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Contested promises. Migrants' material politics vis-à-vis the humanitarian border in Niger

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ABSTRACT
What promises do humanitarian infrastructures make to encourage migrants to abandon their migration projects? And how do migrants contest these promises? In order to curb EU-bound migration in the transit state Niger, the two UN agencies for migrants and refugees established support and outreach infrastructures that incentivized them to enroll in this humanitarian border and abandon migration. These infrastructural promises prompt their own contestation, because they may not be realized. The International Organization for Migration gave promises of assistance, the voluntariness of the return decision to the country of origin, and reintegration support. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees promised assistance, livelihood, and resettlement to asylum seekers and refugees. When these promises failed, migrants exposed the hidden standards of admission and operation of the humanitarian border infrastructures and the histories and political geographies of border violence and displacement they operated in. Through practices of *voice* and *exit*, migrants engaged in material politics that made the absent information visible. They thereby ultimately refused or even altered the services, promises, and actor roles of the humanitarian border. An analysis of such contested promises deepens an understanding of the relationships between humanitarian border infrastructures, their future orientations, and everyday migrant resistance.

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Introduction

'Are you a migrant in need of help?,' two billboards addressed weary travelers when they alighted after day-long journeys in the bus station in Agadez, a migration hub between West Africa and the Maghreb at the fringes of the

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Figure 1. IOM billboard in Agadez central bus station, Niger, 07/2018 (photo: the author).

Sahara (Figure 1). These billboards stood out from among the bustle of the middlemen, vendors, and drivers of the town's migration economy for their size and solidity, but also for the different message they carried. They suggested that migration was a risk and detailed a range of assistance measures to 'return home' instead, provided by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Similar, although smaller, posters by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) had already addressed potential refugees inside the buses pouring into the station and in nearby government buildings. These notices informed travelers that they could contact the UNHCR office in Niger for refugee protection (fieldnotes Agadez, 2018–2019).

These billboards and posters were part of material and informational structures for the assistance and protection of migrants.[1] These infrastructures had recently been established in the context of European externalization policies of outsourcing migration control and refugee protection to Niger. With European funding, such outreach devices – as well as guesthouses, warehouse-style transit centers, and the mansions of the United Nations (UN) and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) – had mushroomed in the sand since 2015/2016 when Niger, an important transit country, agreed to European efforts to criminalize migrant smuggling. Motivated by important European Union (EU) funding and recognition, the state adopted the controversial policy of obstructing migrants on their way to the Maghreb and potentially on to Europe by arresting their smugglers (Brachet, 2018). Less disputed, the state also upped refugee protection with EU and UNHCR support (Lambert, 2020, 2022). However, it almost completely ceded the interrelated humanitarian borderwork of care and control to the UN agencies. Against a risk horizon of death and violence along the Central Mediterranean Route and the widespread destitution in

the country ranking last in human development globally (Lambert, 2022), the emerging UN infrastructures communicated a promise of a better future for migrants and potential refugees if they abandoned migration. The IOM and UNHCR infrastructures thus operated as a 'humanitarian border' (Walters, 2010) that controlled European borders by caring for migrants and their future inside Africa.

Such future imaginaries transmitted by (border) infrastructures have been an important subject in ethnographies inspired by Science and Technology Studies (Abram and Weszkalnys, 2011; Reeves, 2017; Anand *et al.*, 2018; Dijstelbloem, 2021). This article extends these discussions by asking how humanitarian border infrastructures intended to contain transit migration generate everyday migrant contestation through the information they make present and absent. I thereby follow a take on 'material politics' that studies how the presences and absences of information produced by infrastructures create openings for their political contestation (Barry, 2013). I argue that the humanitarian border infrastructures in Niger were enriched with information about the support they would offer to migrants, but, as promises, did not create binding commitments. In encounters with the infrastructures and exchanges among peers, migrants rendered visible the hidden standards of admission and operation of these infrastructures and the political geographies and histories of border violence and displacement in which they were situated. Through practices of '*voice*' and '*exit*' (Hirschman, 1970), migrants vocally criticized the humanitarian infrastructures or expressed their criticism by abandoning them. In this way, they exposed the absences and presences of information upon which the humanitarian border and its promises of a better future had been built. Through these practices, they positioned themselves in agonistic relations of a persisting disagreement with IOM and UNHCR and contributed to the informational and material emergence of their infrastructures.

Methodologically, a perspective on material politics requires an empiricist approach to the political qualities of infrastructures (Barry, 2013, p. 183). Following an ethnographic approach to the encounter of migrants with infrastructures (Scheel, 2019), I here combine interviews with migrants with descriptions of billboards and flyers, as well as with interviews with UN staff, compiled over 13 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Niger between 2018 and 2019.

The study of everyday material politics makes three central contributions to the literature at the intersection of Critical Migration Studies and Science and Technology Studies (STS). First, future-oriented promises contribute a temporal perspective to recent discussions on humanitarian borders (Walters, 2010; Cuttitta, 2020; Dijstelbloem, 2021; Pallister-Wilkins, 2022) while adding an elusive and relational case to the emerging STS-inspired research on temporal borders and the techno-political controversies they facilitate. This literature on temporal borders has thus far focused on practices of

making people wait, holding, disruption, acceleration, and anticipation (Sontowski, 2018; Tazzioli, 2018; Pollozek, 2020). Less direct and immediate in their effects, promises may reorient migrants' futures and roles, but their non-realization also prompts their contestation.

Second, promises constitute a further case for understanding how border control infrastructures facilitate migrant politics (Amelung *et al.*, 2020). The 'autonomy of migration' approach has successfully introduced migrants' agency in contesting borders into migration research. Following recent proposals of autonomy as a relational achievement rather than individual capacity (Scheel, 2019), this article proposes infrastructural promises as a further structural explanation for migrant resistance.

Third, everyday acts of voice and exit expand a reading of material politics from parliamentary and mediatized disputes (Barry, 2013) to vernacular political acts. These everyday practices express migrants' refusal of the services, promises, and inherent actor roles of the humanitarian border and their role in altering them. Such everyday material politics are still widely missing from the government-focused analyses of externalization policies. In what I have termed 'everyday externalization' (Lambert, 2022) I here highlight migrants' role in shaping the implementation of externalization from below and the structural factors that inform their politics.

After introducing the main analytical concepts of material politics, promises, and voice and exit, the article analyzes how migrants contested three promises inscribed in the IOM infrastructure (assistance, a free return decision, and reintegration) and in the UNHCR infrastructure (assistance, livelihood, and resettlement). The conclusion discusses the theoretical contributions and further avenues for research.

The material politics of contesting promises through practices of voice and exit

Infrastructures are material and informational structures (Barry, 2013, p. 78) that facilitate flows of people, goods, and ideas (Larkin, 2013, p. 328). Border control infrastructures surveil migrants, govern their mobility, and include or exclude them, thereby engendering new social relations and subjectivities (Dijstelbloem, 2021). In the case of the 'humanitarian border' (Walters, 2010) in Niger, such infrastructures provide care for migrants with the aim of containing and deflecting their movements away from Europe towards Africa. As much as infrastructures can constrain migrants' contestation or open criticism, they can also engender it (Amelung *et al.*, 2020). To deepen the debate on how humanitarian borders prompt political struggles, I combine an approach to the material politics (Barry, 2013) of infrastructural promises with one to resistance through voice and exit (Hirschman, 1970). This linkage allows me to explore the promises of humanitarian border

infrastructures and how their informational absences and presences contribute to their own contestation.

The political quality of infrastructures is a contested subject in Science and Technology Studies. In an empiricist understanding, Andrew Barry sees the political effects of infrastructures as a 'relational, a practical and a contingent achievement' rather than a pre-given quality (2013, p. 183). Following Rancière, politics is the act of making things and problems visible (Barry, 2013, p. 145). It expresses a relationship of 'persisting disagreement' or agonism (Barry, 2013, p. 7) where consensus is impossible. In the case of the humanitarian border, migrants engage in such agonistic politics against the border's scope and limitations (Walters, 2010, p. 148).

In Barry's understanding of material politics, political disputes emerge as a result of the information actors produce on material infrastructures in an effort to govern them (2013, p. 138). An analysis of disputes requires attention to the evolving and contested relations of 'what was rendered transparent and what was not' (Barry, 2013, p. 176). Transparency involves a 'process of deciding what to present […] and what to make absent' (Rowland and Passoth, 2015, pp. 139f.). In Barry's example of an oil pipeline, a company's attempt to limit controversy by publishing information multiplied the grounds for political disputes on what was present and absent (2013, p. 182).

Building on Barry's take on (in-)transparencies as the source and means of politics, we can ask which visions of the future this information produces. Barry's notion of 'projection' (2013, pp. 24f.) examines how actors narrate the future while reconstructing the past. Statistical models or archives become constitutive for imagining future events. Instead of speaking of projection, I follow a relational take on encounters between border control infrastructures and migrants (Scheel, 2019) by conceptualizing such positive future imaginaries attached to border control infrastructures as 'promises' made by one actor to another (cf. Abram and Weszkalnys, 2011; Anand *et al.*, 2018). Promises such as 'we can assist you' define the 'we' of humanitarians and 'you' of migrants in need, their roles and relationships. With their 'elusive' character, such promises actively express an intention without guaranteeing their realization. Nonetheless, they orient action and thus have performative effects (Abram and Weszkalnys, 2011, pp. 6–9). Usually discursive, promises depend on material practices for their realization. This gap between claims and realization – or their 'betrayal' (Larkin, 2018, p. 193) – engenders political controversies (Barry, 2013, p. 25).

Examining the controversies that migrants engage in requires a conceptual widening of politics. In contrast to the mediatized disputes described by Barry, most migrant struggles in Niger remained invisible to a wider public. Although they occasionally organized mediatized protests, migrants were structurally constrained by their precarity, legal bans on refugee activism (OAU, 1969, §3), and bureaucrats' threats to 'trouble-makers' (Lambert, 2022). Their political work of making problems visible mostly took place in everyday life.

Such practices can be grasped with Albert Hirschman's (1970) seminal work on resistance in organizations through 'voice' and 'exit.' In acts of voice, people express their dissatisfaction generally or specifically to decision-makers (Hirschman, 1970, p. 4). As a political act (Hirschman, 1970, p. 15), voice ranges from 'faint grumbling to violent protest' and thus clearly invites the reading of such vernacular acts as political (Hirschman, 1970, p. 16). In Niger, migrant criticism was often only a faint grumbling expressed to bureaucrats, fellow migrants, or the ethnographer.

In acts of 'exit,' people leave an organization or abandon its services (Hirschman, 1970, 4). Migrants trick, hide from and subvert control practices (Papadopoulos *et al*., 2008). Hirschman understood exit as a 'private, "secret" vote' and thus not political, because it avoided direct confrontation (1970, p. 16). Instead, I argue that migrants exposed agonistic relations in their exit by refusing infrastructural services, promises, and inherent actor roles and by voicing their contestation to the audiences available to them, notably fellow migrants and occasionally the ethnographer. Thus, I consider exit to be a political act.

Furthermore, both voice and exit are able to shift the 'distribution of life,' the aspirations, possibilities, and materials that infrastructures allocate and the resulting life chances for migrants (Appel *et al*. 2018, p. 21) and thereby contribute to the emergence of infrastructures (Harvey *et al*., 2017, p. 10).

Such a reading extends Barry's analysis of public, collective disputes to migrants' everyday practices of voice and exit. Although such tacit, vernacular acts by individual migrants often go unobserved, they challenge the promises of the humanitarian border and the underlying relations of care and control. In contrast to Hirschman's reading, exit is neither a private nor individualistic act, but a resource of contestation that contributes to agonistic relations in border regimes. In a relational reading of autonomy (Scheel, 2019), I suggest that the humanitarian border engenders its own contestation. Instead of being an individual capacity, migrant resistance is rooted in the information that the humanitarian border carries and conceals. Betrayed promises and the material politics of voice and exit they instigate thus represent another structural factor for explaining migrant agency. In the following section, I apply this approach to the humanitarian border in Niger.

Empirical analysis

In connection with the 2015 Euro-African Valetta summit, Niger became a central partner for EU external migration governance. One dimension of this was the state's crackdown on the profitable migration economy in exchange for EU funding. The second dimension was the creation and reinforcement of IOM and UNHCR infrastructures for the assistance and protection of migrants and refugees traveling through Niger. The UN transit centers, guesthouses, outreach devices, and services offered alternatives to the migrants

hindered from traveling and aimed at dissuading them from their migratory projects through incentives of a better future if they enrolled in these infrastructures. Central to this dissuasion work of the humanitarian border was the re-imagining of the Sahara from a space of connectivity and mobility to a risk environment replete with deadly accidents, exploitation, and assaults (Brachet, 2018). Its imagined and experienced hardships turned the Sahara into a conducive environment for the dissuasion of migrants and for their containment by humanitarian border infrastructures. The dissuasion through promises was thus complementary to the Nigerien state's use of force vis-à-vis the migration economy and embedded in the same EU externalization policies of preventing transit migration to the Maghreb and Europe.

Despite their shared rationale, the two UN infrastructures differed in their purposes. An IOM staff member classified the majority of migrants in Niger as 'economic migrants' (IOM-2)[2], to be returned to their countries of origin with IOM's Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration program. In contrast, UNHCR argued in its 'Mixed Migration' policy that among those migrants were potential refugees who could not return. They should instead 'have access to asylum and assistance [in Niger] without resorting to the hazardous journey northwards' (UNHCR, 2017). Whether classifying migrants either as illegal migrants with illegitimate motives that justified their return or as potential refugees in need of support in Niger, both UN agencies followed a sedentary containment logic (cf. Landau, 2019) in envisaging that these migrants should have their near and largely also far future *within* Africa.

The following analysis deals with these promises and their contestation through the material politics of migrants embedded in or excluded from these infrastructures. The concerned migrants often felt stuck in Niger due to their existential immobility (Hage, 2009) of navigating the structural violence and precarity in Niamey and Agadez without advancing in their lives. While onward migration was often out of sight, a decent life in Niger seemed impossible for many of them, too. I met them in or near government and UN offices, as well as in the informal settlements at the margins of these towns, where they were struggling to eke out a decent present and future. Although they had different displacement and migration histories, many had circulated on the African continent for years. Most had recently been subjected to mass deportations from Algeria and had previously had refugee status. In order to challenge the power effects of bureaucratic classifications on narrations of the past and future, the text oscillates between their current bureaucratic status and displacement histories.

Our encounters were part of more comprehensive ethnographic fieldwork on everyday externalization among all concerned actors in Niger over 13 months between 2018 and 2019 (Lambert, 2022). Since access issues in politicized fields (Barry, 2013, p. 26) obstructed the direct observation of encounters between infrastructures and migrants, I here connect two sets of data. First, I describe outreach devices such as billboards, posters, and flyers and I quote

from a dozen interviews and participant observation with UN staff in order to describe the promises of the humanitarian border. Second, to represent migrant perspectives (Scheel, 2019), I include interviews with circa 30 migrants on their acts of voice and exit that challenged these promises. These interviews were recorded with note-taking, anonymized, and subsequently analyzed using content analysis. Following up on migrants over an extended period of time was often complicated by their marginality, which resulted in frequent relocations and a lack of digital communication devices.

In the following, I start with the contested promises – of assistance, a free return decision, and help with reintegration – inscribed in the IOM infrastructures, before elaborating on the UNHCR promises of assistance, livelihood, and resettlement.

International organization for migration

The IOM billboards in the central bus station in Agadez not only asked travelers if they were 'a migrant in need of help.' They further explained: 'IOM is the UN Migration Agency. If you need assistance you can reach out to us at any of IOM's transit centers for migrants […]. We can help you to return home if you wish!' Below, small icons indicated the array of services available: water, food, shelter, medical and psychological assistance, assistance with travel documents, and reintegration (Figure 1).

These measures were part of the 'Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration' program in Niger, where IOM has been active since 2006. For the purpose of organizing migrants' voluntary return to their countries of origin, IOM installed several transit centers in strategic locations to house and assist migrants who accepted voluntary return. In past years, the majority went there after being deported from Algeria. Others were referred by Nigerien migration control actors (attorney Agadez-1), IOM Community Mobilizers and street-level 'orientation offices,' UNHCR, or (non-)citizens. In order to access the centers, migrants first had to register biometrically to be eligible for assistance until their departure to their countries of origin was scheduled, whereupon they could apply for reintegration support (IOM-1).

The promise of assistance

As displayed on its billboards, IOM suggested a wide array of assistance measures for the 'migrant in need.' IOM transit centers, headquarters, and vehicles similarly communicated the functioning, well-funded services available to migrants. Apart from these promising forms (Larkin, 2018), similar assurances came from other sources. For example, an asylum seeker recalled that in a situation of homelessness other Arabic speakers had told him that 'there is IOM – they can feed people' (asylum seeker-3). Other actors in the wider assemblage surrounding the humanitarian border thus contributed to these

promises of assistance. They encouraged migrants in difficulties to enroll themselves in the infrastructure.

In hindsight, migrants often challenged the IOM promise of assistance. During my fieldwork in the capital Niamey, the Liberian couple Ruth and Francis invited me to their current home in an informal settlement where they had moved after having left the IOM transit center. The tiny, tidy room was empty except for two blankets, some clothes, kitchenware, sweet potatoes, a piece of onion, and the container I was seated upon, which was used to carry water from the nearest well. At this time, they did not know how to come up with money for rent and food. They had fled the Liberian civil war in 1997–2003 and received refugee status elsewhere in West Africa before moving to North Africa. Algeria then deported them to Niger in 2018. After entering the transit center in Agadez, Ruth underwent surgery. Four months later, IOM transferred them to Niamey. As Francis explained, 'they were forcing us to go to back to Liberia.' Ruth told me that back then she was recovering from her surgery and showed me the still-swollen scar, adding that she still suffered pain. During my visit, we went to seek medication for her at the Red Cross, one of only two services providing assistance to migrants regardless of their status. Ruth recounted telling the IOM staff: 'I cannot return to my country like this.' The staff replied that they would have to leave the center then, and the IOM doctor told her to 'eat well to heal.' 'But,' Ruth added, 'there is no food here.' By contrasting the medical conditions for recovery with their current hardship, Ruth challenged the dominance of the return paradigm over her well-being and thus the humanitarian promise of 'putting life first' (Redfield, 2012). Their subsequent exit from the IOM infrastructure re-established them as actors of their own care.

Some migrants were also barred from accessing assistance because IOM required evidence of their nationality. An IOM staff member explained that some migrants had indicated a 'false nationality' in order to stay in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and travel to its economic hubs (fieldnotes, 14/05/2019). Several migrants recalled having been asked for a telephone number of a parent in their country of origin, or for their neighborhood, ethnic group, and dialect (migrants-2). During deportations, the Algerian military would often take away telephones, passports, and refugee documents. A Guinean deportee recalled that he was barred from entering the transit center because of a lack of documentation and telephone numbers. Instead, he had a friend in Senegal send him money to pay the return journey himself (migrant-1). Similarly, another deportee did not have 'a contact person in Liberia to prove [to IOM] I am from there,' since he was a child when he was forcibly displaced during the war. He paid for the return journey from Agadez by doing construction work and was now struggling without income in Niamey (former refugee-2). In voicing their criticisms to the ethnographer, migrants revealed the admission standards of the IOM infrastructure, with its

requirement for national identity documents or a social testimony of their origins. As these standards were not communicated in the IOM billboards addressing 'migrants in need,' the contestations exposed a differentiated access policy, with a primacy on returnability to someone's country of origin. In the two cases of rejection, rather than voicing criticism to IOM, the migrants developed alternatives to the IOM infrastructure. Friends and manual labor allowed them to develop autonomy in their migration trajectories. This example of exit, of abandoning the attempt to enter the IOM infrastructure, was later complemented by voicing criticism to the ethnographer.

In these examples, migrants challenged the IOM promise of assistance by exposing the standards of operation and admission to the ethnographer. These standards were absent in the information the IOM billboards conveyed. In one case, a justice claim challenged the primacy of return logistics over the right to health and thus the humanitarian appeal of the operation. The other example made a hidden admission standard visible, specifically the need for documentary or social proof of nationality. In a combination of voice and exit, all critics challenged the general claim of assistance to the 'migrant in need' displayed in the IOM billboards.

The promise of a free return decision

The IOM billboards in Agadez also offered to assist migrants 'to return home if you wish,' a return predicated on voluntariness. In fact, this was the principal condition for receiving assistance: 'The center is for migrants in distress. The only entry condition is the willingness to return home' (IOM-1). To prove voluntariness, IOM required migrants to sign a consent form 'that the migrants return voluntarily, their nationality and that they understand the risks of this declaration' (IOM-2). While also communicating the promise to the international community of upholding international standards, voluntariness constituted a promise to migrants of being the actors of their own decision to return.

In fact, a relevant number of migrants chose to leave the transit centers instead. In 2018, IOM counted 20% of registered migrants who were not returned (fieldnotes, 14/05/2019). Like the Liberian couple Ruth and Francis, they left the transit center at the latest when IOM announced their return journey. Exiting IOM meant reappropriating the promise of a free decision and repositioned them as autonomous actors rather than as aid-dependent victims.

Alongside practices of exit, migrants vocally challenged the possibility of voluntariness. For Ruth and Francis, the return was directly linked to experiences of border violence in the Maghreb, although with subtler means: 'At IOM, they force people intelligently to go home.' Although subtler, the mechanisms were also experienced as forced return. As the couple's aforementioned migration trajectory exemplifies, IOM's voluntary return assistance was

embedded in a long, violent displacement history of civil wars and deportation. The former refugees challenged the promise of voluntariness for lacking a context that would enable a free decision. Their criticism brought to light the political geography of violence in which the IOM return infrastructure was embedded, but which was absent in its promise of voluntariness. For this lack of alternatives, the UN Special Rapporteur for the Human Rights of Migrants criticized on his visit to Niger that 'the return can hardly be qualified as voluntary' (UNHRC, 2019).

Additionally, the IOM promise of voluntariness produced cases in limbo, waiting for return. On one of my evening strolls in Niamey, I got to know two minors on their trajectories 'back home,' to places in West Africa. Elsewhere, Omar and Paul would be school-aged children. Here, they were recently deported from Algeria after several years of hard manual labor. After their arrival at the Nigerien border, IOM staff transferred them to the IOM transit center for minors and started to prepare their return. Omar and Paul told me that they did not want to return, but their empty, hardened faces conveyed a lack of alternatives. Then even IOM could not process their cases, because their families did not sign a document that they would take charge of them. Omar and Paul got stuck in a guesthouse, with some food and a soccer game once in a while, but no schooling or social support. When we said goodbye, I feared that they would stay in limbo until reaching adulthood (fieldnotes, 01/08/2018). Like for Ruth and Francis, the political geography of violence challenged the voluntariness of their return decision. Their situation also rendered visible the safeguards for child protection as a hidden standard of the IOM return infrastructure. Here, the return decision depended on other human and non-human actors in the assemblage, namely a document to be filled in by people claiming guardianship.

Overall, many migrants challenged the promise of voluntariness by simply exiting, thereby claiming autonomy in their migration projects. In rarer instances of voice shared with the ethnographer, migrants revealed two aspects hidden in IOM's information on voluntary return. First, they situated the IOM return infrastructure in its political geography of violence and displacement. Second, they pointed to hidden procedures of delegating the return decision to other actors, namely a document guaranteeing parental care. Both instances challenged the IOM imaginary of migrants as actors of their return decision.

The promise of reintegration assistance

Lastly, the IOM billboards made promises about future work opportunities through 'reintegration' in countries of origin. Reintegration meant material or financial assistance for integrating into the labor market upon return. IOM preferred small group projects, to prevent the reselling of material, but some people with specific vulnerabilities or talents also received individual

support (IOM-2). Some migrants told me of specific sums mentioned to them. While an IOM staff member claimed that 'everyone is eligible who traverses Niger,' he delegated the decision-making to the IOM office in the country of origin (IOM-2). In Niger, there were 'more [Nigerien] returnees than IOM could fund' (EU staff-1). Accordingly, not every returnee would get reintegration support, meaning that the promise of future livelihood lacked any guarantee in the present.

Some migrants voiced their concerns about the difficulty of receiving reintegration support to me and referred to the experience of friends: 'Some of them received it and some received nothing. They are still waiting' (former refugee-1). Another former Liberian refugee reported that some people received pocket money of 30 euros for their travel from IOM, 'but reintegration support will be difficult' (former refugee-2). In this view, the promise of reintegration was complicated based on information provided by fellow migrants. These accounts made hidden admission standards for IOM reintegration support visible. The interviewees classified these standards as either arbitrary or as demanding, based on a justice claim that all returnees should have access to reintegration assistance.

A second argument challenged the time gap between return and reintegration support. A Liberian woman said returned friends had to wait 'a few months' to receive the funding. 'What should I eat for the four months before I get it?' she asked me, and her friend agreed. She proposed instead receiving some business support in Niamey, since she would prefer to stay there, although she experienced it currently as 'really hard.' Her reason was that, as with many others who had fled civil war, her former life in Liberia was over: 'I left Liberia for the war and to return now, without family there, will be difficult' (former refugees-3). Similarly, the Liberian Francis challenged the sum of 1,700 US dollars that IOM had promised him: 'This is not enough for me, because I have got to start a new life there. My parents were killed in the war. I do not have a house to live in, in Liberia' (former refugees-4). The Liberian interviewees criticized the waiting time of the reintegration procedure in contrast to their immediate survival needs as well as the underlying imaginary of a simple return to a 'home' that would require only a small amount of assistance to get their lives back on track, contradicted by their personal histories of war and displacement.

In these examples of material politics, migrants who encountered difficulties with the IOM infrastructure contested the promises of assistance, voluntariness, and reintegration. In the case of reintegration, migrants challenged the intransparency of the admission standards, the time gap between return and support, as well as the inherent assumption of a facile return, against the background of the violent history of displacement that would complicate their return. With regards to the promise of assistance, migrants made hidden standards visible concerning the primacy of the logistics of return over individual well-being

and the return-related admission standard of proving one's nationality. Through acts of exit, they repositioned themselves as autonomous actors of their own care. Lastly, migrants challenged the promise of voluntariness by making visible the political geography of violent displacement in which the IOM infrastructure was embedded. Minors exposed the hidden procedures of delegating the return decision to other actors, namely a document of guardianship blocking their return. Similar promises, and their contestations, were experienced by migrants with the UNHCR infrastructure as well, as the next section documents.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

'Our mission is to save lives, protect the rights of refugees, and construct a better future for refugees, displaced communities, and stateless people,' declared UNHCR on a roll-up in its headquarters in Niamey (fieldnotes, 07/2019). Following large-scale displacements in neighboring Mali and Nigeria in 2012 and 2013, UNHCR opened a country office in Niger. When the EU gauged possible migration control measures in Niger in 2015/2016, UNHCR proposed the 'Mixed Migration' approach. This held that potential refugees were part of the migration flows through Niger and could be provided with protection in Niger instead of traveling the dangerous Central Mediterranean Route (UNHCR, 2017).

Starting in 2016, UNHCR erected an infrastructure for asylum seekers and refugees in these Mixed Migration flows. With European funding, UNHCR opened a field office in Agadez in 2017 and commissioned NGOs to run guesthouses and provide food, medical, and psychological assistance. Outreach staff visited migrant locations in Agadez to share information about asylum in Niger and do a smartphone-based profiling. UNHCR also distributed flyers and posters in government buildings and buses (fieldnotes, 2018–2019). Other asylum seekers were referred by IOM to UNHCR when they expressed a legitimate fear of return (UNHCR-1). They then had to apply for asylum with the state and were registered in UNHCR's biometric database. These outreach technologies promised a better future for those enrolling in the UNHCR infrastructure. For asylum seekers, these promises concerned assistance. For recognized refugees, they concerned livelihood support and resettlement.

The promise of assistance

The materiality of the UNHCR infrastructure in Agadez and Niamey, with its guesthouses and partner NGOs, suggested to asylum seekers that they would receive humanitarian assistance, as did the accounts of other non-citizens. Some asylum seekers heard on the radio 'that refugees are well in Niamey' (asylum seekers-1). In Agadez, UNHCR distributed multi-coloured leaflets to

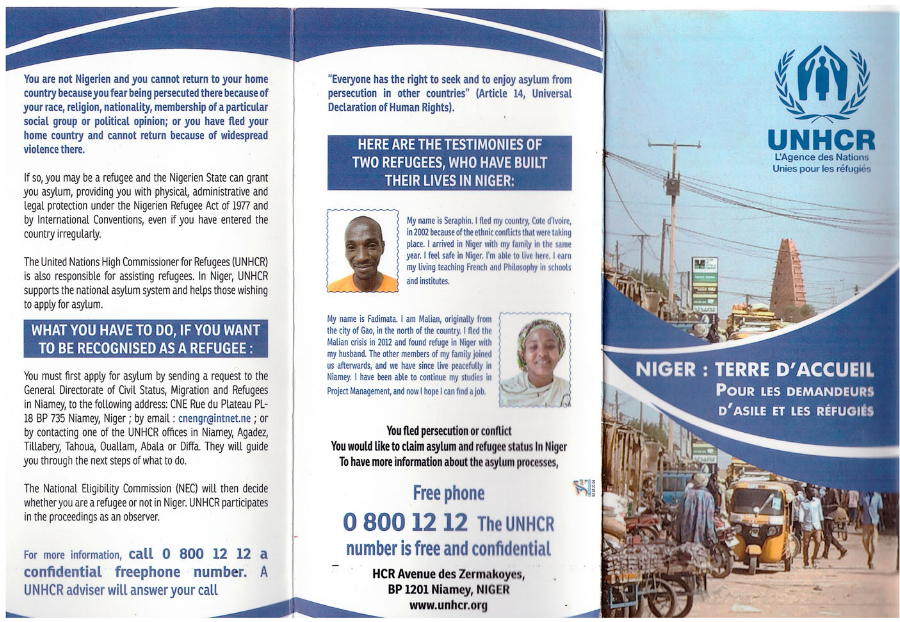

Figure 2. UNHCR flyer on asylum, Agadez, Niger, 2019 (photo: the author).

potential asylum seekers. These flyers defined the state's role in 'physical, administrative and legal protection,' whereas UNHCR was responsible for accompanying this by 'assisting refugees' and helping asylum seekers. In contrast to the state, the UN agency was associated with assistance for asylum seekers and refugees, ranging from health, nutrition, shelter, and education to legal aid (Figure 2). Similarly, two billboards in Agadez depicted UNHCR as a partner of the local government 'to bring assistance and protection to asylum seekers' (fieldnotes, 2018–2019). The infrastructure's promising forms, information in outreach devices such as flyers and the radio as well as accounts of other non-citizens thus combined to create a promise to migrants that they could receive assistance once they applied for asylum.

In practice, however, the provision of assistance was more differentiated and hierarchized. About half of the asylum seekers in Niamey in 2018 were actually assisted with housing and food assistance (UNHCR-1). UNHCR staff told me that asylum seekers were excluded from assistance if they had not been identified in Agadez or referred by IOM (UNHCR-2) and thus did not qualify as Mixed Migration. A state agent added that 'very vulnerable' asylum seekers could be assisted (Refugee Directorate-1).

Accordingly, asylum seekers criticized these admission standards as intransparent. In line with UNHCR's policy to prevent secondary movements (UNHCR, 1989), asylum seekers were repeatedly excluded from assistance when they had refugee status in a third country. Two asylum seekers from the Central African Republic who had recently been deported from Algeria

challenged their exclusion with their current misery and the ongoing war in their country of origin:

> We rejected staying in [first country of asylum], because there is no assistance for refugees. […] This is why we came to Niger. There is still war in our country. They refused to take us at UNHCR. How will we organize to pay the rent, etc.? We cannot return. Here in Niamey it is too hard.' His friend added: 'If I find money again, I will try to make it to Algeria.' (asylum seekers-1)

Leaving a place without assistance was thus an act of contesting the promise of assistance, first by leaving their first country of asylum, then by announcing the intention to remigrate to the Maghreb. This act of exit exposed a promise as empty by simply leaving. With their 'collective exit' (Schaffer and Lamb, 1974, p. 88), they created issues of justification for UNHCR. In a study, it regretted that 'a majority of asylum seekers […] abando[n] the asylum procedures and decide to move on to other countries' (UNHCR, 2015).

These hidden admission standards were also contested by writing letters. Another asylum seeker had left his first country of asylum due to threats and later decided to come to Niger after another refugee had told him that refugees were better assisted there and lived in guesthouses. Now he found that this was not true, since he remained 'without assistance and everything.' He criticized this lack of assistance in letters to different UNHCR donors in Niger. As he had planned, his letters stirred debates, because two UNHCR officials told him to refrain from writing them. And he received an exceptional cash assistance for food, which he considered 'at least a small success' (asylum seeker-5). As a repeated, but resource-intensive act of voice, letter-writing was here a source of infrastructural emergence, as his protest allowed him to alter the assistance infrastructure in negotiations with UNHCR and its donors.

Apart from those excluded from assistance, other asylum seekers criticized the hierarchization of assistance between applicants. For one asylum seeker, the monthly cash assistance of circa 50 euros was 'nothing.' He challenged the fact that asylum seekers in other guesthouses got cooked food, weekend activities, and better medical assistance. For his guesthouse, there were no activities, and pain killers substituted for medical care. His friend added: 'We try always to see what is the difference between us and the Eritreans? We do not know' (asylum seekers-2). 'The Eritreans' were part of UNHCR's 'Emergency Transit Mechanism,' which evacuated asylum seekers from Libyan prisons to Niger. It received larger EU funds for fewer beneficiaries (Lambert, 2020). In this criticism voiced to the ethnographer, the critics challenged the inequality between asylum seekers that they saw based in implicit and arbitrary bureaucratic standards.

The promise of assistance for asylum seekers was communicated in the promising forms of UNHCR's outreach devices and activities, by other (non-)citizens, and the media. In their transparency work, asylum seekers challenged these promises by pointing to intransparent standards of admission and the

hierarchization of asylum seekers. Forms of contestation involved letter-writing as an act of voice, thereby contributing to infrastructural emergence, as well as the act of exit by opting for remigration.

The promise of livelihood

Once migrants acquired refugee status, the food and housing assistance that some of the asylum seekers received came to an end, apart from an initial three-month housing assistance for everyone and extraordinary food assistance for people classified as 'vulnerable.' Instead, refugees could be supported with integrating into the labor market and with higher education (UNHCR-4).

The aforementioned UNHCR leaflet gave an example of a refugee who had received this support. She was quoted as saying that she lived 'peacefully' in Niamey with her family and had 'been able to continue my studies in Project Management, and now I hope I can find a job' (Figure 2). This display of refugee success – managing to complete one's studies in a society known for a lack of affordable quality education (Olivier de Sardan *et al.*, 2018) – promised refugee livelihood. Additionally, the materiality of refugee businesses, refugee university students, and NGOs providing support in labor-market integration or higher education produced the neoliberal promise that refugees could make something out of themselves in difficult circumstances (cf. Bardelli, 2018). This promise was challenged by refugees who pointed to intransparent funding decisions, the lack of procedural guarantees, and the bracketing of basic material and safety needs for running a business.

A refugee student recalled that his rejection for a stipend was justified by UNHCR with the claim that it would not fund private programs.[3] However, the student observed that a fellow refugee had received the stipend, and he wrote a letter to UNHCR protesting his exclusion. In response, a UNHCR staff member explained that the other case was one of 'extreme urgency.' The refugee told me: 'How can they distinguish people? How can they know that I am living comfortably and the other one is not?' He recalled how a UNHCR staff member then complained to him about his letter being an accusation and he replied: 'I was clear in my letter. I deplored the inequality of treatment. […] I wanted to know the criteria of selection, because according to what I saw, I was eligible.' An NGO employee then told him that there was 'an additional thing that was not listed in the criteria list' (refugee-4). As the refugee's criticism suggested, the official standards communicated equal treatment for all applicants, but this was contradicted by arbitrary decision-making based on staff assumptions about vulnerability and a black-boxed informal standard. Other refugee students claimed that the UNHCR decisions on funding for private study programs shifted every year and required them to fight for it anew (Refugee Student Association-1), thereby turning a provision into a topic of repeated dispute.

For labor-market integration, refugees with different educational backgrounds could apply for business creation support. A refugee, who was living on a construction site as an informal guard and surviving on the occasional transport money he was paid in an internship, was told after a year that the NGO had lost his application. He experienced this as a foreclosing of the future: 'I do not know how to go on,' he told me while he relished the simple meal I had ordered us. 'If it was not for my friends here, I would have already given up. It is no thanks to any assistance from UNHCR or the government' (refugee-1). In the sense of 'people as infrastructure' (Simone, 2004), his friends were the ones who guaranteed his survival and hope, rather than the humanitarian infrastructure that he portrayed as failing and disordered, lacking procedural guarantees.

Other refugees had received assistance for creating a business, but had to resell parts of the material to cover their daily expenses. One of them with health issues sold equipment to pay for additional medical expenses and food (refugee-2). A fellow refugee explained how UNHCR's medical assistance required you, on weekends, to 'pay out the money in advance and then they pay you back afterwards. How should a refugee who has nothing do this? You might as well accompany the person to the cemetery' (refugee-5). As the act of exit suggested, the ability to run a business was illusory as long as basic food and health needs were not met, and these were lacking in UNHCR's livelihood support.

The promise of self-actualization based on support for business creation and higher education was challenged by some refugees for the intransparent standards of selection, the absence of procedural guarantees in contrast to the support from their friends, and the bracketing of basic physiological and safety needs. Despite the refugee success stories it sustained, UNHCR was aware of these livelihood issues. A UNHCR responsible told me: 'Of course all of this [refugee support] is happening in this, in the poorest country in the world. Of course, here a refugee is not happy. There is no work for a Nigerien' (UNHCR-5).

The promise of resettlement

Resettlement was the third promise inscribed in the UNHCR infrastructures. It de facto only became available in 2017, when local refugee protection was integrated into EU externalization policies (UNHCR-5). The chances for resettlement were – although still small – much higher for refugees in Mixed Migration than for those refugees from crisis areas in Niger's neighboring countries.[4] Still, the promise of resettlement was part of the incentives UNHCR operated with:

> Agadez for us is: If you are in need of international protection, stop, don't go to that dangerous road, then enter the asylum space here with a possibility if you have the

> profile to depart [for resettlement] or to gain your protection status here. (UNHCR-5)

In this interpretation, the promise of resettlement was an incentive to channel people away from the migration route into the asylum procedure.

These promises traveled through different channels. Some asylum seekers had heard on the radio that UNHCR made refugees 'travel everywhere' from Niamey (asylum seekers-1). This probably referred to France's promise of resettling 1500 refugees from Niger and to resettlement to Europe and North America through the newly created Emergency Transit Mechanism, two resettlement events in Niger that were globally broadcast in the media (Lambert, 2022). In Niger, asylum seekers heard about resettlement at UNHCR or observed fellow refugees' departure (refugee-3; asylum seeker-4). Also, the resettlement benchmarks communicated by UNHCR to the Refugee Committee created a vision of resettlement. Additionally, the resettlement infrastructure, with its multiple actors and objects, also suggested availability: UNHCR resettlement officers and resettlement country missions interviewed refugees. The missions also vetted them for security issues and gave basic country information. Embassies prepared visas and IOM staff organized medical check-ups and flights (refugee-4). Refugees therefore received resettlement information via the news, own observations, other refugees, and through the very materiality of the resettlement infrastructure.

Nevertheless, refugees challenged the intransparency of the procedure. As in other cases (Thomson, 2012), resettlement remained a black box to refugees with little information about its standards. Refugees told me that the successful ones would not share their stories on how they achieved resettlement (asylum seeker-4; refugee-1). A refugee selected for resettlement summarized his advice to fellow refugees:

> It is not easy. You have to be a fighter. And it does not depend on you whether you will be selected. You cannot call them, it is them who will call you and it depends whether you fit into their program. (refugee-4)

Likewise, another refugee criticized that UNHCR staff did not tell him where his resettlement file was and interviewed him several times over years (refugee-5). These refugees challenged the lack of information on the standards of selection and procedure as causing insecurity while holding out the promise of resettlement.

In an attempt to create transparency for themselves, refugees made their own analyses of who was selected for resettlement and for what reasons. Using abductive reasoning (Barry, 2013, p. 84), they generalized their observations to a wider theory. The resettlement theories they created particularly contested the promise of resettlement on the grounds of justice. In some observations, a disproportionate number of the resettled refugees were highly skilled refugees: 'Before, there were 43 students with stipends. Now there remain 18 after

resettlement plus some who could not manage to continue their studies' (Refugee Student Association-1; cf. refugee-4).

Related criticism saw the selection process as a result of favoritism and corruption. A former refugee recalled resettled refugees sharing tips on how to bribe one's way to resettlement: 'Some people paid at UNHCR. Sometimes they told us after they had been resettled how we would have to do it, to whom to talk, how much to pay' (former refugee-5). Nigerien UNHCR staff were repeatedly blamed for helping locals fabricate resettlement stories, since due to their ethnic affiliation they could easily pass as Malian refugees (refugee-5; refugee-6; asylum seeker-5; asylum seeker-6). One of the critics explained:

> They pass! A woman whose family lives close to [place X] is now resettled. I know them from before. Her parents are still here. We criticize this, but they say that it is not true. That it always needs proof. [UNHCR staff] is gravely implicated in this. Some Malians who have lived here for 30 years instead of the victims [of the conflict since 2012] got resettled. Resettlement is for those who do not deserve it and not for those who do. (refugee-5)

In all of these resettlement theories, refugees criticized the selection criteria as either economist, classist, corrupt, or favoritist. The point here is not to take these claims as truth. Rather, they contested the promise of resettlement as potentially available to all, by focusing on the intransparency of how resettlement is allocated. What was produced as a promise of resettlement by UNHCR, the radio, and refugees was contested by the counter-information refugees assembled in their material politics, which made the selection standards of resettlement appear highly unjust, as in the case of livelihood and assistance. Both resettlement and livelihood support were also criticized for a lack of procedural guarantees. The latter, however, was also challenged for bracketing basic needs, while assistance was criticized for hierarchizing asylum seekers.

Conclusion

What, then, do humanitarian border infrastructures, intended to contain transit migration, promise to migrants? And based on which presences and absences of information do these infrastructures trigger migrant contestations?

As this article suggests, the UN agencies operating the humanitarian border in the transit state Niger created visions of a better near and distant future to encourage migrants to abandon their migration projects, but without guaranteeing the realization of their visions. Both agencies promised assistance. IOM also suggested the voluntariness of return and reintegration support, while UNHCR promised livelihood support for refugees in Niger and, less likely, resettlement to the Global North. These promises were created through outreach activities and devices and the promising forms of their

infrastructures, but they were also reinforced and sustained by a larger assemblage of actors. These promises had a particular allure to migrants against the backdrop of infrastructural deficits, social destitution, and the risks of migration in the Sahara and Sahel.

Shifting the analytical angle to material politics (Barry, 2013) in the everyday deepens our understanding of how border control infrastructures and migrant politics are related (Amelung *et al.*, 2020). Border control restrained migrants' agency by contributing to their precariousness in a country often imagined at the margins of the world. The humanitarian border subjectified migrants as victims in need of help (Casas-Cortes *et al.*, 2014, pp. 70f.), a position that precluded political subjectivities (Turner, 2006). Despite these constraints, migrants frequently engaged in vernacular acts of voice and exit. Based on their encounters with UN infrastructures and the sharing of information among peers (Papadopoulos and Tsianos, 2013), they produced information on the complex, exclusionary standards of the humanitarian border infrastructure and its political geography and history of border violence and displacement. These crucial dimensions were absent in the official information presented on the humanitarian border. Through their everyday material politics, migrants thus enriched the infrastructures of the humanitarian border with additional information that challenged the simplicity of its promises of care by exposing its dimension of control and exclusion. This knowledge contributed by migrants is evident in acts of voice such as letter-writing, protests, and their 'faint grumbling' to officials. It is also manifested in acts of exit, such as refusing the roles and resources of the humanitarian border and thus depicting them as insufficient alternatives to irregular migration, care, and support in the self-organized mobile commons, and even to labor exploitation. The significant share of migrants who abandoned the services in Niger points to the UN agencies' failures in offering decent care to refugees and migrants that could stop them from migrating onward. Through voice and exit, migrants partly shifted the particularly strong knowledge hierarchies (Turner, 2006) and accountability gaps (Sandvik and Jacobsen, 2016) between UN agencies and migrants.

Migrants brought up these political claims in response to the promises inscribed in the humanitarian border. In a perspective of material politics, these infrastructures facilitated their own contestation (Amelung *et al.*, 2020, p. 597). Linking migrant criticism with the 'distribution of life' (Appel *et al.*, 2018, p. 21), the aspirations, possibilities, and materials that infrastructures promise and actually deliver, avoids romanticizing migrant agency. Political acts then do not appear as an individual quality, but as a relational, conflictual achievement (Scheel, 2019) in a highly asymmetric border regime that hampers conventional political practices of democratic dispute (Barry, 2013) and representation based on citizenship, deliberation, and participation. In highlighting the gap between promises and their realization as a further structural

explanation for migrant resistance, the article contributes a further dimension to such a relational concept of autonomy.

Far below the representational politics of parliamentary or mediatized dispute (Barry, 2013), these everyday material politics remained mostly invisible to a wider public, but still expressed an agonistic relation of persisting disagreement. In contesting the promises, migrants stepped out of their humanitarian subjectivation as victims and challenged the logics of care and border control underlying the humanitarian border. Through practices of voice and exit, migrants constituted themselves as political subjects. In a few cases, they even eked out additional services and thus altered the standards of the infrastructures, contributing to their emergence. As such, everyday material politics provides an important angle for studying the implementation of externalization policies in third countries. As 'everyday externalization' (Lambert, 2022), it highlights migrants' resistance and its structural factors in a highly asymmetric border regime.

Lastly, researching contested promises introduces a temporal dimension to recent discussions of the humanitarian border (Walters, 2010; Cuttitta, 2020; Dijstelbloem, 2021; Pallister-Wilkins, 2022). The emerging literature on temporal bordering has thus far focused on practices of making people wait, holding, disruption, acceleration, and anticipation (Sontowski, 2018; Tazzioli, 2018; Pollozek, 2020). Through their elusive and relational character, promises present a more tacit dimension of control and its contestation. Being both elusive in their realization and performative in altering actor roles and practices, promises of a better near and distant future can reorient migrants away from routes into relations of care and border control. Nonetheless, their unachieved realization prompts manifold acts of voice and exit in the everyday.

Beyond this case study, similar humanitarian border infrastructures exist in other transit countries. They have thus far not been studied from a perspective of material politics that highlights their inherent promises and their contestation. A comparison of the promises of UN agencies with those of other humanitarian actors engaged in the care for migrants, such as returnee, religious, and civil society organizations, and how migrants challenge these promises, can further refine the analysis of (everyday) material politics. Further studies should also explore the autonomous infrastructures that migrants establish to realize their visions of the future.

Notes

1. I use 'migrant' as an overarching term to destabilize the false, hierarchizing binary of 'voluntary' and 'forced' migrants (Casas-Cortes *et al.*, 2014, p. 72).
2. For interviewees, this abbreviation indicates their employer or migration status. The number details the temporal order of the interviews.
3. Private study programs covered specific fields and were seen as better quality, while public universities were often closed for strikes (Olivier de Sardan *et al.*, 2018).

4. By my own estimates, the resettlement chances in 2019 were 1:8 for the circa 400 refugees in Mixed Migration and 1:200–1:300 for the 175,000 refugees from Mali and Northern Nigeria (Lambert, 2022).

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