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# The development impact of "gold rushes" in Mali and Burkina Faso: the multifaceted effects of migration on artisanal gold mining sites

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GLOBAL COMPACT FOR MIGRATION OBJECTIVES



Abstract: This chapter analyses migration to small-scale gold mining sites in Mali and Burkina Faso. It investigates the extent to which these promote development in communities of destination, and examines migrants' profiles and reasons to migrate. It finds that gold mining sites draw considerable flows of internal and cross-border migrants, which have intensified in the past 10 years. Whereas artisanal gold mining previously attracted temporary migrants, it now appears to have established itself as an economic activity leading to long-term settlement on the sites. Artisanal gold mining promotes economic development, attracts secondary migration through new businesses and services, and represents an alternative to agriculture, absorbing youth unemployment and providing an alternative to migration to cities for young people.

## 23.1. Introduction

Burkina Faso and Mali, two Sahelian countries with a shared border, are located in the same geographical space, along West Africa's Gold Belt (see Figure 23.1). Artisanal gold mining has been practiced there for decades, and "prospecting" continues to mark lifestyles and population movements. In Burkina Faso, the first gold rushes occurred after the droughts in the 1970s and 1980s: a substantial number of migrants, in particular the Mossi from the Plateau-Central Region, set out for the country's southern regions. According to a national survey of the sector (Burkina Faso, 2017), 140,196 workers were active at nearly 448 artisanal gold mining sites in 2016, and the sites had an annual output estimated at 9.5 tons of gold worth CFAF 232.2 billion. In Mali, artisanal gold mining dates to the thirteenth century and the Mandinka Empire. It is practiced chiefly in the gold mining areas of Kayes, Koulikoro and Sikasso regions. Mali is the third-largest gold producer in Africa, after South Africa and Ghana, with an annual output estimated at 60 tons in 2018 (Faujas, 2019). It is estimated that the 300 to 350 artisanal gold mining sites in Mali employ nearly 400,000 men and women workers (EcofinHebdo, 2018).

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Figure 23.1. Map of West Africa's gold belt (Burkina Faso and Mali)

Note: This map is for illustration purposes only. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the International Organization for Migration.

Gold rushes spawn expectations, fears, frustrations and conflicts. They prompt entire families or localities to move, eager to try their luck and make a quick killing. All too often, migrant and local gold miners do not emerge alive from the deep, hand-dug galleries, which can reach depths of 100 metres in Burkina Faso. The miners' living and working conditions on the sites are especially precarious, characterized by squalor and lack of access to water, social services, education and protection in areas often neglected by governments. In recent years, notably since 2012, the discovery of a new seam in the central Sahel has led to a surge in cross-border mobility between gold mines and in migration to sites within countries (International Crisis Group, 2019). Migration flows have accelerated, at the same time upsetting the social and environmental equilibrium in the mining areas. In this article, we endeavour to describe the multiple migrations flows to the gold mines and to understand the various effects of gold migration in Mali and Burkina Faso on development in the host areas, working chiefly with the primary data collected by IOM teams and the literature available.

# 23.2. Methodology

The results presented were collected in the context of regional research on migration flows to artisanal gold mining sites in West Africa, coordinated by the IOM Regional Office in Dakar and covering Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea and Senegal.<sup>2</sup> The research was carried out between February and July 2019, and endeavoured to draw up a detailed

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> In Senegal and Guinea, the research was financed by the United States State Department Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration. In Mali and Burkina Faso, it was funded by the United Kingdom Department for International Development.

profile of artisanal gold miners (men and women), to understand the migration flows to and from the gold mining sites studied<sup>3</sup> and to assess the challenges relating to the protection of vulnerable people around the sites.

This article refers only to the findings for Mali and Burkina Faso, where field surveys were conducted by IOM teams with the support of government partners and local researchers. A mixed research methodology (quantitative and qualitative) was used. The quantitative survey comprised 436 individual surveys of gold miners in Mali and 209 in Burkina Faso. In-depth interviews and discussion groups were organized with various members of the gold mining communities.<sup>4</sup>

For the entire document, the findings are representative only of the sites visited by the IOM teams. The sites were selected on the basis of several criteria shared by the countries covered by the study. First, they had to be informal, artisanal sites that were not managed by mining companies. The teams also gave precedence to sites of intense artisanal mining activity employing different types of worker (haulers, diggers and crushers, among others). The sites also had to be points of destination and transit for migrants.

The research team in Burkina Faso thus studied two major sites employing several thousand workers: the Galgouli site in Poni Province, in Sud-Ouest Region; and the Warwéogo site in Bittou Department, in Centre-Est Region. The research team in Mali opted to work on sites grouped in two regions: Kayes in the north-east, on the border with Senegal (Sadiola and Kéniéba *cercles*); and Sikasso in the south-west, on the border with Guinea (Kadiolo and Wassilou Balle *cercles*), for a total of 12 sites. Specifically, in Kayes Region, the teams covered the Djingoulou, Brogoné, Kakadjan, Sanougou, Sinseko and Sansanto sites; in the Sikasso Region, they covered the Badalabougou, Alhamdoulila-Dadian, Massiogo-Courani, Kabaya, Kodiaran and Solona sites.

The main research limitations included difficulties accessing the sites and certain groups of people, and the absence of reliable and recent statistical data on migration flows<sup>5</sup> in the areas concerned (Fargues, Chapter 1 of this volume). Lastly, the aim of the study was not to obtain representative estimates of the number of miners at national level. The data collected therefore do not claim to fill the gaps in that respect.<sup>6</sup>

# 23.3. The many types of migration flow to the gold mining sites

Until the 1990s, many citizens of Mali and Burkina Faso left for Côte d'Ivoire. According to the Côte d'Ivoire 1998 general population and housing census, 56 per cent of foreign migrants in Côte d'Ivoire were from Burkina Faso and 19.8 per cent were from Mali (Merabet, 2006:18). That trend was sharply reversed in the wake of the economic and political crisis in Côte d'Ivoire in 2002, with many migrants returning home and people moving within the country (Coutin et al., 2010). The return of thousands of people from Côte d'Ivoire to Burkina Faso changed the composition of migrant flows, with some, presumably including the "gold migration" flows, directed towards the south-west of the country.<sup>7</sup>

The "gold rushes" in Mali and Burkina Faso thus represent another major channel of mobility in the region. In Burkina Faso, the artisanal mining sites attract almost exclusively workers of Burkina Faso nationality (98%), whereas those in Mali appear to generate larger cross-border migration flows, even though most of the workers on the sites are

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> For the World Bank definition of artisanal and small-scale mining, see www.worldbank.org/en/topic/extractiveindustries/brief/artisanal-and-small-scale-mining.

In terms of the profiles surveyed during the study, the teams held group discussions with miners (men and women), chefs de trou, sex workers, minors between 14 and 17 years of age, members of the host community and people engaged in economic activity on the site. Semi-structured interviews were held with key players, such as site managers, traditional and/or administrative authorities, site owners and representatives of organizations of miners or trade unions. Some of the authorities were identified in the light of their level of authority at the site and their availability for interviews.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> In the areas surveyed for the study, there were no mechanisms for monitoring migrant flows or counting migrant arrivals. It is therefore not possible to furnish detailed information on the number of internal and international migrants arriving in the localities. The Governments concerned had only recently started to develop national migration strategies (Burkina Faso adopted a national migration strategy in 2016, Mali a national migration policy in 2014), underscoring the need for more systematic collection and publication of migration data in their respective national spaces.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> For a discussion on data gaps and challenges in countries in the region, see Chapters 1 and 2 of this volume (Fargues).

Outin et al. (2010) uphold the idea that the returnees from Côte d'Ivoire turned to other areas for labour migration, but that does not suffice to confirm that all the migrant gold miners at national level migrated in response to the closure of the Côte d'Ivoire corridor.

Malian. On all the sites studied in Mali, people from Burkina Faso accounted for 32 per cent of the sample of artisanal miners, and Guineans 13 per cent.<sup>8</sup> These findings confirm that, in the case of Mali, migration to gold mining sites is regional in nature.

At the two sites selected in Burkina Faso, internal migration was a major component of migration flows. For example, at the Galgouli site, in Sud-Ouest Region, the internal migrants were chiefly from three different regions: Nord, Centre-Nord and Plateau-Central. As they have a reputation for digging good galleries, many gold miners from Burkina Faso also migrate beyond their borders and are present in large numbers at other mining sites in West Africa. According to the results of the study, they were the second-largest group in Mali, and accounted for 27 per cent of the sample in Guinea, and 13 per cent in Senegal. The migration of workers from Burkina Faso to those three countries in the subregion is a perfect example of the creation of new communities of mobile miners, moving as opportunities arise and new seams are discovered, and further evidence of considerable cross-border and regional mobility. The freedom of movement guaranteed by the Protocol relating to Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment, which was adopted by the Economic Community of West African States in 1979, provides a legal framework for this strong cross-border migration flow.

#### 23.3.1. The determinants of gold rush migration

Within this common mining area, artisanal gold miners tend to have a fairly low level of education: over 40 per cent have on average no education at all.<sup>10</sup> They are also an extremely young group: in Mali, 50 per cent were between 25 and 35 years of age. In the countries selected for the study, traditional gold mining appeared to be a strategy used by poor households with unstable income streams, most of them farmers, to diversify their incomes. The same person can alternate between the two activities, digging for gold on a seasonal basis, especially during the dry season (October and November). In some places, for example in Burkina Faso, the mines attract fewer foreign workers. They tend to draw people from neighbouring villages or regions who once lived off the land but now have to find a supplementary activity to buy material or livestock.

In Mali, 92 per cent of artisanal gold miners said that it was job opportunities that drew them to the sites. Only 4 per cent said that they had come to join a family member, and 1 per cent said that they were at the mine as one stage in an international migration plan.

In addition, the sector's great appeal is explained by the "myth", particularly widespread among young people, that gold mining and prospecting for gold are strongly related to success and upward social mobility (Grätz, 2004; Cros and Mégret, 2009, 2014). The stories of fortunes made overnight have a strong impact on the collective imagination in the gold mining regions. In national contexts that remain deeply affected by rural unemployment, the promise of rapid earnings from the discovery of new seams appears to hold the same potential as migration to the city or abroad.

### 23.3.2. Prospecting for gold: The appeal of a long-standing tradition

Migration to the gold mining sites is also very spontaneous in nature, evidence of the ongoing appeal of artisanal sites. Indeed, most of the gold miners (72% in Burkina Faso and 83% in Mali) left their places of origin and migrated to the sites even if they had no confirmation that they would find work there (see Figure 23.2).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> These figures are representative of the sites selected for the study, and not of all active artisanal gold mining sites in Mali and Burkina Faso.

Grätz (2004), in his study of artisanal gold mining sites in Mali, Benin and Burkina Faso, speaks of the "porous borders" brought about by the fact that artisanal gold mining, through the successive waves of migration it has generated, has redefined the geographic and administrative concept of borders in West Africa.

 $<sup>^{\</sup>rm 10}\,$  In Burkina Faso, 53 per cent of miners said that they had had no schooling.

Figure 23.2. Employment offer received before arrival on site

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In Burkina Faso, the population appears to be divided between those who have worked on a limited number of sites and those who have moved extensively between sites, both within the country and at regional level, with 33 per cent having already worked at more than four sites (see Figure 23.3).



Figure 23.3. Number of gold mining sites on which the person surveyed had worked in Mali and Burkina Faso

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In Mali, most of the gold miners (62%) had worked on one or two sites. Those figures also show that prospecting for gold is not considered just a supplementary activity, and has in some cases become the primary economic activity.

The large proportions of gold miners having worked on a limited number of sites – about one third in both Mali and Burkina Faso – also appear to indicate that the sector has no difficulty recruiting new workers. Artisanal gold mining remains attractive and prompts migration among those who have already worked in the sector and those hoping to do so for the first time.

In addition, according to the data collected from the gold miners, they migrated for the long term: most of the miners surveyed (58% in Burkina Faso and 43% in Mali) tended to remain on the job at the same site for over one year. The difference between the two countries can be explained by the differences in the types of site selected. In Burkina Faso, the sites have long been operational (the Galgouli site has existed since 2003 and the first gold diggers arrived at the Warwéogo site around 1998<sup>11</sup>) and are starting to look like real towns, with workers having access to all services. It would appear that the workers migrating to these two sites have settled there over the years. In Mali, on the other hand, some of the sites selected were much further away from a village, smaller and only recently excavated. The workers had therefore not settled there for any length of time, and appeared more likely to migrate between sites on a temporary basis.

Interestingly, there seems to be a constant stream of new arrivals: at the various sites visited in Mali, 19 per cent of the miners on average had started working there between two weeks and three months previously (see Figure 23.4). Despite the lack of regular statistical data on the arrival of workers, this shows that the sites are steadily growing and expanding as new workers arrive.

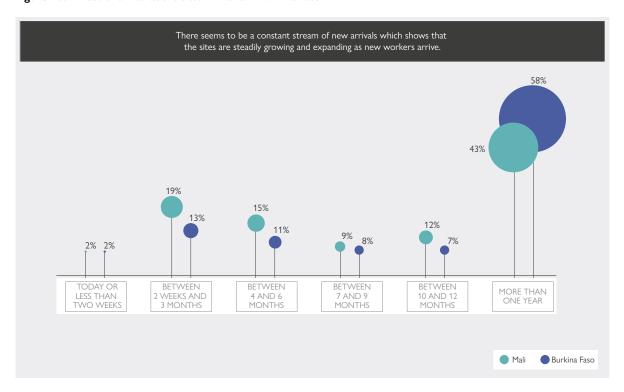


Figure 23.4. Date of arrival at the sites in Mali and Burkina Faso

<sup>11</sup> According to the information collected by the IOM teams during interviews with key stakeholders in April 2019: interview with a site head near Galgouli site and with a local official at Warwéogo.

<sup>12</sup> This was confirmed in discussions with key stakeholders, who described the encounter between groups of Mossi migrants from Plateau-Central with groups of Lobi established in Sud-Ouest. Although the arrival of the Mossi workers originally sparked conflicts, relations between the two ethnic groups are now good, evidence of a shift in social and cultural norms over time.

#### 23.3.3. Onward migration plans

The miners' onward migration plans seem to indicate that the "gold rush" plays a big part in their long-term plans: 41 per cent of miners in Burkina Faso and 45 per cent in Mali wanted to stay on the site (see Figure 23.5). Among those wishing to leave their current site, 88 per cent planned to return to their place of origin; only 4 per cent planned to migrate on to Europe; 4 per cent planned to work at other sites in West Africa. The hypothesis according to which the gold mining sites are transit points for migrants wishing to migrate internationally to Europe is therefore not borne out by the data collected in Mali and Burkina Faso. It is also invalidated by the wide gap in level of education between the migrant gold miners and migrants wishing to reach Europe through irregular channels, who tend to have much higher levels of education.<sup>13</sup>

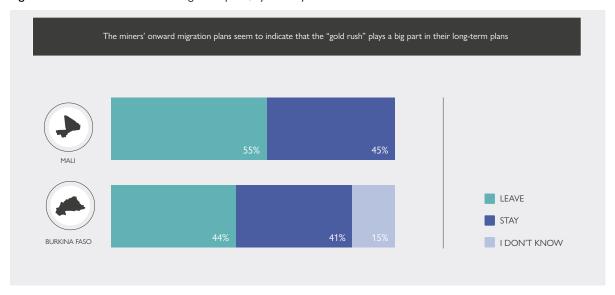


Figure 23.5. Gold miners' onward migration plans, by country

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In addition, many of the workers travel with their families to the sites: in Burkina Faso, 72 per cent of the miners surveyed had travelled to the sites accompanied by their next of kin.

Furthermore, an average of nearly 90 per cent of the miners in both countries said that they did not use social networks to obtain information on their place of destination, how the site worked and how much it produced, or whether there were any jobs to be had; they preferred to communicate by word of mouth, even about sites that were very distant from their places of origin. This appears to show yet again that the migration flows related to "gold rushes" are different from those to Europe, which rely heavily on new technologies, in particular digital technology and modern means of communication (Diminescu, 2008). The profile of migrant miners is different from that of irregular migrants headed for Europe, who do not equip and prepare themselves in the same way for their migration plan.

<sup>13</sup> According to UNDP (2019), migrants from sub-Saharan Africa taking the Central Mediterranean Route to Northern Europe generally have a relatively high level of education.

# 23.4. Migration to gold mining sites: socioeconomic development opportunities and challenges

#### 23.4.1. "Gold rushes" as development factors

In the group discussions in both countries covered by the study, the local authorities all confirmed that migration to the gold mining sites contributed strongly to the development of the migrants' host localities. In rural areas, in both Mali and Burkina Faso, the inhabitants observed an increase in services, trade and infrastructure at and around the sites, thanks to artisanal mining and the arrival of numerous artisanal miners.

Artisanal mining also represents the possibility to live in a larger dwelling, to help one's family in the host community<sup>14</sup> and the community of origin,<sup>15</sup> and to have access to better nutrition, showing that the development impact is felt at both individual and family levels. Some sites had even recently installed service stations, to meet the growing demand for fuel from miners and those selling the gold, who travel by motorcycle.

Gold-related migration creates waves of "secondary migrants", in which various categories of workers – restaurateurs, drivers, vendors or shop owners – migrate to the gold mines to support the workers there. A genuine network of businesses springs up to meet the miners' new and growing demands. Hairdresser salons, outdoor cinemas and shops of all kind are built around the sites, generating a true "economic boom". "Gold rushes" are indeed factors of development, increasing the services available and drawing new businesses and services to areas left behind by urban development.

In Mali and Burkina Faso, artisanal mining is also directly related to higher individual incomes. Despite the difficult working conditions and competition, 66 per cent of the miners surveyed in Mali and 80 per cent in Burkina Faso confirmed that their living conditions had improved since their arrival at the site. What is more, 66 per cent of the miners in Mali and 84 per cent in Burkina Faso also confirmed that they had sent money to their families and relatives in their communities of origin, at more or less regular intervals.<sup>16</sup>

# 23.4.2. Migration to gold mining sites as a means of enabling women to be independent

Migration to the gold mining sites is also seen by some West African women as a strategy to gain independence. Among the Lobi people in Burkina Faso's Sud-Ouest Region, a territory situated between Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire, work in the gold mines was historically reserved for women (Jeune Afrique, 2005), the Lobi culture being different from that of other ethnic groups, in that women play an important role in society.

The group discussions with women miners at the Galgouli site revealed that, for women, "gold rushes" were the driving force leading to greater independence and transforming their role and social status in the household in a way that was beneficial for both the families themselves and the community as a whole.<sup>17</sup> Several women said that they had decided on and organized their journeys alone, following the death of a spouse, a break-up or marital strife. Those were not the only reasons for the women's internal migration; rather, when compounded by the employment crisis, the drop in agricultural revenues and economic instability, they were a triggering factor in some cases. In the face of a worsening economic situation, artisanal gold mining, even if it meant uprooting the family to settle in a place several hundred kilometres distant, in a different cultural and linguistic context, appeared to be the most accessible solution for these women, widows or mothers in search of independence and economic stability. In Burkina Faso, nearly 74 per cent of the women surveyed individually had no occupational training. This makes the work at the artisanal gold mines all the more attractive, as they need no prior training.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> For example, according to the study's findings, nearly 72 per cent of the workers surveyed in Burkina Faso lived with their families in the host locality.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Some of the workers were able to send money back home.

<sup>16</sup> Of the 66 per cent in Mali, 49 per cent managed to send money every month to their families. In Burkina Faso, according to the sample results, among the miners managing to support their families in their communities of origin, roughly 30 per cent sent less than CFAF 50,000 and 23 per cent between CFAF 50,000 and 100,000. In addition, over 32 per cent of the workers concerned sent money every month, and 22 per cent every three months.

Nanquette, Chapter 19 of this volume, provides information on the vulnerability of Ivorian female returnees.

#### Challenges related to the delicate balance between mining and development

The positive effects notwithstanding, the interviews also brought to light a different reality, highlighting the limits to local development within gold mining societies and the weak points of a sector expanding too quickly, at the cost of its players (Sangaré et al., 2016). The intensification of gold mining in the various regions studied has spawned genuine social problems in the host communities, in particular lower school attendance in villages near the sites.

Mining operations – a key economic sector in Mali and Burkina Faso, and a particularly important activity in border regions— is at the crux of conflicts at various levels (OECD, 2018). According to interviews with local authorities, they sometimes lead to deteriorations in social relations between the migrants and their host communities. Indeed, tensions can emerge between migrants and the local population following disagreement over ownership of the land and the gold that will be extracted from it. In addition, gold prospecting in these regions has also been tied to human rights violations such as forced prostitution and child labour. Several women sex workers encountered near the sites in Mali and Burkina Faso spoke of living and working conditions akin to human trafficking.<sup>18</sup>

The steady arrival of new miners and the lack of infrastructure to receive them result in difficult and dangerous living and working conditions for migrants. Living far from an urban centre, in areas where the State presence is negligible, the migrants generally benefit from no measures of workplace protection. This is even more problematic for pregnant women and young children of miners, who are equally active in the mines.<sup>19</sup> In the event of illness or accident, it is difficult to obtain treatment or care, given the distance to hospital and the state of the roads. The hostile and precarious living conditions nevertheless do not stop the miners from settling at the sites.

### 23.5. Conclusions and recommendations

Migration for gold in the central Sahel comes in various forms, and the impact on development in the areas concerned is mixed. In Mali and Burkina Faso, artisanal gold mining appears to act as a catalyst in places where young people face high unemployment rates, have few prospects, and find it difficult to go back to the land because of successive agricultural crises. The steady arrival of new migrants to the sites brings to light gaps in the systems of protection in place, it being difficult for the miners to obtain access to health care and basic infrastructure.

Suitable protection mechanisms and health-care facilities should be established to meet the needs of artisanal gold miners at cross-border mining sites, and the local authorities should be invited to pay closer attention to miners' rights and needs.

In addition, given the growing situation of insecurity in the Sahel (International Crisis Group, 2019), notably in northern Burkina Faso, it is important to reinforce the State's presence at artisanal mining sites and to promote cooperation with the traditional authorities on the management and organization of the sites and migrant flows.

<sup>18</sup> Although the study conditions preclude drawing conclusions, the discussions with sex workers – notably from the Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso – point to the existence of trafficking networks within West and Central Africa.

<sup>19</sup> According to field observations, some children work on the sites with their parents, who are also miners. Others seem to have migrated independently, in order to join an uncle, a parent or another relative. Child labour is prohibited in the gold mines of Mali and Burkina Faso, and the authorities at the sites were reluctant to talk about the issue; it was therefore very hard to obtain information on the problem of child labour during the study.

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