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SUSTAINING POVERTY ESCAPES IN NIGER

Policy Implications Brief

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This document was prepared by Andrew Shepherd, of the Overseas Development Institute (ODI).

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The political, economic, social and environmental context for poverty reduction is challenging in Niger. In the short term, ending war, and getting public expenditure back into supporting development efforts are the priorities. The policy implications drawn in this brief are focused on the medium term, although in the short term programming by development partners and NGOs may be able to help prepare the ground for this medium term.

Aid to Niger has increased, but given its poverty levels, it may still be under-aided. Given the war in the east, keeping basic services going may be a significant agenda for development partners in the short term. Indeed, life is extremely risky and uncertain for poor and vulnerable people in Niger. The government and its development partners could attempt to reduce exposure to risk and strengthen poor people's resilience. Social protection needs to be more widely available and strongly embedded in national systems. Agriculture can be made less risky by supporting investing in irrigation, something many small farmers are doing.

Livestock is seriously under-supported: in particular reducing the risks of livestock deaths from disease or drought are both worth supporting strongly, since livestock represent rural people's major form of saving.

According to the accompanying research report, diversification is an important pathway to sustained escapes from poverty in the qualitative results. Extending rural electrification from a very low base could be an important support for this. Given sparse populations, this may require strong decentralized investment in decentralized mini-grids, especially using solar power. Trade provides opportunities for escaping poverty, but the infrastructure for effective markets relies on myriad small and often informal initiatives. Current initiatives to tax traders may have negative effects on this pathway out of poverty.

Migration is also a critical pathway to diversification in the qualitative data. Given hostile contexts for migrants in Nigeria and Libya, internal migration has become more important than it was. Development policy and programming in Niger could learn from the various migrant support initiatives in Asia, such as the 2008 New Labor Contract Law in China which makes labor contractors the legal employer and responsible for compliance with labor laws for recruited workers, or Pourakhi in Nepal which is a member-based organization advocating for the rights of vulnerable women throughout the migration cycle (Scott et al., 2016; Diwakar and Ghimire, 2018).

Early marriage is a sensitive issue which is a cause of impoverishment. It has been the subject of several initiatives in Niger, all sensibly taking an indirect approach to the issue. However, the results of these have not yet been assessed. There are projects designed to keep girls in school for longer, widely seen as critical to preventing early marriage. This brief recommends a comprehensive evaluation of current and recent projects, in addition to developing a systematic approach to better address this issue.

It is urgent to scale up the basic World Bank supported social protection scheme Niger has, which remains highly inadequate in terms of coverage, given the high level of uninsured risk faced by poor and vulnerable people. This is something which development partners could help finance during a period when government expenditure is heavily committed elsewhere, on the understanding that government revenues would go into the scheme once peace is achieved. Given the risks of drought and conflict, the recently added adaptive component of the scheme is very important.

A health insurance scheme would be needed to prevent the widespread impoverishing effects of ill health. A conflict period could be a good time to experiment with different approaches and develop a 'learning

umbrella' within which these could shelter, so that political parties can assess the advantages of such a scheme, and campaign on it politically at a future election.

It would be challenging to develop a strong portfolio response to poverty eradication at the national level at the present time, but there are critical links among interventions which need to be worked on: for example, electrification and irrigation development; health referral systems and health insurance pilot programs; and the integration between social protection provision and early warning systems.

POLICY AND PROGRAMMING CONTEXT

Niger is a relatively young democracy, facing very challenging circumstances. There are security challenges from Boko Haram and the Islamic State in Greater Sahara, and internally. It has a history of low and volatile, mineral- and agriculture-dependent economic growth; and now faces low commodity prices and therefore low levels of public revenues to improve from its low position in the Human Development Index. It is drought-prone and vulnerable to climate change. All of these create a complex risk environment and affect the process of poverty reduction both directly and indirectly (via revenue allocation and the policy space available for relevant initiatives). In the short to medium term public resources have been concentrated in the defense services (CIA World Factbook, 2018), to the detriment of social and economic services and investments, with the result that teachers and health workers among others may not get paid.

This means that any policy implications we can draw from this research are probably only relevant for the medium term, post-conflict era. In the short term, ending the war, and getting public expenditure back into supporting development efforts must be the priority. In this context, development actions of an innovative nature will rely in the short term on non-state efforts, and may have to manage without the certainty that the state is taking care of basic services and infrastructure development and maintenance.

The quality of governance is of course a key variable determining what can be done to respond to these challenges and reduce poverty. There are several elements to this: the degree of political and economic stability; the understanding citizens have of the political system; capacities to respond to challenges with appropriate policies and programs; the quality of public-private and public-civil society partnerships; and the capacities and intentions of local bureaucracies and political elites to implement policies and programs in a pro-poor way.

How has Niger performed on the aforementioned issues? The record on stability is positive since 2011, both politically and economically, with low inflation and a healthy rate of growth, with a series of reforms of tax and investment codes (U.S. Department of State, 2014), and a renewed attempt to attract foreign investment since 2016. Following a coup in 2010, elections were held in 2011 and 2016. During the 2016 elections, the incumbent party used its position to suppress the opposition, which then boycotted the election. Citizens are aware of democracy and broadly support it as a governance system (Afrobarometer, 2015). However, for the majority of Nigeriens, particularly those living in rural areas, their interaction with democratic institutions tends to be limited to a visit from candidates during the electoral campaign accompanied by the distribution of small 'gifts' (McCullough and Harouna, 2016).

Measures to attract foreign direct investment have begun to have an effect, though Niger's performance on the World Bank's Doing Business index has not improved much.

The record on appropriate policies for poverty reduction has been showing some improvement from a low base. In 2011, Issoufou's government promised to fight corruption, increase transparency, and ensure proper management of the country's natural resources. Niger's position in Transparency International's

Corruption Index has improved slightly since 2011. The Government of Niger also launched the 3N Initiative “Nigeriens Nourish Nigeriens” in 2011 in response to hunger in 2011 and 2012, as the main framework for food and nutrition security interventions by public administrations, local authorities, and non-state actors through to 2035. The initiative aims to strengthen national capacities in food production and supply, and resilience to food crises and disasters (Future Policy, 2018).

With the beginnings of a social protection program in place (see below), there has been some improvement in the policy framework for poverty reduction from a low base. However, disaster risk reduction policies were judged to be relatively weak in 2013 (Shepherd et al, 2013). Recently they have been strengthened by a number of initiatives in response to the Sendai agreement, but progress on these remains unassessed (Laouan, 2017).

Decentralization has been promoted since 2011: the government has formally enshrined it in laws and the constitution, and has developed a strategy for decentralization; set up a training center, and recently devolved education, health, water, and the environment. Municipal capacities are limited but there are ongoing attempts to build capacities and enhance participation, supported by development partners.

During the 2016 elections the Nigerien Party for Democracy and Socialism (PNDS) promised to refocus efforts on growth, investment and industrialization.

Niger was listed as an ‘aid orphan’ between 2006-2012 (OECD, 2015). More recently, aid volumes have more than doubled (OECD, 2018), and Niger is one of Africa’s most aided countries. However, Niger may still be highly under-aided, given its low income and high poverty levels, along with many other very low income countries (ODI., 2018). Given the war in the East and the concentration of revenues in the defense services, keeping basic services operating will inevitably be an important agenda for development partners in the short term. The threat is of significantly increased poverty incidence.

POLICY BRIEF OUTLINE

While many individuals and households escape poverty and remain out sustainably, others escape but then fall back into poverty, while others become impoverished over time and/or remain poor over extended periods of time. Research by CPAN supported by USAID’s Center for Resilience investigated the extent and drivers of transitory and sustained escapes from poverty across a series of country studies to better understand the sources of resilience that enable people to sustainably escape poverty given the complex risk environments in which they live. The research in Niger is summarized in the next section.

Given the multi-dimensionality of deprivation and causes of poverty in Niger, and the context of very stretched government finances and governance capacities, the brief recommends a *restricted* portfolio response to poverty reduction that incorporates a sound understanding of the major drivers of poverty dynamics. A restricted portfolio response recognizes that there are serious limitations to the extent to which initiatives can be joined up at this point in time, and seeks to identify the most critical spaces for joined up policy and programming.

The brief focuses on four substantive areas, which were selected as being the most salient out of a longer list of potential policy and programming focus areas emerging from the quantitative and qualitative research analysis. The first three address the risk environment, which in Niger is especially challenging, and must be a strong priority for action; the fourth focuses on supporting rural economic diversification in a context where agriculture and livestock keeping are becoming riskier and less effective as a route out of poverty.

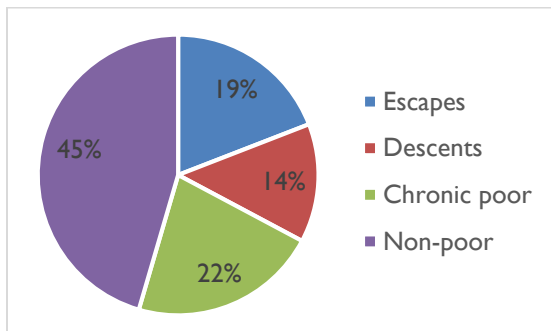
- **Early marriage and teenage pregnancy**
- **Extending social protection to address shocks, especially health**
- **Livestock support services**
- **Supporting diversification: rural electrification and trade**

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

The research report (McCullough and Diwakar, 2018), on which this policy implications brief is based, examines resilience and household poverty dynamics, specifically escapes and descents, as revealed in the quantitative results; with a focus on what explains why some households escape poverty and remain out of poverty (a sustained escape from poverty), while other households escape poverty only to fall back into poverty (a transitory escape from poverty), as revealed in the qualitative results. This research is innovative in two ways: it is a new analysis of Niger’s panel data, and a first analysis of poverty dynamics in Niger; and it marries quantitative analysis of survey results with qualitative analysis of life histories, focus group discussions and key informant interviews.

Analysis of two rounds of the Living Standards Measurements Survey - National Survey on Household Living Conditions and Agriculture in 2011 and 2014 - for this case study reveals that poverty escapes and descents are significant phenomenon in Niger (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Poverty trajectories in Niger, percent of households, 2011-2014



The report combines: 1) analysis from two rounds of the panel survey to investigate poverty mobility (poverty escapes and descents) with 2) qualitative research, in particular, key informant interviews, life histories, and participatory wealth ranking in urban and rural areas of Zinder region to further investigate the drivers of sustained and transitory poverty escapes. Because the panel data only has two waves, the understanding of what makes for a sustained compared to a transitory escape from poverty is based on the qualitative analysis. The analysis investigates the resources (land, livestock, and assets), attributes (household composition and education level), and activities (including jobs and engagement in non-farm activities) that enable households to escape poverty, and, with the help of the qualitative data, understand how some households avoid returning to living in poverty again, as well as the nature and effects of the shocks that exert downward pressures. The report situates these micro-factors in an analysis of the changing context for poverty eradication.

The research found that households which improved access to land, developed a nonfarm enterprise, or received remittances from domestic sources, all improved consumption levels significantly, and, from the qualitative research, those who did this and diversified their assets were more likely to experience sustained than transitory escapes from poverty. Inherited wealth also remained an important determinant of a sustained escape in the qualitative data. Insecurity in Nigeria and Libya was a clear factor influencing people’s decision to undertake local rather than cross-border migration. Combining domestic or

international migration with farm activities was a common strategy in the qualitative data in rural areas and a feature of the sustained escapes found in the qualitative research.

The physical and institutional environment is extremely challenging for poor and near-poor people in Niger. In terms of shock incidence, environmental and agriculture-related shocks were the most common in the survey data; and ill health also figured prominently in the qualitative research data. Price shocks were associated with significantly reduced monetary welfare. Coping strategies included the use of savings, engaging in spiritual activities, and seeking help from relatives and friends.

The changing demographic composition of households were also particularly important in impoverishment processes. Having more children, becoming female-headed as a result of separation, divorce or widowhood, and teenage marriage, especially for women just above the poverty line, were all associated with an increased likelihood of a household descent into poverty in the qualitative data.

Strategies for sustained poverty escapes revealed in the qualitative research included investing in livestock, but this was a high-risk strategy with livestock losses being common. Others were investments into agricultural land, vegetable gardening, and urban property. Sustained escapers in the qualitative data were able to use family connections to help them recover from shocks, for example, to secure jobs as migrants. Several female interviewees were also able to invest in key assets such as push carts for transporting water and peanut oil extraction equipment. A critical enabler of some of these sustained escapes in the qualitative data was being able to access money from formal savings groups, or money contributed at baptism ceremonies.

KEY AREAS OF FOCUS FOR PROGRAMMING AND POLICY

What emerges clearly (and not surprisingly) from the research is how extremely risky and uncertain life is for people below or near the poverty line in Niger. Price and environmental shocks were found to be the biggest impoverishers, so a strong policy response to these shocks is essential. However, measures have been taken during the last decade to reduce vulnerability, especially the government's World Bank-supported social protection program introduced in 2011. This now has an adaptive component, designed to expand the scheme when a widespread shock occurs. The question is will this be enough to avert the possibility of drought-induced famine and the resulting need for humanitarian operations? The answer is almost certainly 'not yet' as coverage in the basic scheme is still low. Expanding coverage would definitely be a priority.

In some areas, in-kind transfers might have to substitute for cash; for example, displaced people in Diffa region do not trust the markets enough to be able to support cash transfers (World Vision, 2017). The current importance of social connections in responding to shocks according to the qualitative evidence, and the inequalities which exist in social connections, suggests that government could try and relieve some of this pressure on families at least in the medium term – through a health insurance scheme, for example, if feasible (see below). This would reduce the need for poor or vulnerable people to rely only on kinship networks to pay the costs of treatment for ill health, a reliance which may not work well for anyone, but especially for the poorest people who have fewer better off social connections than others.

On the productive side, while agriculture remains important, and a significant amount of investment has gone into the sector, it is risky and becoming more so, so diversification is important. Investing in irrigation is clearly a means of stabilizing yields and reducing the major drought risk, and this is what many small scale farmers are doing. Supporting this is a priority in many contexts in Africa (Woodhouse et al, 2017), and in Niger, both the 2016 Niger Renaissance Programme and the 3N (Niger feeds Niger) emphasize irrigation development.

Livestock development is also important (for all rural populations), despite the transition going on from pastoralism to agriculture or agro-pastoralism. Livestock occupies a crucial role in people's livelihoods, representing the major form of savings for rural people, a way of insuring and coping with shocks, and a significant contribution to income, all factors that allow households to escape from poverty, and despite the fact that herd sizes have fallen for many families, compared to previous generations.. However, livestock keeping is also subject to high levels of risk – due to animal diseases as well as drought, for which vaccination, veterinary services and fodder banks can provide a degree of protection.

Trade (and transport) are very important to positive poverty dynamics, with diversification into trade a common approach to building resilience. The brief investigates what can be done to facilitate this. This includes improving the infrastructure of market places, and reducing the inhibitors of trade, such as taxes and corruption at trading checkpoints.

Access to electricity was also strongly linked to households escaping poverty, not least because it provides a basis for economic diversification. Basic connections or solar panels are used to charge phones, which could help a family to diversify; once a household gets a connection to mains electricity, its first investment would often be a fridge, which was used to cool drinks for sale, and to make ice for sale. Wealthier families are more likely to use electricity for consumption. Rural coverage is very low, and the challenge is to increase it rapidly in a low population density context.

Migration emerges as a major strategy for escaping poverty (quantitative research finding) and sustaining that escape (qualitative research finding). Previously Nigeria was the main destination, but currently most migration is internal within Niger. Lessons could be learned from other contexts, for example, Asia's migrant support programs. These have included training and information on opportunities and rights, organization, legal services, provision of ID cards, ensuring access to social services especially for women and children and psycho-social support, and increased recognition by local government of the needs of migrants, both in the sending and receiving areas.¹

On the social side, early marriage was sometimes associated with divorce or separation in teenage years in some life histories, so it seemed that information campaigns on the effects of early marriage might be useful. However, early marriage is a socially very sensitive issue in Niger, on which the opinions of local stakeholders may be very different from those of government officials or the international community. Education is highlighted as critical, though other work on how to tackle early marriage indicates that a number of complementary measures may be needed to address such deeply socially embedded practices. This issue is further discussed below.

Women's access to property is limited and indirect – through husbands, brothers and sons. There is significant gender inequity in access to property through inheritance due to the wider application of customary Islamic laws. Interventions supporting equal inheritance for women and men could help improve women's conditions through increased flow of intergenerational wealth. A recent international report has shown how important inheritance is for women to access land in Muslim countries, and how information on inheritance rights is often missing. Women, communities, judges and traditional leaders

¹ Examples include: the Asian Migrant Centre, for cross border migrants; and for internal migrants, programmes like the [Gram Vikas Trust](#), or the [Ajeevika Bureau](#) in India.

need this information (UN Habitat and GLTN, 2018). An example of this sort of work in Niger is the Women’s Land Initiative in Maradi (Mamadou & Salaou, 2013).

Finally, there is a strong rationale in continuing to focus on *rural* poverty reduction, given the concentration of chronic poverty and impoverishment in rural areas, as demonstrated in the quantitative analysis carried out for this research

EARLY MARRIAGE AND TEENAGE PREGNANCY

Problem statement: Teenage marriages can in some instances be more likely to breakdown according to the qualitative data, and as a result increase the risk of a descent into poverty, especially for women coming from families just above the poverty line. Niger has the highest level of child marriage in the world (28% of girls marry before 15; 73% marry before 18), and some regions have even higher levels (87% of women marry before they are 18 in Zinder)². There are significant health risks for adolescent mothers, and health and nutritional risks for their children; and consequences for how far adolescent girls can go in education. In 2016 there was an 18% gender gap in primary school enrolment, and less than half of Niger’s girls completed primary school. Religious and traditional leaders as well as parents often support early marriage; there is a fear of social disapproval (LASDEL, 2017); and young men’s inability to gather the resources for bride wealth and marry may be roundly criticized in their communities (Masquelier, 2005).

What can be done?

Our review of the literature indicates inconsistent evidence for effective interventions. One review found that economic approaches (such as cash transfers) were the most effective (Kalamar et al, 2016). Another found that empowerment approaches were the most successful and that economic approaches were the least successful (Chae and Ngo, 2017). Yet another found some interventions were ineffective but continued to be implemented, and effective approaches were often delivered inadequately (Chandra-Mouli et al, 2015). So there are no universal keys to success: it is likely that combining different context-specific approaches from among those mentioned above in an integrated “package” is more effective than a single intervention (Girls not Brides, 2018)

Among the interventions in place to address early marriages in Niger, there have been a significant number of NGO initiatives, focused on sexual and reproductive health rights and family planning; protection of the rights of the child; keeping girls in school for longer; tackling gender-based violence; support for students’ councils; income generating activities and life skills education for teenage girls (LASDEL, 2017). These initiatives all take a holistic approach that tackles the roots of the problem, rather than condemning directly the practice, which is advisable, since early marriage is a socially sensitive issue, and a culturally and religiously embedded practice.

² Note, the legal age for marriage in Niger is 15 for women, 18 for men. Niger has an annual population growth of 4.0 percent since 2010 and a fertility rate of 7.6 children per woman, and adolescents aged between 15 and 19 contributing between 10% and 14% of the general fertility level of the country.

There have also been efforts to reform the law on marriage, which discriminates against girls (who can marry at 15, compared with boys at 18), but these have reportedly been resisted by certain religious leaders, who argue that Islam has no minimum age for marriage (LASDEL, 2017: 63). A number of national policies have a bearing on the issue:³ however, the results of these activities have not yet been assessed. The effect of the World Bank supported national social safety net program on early marriage or pregnancy has also not been assessed. A recommendation would be to assess the impacts of these different policies and NGO interventions.

Education is generally seen as critical to prevent early marriage. There is a 2016 presidential promise to provide free and compulsory education through to 16 years of age.⁴ Even though Niger spends more than 20% of its budget on education, getting and keeping more girls in school requires multiple measures – more investment in school construction and key infrastructure such as latrines and washing facilities; training more teachers, and better teacher training so that teachers are more supportive of girls remaining in school. A local language curriculum is being piloted, which should help improve literacy rates. Current budgetary difficulties may affect the extent to which such improvements can be strongly implemented. Since it will be a long time before all girls across Niger have access to enough schooling, additional immediate results might be obtained by working with Koranic schools, which women are commonly able to attend.

The UNFPA supported Illimin ‘Safe Spaces’ programme⁵ has begun to return thousands of adolescent mothers to school. This kind of approach could be extended across the country to make a dent in the high illiteracy rates among young women.

Changing the social norms and parental attitudes around girls’ education is an important long term objective in a context where girls are expected to do mainly household chores, and their education may not be valued as much as that of boys’. However, there is recent evidence to suggest that the great majority of parents/carers in Niger want to send their girls to school but face a number of challenges which need to be addressed: these are on safe transport to and from school, affordability, and whether school environments are safe and gender inclusive. (Leer, 2017).

There are lots of aided projects focused on getting and keeping girls in school, but as yet an absence of a systemic approach to the issue. It would be useful to support a comprehensive evaluation of what is working among these initiatives, and why, as a first step.

³ Including the National Policy on Nutritional Security, which addresses early pregnancy; the National Gender Policy and the National Strategy for the Prevention and Management of Gender-based Violence and its action plan (Ministry for the Advancement of Women and Child Protection, 2017), of which one of the strategic pillars addresses child marriage and includes an action plan for the reduction of early pregnancies. The Ministry for the Advancement of Women and Child Protection established a committee to coordinate national action to end child marriage.

⁴ In principle it is free and compulsory to age 12 currently.

⁵ <https://wunrn.com/2016/07/niger-safe-spaces-program-support-for-child-brides-to-return-to-school/>

EXTENDING SOCIAL PROTECTION TO ADDRESS SHOCKS

Problem statement: Price and environmental shocks are the most frequently experienced shocks – both are widespread; price shocks were experienced more frequently by impoverished households, environmental shocks by those escaping poverty. The qualitative research indicated that famines (caused by droughts) and ill health were the most impoverishing events experienced. Even in good agricultural years between 4 and 5 million people are food insecure (ECHO, 2018). The qualitative research reveals that medical treatments are costly, and are typically paid for by the sale of livestock, thus causing households to fall into poverty. Households making sustained escapes from poverty often manage shocks through social connections, something which was less likely for those making transitory escapes.

What can be done?

The current social protection program includes two components: cash transfers and cash for work. The regular program covers more than 80,000 chronically poor households (over half a million individuals) identified by a proxy means test, with regular transfers for a period of 24 months. It is also designed to encourage behavior change in respect of health and education practices, with parents encouraged to send their children to school and visit health centres.

Coverage remains low, however. In Zinder, only 7/55 (13%) Communes, 89/2742 (3%) villages, 8100/560592 (1.44 %) of households were reached with the transfer of 10 000 FCFA per household per month (data from 2016-2018); stretching for 24 months. This coverage is not unlike that observed for the country as a whole. Cash for work reached 25/2742 (1%) villages, and the same proportion of households. Each year 25 villages are selected for the cash for work scheme from among the region's deficit villages identified by the Ministry of Agriculture.⁶ This safety net could be dramatically scaled up. For this, significantly greater national revenues would almost certainly have to be available. Pending that eventuality, development partners could increase their financial and other support to the initiative.

The behavior change measures accompanying the social safety net program have had significant effects on child rearing practices, including nutrition and child food security, but little impact on some children's outcomes, such as education and cognitive development, reflecting Niger's challenging environment for children (Premand, 2016).

Since 2016 the World Bank supported safety net program has had an adaptive component designed to expand the scheme to include those affected by climate related shocks, but this has also been used to respond to conflict shocks in the context of refugees in the Diffa Region. This component is important and needs to be assessed.

Health insurance?

The safety net Programme does not address the important health related causes of impoverishment. For this, a health insurance scheme would be needed. This would be a different approach to the current effort to make basic health services available free at the point of delivery to certain categories of people, and to

⁶ Key informant interview, August 2018

recover costs from the rest. There have been a number of *mutuelles assurance santé* in Niger (Leer, 2017). It would be important to re-assess their experiences prior to building a new programme.

Developing a new health insurance program would require building pilot programs in rural and urban areas, which could eventually be joined up in a national scheme. Rural pilots could best be linked to agricultural micro-credit programs, as they might be unable to start on their own. Any pilots would have to be undertaken either together with the direct (private) provision of health services, or in partnership with the government, whose services would however need to be upgraded, and whose system would need to be adapted for the purposes of the pilot. If an insurance approach is to work, for instance, ways of including the poorest people, who would be unable to pay premiums, would have to be devised.

In parallel research in Rwanda, where health insurance now covers over 80% of the population, it was found that ill health hardly appears as a cause of impoverishment, or of failing to sustain an escape from poverty: the life histories simply do not contain the usual tragic stories of downward mobility. There were two policy keys to Rwanda's extraordinary progress: making health insurance premiums compulsory for all households but those identified as among the country's two poorest groups, as identified on a regular basis by communities and local governments (with significant targeting errors according to Klls); and at the same time achieving significant improvements to the quality of the public health services including of the referral systems that are included in coverage (Dacorta et al, 2018).

Underlying these policy developments is a unique set of political and institutional conditions (political settlement) specific to Rwanda, which may make policy transfer to Niger difficult. This is illustrated by a comparison between maternal health expenditure and outcomes between countries including Niger and Rwanda (Chambers and Booth, 2012): health expenditure doubled in Niger during the 2000s, but made little difference to health outcomes. Rwanda had a very effective public education campaign on the benefits of attending public health clinics for pregnant women, and fined women who did not attend; health insurance covered 90% of the cost of transport to referral services, and the system led to timely transfers; the quality of health care – presence of health staff, hygiene of health centers, staff respect to patients, and monitoring and supervision actually happen. The key underlying institutional factors explaining these differences were the policy coherence and disciplined implementation which Rwanda achieved, coupled with its tradition of local problem solving by local stakeholders.

Other experiences from which to learn derive from contexts closer at hand – the 'mutuelles' (Community Based Health Insurance schemes) of neighboring Senegal and Mali. However, membership in these cases has been slow to develop: by 2015 only 4% of the population were covered in Senegal (USAID, 2016). A 2017 evaluation of the two countries' insurance schemes identified some of the challenges in the lack of: proper establishment of the scheme at village level; the development of a professional cadre of scheme managers, and support by volunteers; extending the package to cover most of the prevalent illnesses and medical conditions; managing the subsidy of premiums; and the development of well monitored pilots to test out which arrangements work best (Ouattara and Ndiaye, 2017).

LIVESTOCK SUPPORT SERVICES

Problem statement: Livestock represents the major form of saving for households, but come with risks attached – they are a factor in sustaining escapes from poverty but also in impoverishment. They are sold to pay for medical treatment, to buy cereals when harvests fail and to pay for dowries. Accumulation of livestock feature in some stories of sustained escapes but are not a constant factor in explaining these escapes. The risks of livestock keeping are substantial: many interviewees reported livestock deaths due to disease and famine.

What can be done?

In the medium-long term, providing savings institutions as a substitute for saving in livestock would be beneficial – people would have a choice on how to save, and the pressure on shrinking grazing areas would be reduced. However, Niger continues to have a low rate of informal saving (World Bank, 2017b: 101).

In the short term, interventions that help reducing the risks associated with keeping livestock are necessary. A 2013 risk assessment of crop farming and livestock argued that risk transfer (insurance) was not feasible in Niger; that coping mechanisms were needed but not sufficiently available, and the focus should be on risk mitigation measures, which would include fodder banks, and vaccination programs (World Bank, 2013). Purchased fodder is already a major source of livestock diets: extension services to improve the quality and use of purchased fodder, as well as the identification of new sources are potential ways forwards (Amole and Ayatunde, 2016).

In terms of veterinary services, the government has expanded the concept and practice of Services Vétérinaires Privés de Proximité (SVPP), a scheme introduced by the NGOs Vétérinaires sans Frontières-Belgium and Karkara in 2003, and adopted by the veterinary profession in 2011. By 2015 there were 16 functioning SVPPs covering 29 départements out of the 67 and 50% of Niger's rural population, and 51% of the livestock, led by a wider partnership of organisations. There are three components of each SVPP: veterinary clinics run by a vet, linked to nearby veterinary auxiliaries trained, supervised and equipped by the vet; an education or sensitization component run by livestock keepers' organizations; and a monitoring and quality assurance function provided by the veterinary profession and the public sector. This approach has become a model, copied in countries like Senegal. A key question now is can this model serve the whole country? If so it could be expanded. The constraints seem to be institutional, in terms of the availability of additional institutional partners to roll it out, enough vets to run the SVPPs and finance.

SUPPORTING DIVERSIFICATION: RURAL ELECTRIFICATION AND TRADE

Problem statement: With the fragility of agriculture and livestock, and the continuing challenges of adapting to climate change, nonfarm economic activities will be an increasingly important pathway out of poverty. In particular, the qualitative research showed that diversifying into petty trade was an important contributor to sustaining an escape from poverty. And rural electrification, which can support the development of nonfarm businesses is at a very low level, but there are new initiatives.

What can be done?

Ease of doing business

The ease of starting a business improved significantly between 2010 and 2016, among the indicators tracked by the World Bank's Doing Business database. Reducing the number of procedures required has

reduced the time taken to set up a business (World Bank, 2017a). Other indicators⁷ showed little change, but over shorter periods. Of these getting electricity is discussed below.

Adaptive market institutional arrangements

The formal (legal) requirements stipulating how markets should operate can be difficult to achieve in practice. The formal market management committees (les comités de gestion du marché), established after the state withdrew from its previous roles in providing public goods, do not appear to work well – they can be politicized and find it hard to act in the public interest. Adaptive local measures to make markets work better have been taken by local actors, and can be supported. For example, the provision of cleaning services in markets is supposed to rest with the mayor’s office and the market associations. Traders complain that this does not happen, and so pay the cleaners direct. In the central market in Balleyara, a group of poorer women clean each morning and in the afternoon pass by traders’ shops and stalls to collect small amounts of money from each trader. Elsewhere individuals take the job on and are paid by traders’ associations or groups of traders (Oumarou and Boubacar, 2011). Providing security in markets is another issue where innovative solutions are tried at local level.

There are several potential policy related inhibitors of trade: cumbersome registration procedures and other regulations, taxes and corruption. In 2017 the Commissioner of Finance announced that informal sector operators including petty traders, shoe makers and vulcanizers (welders), would be enumerated and taxed, as part of the government’s effort to meet its ambitious internal revenue generating targets (Guardian Nigeria, 2017). This is something a number of governments are trying (Tanzania being one – see Dacorta et al, 2018), which can result in reduced capacity of traders to buy and sell in the market, and in a stalling of the opportunities for upward mobility through trade. It will be important to keep an eye on whether this experience is replicated. According to the president of traders in Zinder, ‘with the introduction of new taxes, the smuggling of fuel has increased. There are now hundreds of fraudsters operating in the Zinder region. The tax has also resulted in an increase in the cost of food, which is negatively affecting poor people. They added a tax to wheat flour and pasta. With this new tax, a ton of wheat flour is now CFA90,000. Before a ton was costing CFA30,000.’ (Key Informant Interview)

Corruption in the checkpoint system operating on Niger’s roads and at border crossings is another inhibitor of trade (Hahonou, 2016; Chêne, 2017). This also emerged in a few interviews for this research. There are now international pressures to monitor borders for security reasons, added to the revenue raising and other motivations for border and/or movement controls.

Rural electrification

Getting electricity is difficult in Niger, by comparison with other aspects of doing business and comparator countries (World Bank, 2017a). Electricity prices are high, despite a low import price, partly because plants in Niger are old and inefficient. Supplies are also unreliable.

⁷ Indicators measured were: starting a business, dealing with construction permits, getting electricity, registering property, getting credit, protecting minority investors, paying taxes, trading across borders, enforcing contracts and resolving insolvency.

There is a raft of projects to expand the grid, and reduce dependence on imports from Nigeria, and Niger has the mineral resources (uranium, coal, oil, gas) and an improved policy environment (Gado, 2015). Liberalization of the sector is recent, and significant institutional development will be required (Germain, 2017).

However, low rural population densities means that the extension of the grid is very expensive per connection achieved. Off-grid solutions are therefore attractive. In 2017 important taxes on solar and other renewable energy equipment were waived, and a World Bank line of finance and technical assistance program were developed. This has the potential to reduce households' very high dependence on biomass energy. ANPER (Agence Nigérienne de Promotion de l'Électrification en milieu Rural) has been created to expand access to electricity, and over 150 mini-grids, each serving a village, have been created (USAID, 2018a). A 2015 Plan for Renewable Energy aims to achieve 30% coverage of the rural population by 2030 (from the current 5-6%) (Government of Niger, 2015). It is not clear what the prospects for achieving even higher levels of coverage are.

TOWARDS A PORTFOLIO RESPONSE

Clearly the needs of poor people in Niger are immense, and the four areas considered here represent only some of the needs.

Developing systemic and national approaches to issues with government firmly in charge emerges as a challenge. For example, with the national social safety net program, Niger needs a program with the reach and status of Ethiopia's Productive Safety Nets Program. An early integration with the early warning systems is needed to make this work to reduce vulnerability to climate change. Such selective integration is probably what Niger can hope to achieve in the short term. Once this is achieved, integration with other policies or interventions (such as financial services (CPAN, 2015) can also be considered.

Other areas where selective integration at program level would be beneficial include electrification and irrigation development; and, at a policy level (in the future), health sector improvement, especially in referral systems; and the rolling out of any health insurance if this is adopted – which will only work if the health systems function well. As in Rwanda, the poorest people will need their premiums subsidized: this will be another call on national revenues. In Rwanda there is a debate about the exclusion of people categorized as 'level 3' (out of 4 wellbeing levels), some of whom are still poor and have to sacrifice expenditure on other necessities or forego small investments to pay for insurance. In Niger, this will also be a significant issue, as there is such a large proportion of the population, which is extremely poor. However, because of the public expenditure implications, strong health service improvements may have to wait until the conflict affecting the eastern part of the country is brought to an end.

At a programming level, building resilience calls for a degree of integration. The USAID project RISE (Resilience in the Sahel-Enhanced) is an example. This has been active in several key programmatic areas and the current, second phase has recognized the need for a comprehensive approach to risks and shocks. It is also moving from a limited range of interventions co-ordinated with partners to a more strategic approach to identify critical interventions which can result in wider system improvements, for example in water security or health (USAID, 2018b).

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