

Understanding the roles of smugglers along mixed migration routes in the Central Sahel

Mixed migration in the Central Sahel is evolving amid a rapidly changing security environment and shifting regional political developments, notably with the recent creation of the Alliance of Sahel States (ASS).¹ These shifts have [increased](#) reliance on smuggler² services, which was already [prevalent](#) in the region. However, there is a lack of recent and up-to-date research on roles of migrant smugglers and smuggling dynamics amidst these evolving dynamics in the Central Sahel.

Based on 1,913 surveys conducted between May and August 2024, this snapshot provides a context-specific, evidence-based and an up-to-date understanding of migrants' use of smugglers in the Central Sahel. It highlights the range of smuggling services that migrants rely on to facilitate their journeys and examines the various roles smugglers play across Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. This snapshot also explores migrants' perceptions of their interactions with smugglers. Additionally, it offers a comparative perspective to a [2021 publication](#) that examined the prevalence and roles of smugglers along mixed migration routes in Mali, Niger and Libya.³ This snapshot is part of a series of 2025 MMC publications that examine trends in human smuggling in the Central Sahel

Key findings

- Most respondents rely on a single smuggler for a specific segment of their journey (51%), rather than for the entire trip (33%).
- Smugglers continue to primarily facilitate movement across borders (63%) and within countries (39%), often assisting with interactions with authorities (41%).

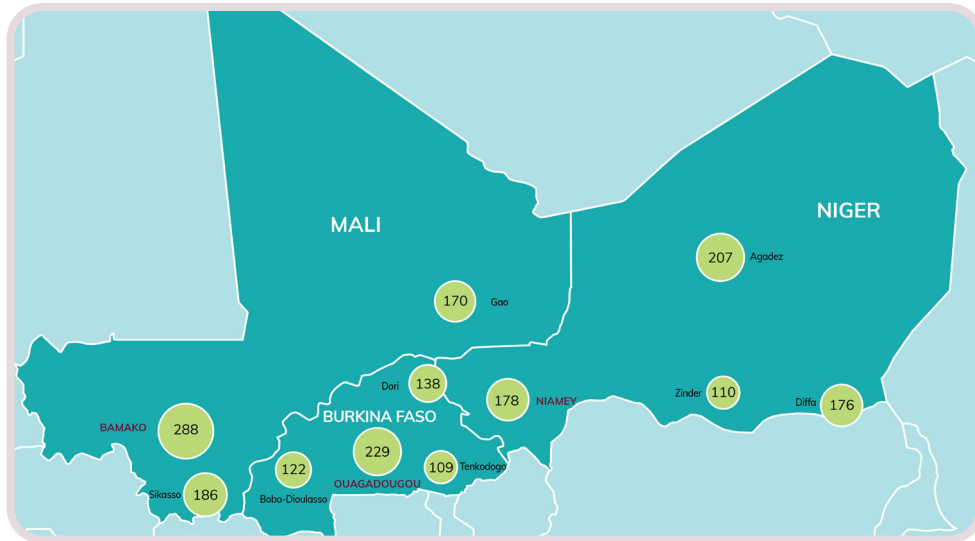
1 For more information, see Thematic Focus of [West Africa Q3 Quarterly Mixed Migration Update](#)
2 or more information on MMC's understanding of human smuggling, visit <https://mixedmigration.org/what-is-mixed-migration/>
3 Comparison is valid only for results in Niger and Mali, as the geographical focus changed between 2021 (which included Libya) and 2024 (which included Burkina Faso). Additionally, the 2021 sample was much smaller, with 516 respondents interviewed across Libya (n=216), Mali (n=150), and Niger (n=150), compared to 1,913 in 2024.

- Migrants also often use smuggler services to meet their basic needs, such as accommodation (30%), food and water (23%), or access to medicine (8%).
- Nearly half (49%) of respondents who received assistance during their journey identified smugglers as the main provider, ahead of family and friends (44%) and fellow migrants (42%).
- Smugglers are seen as the most reliable source of information (27%) among those who seek information about routes, destinations, costs and risks.
- Migrants generally have a positive view of their smuggler(s), with 83% expressing satisfaction with the services provided and only 12% feeling misled.
- Only 3% of respondents identified smugglers as potential perpetrators of abuses in dangerous places.

Profiles

This snapshot draws upon 1,913 surveys conducted with migrants who used smuggler services. Respondents were interviewed in 11 different locations across Niger (n=671), Mali (n=644) and Burkina Faso (n=598), with over a third (38%) surveyed in one of the capital cities (see Map 1). A purposive sampling methodology was applied to interview migrants who used the services of one or several smugglers.

Map 1. Places of interview



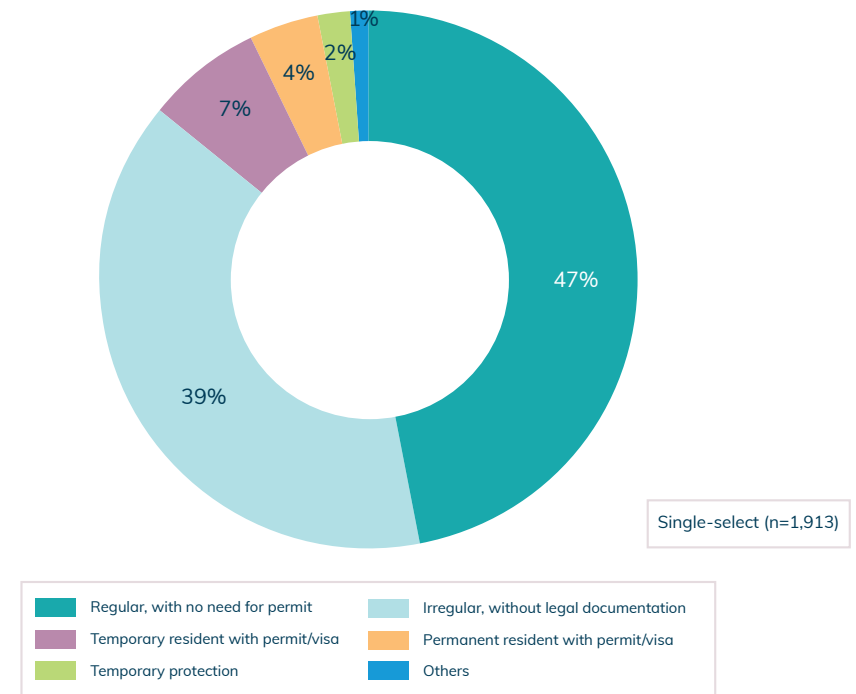
The sample consists of 59% men (n=1,126) and 41% women (n=787). The gender breakdown varies across countries, with a higher proportion of men in Niger (60%) and Burkina Faso (64%), while Mali shows a more balanced distribution with 49% men and 51% women.⁴ A wide range of nationalities (27 in total) from West, Central, and North African countries are represented across the three countries of interview, with the greatest diversity in Mali (25).⁵ The most common nationalities among all surveyed migrants are from West African countries, specifically Nigeria (15%), Ivory Coast (11%), and Togo (11%).

4 For a more detailed and intersectional gender analysis, read MMC's snapshot on the [gender dynamics in smuggler-migrant interactions in the Central Sahel](#)
5 Against 21 in Niger and 20 in Burkina Faso

Most smuggler-users possess legal documentation that would typically allow them to travel through regular channels

The majority of all surveyed migrants who all indicated they used a smuggler identified as being in a regular situation at the time of interview (see Figure 1). This applies especially to respondents interviewed in Burkina Faso, where 80% reported having regular status at the time of the interview,⁶ compared to 52% in Mali and 50% in Niger. Therefore, even migrants with valid travel documents continue to rely on smugglers to bypass the challenges, delays and costs associated with movement restrictions and insecurity on regular routes.

Figure 1. What is your current migration status?⁷



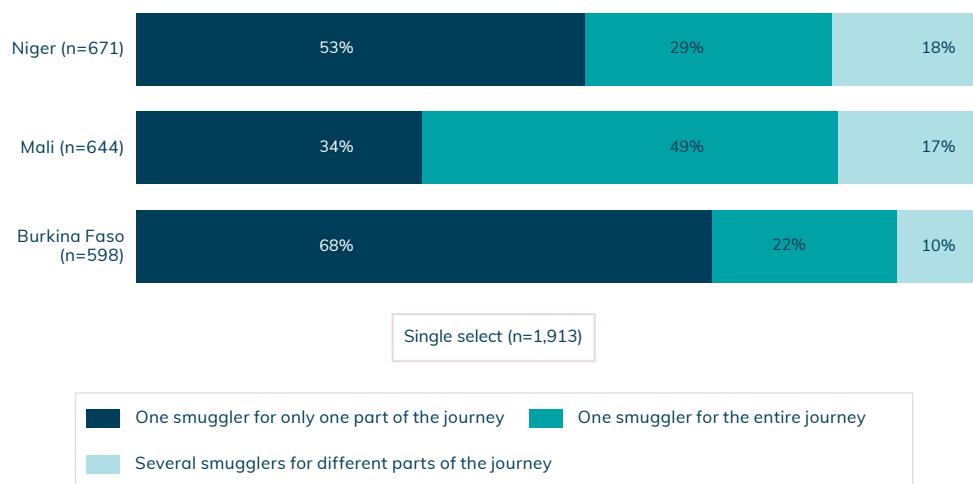
6 Combining 6 response options: "Permanent resident (with permit/visa)", "Regular migrant with no need for permit", "Temporary protection", "Temporary resident (with permit/visa)", "Asylum seeker", and "Refugee".
7 Response options with less than 25 respondents were grouped in the "Others" category and included "Permit is no longer valid/expired" (n=17), "Refugee" (n=10), "Asylum seeker" (n=4), "Don't know" (n=2).

Migrants' reliance on smugglers is context-dependent, with many opting to use smugglers for specific segments of their journey

In most cases, the use of smuggler services is occasional rather than systematic throughout the entire journey. Overall, half of the respondents (51%) report using the services of a single smuggler for only one part of their journey, while a third (33%) relied on a single smuggler for the entire journey. Only 16% engaged with multiple smugglers for different segments on their migration route. This suggests that many migrants selectively use smugglers to navigate obstacles in specific areas, while choosing regular pathways in parts of their journey where conditions are more favourable.

Migrants' strategies for using smugglers vary depending on the context (see Figure 2). Reliance on a single smuggler for the entire journey is most common in Mali (49%), where [rising insecurity drives the need for smugglers](#) to facilitate internal movement. On the other hand, the majority of respondents in Burkina Faso (68%) and Niger (53%) have used a single smuggler for a specific segment of their journey, such as at particular border crossings, like [the Benin-Niger and Nigeria-Niger borders](#).

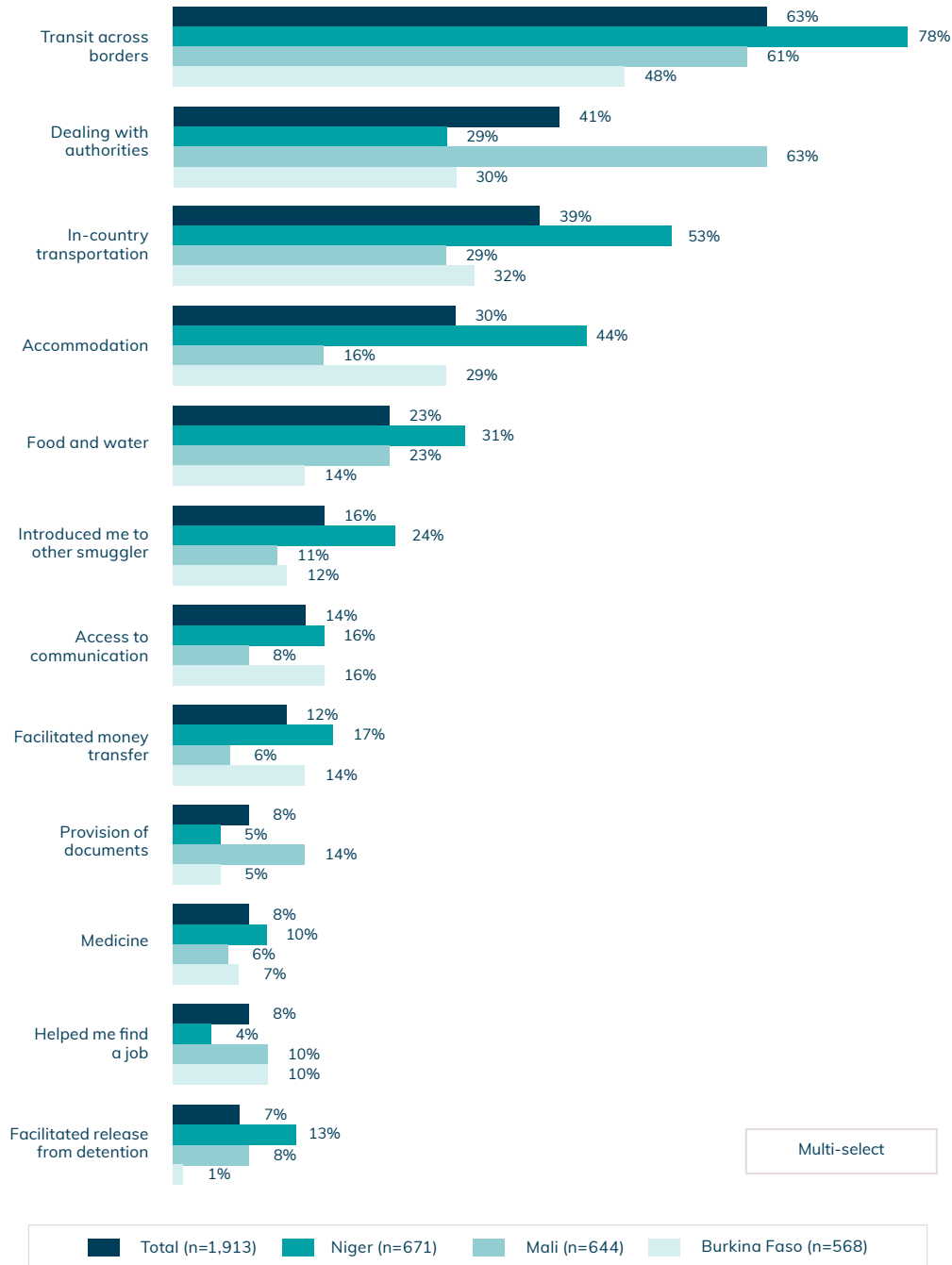
Figure 2. Different strategies in the use of smuggler services, by country of interview



Smugglers primarily facilitate movement, often combining this role with meeting basic needs and coordinating migration journeys

Smugglers are involved in various aspects of facilitating migrants' journeys. Nearly three-quarters (72%) of all respondents report receiving multiple services from their smugglers (see Figure 3). Consistent with the greater reliance on a single smuggler for only part of the journey among respondents in Burkina Faso, they more often (45%) relied on smugglers for just one type of service, compared to respondents in Mali (27%) and Niger (15%).

Figure 3. What did the smuggler provide you with? By country of interview



Smugglers primarily facilitate movement, assisting with border crossings (63%), interactions with authorities (41%), and travel within countries (39%). The reliance on smugglers for border crossings is highest among respondents in Niger (78%), reflecting the impact of border closures with Nigeria (until March 2024) and Benin following the 2023 military coup and ECOWAS sanctions. In Mali, increased movement restrictions amid rising insecurity might explain why nearly two-thirds (63%) of respondents relied on smugglers to deal with authorities, at internal checkpoints for instance, thus facilitating [faster journeys](#).

Smugglers also play a crucial role in meeting basic needs, especially along migration routes to and within Niger (see Figure 3). Overall, 30% of respondents reported receiving accommodation, 23% received food and water, and 8% received medicine through smugglers. Smugglers were also key providers of assistance. Among the 1,151 respondents who received assistance en route, smugglers were the most frequently mentioned providers (49%), followed by family and friends (44%), fellow migrants (42%), and local populations (25%). Burkina Faso is an exception, where smugglers were listed in fourth position (29%) as assistance providers by those who received help en route and were interviewed there (n=294).⁸

Smugglers also act as coordinators along migration routes, facilitating contact with other smugglers (16%), communication (14%), money transfers (12%), and even access to job opportunities (8%). At the country level, comparisons with the 2021 findings indicate a decline in the role of smugglers in connecting their users with other smugglers, in both Mali (from 29% in 2021 to 11% in 2024) and Niger (from 33% to 24%). This reflects the common use of smuggling services for only a segment of migrants' journeys, particularly in [areas](#) where transport is provided by local actors who engage in human smuggling as a supplementary source of income alongside other local businesses rather than being integrated into larger, well-coordinated smuggling networks.

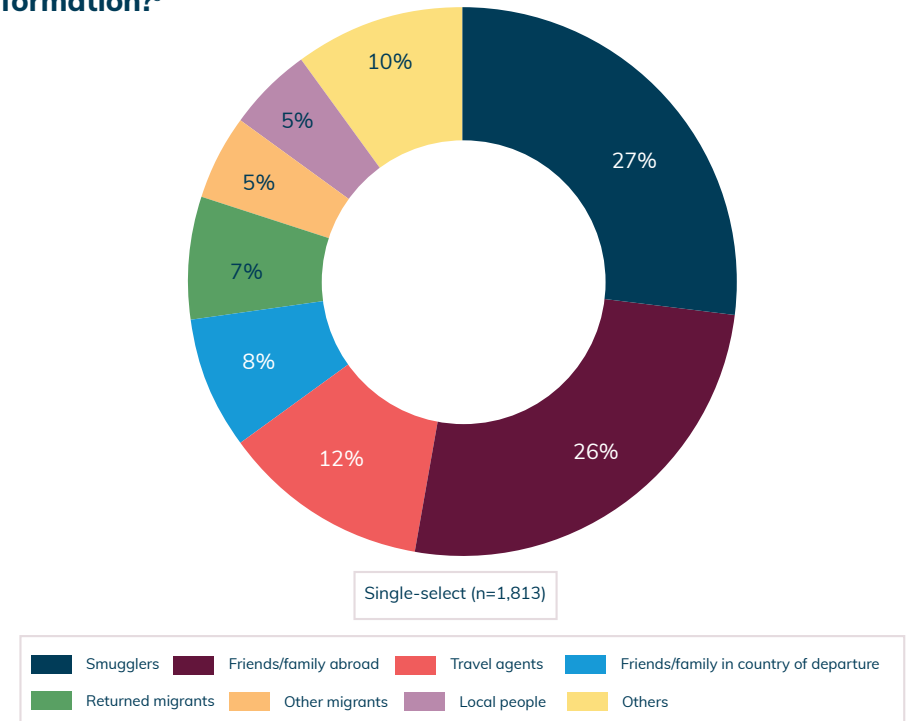
⁸ Behind fellow migrants (70%), family and friends (33%) and local populations (32%).

Smugglers are the most trusted source of information among their users

Smugglers play a prominent role as information providers during the journey. Among respondents who received information before departure (n=1,711), smugglers (44%) are the third-most common information providers behind family and friends outside (64%) and within (50%) the country of departure. However, smugglers become the primary source of information for 64% of the respondents who received information during their journey (n=1,646), surpassing family and friends both in (34%) the country of departure and abroad (52%), as well as fellow migrants (34%) and local populations (27%). In contrast, only a small proportion of respondents who accessed information en route mentioned official sources such as national governments (8%), foreign embassies (1%), and NGOs/UN (1%). 79% of migrants interviewed in Niger who received information during their journey (n=629) identified their smuggler(s) as a source, highlighting the influence smugglers have on migrants' decisions regarding routes, destinations, costs, and risks there.

Smugglers are often perceived as a reliable source of information. Among those who had sought information prior to or during their journey (n=1,813), smugglers (27%) were identified as the most reliable source, closely followed by family and friends abroad (26%) (see Figure 4). Travel agents were also mentioned (12%), often seen as movement facilitators similar to smugglers. Respondents interviewed in Mali (n=602) more often identified their smuggler(s) as the most reliable source of information (37%). In Burkina Faso (n=563) and Niger (n=648), smugglers ranked second (22% and 24%, respectively), behind family and friends abroad (27% and 32% respectively). Notably, very few respondents identified official sources such as national governments (<1%), foreign embassies (<1%), or NGOs/UN (<1%) as reliable, highlighting a complete lack of trust in institutional actors for migration-related information.

Figure 4. Of all sources, what has been the most reliable source of information?⁹



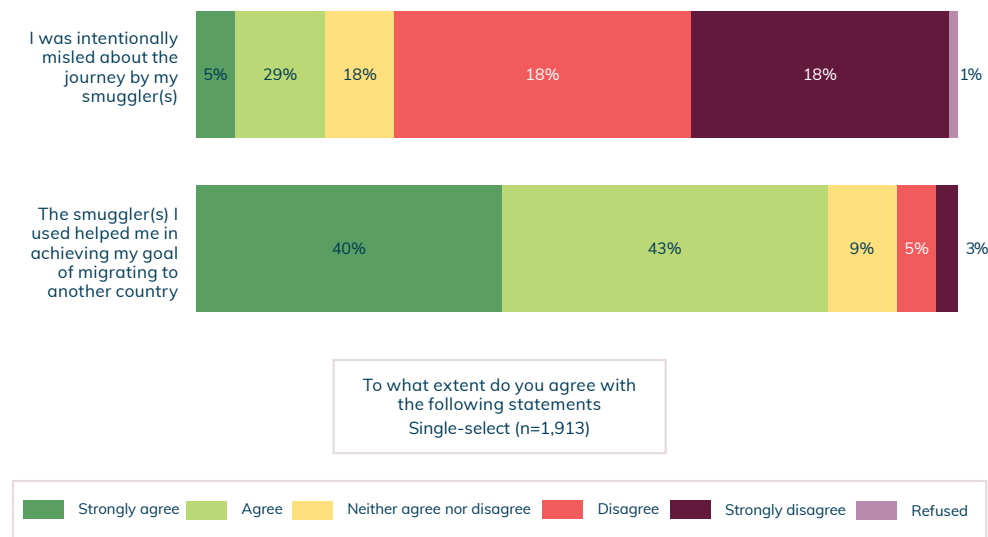
The perception of smugglers among migrants is generally positive

Respondents indicated that smugglers were instrumental in helping them achieve their migration goals, with 83% agreeing that smuggler(s) played a key role in facilitating their journey (see Figure 5). In Niger and Mali, 87% and 86% of respondents, respectively, credit smugglers for helping them meet their goals, while fewer (76%) hold the same view among migrants surveyed in Burkina Faso. This highlights the perceived value of smugglers as facilitators of movement, particularly in contexts where regular pathways are limited.

⁹ Among respondents who received information before and/or after departure. Response options with a percentage rate below 5% were grouped in the "Others" category and included "online community" (4%), "wider diaspora" (3%), "national government" (<1%), "private employment agency" (<1%), "NGOs/UN" (<1%), "foreign embassies" (<1%), "refused" (<1%).

Most migrants develop a trust-based relationship with their smugglers. 17% of all surveyed migrants reported feeling intentionally misled by their smugglers, with the lowest rate in Mali (10%). Similarly, only 3% identified smugglers as potential perpetrators of abuses in dangerous places. In Niger, however, 21% of respondents felt intentionally misled by their smugglers, compared to 11% in 2021. The increase may reflect a deterioration in migrant-smuggler interactions in Niger following the [repeal of the anti-smuggling law](#) in 2023, possibly due to an influx of inexperienced smugglers prioritizing profit over service quality, as well as migrants' heightened expectations of safer or more efficient journeys, which, when unmet, contribute to feelings of being misled.

Figure 5. Overall perceptions of smugglers among migrants who relied on their services



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4Mi data collection

4Mi is the Mixed Migration Centre's flagship primary data collection system, an innovative approach that helps fill knowledge gaps, and inform policy and response regarding the nature of mixed migration and the protection risks for migrants on the move. 4Mi field enumerators are currently collecting data through direct interviews with migrants in Asia and the Pacific, Eastern and Southern Africa, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, North Africa, and West Africa.

Note that the sampling approach means that the findings derived from the surveyed sample provide rich insights, but the figures cannot be used to make inferences about the total population. See more 4Mi analysis and details on methodology at: www.mixedmigration.org/4mi