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Niger

Rahmane Idrissa

INTRODUCTION

Prior to Covid-19, the socioeconomic indicators of Niger were very depressed. Niger's economy, security, and governance systems were severely threatened due to the Islamic insurgency with security implications for the country. Niger is a landlocked country with the largest landmass in West Africa (1.267 million km²), much of which is desert or arid land. The bulk of its twenty million population lives in the southern strip of arable land. Most of them reside and work in rural areas, as Niger has the lowest urbanization rate (19%) in the region, a detail that is important for this study because urban areas were the hardest hit, and government restrictions were imposed on urban, not rural areas.

Niger's economy is small, undiversified, and marked by a largely traditional and informal sector that employs more than 90% of the workforce. Although GDP growth has been consistently high during the past decade (between 5 and 6%), it has little impact on the structures of the economy and does not cope well with a very high population growth rate (4%). Niger has ranked at the bottom of the UNDP's Human Development Index, despite a moderate decrease in the poverty rate (from 48% in 2011

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to 41% in 2019) in recent years. At the time of study, Niger was formally a democracy that tended to slide back into authoritarianism. The leadership in power since 2011 had been mired in a string of financial scandals which had considerably reduced the level of trust in Government in the country, a fact explored in this study concerning government management of the pandemic crisis.

Some border areas of Niger (west-north corner and south-east) are war zones in which various militant forces operate, including Boko Haram and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara. Most Nigeriens are active in the traditional (over 80%) and informal (over 15%) sectors of the economy. The traditional sector is prevalent in the rural areas and the informal in the urban centres. ‘Traditional’ and ‘informal’ may be lumped together into a category which India’s political economists call ‘the unorganized sector,’¹ a term that works well in the conditions of Niger. The unorganized sector may be defined, by and large, as consisting of the sectors of economic activity that are marginalized because rules and policies that comprehensively organize credit, investment, and social protection under the aegis of the state either do not apply to them or apply only occasionally and minimally.

Prior to the pandemic, Niger’s healthcare system did not meet the objectives that the state had set for itself. Niger did not spend 15% of public revenue on the health sector, which translates into much fewer health personnel, weaker institutional capacities, poorer infrastructures, and starker inequality between urban centres and rural areas. Today, Niger has 2467 rural infirmaries (in small towns and villages), 1285 integrated health centres (in secondary towns and the neighbourhoods of larger towns), 56 private hospitals and clinics, 70 public hospitals, 346 pharmacies and laboratories, and 484 small private health centres. Before the pandemic, there were all 9828 hospital beds in the system, and only 52% of the population had ready access (less than 5 km distance) to a healthcare facility of any type. Indeed, data from the Direction of Human Resources of the Health Ministry show that, in 2015, 76% of all health personnel worked in the urban centres, which have only 20% of the country’s total population. The city of Niamey, which has 7% of Niger’s population, concentrates 34% of the health personnel. These service inequalities and imbalances are reinforced by the fact that health

¹ See <https://vikaspedia.in/social-welfare/unorganised-sector-1/unorganized-sector-informal-sector>.

insurance and social protection are mainly tied to jobs in the organized sector.

Acute awareness of this gross inadequacy of the country's equipment regarding Covid-19 infections explains the fearful reaction of the Government, and why measures were taken even before there was a single confirmed case in Niger. As we shall see, Niger, assisted by an array of aid agencies and organizations, ramped up pandemic preparedness in the health sector, although the task of reaching standards required to cope with the pandemic at levels observed in the industrialized countries was hopeless. Moreover, this effort affected the healthcare system regarding inclusion and exclusion.

The study uses a political economy framework to analyse Niger's pandemic response, impacts, and reactions from the population. These are situated in the country's context of a distressed economy and existing sectoral and locational inequalities in access to services. A brief description of the methodology follows this introduction. It is followed by an analysis of government responses, impacts on different sectors, and the responses from different social groups; the last sections conclude and make policy recommendations.

METHODOLOGY

The methodological approach in this study is qualitative. We have used three methods: documentary research, interviews (structured and open-ended), and media analysis. The choice of a qualitative approach is determined by the focus and context of the study. The context is critical since our methodology shifted during fieldwork. For instance, initially, we had planned to apply a survey questionnaire (quantitative method) to the study of the informal sector.

Nevertheless, during the pre-test, we realized that it was fragmented into subsectors that were differentially impacted by the Government's restrictions. The initial sample was thus broken into smaller sub-samples, making it more useful (and manageable) to apply to it the structured-interviews method, instead of questionnaires. Given that the pandemic crisis is a phenomenon with no precedent, qualitative data collection, with its knack for uncovering unexpected information, ultimately appeared to us more pertinent than quantitative. Nevertheless, it relies on small samples, making it critically important to provide contextual information through which the results may be analysed and related to general

conditions. Some results have been presented in a ‘quantitative’ (i.e., numerical) format. Nevertheless, this is to convey information in a short and rapid medium, and there is no claim of any statistical significance attached to the tables: they illustrate empirical qualitative findings.

COVID-19 RESPONSE MEASURES

On 12 March, following the WHO declaration of Covid-19 as a pandemic (11 March), a series of prevention measures were taken. On 17 March 2020, when there were still no confirmed Covid-19 cases in Niger, President Mahamadou Issoufou made a televised speech to explain and justify the measures of prevention adopted five days before, as well as the additional measures, taken that day. ‘On our continent, Africa,’ he said, ‘27 countries, meaning 50%, are affected by a pandemic that is making even the most powerful powerless and defenceless. Their healthcare systems, in particular their reanimation systems, are overwhelmed. Currently, there is neither treatment nor vaccine against this virus. The only weapon that exists today is prevention.’ At the end of the speech, he said, ‘I repeat it: there is neither treatment nor vaccine. Our only weapon is prevention.’²

Swift measures were taken from then on. Between the 13 and 17 of March, Niger’s international airports were closed and land borders shut, and it was recommended to avoid large gatherings. On 19 March, Prime Minister Brigi Rafini was in the middle of a consultation meeting with religious leaders (Muslims and Christians) when the health minister whispered to his ear that there was a first confirmed Covid-19 case in Niger. The next day, many of the measures that had only been recommended became compulsory (including the one about ‘gatherings’), and a slew of rules and policies were adopted under a state of a health emergency. As a result, the measures graduated from the beginning and relaxed as the cases dropped. However, in all, restrictions on movement, a 7 pm to 6 am curfew in the capital Niamey, a ban on large gatherings and safety protocols were announced and enforced strictly and or anecdotally. Perhaps partly because of these measures, the pandemic has had little effect in Niger. At the time of research (September–October), official

² See France 24, ‘Exclusif: Mahamadou Issoufou sur France 24: « Oui, le virus peut tuer des millions de personnes en Afrique. »’ <https://www.france24.com/fr/video/20200403-exclusif-mahamadou-issoufou-sur-france-24-oui-le-virus-peut-tuer-des-millions-de-personnes-en-afrique>.

tallies indicated that total case numbers were 2258 confirmed cases, with 80 dead and 1292 recovered. This is a statistically insignificant impact in a country where the primary killer disease remains malaria.³ However, the socioeconomic impact of the disease is more significant, even though the Government trod much more carefully in the economy than in other sectors (religion, education). The measures were in full force in March–May 2020. Afterwards, they were considerably relaxed, either officially or in terms of their implementation. By August–September, they had become anecdotal, although they have left behind a trail of economic misery.

In terms of managing the pandemic, the Government created a so-called *dispositif de riposte* ('response system') with a pyramidal chain of command and responsibilities and several technical commissions. At the top sat the decision-making *comité d'orientation* (orientation committee), chaired by the head of state, and an Inter-ministerial Committee for the Management and Response to the Covid-19 pandemic, which served to coordinate response among the different ministries and the sectors in which they were in charge. This body's role in the decision-making process was to centralize information required to design the response measures and propose them to the council of ministers. Besides a consultative committee, which advised on non-technical matters, the committee spoke with the One Health technical committee, eight regional technical committees (one for each region), and seven commissions (logistics, communication, monitoring, laboratories, etc.) that constituted the administrative side of the response system.

While the decision-making process was national, in some sectors (financial especially), it was coordinated with countries of the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU) grouping. Other influence came from the WHO and consultation with countries of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). In each country in the region—and such was the case of Niger too—international NGOs and aid agencies also played a significant role in the funding and organization of emergency social support measures thanks to their installed capacities in supplying humanitarian aid.

³ According to the WHO, Niger had 3,358,058 confirmed malaria cases in 2018 (WHO World Malaria Report for 2019).

COMPENSATORY MEASURES

According to a study from the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Niger, the Government took two types of compensatory measures. The first type was economical and fiscal support, which included tax exemptions, waivers and reductions, suspension of statutory payments and suspension of prosecution of tax defaulters, among others. Aside from the national measures, Niger was a party to measures taken at the level of the regional grouping WAEMU. These measures essentially aimed at boosting the financial resilience of member states. They included an increase of 340 bn. Cfa Francs (533.5 million euros) in the volume of liquidities the central bank BCEAO would inject weekly on the money market for the community banking sector, rising it to 4750 bn. Cfa Francs; a broadening of refinancing facilities to include 1700 different businesses across the community; financial interventions of the central bank and the WAEMU Commission aimed at raising concessional resources for member states; the granting of a concessional loan of 15 bn. Cfa Francs to each member state of WAEMU by the West African Development Bank (WADB). In the case of Niger specifically, the WADB decided a moratorium on the country's debts of 13.2 bn. Cfa Francs.

The economic and fiscal measures concerned the formal sector exclusively. Aside from the tax exemptions and other measures of fiscal relief, resources mobilized through the WAEMU-BCEAO-WADB system led to support plans for the formal private sector via the national banking sector. A financing mechanism in the amount of 150 bn. Cfa Franc was thus set up to supply credit to businesses affected by the Covid-19 crisis. This was divided into a 50 bn—envelope for SMEs and a 100 bn. one for larger enterprises. The monies secured via these loans were to be earmarked for payroll and quarterly fixed expenses only. After the crisis has ended, stimulus credit would be supplied based on files and paperwork prepared by applicants. Access to this aid (both relief and stimulus) was and would be contingent on the production of paper evidence (trade registration, contracts of employees, evidence of loss attributable to the pandemic based on a comparison between turnover documentation in the previous year and since April 2020, etc.). In addition, verification of use and management of the loaned funds required further bureaucracy.

As these details indicate, businesses outside the formal sector or with limited formal management capacities were *de facto* excluded from the facility. Yet, these were most businesses in Niger, and the most fragile and

the ones that employed the greater number of people. On 17 June, a group of business associations and organizations put together a consortium of economic and social actors and addressed a memorandum to the finance minister, asking for a mechanism tailored to the needs of businesses in the informal sector. At the time of research, their advocacy did not lead to significant decisions.

The second type of compensatory support concerned social support, which estimated a need for a total financing sum of 597 bn—Cfa Francs (over 910 million euros). The programmes included waiver of household water and electricity bills for April and May, free food, and reduced food price to strengthen the yearly plan of social support for vulnerable people, adoption of a price ceiling for certain products such as grains and household necessities and early release of 1540 prisoners (older, juvenile, women, ill). The waiving of utility bills was a relief chiefly for middle-class households; and the ‘strengthening’ or broadening of the yearly support plan, which included one-off cash payments in some cases, was an ‘empirical’ extension of established social measures, not measures explicitly designed for conditions arising from the pandemic—in part because such conditions were not well-known. The measure of price ceiling was the object of discussion with import–export traders and was not always applied. For example, in the region of Maradi, where I conducted fieldwork in October, traders convinced the authorities that, in the depressed conditions that then existed and especially given restrictions on trans-border trade from both Nigeria and Niger, competition between traders actually would tend to produce lower prices than the price fixed by government order. As a result, the measure was discontinued in the region, and perhaps elsewhere.

THE PANDEMIC HAVOC

Since the Government’s compensatory measures relied essentially on credit and institutional social protection, the consequences for the unorganized sector—especially for the (urban) informal sector—are not hard to fathom. The urban informal sector was hard hit by the measures but could not receive relief to the same extent—or even to any extent—as the organized sector. The urban informal sector includes marketplace, street, and network retail trade; eateries and catering (many makeshift); handicraft and makers of household goods; mechanics; city public transportation (most of it); inter-city public transportation (some of it);

personal services (barbershops, etc.); domestics; carting and distribution (of water, e.g.); and casual workers. This sector employs the vast majority of urbanites. It is partly integrated with the traditional sector since some of the goods and products sold on the markets and some of the raw materials used in some of the activities (food, e.g.) come from the rural areas. Moreover, workers in the city send remittances to the rural areas and invest there in local trade (e.g.: animals, grains).

The unorganized sector is heterogeneous as it is also a place of capital accumulation that leads some to great wealth, not just survival. Indeed, the wealthiest social layer of Nigeriens, the merchant capitalists, begin their journey ‘from rags to riches’ in the unorganized sector and remain active there. The sector is arguably more divided along gender lines than the organized sector. For example, none of those wealthy traders is a woman, whereas women are remarkably successful in the top reaches of the organized sector.⁴ Owing to conservative Islamic values, Nigerien women are more active in petty network trade than in the more rewarding marketplace trade (in contrast, for example, with women in the Gulf of Guinea). The customary rules that apply in the unorganized sector—given the vanishing act played by official rules and policies—also favour men and, especially in some rural areas, high ‘caste’ men and women. Recognizing the importance of the urban informal sector in the livelihood of most Nigeriens, the Government did not apply any real lockdown measure to it.

RESTAURANTS

Restaurants in the formal sector suffered from the measures significantly less than eateries in the informal sector. Restaurants have hours of operation that were less affected by the curfew. Even if they lost dinner customs, their lunch hours stayed busy. They could more easily implement social distancing and hygiene measures and organize catering and food delivery. They could also set up furlough plans for their staff with the support of government services, including in applications for relief credit. After the end of the curfew period, their activity snapped back into its former self with no lasting damage. The picture for eateries in the

⁴ See Clarisse Juompan-Yakam, ‘Au Niger, le business est (aussi) une affaire de femme,’ in *Jeune Afrique* (22 October 2016): <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/270940/economie/au-niger-le-business-est-aussi-une-affaire-de-femmes/>

informal sector was and is very different. Due to the dominant lifestyle in Niamey, the busiest time for their activity is from 2 pm (or later) to 1 am. Daytime eateries are usually snack suppliers, especially grilled meat and skewers. The big business happens after dusk. People unwind as the night sets in, which is when turnover is made in eateries, especially around the city's many 'night markets.'

We interviewed ten owners of eateries, including five women and five men. Their businesses range from those that are more restaurant-like (with premises, furniture, and a staff) to those that are makeshift installations. Figures of daily turnover losses starkly indicate that the more profitable businesses tend to be those owned by men, which reflects well the general context in Niamey (Table 6.1). Indeed, although the data are about a small group of people, trends and structures in the unorganized sector are more favourable to men than to women.

The stories behind these figures show the ramifications of these losses. People with the higher daily turnovers also employed a comparatively large staff, which they had to lay off almost entirely in all cases. Although they have rehired afterwards, their staff is smaller today ('things still have not gone back to normal,' 'this is true poverty, sister.⁵'). In one case, we learn that the curfew has upended a classic plan of immigrant social integration. Many of the owners of these businesses are immigrants from

Table 6.1 Daily turnover of eateries and restaurants in Niamey

<i>Gender</i>	<i>Estimated daily turnover loss under curfew, in Euros</i>
M	305
M	300
M	106
M	92
M	61
F	61
F	53
F	30
F	15
F	15

Source Author's filed work, 2020

⁵ The EPGA researcher for this sector was female.

the rural areas. One of them, the man who lost 92 € daily turnovers, is a 25-years old who had just got married and came to town in search of opportunities to help him support the family he was starting. Now, he said, he was unable to send remittances to his newlywed, whom he had left back at the village, and whom he had planned to bring to town once his business had flourished enough. Others said they had stopped sending food (rice) ‘back home,’ i.e., to the rural areas. None reported any kind of support from the authorities. They do not understand the measures (‘So is it that the virus moves about only at nighttime?’, a woman asked). In most cases, they survived by dipping into their savings or receiving help from friends and relatives. In all cases, they had to cut on some life necessities, including food.

Unlike the eateries sector, the arts and crafts sector in Niamey is self-organized. Artisans and workers in this sector can be divided into two groups: those who have a spot in artisan centres, i.e., the *Village Artisanal de Wadata* and the *Musée National Boubou Hama*; and those who have shops in the city. They are generally registered with the Niger Chamber of Arts and Crafts (CMANI in the French acronym), which gives them a toehold in the formal sector. Those in the *Village Artisanal* and the *Musée National* are also members of those centres’ cooperatives.

The arts and crafts industry has typically larger turnovers than other industries in the urban informal sector, although this varies enormously. The more successful artisans can make hundreds of thousands of Cfa Francs per month, in contrast to a few tens of thousands for those at the bottom. Success is highly dependent on tourism. Artisans already suffered in the past when the first terror attacks in the Sahel curtailed tourism in Niger in the early 2010s. At that point, many travelled outside Niger and the Sahel to make their wares available to tourists. Those who did not travel entrusted their productions to those who did, and hence, business travels became a central part of the business for many artisans in Niamey. These trips led them to festivals, shows, and fairs across West Africa, and a few even found their way to Europe. The measure that hit the hardest is therefore, the closure of borders: not only are tourists no longer travelling in, but artisans cannot travel out. They also complained of the curfew, which, by limiting times of operation, also automatically limited the sales opportunities that remained.

We interviewed ten artisans, all men (the industry appears to be entirely populated by men). Estimated turnover losses confirm the fact that artisans belong to very different leagues (Table 6.2).

Table 6.2 Turnover of Artisans

<i>High earners estimated turnover losses due to restrictions from late March to October (€)</i>
18,000 +
15,000 +
10,000 +
10,000 +
9000 +
<i>Low earners estimated turnover losses due to restrictions since late March to October (€)</i>
1200 +
1000 +
530 +
460 +
380 +

Source Author's fieldwork

Despite the differences in earnings, reported hardships are very similar. If low earners have cut dramatically in their spending ('I went from about 2000 francs [3€] a day to 500 [0.7 €],' reported one), the income stoppage also has dramatic consequences for high earners due to their higher spending and fixed costs (rent, utilities). High earners employed paid apprentices, whom they had to lay off. The man who reported the highest losses and regularly attended lucrative events in France found a way to export artsy masks there and has kept one paid apprentice out of eight: 'I had to let the others go because there were things I was no longer being able to take care of in my household.' Others in both categories have tried their hand at different activities, but with little luck: 'I tried,' said one, 'but unfortunately, I realized that the Covid-19 has made things harder in all activities.' 'I opened a small shop at my door and tried selling rice, but that really was not my area, I was a bit confused about it.' They also tried cutting their prices and directly contacting customers. The results, they said, were lacklustre.

Unlike workers in the eateries sector, everyone reported having received food aid, either through the cooperatives or through CMANI. These organizations give artisans a voice in meetings with the authorities and donors, even though they are not set up in such a way that they could organize group solidarity.

PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION I: TAXIS AND 'FABA'

Niamey has a unique—relative to other towns in Niger—city public transportation system that combines buses (a formal-sector company), taxis and minibuses known as '*faba*' ('succour,' in the local Zarma language). These two are the main city public transportation, given that the bus network has limited reach. Taxis and *faba* are registered at city hall, paying the imposts tied to trade vehicles. This gives them a certain formality that has enabled their drivers to unionize, and at times, to organize strikes—mainly against petrol price increases. The measures that affected taxis and *faba* are the curfew and the social distancing prescriptions. These measures limited the number of passengers, but the fare rate remained the same. Profit margins for taximen, especially those who work for an owner, are thin and volatile, requiring them to make constant calculations of fare, distance, and petrol consumption to save the day. The social distancing measure threw a wrench in those calculations. Owners have little patience when taximen do not make the daily payments, and this was the case even under the special conditions of the pandemic. Owners must spend money on maintaining the car and paying its taxes. Many owners have small incomes. Six out of the ten taximen we interviewed said they lost their contract during the pandemic (one, only for three months). Even though the sample is tiny, it is still significant considering that the proportion is actually even higher (i.e., 6/8) because two of the ten interviewees were the owners of their taxis. The social repercussions of such loss of income are significant, given that many taximen support relatives in the rural areas. In one case, a taximan-owner told us: 'I host several high school students from our village because it doesn't have a high school. However, this year, I told them not to come to my house, save for just one, because I have no means to support all of them.' Another one had to divorce at the age of 56 (box 1).

There is no programme to help taximen. Their union was able to secure food aid during the duration of the restrictions (April–May), but it was offered only to hired taximen. Not only did taximen-owners receive nothing, but city authorities declined to give them relief on taxes and fees beyond a stated time. The man who could no longer host school students from his village told us he had to park his car and work as a substitute driver because his straitened circumstances did not allow him to sort the bureaucratic payments.

Box 1: Pandemic Experiences of Taximen

Taximen under stress.

The car has gone. Well, the crisis has meant that the car has gone, the owner took it back. That's because of the curfew. I worked for that person on the afternoon and evening shift, which means from 1 to 6 pm, and after an hour break, I worked again from 7 pm until late at night. Nevertheless, with the curfew, I couldn't make the payments, and also had a colleague who worked in the morning, but he was no longer able to do it. So the owner could rely only on my payments, which I couldn't make. See, the thing is, before, I always managed to make 5000 francs [7.6 €] a day after I made the payment, but during the curfew, that was impossible. The owner was losing money, so of course, he took the car back. So I became a porter; I am able to give to my wife 1000 francs each day, that's half what I gave her before. I have back rent of 140,000 francs. The taxi drivers' union got us some food aid, I was told about it and went to get my share. But when I got there, they told me my name wasn't on the list. Frankly, the Government has destroyed me.

It's getting better. I couldn't work as much as I used to, so it kind of broke me financially. You know, with the social distancing, and the curfew, this was a great deal less to have in one's pocket. The owner was understanding to some extent. He reduced my daily payment from 7000 francs to 5000 francs. Moreover, I cut on spending at home. It wasn't too bad, I just spent less. I did get some food aid, the union drew up lists and gave us tickets, and officers of the Water and Forestry Authority distributed the food. But I thank God, it's getting better now.

It's all pain. I worked the night shift, so with the curfew, the owner just fired me. At the time, if I subtract the payment to the owner and petrol costs, I made 3000 francs a day. And all of a sudden, I was making nothing. I could no longer help the family back home, in the village, which I used to do. But with the loss of income, my wife became very angry at me, and eventually, she left me. I feel completely helpless. When I find something, I do it, and when there's nothing I am patient. The union gave me tickets for food aid,

and the Water and Forestry Authority handed it out. This was 50 kg of millet, 50 kg of maize, and 20 kg of black-eyed peas per month. We got it twice until they lifted the curfew. But in the meantime, I have become a man with no job and no wife. It's all pain.

You just cannot not work. With the pandemic, customers became very wary. And then there were the measures from the Government. These created hardship but in the end, I think they were efficient. Because they prevented the fast spread of the virus, didn't they? Anyway, I used to make 10,000 francs and even more before, I mean, after I made the payment and paid the petrol. This went down to just 2000 francs, pretty steep. And then at some point, it became impossible to make any payment to the owner. The owner got fed up and sold the car. That was tough. You know, I was in the habit of bringing fruits to the kids each day at the end of my shift. But then I became so embarrassed that I could no longer do that that I started to be back home after their sleeping time. I also got into debt. A taximan just cannot not work. I worked really hard to keep that car, but it didn't happen. I got some food aid through the union, and I am mostly doing substitute driving. Things are a bit better now that the measures have been lifted. Of course, I no longer have a car, but it is better than when the measures were in force.

PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION II: 'BUSH TAXIS'

Bush taxis are intercity public vehicles, usually with 17 passengers' seats (although the practice is to take in 18 people by adding a spot in the front cabin). In the case of Niamey, these minibuses connect the city to other towns in Niger and foreign towns, especially in northern Mali, Burkina Faso, and Benin. In recent years, the development of bus transportation (formal sector companies) has tended to crowd them out of the more popular international destinations in the ECOWAS region. They are much cheaper than the buses and popular with people in the rural areas and the more impoverished social categories. Their organization is very similar to urban taxis, where their owners drive some, others by hired drivers who

must make payments after each trip. They are registered in the transportation system and must pay taxes and car insurance. However, they are not unionized.

During the sanitary isolation of Niamey (from late March to mid-May), the activity was virtually dead due to land border closures and a decline in passenger flow. Unlike the taximen, bush taxi drivers did not receive any food aid during the period, which can be ascribed to the fact that they are not unionized. The union offers a level of formality which could help the authorities identify legitimate aid recipients, and it could also talk with the Government. Without such an organization, the bush taxi drivers were only part of the mass of the needy, most of whom would only receive, by luck, some occasional humanitarian aid. Given the limited reach of such aid, it had no impact on the situation of bush taxi drivers.

For some, though, this proved to be a boon *after* the sanitary isolation of Niamey was lifted. At that point, the only restriction left—aside from the shut borders—was the social distancing measure which cut the number of persons admitted in a minibus from 20 to 10 (driver and ‘apprentice’ included). Due to this measure, steep increases in fares (generally more than three times higher) were allowed. However, since the police had ended the patrols, which only aimed at enforcing the isolation of Niamey, some drivers resumed the practice of rendezvousing with passengers in the open country. As a result, these drivers could fill their car at a much higher fare than before. One interviewee who was particularly successful at this business was straightforward about the result: ‘the fact is, the crisis has given a big boost to my profit.’ Nevertheless, given government regulation, this was still a risk, and those who tended to take it were drivers who were also owners (which was the case of that interviewee).

The period was a time of misery for many more. It was a time of dishonour:

The only option left to me was debt, but since I cannot repay it, I live in dishonour.’ My wife cannot accept that I cannot provide, she’s angry, yells at me, and I cannot respond because I am not providing. Therefore, the Government has dishonoured me in the eye of my wife.

A time of helplessness,

I just go to the station, sit, and wait, and nothing happens, so I come back home, friends and kind-hearted people support us.' 'Now I am picking wood and selling it on a cart, and it is that or nothing.

This is the fate of hired drivers, who were laid off since the vehicles were no longer profitable. Nevertheless, many driver-owners also suffered a similar situation. After having spent their savings and gotten into debt, the bureaucratic costs of running the business became unbearable: 'I could not pay the papers, so I parked my car, and now I am doing substitute driving when I get the chance.' The crisis disrupted the industry's organization and habits, with one result being that travellers deserted the minibus stations. Some drivers therefore started to park at unconventional spots, where the custom was more easily found. However, they were harassed by the police. One of them was fined a hefty sum (73 €) when the EPGA researcher interviewed him at one such location. This kind of lack of understanding from the authorities deepens the sense that '*le gouvernement s'en fout de nous*' ('the government does not care a fig about us').

Moreover, they must contend with the competition of the big bus companies, which travel to secondary towns. Before, such minor destinations were left to the bush taxis. As long as the borders were shut, this competition continued.

The social and economic consequences of the crisis extended beyond the misery of transportation workers. Usually, these workers are breadwinners for their families and relatives in the rural areas. One very successful driver-owner possessed six minibuses. Although childless, he calculated that he had over 40 persons directly under his care in Niamey and his village, all of whom suffered from income stoppage. The minibuses are also a critical factor in petty trade, especially between the rural areas, secondary towns, and Niamey. Many of these precarious ventures were broken because the bush taxis could no longer move goods around. The freezing of minibus stations wrecked the street trading of small retailers, coaxers, and snack vendors that flourished around them.

In May, the Government ended some of the restrictions and calculated that 85 bn. Cfa francs were needed to restore the passenger transportation

system to its former self⁶. Nevertheless, this estimate was based on the needs of the formal sector. The latter is a dynamic and booming sector of Niger's service economy, with 18 bus companies connecting all the country's main towns and destinations across West Africa, specializing in postal service and intercity and international instant cash transfer. Some of these enterprises belong to Niger's wealthiest businessmen—including notorious tax evader Mohamed Rhissa Ali of 'Panama Papers' fame⁷—and the diversification of their activities means that, while they indeed reeled from the restrictions,⁸ they did not lack the sinews to rebound when international borders reopened. On the contrary, they, not the bush taxis, were set to reap the benefits of the stimulus policy that the Government planned for after the pandemic.

PETTY TRADE: MKK AND BUCKETS

Petty trade is an everyday activity in the unorganized sector, either to add to income on the side or as principal activity. It ranges from established small-size shops to street hawkers and peddlers. We studied them to understand how people in the sector were affected or profited from the pandemic. For this, we conducted fieldwork in Maradi, which borders Nigeria enjoys a vibrant transborder trade or piggyback on trade with the large Nigerian cities of Katsina and Kano; and Niamey, the capital. The Nigerian transborder trade is organised in a scheme, 'the special transit,' whereby merchants in the three cities of Maradi, Katsina and Kano import consumer goods and equipment via Niger's docks in Cotonou and ferry them through southern Niger and into northern Nigeria, paying only

⁶ See Morgane Le Cam, '« La route est vitale pour nous»: au Niger, le secteur des transports au bord du gouffre,' in *Le Monde* (11 November 2020): https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2020/11/11/la-route-est-vitale-pour-nous-au-niger-le-secteur-des-transports-au-bord-du-gouffre_6059376_3212.html.

⁷ See <https://panamapapers.investigativecenters.org/niger-2/>

⁸ We interviewed the director of one of those companies, *Société des Transports Moderne* (STM), which has 650 employees. He reports a loss in turnover of 40% caused by the restrictions and salary payments of 50% in May. However, the company's capital allowed them to maintain their infrastructure (including station buildings rented across Niger and some West African countries), and if costs were cut on running bills, employees are now paid in full, partly on shareholders' dime. In the universe of Niger's bus companies, STM is middle-ranked. The lower-ranked ones suffer more from the pandemic havoc, including non-payment of salaries.

transit taxes. Under cover of the Nigerian imports, merchants in Maradi could also import goods at the same reduced tax rates.

Moreover, Maradi is part of the trade corridor known as MKK (Maradi-Katsina-Kano), a trade route with its own office at Maradi's chamber of commerce. In this commercial system, Maradi exports agricultural and pastoral products and buys consumer goods and equipment, a fraction of which is manufactured in Nigeria. If the rate of profits depends a good deal on the exchange rate between the Naira and the Cfa Franc,⁹ goods bought in Nigeria are, at any rate, cheap by Nigerien standards since conditions in the enormous Nigerian market tend to generate low prices compared with those in Niger.

This trade—the most intensive at any border region in Niger and, in fact, in any part of the country—has many effects, including the fact that many among Maradi working and pauper classes earn a living through petty trade. This activity was damaged by the Covid-19-related border closure. Nigeria and Niger froze passenger-car traffic, and the border was effectively sealed. The 'Corona closure,' as it was known, stopped the flow of trade and turned Maradi into a ghost town.

The stories we collected from petty traders and shopkeepers describe effects reminiscent of those attending a natural disaster. The border closure brought hardship to the smaller traders, who, given their dependence on short spurts of cash flow, had to make several trips to Nigeria a week (for some, a day) to sustain their activity. When these trips became impossible, they were utterly deprived of income. Nevertheless, on the other hand, those who could make stocks (shopkeepers and suppliers of certain types of goods, for example, plastic bags to make water pouches.¹⁰) benefited from the higher prices created by penury. However, according to testimonies, this was counterbalanced by the fact that these traders frequently had to sell on credit or—in the case of commodities such as water bags—at a loss when it came to habitual customers.

Petty trade differs from other occupations by its adaptability, as was shown by the case of hygiene kit sellers in Niamey. Most of those we

⁹ They are, at present, favorable to Niger due to the depression in the global petroleum market. However, many in Maradi deplore the loss in value of the Naira because it depresses commercial activities in Nigeria and, by repercussion, in Maradi.

¹⁰ In the indigent economy, water pouches initially played the role of bottled water in more affluent economies. However, they have become a standard on the market for retailing drinking water in most African countries.

interviewed were small retailers (shopkeepers) who found themselves in difficulty when their customers dwindled in number and re-stocking became a challenge. A case in point is that of a shopkeeper successful enough to run two shops, one of which he entrusted to a brother brought from the village. Given the fall in business that came with the curfew, travel restrictions, and border closure, he closed his shop, sent his brother back to the village, took over that other shop, and turned it into a selling point for buckets. That article had become popular due to the Government's hygiene campaign. Soon afterwards, he learned how to turn buckets into hygiene kits (a bucket set in a high-legged metal basket and sporting a faucet and a soap dish on the sides). 'I went from being a seller of wrappers and women's articles to being a seller of hygiene kits and all that goes with that,' he said. Another trader said that such conversion came from the simple fact that they saw sales of buckets going from two to three units per day to several dozen almost overnight. 'The crisis,' he said, 'has created some temporary jobs, such as making and selling masks. However, I think these hygiene kits are here to stay, and we know how to make them.' The hygiene kits were adopted by many eateries and may become an essential article in those businesses or in households.

RURAL AREAS

At the time of writing, the pandemic did not spread significantly in rural areas, but they felt its economic impact. According to a study by Save the Children, the Food Economy Group, and the USAID, two million people (70%) in rural areas would face livelihood and survival deficits due to Covid-19. The studies estimated that the many Covid-19 restrictions could affect 40% of the sale of animals and animal products, 40% of the supply of agricultural workforce, cut seasonal cash transfer from urban areas, reduce the sale of garden products, reduce trade incomes, and increase the cost of agricultural input. They also considered that the 'rural areas' are complex regions with different 'livelihood zones.' Thus, its findings remind us that the rural areas are not isolated from the country's general welfare.

PUBLIC RESPONSES TO COVID-19 MEASURES

The public responded in variable ways, according to social milieu, economic activity, and type of measure. For this study, we conducted a social media analysis that gave us access to opinions in the Francophone social milieu, Islamic religious circles, the informal sector, especially public transportation, petty trade arenas, and among the pauper classes in Niamey.¹¹ The situation in Niger moved from public fear of a health crisis of unprecedented proportions in March–April–May; to a period of cautious hopes, in June–July, that this might not come to pass; to a growing conviction that the Covid-19 disease was not a severe threat. This evolution is particularly well-reflected in attitudes in the Francophone social milieu, which, in turn, showed a greater responsiveness to government discourse—distinctly because this milieu is also the one from which government staff and decision-makers overwhelmingly come.

In the first phase (March–May), the curfew and the closing of mosques to significant prayer events triggered resistance across the country, including riots and acts of rebellion. Such resistance came principally from people in the country's large lower classes. In some cases, police stations were attacked, and in Mirriah, a town in the region of Zinder (centre-east) at the border with Nigeria, a school was torched after the arrest of a cleric who was calling for disobedience. In many cases, incidents were avoided because the police forces sent to guard mosques successfully resorted to negotiation. In practice, the mosque control measures were relaxed or unenforced by the end of April due to the onset of the fasting month of Ramadan (23 April–23 May). Indeed, they were formally ended on 13 May. Nevertheless, among the more compliant Francophones and the more restive lower classes, mistrust of the Government ran high, though it was expressed in very different ways and led to quite different attitudes.

The educated class, referred to as 'Francophones,' refers to the socio-cultural group of people who have gone through the different levels of schooling—in French—and would generally work in the formal or modern sector of the economy. The better off in this group is the country's middle class, and the others would, at any rate, aspire to that social condition. Perhaps ten per cent of Nigeriens belong to this social category. Although this social class were more responsive to the government's responses with the belief of the peril of the crisis, a section faulted the

¹¹ Data for the pauper classes are missing at the time of writing.

Government's heavy-handedness, civil right abuses connected to crisis management, lack of transparency, accountability, corruption, and issues about priorities on the management of the pandemic.

Reactions by the majority of Muslims are essential to note. Over 98% of Nigeriens are Muslims, but Islam is not a monolithic reality in the country. It is shaped by history, sociology, and external influences. Most Nigeriens are Sunni Muslims and most also belong to the lower classes (urban low-income and paupers, rural poor). Closing mosques and other places of worship was a decision that most, if not all, West African states took in the early months of the pandemic. What distinguished Niger was that, unlike many of its neighbours, it did not close the markets as well; and, unlike the countries of the Francophone Sahel (Burkina Faso, Mali, Senegal), with which it has so much in common, it is under the influence of opinion trends in northern Nigeria. These two facts combined made the measures that tried to restrict religious gatherings more controversial in Niger than in neighbouring countries. While citizens, even religious leaders, praised the Government (if grudgingly) for keeping the markets open, they also were struck by the inconsistency of having these day-long, crowded areas going while mosques were told to shut.

Moreover, the general mistrust of a government that was not known to care very much for the living conditions of the working and pauper classes was heightened, in Niger, by the widespread belief, sourced from northern Nigeria, that the Government was a stooge of the West, seen as the enemy of Islam. This is an ideological belief which is not moved by contradictions: thus, an interviewee who mentioned the (perceived) government inaction during a cholera epidemic as proof of its lack of care, stressed that the population was saved in the instance by an emergency health centre built by Médecins Sans Frontières, a Western organization: yet, he kept assuming that the West was hostile to the Muslim people of Niger. Because these clerics are more influential among the working and pauper classes, these ideological beliefs are more prevalent there too.

This context says a lot about the level of mistrust the Islamic leadership feels toward the Government.¹² The top-down approach the Government adopted in relation to the faithful, as opposed to working with all layers of the Islamic religious leadership, ultimately proved ineffective in controlling the faithful.

¹² In Niger, traditional chiefs are state agents under the ministry of the Interior. The higher-ranked (sultans, chiefs of province and canton) have salaries and perquisites.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study reviews how the Government and the public responded to the Covid-19 pandemic in Niger, focusing on issues of trust and inclusion/exclusion. It tells the story of how, following a warning from the World Health Organization and taking into consideration the minimal resources of the national healthcare system, the Niger's Government was on alert at a very early stage and took Covid-19 prevention measures before there was a single confirmed case in the country. This responsiveness was inspired by fears stemming from the conviction that Niger faced a humanitarian disaster of untold proportions. The study shows that the strategy that was followed relied on the concept of 'prevention,' meaning slowing down as much as feasible the introduction and then the propagation of the virus in the country. The main steps in this view included the closure of national borders, the 'sanitary isolation' of the capital (seen as the main point of entry of the pandemic), the banning of crowd congregations across the country, and the freezing of passenger travels. Controversially, banning crowd congregations allowed congregations in the marketplace but not in places of worship. This led to many incidents, including riots. The study also reviews Niger's healthcare system and how the Government attempted overhauling it in the hope of coping somewhat with the expected waves of Covid-19 patients. Alongside these emergency measures, the Government took compensatory measures, which are also studied.

The study relies on the results of fieldwork conducted in Niamey and Maradi, in August-October 2020. Reports, studies, and other documents were also collected and used. Thus, the study goes into the details of the government policy, and the grain of public response and experience, in the religious sphere and the urban informal sector. The latter is analysed from the abovementioned perspectives: trust and inclusion/exclusion.

The study argues that trust in the Government, which had been low before the epidemic, remained so, but in different ways depending on socio-cultural categories. The middle-class 'Francophones' were critical of government corruption, and incompetence and consistently believed in the conspiracy theory that the official epidemic figures—at many points in time the lowest in West Africa—were inflated by the Government, which, it was thought, hoped to secure aid funds, and embezzle it. People from the lower classes, outraged by the closure of mosques in a country where the Islamic faith is often tinged with ideological convictions imported

from northern Nigeria, accused the Government of being a stooge of the West, which would have created the ‘Corona’ scare to undermine the practice of Islam. However, mistrust did not hurt compliance. This outcome is mainly due to the counterbalancing effects of an intensive campaign of persuasion that enlisted even figures traditionally opposed to the Government.

Concerning inclusion/exclusion, the study found that the epidemic and its response revealed a form of bias that is based not so much on discrimination as on structure. Professional groups and social categories whose needs are amenable to bureaucratic governance are more easily and consistently included in relief schemes than those in the ‘unorganized sector,’ i.e., the informal and traditional sectors. This is the case even though the latter are more vulnerable to and suffer more from the restrictions imposed by the Government. Humanitarian aid, which has fewer bureaucratic demands than processive policy, reaches them better but has fewer long-lasting effects.

There are lessons that the Government in Niger and other Sub-Saharan African countries may draw from this.

Regarding the issue of trust, governments—aside from the ideal point of developing better financial ethics—must become more adept at using tools of persuasion rather than coercion. If, despite the high level of mistrust, Nigeriens were by and large compliant, this is due mainly to the efforts put into sensitization campaigns, including resources allocated to the training of media workers and frequent interventions of usually more distant state officials.

Regarding the issue of structural inclusion/exclusion, changing the structures to eliminate the problem would be ideal but appears like an unrealistic tall order. It seems better to adapt to them by establishing levels of correspondence between the ‘unorganized’ and state/formal bureaucratic order. Pragmatic solutions, including through reliance on technology, may be fleshed out. Moreover, the mobilization of actors to boost the healthcare system in response to the emergency of the pandemic showed that it could be far more inclusive than it usually is. Lessons should be drawn to study how one could integrate the observed efficiencies into the regular operation of the healthcare system.

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