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Insecurity and generalized political crises

A challenge for tourism development in the Aïr massif region of Niger

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Translation: Brian Keogh

- 1 Introduction
- 2 The geopolitical position of Niger within a Sahel-Saharan zone that is undergoing profound political change is raising questions regarding the development of certain territorial resources that are potentially indispensable to start or accelerate the development of an entire region. Situated in the north of Niger, the Agadez region is distinctive in that it represents a commercial crossroads and is located on the only route between the Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa. For Niger it provides the main export resource, namely uranium, and remains the last stronghold of Touareg culture, anchored in the mountains of the Aïr Massif and the Sahara desert. Over the past two decades, it has witnessed a gradual increase in insecurity and in traffic of all sorts.
- 3 Despite the existence of an undeniable tourism potential, comprising several flagship and sometimes unique products (cultural, archeological, landscape, architectural), the region appears helpless as it witnesses the slow disappearance of one of the crown jewels of its economy, even though tourism has made it and the country as a whole famous over recent decades, with the Paris-Dakar Rally crossing the Aïr Massif and the dunes of the Ténéré desert and providing a window on the cultural wealth of the desert's "men in blue". Today tourism stakeholders in Agadez talk with considerable bitterness and regret about this period of abundance and prosperity, now a thing of the past. And yet it is only recently that the geopolitical exposure of this region has placed

it at the centre of several political crises, both national and international (Grégoire, Scholze, 2012).

- 4 This article, based on data obtained from investigations over three years as part of a research programme (MIST-AA), examines not only the considerable diversity of what the Agadez region has to offer for visitors, but also reveals the extreme fragility and vulnerability of this tourism model that is today in crisis. In the field, the analysis of the behaviour of different actors to overcome the difficult situation they face, some of the causes and consequences of which go beyond the national borders, identify several types of strategies that are often timely and temporary, but sometimes reflect despair.

Methodology and context of study

Research methodology

- 5 The approach adopted in this research was based on a methodology comprising several stages:

Documentary search and analysis

- 6 This involved obtaining and consulting available documents both from documentation centres and the different actors interested in tourism in Niger, particularly in the Agadez region. This stage enabled a diagnostic analysis to be conducted focusing on the development of tourism in the region but also, more importantly, on the potential for tourism and the factors acting as a brake on development.

Field investigations

- 7 Three field investigation campaigns were conducted: one collective investigation involved all the members of the research team, while the others involved geography and sociology students, who carried out interviews. These investigations provided data to complete and consolidate the first analyses based on documentary data.
- 8 The approach based on qualitative interviews was aimed at involving a large number of actors by encouraging discussion among those who exercised the same activity. Using this approach enabled us to take into account the diversity of opinions through a process of participative communication.

Exploratory interviews

- 9 These were conducted during a collective investigation and, with the help of information obtained from contacts, resulted in the identification of the main stakeholders in tourism in the region: travel agents, rural and urban tour guides, hotel owners, restaurant owners, craftspeople and the customary and administrative authorities. In each of these groups of actors, grouped interviews were conducted with those persons concerned by tourism management. The meetings encouraged discussion among the different participants and enabled an analysis of the constraints imposed on tourism in region by the increasing insecurity. The exercise also enabled us to identify the initiatives taken by each of the groups of actors faced with these constraints as well as their proposals for improving the situation.

- 10 It was on completing the first stage that one of the adaptation strategies common to all the main participants attracted out attention. This was the diversification of activities in what was like a trial and error process, as each actor sought a way to make ends meet financially while waiting for better times to return.
- 11 In-depth interviews
- 12 To better understand the dynamics observed during the exploratory interviews, more in-depth interviews were conducted mainly on the subject of the adaptation strategy identified, particularly that of pluriactivity.
- 13 These interviews were structured and focused on the following:
 - hotel owners
 - tour guides still in work and those not in work or having changed activity
 - travel agents
 - restaurant owners
 - craftspeople
- 14 The aim of the interviews was to gain some insights into tourism practices in the region during times of peace, the constraints relating to insecurity, the solutions envisaged to deal with the problems, particularly the alternative activities that people resort to, and finally the intentions of participants should there be an improvement in the security situation in the region. In general, the interviews focused on specific themes and were directed to the different actors according to their involvement in tourism, whether it be at the regional, national or international level. The data collected were then analysed and the results submitted for evaluation to the different actors attending a feedback workshop.

The context

- 15 In Niger, there are basically two tourism models that have been adopted, that of Agadez, centred on the north of the country (Aïr, Ténéré), and that known as the “River Niger, W Park” model. Internationally known, with a rich potential and more attractive than the second, the Agadez model is, however, very fragile. The Agadez region covers some 667 799 km², or 52.6% of the national territory, occupying the entire northern part of Niger. It borders Algeria along 920 km, Libya along 350 km and Chad along 600 km (figure 1).

Figure 1. Location of Agadez region in Niger

- 16 [Image non convertie]
- 17 Thanks to the Agadez region, Niger has become a strategic crossroads of migratory movements that sees some 65 000 migrants from sub-Saharan Africa pass through every year, heading in the direction of North Africa and Europe (Ben Saad, 2003).
- 18 Agadez was, for a long time, before the recent discovery of oil and gold, the region that supplied the only mineral resource that was exported from Niger, that of uranium. The region also supplies the coal used in the production of electricity for the COMINAK and SOMAIR uranium mines.
- 19 Today, this area is suffering from insecurity associated with the recurrent Touareg rebellions but also, more importantly, the new international situation that has made

the Sahel-Saharan area important for several types of traffic. Political unrest in Libya following the fall of Colonel Kadhafi has further weakened this extensive area that is difficult to control and probably offers refuge to numerous groups considered to be terrorists, bringing together jihadists, as well as dealers in different types of traffic. In short, it is a situation that prevents any return of the tourists, however much this may be desired by local stakeholders.

Components and conditions of the tourism model in the Agadez region

Components of tourism in the region

- 20 The tourism sector in Niger is a transversal activity with considerable impact on the national economy, but its direct contribution to GDP is not well understood. More than anywhere else in Niger, tourism in the Agadez region, given its considerable potential, must act as a motor in the struggle against poverty, especially because of its important knock-on effects in the areas of jobs, income, transport, hotels, trade, industry and communications.
- 21 Without being exhaustive, the list of the Agadez region's considerable heritage and potential tourism assets shown in figure 2 may be divided into four categories: historic monuments, landscape sites, intangible heritage, and archaeological remains. These remarkable elements of the region's heritage constitute a territorial resource (Landel and Senil, 2009; Gumuchian and Pecqueur, 2007) that is internationally recognized and has been the subject of efforts to obtain recognition on the UNESCO list of World Heritage Sites (Scholze, 2008).

Figure 2. Tourism potential of the Agadez region

- 22 [Image non convertie]

Historic monuments

- 23 In this category we find:
- The Sultan's Palace with its incomparable architecture;
 - The famous 15th century Agadez mosque, which overlooks the town from its height of 27 metres;
 - The Aïr hotel, the first residence of the Governor of Agadez;
 - Assodé, the former capital of Aïr, comprising a group of ruins to the north of the village of Timia.

Landscape sites

- 24 The region offers a wide and diversified range of landscape sites, among which the following should be mentioned:
- Taguidit cliff to the north-east of Agadez with its rock engravings;
 - the Aïr Massif, a mountainous area situated to the north-west of the region, extending some 300 km from north to south and some 200 km from east to west. It comprises a group of high crystalline and volcanic massifs emerging from an ancient bedrock. The summits often

exceed 1000 metres, with the highest peak being Mont Gréboun at 2310 m. The southern slopes lead down to a depression dominated by the Tiguidit cliff. The eastern slope is in contact with the sandy erg of the Ténéré desert. To the west, there is a rapid transition to the Talak plain and the regions of Azawak and Tamesna. The Aïr Massif thus presents a feature of varied facies in the middle of a zone of hyper-arid monotonous plains.

- The mountain oasis of Timia, situated some 200 km from Agadez and referred to as the Switzerland of the desert with its mud-brick houses and its palm grove among a scattering of old volcanic craters;
- The Temet dunes situated at the foot of Mont Gréboun, some 40 km to the south of Adar Bous;
- Adar Chiriet situated on the edge of the Ténéré, presents a striking contrast of mountains and dunes, offering magnificent views;
- The Kogo, with its blue mountains within the National Natural Reserve of the Aïr Massif and the Ténéré desert;
- The Ténéré desert covers a large part of the north-east of the country. This is a hyper-arid sandy plain, bounded to the east by the Kavar cliff and to the north by the plateau areas of Djado and Mangueni. It is currently the most arid zone of the Sahara. Among its tourist attractions, mention should be made of its Natural Reserve with its rare animal species such as Barbary sheep, Saharan cheetahs, bustards and a diversity of birds.
- The Djado, accessible via the Ténéré desert from the Aïr Massif (400 km from Adar Bous), is endowed with a number of mysteries among the ruins of former cities.

Intangible heritage

- 25 The region's immaterial or intangible heritage is particularly varied and includes all the diversity and cultural wealth of the Touareg populations – the Peule, Haoussa and Toubou – that are manifest in the different feasts and celebrations organized annually throughout the region (the Aïr festival in Iférouane, the Bianou and the Tendé in Agadez, and the Cure Salée and the Gueerewol in Ingall). Several photos, sometimes mythical, are seen to portray the blue men of the desert, alluding to the Touareg, a reference that continues to fascinate visitors and potential visitors to the region. Aware of this cultural wealth and the attraction that it holds for visitors, local residents improvise stages for folk dances and songs each time visitors arrive in the villages to satisfy their curiosity and buy a few presents. Nowadays, travel agencies operating in these regions with the support of the State have improved these practices so as to better meet the expectations of tourists and, at the same time, generate more income for the local population.

Archaeological remains

- 26 The history of the Sahara when it had a more humid climate explains the presence of several prehistoric sites as well as important archaeological sites that have not yet been fully explored. Mention may be made of the dinosaur site at Gadoufawa (south-east of Agadez), the petrified woods of Marandet, cave engravings, and different tools from prehistoric civilizations.
- 27 Generally, the Aïr Massif and the Ténéré desert remain the main attractions for tourists visiting the Agadez region, with 68% mentioning these sites (figure 3). The second most

frequent reason cited by visitors is the discovery of local society, particularly the cultural aspects such as feasts, the nomads, the camel caravans, etc.

Figure 3. Main attractions for tourists in the Agadez region

28 **[Image non convertie]**

SURVEYS BY MIST/AA, 2011

29 This region's favourable natural environment has resulted in most travel agencies being located in Agadez. The region numbers some 52 travel agencies and 18 hotels, 10 of which are in the town of Agadez, making this town by far the most important visitor centre in the country, given that the country's second town, Zinder, has only 4 or 5 hotels that are operating today.

Vulnerability of tourism model in the Agadez region

30 Today, the Sahel-Sahara region has become a theatre of increasing insecurity fuelled by a number of rebellions (MNLA, MUJAO, ANSAR DINE), terrorist activities (hostage taking by AQMI) and trafficking of all sorts (drugs, weapons, cigarettes, people). The knowledge of the nomads has been reinvested in these practices in a climate of generalized insecurity (Retaillé and Walther, 2011; Giraut and Moutari, 2010)

31 Faced with this situation, the job of ensuring the safety of visitors and their belongings becomes increasingly difficult, particularly given the vast expanses of territory that are difficult to control by the different governments in power.

32 In the case of Niger, the remaining insecurity resulting from the two armed rebellions that beset the country in the periods 1990-1995 and 2007-2009 has plunged the tourism sector into a state of general morosity interspersed with a few periods of renewed activity initiated by the same actors (Grégoire, 2006). The last timid attempt at relaunching international tourism was sorely tested by the recent Libyan and Malian crises as well as the Islamist movement, BOKO HARAM, in northern Nigeria. Figure 4 shows how Niger is ensnared in the Sahel-Saharan zone at the centre of several hotbeds of tension that could degenerate at any moment into open conflict.

33 Given the extent of the national territory, together with the desert-like character of all its northern part in contact with the Sahara, the Niger government does not have sufficient means to make this fringe area of its territory secure, so that more than ever today it is affected by growing insecurity. This situation discourages or destroys any attempts at development, particularly since one of the flagship economic activities (apart from mining) in this region is still tourism, which has given rise to considerable hope since the end of the armed rebellions.

Figure 4. Location of Niger in the Sahel-Sahara region

34 **[Image non convertie]**

35 In the Agadez region, rightly considered as the most important destination for international tourism in Niger, tourist activity has experienced a somewhat irregular development on account of the climate of insecurity referred to earlier. In this region we are in the presence of a tourism model based on a solid and diversified tourist product thanks to the region's exceptional assets, sometimes unique but also fragile

because of its geopolitical position in a region that has been potentially unstable for two decades.

- 36 In the field, insecurity is reflected in the Agadez region in the systematic laying of mines along the main routes leading to important towns and other tourist sites. This situation is represented in figure 5, which reveals the extent of the mined zone as well as the number of fatal accidents already recorded. The north of Niger (Aïr, Ténéré), which might be compared to the lungs of the tourism industry, is no longer a region that can be frequented by western tourists as it has been banned by different European governments as well as the United Nations. In addition to the risk of being blown up by a mine, there is also the danger of being robbed or kidnapped. In the past few months, the development of the crisis in Mali and the resulting stream of civil and armed refugees have only aggravated the situation for tourism in Niger, and in Agadez in particular.

Figure 5. Mined areas and accidents related to mines

- 37 [Image non convertie]
- 38 In Agadez, the tourism sector is organized around a number of structures: Direction régionale du tourisme et de l'artisanat (Regional Directorate of tourism and crafts), Centre National de Promotion Touristique (National Centre for the Promotion of Tourism), Association Nationale des Professionnels du Tourisme et de l'Hôtellerie (National Association of Tourism and Hotellery Professionals) and the Syndicat du Tourisme du Niger (Niger Tourism Information Office). To better understand the current situation, it would be expedient to take a retrospective look at the dynamics of the sector since the mid 1980s.
- 39 Figure 6 shows that, for the case of the Aïr Massif and the Ténéré desert, the annual number of visitors was around 1500 during the period 1986 to 1989, and then reached 2500 in 1991, before dropping to zero in 1993 and 1994.
- 40 A timid recovery was observed between 1995 and 1997 with around 500 visitors per year, but this was followed by a total absence of visitors from 1998 to 2000. The situation improved substantially from 2001 to 2005 with 3000 to 4000 visitors per year before the area once again became insecure from 2007.
- 41 During these years of rebellions, tourism experienced enormous difficulties that led to a virtual halt in all tourism activities.

Figure 6. Changes in the number of tourists visiting the Aïr-Ténéré region with Agadez travel agencies from 1986 to 2005

- 42 [Image non convertie]
- ANTHELME ET AL., 2005**
- 43 The re-opening of Agadez airport (closed between 2001 and 2004 for restoration) enabled a sharp increase in the number of tourists visiting the region between October and March, the period when the airport operates. During the 2004-2005 season, two regular weekly flights operated (Point-Afrique and Go-Voyages) as well as a few occasional flights (Air Algérie). During the season, they brought some 3000 tourists. The tour-operator Point-Afrique also began offering circuits in the area through certain local agencies. During the period, 36 travel agencies in Agadez brought in around 4000

tourists (a maximum that has never been reached since), a major part of these being French. The most frequent circuits were no longer than a week and most of them took in Timia, Iférouane and the edge of the Ténéré desert. The south of the Aïr Massif (Tabelot and the Mounts Bagézans) benefited from an influx of tourists at the end of 2004 that was greater than normal, but still limited on account of the insecurity in the Tamgak region. As for the Aïr festival, held at the end of the year in Iférouane, it has attracted increasing numbers of visitors each year.

- 44 Thus tourism in the Agadez region first experienced a period of expansion until 1991, then a brutal fall in visitor numbers between 1991 and 2000, a recovery between 2000 and 2006, and finally another brutal halt in 2007.
- 45 Overall, the tourism sector in the region provides employment for around 4000 people (agencies, hotels, camping, etc.). The local populations in this zone were satisfied with the development of the sector and consider it an interesting way of diversifying their sources of income. The economic spin-off effects the most often cited are the renting of camels for the méharées (camel treks), the sale of handicrafts, and the sale of young goats and cheese. Some accommodation structures have existed for several years, while others have only recently appeared. The communal structures resulting from the application of decentralization measures, namely in the communal development plans, are beginning to imagine the introduction of a tourism tax on their territory. But, as already mentioned, tourism has experienced an unprecedented decline in recent years, as reflected in the numbers of foreign customers in four restaurants in Agadez as well as in the cumulative turnover for the same restaurants (figures 7 and 8).

Figure 7. Number of foreign customers in four restaurants in the town of Agadez

- 46 [Image non convertie]

Figure 8. Changes in cumulative turnover of four restaurants in the town of Agadez

- 47 [Image non convertie]

- 48 Certain problems concerning the tourism sector were mentioned by handicraft workers. The latter frequently complained that the guides and drivers do not often stop at the sites selling handicrafts. The same is often true for the inhabitants of villages and even those of Agadez, who also confirm that there has been a drastic drop in visitors to the region, as witnessed by the change in the number of customers received by 26 craftspeople in Agadez (figure 9). They remark that the agencies arrive in the area with all their equipment and that they buy very few products locally. Similarly, they prefer to sleep in the bush, so that local accommodation structures are not often used. Some populations also feel left out since most of the circuits do not pass through their area or only make a very brief stop (El Méki, Tabelot, In Dakat, Tchintoulous, Gougaram): "All we see is the dust". The consultation procedures that were initiated by certain tourism development projects in the past (Sanady, 1999 et UICN, 1999) should therefore be restarted.

Figure 9. Number of foreign customers received by 26 handicrafts stalls in the town of Agadez

- 49 [Image non convertie]

SURVEYS BY MIST/AA, 2011

Adaptation strategy: conversion of actors or reversal of hierarchy in the tourism model

Principal constraints of the tourism model in use in the Agadez region

- 50 From the in-depth interviews we held with five different categories of actors in the tourism sector – restaurant owners, hotel owners, crafts people, tourist guides and travel agents – concerning their perception of how their activities were developing in relation to tourism, a number of interesting insights were obtained. Figure 10 shows that insecurity, cited in 50% of cases and across all categories, is the main constraint on tourism in the Agadez region. In this respect, contrary to what one might expect, the recent Libyan crisis, despite its inevitable repercussions on Niger, is not mentioned by many interviewees. This suggests that the security question and how it affects the free movement of tourists, especially western visitors, was already a problem well before the events in Libya and had more to do with the internal situation resulting from the different rebellions.
- 51 No doubt the troubles in Libya aggravated an already difficult situation in Niger, and this was further compounded by the fact the great majority of tourists visiting Niger come from Europe (figure 11).

52 **Figure 10. Main constraints on tourism in the Agadez region**

53 [Image non convertie]
SURVEYS BY MIST/AA, 2011

Figure 11. Origins of tourists visiting the Agadez region in 2005 and 2010

54 [Image non convertie]
SURVEYS BY MIST/AA, 2011

- 55 The second constraint mentioned by interviewees concerned the difficulties of selling tourist products on account of the drop in visitor numbers in the region but also because of the morose economic climate at the regional, national and even international level.
- 56 To deal with these constraints, the different actors have developed strategies that, in some cases, amount to a reversal of the hierarchy in the former tourism model.

Adaptation strategy of different actors: pluriactivity or conversion

- 57 The strategy developed mainly concerns the diversification of activities while waiting for better times. Thus, 30% of those people in the restaurant business interviewed are involved in other activities, essentially the management of bars and small-scale trading activities. While the management of bars by restaurant owners is a common activity in Niger, and may be considered a pluriactivity, running a small shop or business, which has become quite common in recent years, is nothing less than a conversion. Our investigations showed that 2/3 of restaurant owners interviewed are involved in this

type of change and the great majority among them exercise more than one activity outside the restaurant business, still considered as the main activity.

- 58 As for those in the hotel trade, their solution tended to involve initiatives to diversify the services offered by the hotel. To compensate for the drastic drop in income from tourists, the hotels of Agadez have now become, more than ever in the past, venues for seminars, workshops and meetings held by projects, NGOs and the State. This activity, although not new, seems to be a solution for maintaining, after a fashion, hotel infrastructures in the absence of foreign tourists. Thus, more than half of the hotel owners interviewed (57.14%) had reduced their staff, laying off in particular cooks and room cleaning personnel. Our investigations revealed that for the personnel who lost their jobs, there were three possible solutions: conversion to another area of activity, generally a small shop or business (42.86%), unemployment, or migration to other regions of Niger, to neighbouring countries or, in some cases, to Europe. For the tour guides interviewed, some had remained in the activity, while others had completely abandoned it.
- 59 For the first group, only 30.77% considered the escorting of tourists as their main occupation. For the great majority, it was an occasional activity that was practiced by a number of different trades or professions. Among our interviewees who declared to be tour guides, some were also drivers, mechanics, NGO employees, craft workers, cooks and even State employees, particularly teachers.
- 60 The situation is completely different for those working in handicrafts, since 80% believe that insecurity is the cause of the constraints imposed on the tourism sector. However, despite all these difficulties, the 26 craftspeople interviewed do not exercise any other activity. They have made a number of adjustments, however, to adapt to the crisis situation. Thus they have focused more on producing utilitarian articles, for which there is greater demand from the local population, than on those exclusively reserved for tourists. Other better-organized craftspeople manage to obtain orders for articles to be exported via solid networks that have been in place for decades. These more fortunate stakeholders manage to participate in international events (different international fairs in Africa, Europe and the Americas), enabling them to carry on their activities more normally and to earn a living despite the crisis. This is a strategy that, without being new, is today tending to provide an option for attenuating the effects of the current collapse of the tourism sector in Agadez.

Conclusion

- 61 The analysis of the crisis situation in which tourism in the Agadez region finds itself today reveals just how vulnerable a tourism model based exclusively on foreign demand can be. It only took an interruption in the flow of foreign tourists for the system to suffer a total collapse, without any solution being found for either the short or medium term. The different adaptation strategies developed by the various stakeholders have only been temporary responses to meet the most urgent needs, but have in no way constituted real long-term solutions based on careful thought and sound planning of the type needed to stem the effects of a crisis that may well last for many years.

- 62 This study shows that while the geographical position of Agadez has endowed the region with an extraordinary tourism potential (cultural, archaeological and landscape assets), its geopolitical situation has rendered it extremely fragile by placing it in a context of generalized insecurity resulting from local and regional political crises. One may now well ask whether the collapse of this tourism model, which has thrown entire families into unemployment, is not a factor that could act as a catalyst for the development of activities considered today as organized crime or terrorism and observable throughout this region, in other words, activities that generate “dirty money” fueling several types of traffic and illicit activities.
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ABSTRACTS

The tourism model adopted by the Agadez region in Niger, which is built around a series of pioneering and sometimes unique products, has had a rough ride for two decades and today is in crisis.

The region has reached an impasse as a result of a situation of generalized insecurity in the Sahel-Saharan sub-region and in northern Niger in particular. This chronic insecurity, resulting from several political crises (two rebellions in Niger, crises in Libya and Mali, the Boko Haram movement in northern Nigeria) since the 1990s, has revealed the extreme weakness of a tourism model in an area whose geopolitical situation, once considered an asset, has become a major constraint on the flowering of an activity that contributes both to the livelihood of a whole region and the cultural development of an entire people.

This insecurity has obliged different local stakeholders to develop adaptation strategies ranging from the exercise of multiple activities to a sort of conversion from tourism towards other

sectors of activity. The change in the economic situation has different consequences depending on the stakeholders and their level of dependence on tourism.

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Keywords: Agadez (Niger), tourism, insecurity, Touaregs, conversion of tourism stakeholders

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