

# Preserving Protection Environment along Mixed Movements Routes in the Central Sahel



Decision-making Support Bulletin for the Central Sahel | Burkina Faso, Mali, western Niger  
February 2026

### Heightened protection risks in route areas fuel instability and displacement

The **West Africa-Atlantic Route (WAAR)** is a major corridor for mixed movements of refugees and migrants, with several routes traversing the Central Sahel, a region facing intersecting security, humanitarian, and socio-economic crises. As of January 2026, nearly 3.6 million people are displaced in the Central Sahel, including **2.9 million internally displaced persons (IDPs)**. In 2025, Mixed Migration Centre revealed that up to 85% of young migrants in West Africa intend to continue their journeys, while **only 28% intend to remain in the region**.

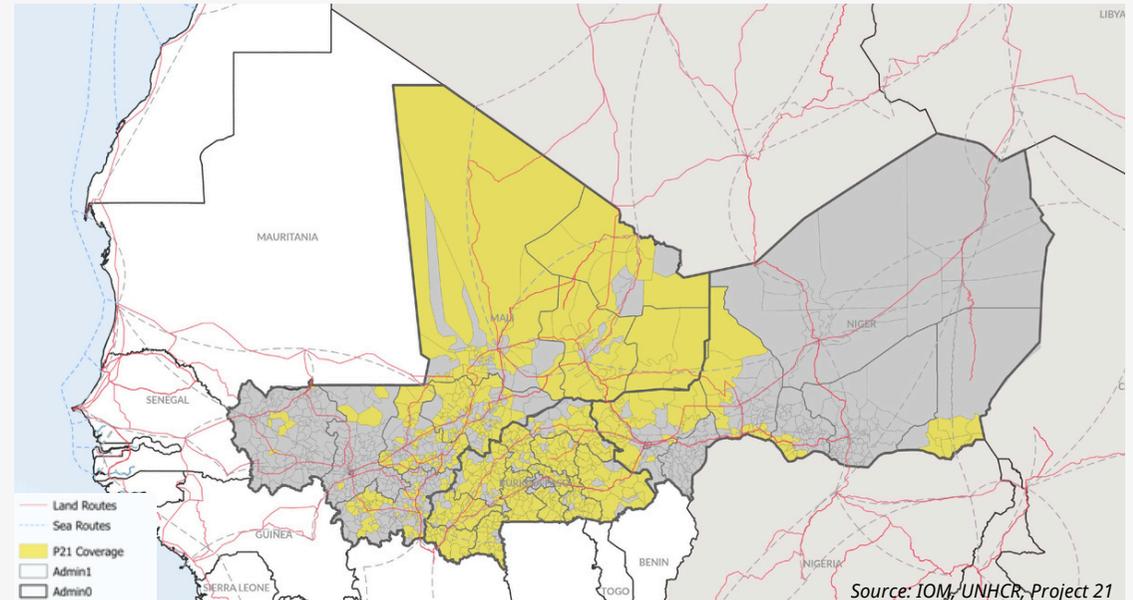
Although most displaced populations prefer to stay near their areas of origin, UNHCR protection monitoring indicates that internal displacements can lead to **cross-border movements**, particularly as security conditions deteriorate and assistance declines in areas of origin and transit. Project 21 (P21) data from 2025 shows that areas directly traversed by mixed movements routes in the Central Sahel are marked by compounding protection risks, including:

- Widespread insecurity and movement restrictions
- High levels of conflict-related violence
- Increased denial of access to resources, opportunities, and services
- Limited access to food, water, and essential social services
- Harmful survival strategies that disproportionately affect women and children

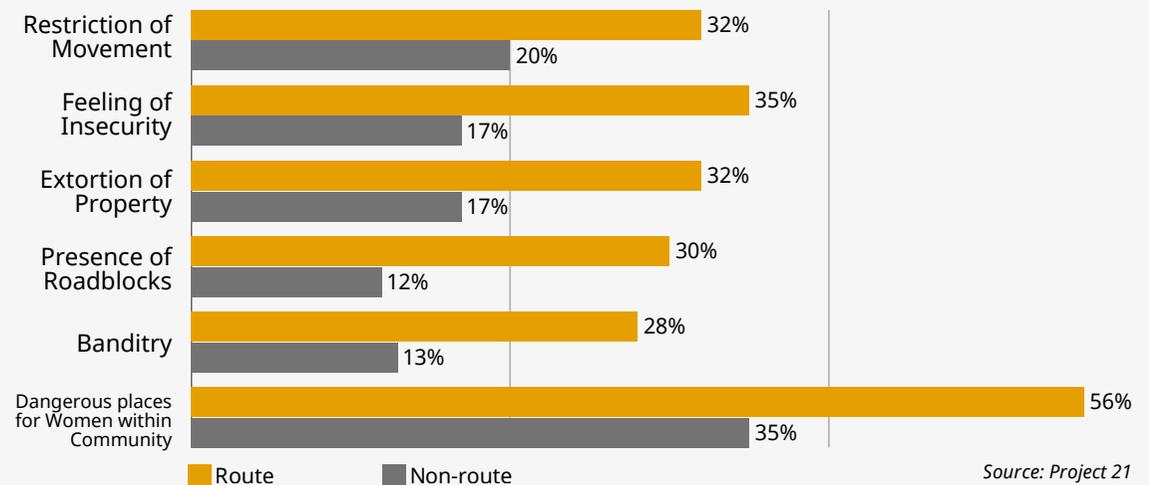
This note sheds light on protection environments in areas directly traversed by mixed movements routes in the Central Sahel. By comparing them with areas not crossed by these routes, it provides evidence-based insight into how **routes can interact with existing protection risks and amplify their impact**. Finally, it outlines key considerations for Humanitarian, Development, and Peace actors to mitigate protection challenges and strengthen responses in mixed movements route areas.

*This analysis draws on more than 71,000 interviews conducted in the Central Sahel (Burkina Faso, Mali, western Niger) between April 2023 and August 2025.*

### Major Mixed Movements Routes crossing Central Sahel



### Mobility & Security: Route vs Non-route Areas (2023-2025)



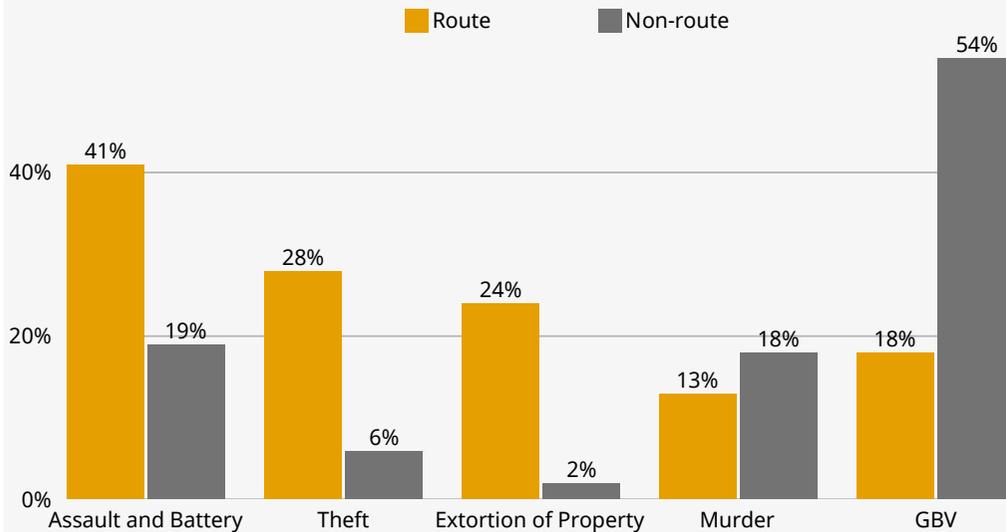
Source: Project 21

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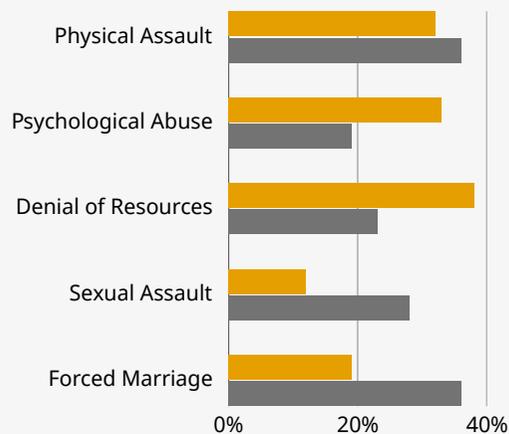
## Top 5 Reported Protection Incidents: Route vs Non-route Areas (2025)



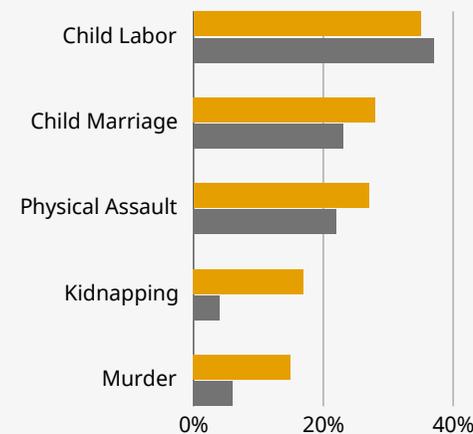
- Criminal roadblocks, extortion networks, and banditry contribute to a volatile protection environment in route areas, marked by elevated **movement restrictions** and **generalized insecurity** (reported by 1 in 3 informants).
- Route areas exhibit **greater instability**, with higher reports of assault, theft, and extortion. Over half of respondents identify unsafe locations for women and girls within their communities.
- Reporting of GBV show significant difference, reflecting a combination of **underreporting** in route areas and prevalent household-level violence in non-route areas.
- Women in route areas experience nearly twice the levels of psychological abuse (1 in 3) and **denial of resources** (2 in 5), suggesting elevated stress, economic precarity, and dependency risks.
- Reports of **kidnapping and lethal violence** affecting children are substantially higher in route areas (x3 non-route area level), indicating heightened exposure to severe protection threats.
- High reported child labor in both route and non-route areas suggests widespread reliance on harmful coping strategies linked to **household economic stress**.
- While primary displacement remains dominant, reported **secondary movement** increased toward late 2025 (37% of respondents in Q4), primarily linked to declining humanitarian assistance, food insecurity, and limited access to natural resources.
- Despite ongoing instability, 9 in 10 informants report strong integration of displaced communities. Nearly 6 in 10 families in route areas can access land, often through **host community support**.

## Different Risk Profiles Along Mix Movements Routes

### Forms of Gender-based Violence



### Child Protection Threats



Analysis in this document is conducted at administrative level 3. Project 21 does not collect data directly from migrants.

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## Recommendations

Contact Project 21 to obtain detailed tables and maps outlining key regions and provinces

### For Humanitarian Actors

- **Systematically prioritize admin-3 areas traversed by major routes for protection programming**, using the mapping on Page 1 as a geographic reference. Integrate protection risk screening (movement restrictions, insecurity, GBV, child protection threats) into multi-sectoral responses in these areas.
- **Support and formalize community protection committees**, including women, youth, and displaced representatives, in high-risk route areas. Work through local leaders, religious figures, and customary authorities as trusted intermediaries for early warning, referrals, and information dissemination.
- **Prioritize mobile child protection services**, community surveillance, and referral mechanisms in route-areas where kidnapping and murder of children are significantly higher.
- **Strengthen psychosocial support and GBV case management** for women experiencing denial of resources and psychological abuse.

### For Development Actors

- **Prioritize schools, health centers, water points, and access roads** in route-areas where insecurity and service pressure are highest. Align investments with displacement-affected zones to benefit both host communities and mobile populations.
- **Promote land access arrangements** (e.g. community donations, negotiated tenure) in route areas where settlement and stabilization are already occurring. Invest in agropastoral and non-farm livelihoods targeting women, youth, and displaced households.
- **Reinforce local administrative and civil registration systems** in route-areas to sustain high documentation coverage. Support local capacities to manage increased demand linked to displacement and transit.

### For Peacebuilding Actors

- **Prioritize route-areas with high levels of banditry, roadblocks, and insecurity** for preventive engagement. Support local mediation mechanisms to address disputes linked to land, resources, and service access.
- **Facilitate inclusive dialogue platforms** involving host communities, displaced populations, women, youth, and traditional authorities. Ensure participation from groups disproportionately affected by route-related violence.
- **Support community-based early-warning systems** in route areas to flag rising insecurity, child protection threats, and GBV risks. Link local alerts to humanitarian and local authority response mechanisms.

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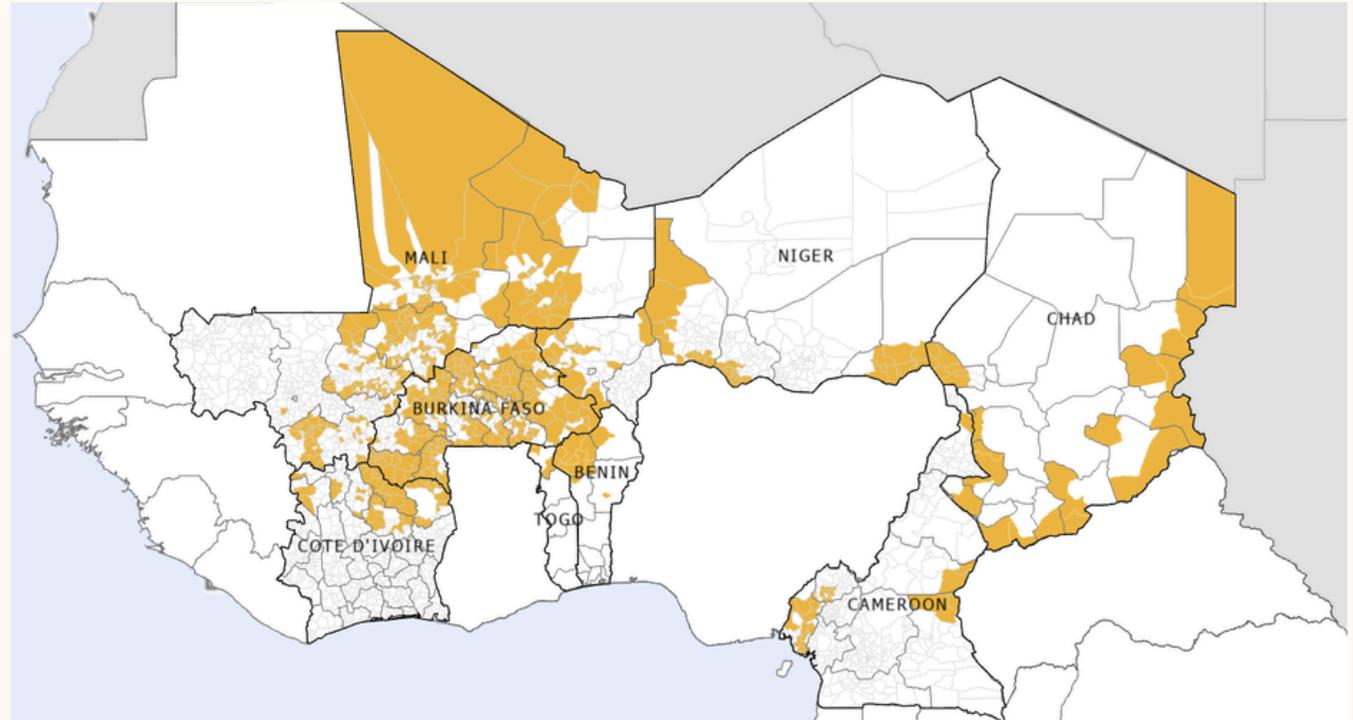
## About Project 21

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, we partner 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 **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 **nearly 200,000 interviews** in Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Ivory Coast, Mali, Niger and Togo. In 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 collects, analyses and disseminates data on the situation of communities affected by forced displacement, through consultations with households and key informants. Project 21 data is analyzed by dedicated analysis groups established at the regional and national levels. The conclusions presented in this document reflect only the situations of the interviewed individuals, households and communities in the areas and the period covered.*

## Overview of Project 21's geographic coverage



## Towards a regional reference framework for protection data

### 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.



### 2022 - 2025

- Deployment of dedicated field teams.
- Extension in Benin, Chad, CAR, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire and Togo.
- Conduction of an External Mid-Term Review.



### 2025 - 2027

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

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