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Labour-trafficking in ASGM: Assessing risks in the Sahara-Sahel goldfields

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Summary

This report assesses risks of exploitation and labour trafficking in gold-mining areas in northern Niger and northern Mali. It examines the modalities of recruitment and employment, the risks they pose to workers and the structural factors that contribute to the vulnerability of gold miners. The report also identifies key opportunities for policy makers to address these risks while recognising the crucial role of gold mining for local livelihoods and stability.

Recommendations

Support efforts to formalise gold mining in a way that allows ASGM to be sustained alongside industrial mining while providing guarantees for workers:

- Include safe labour standards in mining regulations;
- Adjust formalisation procedures to support independent gold miners and reduce corruption and clientelist risks;
- Promote dialogue around challenges and opportunities for ASGM in the Sahara–Sahel;
- Invest resources in the deployment of state services and security at goldfields.

Support roles for civil society to reduce risks in ASGM alongside national formalisation drives:

- Raise awareness of labour-trafficking risks in ASGM;
- Encourage and provide frameworks for the creation of gold-mining unions and cooperatives.



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Organised Crime: West African Response to Trafficking

Introduction

Since 2013, the discovery of gold deposits across the northern Sahel and central Sahara and the subsequent boom in artisanal and small-scale gold mining (ASGM) have given rise to new challenges and opportunities for local communities and local, national and regional authorities.

In a context where livelihood options are scarce, gold mining is viewed as an opportunity not to be missed by unemployed or low-income young men hoping for a change of fortune in Niger and Mali. However, gold mining also poses substantial risks and challenges to those involved. A former gold miner described his recruitment experience:

We arrived in Djado in the evening. They unloaded the car and we started to prepare food. I heard them change language; they started speaking a different dialect [...]. I heard them talk of prices, asking how much one thing or another was. I asked them what they were buying and selling: 'Is it equipment or is it us [the gold miners] that you are selling?' [...] I was told that we were now 'sold', that we had been bought and that we should go where we were told. [...] When I heard that I had been bought, I realised it was over.¹

Although not representative of systematic practices in ASGM, this testimony provides a telling example of how gold-mining experiences can turn sour in remote Saharan goldfields. Assessing the risks posed to gold miners and the factors which make them vulnerable in these contexts is key to building a nuanced approach to ASGM and ensuring its potential is harnessed in a way that meets the needs of gold miners themselves.

ASGM now plays a central role in political economies and stability dynamics in the region. Goldfields have attracted increasing numbers of actors involved in informal and illicit activities, and some have emerged as major hotspots and logistical hubs for illicit economies.² The geographic and political isolation of certain Saharan and central Sahelian sites which remain largely beyond the reach of national authorities, or where state presence is limited, and the sheer concentration of workers in otherwise lightly populated areas, have led some to emerge as nexus points for a plethora of criminal routes and activities.

Many gold-mining areas are also located along historic regional trafficking routes and have evolved alongside – and with linkages to – various illicit economies, such as drug trafficking, human smuggling, arms trafficking and banditry, some of which largely pre-date the gold rush.³

However, goldfields are also key to local livelihoods and economies and central to community and political dynamics at the local and regional levels. They can provide an economic 'sponge', offering informal livelihood options to actors which steer them away from involvement in more nefarious or violent forms of criminality. In so doing, the goldfields offer a degree of stabilisation in the broader areas in which they are located.

Existing research has identified the links between gold mining, illicit economies and conflict dynamics in the Sahel and West Africa⁴ and underlined potential risks of human trafficking in gold-mining areas in West Africa. For instance, the US Department of State's Trafficking in Persons reports repeatedly highlight human-trafficking risks linked to gold mining in many West African and Sahelian countries, including Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Mali, Niger and Senegal.⁵

Goldfields have attracted increasing numbers of actors involved in informal and illicit activities, and some have emerged as major hotspots and logistical hubs for illicit economies

However, specific research into human-trafficking dynamics in goldfields in the more inaccessible zones of the northern Sahel and central Sahara is far more limited. Because of the remoteness of many of these sites, and

the difficulty of conducting applied field research, evidence on the linkages between goldfields and human trafficking in northern Niger and Mali is scarce.

Previous research conducted by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) in Chad suggests that the lack of regulation or law enforcement in goldfields such as Kouri Bougoudi, combined with the geographic position of gold sites and prospective gold miners' lack of awareness of working conditions at the goldfields put many workers at risk of human trafficking.⁶ This is particularly true for those who travel on credit to work in the goldfields.⁷

Kouri Bougoudi is also an important hub for illicit activities between Chad, Libya and Niger, such as drug and arms trafficking and armed banditry, resulting in high levels of criminality and violence at the goldfield.

This report aims to better understand whether similar dynamics are at play in goldfields in both northern Niger and northern Mali. It further assesses the risks to adult miners of exploitation through labour trafficking at extraction sites. Although relevant, this report does not examine sex trafficking, as women – who constitute most victims – are absent from the extraction sites under study. Sex-trafficking dynamics are more closely associated with more densely populated towns that service the goldfields or associated gold-processing centres. The report also does not assess child-labour risks, as applying international definitions of child labour to local ASGM contexts is problematic, as discussed below.

Adult miners are at risk of exploitation through labour trafficking at extraction sites

This report examines the modalities of recruitment and employment in gold-mining sites in Mali's Gao region (N'Tahaka) and Niger's Agadez region (Tchibarakaten and Djado), the risks they pose to workers and the structural factors that contribute to vulnerability to human trafficking and other exploitation. The research focuses on artisanal gold mining, which represents the bulk of gold mining in the focus areas. Rather than implying that artisanal gold miners are inherently criminal, this focus is motivated by the recognition that the mostly informal nature of their activities – and indeed the challenges they face in accessing formalisation – make them particularly vulnerable to exploitation.

The research therefore aims to provide a relevant and timely analysis of labour-trafficking dynamics at gold sites in northern Mali and Niger and the challenges and opportunities they pose for stabilisation strategies in a context affected by deteriorating security and political uncertainty across the region.

The report also identifies key opportunities for policy makers to engage with local communities, national authorities and regional actors to address human-trafficking risks in Sahara–Sahel goldfields while recognising the crucial role of gold mining for local livelihoods and stability.

Methodology

This report draws on 65 semi-structured interviews conducted in Tchibarakaten, Djado, Agadez and Niamey in Niger and N'Tahaka in Mali in July and September 2022. Due to security and access considerations, the fieldwork was conducted by local researchers originating from the areas under study. Interviewees at the goldfields included gold miners, bosses (or *patrons*), permit holders, traders, smugglers, community leaders, military and security actors, local authorities and civil society actors.

Due to the complex political and security dynamics in northern Mali, fieldwork was restricted to the N'Tahaka goldfield in the Gao region. These interviews were conducted in person by the Bureau d'Etudes sur l'Extrémisme Violent et les Conflits Communautaires en Afrique (Bureau of Studies on Extremism and Community Conflicts in Africa, BSECA) and a local independent researcher. The BSECA conducted remote interviews by phone with gold miners and security actors in N'Abaw, another goldfield in the Gao region, as access to the site presented heightened security risks.

In Niger, the goldfields of Djado and Tchibarakaten were selected due to their size and their location in remote northern areas of the country that are characterised by limited state presence and entrenched organised crime dynamics. Interviews in northern Niger were conducted by Nigerien researchers with longstanding experience and knowledge of gold mining in the area and the ability to access the sites and reach target groups.

Fieldwork was conducted in Tchibarakaten by Rhoumour Ahmet Tchilouta and in Djado and Agadez by a local researcher who wishes to remain anonymous. This field research faced some constraints, including the length of time spent at the goldfields, which limited the number of sites the researchers could access due to the distance between them, and the reluctance of certain interlocutors to agree to interviews due to the sensitive nature of the research questions.

Data collection in Niamey was also conducted by the Mouvement des Jeunes pour le Développement et l'Éducation Citoyenne (Movement of Youth for Development and Civic Education, MOJEDEC) in Niger, a member of the West Africa Research Network on Organized Crime within the framework of the Organised Crime: West African Response to Trafficking project. The MOJEDEC interviewed civil society organisations, institutional actors and government agencies and participated in a data-validation exercise.

The fieldwork was supplemented by remote semi-structured and informal key informant interviews with international researchers and experts and local gold-sector professionals.

The research also draws on a comprehensive literature review, including academic and other literature as well as proprietary GI-TOC research conducted since 2017 on gold-mining issues in the Sahara–Sahel. The research also involved open-source data collection and media analysis in English and French.

Finally, the report draws on analysis and perspectives shared during a research-validation workshop held in Lagos in December 2022 which brought together a range of local, regional and international experts, academics and civil society organisations, as well as the researchers who conducted the fieldwork. This provided an opportunity to assess and discuss the preliminary findings, identify gaps in the research and collectively formulate recommendations.

The evolution of artisanal gold mining and connections to organised crime and violence in the central Sahara

Regional context

In the last 10 years, the entire Saharo–Sahelian strip has experienced an unprecedented gold rush. Gold mining began in earnest in 2012, with the first discoveries in Sudan in 2009 followed by discoveries in Chad between 2013 and 2016, in Niger and Algeria in 2014 and in Mali and Mauritania in 2016.⁸ Cross-border flows of artisanal gold miners, including Sudanese, Chadians and Burkinabes, in the northern Sahel and central Sahara were key to facilitating the boom in artisanal gold mining, providing a steady pool of workers and experienced gold miners to goldfields.⁹

Given the complex political, economic and security challenges across the region, the discovery of gold marked an important development opportunity. However, failures to effectively formalise the artisanal gold-mining sector in a way that benefits gold miners and local communities have undermined its full potential as an economic driver of development in the region.

In the same period, the growing presence of violent extremism across the region presented major security and political challenges to Sahelian states. In early 2012, Mali entered a period of crisis when a coalition of rebel and jihadist armed groups seized large swathes of northern

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*View from a
gold-mining site
in Djado goldfield,
Niger, June 2022*



Mali. Although the jihadist groups were later dislodged by the French military's Operation Serval, conflict and instability persist due to difficulties in implementing the 2015 peace agreement, ongoing competition between major powerbrokers and armed groups, and a sharp rise in violent extremism.

Violent extremist groups also spread to neighbouring regions in Niger, which became a transit zone for combatants and arms between Mali and Libya. The outbreak of civil war in Libya following the 2011 uprising presented additional security challenges to the Sahel region due to the porous nature of the country's southern borders, which allowed fighters and weapons to spill into the Sahel–Maghreb region.

These dynamics in turn shaped a new era for organised crime in the Sahel by creating opportunities for illicit economies and criminal groups to consolidate and diversify. In the wake of the conflicts in Libya (2011) and Mali (2012), arms stockpiles from the former Libyan regime poured into neighbouring countries, fuelling armed violence across the region and strengthening the operational capacity of criminal groups.¹⁰

By the mid-2010s, military and law enforcement efforts – particularly Operation Serval and its successor Operation Barkhane, launched in 2014 – derailed and displaced certain smuggling and trafficking activities.¹¹ Organised crime was also affected by local developments, including the rise in armed banditry which disrupted high-value drug trafficking routes through Mali, Niger, Libya and Chad, and the reversal of arms flows due to renewed conflict in Libya in 2014.¹²

However, while organised crime dynamics have adapted to changing political and security environments in the region, formal – and some informal – economies have struggled to survive.

In northern Niger, the Libyan civil war and the ensuing instability reduced the licit trade flow between Agadez and Libya, depriving the region of a key source of livelihoods. Rising insecurity and violent extremism also disrupted Saharan tourism, which until 2007 provided a crucial employment source in Niger.¹³ The transport of migrants had been a major activity for large numbers of drivers in the Agadez region and was tolerated by authorities. Its criminalisation in 2015 exacerbated unemployment levels and pushed many former drivers towards illicit activities and artisanal gold mining.¹⁴

Niger's uranium production (the fifth largest in the world) was severely affected by the global price drop following the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster.¹⁵ The development of the Imouraren mine, owned by the French group Orano (formerly Areva), which was supposed to bring in additional revenues and jobs, has been


repeatedly postponed since 2014.¹⁶ Several uranium mines in the Agadez region have also closed since 2014, including Somina (2014) and Cominak (2021), leaving hundreds without jobs.¹⁷

In northern Mali, persistent instability since the 2012 rebellion has fuelled and been fuelled by illicit economies and organised crime dynamics, the development of which has long been intertwined with Mali's political history.¹⁸ Despite the 2015 peace agreement, competition over key trafficking routes and hubs in northern Mali has continued to trigger conflict between signatory armed groups and also shape alliances between them.

In central Mali, jihadist groups such as Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wa al-Muslimeen (JNIM) and the Islamic State Sahel Province (IS Sahel), and self-defence militias that mobilised against them since 2016, such as Dan Na Ambassagou, also became involved in various forms of organised crime, including arms trafficking, protection rackets and kidnap for ransom.¹⁹

This combination of instability, weapons and armed groups in turn allowed new criminal markets to develop. Livestock theft, for example, has become a major criminal market across northern and central Mali.²⁰ In addition to disrupting crucial local livelihoods, this has exacerbated existing tensions within and between communities. Although a range of actors engage in livestock theft, including armed groups and bandits, jihadist groups have intentionally used it to exploit grievances to their strategic advantage.²¹

A combination of instability, organised crime and armed groups allowed new criminal markets to develop across the region



Climate variability and severe drought had adverse effects on agriculture and pastoral farming across the region, weakening another crucial employment sector.²² Youth unemployment was also persistent. In sum, the regional economy was facing considerable challenges by the time the gold rush was triggered.

Against this background, the boom in artisanal gold mining in the Sahara-Sahel helped to revive local informal economies, driving formal ancillary business opportunities around gold-mining areas and redefining socio-political dynamics. The discovery of gold brought a rush of miners from Sahelian and sub-Saharan states, including Nigeriens, Chadians, Nigerians, Burkinabes, Malians and Sudanese experienced in gold mining.

Traders also headed to the gold sites to cater to the rising demand for food, water, fuel, coal, tools, vehicles and materials.²³ The establishment of gold-processing centres provided another significant source of employment. Other licit activities ancillary to the goldfields and processing centres involved restaurants, accommodation, mechanical and repair workshops, health centres and other services.

Illicit markets also flourished, responding in some areas to a demand for illicit medicines (particularly Tramadol), drugs and weapons. The influx of a large and exclusively male gold-miner population triggered a demand for sex work in some nearby towns or towns that house gold-processing centres (Chirfa, Arlit, Tabelot).

According to the Nigerien Ministry of Mines, Niger had more than 230 gold-mining sites by 2017, which employed more than 800 000 people (11% of the active population) and directly or indirectly supported nearly 20% of the Nigerien population.²⁴ Large-scale gold mining represents only a very small proportion of these activities, with only one industrial mine located in the Tillabéri region, operated by the Liptako Mining Company (Société Minière du Liptako).²⁵

The rest is ASGM, including artisanal and semi-mechanised operations, representing 79–89% of all gold mining in Niger, according to some estimates.²⁶ However, the number of artisanal gold-mining sites in Niger is difficult to estimate, as a significant proportion in both the north and the southwest is informal. In Tchibarakaten, most gold-mining operators are authorised by the Ministry of Mines.²⁷ However, in Djado, a majority of gold miners operate informally without permits.²⁸

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miners in Mali at 700 000.³² Gold also spurred development in the region, triggering a notable increase in trade, transport activities and housing construction.³³

Gold, conflict and insecurity

While the discovery of gold created positive economic opportunities, it also raised significant security challenges in peripheral desert regions that have historically been beyond the reach of law enforcement actors. States have a limited presence in these complex areas and lack sufficient human and technical resources to oversee such booming informal activity.³⁴ National authorities typically also lack the political will to effectively regulate gold mining beyond clientelist strategies that benefit local elites.³⁵

In the absence of effective governance and regulation mechanisms, tensions between local communities and foreign miners have fuelled political and community grievances as well as violent conflicts among miners who compete over access to mines, equipment and resources.³⁶

Underlying community dynamics between groups can also cause conflicts to escalate rapidly, as happened in Kouri Bougoudi in May 2022 when deadly clashes between two communities resulted in the evacuation and closure of the goldfield.³⁷

Mali is the fourth-largest gold producer in Africa.²⁹ Gold mining in the southern regions of Kayes, Sikasso and Koulikoro largely predates the discovery of deposits in the north and involves industrial mining companies – many of them foreign – and artisanal gold miners. In these regions, gold mining is mostly formal and takes place largely under government purview, yet there is frequent tension and conflict within gold-mining communities and between these communities and mining companies.³⁰ In the Kidal and Gao regions, however, most gold mining is artisanal and informal, with a small amount of semi-mechanised gold mining.

Gold discoveries in Mali instigated a new economic dynamic in the mining areas, providing alternatives to criminal activity.³¹ Exact figures of the number of people employed at gold sites are impossible to obtain, but some estimates put the total number of artisanal gold

Gold-miners' shelters are set on fire as intercommunal violence escalates in Kouri Bougoudi, Chad, May 2022



Outbreaks of violence have taken place at gold sites across the region.³⁸ In northern Mali, local pastoral communities have been involved in such tensions due to the devastating impact on livestock of the chemicals used in gold processing, including cyanide and mercury, and the partial destruction of grazing areas by gold-mining activities. In N'Tahaka, for example, herders were deprived of an area over 10 kilometres wide when gold mining boomed. One gold miner described the local impact:

This area is a grazing area and, since the beginning of the exploitation of the site, we have destroyed several kilometres and several times miners have caused bushfires, burning 30 kilometres and destroying the pasture. It is a disaster for breeders.³⁹

However, it should be noted that the level of violence seen in gold-mining-related conflict in Mali is not comparable with that in Chad. Further, gold mining in northern Mali has at times also allowed for a rapprochement between signatory armed groups who were otherwise in conflict.⁴⁰

Nonetheless, the broader context of regional instability has allowed for the proliferation of criminal actors around gold-mining areas that often become logistical hubs for trafficking activities. As goldfields emerged as nexuses for criminal routes and actors, they also increased the profitability of banditry operations, which had previously targeted mainly high-value drug convoys. While banditry in the region is not new, gold miners have increasingly become key targets since 2014, due to the highly lucrative potential of gold shipments.⁴¹

Such attacks have also increased in a broader context of escalating banditry in northern Niger that involves both Nigerien bandits and Chadian groups. Banditry increased following the 2015 criminalisation of human smuggling and the ensuing local economic contraction that pushed some locals to join criminal groups.⁴² Another surge was triggered by the October 2020 ceasefire in the Libyan war, which deprived many Chadian fighters employed as mercenaries of a key source of revenue.⁴³

Since mid-2022, the targeting of gold convoys in northern Niger has become a significant concern for gold-mining actors. A noteworthy example occurred in January 2022 when bandits attacked a National Guard convoy escorting a gold shipment between Djado and Agadez. Reportedly, 122 kilograms of gold were stolen, worth around three billion FCFA (€4.5 million).⁴⁴ Such attacks also appear to be on the rise near Tchibarakaten.⁴⁵

The targeting of gold convoys in banditry operations in northern Niger has become a significant concern for gold-mining actors

The rise in banditry in turn triggered the mobilisation of armed self-defence groups. These are not a new phenomenon around goldfields in the region, with notable examples in northern Chad, with the Comité d'Autodéfense de Miski (Miski Self-Defence Committee), and in Burkina Faso, with the Dozo and Koglwéogo groups.⁴⁶ In 2022, similar dynamics emerged near Arlit in Niger, where local groups formed a self-defence group against bandits.⁴⁷

Following the 2016 discovery of gold deposits in Mali, goldfields in the Kidal and Gao regions were immediately targeted by armed groups who saw a lucrative 'taxation' potential. This provided significant revenue streams for both signatory armed groups and violent extremist groups. Artisanal gold mining in northern Mali is also a potential recruitment ground for violent extremist groups.⁴⁸ Where gold mining involves the use of explosives, mining sites can additionally provide armed groups with a source for them and training in their use.⁴⁹

Much like most other countries in the region, Sahel governments – including Niger, Chad and Burkina Faso – have reacted to these growing security threats with crackdowns on artisanal gold mining.

Although motivated in some cases by legitimate concerns, this hard-line approach has typically been counterproductive. By depriving communities of critical livelihoods in a context where alternative economic opportunities are scarce, crackdowns have fuelled alienation and resentment, in particular among marginalised cross-border communities, which in turn provide incentives for armed rebellion.⁵⁰

The negative effects of crackdowns on goldfields, compounded by the continued development of illicit economies and organised crime across gold-mining areas, have raised suggestions for states to formalise artisanal gold mining rather than criminalise it. In addition to the benefits of gold mining as an economic ‘sponge’ that offers livelihood options to communities and an alternative to illicit activities or armed groups for those vulnerable to recruitment, the formalisation and regulation of artisanal gold mining could present opportunities for governments themselves.⁵¹ These include revenue opportunities, such as taxation, and entry points to strengthen state presence and legitimacy in otherwise isolated areas.⁵² Formalisation could also represent a key step in addressing human-trafficking risks in gold mining.⁵³

Existing analysis on human trafficking at Chadian goldfields

Although reporting on human-trafficking dynamics in West African gold-mining areas provides some insight into the impact of gold mining – both industrial and artisanal – on dynamics such as sex trafficking,⁵⁴ important knowledge gaps remain. The evidence also pre-dates the recent Sahel–Sahara gold rush.

Child labour in particular has been highlighted as pervasive across gold-mining regions. In 2011, Human Rights Watch assessed that between 20 000 and 40 000 children were working in gold mines in southern Mali.⁵⁵ In 2022, the UN Panel of Experts on Mali estimated that one-third of those working in goldfields are minors, who are typically used for dangerous tasks such as entering deep and narrow mining shafts.⁵⁶

However, international definitions of ‘child labour’ are largely at odds with local conceptions, where adolescents and even pre-adolescents over 12 years of age are not considered children. The employment of minors in labour-intensive agriculture and livestock farming is also widespread, commonly accepted and often a necessary source of income for households.⁵⁷ Although exploitative child-labour risks should by no means be overlooked, existing assessments of child labour in ASGM in the region can be seen as disconnected from local contexts.⁵⁸

Many human smugglers have taken on the role of recruiters, offering prospective miners the option to travel on credit to the gold site

The existing reporting on adult labour trafficking in West Africa is concentrated on gold-mining activities taking place close to urban areas or in areas with established state presence.⁵⁹ Risks of labour trafficking and exploitation in remote Saharan goldfields and areas beyond the reach of national authorities have received less attention. Nonetheless, existing research on northern Chad goldfields can provide an important base for understanding dynamics in geographically and politically isolated gold-mining areas.

Ongoing GI-TOC research has highlighted clear trends in human trafficking in Chad, where the dynamics are closely linked to the goldfields’ economic model, which relies on cheap labour.⁶⁰ In Kouri Bougoudi, the largest goldfield in northern Chad and also a major regional hub for poly-criminal armed groups,⁶¹ increasing numbers of young Chadians, particularly from the south, are recruited for gold mining.⁶²

Many human smugglers have taken on the role of recruiters across the country, offering prospective miners the option to travel on credit. By portraying gold mining as a unique opportunity to earn money easily and deceiving young men into thinking the travel is free, human smugglers can lure workers into indentured labour agreements.⁶³ The smugglers are then paid by the owners of the gold site, who employ the miners under terms in which the miners must first repay their costs of recruitment before they start earning a wage.



Gold miner in Djado, Niger, June 2022

Such labour agreements often turn into further exploitation as workers are exchanged between gold-site owners. Gold miners are not free to end their employment at the gold mine and their attempts to escape expose them to risks of violence and reprisal from their employers.⁶⁴

These practices also illustrate the blurred lines between legitimate movement within Chad, human smuggling and trafficking. Although migrants make the journey willingly, they often do so without knowledge about the working conditions at the goldfields.⁶⁵ Many areas within the Kouri Bougoudi goldfield lie beyond the reach of Chadian authorities and security forces and, although traditional mechanisms exist to regulate gold-mining activities and relations between gold miners, these structures do not appear capable or willing to address the exploitation or abuse of workers. Due to the geographic remoteness, workers in such situations usually find themselves with limited recourses for redress or escape.

Overview of gold sites under study in northern Niger and northern Mali

Djado

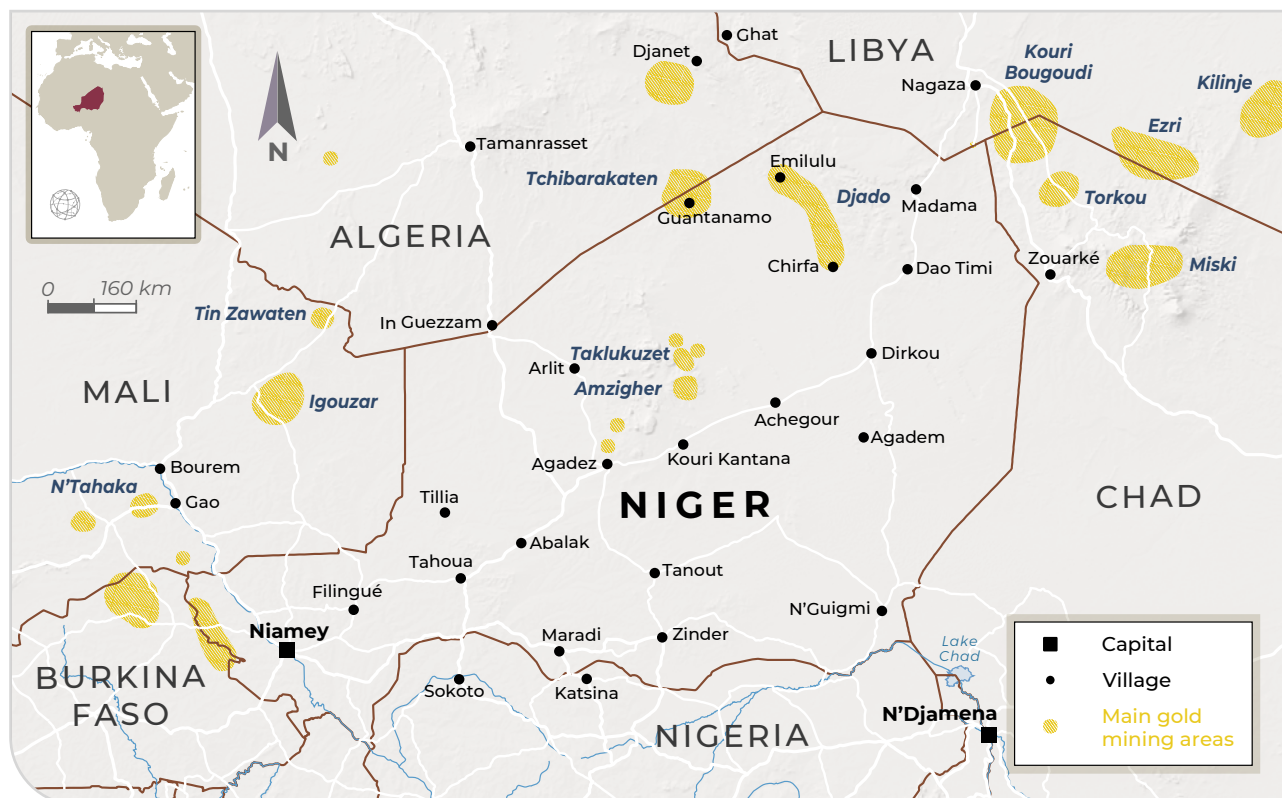
Djado, one of the largest goldfields in northern Niger, is located 650 kilometres northeast of the city of Agadez and extends across a huge area around 300 kilometres long and 50 kilometres wide.⁶⁶ Gold deposits in the Djado plateau are mostly alluvial and do not require heavy machinery or equipment to extract, allowing for individual artisanal mining.⁶⁷

However, in recent years, partly due to the depletion of gold ore at superficial levels, gold miners have also turned to semi-mechanised operations using heavy machinery.⁶⁸

The gold rush in Djado in 2014 attracted workers from Niger and beyond, including Chad, Sudan and Libya. However, the significant presence of foreign miners triggered local complaints and – at the national level – security concerns. It is likely that local grievances were motivated by the perceived success of foreign miners, especially Chadians and Sudanese, who outnumbered the local population in 2014. As these workers were generally more skilled and better equipped, they occupied the richest mining sites, to the detriment of Nigeriens. Foreigners also came to be associated with theft and banditry. As a result, the Nigerien authorities resorted to deporting hundreds of gold miners from Chad and Sudan.⁶⁹

Amid growing tensions and the increasing presence of foreign actors at the goldfield, the Nigerien government eventually closed the Djado site to individual miners in February 2017.⁷⁰ This closure was officially justified on security grounds, with the government raising the prospect that the site could be hosting and helping to fund foreign armed groups active in the region.⁷¹

Chart 1: Main goldmining areas in the Sahel-Sahara



The goldfield also served as a stopover location for migrants travelling north, and it is probable that this also influenced the closure decision, given Niamey's aim to reduce northbound migrant-smuggling flows.⁷²

The closure upended the livelihoods of tens of thousands of gold miners and exacerbated underlying grievances among Tebu groups (dominant in Djado), amid perceptions of the community's marginalisation by national authorities and growing incentives for mobilisation under rebel groups. The repressive stance adopted by the Nigerien authorities in Djado also contrasted with the softer approach adopted towards gold mining in Tchibarakaten, which remained open due in part to the government's clientelist ties to local political elites.⁷³

Amid simmering tensions among Tebu communities and the looming threat of armed mobilisation, the Nigerien government gradually relaxed the official closure of Djado. Activity at the goldfield revived in 2019 and the expulsions of gold miners ceased. This was also partly due to the positive impact of gold mining on the local economy in the village of Chirfa, the main market town of Djado municipality, which is located around 20 kilometres from the nearest gold sites of Djado (the farthest are up to 300 kilometres away).⁷⁴

According to the Djado *chef de canton*, around 5 000 to 6 000 people live in Chirfa, but the population of the Djado goldfield is estimated at around 50 000.⁷⁵ The Ministry of Mines has provided permits in Djado, including to foreign companies, and gold mining is therefore authorised. However, many of these permits are reportedly not currently operational and the majority of gold miners in Djado operate informally, without permits.⁷⁶ These gold miners are systematically repressed, in particular by the Nigerien armed forces who regularly intercept clandestine gold miners travelling to Djado and seize their equipment.⁷⁷

In addition to its role as an economic centre, the Djado field is a transit point for migrants travelling to Libya. While some foreigners only come to work in gold mining, others incorporate it into their funding strategy for the remaining leg of their journey.⁷⁸

In May 2020, as a result of reduced demand for smuggling of migrants linked to regional COVID-19 travel restrictions, smugglers (*passeurs*) in Agadem shifted their activities to the Djado goldfield, where activities

were largely undisrupted by the pandemic. Some smugglers established their own gold-mining sites while others became involved in transport. This mostly involved moving workers, but also goods and fuel, from Agadez to the mines. Although COVID-19 restrictions were gradually lifted in Niger in mid-2021, most smugglers remain involved in gold mining and smuggling in Djado, as the pool of foreign migrants transiting Niger has remained suppressed.⁷⁹

Tchibarakaten

The Tchibarakaten gold sites, the second largest goldfield in northern Niger, are situated 400 kilometres northeast of Arlit near the border with Algeria. The site was discovered just a few months after that of Djado in 2014. The area is around 200 square kilometres in size, with mines sprawling across Nigerien and Algerian territory.

Gold mining in Tchibarakaten includes artisanal, semi-mechanised and industrial operations, with semi-mechanised mining becoming increasingly widespread. Most sites now operate legally under a Ministry of Mines permit.⁸⁰

In contrast to Djado, most gold deposits at Tchibarakaten are filonian, requiring digging equipment or, in some cases, heavy machinery to extract deeper ore.⁸¹ Because of this, independent gold miners are rare. According to International Organization for Migration data, 87% of gold miners in Tchibarakaten work for an employer.⁸²

While the sites in Niger are accessible and can be mined formally, gold mining in the Algerian territory is strictly prohibited for foreigners by the Algerian authorities.⁸³ The Algerian military deploys significant means to militarise their 951-kilometre-long border with Niger.⁸⁴

The discovery of gold deposits in Tchibarakaten attracted Nigerien and foreign workers of over 17 nationalities, including Nigeriens, Chadians, Mauritians, Burkinabes, Nigerians, Libyans and Algerians.⁸⁵ Although it is difficult to obtain precise figures, the population of Tchibarakaten has steadily risen since the advent of artisanal gold mining in the region.

In the latest electoral census, in December 2019, the municipality of Iferouane (an oasis town located some 300 kilometres south of the goldfield and the municipality under which it falls) counted 11 000 registered voters, of whom 2 000 were registered in Tchibarakaten (including gold miners and military personnel).⁸⁶ But, according to the former mayor of Iferouane, the current population of Tchibarakaten may be between 30 000 and 40 000 people.⁸⁷ Constant fluctuations of people leaving and entering the sites make it difficult to develop reliable population estimates.



Artisanal gold miners in Tchibarakaten, Niger, July 2022

Roughly 15 sites are active in Tchibarakaten; Site 23, Site 40 and Guantanamo are the main sites.⁸⁸ As mining activities continue to spread, new sites are discovered every day while others disappear once deposits are depleted. Guantanamo, the first site discovered in 2014 and located four kilometres from the Niger–Algeria border, remains the most important site, acting as the main village of Tchibarakaten. Guantanamo accommodates most of the people as well as the municipal representatives of Iferouane, the Armed Forces of Niger, the national gendarmerie, customs, the Nigerien Waters and Forestry authority and the Comité de Gestion de Tchibarakaten (Tchibarakaten Management Committee) and some of its subcommittees.⁸⁹

The bulk of the economy of Tchibarakaten is based on gold mining and auxiliary activities, including ore processing, trading of goods and equipment and various forms of smuggling, including fuel. The development of trade in Tchibarakaten has turned it into a supplier of food products such as pasta, semolina and soft drinks to Arlit and Iferouane.⁹⁰ Tchibarakaten is also the main supplier of fuel to northern Mali, with dozens of tanker trucks leaving Tchibarakaten weekly.⁹¹ However, the economy in Tchibarakaten remains fragile, as it largely depends on the continuation of the smuggling of fuel and other goods from Libya.⁹²

In 2014, as Tchibarakaten’s contribution to the regional economy of Agadez grew in importance, it became the subject of a territorial dispute between the municipalities of Iferouane and Gougaram, with each claiming that the site belongs to their territory. Nonetheless, the new municipality of Iferouane – run by the ruling Parti Nigérien pour la Démocratie et le Socialisme (Nigerien Party for Democracy and Socialism, PNDS Tarayya) – appointed a provisional village chief to Tchibarakaten in 2017.⁹³

N’Tahaka

N’Tahaka is the largest goldfield in the Gao region, situated 90 kilometres west of the city of Gao in the northeast of the country, in the municipality of N’Tillit. While N’Tillit includes numerous small individual gold sites, N’Tahaka is the largest goldfield in the region. It reportedly stretches across seven or eight kilometres, although some estimates are far higher.⁹⁴

Like all gold mining in northern Mali, gold mining at N’Tahaka is informal and includes artisanal and semi-mechanised operations. Gold-mining activities reportedly began around 2018. Estimates of the number of gold miners at N’Tahaka are vague, but several interviewees believe up to 10 000 miners were working there in late 2022, including local communities from the Liptako Gourma region (Maliens, Burkinabes and Nigeriens), but also migrant workers hailing from Sudan, Nigeria, Chad, Liberia, Ghana, Mauritania, Senegal, Guinea, Togo and Algeria.⁹⁵

View from inside a gold-mining shaft in N’Tahaka, Mali, August 2022



The goldfield is controlled by Malian signatory armed groups who, in 2021, formed a coalition under the Cadre Stratégique Permanent pour la Paix, la Sécurité et le Développement (Permanent Strategic Framework for Peace, Security and Development, CSP), bringing together the Coordination des Mouvements de l'Azawad (Coordination of Azawad Movements, CMA) and the Plateforme.⁹⁶ As a result, the CSP derives substantial revenue beyond the tight control of gold mining itself. Gold miners are usually only authorised to sell gold to the CSP at rates fixed by the CSP, and the CSP also benefits from taxing vehicles entering and leaving the goldfield, as well as control over ancillary markets such as fuel, water, food and equipment.

The CSP claims to provide security to gold miners at N'Tahaka, stating that 'Our goal is the well-being of local communities. This is why we mobilised our men as a whole for the security of the gold sites since the Malian authorities are unable to.'⁹⁷ However, interviews with some gold miners suggest that security provision is minimal. Despite the presence of CSP armed groups, security threats remain prevalent at the mining sites. Armed groups are also deeply entrenched in illicit economies and organised crime in the gold-mining area. As one gold miner told the GI-TOC:

Illicit activities are numerous, and I do not think anything is lawful here except the meals we eat. There are targeted assassinations, robberies, armed robberies, arms sales and trafficking, gold trafficking, and there is also the transit and sale of drugs on the site, except when the jihadists are on the site.⁹⁸

The current difficulties in securing the goldfield could also be linked to the decreasing capabilities of the CSP due to the mid-2022 redeployment of significant personnel and vehicles to respond to the uptick in IS Sahel activity in the Ménaka region.⁹⁹

The security situation had reportedly vastly improved in December 2021 when the CSP took control of the goldfield, which had until then been occupied by local factions of the Mouvement National pour la Libération de l'Azawad (National Movement for the Liberation of the Azawad) and the Groupe d'Autodéfense Tuareg Imghad et Alliés (Imghad and Allies Tuareg Self-Defence Group). With the decreased presence of CSP armed forces at the goldfield in the latter half of 2022, members of these local factions have also reportedly returned to the goldfields to engage in predation.¹⁰⁰

Local criminal groups and violent extremist groups are also responsible for insecurity in N'Tahaka, as they reportedly infiltrate the goldfield to conduct attacks, thefts or engage in illicit mining,¹⁰¹ although in some cases they may also have some form of alliance with signatory armed groups. The goldfield and the nearby town of N'Tahaka see regular attacks and skirmishes.¹⁰²

However, the area has also seen a sharp rise in attacks targeting civilians, including cattle-rustling attacks. The first half of 2022 saw a dramatic surge in IS Sahel attacks in the Gao and Ménaka regions, with almost weekly attacks on villages and indiscriminate killings and lootings.¹⁰³ This wave of violence killed nearly 1 000 civilians between March and September 2022 and displaced tens of thousands either internally or to Niger.¹⁰⁴

On 25 July 2022, a group from the Idaksahak community were killed on the road leading to the goldfield in N'Tahaka and their car confiscated by elements of the IS Sahel.¹⁰⁵ A CSP member acknowledged that the group was unable to fully secure the N'Tahaka goldfield:

That is why the CSP is working to fight against these criminal groups, but they are so powerful that we are often forced to remain silent and watch it happen. Dozens of arms traffickers circulate here freely and we are powerless to confront them.¹⁰⁶

JNIM – which has been in a détente agreement with the CMA since 2021¹⁰⁷ – also enters the goldfield occasionally, reportedly to settle disputes.¹⁰⁸ However, JNIM has full control over another goldfield at N’Abaw, located close to the Burkinabe border, 175 kilometres southwest of Gao. N’Abaw is smaller than N’Tahaka, spreading across roughly four square kilometres and bringing together around 2 000 gold miners.¹⁰⁹

JNIM reportedly allows gold-mining activities to take place on the condition that religious rules and practices are upheld. JNIM leaders reportedly do not systematically levy the zakat (religious tax) at N’Abaw but require it to be paid for any amount above FCFA 1 million (€1 524). JNIM also reportedly provides security for gold miners in N’Abaw and intervenes in cases of disputes or conflicts.¹¹⁰

Key findings: A nuanced approach to assessing human-trafficking dynamics in Sahara–Sahel goldfields

Defining labour trafficking in ASGM in the Sahara–Sahel

There is a degree of confusion in the definition of human trafficking, including labour trafficking, and the forms of exploitation or abuse that constitute it.¹¹¹ The definition commonly accepted internationally is based on the Protocol to the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Human Trafficking, in particular Trafficking Involving Women and Children – also known as the Palermo Protocol – which defines human trafficking as:

the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of threat or use of force, or other forms of coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability, or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.¹¹²

By this definition, gold miners could be considered victims of human trafficking in various situations, to varying degrees of gravity, in which they are:

- recruited to work at goldfields
 - by means of deception (workers promised proper pay and working conditions)
 - through abuse of their position of vulnerability (workers in precarious situations with no means of subsistence; workers with no knowledge about conditions at the goldfields)
 - through abuse of power (workers recruited by members of their community who have a degree of authority or influence over them)
- forced to work without (or with little) pay
 - by means of threat or use of force
 - due to debt related to their transport to the goldfields.

However, applying this definition of human trafficking poses significant challenges for certain practices in Sahara–Sahel ASGM, where there are varied perceptions of these practices, the degree to which they are intentional and whether they are accepted locally. In many cases, interviewed gold miners had experienced exploitative and abusive situations but would not consider themselves victims of human trafficking.

Likewise, gold-site owners or local community leaders at the goldfields recognise that such situations exist without equating them to human trafficking; several interviews suggest that these situations are

considered normal. Assessing human-trafficking dynamics therefore requires a more nuanced and locally grounded approach to understand the complex realities and modalities of the transport, recruitment and employment of gold miners.

Further, there is some doubt surrounding the utility of determining a person's status as a victim of human trafficking in such contexts. The goal of this determination is usually based on the rights granted to victims under international law. However, where governments lack the resources, capacity or willingness to uphold these rights, its importance seems limited.¹¹³ Therefore, it is likely that applying the Palermo Protocol definition to identify human trafficking in ASGM would be not only problematic with regard to the local context of this research but also largely futile.

Instead, the report focuses on evidence of exploitation or abuse that falls under a narrower definition of 'labour trafficking', using the International Labour Organization's definition of forced labour, which refers to:

situations in which persons are coerced to work through the use of violence or intimidation, or by more subtle means such as accumulated debt, retention of identity papers or threats of denunciation to immigration authorities.¹¹⁴

This research thus highlights evidence in two broad categories: workers being forced to work for little or no pay by means of threat of or use of force (coercive control), and workers being forced to work for little or no pay by means of abuse of their positions of vulnerability. The following sections highlight evidence pertaining to both categories.

Risks of labour trafficking through coercive control

Examples of labour trafficking through coercive control are limited in the framework of this study. Little evidence of the use of force or violence to coerce workers was found in N'Tahaka. This does not mean that such practices do not exist; the lack of evidence could be linked to challenges in accessing victims and the reluctance of victims to report abuse. In the Nigerien goldfields, however, although these practices do not appear to be systematic, multiple interviewees reported instances where forms of violence have been used to coerce workers, particularly in Djado. In most cases, they provided eyewitness accounts but did not report experiencing such practices themselves. A direct account is detailed below.

One former gold miner, interviewed in Agadez in November 2020, provided a detailed account of his experience in the Djado goldfield, during which he claims he was sold to gold-site owners and forced to work without pay under the threat of violence. He told how he had been recruited from Agadez by a group of men who offered to take him to Djado to work in gold mining.

The recruiters, who reportedly reassured him that he would be working for them and not for anyone else, discussed employment conditions with him, giving him the option of being either paid per day or paid a proportion of the gold he found. He chose to be paid based on what he found and agreed to travel to Djado. He was transported by the recruiters alongside 10 other newly recruited gold miners.

On arrival in Djado, the recruiters reportedly handed over the group of gold miners to other individuals in exchange for payment and left. They were then told they had been 'bought' and were taken to a remote gold site where they were instructed to work.

¹¹⁵

We could not do anything. I was told to collect my stuff and follow another guy. We did about 40 kilometres on foot, using paths that cars cannot use. I was brought to a place where I would work, I was given a machine and told to work from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. When I heard that I had been bought, I realised it was over.

The people who bought us, I didn't see weapons, but they were very harsh with us. They told us we had to pay for our transport, that we would work each day for 2 000 francs but I would work for 40 days for free to reimburse the transport costs. We did not have a choice. You cannot reach anywhere to get help. There are 180 kilometres to the nearest place. I know a guy who escaped, and he was beaten. They beat you if you leave, they beat you if you don't work. There was a lot of violence. I was not beaten because I did not do anything wrong. But people in my group were beaten.

The work is really hard. People get sick, there is lots of dust, so people suffer from coughs. When you get ill, they don't buy you medicine. In some places they do, but not always. When they told me I would have to work 40 days for free, I thought I cannot do that. I worked for 21 days. I waited till one night, I escaped and walked about 60 kilometres to Chirfa.¹¹⁵

Several interviewees reported witnessing workers in Nigerien goldfields being tied up at night by their employers, to stop them from escaping before they had paid their transport debt. One gold miner who had worked at Djado claimed this is a common practice when gold miners travel on credit: ¹¹⁶

In Djado, the Tebu even tie the Hausa with ropes [...]. It was in front of me that it happened. I saw people tied with ropes and [they also tried to] tie me. I said, 'I'm not going to be tied up.' I asked why I have to be tied up, they said that if I am not tied up I will run away. [...] When they arrive there, we Hausa, our problem, when we feel the suffering, we flee. And so, [the Hausa] were just fleeing, fleeing and fleeing. The Tebu are tired of this [...]. They thought, 'We're not going to pay them the transport costs for them to come here and flee.' And so as soon as night falls, you eat and you are full, you are tied until morning. In the morning, they come to untie you to go to work, like a sheep.¹¹⁶

Multiple interviewees also reported widespread use of force and violence against workers at the goldfields. Several gold miners reported they had been physically attacked by their employers, and many witnessed other workers being beaten in Djado.¹¹⁷ There were also reports of situations in which their employer refused to pay them at the end of the agreed time, which in some cases resulted in physical threats by the employer and physical altercations: 'He refused to pay me. He even threatened me with a shovel, and I defended myself with a shovel too.'¹¹⁸

These are examples of the use of physical violence and constraint to coerce and exploit workers. However, interviews suggest that gold miners also face exploitation as a result of structural factors that create an environment of latent violence where workers are dependent on their employers and have little to no control over their working conditions or pay.

Risks of exploitation through abuse of positions of vulnerability

The geographic remoteness of the goldfields is the main structural factor contributing to exploitative working conditions and labour-trafficking dynamics. In Tchibarakaten and Djado, for example, most gold miners arrive

from southern Niger or neighbouring countries and know no one other than the person who brought them to the site, usually an intermediary. Gold miners are dispatched to the different sites – which can be hundreds of kilometres away from the main market locality – without any means of communication or transport.¹¹⁹ A gold miner working as a team supervisor in Tchibarakaten explained:

There are people who take workers from afar, they bring them here to work even though they cannot provide them with what they need to work. These kinds of people go into a lot of suffering. It happens that a person brings people and, after a month or two, he will run out of water, food, work equipment is at a standstill. People will look for a way to get home and they will not be able to, it exists and it is done.¹²⁰

In these situations, although workers are indeed free to leave when they want to and are not constrained in any physical way to continue working, they typically have no means of leaving and are therefore forced to remain until they have sufficient funds for their journey home or their employer agrees to take them back to the main site.

Workers depend entirely on their employer, and where the only means of transport is the employer's vehicle, this dependence increases with the remoteness of the site. In these cases, even workers with enough funds to leave still depend on the employer's willingness. In Tchibarakaten and Djado, for instance, interviews with gold miners suggest that this form of dependence is abused by employers, who take advantage of the vulnerability of workers.

A gold miner in Djado reported that he had heard of people being exploited in remote areas of the goldfield: 'They lie about the place and take you somewhere else far away to exploit you. And it is impossible to return on foot.' Although he himself had not experienced such abuses, he only stayed in Djado because he could not afford to leave: 'Life here is an obligation for me. If I had enough to pay for the trip to go home, I would go back. I don't want gold mining any more. I do not wish to come back here.'¹²¹

This geographic factor is more significant for remote goldfields like Tchibarakaten (400 kilometres from Arlit) and Djado (650 kilometres from Agadez) than those located closer to major towns and cities, such as N'Tahaka (50 kilometres from Gao).¹²² However, interviewed gold miners in N'Tahaka reported having travelled on credit to the goldfield from further afield than Gao. Transport debts for gold miners in N'Tahaka can reportedly range between FCFA 200 000 and FCFA 500 000 (€305–€762).



Gold miners transported from Arlit to Tchibarakaten, Niger, July 2022

Interviews in Djado suggest that travelling on credit – which is often necessary due to the cost of the journey from Agadez – is another key factor of vulnerability for prospective gold miners. Gold miners explained that they had in fact been recruited in Agadez, where smugglers gather prospective gold miners to transport them to Djado. On arrival in Djado, the smugglers ‘sell’ the gold miners’ debt to employers:

I came [...] to Agadez where I heard the drivers talking about Djado. They told us that we had to work to reimburse them. They do not bring you to Djado, they bypass Djado to go to the bush. It is there that they will sell you for 30 000 francs [€45.70] per person. You will work for 15 days to repay the debt at the rate of 2 000 francs [€3] per day. [...] As soon as you start working, he tells you that he bought you and that you have no rights.¹²³

According to several interviewees, smugglers can make FCFA 15 000 (€22.80) profit per passenger in such operations, during which they typically transport around 10 passengers. One miner described the vulnerability of travelling on credit:

The case of travel on credit is a matter of humiliation. Credit is a problem. The biggest problem is that drivers do not tell the truth to passengers. Once here they [the driver and the future employer] consult with each other and the driver leaves. As soon as you get up to speak, you are told that you have been sold.¹²⁴

Another factor that can contribute to exploitative working conditions is the use – or misuse – of the traditional payment system known locally as *‘les trois-tiers’* (‘the three-thirds’). In this system, the extracted gold is divided into three equal parts. Two-thirds go to the employer and one-third goes to the team of gold miners. The employer deducts food and water provision fees from the gold-miners’ share, which is then divided by the number of people in the team for each worker’s share. In some cases, equipment (engine, compressor) fees are deducted from the total before it is divided by three; in others, the equipment fees are calculated as another equal share alongside the gold-miners’ share.

This sharing system applies to all sites under study across northern Niger and Mali.¹²⁵ Although it is accepted and understood by all gold miners in the region, it both relies on and contributes to the vulnerability of workers, who cannot negotiate better remuneration and often find themselves working for several months without pay: if they do not find gold, they receive only basic food and water. Yet this three-thirds payment system alone, although abused in some cases akin to exploitation, cannot be considered akin to labour trafficking.

In addition to this unequal distribution of revenues, however, gold miners can also be forced to share their earnings with the person who recruited them. As the pool of prospective miners is far greater than the demand for workers, many resort to recruiters to find employment at goldfields. In doing so, they often commit to sharing part of their earnings with the recruiter as a recruitment fee.

Most workers will first contact recruiters or intermediaries based in towns near the goldfield,¹²⁶ who typically find them an employer and may also arrange for their travel to the goldfield. Some recruiters fund the worker’s travel, adding the cost to the amount owed.

To work in Tchibarakaten, prospective gold miners usually approach intermediaries in Arlit, known as *‘ouban groupe’* (‘group father’ in Hausa). Alternatively, they travel to the goldfield and find an on-site recruiter, known as *‘sarkin tacha’* (‘head of the station’). These intermediaries typically have experience in gold mining themselves and find work for members of their own community or nationality. However, their service comes

at a cost for prospective miners, who owe the intermediary a percentage of the gold they find. In most cases, intermediaries are included in the three-thirds payment system and receive an equal share alongside gold miners themselves.¹²⁷

Many interviewed gold miners believe they are being exploited by intermediaries who exaggerate the cost of their services. They see intermediaries as abusing their power to exploit the precarious vulnerability of workers who have no viable economic opportunities other than gold mining.¹²⁸

Some gold miners also suggest that they were misled by their recruiters and found the working conditions were not what they had agreed upon before departure. An unemployed agricultural worker claimed he was recruited by an individual in Agadez to work on an onion farm, only to find himself transported on credit to Djado, where he was obliged to work as a gold miner to reimburse his travel:

He told me that I will work the onion for him. We ran into each other in town when I was looking for work. He told me there is work if I want to work for him. He took me in his vehicle to where his other workers are. In the evening I saw him close the headlights of his vehicle with tape; then he [fled] to the Sahara. [...] He took us to the Tuaregs and sold us.¹²⁹

In N'Tahaka, the vulnerability factors are somewhat different than in the remote goldfields of Djado and Tchibarakaten. Vulnerability seems more strongly linked here to insecurity at the goldfield and predation by CSP armed groups. Interviewees highlighted the role of armed groups in control of N'Tahaka in facilitating exploitation, due in part to the impunity they enjoy when conducting business and illicit activities. One gold miner explained that exploitation is common in N'Tahaka and accused members of the CSP who are involved in gold mining of abusing their position to impose unfair and exploitative conditions on workers:

It is always the CSP, with international actors including the people of Dubai, we are obliged to sell them our gold; otherwise, they will take away our property by force of arms and often they assassinate the rebels and they set their prices. It is the CSP who manages all the shops, who sell us water during the dry season.¹³⁰

However, gathering evidence for such practices is challenging. One gold miner told the GI-TOC that, despite widespread examples of abuse, few gold miners are prepared to speak out about the conditions imposed by



*Makeshift shelters
in Tchibarakaten,
Niger, July 2022*

CSP members for fear of reprisals: ‘because they are the ones who control the area from start to finish. No one dares to criticise them because if you do you will find yourself in a grave the next day.’¹³¹

In N’Tahaka, high levels of dependence on employers or armed groups to provide equipment, food and water result in exploitation dynamics similar to those seen in Tchibarakaten and Djado. One gold miner reported that he had worked with a young Nigerien gold miner in N’Tahaka who had worked for seven months. When he decided to leave to go back to Niger, his employer reportedly only paid him FCFA 25 000 (€38). The interviewee claimed that, after a failed negotiation with the employer, they called on CSP members to settle the dispute. When the CSP failed to respond, they reportedly requested members of the IS Sahel to intervene.¹³²

Although the final outcome of this situation remains unclear, it further illustrates a practice common to all the sites under study, in which employers exploit the vulnerability of gold miners by deceiving or misleading them or withholding their pay.

Role of community dynamics in vulnerability factors

The gold-mining boom in the central Sahel continues to attract prospective miners from both local populations and across the region. The areas of northern Niger and northern Mali bring together people from Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, Chad, Côte d’Ivoire, Benin, Ghana, Gambia, Guinea and Senegal.¹³³ Among these nationalities, gold miners also come from different communities, and often live and work in groups divided along community lines. These dynamics can play a role in the organisation and regulation of gold-mining activities. They can be a resource for many gold miners, who rely on representatives to help manage conflicts, settle disputes, find work and build business relations.

However, an unequal power balance between communities – particularly between those who come from the area, have access to resources (including vehicles, arms and money) and can leverage political influence, and those who do not – can cause certain groups to be targeted by exploitative practices and exposed to increased risks. For instance, Tuareg communities typically hold most of the powerful positions in Tchibarakaten, whereas the Tebu seem to wield more influence in Djado. Gold miners in both goldfields suggested that these two groups usually enjoy positions of power that allow them to employ workers from other communities.

In Tchibarakaten and Djado, many gold miners come from southern Niger and northern Nigeria, and most from Hausa (from Niger or Nigeria) or Djerma communities. These groups typically perform the most difficult tasks in gold mining, such as digging and extracting from deep mineshafts. According to interviewees, when mineshafts reach a certain depth, many gold miners from Tuareg and Tebu communities will refuse to dig any deeper due to the risk of collapse and other accidents. Employers will then reportedly bring in workers from Hausa or Djerma communities to continue the work.¹³⁴

According to a nurse at a health centre in one of the Tchibarakaten gold sites, the overwhelming majority of patients treated there for work accidents are either Hausa or Djerma.¹³⁵ The other communities present in Tchibarakaten typically occupy positions at lower risk of accidents.

Community dynamics are also visible in the different living conditions afforded to workers on the goldfields. Living quarters are typically divided along community lines. While some live in crowded makeshift sheds, others can secure more comfortable housing, in some cases including satellite dishes, humidifiers, sanitary facilities and refrigeration.¹³⁶

Perceptions and responses

National authorities

Although national authorities in both Niger and Mali are typically concerned with growing insecurity and criminality trends at goldfields, little attention has been paid to human-trafficking and exploitation risks.

In Niger, responses to ASGM mainly involve moves towards formalisation. Besides longstanding imperatives to curb instability in the north, Nigerien efforts to regulate gold mining in the Agadez region have been largely motivated by the strategic interests of local and national political elites in granting – or maintaining – access to and control of gold-mining sites.¹³⁷ This has resulted in contrasting approaches to gold mining in northern Niger, depending on the proximity between national authorities and local patronage networks and the degree to which the former are willing, able or obliged to negotiate with the latter.¹³⁸

Nonetheless, there is a clear impetus within the Nigerien government to increase formalisation. In a rare visit to Tchibarakaten in November 2022, the minister of mines, Ousseini Hadizatou Yacouba, referred to the government's aim to better manage and oversee gold mining in order to harness its economic benefits: 'We are sat on gold riches, but we don't see them. [...] As long as [gold mining] is informal, we cannot count on it as a lever for our economy.'¹³⁹

Yet, so far, the gradual formalisation of ASGM in Tchibarakaten has almost exclusively benefited actors who have the means and political connections to obtain mining permits and forced gold miners to either seek employment with permit owners or leave the goldfield. The delivery of permits to mining companies is also not linked to any effective regulatory framework to safeguard workers' rights and safety, and recruitment and remuneration practices on the ground remain largely informal.¹⁴⁰ Steps towards formalisation in Tchibarakaten therefore seem to have further exacerbated vulnerability factors, as individual workers must either comply with working conditions imposed by permit holders or be pushed into risky illegal mining.¹⁴¹

In Djado, where government purview is weak and national authorities have mostly seen ASGM as a threat, few concrete steps have been taken towards formalisation besides the delivery of a limited number of permits to mining companies. For now, these permit holders are not operational, but gold miners are concerned that they may face similar challenges to those at Tchibarakaten.¹⁴²

While some official bodies in Niger are tasked on paper with overseeing gold-mining operations, in practice they are largely absent from Saharan goldfields. At the national level, the Ministry of Mines' Direction des Exploitations Minières à Petites Échelles et des Carrières (Directorate for Small-scale Mining and Quarries, DEMPEC) is supposed to be in charge of organising and promoting artisanal mining operations, including ASGM.¹⁴³ However, beyond their role in issuing permits, DEMPEC officials' involvement in Saharan goldfields is limited.

A regional body also exists – the Observatoire Régional de Surveillance Administrative des Sites d'Orpillage (Regional Observatory for the Administrative Supervision of Gold-mining Sites, ORSASO) – but does not appear to be active or present on the ground in Tchibarakaten or Djado.¹⁴⁴

Finally, there is Niger's national mining company, the Société du Patrimoine des Mines du Niger (Niger Mining Heritage Society, SOPAMIN). In 2017, at a time when SOPAMIN owned gold-mining permits in Djado and Tchibarakaten, a decree tasked it with additional mandates in the supervision of gold-mining sites and raising awareness of risks for gold miners.¹⁴⁵ It was reportedly unable to fulfil this role due to the lack of budget allocation and the perceived reluctance of DEMPEC to delegate such prerogatives to it.¹⁴⁶

This suggests that Nigerien authorities are aware of the need for more control and supervision of ASGM activities and have designed strategies to address it, but significant challenges and a lack of political will impede their implementation.

In N'Tahaka and other gold mines in the Gao and Kidal regions, prospects of any national-level responses to ASGM are bleak given the total lack of state presence in these areas, which remain under the control of JNIM.

The delivery of permits to mining companies is not linked to any effective regulatory framework to safeguard workers' rights and safety, and recruitment and remuneration practices on the ground are largely informal



Local authorities

Local governance mechanisms – both formal and informal – have typically played a much stronger role in regulating activities in remote goldfields and have demonstrated awareness of labour-trafficking risks. Although technically informal, management committees set up in both Tchibarakaten and Djado are examples of locally led governance systems.

The most developed is the Comité de Gestion de Tchibarakaten, which aims to settle disputes among gold miners or between workers and employers and to address exploitation and labour-trafficking risks. The committee can reportedly issue written contracts to formalise workers' employment but admits that these are very rare.¹⁴⁷ However, the committee itself is made up almost exclusively of site owners or *patrons*, which may bias arbitrations in their favour. Although the committee does reportedly still intervene in favour of unpaid or mistreated workers, structurally it remains in the hands of powerful *patrons*, some of whom benefit from exploitative employment practices.¹⁴⁸

Local security forces in Tchibarakaten also respond to some, albeit limited, labour-trafficking or exploitation situations. The local gendarmerie unit at Tchibarakaten's main site reported that, in addition to high levels of criminality at the goldfield, they must deal with numerous conflicts around work arrangements, payment and territorial disputes and, in some cases, abuse of workers.¹⁴⁹ However, its intervention is reportedly rare, and most abusive situations go largely undetected by security actors. Further, when the gendarmerie does intervene, it systematically involves the committee to help settle disputes.¹⁵⁰

Local governance mechanisms have typically played a stronger role than national authorities in regulating activities in remote goldfields

In N'Tahaka, as highlighted above, security actors – that is, groups operating under the CSP – are seen by some gold miners to play an active role in exacerbating rather than addressing human-trafficking and exploitation risks. In the absence of formal local governance, gold mining is governed entirely by armed groups. Yet interviews in N'Abaw, where the goldfield is under the control of JNIM, suggest that security actors there actually help to address such risks. Although these testimonies should be treated with caution, some suggest that the religious governance system implemented by JNIM – although in many other regards a driver of conflict and violence – may contribute to reducing the vulnerability of workers by providing and enforcing a strict moral regulatory framework.¹⁵¹

View from a gold-mining site in Djado goldfield, Niger, June 2022



Conclusion

The boom in artisanal gold mining has created significant challenges and opportunities for local and regional stabilisation and development. In remote Saharan goldfields and gold-mining areas that lie beyond the control and purview of national authorities, the perceived threats posed to states by the ASGM boom have mostly been addressed through highly securitised approaches.¹⁵² Yet governments have paid limited attention to risks posed to gold miners themselves, and the regulation of gold mining has essentially been left to informal governance systems controlled by powerful elites or conflict actors.

This research found evidence of labour trafficking based on forced labour in Djado and Tchibarakaten, where some gold miners, particularly those originating from southern Niger, are subject to physical violence and constraint. However, these practices do not appear to be systematic across the goldfields under study. Instead, this research has highlighted key factors that exacerbate the vulnerability of gold miners to exploitative practices and abuse.

Several of these factors are linked to the remote geographic location of the two goldfields under study, Djado and Tchibarakaten. The cost of travel from major towns such as Agadez or Arlit to the goldfields usually requires low-income prospective gold miners to travel on credit, and subsequently enter into indentured labour agreements with employers which make them vulnerable to exploitation. The remoteness of these goldfields, and even more so certain gold sites within them, further exacerbates their vulnerability as gold miners are highly dependent on their employers.

The location of goldfields, combined with the high demand for employment in ASGM in the context of limited livelihood options, also creates a reliance on recruiters or intermediaries to find work there. Although not exclusively predatory, these actors can contribute to the exploitation of workers, either by deception (about working conditions, locations) or by demanding additional shares of their income.

Finally, security actors can also play a role in ASGM exploitation by abusing their positions of power to impose unfair or exploitative working conditions. This is especially the case in N'Tahaka, but it can be found across all the sites under study, including in community dynamics.

These practices also take place within a broader context of insecurity and ineffective law enforcement, which contributes to gold miners' risks. Although not directly linked to labour trafficking and exploitation, organised crime dynamics such as drug- and arms trafficking are also relevant insofar as they increase overall insecurity and violence in these remote areas, which can jeopardise the safety of workers.

Addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach that takes into account the social, economic and political context in which ASGM takes place.

Although ASGM in goldfields such as Tchibarakaten is managed and increasingly regulated by local governance structures, efforts to address labour-trafficking risks and improve working conditions are lacking. More broadly, research shows that the Nigerien government's steps towards formalisation have, so far, only benefited local political and business elites while further exacerbating the vulnerability of individual miners.

In N'Tahaka, prospects for formalisation are bleak while the area remains beyond the control of Malian authorities, but this research suggests that improving security at the goldfield could help reduce the gold miners' vulnerability to exploitation. Further research is needed to assess the situation of goldfields in the Kidal region of Mali, where artisanal gold mining also plays an important role within local and regional political and security dynamics.

The current situation – marked by growing efforts and advocacy to formalise gold mining and harness its economic and development potential in a region otherwise marred by instability – represents a

crucial opportunity for Sahel states. If properly managed, the gold-mining boom, rather than feeding into conflict and criminality and exposing workers to risks of exploitation and abuse, could secure safe and sustainable livelihoods.

Further, it provides opportunities to boost tax revenues and contribute to stabilising and bolstering state presence in otherwise marginalised and isolated regions. To do so, states must strike a balance between industrial and artisanal small-scale mining, and effectively address labour-trafficking risks and exploitative practices as part of formalisation efforts.

Such imperatives are all the more crucial to regional stability since the gold sector has become a key predation target for the Russian private military company, Wagner Group. Wagner's presence in Mali since November 2021 has raised suspicions that it may receive mining concessions in payment for its services, as it has done in the Central African Republic and Sudan.¹⁵³

Recommendations

The following recommendations would contribute to reducing the risks of labour trafficking in ASGM in the Sahara–Sahel and improving working conditions for gold miners. While they are mainly directed at Djado and Tchibarakaten, they could also apply to other sites in the region. Although most cannot be applied to N'Tahaka in the current political and security context, they remain relevant to the broader ASGM context in Mali.

Achieving these recommendations could also be impeded by the lack of capacity and/or willingness of Sahelian states to effectively regulate and supervise remote Saharan goldfields. Therefore, international partners should play a role in pushing for and supporting their implementation.

Support the formalisation of ASGM

States should continue efforts to formalise gold mining in a way that allows ASGM to be sustained alongside industrial mining while providing guarantees for workers.

Include safe labour standards in mining regulations

The formalisation drive should ensure that gold-mining regulatory frameworks provide clear standards for working conditions in both ASGM and large-scale gold mining. These should also be disseminated by mining ministries and made accessible in the field through local representatives of the ministry. Ministries of labour and mines could elaborate a locally available grievance mechanism for complaints and standard procedures to assist miners whose rights have been violated. The mining ministry should create and allocate resources to mechanisms to monitor and supervise the implementation of these regulations.

Adjust formalisation procedures to support independent gold miners and reduce corruption and clientelist risks

To avoid further marginalisation and criminalisation of individual miners, formalisation should not be limited to granting permits to mining companies and should be more affordable and accessible to individual gold miners. Permit procedures should also be more transparent to reduce risks of corruption and clientelism. When providing the mining permit, the relevant authority should also provide information about safe mining, including labour standards.

Promote dialogue around challenges and opportunities for gold mining

Dialogue and sharing of experiences at national and local levels could help Sahel states to formulate and implement sustainable conflict-sensitive formalisation processes that mitigate labour-trafficking and exploitation risks. Experiences of formalisation in Mauritania, for instance, which focused on gold processing rather than extraction sites, and Sudan¹⁵⁴ could provide useful comparative bases in areas that share similar characteristics.

Such dialogues should involve local actors and policy makers, such as gold miners themselves, community leaders and governmental actors, to ensure that formalisation processes are locally owned and that the institutionalisation of practices is accepted and considered fair at the local level.

Invest resources in the deployment of state services and security at goldfields

The formalisation of ASGM should be accompanied by efforts to provide security and basic services in return for taxation. The state deployment should also bring increased financial and human resources to local monitoring and supervision mechanisms and law enforcement.

Support roles for civil society in gold mining

National formalisation drives, even if successful, are lengthy and complex processes. While government efforts to support the formalisation of ASGM may provide safer conditions for workers at goldfields, addressing labour-trafficking risks should also involve civil society.

Raise awareness of labour-trafficking risks in ASGM

In prospective miners' places of origin, civil society should play a role in sharing relevant information on the ASGM situation. While these efforts should not aim to discourage prospective miners, they should provide information on working conditions in ASGM in key destination goldfields and advice on ways to reduce vulnerability (e.g. avoiding travel on credit, avoiding certain intermediaries, seeking written contracts from local management committees when possible). Information could be shared through civil society organisations, traditional community leadership structures or social media.

Encourage and provide frameworks for the creation of gold-mining unions

Gold-miners' unions could contribute to better representation of workers' interests, accompany formalisation processes, raise awareness around labour-trafficking and exploitation risks and represent a credible and legitimate interlocutor for local and national authorities. A Syndicat National des Travailleurs des Mines de Niger (National Mineworkers Union of Niger) exists in western Niger, although its role and capacities are reportedly limited.

Encourage and provide frameworks for the creation of gold-mining cooperatives

Gold-miner cooperatives could support the sustainability of individual gold mining and reduce the vulnerability of workers by allowing the pooling of resources for gold-mining equipment, taxes and permits, and by reducing gold miners' dependence on mining companies. Mining permits should also be accessible to gold-mining cooperatives. Cooperatives could also be key interlocutors for local and national authorities in formalisation drives.

Notes

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