced people seek to settle, to find a place "while waiting". This lack of stable residence in the non-zoned areas is expressed in local discourse. For example, the notion of *Sonsoribougou*—"the village where one must remain squatting"—is often used by people to refer to the non-zoned neighborhood in Julakan and Bamanakan. The notion of *sounsourougou* signals uncertainty: one never knows whether one will stay or leave in the event of a zoning operation. Seen from this angle, the massive arrival of displaced people immediately poses the spatial problem of where they could settle. While many displaced people seek to settle with relatives and acquaintances, the high number of people who have fled their rural villages constitutes a challenge for any public authority. Until now, displaced people often seem to settle in secondary towns, or even in regional capitals. A resource person in Banfora (Burkina Faso) explained the problem as follows:

People from [rural] municipality X fled to Banfora because of the attacks. They settled with us and got registered, and then they received government assistance. In the end, they were richer than us. Some even bought plots of land to build on in Banfora, while keeping their fields in X.

Land tenure pressure appears to have an impact on urban housing. In Dédougou (Burkina Faso), housing is a problem for students originating from rural villages. This problem is attributed to the arrival of displaced people. In Kaya (Burkina Faso), entire villages have fled the countryside to settle in the regional capital, such as the village of Baobokin, which a resource person mentioned. Nowadays, residents of this village return to Kaya for family ceremonies, because "no one has stayed in the village." This information is corroborated by official figures: in September 2022, Kaya housed 110,000 displaced people (CONASUR, September 2022).

Hence, the consequences of displacement on urbanization are significant in terms of land use, particularly in undeveloped areas—the socio-spatial, temporal and legal-political in-between spaces (Robineau (2014)—even if it is difficult to put forward any reliable figures. As for insecurity and violence, secondary cities are the most exposed, because this is where populations fleeing violence initially seek refuge. On the other hand, everything indicates that the figures for displaced people in Sahelian capitals are largely underestimated, as demonstrated by Degorce et al. (2024):

Local political leadership nonetheless remained ambivalent. Officially, there were few displaced people in Ouagadougou, but through associations, the displaced made lists for the local authorities, that, when they could, provided food. Bags of rice, boxes of sugar and oil: enough to feed families for a few days. The support turned into political charity, far from meeting people's needs. The result was a general insufficiency of aid in light of the migratory flows generated by the regular episodes of violence. (Degorce et al. 2024: 99)

Basic public services

Displaced people who have settled in non-zoned areas live in these in-between spaces where basic public services are insufficient, or often even absent. Robineau (2014: 7) cites a former resident of an undeveloped neighborhood in Bobo-Dioulasso:

When I stayed in the non-zoned [area], I did not live in the city. There was no water, no electricity. Here and now, yes, I am in the city. There is water, there is electricity, and you can build [a house]. I feel better in the zoned because I am peacefully settled on my plot. In the non-zoned, the plot is not officially recognized. From one day to the next, you can be asked to leave; that's not easy.

In addition to these difficult conditions, displaced people are using survival strategies to find livelihoods, housing, schools, sanitation, etc. Indeed, access to basic public services is often

problematic. In 2021, during field research in Bamako (Hagberg et al. 2022), we visited a displacement site in a Bamako neighborhood. At the time, there were no toilets—even the most basic ones—that displaced people should use. For example, women would go to the mosque to relieve themselves, which led the imam to say that they could not use the toilets during prayer times. It is clear that the lack of hygiene services is problematic in the sites. Humanitarian organisations are certainly making an effort in this regard, but given the number of displaced people, it remains insufficient.

Similarly, access to education remains precarious for children in displacement sites, as is the case in the areas they have left. Several ongoing studies in Mali document how humanitarians are increasingly playing the role of the state for displaced people (Hagberg et al. 2017, 2019; Touré, Simon, Diakité forthcoming; Hagberg et al. forthcoming).

Transformation of gender relations within the family

For many displaced people, one consequence of moving to the city is the transformation of gender relations within the family. This primarily concerns the increase in the number of female heads of household (*de jure* or *de facto*) in IDP sites. Displaced women often benefit from support from NGOs, particularly humanitarian ones, in terms of training and empowerment assistance. At the same time, masculinities are undergoing a profound transformation following security crises (Hagberg et al. 2019: 61-12). As a result, many displaced male household heads are unable to protect their families and, in some cases, to provide for their needs. During field research in Fada N'Gourma in 2021 (Hagberg et al. 2022: 45), the transformation of gender relations within displaced households was raised several times. Many men felt "useless" in this life as IDPs:

You, as a man who enjoys all your faculties, you are unable to feed your wife and your children and she has to run everywhere to NGOs to feed you and your children [sigh]. It is humiliating and this situation makes us lose our honor, we are no longer men and sometimes you want to disappear and if you don't think you can do things that are not right [...] and so some leave to try to find solutions elsewhere.

At the time, a displaced woman told us that her husband had left the family: "He has been gone for over a year, we do not know where he is. I am here alone to support my children." Even if we are not able to say that displacement systematically led to such family changes, it is clear that the often traumatic situations in which displaced people find themselves have consequences on the composition of family units.

Displacement sites as "jihadist nests"

Mass displacement has also resulted in fueling suspicion in people's minds vis-à-vis displaced people. Therefore, in addition to the vulnerabilities and precariousness, some expressed reservations regarding displaced people. Similarly, it has been reported that local authorities view displacement sites with a certain suspicion. For example, a District head banned displacement sites because they were said to be "nests of terrorists." Indeed, security issues are topical, because in a context where "we no longer know who is who" (Hagberg et al. 2022; Koné and Hagberg 2019), non-zoned areas—these in-between spaces which have become sites for displaced people and refugees—do not officially exist, although they are visible (Degorce et al. 2024; cf. Robineau 2014). Indeed, after deadly attacks like those in Barsalogho in August 2024, waves of displaced people arrived in Kaya. Many people therefore wondered whether there were any "terrorists" among the displaced people from Barsalogho.

The situation of young men is a major concern. In 2021, an NGO in the Mopti region launched an initiative targeting young men through their mothers:

Since the crisis, we have been raising awareness among mothers about the young boys that they have at home. The young boys had been duped by jihadists who were spreading misinformation. A young person who doesn't work, who cannot even afford the price of tea during the day, so if someone finally offers him 50,000 CFA francs or 100,000 CFA francs, he will accept. That's how the jihadists got hold of many young people. Afterwards, the young people realised that this was not serious, but it was too late. They could not do anything yet. That's why we are focusing on our young people who are unemployed. (Hagberg et al. 2022: 46)

The resourcefulness of the displaced

The number of beggars and people in precarious situations encountered in Sahelian capitals is high. In regional capitals, such as Mopti, women and children beggars dominate. However, in some provincial capitals, we note that displaced women are more involved in agriculture. There is also a growing exploitation of displaced women in cities. In particular, poorly paid "small jobs," such as laundry and cleaning, are increasingly reserved for them. Beyond such situations, it is clear that it is in the informal sector that most displaced people invest to make ends meet.

In Dédougou (Burkina Faso) and Bamako (Mali), displaced women complained about the exploitation they endure within host families. Living in unprecedented precariousness, these women do not hesitate to do household chores in the hope of earning something to at least meet their children's food needs. They find themselves in a situation where they are very poorly paid or rewarded. A resource person who has conducted extensive field research with displaced women was explicit: "sometimes these displaced women earn nothing at all."

CONCLUSION

This policy brief is an attempt to analyse population displacement in the Sahel, with a particular focus on Burkina Faso and Mali, and their consequences on accelerated urbanisation of secondary cities. Although migration to national capitals is documented, it is noted that displacement due to insecurity and violence is particularly significant in regional and provincial capitals. Displaced persons first seek to escape violence and find refuge in these cities, rather than engaging in migration trajectories towards the national capital, or even large sub-regional cities, such as Abidjan and Lomé. Movements towards secondary cities therefore dominate.

It is worth noting that displaced people who are victims of community violence often end up in cities. In Banfora, many Fulani who were driven out of rural villages in 2023 are still in the city; some of them are believed to have fled Burkina Faso to try to find refuge in Côte d'Ivoire or Niger. The violence in the Dédougou region (Burkina Faso) has pushed populations towards the Sikasso region (Mali).

The most visible consequences of these displacements are the occupation of spaces, particularly housing and land in undeveloped areas, as well as the precariousness, or even the absence of basic public services. The number of displaced people puts enormous pressure on secondary cities, which in most cases already had insufficient infrastructure and basic services before the crisis. Beyond these material aspects, it is important to highlight the changes occurring within families, particularly with regard to gender relations. Masculinities are being completely reshaped as women heads of household become increasingly common. Displaced people are also the subject of mistrust, as some residents, including municipal authorities, consider the sites to be nests of jihadists. Finally, to feed themselves, displaced people "get by," which in itself exposes them to abuses; thus, women are often particularly vulnerable in cities.

We also analysed the categories used by the State, humanitarians, NGOs, the UN, on the one hand, and those used by the displaced themselves: "internally displaced persons", "refugees", "fugitives", "displaced", "those who will not stay", "potential jihadists", etc. It is clear that further research is needed to understand how the different words used impact the processes underway, particularly in the displacement sites.

The play with numbers—"the truths in figures"—represents significant political stakes, because for Sahelian public authorities, a large number of displaced people could indicate that the policy being implemented is not effective. Humanitarian agencies may also have an interest in presenting high figures for the number of displaced people to facilitate fundraising. In fact, the exact number of displaced people is unknown, which is why quantitative and qualitative research is essential. Indeed, qualitative studies on the processes and perspectives of the displaced people themselves are particularly important.

Displaced people in secondary cities are located in the socio-spatial, temporal and legal in-between, between the formal and the informal. But instead of focusing on this divide between the formal and the informal, we must focus on practical norms to understand how and by what means displaced people arrive and settle, even temporarily, in the city. According to J.-P. Olivier de Sardan, the concept of practical norms makes it possible to uncover "a variety of modes of social regulation, patterns of real governance, without prematurely aggregating them into a single model, and without organising them into *a priori* types" (Olivier de Sardan 2008: 18, see also Olivier de Sardan 2021). Focusing on practical norms, particularly on the actions and statements deemed legitimate and acceptable in society, could allow us to go beyond numerical truths and politically charged discourses.

To conclude this policy brief, which set out to analyse the consequences of population displacement on urbanisation in secondary cities in the Sahel, more in-depth research is needed

to monitor ongoing displacement in relation to urbanisation processes. Indeed, it seems fundamental to us to describe and empirically analyse the practical norms regarding the relationships between displaced people, host populations, municipal authorities, basic public services and community movements, etc. in these in-between spaces of Sahelian secondary cities. It is from daily practices and the discourses linked to these practices that we have analysed the consequences of displacement on urbanisation in Sahelian secondary cities.

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PASAS

PLATEFORME D'ANALYSE,
DE SUIVI ET D'APPRENTISSAGE
AU SAHEL



PORTÉ PAR



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