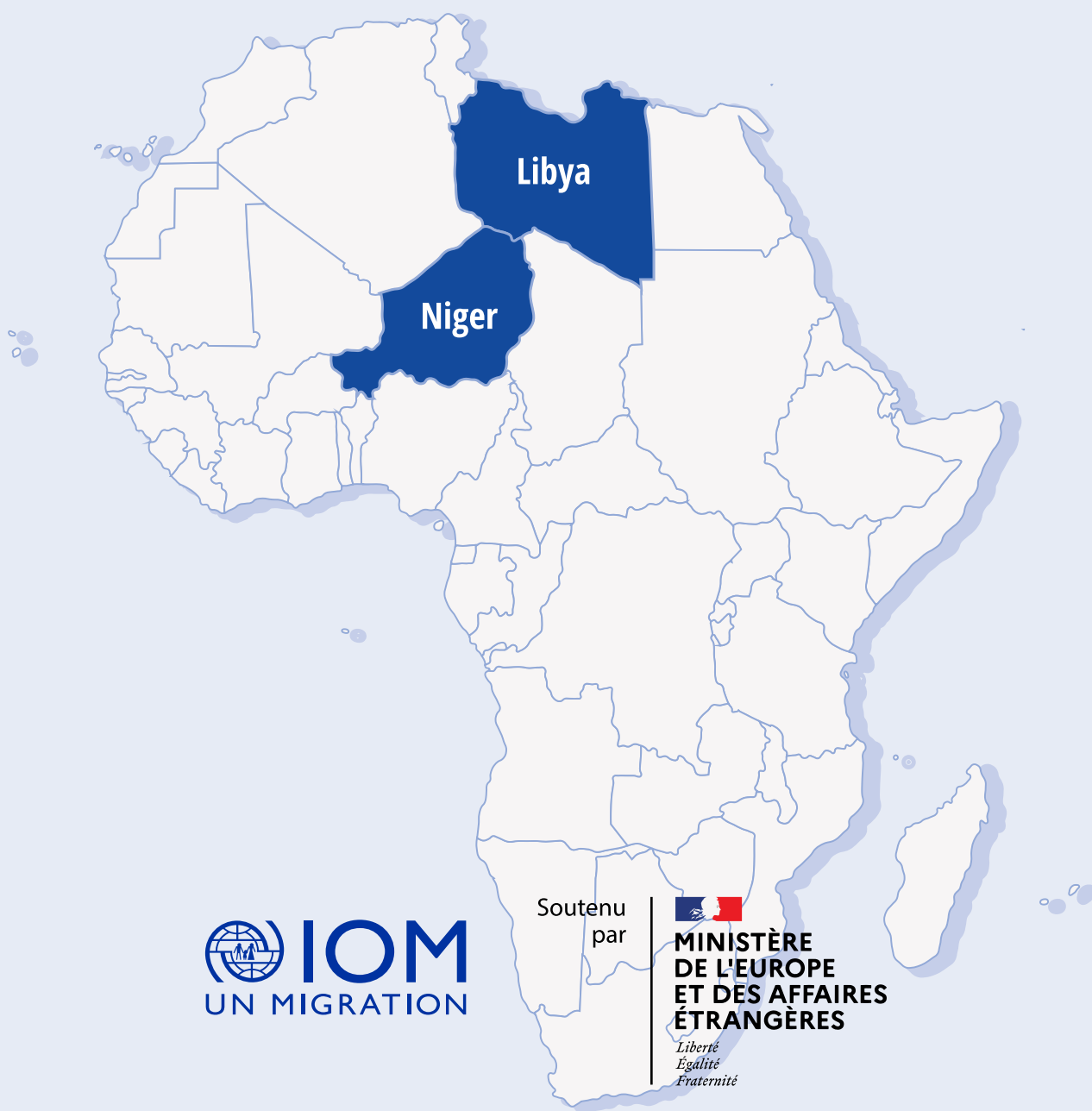


# NIGERIEN MIGRANT WORKERS IN LIBYA

General Overview and Opportunities  
for the Future

Background paper

Operationalization of Memorandum of  
Understanding between Libya and Niger



 **IOM**  
UN MIGRATION

Soutenu  
par



**MINISTÈRE  
DE L'EUROPE  
ET DES AFFAIRES  
ÉTRANGÈRES**

*Liberté  
Égalité  
Fraternité*

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The aim of this paper is to provide an overview of Nigerien labour migration to Libya, emphasizing on the opportunities related to an improved management of labour migration between Niger and Libya. This paper was drafted with the aim of guiding the operationalization of a Memorandum of Understanding on bilateral labour migration signed by both states in 2021. This paper was drafted using IOM's Flow Monitoring Surveys (FMS) data (2020-2022), data from qualitative interviews with Nigerien migrant workers collected in December 2022 and relevant policy and academic literature (see [Methodology section](#) for more information).

Historically, Niger and Libya have been closely connected, socially, culturally and economically. Mobility between both countries has been long-standing and Nigerien migrants, along with other migrant nationalities such as Egyptians and Sudanese play a vital role in Libya, providing a much-needed skilled workforce in the economy.

### DEMOGRAPHICS

Nigerien migrants constitute 25 per cent of the total migrant population in the country, making the most represented migrant nationality in the country. 91 per cent of them reported moving to Libya for a variety of economic reasons.

### ENTRY IN LIBYA

Nigerien migrants' entry in Libya is characterised by large levels of irregularity. In several instances, entry in Libya was reportedly considered by respondents as unsafe, long and stressful.

### EMPLOYMENT STATUS

A vast majority of Nigerien migrants in Libya are employed (74%), whereas only 36 per cent were employed in Niger prior to migrating to Libya.

A high proportion of Nigerien migrants surveyed were employed in elementary occupations, characterized by activities involving manual labour. Beyond this, many respondents reported being employed in sectors such as carpentry; construction; manufacturing and agriculture.

### ACCESS TO DOCUMENTATION

A vast majority of Nigerien migrants reported that they did not have a work permit (95%) or residency permit (98%) in Libya, confirming that migration from Niger is characterised by a large proportion of irregularity. Virtually all interviewees reported that this lack of official status created safety issues for them and their families.

### REMITTANCES

Nearly a quarter (24%) of Nigerien migrants reported sending money home since they arrived in Libya and nearly half (45%) intended to send money upon saving assets. Finding employment and remittances was reportedly a core motivation for Nigerien migrants in Libya.

### MIGRATION INTENTIONS

Half of Nigerien migrants surveyed expressed the intention of staying in Libya. That said, several interviewees outlined that in the long-term, they were planning to return to their home country.

### WAY FORWARD

While the signature of a MoU between Libya and Niger is a significant step, its prompt operationalisation and the creation of regular pathways between both countries is paramount to ensure the protection of Nigerien migrant workers in Libya.

## 01. INTRODUCTION

Human mobility in the area of Niger and Libya is a long-standing phenomenon, which started long before both countries' borders were consolidated, notably with the movement of nomadic pastoralist such as Tuareg and Tubu (Cepero, 2021). In the 1960s, human mobility between Niger and Libya became oriented towards, labour since Libya became a key oil producer and exporter on the African continent and imported foreign workforce. Mobility between both countries was further intensified in the 1990s, following Muammar Gaddafi's open-door and visa-free policy for most Sub-Saharan Africans, including Nigerien migrant workers. Today, there is a total of **159,944 Nigerien migrants in Libya**, which represents 25 per cent of the total migrant population in the country, the largest share amongst all migrant nationalities (IOM, 2022 b).

In November 2021, the governments of Libya and Niger signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) aiming to strengthen migration management and labour mobility. The MoU seeks to protect migrant workers through effective work visa issuance before employment and to better respond to Libya's labour market needs (IOM, 2020). This agreement has the potential to benefit both parties alike through fostering partnership between both countries and supporting legal frameworks for regular migration pathways, which have the potential to protect migrant workers' rights.

The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of Nigerien migration in Libya, with a focus on the main socio-economic characteristics of Nigerien migrant workers, including conditions of entry in Libya, employment status, access to documentation, remittances and mobility intentions. The paper also discusses some options for the future of migration between both countries. Evidence generated as part of this paper aims to guide the operationalization of the signed Memorandum of Understanding on bilateral labour mobility between Libya and Niger.

## 02. METHODOLOGY

The paper relies on the following data sources:

### (1) FLOW MONITORING SURVEYS (FMS)

Conducted by IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) in Libya is a data collection system used to conduct surveys with migrants along key migration routes, and at key locations in Libya. The sample analyzed for this paper included 9,916 Nigerien respondents, who took the survey in Libya between 2020-2022. The survey focused on a variety of topics, including demographics remittances, history of migration, reasons for mobility, etc

### (2) QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS

Conducted with 10 Nigerien migrants (5 males and 5 females) in Benghazi and Tripoli, in December 2022. The interview questionnaire is available in the [Annexes](#).

### (3) REVIEW OF RELEVANT ACADEMIC AND POLICY LITERATURE

Due to the limited availability of government produced data, most of the data provided as part of this paper is self-reported by migrants. While this enables the paper to provide an indication of the perceptions of Nigerien migrants in Libya, findings in later sections of this work cannot necessarily be generalized to the entire population.

## 03. LABOUR MIGRATION TO LIBYA

### BACKGROUND, TRENDS AND DEVELOPMENT

#### 3.1. EVOLUTION OF LIBYAN LABOUR MIGRATION POLICIES\*

Libya adopts Law No. 6 of 1987, as the main framework governing the entry of foreign nationals.

Law No. 6 is complemented by Law No. 10 of 1989, which allowed nationals from Arab countries to enter Libya and reside in country. These foreign nationals benefitted from advantageous conditions, including enjoyment of some political rights.

Following the UN air and arms embargo on Libya (1992-2000), Gaddafi adopted policies aiming to facilitate migrant from Sub-Saharan African countries, especially Nigeria, Sudan, Chad and Mali.

Libya and the European Union launch cooperation to combat irregular migration to Europe. New laws and rules were introduced with the purpose to regulate large number of undocumented migrants in Libya. However, these measures led to large-scale rejections at borders and repatriations of undocumented migrants.

New visa requirements were imposed to all foreigners, with the exception of Arab country nationals

Migrant workers are currently allowed to obtain work permits if they have employment contracts in Libya, according to national rules and regulations. However, the procedures are not always strictly or literally applied by the authorities.

Libyan authorities including the Ministry of Labour and Rehabilitation started the negotiations with the Governments of Egypt and Niger to conclude bilateral labour agreement to facilitate safe, orderly and regular migration to Libya.

The Ministry of Economy and Trade issues a decree banning non-Libyans from: real estate brokerage; renting bakeries and other commercial places for themselves.

1987

⋮

1989

⋮

1990s

⋮

2000s

⋮

2007

⋮

2019

⋮

2020

⋮

2022

\* Overview of Labour Migration Policies and Developments in Libya (1980s to today). Adapted from Borgnäs, E., Cottone, L. and Teppert, T. (2020), Labour Migration Dynamics in Libya. In: Migration in West and North Africa and Across the Mediterranean: Trends, Risks, Development and Governance.

### 3.2. NIGERIEN LABOUR MIGRATION TO LIBYA: A Historical Perspective

While Niger is sometimes portrayed as a geographical corridor for migration towards Europe, it is also a departure country, not primarily to Europe, but mostly to neighbouring countries, traditionally Ivory Coast, Nigeria and Ghana, and since the 1950s towards the Maghreb, particularly to Algeria and Libya. Long before the consolidation of the nation states in the region in the 1960s, nomadic pastoralist groups such as Tuareg and Tubu were already moving around the Sahara Desert. Since then, the border area between Niger and Libya remained very porous, with strong economic, social and cultural connections between both countries (Cepero, 2021).

In the 1960s, Libya became an appealing destination for migrants particularly from neighbouring countries, seeking livelihood opportunities on a temporary or long-term basis (IOM 2019). Nigerien migrants, often from the Hausa and Kanuri regions travelled to Libya in the 1980s through temporary and circular movements during the dry season (Brachet, 2007). At end of the 1990s, migrants from urban areas like Niamey also joined the itineraries towards the North, with economic and political crises as push factors and Muammar Gaddafi's open-door and visa-free policy for most Sub-Saharan African countries, as pull factor (IOM, 2019).

With the 2011 Arab Spring and the deterioration of the security situation in Libya, a significant proportion of Nigeriens returned to their home country, particularly during the 2014-2015 waves of violence. Despite this, the number of Nigeriens migrants in Libya remains significant, with Nigeriens being the most represented migrant population in Libya. That said, Nigerien migrants' conditions remain very precarious, with numerous occurrences of Nigerien migrants expelled back to Niger, oftentimes on the border of Algeria and Niger known as "Point Zero" (MSF, 2022). In addition, Nigerien migrant workers often have fewer residency and work permits than other migrant nationalities (see [Section 4.4.](#))

### 3.3. LIBYAN LABOUR MARKET: Key Characteristics

Over the past few years, a number of studies assessed the state of the Libyan Labour Market (see for instance: REACH 2022). These studies outline the following main trends affecting the country's labour market: a bloated public sector (employing nearly 70 per cent of salaried employees); a private sector with limited capacity, and an education system that could be strengthened. The following sections outline the main characteristics of the Libyan labour market in further depth.

Libyan labour market appears sufficiently large to absorb foreign labour force, with migrants going to Libya reportedly finding little to no difficulties to find employment (IOM 2021 b). In fact, as per DTM's 2022 June-July "Migration Report", 76 per cent of migrants reported being employed in Libya at the time of the interview, while only 52 per cent said they were employed in their country of origin. Migrants are primarily employed in the construction, water supply, electricity and gas sectors, as well as agriculture, pastoralism and food industry (Borgnas et al., 2021).

Besides, although perceptions of Libyan nationals towards migrants are not always positive (IOM 2022 b), migrants are not necessarily perceived by the local community as competing with Libyan citizens in the job market, since they often occupy jobs that Libyans are generally not willing to do. In particular, employers in key sectors such as construction or agriculture report difficulties hiring Libyans because many lack the technical skills for specific positions and desire to perform jobs requiring physical labour (El Kamouni-Janssen et al., 2019). Therefore, these industries reply to varying levels on migrant workers. As such, despite the security challenges faced by Libya over the past decade, migrants continue to provide key contributions to the Libyan labour market.

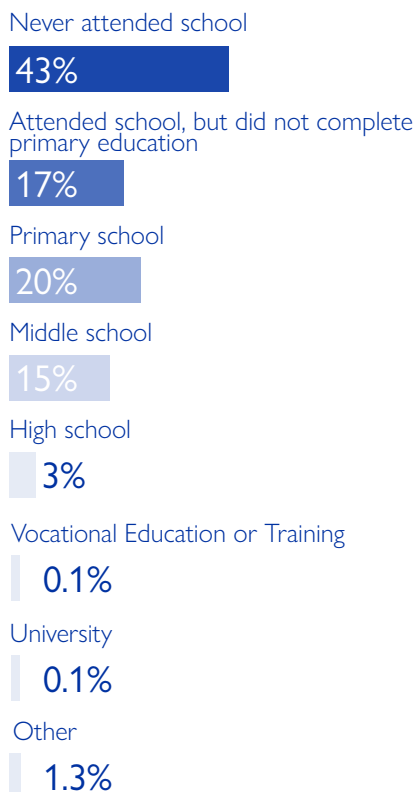


## 04. OVERVIEW OF NIGERIEN LABOUR MIGRATION IN LIBYA

### 4.1. KEY DEMOGRAPHICS AND CHARACTERISTICS

According to IOM, there is a total of 159,944 migrants from Niger in Libya which represents 25 per cent of the total migrant population in the country – the largest share among all nationalities. The majority of whom were single, male and had limited educational levels (never attended school or only attended partially). The majority of Nigerien migrants who responded to the survey were located in the West (56%) or the South (42%) of Libya while a minority are in the East (1%). A significant number of Nigerien migrants come from the following three regions of Niger): Agadez, Zinder and Maradi. 91 per cent of respondents reported moving to Libya for different economic reasons, related to insufficient income in country of origin (48%); lack of job opportunities at home (24%) or looking for job opportunities in Libya (19%).

#### • EDUCATION LEVEL



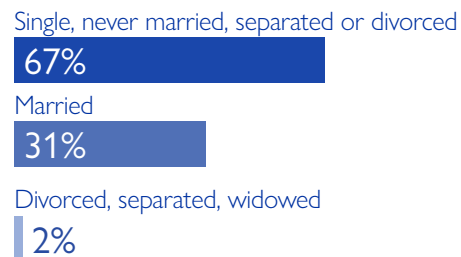
Source: DTM flow Monitoring Surveys Jan - Dec 2021

#### • GENDER

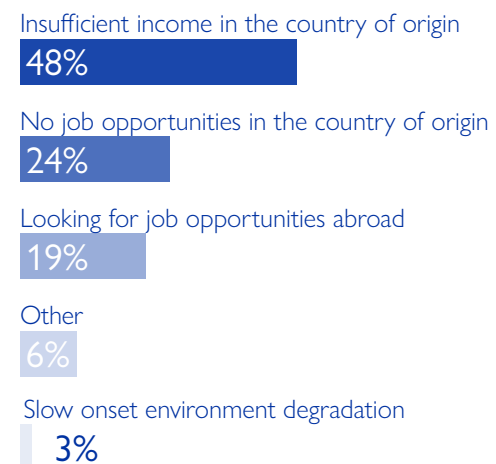


Based on the overall gender breakdown of migrants across Libya (n.b. the breakdown by gender is not available by nationality) there is an estimated 78 per cent adult males, 12 per cent adult females and 10 per cent children.

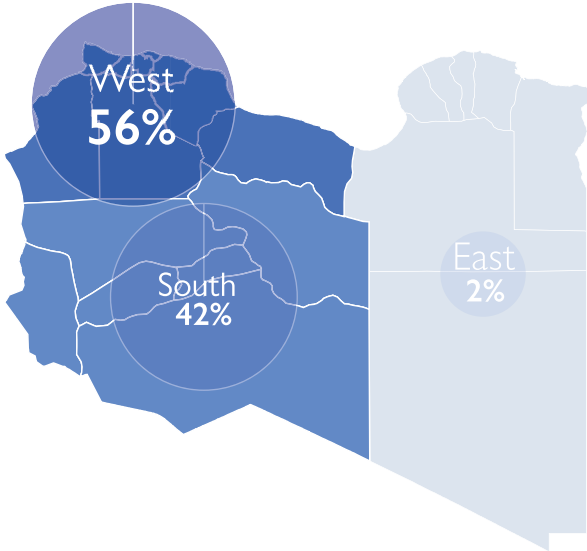
#### • MARITAL STATUS



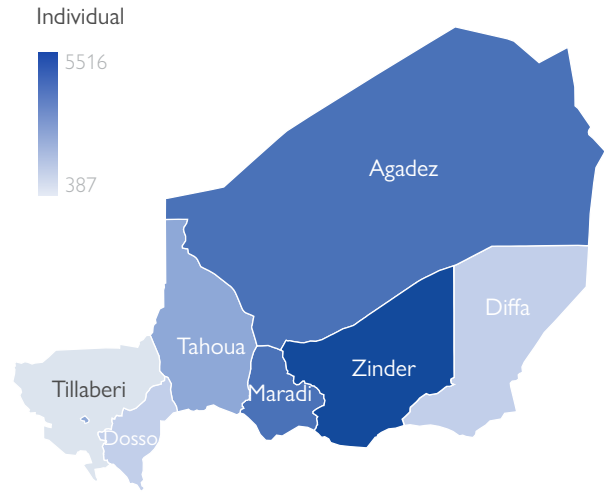
#### • THE MAIN REASON FOR WHICH MIGRANTS DECIDED TO LEAVE THEIR COUNTRY OF ORIGIN



REGION IN LIBYA WHERE THE SURVEYS WERE CONDUCTED WITH NIGERIEN MIGRANTS



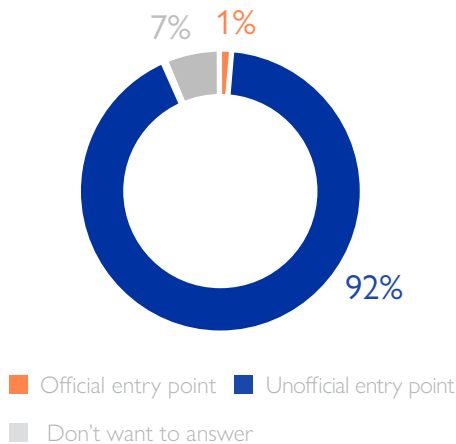
CITY OF ORIGIN OF NIGERIEN MIGRANTS INTERVIEWED IN 2020-2021



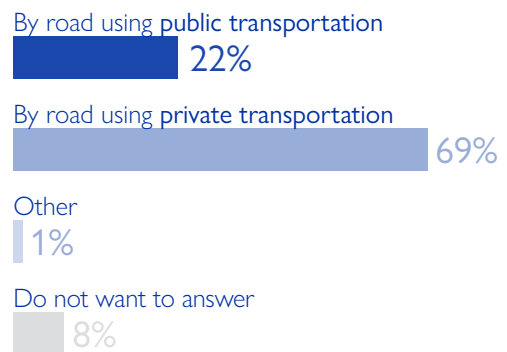
4.2. ENTRY IN LIBYA

Nigerien migrants' entry in Libya is characterized by large levels of irregularity, with a significant portion of respondents (92%) reporting that they entered Libya crossing the border through an unofficial entry point. The vast majority of respondents reported that they entered Libya by road, using either public transportation (22%) or private transportation (69%). The average reported cost of travel between 2020 and 2022 was 675 USD.

TYPE OF ENTRY



MODE OF TRANSPORTATION MIGRANTS USED TO ENTER LIBYA



Nigerien migrants reported that the travel lasted for several days and could be very difficult:

“The last time I came to Libya was in 2020, where I left my city of Tillaberi and came to Agadez. We paid the owner of the truck about 200 LYD, and then the mediator coordinated a truck for us heading to the Libyan border. After we arrived at the border, we got into another car that was waiting for us there until we got to the city of Sebha. I paid 800 LYD to get to Sebha, where they put us inside a farm, where we stayed for about 10 days. After this, the mediator put us in a car at night and we moved to Tripoli. I was afraid because some friends got caught by Libyan authorities and the road was difficult. We did not stop to eat or drink”.

Female, Free Trader / Cleaner, 52 years old

“I spent two nights heading from my city to the starting point in Agadez. From there I started a 3-day journey in the desert until I reached Libya's first inhabited city (Sebha). The trip to Libya cost me about 350 USD that I had earned from my savings. My cousin traveled with me on this trip and our feelings were mixed as to whether we were going to reach our destination peacefully or not. We were also grieving our life in Niger, but also wanted to get jobs and save money”.

Male, Employee in Marble Factory, 42 years old.

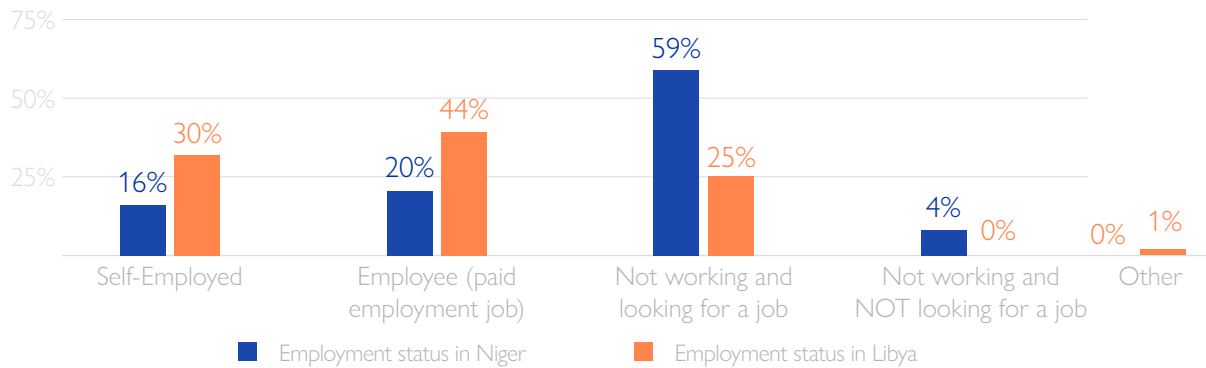
### AVERAGE COST OF JOURNEY



## 4.3. EMPLOYMENT STATUS

A vast majority of Nigerien migrants in Libya are employed or self-employed (74%), whereas it was the case only of 36 per cent of them in Niger. This figure is in line with finding in [section 4.1](#), which shows that a high proportion of Nigerien migrants moved to Libya, due to lack of economic opportunities in their home country. This finding is also consistent with the idea that, although the Libyan socio-economic climate is tense, the labour market is sufficiently large to absorb migrant labour workers and that Nigeriens workers' skills are complementary to those of the local population (IOM 2021 a).

## EMPLOYMENT STATUS IN NIGER AND LIBYA



Nigerien migrants are employed in various occupational activities, including elementary occupations (48%); service and sales workers (8%); craft and related trade works (7%); skilled forestry and fishery works (7%). Several respondents also reported that they had several activities at the same time or changed activity over time. For instance, one of the interviewees for this paper outlined the following:

*“I used to work on many things, most notably sitting in public stations on the street waiting for anyone who needed anything to call me for work. I worked in a brick building factory in the Spring Valley, I was also a cargo carrier, until I settled my situation in the Romani factory that I joined after meeting with a Moroccan construction technician”.*

*Male, 24 years old*

Several interviewees outlined that through their experience in Libya, they gained several new skills. For instance, one interviewee who joined a farm outlined his technical value in his area of work:

*“I gained experience in farming and how to solve crop problems, when to plant seeds and what to do when plants are sick or exposed to certain agricultural pests. I am now able to work on my own or in any other farm”.*

*Male, 53 years old*

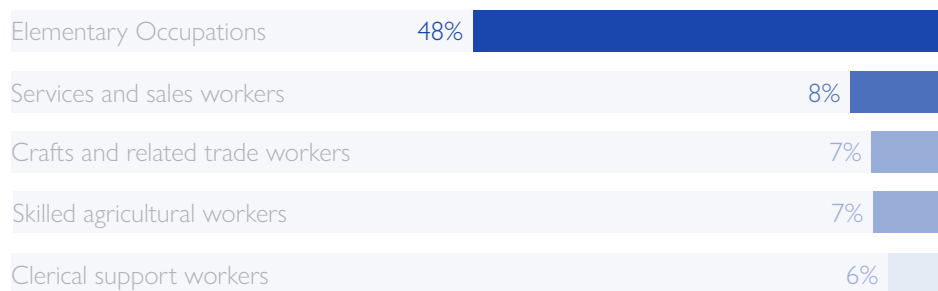
Another interviewee pointed out that through migrating, he improved his ability to develop projects in the future:

*“I have acquired many skills that I think will help me a lot in the future, such as relying on myself and being able to form my own project when I return to my country of origin. I can also help others to benefit from the experience I had and what I learnt in Libya”.*

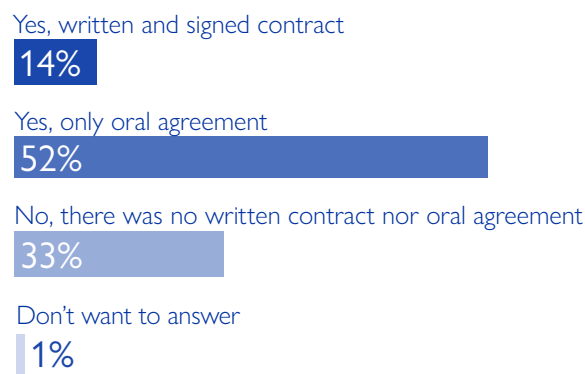
*Male, 24 years old*

That said, the perception that the experience in Libya helped with gaining new skills was less unanimous among women interviewees. While some of them outlined that they had learnt Arabic or how to adapt to the Libyan lifestyle and culture such as learning new cooking techniques, the majority did not perceive that they had learnt new skills in Libya. This was mainly because most of them did not have a professional occupation in Libya. Nearly all women interviewed showed great interest and enthusiasm in benefiting from vocational training, in case such initiatives were made available to them.

#### • TOP 5 OCCUPATION FIELD IN LIBYA



#### • TYPE OF CONTRACT FOR EMPLOYMENT IN LIBYA



Employment of Nigerien migrants in Libya is characterized by considerable levels of informal work, since only 1 per cent of respondents reported having a written and signed contract and 33 per cent reported that they had neither a written contract nor an oral agreement in their job.

## 4.4. ACCESS TO DOCUMENTATION

A small minority of Nigerien migrants (5%) reported having a work permit in Libya, considerably less than the 15 per cent average for all nationalities. Out of the 5 main migrant nationalities in Libya, Nigeriens are the least likely to have a work permit. A similar pattern can be observed for residency permits. 2 per cent of Nigerien migrants reported having such permit in Libya, considerably less than the 14 per cent average for all nationalities.

A number of interviewees outlined that the lack of documentation constituted a significant challenge to their daily life. For instance, one interviewee outlined that amongst of the challenges of life in Libya was the:

*“Fear of being arrested by the illegal immigration police and being placed in detention centres and not being able to leave this place due to the lack of identification papers”*

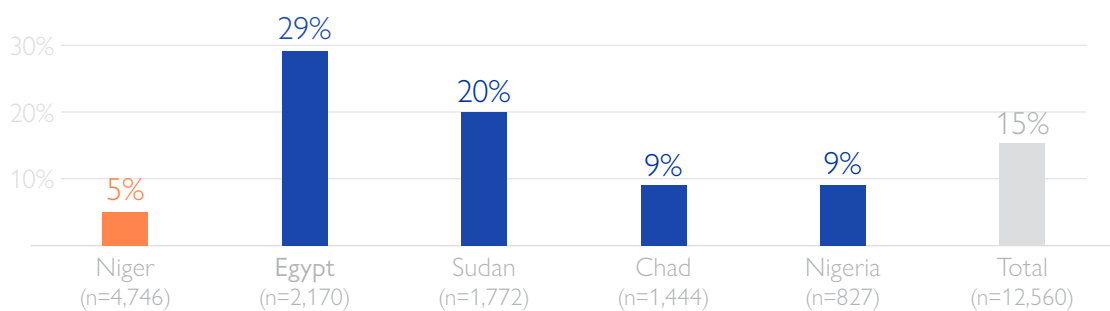
*Male, 24-year-old, waiter in a café*

The vast majority of interviewees outlined that if initiatives to register migrants or provide them with work permits existed, they would be very inclined to participate:

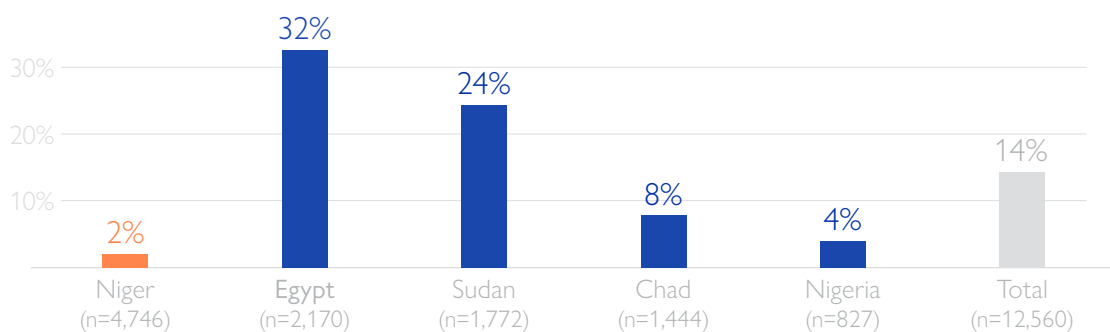
*“If there was an opportunity to be registered at municipal level, I would like to be made aware of it. That way, I would not risk to be arrested by the local authorities in Libya, and I would walk, go the doctor, to the market in full confidences”*

*Female, 24-year-old, housewife*

### WORK PERMITS IN LIBYA (TOP 5 MIGRANT NATIONALITY)



### RESIDENCY PERMITS IN LIBYA (TOP 5 MIGRANT NATIONALITY)



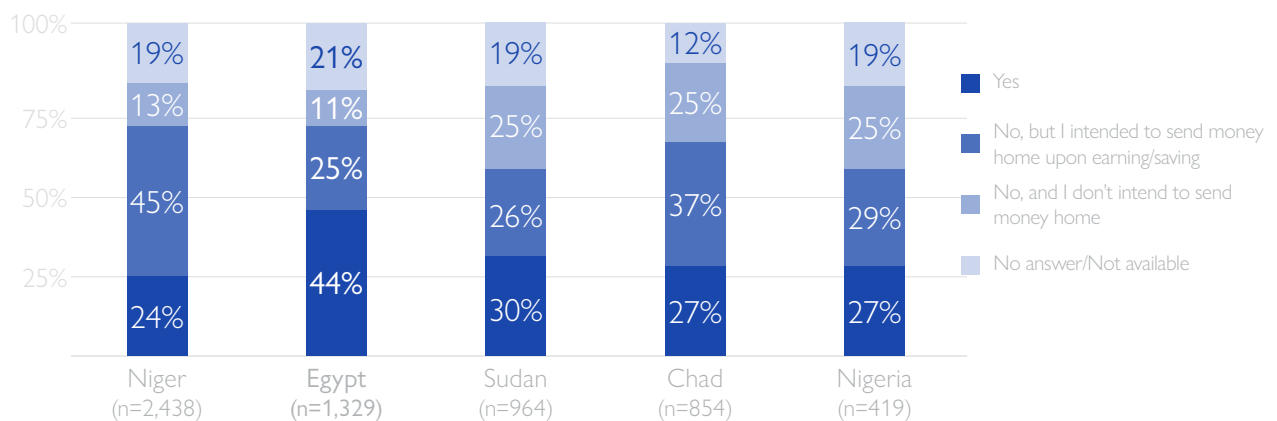
## 4.5. REMITTANCES

While nearly half of Nigerien migrants (45%) reported that they intended to send remittances/earnings home, only a quarter (24%) had already done so since they arrived in Libya, slightly less than the other four nationalities. This result is in line with several testimonies gathered as part of this research, which outline that sending remittances was a key part of taking the decision to go Libya, but also outlining the financial difficulties they encountered. For instance, one interviewee outlined the following:

“(Some of my relatives) are in a very weak situation and they depend on the money I give them. The situation there has become very difficult (...). I decided to come to Libya to seek employment and get enough money to provide my family with the minimum... But the living situation here is very difficult. The available works are farming and livestock grazing, but the value of daily pay is very low, so oftentimes I struggle to send money”

Female, 53-year-old, Daily worker in agriculture

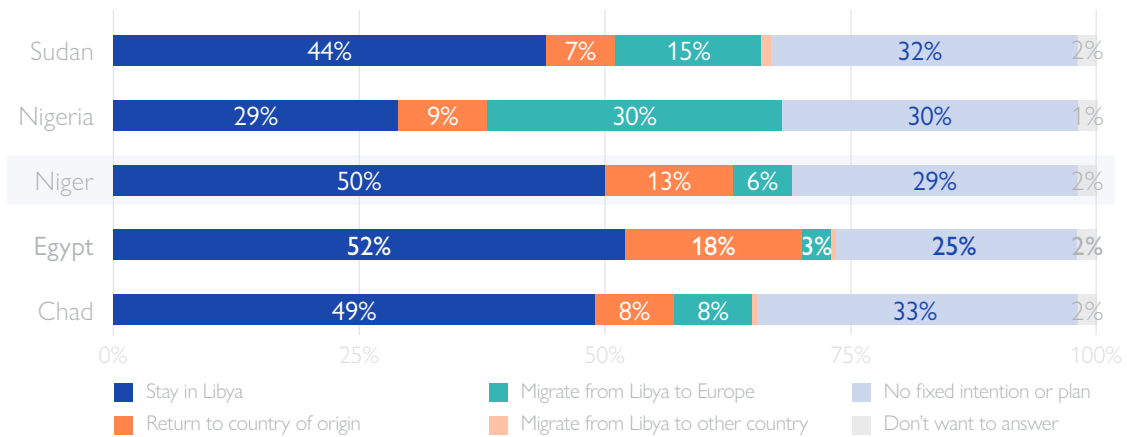
HAVE MIGRANTS SENT MONEY HOME SINCE ARRIVING IN LIBYA?  
(TOP 5 MIGRANT NATIONALITIES)



## 4.6. MOBILITY INTENTIONS

Nigerien migrants' migration intentions are diverse, with 50 per cent of surveyed individuals indicating they plan to stay in Libya; 29 per cent having no fixed intention or plan; 13 per cent planning to return to their country of origin and 6 per cent intending to migrate to Europe.

CURRENT MIGRATION INTENTIONS FOR TOP 5 NATIONALITIES IN LIBYA (2020-2022)



This diversity is reflected in qualitative results as well to some extent, with several participants being unsure of what their long-term plan is. However, a majority of respondents outlined that, while they intend to stay in Libya in the near future, their long-term aim is to return to their country of origin, with enough savings to start a project and/or have a stable life. As per one interviewee's words:

*“My simple plan for the coming years is to get enough money to open my own project in my own country (...). I am still young for now, but I already think about the age of stability and return to my country in Niger. I hope to educate my children and transfer my experiences to them back there”*

*Male, 24-year-old, factory worker*



## 05. CONCLUSION & WAY FORWARD

Despite the political changes and a decade of conflict, Nigerien labour migration to Libya has remained a relatively stable phenomenon in the history of both countries since at least the 1960s. This paper confirms the significant contribution of Nigerien migrant workers to Libya's economy, since Nigerien migrants fill out key gaps in Libya's workforce, potentially playing a key role in the reconstruction process. Beyond this, a significant part of Nigerien migrants in Libya transfer remittances to their relatives in Niger or intend to do so, making them key assets to the development of their home country's economy. In that regard, several individuals interviewed as part of this research outlined that they had learnt some new skills or improved their professional skills in Libya, which they would hope to spread to Niger upon return.

Despite being key assets for both countries, Nigerien migrants' situation is too often precarious, characterized by large levels of irregularity and informality. Several participants in this research outlined that they lacked important documentation, including residency/work permits, which would protect them from deportation and other risks. The signature of the MoU between both countries and discussions around its operationalization are significant steps towards increasing regular pathways towards Libya, supporting with visa issuance before employment. Additional paths for action relate to the regularization of Nigerien workers already present on Libyan territory as well as the provision of skills enhancement schemes destined to Nigerien migrant workers, thereby providing Nigerien migrant workers with more work opportunities. Such steps will be paramount to ensuring the protection of Nigerien migrant workers in Libya and contributing to Libya's reconstruction.

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# ANNEX: QUALITATIVE QUESTIONNAIRE

UN Migration Agency

A qualitative questionnaire about - Nigerien Labour Migration in Libya

The date of the interview		Region and city	
---------------------------	--	-----------------	--

<b>1. Introductory questions:</b>	
1.1.	Please introduce yourself, and then make sure the interviewee answers the following questions:
Nationality	
Age	
Occupation	
Duration of stay in Libya	
1.2.	Why did you leave Niger and decide to come to Libya? What is your goal in staying in Libya?
1.3.	How was your life back in Niger? (i.e. which region of Niger; occupation; description of family/relatives etc.)
<b>2. The trip to Libya:</b>	
2.1.	How would you describe your journey to Libya? (trip length; cost of journey; accompanied / alone; feelings associated with departure i.e. difficult/easy journey; anxiety before departure etc.)
<b>3. Life in Libya:</b>	
3.1.	Can you tell me more about your life in Libya? (where does he/she lives; with whom; what are the participant's occupations outside of work)
3.2.	How would you describe your workplace? (i.e. good / bad work conditions and why)
3.3.	Have you acquired any skills in Libya which you think will be useful for the future? If yes, how do you plan to use these newly acquired skills? If not, what type of skills would help you get a better job opportunity in Libya? If offered a training, would you be able to attend? What modality of training program/length of a training program will it be realistic for you to be committed to?
3.4.	Thinking about your experience in Libya, what have been the main challenges and opportunities?
<b>4. Prospects:</b>	
4.1.	What are your main projects for the coming years? (i.e. stay in Libya / go back to Niger / go to a third country)
4.2.	If there was a possibility for migrants to register formally with Libyan authorities (i.e. in municipalities) in order to be matched with work opportunities and ensure legal stay in Libya, would you consider being part to such initiative? Why/Why not?





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