

Forced Displacement and Movement Restrictions in the Central Sahel

Briefing Note | Burkina Faso, Mali, Western Niger

May 2025



A convergence of crises exacerbated by forced displacement and restrictions to freedom of movement

According to the World Bank, in 2024, **over 70%** of the Western and Central African population lived in countries affected by **conflict and violence**. In the Central Sahel (Burkina Faso, Mali and Western Niger), **insecurity** remains the primary driver for forced displacement. As of May 2025, 9 in 10 communities surveyed by Project 21 declare that displacement is caused by attacks and/or fear of an attack. 9 in 10 surveyed families also declare that their movements are restricted due to armed groups' activism.

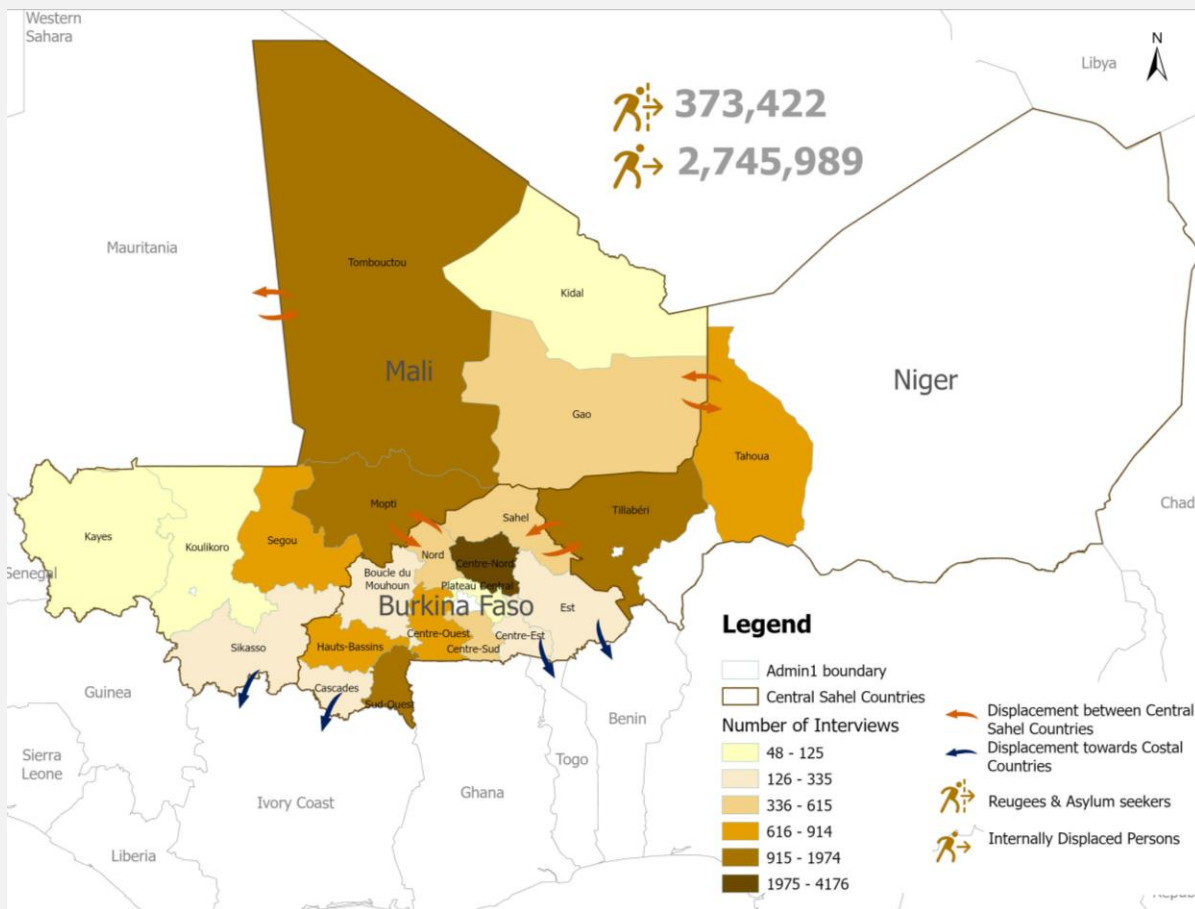
From 2020 to 2024, the number of registered **internally displaced persons (IDPs)** in Burkina Faso, Mali and Western Niger has **tripled**, while the number of registered **refugees and asylum-seekers** has **almost doubled**. Combined with other factors, notably related to **poverty, food insecurity, climate change, as well as infrastructure development**, forced displacement and movement restrictions limit access to already scarce essential services, exacerbating structural challenges across the Central Sahel.

Throughout 2024, Project 21 has continued to survey affected communities in some of the most **hard-to-reach** and **conflict-affected areas**. Highlighting increasing **needs for protection and solutions** in the Central Sahel, the following results also require enhanced cooperation between **humanitarian, development** and **peace-building** actors.

Map of Project 21 data collection coverage, with numbers and flows of registered displaced populations in 2024 in the Central Sahel

January – December 2024

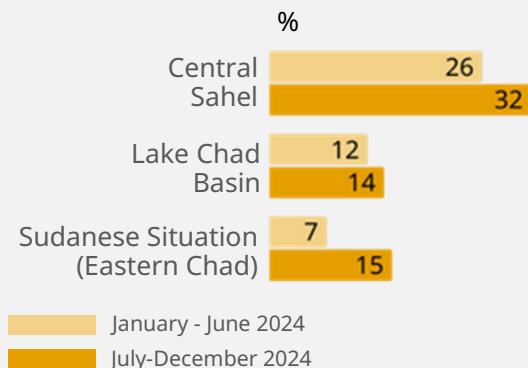
Sources: Project 21, UNHCR



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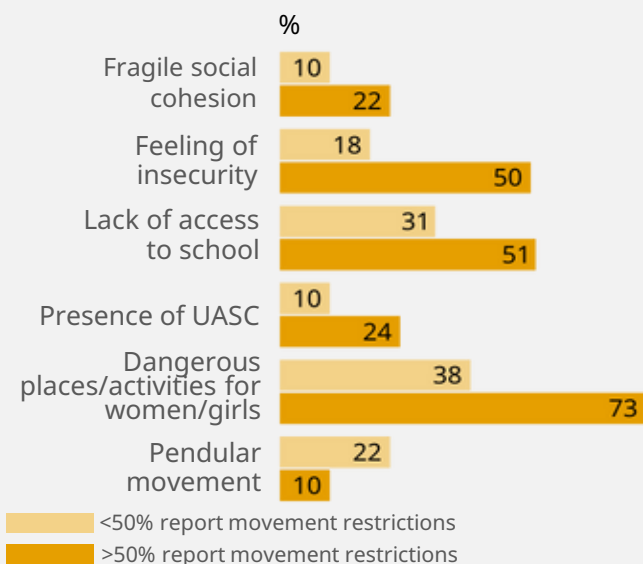
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Throughout 2024, Movement Restrictions have constituted one of the most prominent protection threats in the Central Sahel



- **3 in 10 surveyed families have declared being subjected to movement restrictions** in Burkina Faso, Mali and Western Niger. This represents the **highest proportion** of surveyed families identified by Project 21 throughout Western and Central Africa;
- For surveyed families, movement restrictions materialize in the **impossibility to exit the geographical perimeter of their community** (87%), **going to the market** (36%), and even **crossing a border** (8%);
- **9 in 10 surveyed communities attribute movement restrictions to armed groups' activism and its consequences.** Other causes are also related to insecurity, namely to the presence of mine and other explosive ordnance, military operations, curfews and travel restrictions, criminality, banditry and roadside robberies;
- From the first to the second half of 2024, in the Central Sahel, **surveyed families have increasingly declared being subjected to movement restrictions: +6%.**

Movement Restrictions multiply affected communities' exposure to violence and obstacles to access essential services



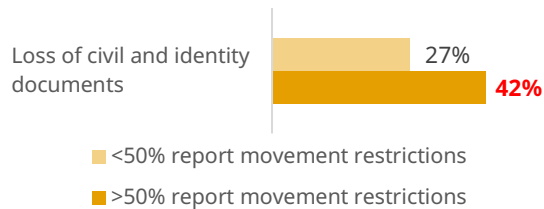
- Families reporting movement restrictions are **3 times more likely to feel insecure**, and **twice more likely to confirm the existence of dangerous places for women and girls.** Movement restrictions act as a multiplier for risks related to attacks against civilians and civilian objects, as well as gender-based violence;
- This explains why families reporting movement restrictions are also **twice as few to undertake pendular movements**, consisting in repeated movement of population between two or more locations. Pendular movements are used by displaced families to address essential needs and livelihoods.
- Communities where families report movement restrictions are **twice more likely to describe social cohesion as 'fragile'**, as well as to confirm the presence of **unaccompanied and separated children (UASC)**. Movement restrictions act as a multiplier for risks related to the degradation of social cohesion and peaceful coexistence as well as to child and forced family separation;
- Movement restrictions also increase the proportion of communities declaring that their **children do not have access to formal school** by 20%. In conflict-affected areas, the lack of access to school further exposes children to additional protection risks such as trafficking, forced labour and exploitation, recruitment and association in armed forces and groups, as well as forced marriage.

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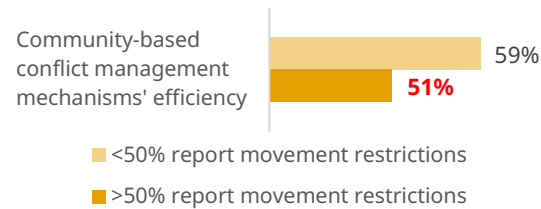
Capacities to support in order to address needs, mitigate and reduce affected communities' exposure to protection risks

Civil and Identity Documentation



Movement restrictions increase the proportion of surveyed respondents declaring **having lost their civil and identity documents** by 15%. Without documentation, affected communities cannot prove their identity in contexts of **generalized mistrust and suspicion**. In the Central Sahel, mistrust and suspicion are a cause of intercommunity tensions for 7 in 10 respondents, and an obstacle to integrating displaced communities for 1 in 3 respondents. The lack of documentation also restrains affected communities from **accessing essential services** that require a proof of identity.

Community-based mechanisms



Movement restrictions reduce the proportion of surveyed respondents declaring that their **community-based conflict management mechanisms are efficient** by 8%. These mechanisms play an indispensable **regulating and peacemaking role** throughout the Central Sahel, maintaining **social cohesion** and offering effective means to prevent, manage and solve tensions. Community-based structures, actors and leaders are also the **preferred source to receive information on available services** for 3 in 5 respondents as well as the **first interlocutor to report an incident to** for 4 in 5 respondents.

Access to land and self-reliance



Movement restrictions increase the proportion of respondents reporting **difficulties accessing land** by 14%. Essential for **emergency or durable shelter** and **agropastoral income-generating activities**, reduced access to land undermines displaced and host communities' self-reliance. In the Central Sahel, only 1 in 10 surveyed families mentions considering **humanitarian assistance** as a source of income, compared to 1 in 3 mentioning **agropastoral production** as a source of income: affected communities do not rely on humanitarian assistance, but rather on access to land, to survive and to thrive.

Support

Local and National capacities to provide Civil and Identity Documentation to displaced populations who have lost their proof of identity during and/or in the wake of their displacement.

Strengthen

Community-based Mechanisms and Capacities to prevent, manage, respond, and solve conflicts and tensions, including through Protection-Sensitive Technical Assistance as well as Material and Logistical Support

Reinforce

Community-based, Decentralized and National Land Management Capacities to foster displaced communities' inclusion and self-reliance

About Project 21

Providing Protection Data for Informed Actions



How does Project 21 work?

Project 21 is a **cross-border, inter-agency** and **regional protection monitoring system**. Based on a standardized methodology and harmonized tools, Project 21 continuously surveys communities affected by **forced displacement, insecurity, and conflict**. Working through existing platforms and dedicated coordination groups, P21 partners with more than **30 organizations**, amongst which two thirds are local and national ones, to collect, analyze, and disseminate protection data. Since 2021, Project 21 has contributed to merge over **18 different protection monitoring systems** deployed in the Central Sahel and has addressed gaps in data collection and analysis.

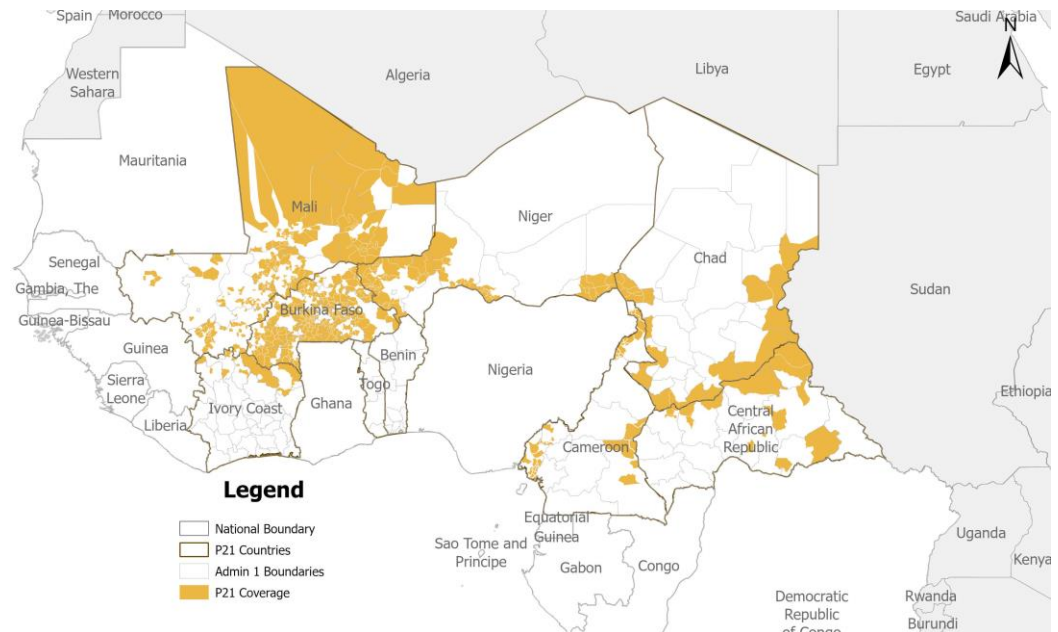
Advancing the **centrality of protection** across the Humanitarian, Development and Peace Nexus, Project 21 transforms affected communities' voices into **informed strategies, programs and actions**. Since 2021, Project 21 monitors have conducted over **118,000 interviews** in Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Ivory Coast, Mali, Niger and Togo. As of May 2025, Project 21 strives and succeeds to maintain its presence in **West and Central Africa's major forced displacement situations**: (i) the Central Sahel; (ii) the Lake Chad Basin; (iii) the Sudanese Emergency in Chad; (iv) the Gulf of Guinea's Coastal Countries.

**Project 21 provides data on the protection risks and needs as perceived and declared by the displaced and host communities living in areas affected by forced displacement. Collected through interviews conducted with heads of households and key informants, face-to-face and/or remotely depending on the security context, Project 21 data is analyzed by dedicated analysis groups established at the regional and national levels. The conclusions presented by Project 21 only reflect the declarations and perceptions of the surveyed affected households and communities, within the municipalities, provinces and regions into which protection monitors have surveyed them. Therefore, suggested conclusions and recommendations should solely be considered in relation to these surveyed populations and the geographical areas covered, at the time of the survey.*

Overview of Project 21's geographic coverage

Covered municipalities (admin3 level), January 2025

Source : Project 21



From a pilot project towards a regional reference framework for protection data

Phase 1 (2020-2022)

- Launch of Project 21 as a pilot project;
- Development of harmonized tools and methodologies;
- Deployment in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Lake Chad Province.

Phase 2 (2022-2025)

- Deployment of dedicated field teams;
- Extension in Benin, Chad, CAR, Cameroon, Ivory Coast and Togo;
- Conduction of an External Mid-Term Review.

Phase 3 (2025-2027)

- Consolidation of Project 21 as West and Central Africa's Reference Protection Data Framework;
- Enhanced contributions to the Localization and Inclusion Agendas.