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CORRUPTION, INSECURITY AND BORDER CONTROL IN NIGER

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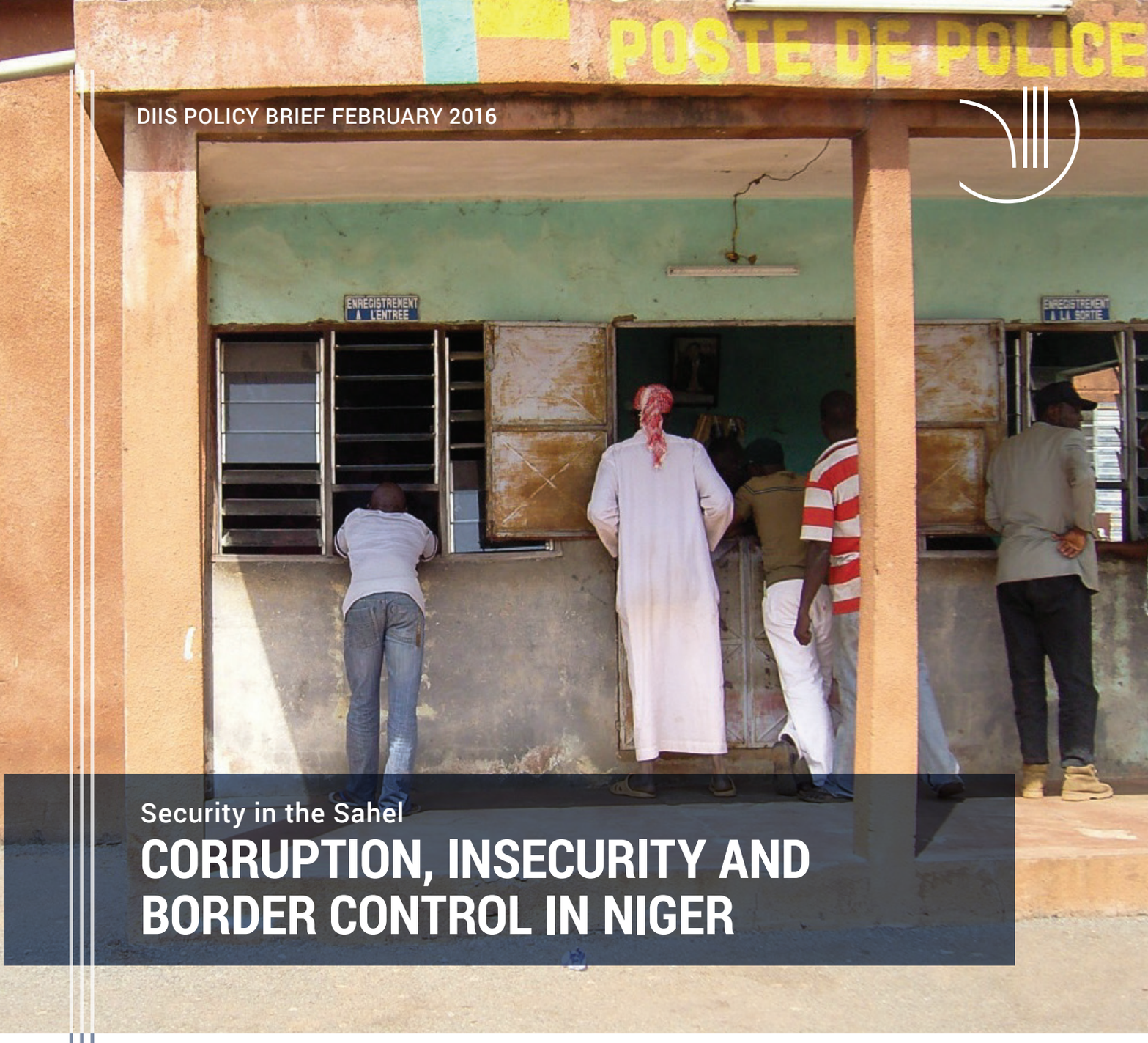
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Security in the Sahel

CORRUPTION, INSECURITY AND BORDER CONTROL IN NIGER

In Niger, deficient border control contributes to the spread of smuggling, drug trade and circulation of jihadists in the Sahel. More checkpoints cannot fully solve the problem. Training security forces and tackling corruption should be first priority.

Since the collapse of Gaddafi's regime in Libya and the expansion of violent conflicts in the Sahel, much attention has been paid to the porosity of the borders between Nigeria, Niger and Mali. Everyday petty corruption at border controls provides supplementary revenues to state agents as much as it exposes the region to a number of interrelated threats including illegal trade, criminal networks, smuggling of weapons

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The multiplication of border offices is insufficient for improving effective border control. Without complementary activities, it could expand corruption opportunities and increase insecurity.
- Security policy should focus on creating a culture of effectiveness including systematic and regular staff meetings, reporting, law implementation and sanctions as well as new modalities to reward border guards and other state agents.
- Corruption is, to a large extent, embedded in the social norms of the users of public service in Niger. Sensitisation among transporters, passengers and traders is crucial.

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Fieldwork shows that there is no positive relation between a higher number of checkpoints and an increased level of control

It is well known that beside the donations received from abroad, terrorist organisations such as Islamic State in West Africa (ex-Boko Haram) gather funds at the local level by controlling part of the trans-border trade between Nigeria and Niger.

and drugs, human trafficking and spread of terrorists. Undoubtedly, it is important to reinforce effective border control. Yet, what effective border control entails should be reconsidered.

Despite the existence of control offices, Nigerien state agents – police, customs, gendarmerie, soldiers and rangers – responsible for territorial protection and control of the circulation of goods and persons rarely carry out effective control at the border or at other domestic checkpoints.

External security actors such as France and the EU insist on increased border control by promoting the construction of new border offices as well as the provision of new equipment. However, recent fieldwork in the region suggests that the problem is not so much the lack of structures or equipment but the lack of will to control. Control officers strategically avoid to proceed to effective control of those who cross borders. This lack of will and effectiveness is explained by endemic corruptive practices that eventually meet the interests of both controllers and users.

How everyday petty corruption increases insecurity

Recent anthropological research shows that regular traders, transporters and passengers circulating within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) usually provide various kinds of informal payments to state agents. Bribing allows users to escape the taxation of goods or bureaucratic procedures imposed by state agents. In return, state agents turn a blind eye to imported goods and the identity of the persons that pass the border undeclared or unregistered. Even users without anything to hide are systematically requested by control agents to provide small amounts of money.

Apparently benign, these everyday informal practices of border crossing have nonetheless severe consequences in contexts of volatile security. Since paying informal fees has become the most common strategy to rapidly pass a border or any domestic police checkpoint, this daily routine has opened opportunities for smugglers as well as criminal and terrorist networks to develop their activities. Indeed, a good part of smuggling activities takes place on official roads and goes through official checkpoints exactly because everyday corruption makes such movements relatively safe and unseen.

A CASE OF CROSS-BORDER SMUGGLING

Yauri is a central market place for smoked fish, a very lucrative business in Northern Nigeria. In February 2014, a man suspected to be a gun runner was arrested by the Nigerian police in Yauri. The man was smuggling weapons from Mali to Nigeria via the Niger republic. He was transporting cartons that contained "unspecified quantity of guns and ammunitions covered by smoked fish" . Over the years, the suspect had operated under the cover of an international smoked fish dealer from Mali to Yauri.

This event, which was not isolated, occurred in a highly volatile security context in which weapons, illegal goods, terrorists and money circulate beyond borders in the Sahel since the collapse of the Gaddafi's regime in Libya in 2011. From 2011 onwards, insurgent movements and terrorist organisations as well as a number of militias and other armed groups in the Sahel have benefitted from the de facto free circulation of weapon and fighters across national borders.

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Moreover, it is well known that beside the donations received from abroad, terrorist organisations such as Islamic State in West Africa (ex-Boko Haram) gather funds at the local level by controlling part of the trans-border trade between Nigeria and Niger, including the lucrative business of smoked fish from the Lake Chad area. The army as well as defence and security forces have occasionally seized and destroyed cartons of smoked fish and arrested smugglers. But the sporadic arrests of weapon dealers have not triggered a reform in the functioning of border control and protection between Nigeria and Niger. In practice, effective control has remained the exception rather than the rule.

External security actors and the state facing the porosity of Nigerien borders

In the post-Gaddafi regional context, Niger's technical and financial partners (e.g. EU, France, USA, Belgium, Germany) have paid particular attention to border control in order to secure Niger from external threats. They emphasize the need to increase control by providing equipment and building control offices along the 1,500 km long Nigeria-Niger border.

Yet, fieldwork conducted by the author (June 2015) along the Niger-Benin-Nigeria border shows that there is no positive relation between a higher number of checkpoints and an increased level of control. On the contrary, state agents often create fake offices and checkpoints in order to increase the number of opportunities for taking bribes and racketing citizens.

Formulating realistic security reforms

Border control is crucial to hinder the expansion of armed conflicts across national borders. However, the excessive focus on the insufficient number of border control offices tends to divert attention from the quality and efficacy of public service. It is particularly important to better understand how border bureaucra-



Migrants on top of a truck in Agadez, Niger. From here, they have to cross the Sahel desert to Libya or Algeria as part of their journey towards Europe © AP/Ali Abdou

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cies deliver public service, how state agents perform their duty and how users become either accomplices or victims. A reform of public security should take its point of departure in the "real governance" of borders rather than being framed according to an ideal-type model removed from the real world.

For example, it would be important to know under which circumstances state agents do effectively control users at the border and impose sanctions in case of irregularities or illegal activities. It would be equally significant to assess how hierarchical structures within security services affect the behaviour of street-level state agents, which would allow policy-makers to ground their decisions in the problems faced by border bureaucracies in order to reform them in a way that is realistic. This requires that the results of empirical research that has already been conducted (see for example Etudes & Travaux du LASDEL) are shared with decision-makers at national and local levels.

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Cover photo: A police checkpoint at the Niger-Nigeria border © Eric Hahonou

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