

# DIALOGUE

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## Focus:

Migration processes and  
social and political  
dynamics in the Kayes  
Region, Mali: New  
insights into new trends

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## Focus:

# Migration processes and social and political dynamics in the Kayes Region, Mali: New insights into new trends

This focus presents the findings of a multidisciplinary study funded by the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs to take a fresh look into migration processes in the Kayes Region. The research, conducted by a dozen researchers, doctoral candidates and students over a two-year period, was driven by three questions.

- Impacts of migration processes on power relations. First of all, within the family with a focus on how the social position of members of households concerned by migration is negotiated. Secondly, on the Malian political scene with an analysis of how the migration phenomenon shapes political (re-)configurations at municipal, regional and national level.
- Current drivers behind the migration aspirations of young men and women of the Kayes Region, with an examination of whether information on migration conditions is a factor in these aspirations.
- The phenomenon of return migration in order to understand the magnitude of this phenomenon and identify whether new dynamics are taking shape, especially with respect to the return of women and their social and economic reintegration into Mali.

## A multidisciplinary team

The French Research Institute for Sustainable Development (IRD) represented by DIAL conducted this study in cooperation with the University of Toulouse 2, the University of Picardie Jules Verne and Malian research Institute Point Sud.<sup>1</sup> Three research teams were set up to answer the questions raised and guarantee multidisciplinary. The first team, coordinated by DIAL's Sandrine Mesplé-Somps and Björn Nilsson, was in charge of producing a statistically

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<sup>1</sup> Point Sud, a centre for research on local knowledge, is an independent international research institute that focuses on training, research and the organization of international scientific meetings. It has been established in Bamako since 1997. It sponsors individual and joint research projects (see <http://pointsud.org/>).

documented description of the magnitude of the migration phenomenon and return migration in the Kayes Region and Mali as a whole. They also conducted a randomized control trial on a representative sample of 2,000 young men aged 18 to 35 to assess migration aspirations and study the impact of information campaigns on migration conditions and local economic opportunities.<sup>2</sup> A second team studying new migration configurations and their impact on family dynamics and gender relations was coordinated by Nehara Feldman, social anthropologist, member of the CURAPP-ESS laboratory<sup>3</sup> and senior lecturer at the University of Picardie Jules Verne (UPJV), in liaison with Aïssatou Mbodj-Pouye, anthropologist at the CNRS based at the IMAF laboratory<sup>4</sup> in Paris and associate member of Point Sud, Bamako. This team included four other members: Joanne Le Bars, geographer and postdoctoral fellow funded by the project; Nassima Guilal, M2 student in social sciences at UPJV; M'Baré Fofana, intern at Point Sud funded by the project; and Mariam Sissoko, intern at Point Sud funded by the project. The third team focused on the impact of the region's migration on the local and national political scene and the organization of administrative areas. It was coordinated by Stéphanie Lima, geographer, member of the LISST laboratory<sup>5</sup> at the University of Toulouse 2 and senior lecturer at INUC<sup>6</sup> in Albi. Two other geographers were on the team: Hawa Coulibaly, postdoctoral fellow, and Soumaïla Berthé, doctoral candidate, both funded by the project. The configuration of the teams, based in both France and Mali, enabled multisited surveys to be conducted in Paris, Bamako and in the Kayes Region as well as surveys of natives of the Kayes Region living in Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire). Here are the main findings of this research published in a report spanning more than 200 pages (Feldman, Lima and Mesplé-Somps, 2020).

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<sup>2</sup> This randomized control trial was also funded by the French Agency for Development (AFD)

<sup>3</sup> CURAPP-ESS: Academic Center for Research on Public Action, Politics, Epistemology and Social Sciences, UMR 7319 (see <https://www.u-picardie.fr/curapp/>).

<sup>4</sup> IMAF: African Worlds Institute is an interdisciplinary joint research unit.

<sup>5</sup> LISST: Interdisciplinary Laboratory Solidarities, Societies, and Territories, CNRS UMR 5193.

<sup>6</sup> Champollion National University Institute – Albi campus ([www.univ-jfc.fr](http://www.univ-jfc.fr)).

## A region where migration remains deeply embedded in the culture

### *Diversification of destination countries*

The Kayes Region is the number one source region in the country for Malians who leave to live abroad, with an estimated emigration rate of nearly 5% of its population. Nearly one in four migrants from the Kayes lives in Europe, compared with a percentage of just 17% for the Malian population as a whole. The Kayes also has much fewer emigrants living in Côte d'Ivoire (12%) than at national level (32%), but more migrants living in African countries other than Côte d'Ivoire (61% versus 50%). However, destination countries have been diversifying since 2011 (see Figure 1). First of all, migrants from the Kayes (as with those from the rest of Mali) appear to now be foregoing border countries such as Senegal, Burkina Faso and Mauritania in favour of farther-flung countries such as Gabon. The second important shift is the large downturn in emigrant flows to France: one-third of migrants from the Kayes went to France in 2011 as opposed to just 14% in 2016. Despite the increase in migrant flows to other European countries such as Spain and Italy, the percentage of migrants from the Kayes Region living in countries in the North dropped from 40% in 2011 to just 25% in 2016.

### *Strongly dominant male emigration*

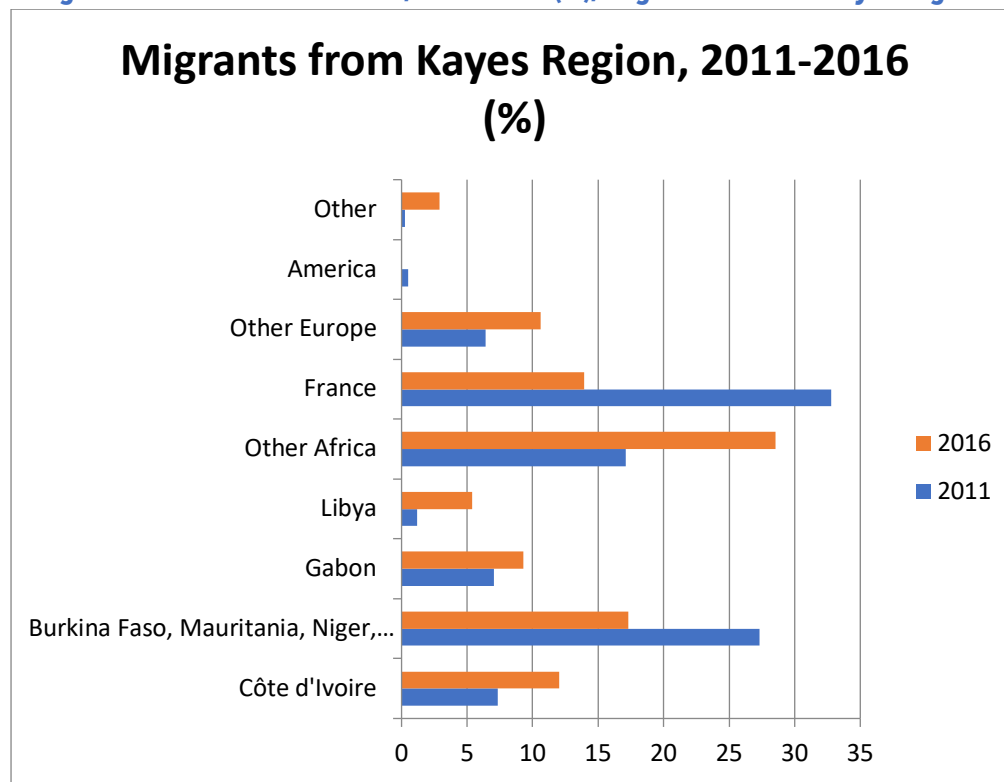
A full 90% of international emigrants from the Kayes are men and aged 25 when they leave, with 80% being from rural areas. The different ethnographic field surveys undertaken by the project in both Mali and France confirm this fact previously observed by Feldman (2018). Although there are women from the Kayes Region who take the route to Europe via the Mediterranean, they form an exception.

### *Substantial financial support, but not for the region's poor*

Migrants from the Kayes, whether living in OECD countries or elsewhere, have a higher propensity to send remittances to their families back home than other Malian migrants from other regions in the country. This is probably due in part to the relatively high level of wages in these countries, but also possibly to greater redistributive pressure exerted by the families and communities on

those living in these countries. The largest total sums of remittances are sent from France and other European countries, accounting for 55% of all sums received by households. Remittances provide for the needs of a large number of people, but not the poor. As has already been shown in other settings, this is due to the fact that migrants are not members of poor households given the financial cost of migration itself and the fact that migration is fed by pre-existing migration networks, family networks in particular.

**Figure 1: Destination countries, 2011-2016 (%), Migrants from the Kayes Region**



Sources: EMOP2011, EMOP2016, authors' calculations

NB: Migration flows in the five years preceding the survey (2006-2011 and 2011-2016).

## Impacts of migration processes on family social dynamics and gender relations in particular

### *Migration – a family strategy*

In general, migration from the Kayes Region by a family member fulfils a family strategy. This is true as much for moves by men as by women. By the same token, migration abroad appears to be virtually systematically organized

by families who already have members living outside the village who can take care of the moving expenses.

Whereas the main aim of a man's departure is for him to find a paid job and send money to the family back home, a move by a woman is defined initially as a way to assist another family member (sister, aunt, husband, etc.). Note, however, that the fact that the men also leave to join other family members living at their point of destination and that the women are also solicited by family members for financial support tempers the gender-based differences in their relatives' expectations and the difference between social representations and reality.

We can nonetheless confirm that men in village households, that have already experienced migration, virtually systematically have plans to move abroad. A man's desire to migrate often meets the elders' wishes. The loss of manpower due to the departure is generally offset by the money sent and the seasonal workers it pays for, which is not the case with a move by a wife to join her migrant husband (see below).

The order in which men migrate generally corresponds to the order of primogeniture, but some young men get around the system by going through their mother's family. The young men who have migrant family members who step forward to help them migrate are taken in hand from the village through Bamako to their destination.

### *The important role of social media and instant messaging platforms in community and family relations*

The ethnographic survey reveals a current intensification in contacts and communication, in particular with the circulation of photos within the family. The ethnographic surveys conducted at the different locations found that virtually all family members with a mobile phone had a social media and/or instant messaging account. Information-sharing groups exist at a number of levels, mainly the lineage segment scale, the age bracket scale and the village scale (including migrants from the village). The widespread affordability and instant nature of these information circulation tools have been instrumental in consolidating the collective dimension and its control over individuals, their choices and their actions.

This virtual networking has also developed a matchmaking market that tends to perpetuate endogamy. This is a new space where migrants present their social success stories. The creation of specific discussion groups has even been observed to put women back home in contact with migrants with a view to potential marriage.

### *The strategy of migration via marriage also concerns men*

Migration to join a husband is a well-known time-honoured practice in the Kayes Region. As mentioned above, the motive of assisting another member of the family is virtually the only credible reason for a woman to migrate, mainly as a wife joining her husband. Today, however, in the Kayes Region, we are also seeing the use of marriage as a migration strategy among men – men from the Kayes Region marry descendants of people from the region with French nationality in order to be able to legally emigrate to France.

### *Female geographic immobility (like their mobility) is part of the family strategy*

The ethnographic survey in the Kayes Region shows that bids by wives to join their migrant husband at his destination point often meet with opposition from the husband's family. Leaving wives and children behind in the village is a way of publicly signalling the migrant's attachment to the village and his family back home. It is also a way of guaranteeing his continued financial support. Lastly, note that a migrant wife is not replaced by domestic staff, unlike the case where the migration-related shortage of male manpower is offset by the use of seasonal labour. In addition, a daughter-in-law's contribution to the household head's wives is not limited to the performance of a list of tasks. There are other concerns, which makes her contribution more complicated to replace.

### *The gender norms that hold in the village continue to play a role to varying extents in the place of settlement*

Despite the geographic distance between the Kayes Region villages and the different places where their migrant members settle, migrant household dynamics continue to be marked by models that hold in the village. This factor can sometimes create ambiguous and contradictory attitudes. For example,

the survey in Abidjan suggests that family dynamics in migrant households from the Kayes Region tend to take the village lifestyle as their model, especially in terms of marriage strategies (endogamy and child marriage for girls), education strategies (enrolment of children in Koranic schools), and making women stay at home.

### *Empowerment through migration – a still-incomplete process reserved for certain social categories of women*

The survey confirms the particularity of the migration pathways of women from the Kayes Region cities with a certain level of education/training. These pathways have virtually nothing in common with the pathways of rural female migrants from the region. The survey also shows that the break with the community made possible by this particular social rank makes them highly vulnerable in France, at least initially. Lastly, with respect to their social position in the country, the acceptance of their social and economic independence that these female migrants have managed to build following their international migration depends on the forms of redistribution of the returns on this independence within their entourage.

### *The effects of migration movements on local development, the local and national political scene, and the organization of administrative areas*

Migrants from the Kayes do more than just support their families. They are also actively involved in the social and economic development of their community. The migrants living in Northern countries are particularly committed to this cause.

### *A multi-level associative fabric: local engagement and implicit criticism of the government*

The migrants from the Kayes living in France have been running their associations for some four decades. These Home Town Associations offset government shortcomings in a number of local everyday areas (health and education, see Daum, 1998; Chauvet et al., 2015). More recently, in a climate of acute state crisis, the Malian diaspora has become involved at national level



in questions regarding the role of Malian emigrants in the country's political stabilization. The migrants' local engagement and sense of civic duty are rooted in a relationship built over the years between the Malian state and its nationals in an ambiguous dynamic caught between the assertion of a counterbalance and the institutionalization of a social and political force. This report reconstructs the evolution of these practices at the different levels (local, regional and national).

In a unique event in Mali, the Kayes home town associations took part in shaping the communes in the late 1990s. The Malian government asked them to roll out the decentralization reform given their experience in local development and intervillage relations. However, to preserve the associative dynamic at work in the Kayes villages, the immigrants living in France sought to match the perimeters of the future commune zones with the associations' catchment areas, without any real success since other factors were at play. The reorganization of the Kayes Region communes hence shaped a new map dominated by territorial fragmentation. This local administrative splintering threatened to destructure the development associations themselves. Consequently, on the eve of the first commune elections in 1999, their future was looking uncertain.

### *The migrant associations and the 1999 political watershed: mistreated legitimacy and citizenship*

Recognized as fully fledged development players by both the Malian government and by their partners in Europe, the home town associations acquired a social and political legitimacy that stands them in good stead to this day. In the late 1990s, however, the lines became considerably blurred on the political scene between elected officials, migrants and the central administration. In the Kayes Region *cercles* where migration is the most active (Kayes, Yélimané, Nioro and Diéma), many mayors and local councillors are former home town association leaders.

In effect, from 2000 to 2012, the Kayes Region emigrants in France accepted the creation of this additional associative level, since their legitimacy and the fate of their home village in the commune territories depended on it. They ultimately took on board the administrative and political game change of decentralization, which they themselves had also called for. For the migrants,

now connected regardless of whether they had settled in Europe or Africa, the point was also to maintain a balance and staying plugged into the populations' needs while exercising a form of control in the decision-making process. This dialogue between migrants and elected officials, albeit sometimes hesitant, was not limited to the local level. It was gradually extended to other administrative levels where elected authorities were also looking for dialogue partners within the diaspora.

In 2009, the creation of CADERKAF,<sup>7</sup> a regional federative structure, marked a further step in the institutionalization of the associations of emigrants from the Kayes. However, cracks of tension are starting to show through the veneer of this cohesive, balanced picture. The associative fabric is more fragile than it seems and new forms of associations have been identified (e.g. in the District of Yélimané), which are moving into position as countervailing forces to commune elected officials, some of whom are former migrants.

## Migration aspirations

In our analysis of the young men's migration dynamics, we prefer the "killimuuraana" expression used by our interviewees in the ethnographic survey to the "would-be migrant" notion frequently used by migration flow management institutions. The expression "killimuuraana" is commonly used to refer to young people who are considering departure and particularly those who leave the villages for Bamako to prepare for their migration. The "would-be migrant" category does not reflect the complexity of the profiles encountered. First, schoolboys and students can find themselves on the migration routes. Second, those who go to Bamako with the idea of migrating may find employment in the city and shelve their initial plans.

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<sup>7</sup> CADERKAF: Coordination des Associations de Développement des Cercles de la Région de Kayes en France (Committee of Development Associations of the *Cercles* of Kayes Region in France).

### *The elders' accounts continue to hold male emigration in esteem*

The elderly men met in the Kayes Region justified the need for migration by extreme weather and its detrimental effects on harvests. This is a widespread narrative in other Sahelian countries. At the same time, the elders often speak highly of what the migrants bring in. Some of them convey their view of migration on social media and in discussion groups of migrants and non-migrants. Moreover, they often make a contribution to funding the younger villagers' departures.

### *A high proportion of individual aspirations to migrate both abroad and within the country*

The survey conducted on a representative sample of young men (18-35 years old) living in the rural *Cercle* of Kita (*cercle* in southern Kayes) confirms the importance of migration in the life plans of rural young men in the area studied. A full 60% of the 2,000 individuals interviewed said they hoped to leave their place of residence. Nearly all of them said they wanted to leave to improve their standard of living. Rare were those who said they wanted to leave to get away from their family or have more freedom (19 of the 1,200 individuals wanting to leave). These young men have high hopes that migration will improve their living conditions, which three-quarters of them see as passable if not difficult. Migration is therefore perceived as a significant opportunity to escape their current conditions. Yet it is not just international migration that is envisaged, but also migration within the country to areas of employment such as the mines of Kenieba. These areas represent a substantial source of income to supplement agricultural earnings. The young people go to work there either between two crop seasons or live there for short periods of less than five years. A total of 28% of the entire sample (or 47% of the people interested in migrating) said they wanted to migrate within Mali – essentially to Kenieba or Bamako. Among those who said they were considering migration abroad, more of them expressed a wish to leave the African continent than to stay on it. Just 9% said they wanted to move to another Sub-Saharan African country (essentially Gabon or Côte d'Ivoire) and 4.5% were considering a North African country (Algeria or Libya), while 18.5% wanted to leave Africa and placed France, Spain and Italy top of the list of

destinations they would like to reach. It is interesting to note that the majority of the people interviewed (over 60%) stated that their migration project was a personal project and they did not want to share it with the other members of their family. This points to the desire to free themselves from pressure from the elders to support the family once they have migrated. They see their earnings, admittedly hard-earned from working in the gold mines, as enabling them to fund their project and therefore to be less beholden to family members who would have had to fund their project had they not had this opportunity.

### *Awareness of the risks of illegal immigration into Europe does not really compromise the migration project*

The ethnographic survey shows that tougher migration policies in Europe are not dissuading the Kayes Region "killimuuraana" from leaving. Their effect on those targeting Europe is to steer them towards the Mediterranean crossing route with all the dangers this entails. By the same token, to avoid the lot of other migrants entering Europe illegally, families are sending their sons at younger ages to take advantage of the relatively rapid access to the legal right of residence in Europe reserved solely for those granted the status of unaccompanied foreign minor.

The ethnographic survey of young men from a village near the border with Mauritania shows that the young men considering crossing to Europe by sea are well aware of the dangers, but that this awareness does not appear to compromise their plans. The argument is put forward by both young men preparing to migrate and young men who have already crossed the Mediterranean to France: they take the route despite the risk because they feel they have nothing to lose, they do not see any other way to get on in life and they put themselves in God's hands. The statistical survey conducted in Kita confirms this state of affairs. Watching the documentary on a peer's failed migration attempt and its damaging effects on him had no effect on the migration aspirations of the young men interviewed. The statistical survey also shows that the income to which they aspire in France is very high, at twice that actually earned by Malians working in France and virtually 30 times higher than the income they think they can earn in Kita. Risks aside, then, their desire to migrate remains intangible.

## *The connection for the men between migration project and married life – new trends?*

Marriage and migration are still two important steps in the rite of passage to manhood for young men from the Kayes Region. And both of these two designs combine personal initiative and family choices. They are both subject to strong social expectations and both require substantial financial means. Compared with previous decades, the men display a general tendency to migrate later on in life due to the difficulties involved in migrating legally and the size of the sums they need to raise. This phenomenon combined with their awareness that a migrant can spend years in Europe without being able to return home make it impossible to adopt the former model of migration prior to marriage and a first return to the village to get married (early 1970s model described by Samuel, 1978). The young men and the families are therefore torn both ways, which explains the divergent lines of reasoning found by the survey: interviewees who remain attached to the idea of prioritising migration before marriage and others who insist on the need to get married before migration once they reach what is seen as the 'normal' age to get married. Both groups point out the difficulties associated with these two configurations.

## *Return to the country*

The migration process is all the more an integral part of some of the the Kayes inhabitants' family and individual life plans in that migration is rarely seen as definitive. Many return to the country. These returns are frequent and they drive economic and social reconfigurations at family level, but also on the local and national political scene.

## *Fewer returns by migrants living in OECD countries*

Many emigrants from the Kayes Region return to live in Mali. These return migrants represent around 5% of the population living in the Kayes (as opposed to 4% of the country's inhabitants). Malians who migrate to Europe return the least. Just 11% of the return migrants in the Kayes come from France or other European countries, whereas they represent 25% of the migrants who migrate abroad. This state of play is due to a number of factors, including constraints on mobility between Africa and Europe and the free

movement of persons within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

### *Return migrants, an important source of economic support for the family*

The quantitative surveys show that people spend six years abroad on average before returning to Mali at around 32 years old. Kayesians who migrate to countries in Africa return with wives and children. This is less the case for the men who migrate to Northern countries, since their families generally stay behind in the Kayes. The vast majority of the return migrants go back to agricultural activities as own-account workers. They earn significantly more than non-migrants. This enables them to accommodate people and provide for their needs, and they are proportionately more polygamous than the other households. Consequently, their households are much larger than non-migrant households, although there is little difference between their levels of per capita consumption, aside from in households with men who have lived in OECD countries where the standard of living is 18% higher than in households without migrants or with return migrants from other African countries.

### *Returns by women*

The statistical surveys show that 10% of the migrants who have returned to live in the Kayes Region are women, which is the same as the percentage of women among the migrants. Returns from migration by women are therefore no more intense than for the men. The ethnographic survey of female emigrants to countries on the African continent who have returned to Mali and now live in Bamako shows that the decision to return, like the initial decision to leave, is made by the husband and his family. Clearly, the women do not have a say in the matter. The women met in Bamako stated that the return trip was usually made on the pretext of needing to provide healthcare for another family member – a trip that unbeknownst to the women was actually a definitive return. The women interviewed all expressed their preference for living in Bamako rather than going back to the village. They had all taken up the same small-scale informal business they had run in the migration destination country.

## The actively engaged diaspora: what role does it play on the Malian political scene?

Politically engaged migrants from the Kayes circulate between their country of settlement and Mali. Whether still migrants or definitive returnees to Mali, they constantly negotiate their positions on the local and national Malian political scene.

### *Bamako, a strategic place for negotiations between migrants from the Kayes and central government*

In addition to studying the associative networks with their multiple sites between source villages and destination countries, there is such a magnitude of internal migration that the study was also able to look into the networks built between the Kayes and Bamako. Paradoxically, decentralization means that the capital of Mali now occupies a particular position, since it has become a strategic place for access to central government, its financial resources and its political networks. Migrant association branches in Bamako are part of a new centrality. Bamako is hence the place where the limitations of the engagement of the Malians Abroad can be seen to take shape, here in a post-crisis environment, revealing heightened tensions between the administration and the Malian diaspora.

### *Is local and national political recognition a trap?*

Despite national political recognition of Malian emigrants with the creation of the High Council of Malians Abroad (HCMA) in 1992 and the Ministry for Malians Abroad in 2004, many are the voices in the diaspora that take issue with the government and its inability to create the conditions for a relationship of trust between the administration and its expatriates. The interviews conducted in Paris, the Kayes and Bamako reveal that Malian emigrants feel somewhat trapped in a citizenship “split” between local and national level. Behind this “Malians Abroad” title, which acknowledges the citizenship of all emigrants wherever they may live, two tendencies are shaping up with, on one side, “translocal” citizenship revolving around the development of the home town and, on the other, “diasporic” citizenship revolving around

political engagement and critical scrutiny of the Malian administration and its institutions. A debate is currently underway regarding the diaspora's representation in the National Assembly. This is a long-standing promise that has never been fulfilled. It is in this climate that a new association was set up in 2015, the Higher Council of the Malian Diaspora, in a break with the HCMA. Since the 2012 coup d'état and collapse of central government, the migrants and their associations have been increasingly critical of the administration and its ability to take action both in local development and in assisting its nationals abroad.

### *Migrants, which political players?*

In this agitated political landscape where the government's legitimacy is strained, the question as to whether the migrants are vehicles for political pro-democratization standards remains open. Decentralization has created a dichotomy for the Malians of the diaspora, torn between political monopolization and renewed criticism, and this on a playing field of sliding scales.

In the Kayes Region, many of the first mayors, migrant and non-migrant, to be elected to the communes in 1999 still hold their mayorship. Some elected representatives and former migrants, while remaining in the associative environment, have risen up through the different levels of authority to sit on *cercle* councils, the regional council and even the High Council of Local Government Authorities. This dual political and associative affiliation is open to interpretation as being designed either to form a bridge between the two spheres or as a partisan takeover, so much so that confusion could end up prevailing and discrediting the associative movement. Despite the restructuring of the emigration-based associations, the "political opposition" aspect appears to have been dropped since the "elders" have become integrated into the political system. They have also become partners for European and international development agencies and have obtained substantial funds from the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa<sup>8</sup> to address the root causes of migration. In this light, the debate on the defence of migrants'

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<sup>8</sup> EUTF for Africa: The European Union Emergency Trust Fund for stability and addressing root causes of irregular migration and displaced persons in Africa. The amount for Mali is 196.6 million euros: [https://ec.europa.eu/trustfundforafrica/content/trust-fund-financials\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/trustfundforafrica/content/trust-fund-financials_en)



rights appears distorted and voices in the Kayes Region speaking out against this conflation of local development and restriction of mobility are becoming rare. In the face of a fragile state with decentralization at a standstill, the Kayes Region local authorities are finding it hard to propose alternatives to young people desperately in need of work for whom migration remains ultimately a life project accessible in the short term. When all's said and done, members of the Malian diaspora living in both Africa and Europe display an extraordinary sense of civic duty and keep their sights set on new political horizons.

Nehara Feldman, Stephanie Lima and Sandrine Mesplé-Somps

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