



BACKGROUND BRIEF

ON THE SAHEL & LAKE CHAD BASIN

AMID COVID-19 CRISIS



OVERVIEW

For decades, the countries covered in this Background Brief have been facing chronic humanitarian crises linked to **protracted conflicts and environmental conditions**. The current situation represents not only a challenge for the affected countries but also for the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin (LCB) regions.

The **COVID-19 outbreak** has hit 52 African countries, among which 23 are in West and Central Africa. Seven countries in the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin (LCB) are affected and at least **2,500 positive cases** and over 80 deaths have been confirmed.

Both regions present **specific fragilities** related to the **weakness of basic social services** including health care, **low-income economies** and **informal sector** which limits livelihoods options. These fragilities are compounded by growing security challenges such as frequent riots and violent extremism, in a context of climate change, land degradation and water scarcity.

Due to the upsurge of violence in parts of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Niger, and Nigeria (over 800 security incidents recorded in Burkina Faso only in 2019), **health centres are either closed** or not fully functioning, leaving millions of people without access to adequate basic services.

Recurring or **continuing instability** and the subsequent internal displacement is affecting a substantial number of people, particularly in the Liptako-Gourma and Lake Chad areas. Most of the 5 million IDPs living in the Sahel and LCB are seeking shelter among **populations in communities already struggling** to meet their own basic needs.

Measures taken by governments to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the regions have left more than **10,000 migrants stranded at borders** or waiting in transit centers across the region.

Although no cases of COVID-19 have yet been reported among displaced communities or in transit facilities, **prevention and protection** remain essential to avoid possible spread of the virus in these locations.

However, in IDP sites, camp-like settings or transit centers, the **recommended preventive measures** such as social distancing and hygiene measures e.g. handwashing with soap are challenging in overpopulated areas with limited access to water.

Additionally, the **socio-economic side effects** of the measures taken by governments to prevent the spread of COVID-19 could become a major contributing **push factor** in the region, increasing the likelihood of **(re)migration**. The closure of border posts already has a heavy impact on **border communities' economies** which may lead to the crossings at non-official points of entry, especially small-scale border traders, who have potentially lost their income.

The direct impact of measures to slow down the spread of the disease such as the closure of markets, quarantines or curfews will further impact livelihoods and access to food, aggravating an already existing **food insecurity**.

Indications of **growing animosity** among local populations, some of whom perceive foreigners or minorities as responsible for spreading the disease.



Xenophobic incidents were reported in the region. The likelihood of such incidents will probably grow as Covid-19 continues to spread.

Finally, **violent extremist groups** may exploit the current chaos, taking advantage of the overall international attention being distracted by the COVID-19 crisis, reportedly perceived as a “window of opportunity” by criminal and extremist groups to target populations.

Migration Dynamics Amid COVID-19 Crisis

LAKE CHAD BASIN

The Lake Region – geographically dominated by the Lake Chad which borders both Cameroon and Nigeria, is the most affected region by the Lake Chad Basin crisis, causing an increase in displacement in the region as a result of the surge in the frequency of security attacks.

The recent declaration of a war zone in the Lake Chad Region by the Chadian government following a deadly attack by the non-state armed group Boko Haram, and the measures taken by the government to limit the spread of a COVID-19 outbreak are having a severe socio-economic impact on the population already affected by the country's weak economy.

Over 20,000 people living on the Lake Chad islands were displaced to the mainland following the war zone declaration at the government's request. All borders and points of entry into the region have been closed, leaving most of the

displaced populations with limited access to basic amenities and food items, and vulnerable to safety and health risks.

TRANSIT COUNTRIES

Migrants and mobile populations in the region are heavily affected by the consequences of the pandemic (such as border closures) and can find themselves in vulnerable situations. So far, thousands of migrants are stranded at borders including 1,100 Chadian students in Cameroon.

Over 2,500 are currently waiting in IOM's transit centres (mainly in Niger, Mali, Chad, and Burkina Faso) for voluntary return to their country of origin. Most of the transit centres have reached maximum capacities. In Mali and Niger, IOM is limiting admissions only to the most vulnerable migrants. However, migrants are still being abandoned along the migration routes, adding to the number of people in need of assistance and making it increasingly complicated to place them in quarantine.

In Niger, the Minister of Foreign Affairs has formally authorized movements (humanitarian corridors) for migrants in IOM transit centres across the territory pending authorization from countries of origin. Negotiations with authorities from countries of origin are under way. In the meantime, alternative shelters within migrant and host communities are being assessed.

PASTORALISM

During the dry season (January-May), mobility is not a pressing concern as cattle graze in coastal countries. However, with the wet season approaching (starting in May), governmental



measures related to the pandemic (the closure of borders and markets) will necessarily impact transhumance flows, as herders may not be able to: i) access grain supplies for their cattle; and ii) sell their goods (i.e. milk and meat). The severe expected income losses will have a direct impact on food and nutrition security in the region. Additionally, because of their nomadic nature, herders are hard-to-reach people with no or limited access to the information related to COVID-19 and therefore sensitization is challenging.

COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN

Since 2017, over 75,000 migrants who were stranded along the Central Mediterranean Routes were assisted to return to their countries of origin in West and Central Africa, among which 45,000 returned to the Sahel and LCB.

While reintegration assistance in the form of setting up businesses for instance is provided to returnees, the suspension of “non-essential” activities and lockdowns in several cities in the target countries may have a dramatic impact on a number of small businesses established by returnees.

BORDER TRADE

In both regions, the weak state presence in remote areas (incl. border areas) can lead to the absence of public and social services.

Border officials are “the frontline fighters” against COVID-19 and as such are involved in the response. However, most of them have neither the equipment to screen for the disease at border crossings, seaports and airports nor the

information to raise awareness among border communities and travelers.

When border trade resumes, crossings of traders and truck drivers may create sanitary risks if no additional measures such as testing, or isolation are put in place.

The closure of border posts already shows a heavy impact on border communities’ economies which may lead to the crossings of small-scale border traders at non-official points.

Four countries in the Sahel Region (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, and Niger) are landlocked countries heavily dependent on their neighbours’ – mainly Senegal, Guinea, Cameroon, Libya, Sudan, and Nigeria – ports for essential goods.

MOBILITY

The COVID-19 outbreak has significantly affected mobility in West and Central Africa in the form of various travel disruptions, restrictions and bans, which often leave migrants stranded.

Through IOM’s Flow Monitoring Registry (FMR), a tool of IOM’s Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) a 28 per cent decrease of travellers was witnessed between January and March 2020.

A striking acceleration in the decrease in flows was noticed over the second half of the month of March: the number of travellers observed weekly dropped by 79 per cent. This coincides with the period during which countries in the region started imposing travel bans and enacting border closure measures.



IOM PRIORITIES

The COVID-19 response should not be done at the expense of existing programmes and activities. The security threats in the region call for a continuous action against non-state armed groups. **Stabilizing the regions**, at the security and economic levels, should remain a priority if we want to prevent a next humanitarian emergency.

Sustaining humanitarian assistance especially in conflict-affected areas – Liptako Gourma or Lake Chad Basin- is key to reducing the rates of transmission. In cases of lockdown or significant restrictions of movement, humanitarian agencies should be allowed to continue humanitarian operations while respecting public health measures put in place. To ensure the continuation of humanitarian operations, IOM is working towards **securing humanitarian corridors** in countries of origin and of transit. Additionally, solutions are sought to bring to safety thousands of migrants waiting in transit centres (ca 2,500 mainly in Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Chad).

The **socio-economic vulnerabilities** of the most marginalized and vulnerable people in conflict-affected and fragile settings should be incorporated into the national response of host governments. Multiyear **livelihood projects** in highly mobile community to reduce the likelihood for the youth to take the dangerous journey should also be considered.

AREAS OF INTERVENTION

- coordination and partnerships
- risk communication and community engagement (RCCE)
- disease surveillance
- points of entry (POE)
- national laboratory system
- infection prevention and control
- case management and continuity of essential services
- logistics, procurement and supply management
- protection
- camp coordination and camp management (CCCM)
- displacement tracking
- socio-economic impact

