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POPULATION MOBILITY IN THE SAHEL: IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL PROTECTION PROGRAMS AND SYSTEMS

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**SAHEL ADAPTIVE
SOCIAL PROTECTION
PROGRAM**

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1 KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

The Sahel is a dynamic region where population mobility is central to people's livelihoods and economic security. While internal migration is commonly driven by economic motives, its manifestation and profile of migrants vary across countries. Wage differences explain a large part of the motivation to move from rural to urban areas. Non-economic motivations include marriage, family-related reasons (particularly among women), education, and cultural values. In recent years, insecurity and climate change have led to an increasing number of distressed migrants and internally displaced persons (IDPs).

Although mobility is a central aspect of economic and cultural life in the Sahel, it can result in vulnerabilities for migrants and their family members at origin, during transit, and at destination. Many migrants experience poverty and lack access to basic services. They may not have the skills required for gainful employment at destination. Migration often entails dangerous journeys. Relocation can disrupt people's access to social networks, making them vulnerable to discrimination or exclusion. Moreover, migrants or their families may lose access to programs and services.

Given the salience of mobility dynamics in Sahelian livelihoods and some of the associated vulnerabilities, Adaptive Social Protection (ASP) programs and systems may need to be adjusted to ensure that migrants and their families are supported, not penalized.

- At the policy level, this may require a reflection of mobility-related considerations in policy frameworks for social protection, coordination across multiple administrative departments and levels as well as with humanitarian agencies, the adaptation of social registries, and campaigns to improve access to basic services, national IDs, as well as information on safe migration practices.
- At the operational level, meaningful modifications to ASP programs and systems can be made at each step of the delivery chain to ensure that migrants do not miss out on account of programmatic or administrative blind spots.
- These modifications may include measures such as allowing dynamic and on-demand program registration, allowing multiple household members to receive program benefits, directing better coordination across administrative and geographical boundaries to ensure portability of benefits, and reviewing and adjusting the content, timing, and modality of program benefits to better suit the needs of people on the move.

Applying a mobility lens to ASP can contribute to realizing the full potential of population mobility in the Sahel.



2 INTRODUCTION

Population mobility in the Sahel is a multifaceted phenomenon.

Economic factors play an important role, with many seeking better livelihoods, higher wages, and improved living standards in response to widespread poverty, unemployment, and limited job opportunities. While traditional migration flows have been influenced by economic and socio-cultural motivations, recent challenges such as conflict and climate change have resulted in forced migration.¹

The large scale of internal mobility reflects opportunities and challenges for migrants and their families.

Internal mobility can reduce household risks by diversifying income to mitigate against climate- and conflict-related shocks.² The spatial reallocation of labor can optimize households' labor, skills, and human capital, resulting in higher incomes, and greater resilience and stability. However, migration can pose risks and vulnerabilities. Social protection can play a critical role in supporting individuals and households in realizing the potential benefits of migration whilst reducing the risks.

Social protection programs must be designed and implemented to support mobility dynamics.

Policies, programs, and systems with a "sedentary bias" (assumptions about population groups being immobile) may overlook the requirements of individuals who migrate, potentially resulting in lower impact. The design and implementation of safety net systems and programs might need to be adjusted to ensure that people on the move can participate in and benefit from them to the greatest extent possible.

This note provides an overview of mobility patterns in the Sahel, discusses their implications on migrants' vulnerabilities, and presents considerations for social protection systems and programs.

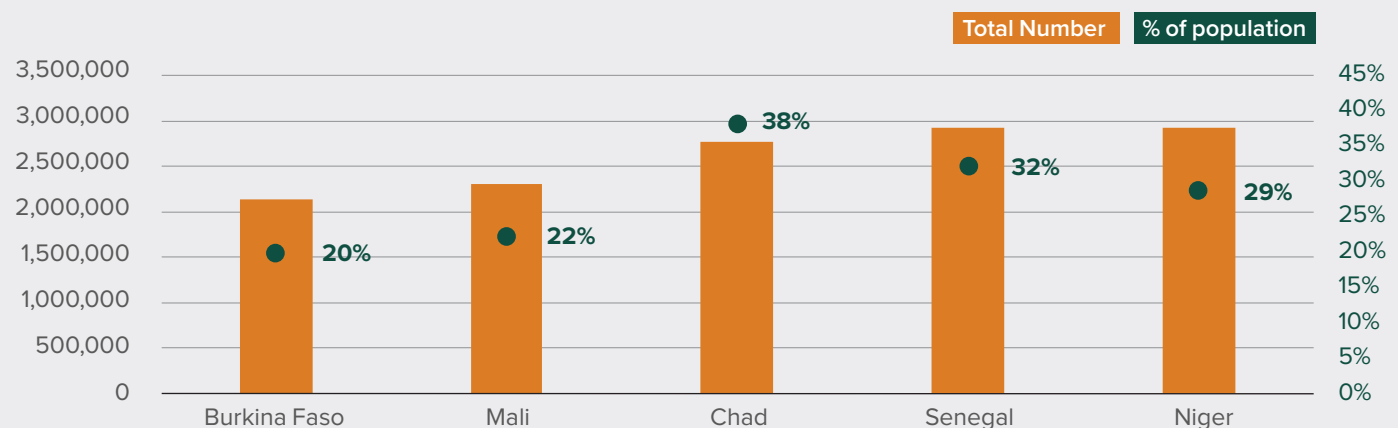
It draws, among others, on a background paper on understanding trends and patterns of internal mobility in the Sahel³ and a review of global best practices in including internal migrants in ASP programs⁴ supported by the Sahel Adaptive Social Protection Program (SASPP).

3 DESCRIBING INTERNAL MOBILITY IN THE SAHEL

Over 47 million individuals, representing over 27 percent of the population aged 15 and above in the five largest countries of the Sahel (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Niger, and Senegal) are nationals who have previously resided elsewhere within their

country. Their share in the country's population ranges from 20 percent in Burkina Faso to as high as 38 percent in Chad. Although voluntary migration is predominant, forced migration has increased in recent years.

FIGURE 1. Internal migrants in the Sahel: Total number and as a percentage of the population, by country



Source: Adapted from Gautrain et al. (2024) using EHCVM 2018–19. Calculations for internal migrants and total population of persons 15 years and above.

MOTIVATION FOR VOLUNTARY INTERNAL MIGRATION

Economic motives are the primary driver of voluntary internal mobility. In Burkina Faso, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Chad, Guinea, Mali, and Niger, 77 percent of migrants surveyed reported traveling primarily for economic reasons.⁵ Migrants in West and Central Africa who move for employment and economic opportunities often head to labor-intensive areas.

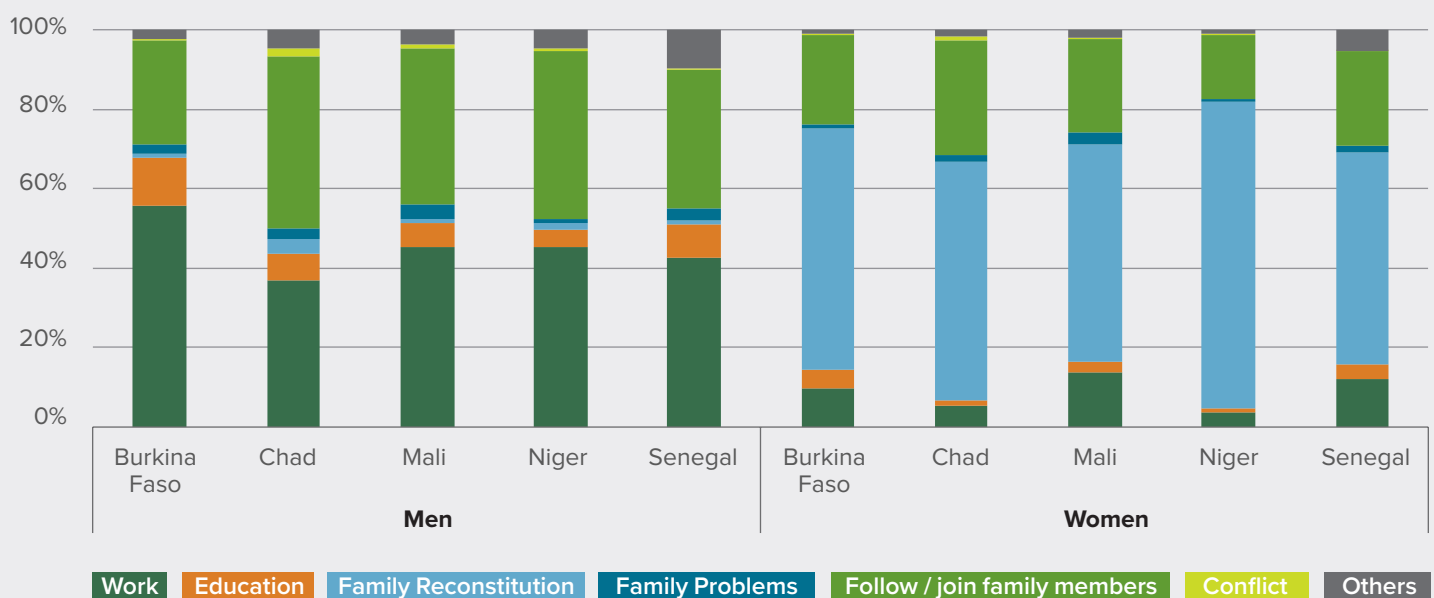
Economic motives drive migration from rural to urban areas, as urban areas tend to offer higher wages. Even among individuals of similar age, gender, marital status, education, sector of employment and region of residence, wages in urban areas were higher than in rural areas in four out of five countries.⁶ by 22 percent in Senegal to as much as 38 percent in Chad. Only in Mali were rural wages significantly higher than urban by 13 percent.

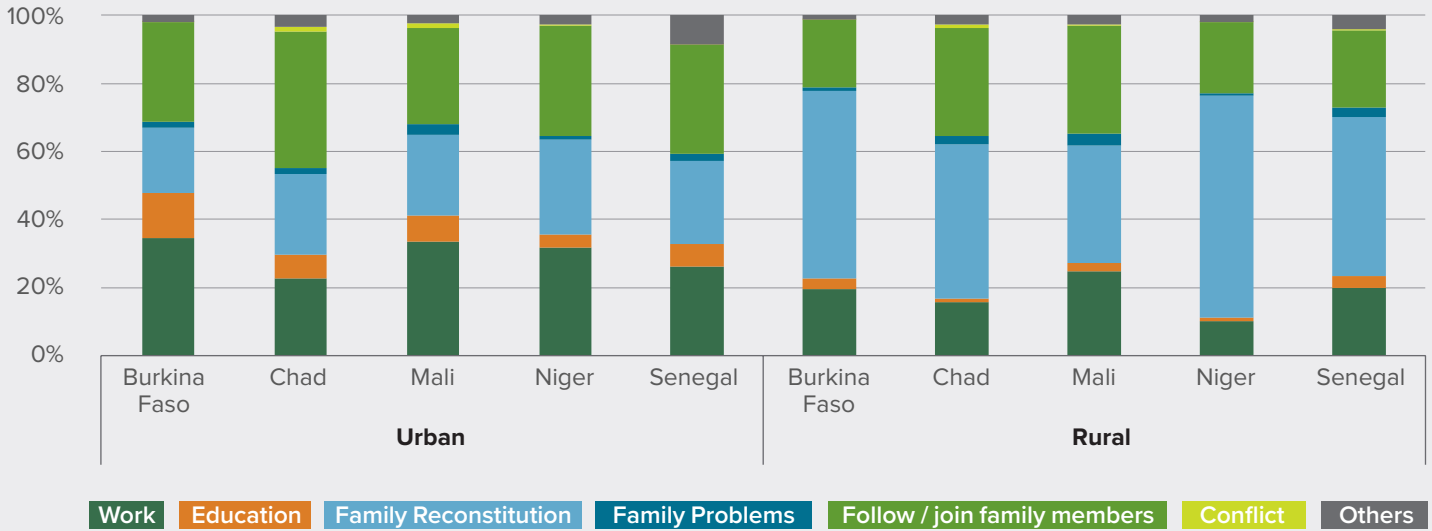
Seasonal variations in economic opportunities explain long-standing migration and livelihood patterns involving pastoralism and transhumance. Seasonal migration is mainly characterized by circular patterns involving rural and urban communities, encompassing nomadism and transhumance.⁷ Herders and pastoralists rely on seasonal migration during the dry season. Such movements play a significant role, contributing to the survival and sustenance of these communities.⁸

Other forms of voluntary migration are motivated by marriage and family reunification, education, child-fostering, and socio-cultural values. Men primarily migrate for labor and education, and women for marriage.⁹ In addition, “personal or family reasons” were a notable motivation for migration in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, with women reporting almost double the prevalence compared to men.¹⁰ Individuals, particularly children, may also migrate for educational reasons. Another driver is the presence of a culture of migration, which views it as a customary step into adulthood.¹¹

Drivers of voluntary internal migration vary by gender and the type of migration destination. Familial reasons (such as joining or following a family member, marriage, divorce, widowhood, or family issues) are the most prevalent in both urban and rural destinations, particularly for women. They are also more commonly cited as drivers to rural than to urban areas, a tendency particularly noticeable in Niger. Job-related motives are more commonly reported among migrants in urban destinations, especially in Burkina Faso and Mali and especially for men. Regarding other reasons for migration, education-related motivations are more common for men and in urban areas.

FIGURE 2. Main reason to move internally by country and (a) gender and (b) location.





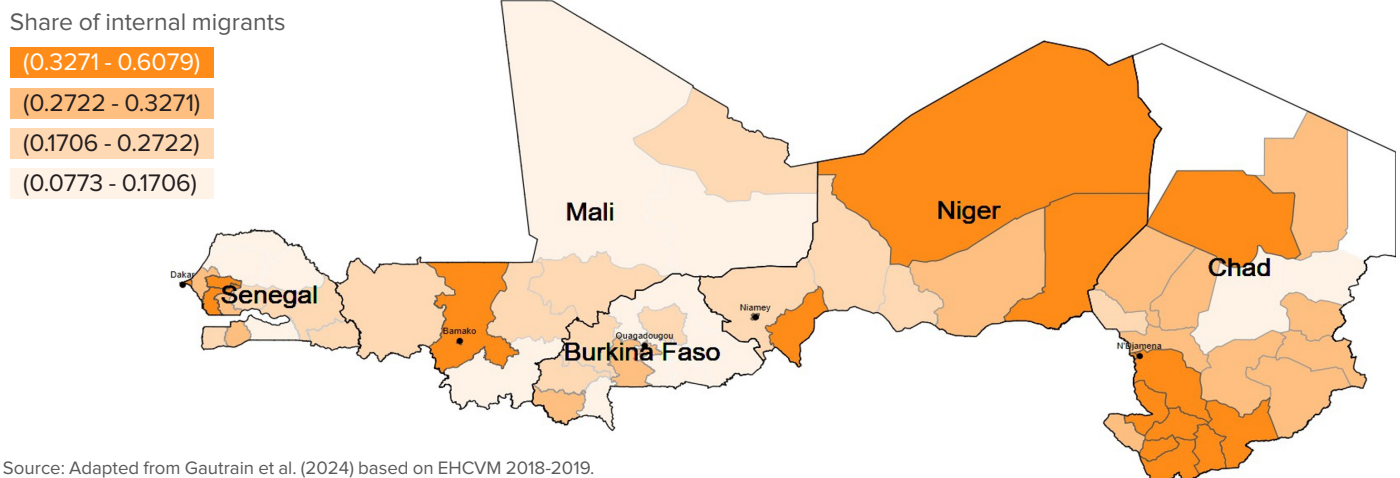
Source: Adapted from Gautrain et al. (2024) based on EHCVM 2018–2019.

PATTERNS OF VOLUNTARY INTERNAL MOBILITY

Population mobility is overwhelmingly internal. Economic migration predominantly occurs along an east-west axis towards labor-intensive work centers, with secondary routes running North to South (IOM 2018).¹² The share of people willing to migrate ranges from 20 percent in Mali to 41 percent in Senegal. It is typically higher for urban, younger, and more educated people, men, and those with a poor perception of their living conditions.

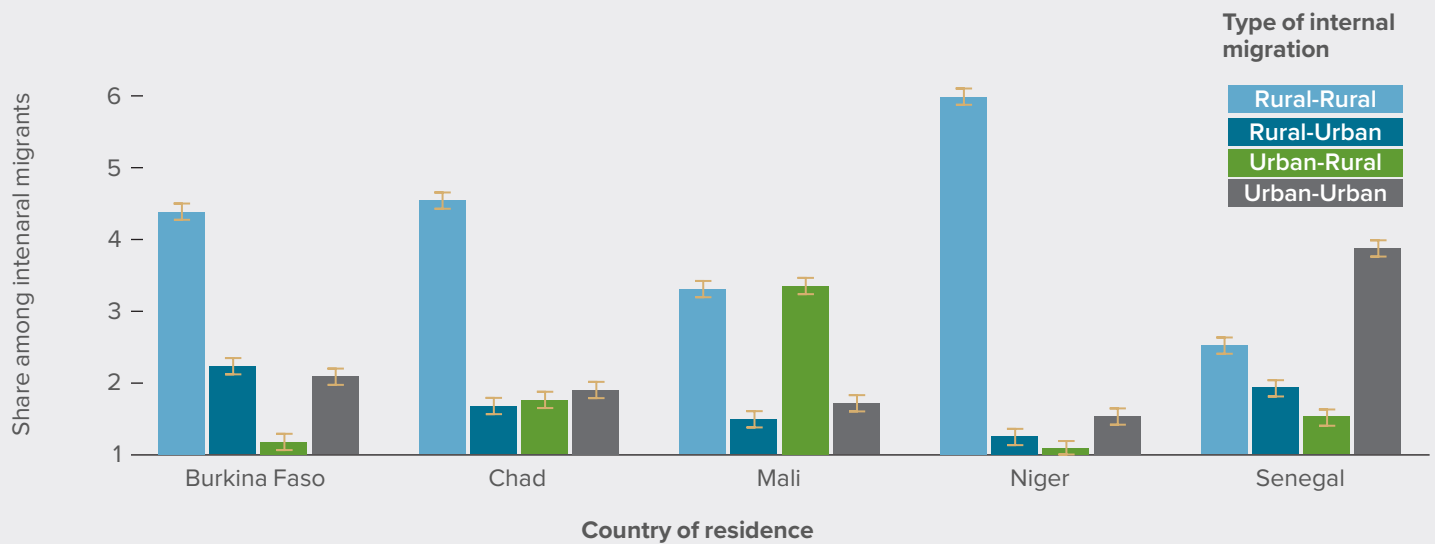
In Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, and Niger, rural-to-rural migration is predominant. Urban-to-urban migration takes precedence in Senegal. In Niger, rural-to-rural migration constitutes over 60 percent of all internal migration, indicating the significant importance of rural areas as both origins and destinations. In Mali, approximately 35 percent of migration involve rural-to-rural and urban-to-rural movements, with the latter exhibiting the highest rate among the countries considered. In the remaining countries, the proportion of urban-to-rural migration does not exceed 20 percent. Diverse internal migration patterns focus on migration to rural areas in most cases.

FIGURE 3. Prevalence of Internal Migrants in the Sahel, by country, (sub-national) region



Source: Adapted from Gautrain et al. (2024) based on EHCVM 2018–2019.

FIGURE 4. Patterns of internal migration



Source : Adapted from Gautrain et al. (2024)

FORCED MIGRATION

Violent conflict and climate change are driving increases in forced migration. The number of IDPs in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, and Niger is projected to increase by 24 percent over three years — from 3.4 million people in 2022 to 4.2 million by 2025. As of 2022, the share of refugees in the total population ranged between 0.7 percent in Senegal and 3.3 percent in Chad, while IDPs ranged from 0.05 percent in Senegal to 1.7 percent in Chad and Mali.¹⁴

The Sahel region experiences substantial impacts from environmental damage and climate change, which can exacerbate economic migration. While conflict may lead to migration due to concerns of physical security, climate change can intensify underlying factors that drive economic migration — including wage differences between source and destination areas, livelihoods, and habitability. This suggests an intersection between voluntary and forced migration, whereby although climate change may be a factor that results in migration under distress, it operates primarily through economic channels.

During a 2004 drought in Burkina Faso, around half of the households reported sending at least one member to migrate for work.¹⁵ The impact of seasonal rainfall and periodic droughts has prompted diverse migration patterns.¹⁶ However, climate events can have contrasting effects. Excessive precipitation in Senegal contributed to international migration, while heatwaves in Burkina Faso deterred migration.¹⁷ In Mali and Senegal, seasonal and temporary migration is an adaptive strategy to varying climatic conditions.¹⁸ Climate change has the potential to intensify migration from rural to urban areas, amplifying existing trends of rapid urbanization in Africa.¹⁹

Climate change can intersect with or cause conflict, resulting in greater economic distress and forced migration. Climate change and the ensuing exacerbation of drought, desertification, and soil degradation can increase communal violence and armed conflicts, potentially involving organized armed groups, which in turn could lead to the forced displacement of large numbers of people across the region.

LABOR MARKET PROFILES OF VOLUNTARY INTERNAL MIGRANTS

Unemployment is quite common among internal migrants in urban destinations (except in the case of Senegal). For those employed in urban settings, the tertiary sector is the most common area of work. This tendency is further accentuated by the higher prevalence of skilled workers in urban areas. A significant portion of internal migrants who work in rural regions

are engaged in the primary sector (agriculture and extractive activities). The situation in Senegal's rural areas is different, where the tertiary sector (including small retail businesses) is more prominent among internal migrants. Women are more likely not to work or to be engaged in family work (Figure 5b). Men commonly work independently or as business owners.

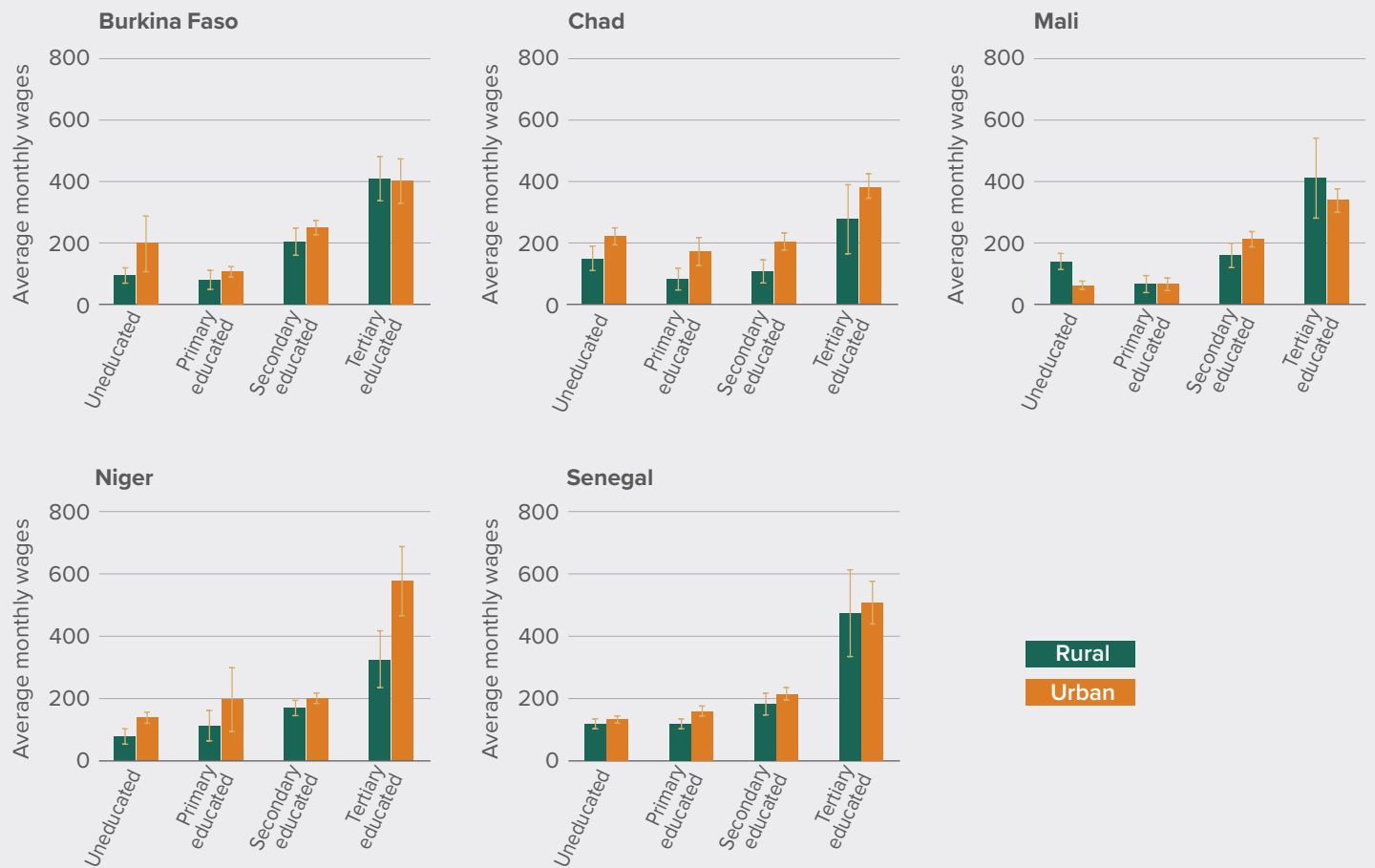
FIGURE 5. Employment status of working-age internal migrants (a) by location and (b) gender



Higher education correlates positively with higher wages in urban areas. Although urban areas typically offer higher wages, some notable exceptions exist, such as tertiary-educated internal migrants in Burkina Faso and Mali whose earnings are similar to their rural counterparts or uneducated individuals

in rural Mali (Figure 6). The attraction of urban employment is particularly pronounced in Chad and Niger due to urban-rural wage differences. This analysis excludes income from self-employment, thereby omitting earnings from activities like family farming, which could lead to an underestimation of rural incomes.

FIGURE 6. Wages of internal migrants by country, area of residence, and level of education



Source: Adapted from Gautrain et al. (2024)

VULNERABILITIES ASSOCIATED WITH MIGRATION

Although migration is frequently undertaken by people to improve their livelihoods, migration itself may expose people to risks and vulnerabilities during transit and at destination. They include²⁰:

Arduous journeys: Migrants may spend many days on the move without sufficient food, water, or shelter. Women and children face heightened risks of trafficking, forced labor, physical and sexual abuse, and disconnected access to education. In conflict-affected areas, migrants may be exploited by smugglers and coerced into working and fighting for armed groups. They may also face risks of harassment by authorities, including detention, extortion, and confiscation of assets and cash.²¹

Poverty and unemployment: Although many migrants are motivated by the prospects of earning higher incomes at destination, they often face unemployment and underemployment, resulting in poverty and economic precarity. Many migrants are employed in low- or semi-skilled jobs that are often unregulated and temporary, leaving workers more susceptible to exploitation at destination.

Social exclusion and tensions: Migrants often face difficulties integrating due to existing social hierarchies. Although porous

borders and shared cultural traits may ease migration, they can also hinder integration.²² Migrants face social isolation and separation, disconnection from social networks, conflict with local populations, heightened levels of violence, as well as mistreatment and abuse.²³

Lack of identification and documentation: In Chad, Mali, and Niger, lack of identification was a significant factor contributing to the vulnerability of voluntary migrant women subjected to forced labor, with only 47 percent of these women possessing such documents.²⁴ The lack of documentation can limit migrants' access to better jobs and basic services. In the case of forced migration, official recognition of refugee or IDP status can give individuals access to jobs, services, and rights that they may otherwise not be able to avail of during displacement.

Difficulties in accessing services: Migrants often experience difficulties in accessing basic services such as water, sanitation, health, education, and social protection. In urban migration destinations, migrants frequently settle in impoverished ghettos with inadequate housing, sanitation, and security. Migrants may not be able to access healthcare and education services, which are often more expensive at destination.²⁵

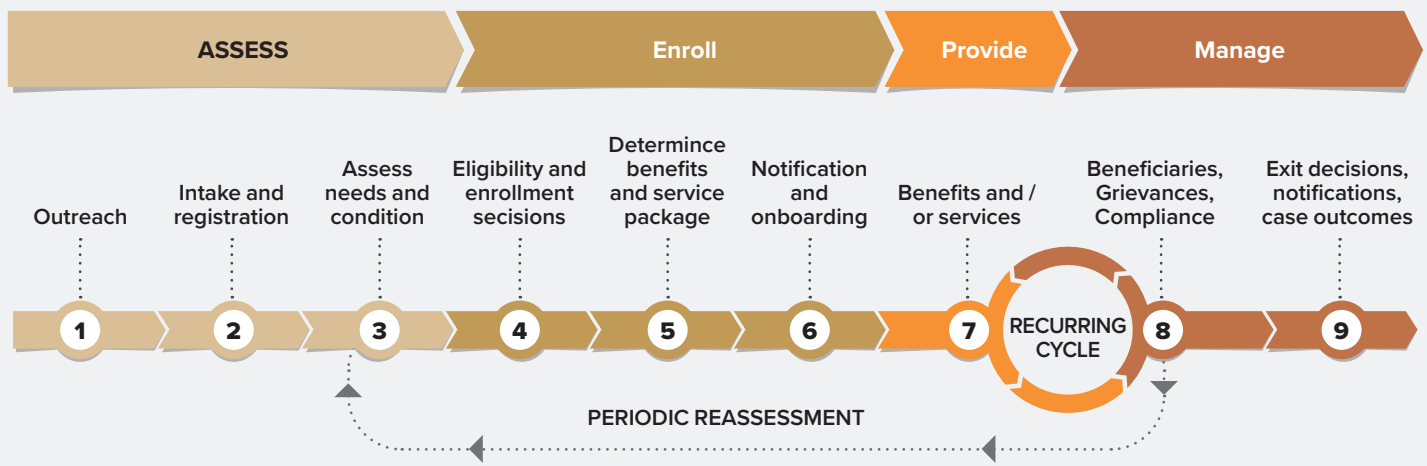


4 IMPLICATIONS FOR ADAPTIVE SOCIAL PROTECTION PROGRAMS

ASP is essential for enhancing the resilience and productivity of the poorest and most vulnerable. It is critical for ASP to be cognizant of the scale, drivers, and challenges of migration to design and implement ASP programs and systems (for example, registries) better suited to the needs of a mobile population. This discussion outlines potential solutions at the policy level

and at the different stages of the ASP delivery chain (Figure 7). It seeks to illustrate possible solutions to make ASP programs more inclusive and supportive of internal migrants, drawing on the detailed companion report to this brief, which also proposes a diagnostic tool (Holmes and Branders, 2024).

FIGURE 7. The Adaptive Social Protection Delivery Chain



Source : Adapted from Bowen et al. (2020)



Photo: © Curt Carnemark / World Bank

POLICY-LEVEL CONSIDERATIONS

Harmonizing ASP with population mobility requires recognizing migration patterns and adjusting policies, programs, and systems to maximize impact for internal migrants. Most ASP programs or systems do not explicitly acknowledge or accommodate the needs of mobile populations. This can result in systematic under coverage of programs among internal migrants. Even when migrants and their families participate in ASP programs, design and implementation may be at odds with the reality of mobility dynamics. At the policy level, specific actions can increase the suitability of ASP programs to mobility dynamics:

- Developing an institutional framework that allows the portability of benefits
- Establishing a mechanism to coordinate actions to address the needs of people on the move
- Ensuring national social protection strategies explicitly recognize groups likely to be mobile
- Ensuring social registries are supportive of mobility by adopting dynamic, on-demand approaches
- Deploying public outreach and communication campaigns to enhance information on migration
- Simplifying processes to obtain, renew, or replace identification documents.

OUTREACH

Enhancing program outreach to communicate critical information on migration-related concerns, especially in high mobility areas: ASP programs may not have clear rules on the continuity of benefits to a household if the main or registered recipient migrates. Where such rules have been defined, participants may be unaware of them. ASP programs can inform participants of rules concerning benefits following individual/household migration, as well as ways to access support and services in prominent migration destinations. Such outreach can be more effective when communication is tailored to participants based on factors such as gender and age.

ASSESSING NEEDS AND CONDITIONS

Deploying dynamic social registries, frequent opportunities for assessment, and “on-demand” registration for programs: ASP eligibility assessments are routinely undertaken to determine household and individual conditions and needs. Such assessments, typically based on community meetings, data from social registries, geographic considerations, or a combination

of these data sources, may unwittingly exclude or penalize households with internal migrants if they are not present at the time of eligibility determination. Some solutions to overcome these limitations include using dynamic social registries, more frequent updates to program-level eligibility assessment data, and allowing open, flexible, and on-demand registration for programs.

ELIGIBILITY AND ENROLLMENT

Reviewing program eligibility criteria to ensure internal migrants can benefit: ASP program eligibility criteria may militate against including internal migrants and their families. This is the case, for instance, when eligibility criteria explicitly include residence requirements. If criteria do not clearly distinguish between individual or household eligibility, then entire households may get excluded from programs if the registered individual migrates or may not be included for lack of proof of residence.

DESIGN OF A SUPPORT PACKAGE

Ensuring program contents and benefits are relevant to recipients even if they migrate: The types of benefits and services provided by ASP programs, as well as the conditions or co-responsibilities they may entail, may not always be suited to the needs of a dynamic population. For instance, skills imparted in productive inclusion programs that are specific to rural livelihoods, may be of little use to participants if they migrate to urban areas. Similarly, if in-person attendance of group meetings is a condition for households to receive assistance and more mobile members migrate, those left behind (especially older and less mobile persons) may not be able to meet attendance requirements and may thus be struck off beneficiary lists. In other instances, the timing of ASP interventions may not be in sync with known or anticipated population movements. In the case of poverty-targeted social assistance, delivering in-kind transfers may not be useful for people on the move who may prefer digital payments where possible, which are accessible even if people migrate. The suggestion is to examine the relevance and usefulness of the package and adjust offerings as needed.

PROVISION OF BENEFITS AND SERVICES

Ensuring program benefits do not exclude or penalize migrants and their families: ASP program benefits may exclude participants if they must be collected by an individual likely to migrate. Allowing multiple (or at least an alternate) household

members to access benefits can prevent households from missing out. Effective provisioning should ensure that the scheduling of program activities is synchronized with migration patterns and cycles. For instance, scheduling public works interventions keeping in mind seasonal migration patterns can enable seasonal migrants to participate in these programs in the lean season. Beyond the support provided by the ASP programs, programs could provide information on available services matching internal migrants' broader needs (e.g., emotional, and psychological support, gender-based violence services, social cohesion activities) and facilitate referral.

GRIEVANCE AND FEEDBACK MECHANISMS

Ensuring grievance redress is accessible and known to beneficiaries regardless of their physical location: ASP participants may have limited knowledge of grievance systems leading to limited use of complaint and redress mechanisms. This may be especially acute for migrants when grievance mechanisms rely on traditional channels (assuming one belongs to social networks) or require in-person submission of grievances. In addition to raising awareness of existing grievance redress mechanisms among all participants, the use of phone- and digital means of filing complaints and seeking redress may increasingly be more feasible and useful in contexts of population mobility.

PROGRAM MONITORING

Enhancing program monitoring to generate granular data on mobility dynamics to inform modifications to programs to improve better support internal migrants: Traditional program monitoring systems do not account for population movements and may only collect household-level information. As a result, program administrators cannot tailor programs to migration patterns and the specific needs of migrants. Efforts to use program monitoring and evaluation to collect disaggregated information on mobility-related questions at the individual level could help provide the necessary data for tailoring program features.

FINANCING

Allowing flexible financing to accommodate additional beneficiaries: Social protection programs typically do not have budget flexibility to respond to internal migration patterns and accommodate new beneficiaries outside of their regular enrollment cycles. To provide such flexibility, programs could allocate funds to enroll internal migrants off-cycle, or governments could decide on top-up budgets to respond to new arrivals, especially in the case of sudden and large internal migration.

CONCLUSION

Some of the modifications discussed in this note need not represent radical changes to program design or implementation but instead exemplify the application of a mobility lens that ensures that ASP remains meaningful and can enhance the benefits of population mobility in the Sahel. Integrating mobility-related considerations is vital to ensuring migrants are supported. ASP program adaptations can safeguard migrants from programmatic deficiencies.

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