

Migrant Smuggling in the Casamance Area of Senegal



Key lessons

- The criminalisation of migrant smuggling has not succeeded in eliminating the practice.
- Risk-awareness campaigns do not deter irregular migrants as there are complex socio-cultural reasons for migrating.
- Efforts need to be made to open up more channels for legal migration and labour circulation.

The phenomenon of irregular migration

In the mid 2000s, Senegalese nationals accounted for the largest proportion of irregular migrants intercepted in the Mediterranean. These irregular boat migrants, who risked their lives to reach Europe, were described as young single men between 20 and 29 years of age belonging to the Mouride brotherhood (a branch of Islam originating

in the Senegalese city of Touba) and the Wolof ethnic group. In the decade between those studies and this research, there has been a diversification both of routes and of the ethnicities of people migrating from Senegal, in response to the changing policy context and the emergence of a more established migration industry. Accounts show that overland journeys via Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and onwards to Morocco or Libya are just as important as the sea route via Mauritania towards Spain, if not more so.



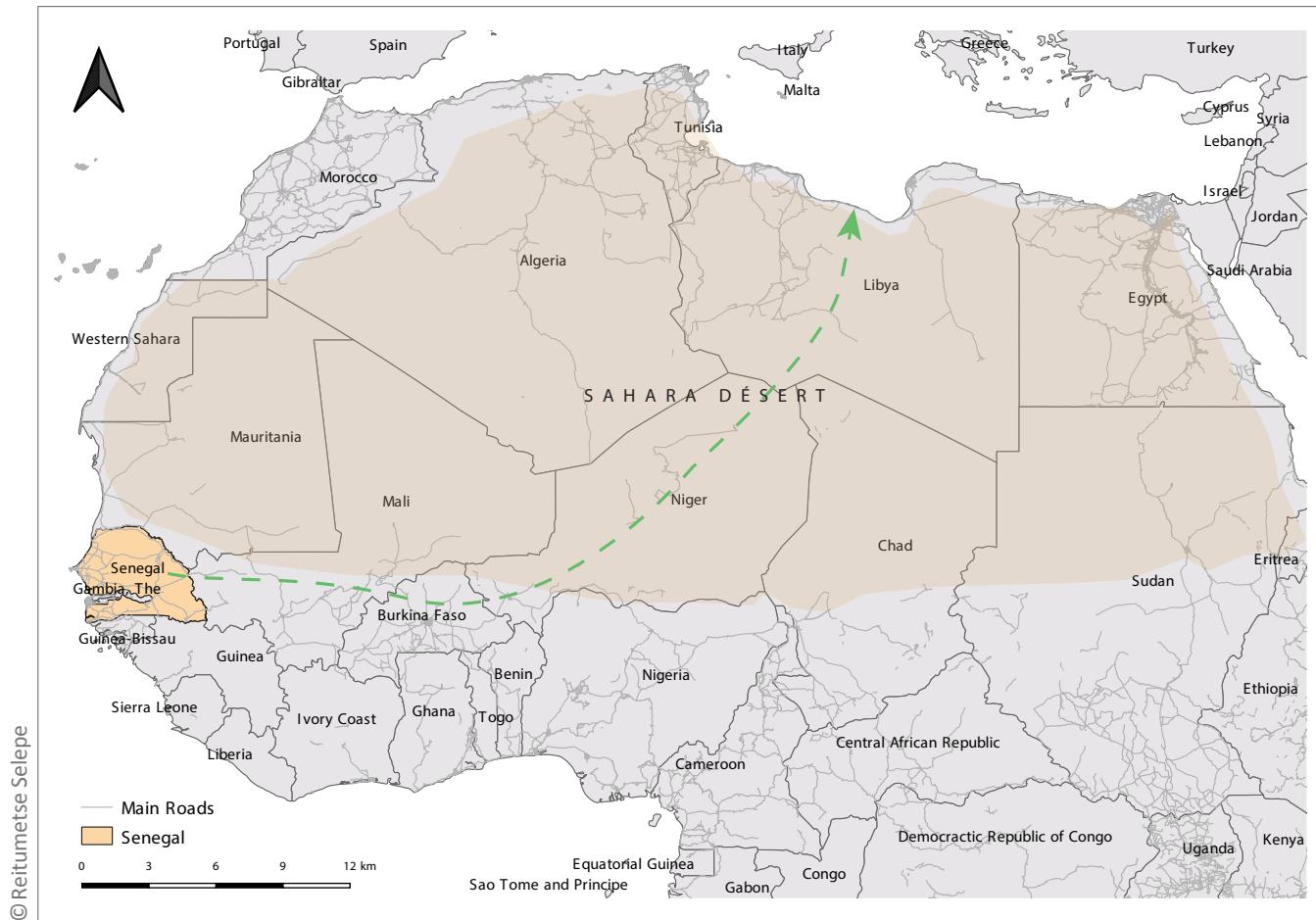
A high-risk decision

As routes and migrant profiles have diversified, so have the infrastructures of migration mediation. This research provides an up-to-date account of the structure and functioning of the Senegalese migration industry: the functions of actors at different levels and in different spaces, the social relations between them and the transactions they carry out, whether and how they relate to each other and what the implications are for migrant welfare. The research was conducted by the University of Assane Seck in Ziguinchor in collaboration with the University of Sussex, in the Casamance area of Senegal. Casamance is an important point of origin for migrants travelling towards Libya and also a transit point for migrants from neighbouring Guinea-Bissau, Guinea Conakry and The Gambia.

The last decade also saw the intensification of border controls through sea patrols as well as measures such as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime's Regional Strategy to Combat Trafficking in Human Beings and Smuggling of Migrants in West and Central Africa (2015–20). However, the investment and effort that have gone into these control measures have not resulted in a concomitant drop in irregular migration, as the migration industry has adapted to new controls, and 'victims of trafficking' are notoriously difficult to identify on the ground. Another aim of the research was therefore to show how irregular migration is organised against this backdrop of tightening controls on migration to Europe.

The research was conducted in four regions: Kolda region (Medina Yoro Foulla, Vélingara and Kolda departments), Sédiou region (Goudomp

Figure 1 Route used by migrants travelling from Senegal to the Libyan Coast





department and Tanaf locality), Ziguinchor region (Oussouye department, Elinkine locality) and Tambacounda region (Tambacounda city). Although not part of Casamance, the latter was included because many brokers are located there. Interviews were conducted with aspiring migrants (18), returned and deported migrants (26), the families of migrants (12), six smugglers and four civil society organisations. All the interviewees were male. Although the plan was to interview equal numbers of men and women, the research team did not succeed in speaking to any female migrants, and all the male interviewees denied the existence of any female migrants at all. The independent migration of women to foreign countries is stigmatised in Kolda because of the belief that they must sell sex in order to survive. These stereotypes about female migration were reinforced by radio broadcasts about the vulnerability of women to being trafficked for sex. Interviews with smugglers do indicate that women may use sex transactionally to obtain protection for a safe passage; however these activities are not necessarily forced.

The interviews at the point of origin show that the decision to migrate was taken in spite of the high risks, as migration was seen as the only way out of a life with no future. It was regarded as key to realising dreams and visions of a more prosperous future. This is wrapped up with masculinities and the desire to be a good family provider and/or son but migration is also seen as an escape from dishonourable ways of making a living locally. As one father said, he would prefer his son to migrate rather than sell timber illegally and bring shame upon himself and the family:

Either he migrated or he would have got into complicated situations like for example selling [wood] and trafficking between Senegal and Gambia. Imagine the shame I would have felt towards my relatives if he had fallen into delinquency. He had to go.

The structure of the migration industry

The migration industry in Kolda is characterised by a plurality of actors who work either together or independently and who may have fluid roles depending on the need of the moment and their capacity to find innovative solutions to a particular problem. Thus, understanding how they come together in assemblages of functioning is probably more helpful than viewing them as separate and discretely identifiable entities with clear-cut hierarchies. Profit-making and altruistic motives may overlap, but we classify actors as altruistic or transactional depending on their predominant motivation. Altruistic migration actors are found at the place of origin and include returnees, deportees, friends and family members, who offer advice on where to cross the border, which modes of transport to use, how to prepare for the journey, what to carry on one's person, how to avoid being robbed and exploited on the way, and where to stay en route. These actors usually do not expect financial remuneration, but the migrant may run up 'cultural debts' in social systems of reciprocity, which ought to be repaid at an unspecified point in the future.

Transactional actors include *marabouts* (spiritual leaders); *cokseurs*, who are found in bus depots and at various transit points picking out migrants with an eagle eye to recruit them for particular drivers; border police; and in the case of sea migrations, also the pirogue captains and the fishermen who help construct boats. The migration project often starts with the aspiring migrant working to save money or selling land or animals to finance the journey. Families may or may not be involved at this stage and several migrants said they left without informing anyone, for fear of being stopped. Parents are reluctant to support irregular migration because the dangers are well known. Some support the project and consult *marabouts* or other psychics to seek protection for their wards; they can pay 100,000–150,000 CFA francs for this service. The marabout might also ask for offerings of other kinds: a rooster, or a goat which



is killed to prepare a meal for the whole community. This is a way of earning good fortune through good deeds. *Gris-gris* (amulets or lucky charms) and magic potions are given in preparation for the journey to ‘force fate’ to prevent deportation, which is the ultimate failure. Forcing fate also means seeking protection against theft, scams and all the other hazards that could occur along the way. There are thus enormous hopes for the migrant and his success.

A long and complicated journey

After this point the migrant is passed on from one transactional actor to another, starting with agencies who advertise themselves as specialists in delivering migrants to Europe. These can be tour operators whose operations have gone underground since the criminalisation of migration facilitation. Many smugglers are based in Tambacounda. The last one to trade openly was charging each migrant 150,000 CFA francs for arranging their passage to Libya. These agencies then link up with *cokseurs* and drivers to facilitate the clandestine journey of migrants to certain ‘ghettos’ at transit points in which they have an interest. All of this is done under the interested, benevolent watch of the police.

Cokseurs often recruit migrants on the basis of their language and ethnicity, as they use this to establish rapport and trust. They use words in local languages to greet them, such as *nagandef* in Wolof or *diarama* in Puular. They employ mobile phones and digital technologies to entice the migrant to their transport operator. This includes showing them photos on Facebook of Africans looking happy in Europe and messages on WhatsApp from migrants supposedly thanking the *cokseur* for a successful journey. These ploys are adopted to make the migrant believe that the *cokseur* has the connections to deliver them safely to Italy or Spain. They don’t hesitate to take advantage of the migrant’s fear and anxiety to tie them into an arrangement. The *cokseur* is paid by the drivers but he is known to extract money from migrants as well, for example by selling them sim cards and overcharging.

High costs but no guarantee of safety

Once the migrants are in the vehicle, the drivers take them to particular ghettos which they have a personal connection with through the managers. Ghettos are staging posts and are typically organised on the basis of nationality. To enter the ghetto, migrants must pay the *cokseurs* there an entrance fee of 20,000–100,000 CFA francs. These *cokseurs* belong to Peulh, Wolof, Mandingue and Jola ethnic groups and cater to migrants from those groups. The conditions inside are cramped and mercenary. All sense of a cohesive community breaks down in these locations and there is a complete lack of trust or mutual help. As one migrant remarked, ‘Everyone for himself and God for us all.’ Those without money must work to survive, otherwise they will starve. Migrants work as coffee-sellers, clothes-washers, hairdressers and petty traders as well as doing unpaid work such as cooking and cleaning to maintain the ghetto. Each nationality has a representative called the ‘chief’, who is linked through another layer of intermediaries to a particular smuggler. Only those in ghettos will be put in touch with drivers for the next part of the journey and from this point the migrants are firmly locked into broker networks. Although the accommodation in ghettos is run by brokers on migrant money, the migrants are treated like captive slaves. The chiefs in the ghetto can speak Arabic and they negotiate the terms of the onward passage with drivers, who are often from Libya. The chiefs collect money from the migrants and tell them to come to a particular departure point but there were accounts from the migrants of being cheated and the trip not materialising. Through their connections the chiefs may also help migrants to have passports forged in Mali for a charge of 50,000 CFA francs.

The crossing of the desert is done in ‘combat’ in overloaded pick-up trucks led by smugglers armed with Kalashnikovs. The guns are meant to protect the smugglers not only against robbers along the way but also against the migrants they are carrying. They fear



strong solidarity among migrants, and arm themselves to avoid any rebellion during the crossing of the Sahara. Conditions in the desert are extremely dangerous and precarious. They tie wooden sticks to the sides of the vehicle, which offer flimsy support to migrants as they travel standing up or perched on the sides. The van drivers are ruthless and if a migrant loses his balance and falls, they do not stop to rescue him because they have already been paid and there are no legal or moral checks against such behaviour in the desert.

At every border crossing, migrants must pay a 'tax' to the border police. Crossings into Burkina Faso are the most expensive and difficult; migrants pay an average of 40,000 CFA francs at the border. In Niger and Mali around 30,000 CFA francs are extracted at the border. In addition, they pay banknotes of 1,000 CFA francs or 2,000 CFA francs at various internal checkpoints all the way to Tripoli. The border police are embedded in the system and further extract money from the migrant rather than protecting him or her.

Boat journeys are similarly harrowing. Pirogues or dugout boats are constructed on the shores with the help of local fishermen and tightly crammed with migrants. Navigation techniques are basic and only the captain has a compass and phone. Mental breakdowns and accidents, with migrants either falling or being pushed overboard, are common.

It is difficult to state with precision the costs related to the journey, especially since they may vary, depending on the negotiations between the migrant and the various intermediaries and also the different rates offered. Our research shows that, on average, at the beginning of migration, the migrant carries with him/her a sum of between 105,000 and 250,000 francs. As s/he progresses along the migration routes, the expenses increase to amounts ranging from 900,000 to 1,500,000 francs. Further large sums may be needed if the migrant is held in transit or kidnapped along the way. The Senegalese compatriot or Gambian neighbour who was thought by a migrant to be helping

and supporting him/her is often involved in the kidnapping of migrants, in complicity with Libyans, in order to claim a ransom. Typically migrants are beaten and they call their families, who desperately gather money to release them. Money transfers are made through Western Union or Orange Money directly to the broker. While waiting for his/her release, the migrant is treated like a slave.

It's all down to chance and luck in a mercenary environment

In the absence of any legal protection and given a completely mercenary environment, the outcomes of irregular migration depend on chance and luck. It is hardly surprising then that migrants and their families place such faith in the *marabouts'* blessings. Those who survive and succeed in accumulating enough money to make the crossing to Europe are the lucky ones. Many have died in the desert or at sea and others have been deported. Repeated deportations may force people to become immobile and re-establish their original occupations of agriculture and animal husbandry but that does not extinguish the desire to migrate.

The migration journeys of the Senegalese from Kolda are rarely linear or quick. Interrupted journeys with long sojourns at transit points were common. In some cases journeys could span several years. In one extreme case a migrant from a subsistence farming family had remained a migrant for 20 years, working his way through successive locations and being deported three times. By the time he was deported from Mali in 2017 he had lived and worked in Burkina Faso, Niger, Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Cameroon, Ivory Coast and South Africa. These accounts are remarkably different from the accounts of irregular migrants in Ghana. Although they too are gambling with death and being robbed along the way, their journeys are shorter and along established



routes, and they do not report being harmed by brokers and smugglers to the same extent. The reasons for these differences are not entirely clear at this stage of the analysis but a possible explanation is the less organised and developed nature of the migration industry in Senegal, where the balance of power is still with brokers and smugglers.

The high costs and extreme unpredictability of irregular migration have economic and psychological consequences for the family as well as the migrant. Before they receive a call from the smugglers, families may be unaware that their relative has been imprisoned. Their anxiety is compounded by regular radio broadcasts, testimonies and awareness campaigns conducted by non-governmental organisations on the dangers of land-based migration.

Implications for policy

There is a vast clandestine infrastructure involving both state and non-state actors, where roles are overlapping and boundaries are blurred. The same

actors, such as the border police, may perform both formal and informal roles, which poses difficult challenges for government. Criminalisation seems to have served mainly to create more opportunities for smuggling and rent-seeking rather than eliminating the practices of smugglers and their networks. In a country where nearly 40 per cent of the population is poor and the lifestyles that the young aspire to cannot be obtained at home, there are no easy ways of addressing the 'root causes' of irregular migration. A more serious and honest look at the global forces underlying international (under)development is necessary to start identifying lasting solutions to the current situation.

Creating more channels for legal migration would help to avoid some of the extreme hardships faced by migrants and reduce the need for smugglers. There is a need to revisit temporary migration programmes, as they could offer benefits to both migrant-sending countries like Senegal and countries with a labour deficit in Europe.

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