

Freedom of movement activism in the Sahara

Moctar Dan Yaye and Maurice Stierl

Activists in the Sahara have mobilised to protect the rights of migrants to mobility and safety during their journeys to North Africa but they face significant challenges in a hostile political environment.

As the largest hot desert in the world, the Sahara is close in size to China or the US. Historically divided into countries through borders drawn by colonial powers, today the region faces the effects of Europe's externalisation of its borders.¹ Niger is one of the eleven countries touched by the Sahara. The region is host to diverse communities, despite people often conceiving of the desert as a vast and empty space. The Sahara also experiences interrelated (geo-)political conflicts over territory, resources and mobility.

Although Niger is not part of the Middle East and North Africa region, it plays an important role in the context of migration. Niger hosts many people on the move, including those in transit, people pushed back from North Africa, or those migrating along trade routes as part of the regional economy.

In places such as Niger, the externalisation of Europe's borders has had particularly devastating consequences. Both politically pressured and financially incentivised by the EU, Niger passed a law² (law 0-36) in May 2015 on the 'illegal trafficking of migrants', thereby criminalising what had previously been a legal and regular occupation: the northbound transport of people on the move. The effect of this type of work moving 'underground' was an increase in inexperienced drivers, longer and more dangerous routes, and increased fatalities.

In response to the deaths along desert routes, activists in Niger and several other African countries launched *Alarme Phone Sahara*. Since 2017, this project "with the aim to defend the lives and the freedom of movement of migrants and refugees against repressive and often deadly migration policies"³ has run awareness campaigns about the conditions and risks of the journey, documented accidents, violence and deaths on migratory routes, and assisted people in distress in the desert.

Moctar Dan Yaye, who lives in Niamey, Niger, is an activist of *Alarme Phone Sahara*. In the following interview he highlights how EU policies seeking to restrict migration movements have prompted activism in response and how, despite adverse political conditions, *Alarme Phone Sahara* has evolved into a trans-border infrastructure of solidarity.

Why do people on the move die in the Sahara?

In the desert, almost all deaths occur from dehydration – when cars break down, when people lose their way while trying to avoid detection, or when people are abandoned. In the past, before this criminalisation of transport, people used to travel to Libya or Algeria in a convoy of cars. If one car broke down, others would assist. If someone was in distress, others passing by would help them. Since the criminalisation, there are no more convoys and everyone has to find their own route. Also, the type of driver has changed. Unlike the old drivers, the new ones are not known to the local population and they do not know the desert well enough, which puts lives at risks.

How did *Alarme Phone Sahara* come about?

Alarme Phone Sahara started in 2017, following the so-called 'migration crisis' of 2015 in Europe. We realised that public attention was focused on the Mediterranean Sea and other EU border regions. We decided to draw attention to the situation here to show what people on the move were experiencing before reaching the Mediterranean. We wanted to expose human rights violations.

Our motto is: free to go, free to stay. We ourselves are not facilitating movements. We just want to stop human beings dying. Our headquarters is in Agadez, Niger – one of the main gateways of northbound migration – but we are

also present in many other African countries, such as Mali, Togo, Burkina Faso and Morocco. We also have members in Europe and consider ourselves to be a transnational project between Africa and Europe.

We see Alarme Phone Sahara as the sister project of Alarm Phone, the activist hotline operating in the Mediterranean, which inspired us. We decided to build a similar structure for the desert, and circulate a phone number that could be called by people in distress. However, we realised that creating a phone line here was not enough, due to limited network coverage in the desert.

In some regions of the Mediterranean people use satellite phones because of such limited network coverage. Do people crossing the Sahara carry satellite phones?

People on the move rarely have satellite phones. It is dangerous to carry them as you could be seen by the police or military as belonging to a crime network. We therefore had to think about alternative ways to learn about distress situations.

We decided to build a network of volunteers who live in villages around the routes of migration to Libya or Algeria and who know these regions well. We call these people ‘whistle-blowers’ as they raise the alarm when migrants are in distress. They know where to find phone network coverage and water or how to assist people in need, for example by fixing broken cars. Finding whistle-blowers was not easy, however. We had to build confidence among the population. Over time, these locals realised that what we were trying to do was also in their own interest. We see this as a common fight.

The criminalisation of migration has affected the whole economy of the region. Many people were involved in migration-related activities, which used to be legal and normal. People in the villages do not want anyone to die in the desert but they are scared of the consequences of engaging with migrants. They fear criminalisation. So, together, we tried to come up with ideas of what to do. We also held meetings with former drivers who used to transport people (legally) in order to get their advice and share our information with them.

If our whistle-blowers hear about abandoned migrants, they cannot transport them as they might be considered smugglers or traffickers if caught by the police. What they can do, however, is to orientate the migrants and tell them how far it is to reach Libya or the next village.

Combined with this network of whistle-blowers, our hotline works well. Sometimes when we inform authorities about distress cases, they allow us or our whistle-blowers to evacuate the migrants to the nearest villages. We also get calls from different cities in Niger from people asking about the risks of the journey, or we receive calls from abroad from people in the diaspora who are searching for someone.

Some international organisations claim that more people die in the Sahara than in the Mediterranean. Do you have an estimate of how many people die in the desert while migrating?

Nobody can tell how many dead bodies lie hidden in the desert. As Alarme Phone Sahara, we never give estimates on the number of people dying in the desert. Organisations that claim to know might do so because they use numbers to justify their work or to get funds. In the political realm, numbers give importance to an issue, but for us it is not about numbers but humans. We are human rights defenders. What we do is to draw attention to the fact that deaths are happening in the desert, and to the criminalisation and repression of human rights defenders involved in rescue.

What do you regard as your biggest successes and main obstacles?

We have succeeded in drawing international attention to what goes on in the Sahara – that is, before people reach the Mediterranean and Europe. For us, this is a real achievement. We have also been on several tours in Europe to speak to a range of audiences about the situation here. In addition, we have managed to document what nobody else had documented before: the pushbacks of migrants from Algeria. Now more people have a sense of the scale of pushbacks occurring along the Algeria–Niger border.

The biggest challenge we face is the 0-36 law and the lack of legal protection. We work in a situation where we could be criminalised at any moment, if considered to be helping 'irregular migration' or accused of human trafficking. And that scares us. Another big challenge is the security issue. The desert is a dangerous place due to militarisation and increased insecurity. We go out there at our own risk in order to defend the right of mobility for everyone.

**Do you ever feel at risk in your activism?
Do European activists fail to understand what it means to do activism in the Sahara?**

When you do activism like this, in a country like ours, the feelings of danger and fear are permanent. The biggest issue is that if something happens to you, you do not know who to turn to. They can throw you in jail or even worse. In terms of controlling migration, both local authorities and international forces collude. In 2021, I was physically assaulted by men in uniform without knowing their exact reason for doing so. Was it because of my activism or just for being in the wrong place at the wrong time?

I would not say that European activists completely fail to understand the context here. We are in contact with many international networks and inform them about the environment

in which we work. Still, I do not think they fully understand the situation and the conditions in which we engage. We are all activists but we are not in the same situation. They have privileges that others do not have, so they need to remember this and place it in the centre of our collaborations.

Some activists can move freely. Some are protected by the law. Others are not.

Another issue is finances. To be an activist here closes many doors, even in your paid work, which is not the same in the Global North. Here you often cannot do activism openly. I would remind other activists and comrades from the Global North to always remember this, and to always engage in sharing knowledge about the contexts and realities of activists in the Global South.

Moctar Dan Yaye mdanyaye@gmail.com

Alarme Phone Sahara, Communications and Public Relations

Maurice Stierl

maurice.stierl@uni-osnabrueck.de

@MauriceStierl

Researcher, Institute for Migration Research and Intercultural Studies, University of Osnabrück

1. See www.fmreview.org/externalisation for further discussion on externalisation.

2. République du Niger (2015) 'Loi N° 2015-36 du 26 mai 2015 relative au trafic illicite de migrants' www.refworld.org/docid/60a505e24.html

3. <https://alarmephonesahara.info/en/>



Alarme Phone Sahara office, Agadez, Niger. (Credit: Laura Lambert)