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# Resettlement as a temporal border: infrastructural promises and future-making among migrants and officials in Niger

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## Abstract

Resettlement is a safe pathway to the Global North, but only few refugees in the Global South receive it. This article argues that beyond being a highly selective durable solution, resettlement can also operate as a temporal border intended to delay migration by making elusive promises of a better future to transiting refugees if they abandoned migration and waited for resettlement. This was the case in the major transit country Niger where resettlement was established in 2017 as a part of UNHCR's Mixed Migration policy to contain EU-bound migration. Based on an ethnography in Niger in 2018–2019, the article identifies three modes of future-making by refugees and officials in response to these resettlement promises: risk assessment, temporal reordering, and experimentation. In acts of risk assessment, refugees weighed the risks associated with waiting for resettlement and its alternatives against each other. In the asylum procedures, state officials foregrounded refugees' resettlement hopes over their past persecution and present protection risks. This temporal reordering could lead to rejecting their asylum applications. In acts of experimentation, refugees developed alternative futures when their resettlement eschewed. By developing resettlement promises as a temporal border, the article highlights the role of promises and future-making for migrant containment and its subversion.

**Keywords** Resettlement, Future-making, Temporal border, Mixed migration, Adventurer, Infrastructuring, Experiment, Risk

## Introduction

When his resettlement case was rejected, Jonathan did not know how to go on. He felt “stuck” (*coincé*) in Niger, an important transit country between Sub-Saharan and North Africa. He could not move back to his conflict-ridden country of origin, nor did he envisage risking the dangerous voyage through the Sahara to the Maghreb. Without a job and even enough to eat and sleep somewhere securely, a future life in Niger appeared impossible to him. The resettlement rejection by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) felt like the only decent future he had envisioned for himself was

foreclosed (interview refugee-1)<sup>1</sup>. Jonathan experienced a sense of going nowhere in life, an “existential immobility” (Hage, 2009). Despite feeling stuck, he relentlessly moved around in the capital Niamey and mobilized his social contacts to find a way out. Jonathan pressured UNHCR to reopen his resettlement case, sought assistance to open a business, and consulted with officials and refugees to come up with alternatives (field-notes Niamey, 2019).

Notions of feeling stuck and waiting tend to obscure these manifold activities that migrants engage in to secure a better future (Brun, 2016: 393). The growing literature on the temporality of migration and border has frequently conceptualized migrants’ practices in response to the immobility enforced by asymmetric border regimes as waiting and hope (Hage, 2009; Andersson, 2014; Twigt, 2022). Certainly, waiting does not imply passivity (Rozakou, 2020: 24). Nevertheless, it provides little conceptual repertoire to analyze migrants’ manifold practices to recreate their futures that happen, as in the case of Jonathan, while waiting. As a viable alternative, the anthropological notion of future-making centers actors’ everyday practices to conjure up, realize, or obstruct their own or other’s futures (Appadurai, 2013; Kleist & Jansen, 2016; Greiner et al., 2022). Its main advantage lies in being a relational concept that examines actors’ evolving practices in relation to different actors, materials, and containment contexts (Scharrer et al., 2024; see also Millar, 2025, Pekşen, 2025 in this paper cluster). This allows distinguishing different modes of future-making and thus a nuanced analysis of such disparate practices to recreate the future.

In the case of resettlement, future-making facilitates a temporal perspective on resettlement. As one of the three durable solutions for recognized refugees, resettlement organizes the relocation of those whose protection is at risk in the first country of asylum to a new host country, usually in the Global North. Yet, it is only available for less than 1% of recognized refugees. Instead, most refugees in the Global South are subject to repatriation or local integration (Boer & Zieck, 2020). Because of this highly exclusionary process, the resettlement selection in these Southern host states has been criticized as a filtering border shaped by discretion and opacity (Jansen, 2008; Thomson, 2018; Garnier et al., 2018; Menetrier, 2021). Applying the notion of future-making to resettlement, this article examines how resettlement shapes refugees and officials’ practices of imagining and realizing the future and the effects this has on migrant containment.

From the vantage point of future-making, this article argues that resettlement is not only a filtering border, but also a “temporal border” (Mezzadra & Neilson 2013, Tazzioli, 2018a) that mobilizes time for the control of migration. Resettlement, I argue, mobilizes promises of a better future to contain migrants in transit states. Introduced in Niger in 2017 as one of several containment policies (Boyer et al., 2020), resettlement promised a future decent life in the Global North to migrants provided that they abandoned their migration projects through the Sahara and waited in Niger for the outcome of year-long asylum and resettlement procedures. I distinguish three modes of future-making which refugees and asylum officials employed in response to these resettlement promises, namely risk assessment, temporal reordering, and experimentation. First, refugees weighed the risks associated with waiting for resettlement against those of its alternatives like irregular migration. Second, state officials suspected asylum seekers of seeking

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<sup>1</sup> This codename indicates the interviewee’s legal status or organizational affiliation.

resettlement in the asylum procedure. In acts of temporal reordering (Hauer, 2021), they emphasized applicants' (alleged) resettlement hopes over their past persecution and present protection needs and restricted their access to resettlement early on. Third, rejected candidates like Jonathan engaged others in experimenting (Feldman, 2016) with alternative futures when resettlement failed.

This article makes two central contributions. First, it suggests to resettlement research to go beyond a critique of selection processes by studying the role of resettlement as a temporal border that prompts different modes of future-making. Second, with respect to the emerging research on temporal borders, it emphasizes a need to examine future orientations more generally and promises more specifically as dimensions of temporal containment. Promises claims a future action without materially guaranteeing its realization. This elusiveness (Abram & Weszkalnys, 2013) thus plays on migrants' hopes and prompts specific future-making practices that can reinforce or subvert such temporal bordering.

The article draws on 13 months of ethnographic fieldwork with asylum seekers and refugees<sup>2</sup> processed under individual Refugee Status Determination, state officials, and UNHCR staff in Niger in 2018–2019 (Lambert, 2022, 2023). UNHCR (2017a) classified these migrants as “Mixed Migration”, because it assumed they were traveling on the Central Mediterranean Route from Sub-Saharan Africa towards Europe, and obtained European Union (EU) funding to reinforce their asylum processing, assistance, and resettlement.

The article first introduces a theoretical perspective on resettlement promises as temporal borders and delineates the ethnographic methodology to document the future-making they engender. It then details the infrastructuring of resettlement in the context of externalization policies in Niger after 2017. It then analyzes risk assessment, temporal reordering, and experimentation as three modes of future-making in response to resettlement promises. Finally, the article embeds the results in a concluding discussion on future-making and temporal borders.

### **Theorizing resettlement promises as temporal borders**

This section develops the theoretical argument that resettlement promises operate as a temporal border in transit spaces by drawing on research on resettlement, future-making, and temporal borders.

Research has discussed the role of resettlement as a filtering border, but it has so far neglected how it delays and reorients migration movements in transit states. Most resettlement research in asylum countries in the Global South has analyzed the highly exclusive selection process and the underlying power relations. It is largely in the hands of UNHCR, which applies its own soft law and policies (Sandvik, 2011), and resettlement countries with their interests and norms (Balakian, 2020; Welfens & Bonjour, 2021; Schneider, 2021). It has frequently been criticized as an intransparent, highly discretionary bureaucratic process (Thomson, 2012; Vera Espinoza, 2018) without procedural rights for refugees (Boer & Zieck, 2020). Despite these formal responsibilities, often-informal street-level negotiations between refugees and officials from the state administration, UNHCR, and non-governmental organizations in Southern host countries

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<sup>2</sup> I distinguish legal status only when relevant and otherwise speak of migrants as an overarching term.

inform the selection (Thomson, 2012, 2018; Garnier et al., 2018; Nakueira, 2019; Bala-kian, 2020; Menetrier, 2021; Gouyon, 2022). For instance, officials' suspicion (Nakueira, 2019), stereotyping, or jealousy (Menetrier, 2021) can inform the selection process. Equally, refugee strategies like paperwork (Thomson, 2012; Nakueira, 2019), forum shopping (*ibid.*) and adapting persecution narratives (Thomson, 2018) shape the selection negotiations.

Surprisingly little research has explicitly investigated the future aspect of these resettlement negotiations in the Global South, although resettlement hopes have frequently been found to be prominent among refugees. As a safe, regular access to an imagined decent future life in the Global North, it represents a way out of an often-precarious present shaped by structural violence (Horst, 2006; Jansen, 2008; Ramsay, 2017). Such "resettlement imaginaries"—produced by policy actors, UNHCR, the media, refugees, and researchers—unite these actors across banks in their understanding of resettlement as an automatic solution to displacement (Ramsay, 2017). Despite this global production of resettlement hopes, refugees are often ostracized for their excessive expectations (Secor et al., 2022). In the elongated resettlement process, refugees perform their future assimilability (Welfens, 2023) and must endure uncertainty and precarity (El-Shaarawi, 2021; Fee, 2022; Twigt, 2022; Gouyon, 2022). Resettlement requires refugees' faith in its possibility while it remains out of their control and consumes time that could be used for realizing other futures (Poole & Riggan, 2020). When resettlement hopes fail, they may strain refugees' psyche (Horst, 2006) and relations with humanitarian actors (Vera Espinoza, 2018) and disillusion others about their future possibilities (Adhikari, 2021). Despite its scarcity, resettlement thus powerfully affects refugees' future orientations and practices to realize them.

This future perspective can be captured with the anthropological concept of future-making (Appadurai, 2013; Kleist & Jansen, 2016; Jasanoff, 2020; Greiner et al., 2022). With its interest in people's "mundane engagements with the future" (Kleist & Jansen, 2016: 380), future-making centers actors' everyday practices of imagining and realizing their own and others' futures below the level of governmental planning. In contrast to waiting, it invites differentiating modes of future-making in relation to the structural contexts that actors are situated in and the collective repositories they rely on (*ibid.*). Rather than following an individualizing, actor-centric perspective, future-making thus facilitates a relational analysis that connects actors' evolving practices with the wider assemblage of actors, material and informational infrastructures, and containment contexts they are situated in (Scharrer et al., 2024). Examining resettlement through the lens of future-making thus centers refugees' and officials' relational modes of imagining and bringing about futures in a highly asymmetric border regime.

Here, it is fruitful to connect the insights into future-making with the recent interest in temporal borders (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013; Mountz & Hiemstra, 2014; Tazzioli, 2018a; Rozakou, 2020). While space has long been the central category for investigating containment, temporal borders highlight the mobilization of time, usually alongside space, for controlling migration (Mezzadra & Neilson 2013: 133). According to Tazzioli (2018a: 15), temporal borders exert both "control over and through time" to govern migration. Such temporal governance is complex, evolving, and done by multiple actors (Little, 2015). Temporal borders contain or reorient migrants' movements, de-/value their labor, and affect their subjectivities and dissonant practices (Mezzadra & Neilson,

2013: 133–138). Studies have examined practices of delaying, disrupting, and making wait and their deterring and disorienting effects on migrants (Andersson, 2014; Tazzioli, 2018a). Further research has examined practices and technologies of accelerating deportations (Griffiths, 2014), border control (Sontowski, 2018), detecting, and anticipating movements (Tazzioli, 2018b; Pollozek, 2020). Both slowdown and hastening can also constitute migrant strategies to navigate containment (Andersson, 2014; Rozakou, 2020).

The literature on temporal borders has so far little focused on the future as a temporal dimension through which bordering takes place. Andersson (2014: 805) described how the “faint promise” of on-ward mobility held in documents and schedules in a camp in Ceuta reduced migrants’ resistance to their containment. According to Freemantle and Landau (2020), European policymakers mobilize Africans’ future mobility to justify their current exclusion from global mobility schemes. I analyzed how the promises made by humanitarian border infrastructures to migrants to contain their mobility prompted their own contestation (Lambert, 2023). Here I suggest that promises may constitute a temporal border through the future-making they prompt.

Resettlement promises can constitute a temporal border, because they require migrants to wait for an eventual delivery of this promise and sideline other modes of future-making like irregular migration to realize similar future imaginaries. Accordingly, they may interrupt and delay migrants’ irregular mobility towards the Global North. As a specific mode of future-making, promises express an intention without offering a material guarantee for their realization (Abram & Weszkalnys, 2013). Despite this “elusive” character, promises subjectify actors and inform their future orientations and future-making practices (ibid.). Resettlement infrastructures carry a promise of the safe, legal access to a decent future life in the Global North, but without providing guarantees. While resettlement “is not a right” (Garnier et al., 2018: 1), it may still prompt migrants to abandon migration and wait for resettlement in a transit state. The following section presents the ethnographic methodology to examine these tacit relations in Niger.

### **Ethnographic engagements with future-making**

Infrastructural promises are often elusive and gain traction through a larger assemblage of humans and material infrastructures (Abram & Weszkalnys, 2013). Equally, migrants’ future visions and attempts to realize them transform in relation to the collective repositories and opportunities that present themselves (Kleist & Jansen, 2016). Also, migrants and officials may conceal their future-making practices when— as I demonstrate below for resettlement suspicions— they are policed. Future-making, as an often-tacit, evolving, and relational practice in a wider sociomaterial assemblage, is therefore best documented with an ethnographic methodology. Ethnography centers a sustained engagement with actors in the aim of producing rich descriptions “at least partly *in [their] own terms*” (Willis & Trondman, 2000: 5).

Over 13 months in 2018–2019, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork on the EU outsourcing of asylum in the capital Niamey and the transit town Agadez (Lambert, 2022, 2023). Resettlement proved to be a major theme of contestation, which I documented with three central methods. First, refugees expressed their hopes and officials their uneasiness with these desires in informal conversations. Second, I conducted a 1-month participant observation inside Niger’s asylum office, the Refugee Directorate, and the “One-Stop Shop” for protection and assistance run jointly by the state and UNHCR.

Further observations were made over months during access negotiations and follow-up visits. With some refugees like Jonathan I engaged over several months in different locations. Third, I conducted over 300 formal interviews with state officials, UNHCR staff, and migrants in Niger. The selection of participants aimed at comprehensiveness by representing different migration trajectories and bureaucratic positions. All data were recorded with note-taking or audio devices, transcribed in an anonymized way, and subsequently analyzed using qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz & Raediker, 2023) in MaxQDA.

Documenting actors' future-making in the highly asymmetric border regime in Niger requires a reflexive approach (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019) to the researcher's positionality— in my case a *white* European then-doctoral student— and the potentially negative consequences of the research. Long-term immersion helped building trust relations with some research participants and general contextual understanding, which allowed representing actors' perspectives as a relational achievement rather than individualizing their future-making and potentially denigrating them as troublesome migrants or bureaucrats. These reflexive concerns run through the analysis below.

The following section describes the infrastructuring of resettlement in Niger and the temporal bordering envisaged and achieved through these elusive resettlement promises.

### **Infrastructuring resettlement and its promises in Niger**

In the wake of the 2015 EU-Africa Valletta summit, European policymakers turned towards Niger to contain migrants already in the Sahel state before they could reach Libya or European shores. In exchange for important EU funds, the Nigerien government criminalized the flourishing migration industry in the country (Boyer et al., 2020). Complementary to these repressive policies, European and United Nations policymakers also drafted humanitarian and development policies to further reduce migration on the Central Mediterranean Route (European Commission and High Representative, 2017; UNHCR, 2017b).

One aspect of it was the “Mixed Migration” policy that UNHCR introduced in Niger in 2016. UNHCR obtained EU funding to reinforce the assistance and durable solutions for asylum seekers and refugees and improve the state's asylum processing. The idea was that potential refugees traveled on the same routes as economic migrants. Providing them with protection and assistance in Niger meant they would not need “resorting to the hazardous journey northwards” (UNHCR, 2017a). As a result, those asylum seekers seen as traveling on the Central Mediterranean Route received better assistance and resettlement, which raised envy among those excluded (interview asylum seekers-2).

A central component of the Mixed Migration policy was resettlement. It was introduced in Niger in late 2017 in the context of the Emergency Transit Mechanism, an evacuation program for protection seekers from Libyan prisons to Niger before their resettlement to Europe or North America (Lambert, 2021). This politicized program provided the funding and political leverage for UNHCR to negotiate resettlement pledges for the other refugee categories in Niger with resettlement countries (interview UNHCR-1). Mixed Migration refugees received much higher pledges than the tens of thousands of refugees from Mali and Nigeria in the country (Lambert, 2023). In 2019

alone, 53 pledges were made available for the about 400 Mixed Migration refugees (interview Refugee Committee-1).

This privileging of Mixed Migration refugees in the resettlement selection was linked to the purpose ascribed to resettlement to contain transit migration to North Africa and Europe. The EU claimed that resettlement could be a “disincentive for persons in need of international protection to embark on dangerous journeys” (European Commission and High Representative 2017: 11). Similarly, UNHCR saw it as “reduc[ing] for a significant portion of refugees the incentives [...] to embark on dangerous irregular travel” (UNHCR, 2017b: 8). For both, resettlement presented an incentive for transiting refugees to abandon their migration projects. It promised a safe way to a better future to discourage refugees to take risky journeys through the Sahara.

The logic of resettlement promises as a temporal border was also expressed by senior UNHCR staff in Niger. A senior official described the purpose of UNHCR’s new Agadez office to have protection seekers not “go to that dangerous road”, but rather apply for asylum “here with a possibility if you have the profile to depart” for resettlement (interview UNHCR-2). Resettlement as a “possibility” should thus redirect refugees from the risks of transit migration to waiting for the refugee status and resettlement in Niger. Another UNHCR officer was sure that such incentives were more effective in containing transit migration than the awareness-raising by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) about the risks of irregular travel (interview ex-UNHCR-2).

Understanding resettlement as an “incentive” that would prevent migration framed refugees as “adventurers”; as highly mobile and usually male migrants who “desire to live in another way” and take risks to realize this (Bredeloup, 2016: 134). In line with this adventurer framing, UNHCR’s Mixed Migration policy subjectivated them as mobile refugees with a past of persecution who could be reoriented from their risky migration plans into (temporary) sedentariness in Niger to wait there for resettlement. While resettlement generally frames refugees as vulnerable victims in need of protection elsewhere (Garnier et al., 2018), it here instead addressed them as adventurers, as migrants ready to take risky actions in their pursuit of better futures.

The elusive promises were prompted through new material and informational resettlement infrastructures. In a laborious process, UNHCR established organizational units for resettlement and Refugee Status Determination in a separate multi-story mansion, procured registration and transportation technology, and deployed officers and translators to Niger (interview ex-UNHCR-1). Short-term resettlement country missions interviewed refugees, vetted them for security issues, and briefed them on practical and cultural issues, while their embassies issued visas. IOM staff organized medical check-ups and transportation (fieldnotes Niamey, 2018–2019; interview refugee-2). These costly high-tech infrastructures stood out against the backdrop of structural poverty and the risks associated with trans-Saharan migration. Like other infrastructure projects (Anand et al., 2018; Jasanoff, 2020; Hauer, 2021), resettlement infrastructures prompted new future visions, affects, and relations among actors. Through their “promising forms” (Larkin, 2018), they suggested a modern future life in safety and an escape from poverty to refugees, but without guaranteeing their realization.

Apart from these promising forms, resettlement countries and UNHCR also engaged in publicity campaigns that portrayed resettlement from Niger in the news (RFI, 2017) and on their social media accounts. Two refugees told me that they had heard in the

radio that UNHCR made refugees “travel everywhere” from Niamey (interview asylum-seekers-1). In Niger, asylum seekers heard about resettlement at UNHCR or observed fellow refugees’ screening and eventual departure (ibid.; interview asylum seeker-2). As I discuss below, others learned about resettlement through fellow migrants. Although UNHCR mostly refrained from directly advertising resettlement, this assemblage of actors and objects conveyed a promise of resettlement to migrants.

Created as a means to contain migration to Europe, the high-tech resettlement infrastructures conveyed an elusive promise of a decent future if refugees waited for resettlement decisions in precarious Niger. A wider assemblage of migrants and (social) media reinforced these elusive promises. The following sections explore how these resettlement promises altered the future-making practices of migrants and officials.

### **Risk assessment**

West African migration to North Africa and Europe has often been depicted as a risky undertaking (cf. Bredeloup, 2016). In contrast, the risks associated with waiting for resettlement have only recently been discussed (Poole & Riggan, 2020; Fee, 2022; Twigt, 2022; Millar, 2025 and Pekşen, 2025 in this paper cluster). According to Appadurai (2013: 3), being “attuned to the right risks” is an element of designing one’s future. Based on the case of Abdi, an asylum seeker with a visible disability, this section discusses his everyday work of assessing the risks linked with resettlement and its alternatives, notably irregular migration. Opting for the ‘right’ risk, I argue, could secure his future when confronted with the temporal border of resettlement.

When we first met, Abdi asked me if I could support his case and I declined by explaining my role as a researcher. He went on telling me how, on his way to Libya and Europe, fellow nationals had warned him that Libya was too dangerous and suggested trying Niger, because he “could get resettlement from there”. Following their advice, Abdi made use of free rides and alms that transporters and travelers gave him to get to Niamey (fieldnotes One-Stop Shop, 2019). Information shared by other migrants made him thus reconsider the risks associated with transiting Libya and develop resettlement as a safer alternative to realize his future visions.

Upon arrival in Niamey, he applied for asylum at the Refugee Directorate and asked for assistance and resettlement at UNHCR. These processes required Abdi to “follow the file” (*suivre le dossier*), to regularly visit the officers in different locations to remind them of his needs and make friends with them. I frequently met Abdi while he pushed through the sandy, bumpy dirt roads under the glaring sun, then moved up the stairs of the buildings to reach out to officers who could easily stay out of his way. In view of these difficulties, Abdi told me, a UNHCR protection officer had pushed for an accelerated processing of his asylum case to facilitate potential resettlement (fieldnotes One-Stop Shop, 2019). Like the free rides, his visible disability prompted compassion in a UNHCR officer who supported his resettlement case because the disabling environment in Niger suggested current hardships and the risk of severe future suffering.

Despite his speedier processing, the temporal border of resettlement promises disciplined Abdi into waiting to achieve it. After a few months, other refugees told him that one needed to wait one or two years to get the refugee status. In 2017, a first-instance asylum decision took on average 19 months, a period UNHCR qualified as “excessively long” (UNHCR, 2017a). This period made Abdi reconsider irregular migration to Libya.

In a joint discussion with a fellow asylum seeker, he told us: “I am not lazy. I do not want to lose time. I want a better life. I want wife and children. I want to go to Italy. I can work different things. And first I want to learn more”. His fellow tried to calm him down with the elusive promise of resettlement: “Wait and get Libya out of your mind. Maybe you will get resettlement” (fieldnotes *One-Stop Shop*, 2019). The waiting stirred a fear in Abdi that he was “losing time” (Simonsen, 2018), that he was sustaining a present without progressing towards his future visions of education, work, and family life. In this relational engagement with a fellow asylum seeker and myself, he weighed the risk of losing time by waiting for resettlement against the risks associated with irregular migration to realize it.

Following his perceived need to act on his future rather than wait for its materialization, Abdi actively solicited all actors he had access to in support of his resettlement case. Like in other resettlement negotiations (Thomson, 2012; Nakueira, 2019), he addressed UNHCR and state officials, NGO staff, and myself via courtesy visits and everyday encounters to have us contribute to realizing his resettlement plans. With Abdi’s growing feeling of losing time, his attempts became increasingly frequent and partly aggressive. These instances shifted bureaucrats’ sentiments from initial compassion to vexation. In the UNHCR and state offices, he became known as a troublemaker whom staff tried to avoid. “He risks his case”, a state official told me. “He threatened a colleague. How could they resettle someone like this to Europe?” (fieldnotes *Refugee Directorate*, 2019). As an important strategy for achieving resettlement, following up on one’s case meant navigating the risk of being seen as a disobedient service user.

The case of Abdi demonstrates the ambiguous effects the temporal border of resettlement promises had on adventurers’ future-making practices. The risk of losing time associated with waiting for resettlement meant sustaining a present that did not come nearer to their future visions, which conflicted with a self-understanding as a risk-taking and mobile adventurer. Migrants had to conceal this inner temporal conflict to be seen as passive victims without alternatives who could not survive in Niger but relied on external intervention. This conflict between outer temporal control and inner time resulted in tensions that migrants resolved by weighing the risk of losing time against alternative risks in relational engagements with other migrants, officials, and researchers. Among these risks were losing one’s deservingness when pushing one’s resettlement case too much or the violence associated with irregular migration to Libya. The case of Abdi therefore also demonstrates the fragile character of resettlement promises as a temporal border. Enacting one’s future vision through irregular migration remained an option for adventurers. Shifting the perspective to state asylum officials’ future-making, the following section discusses the resettlement suspicions they directed at asylum seekers and their reordering of time in the asylum procedure.

### **Temporal reordering**

Temporal reordering describes a mode of future-making in which actors change the relations of the past, present, and future (Hauer, 2021). This can mean to blend out problematic pasts to silence contestation and thereby support future visions (ibid.). In contrast, state asylum officials foregrounded applicants’ future dreams over their past persecution and present protection needs. Although they did not have a say in the resettlement

selection, asylum officials could mobilize these resettlement suspicions to exclude applicants from resettlement early on.

The resettlement program fostered suspicions among state officials that asylum seekers did not seek refugee protection in Niger, but a secure access to a better life in the Global North. In our interviews, asylum officers described the new resettlement opportunities as a “pull factor” for asylum seekers to come to Niger (interviews Refugee Directorate-1, Refugee Directorate-2, Refugee Directorate-3). They did not see Niger as an evident host country for mobile refugees, because richer economies were only a bus drive away. During my participant observation in the Refugee Directorate, an eligibility officer challenged: “Why otherwise would all these people come to us if it wasn’t because getting asylum was easy and resettlement also?” For him, the reason for an asylum application was not Niger’s quality as a host country, but the availability of resettlement from the country. While sorting out the relatively numerous files of applicants who had abandoned their asylum procedures, his colleague claimed: “It might not even be their real names. They think that we give them here the status for there” (fieldnotes Refugee Directorate, 2019). “There” signified Europe as the main resettlement destination. In such abuse discourses, state officials criticized that asylum seekers did not want to remain in Niger but ultimately sought resettlement and manipulated their cases to achieve this.

Following their suspicions, state officials policed and delayed the registration of applicants they considered undeserving. During my research in the Refugee Directorate, a registration officer asked me to interpret for him when a young Anglophone man from South Sudan wanted to file an asylum application. The civil war in his country of origin meant that he had high chances of getting the refugee status (UNHCR, 2024). When the officer asked him about his trajectory, he hesitatingly added that he had been deported from Algeria to Niger and had since been assisted by IOM for a scheduled voluntary return. The ongoing civil war, he asserted, made his return to South Sudan impossible. The registration officer then insisted on a “referral letter” from IOM to know what is “going on between you and IOM”. The man had to leave without filing an asylum application. The state agent told me: “We give them a delay to come back and ask for asylum, maybe two weeks. To see if they really want to apply for asylum in Niger. They want to enter the procedure.” Surprised, I asked: “For assistance?” He replied: “They are bullheads. They want to go to Europe” (fieldnotes Refugee Directorate, 2019). Based on the applicant’s appearance and deportation from Algeria, the registration officer suspected him of being an adventurer aiming for Europe and only instrumentally applying for asylum in Niger to be resettled there. The officer thus foregrounded presumed future visions of a decent life in Europe while blending out the applicant’s escape from the civil war in South Sudan and his present protection risk of being undocumented in Niger as sound reasons for his asylum application. Through the official’s temporal reordering, future visions of a better life erased the protection issues in the past and the present.

Such practices of temporal reordering continued throughout the asylum process. In our interviews, several asylum decision-makers from the National Eligibility Commission told me that they sought to identify and reject adventurers in search for resettlement (interviews CNE-4, CNE-9, CNE-11, CNE-13, CNE-19, CNE-21). For instance, one of the adjudicators saw an increase in unfounded asylum applications with the establishment of resettlement in Niger: “[Before, ] there were not many cases. But then people understood that they could come to Niger to apply and then continue to Europe

with the document. They are mostly economic migrants.” (interview CNE-13). His colleague explained the difficulties for the commission to find “evidence that some people are really adventurers, people who are looking for a better life. We try to sift through it. But you know, it’s a bit difficult. We only have people’s stories. Big documents to read. Of course, UNHCR tries to do research on the ground. But it’s not easy.” (interview CNE-11). Rejecting adventurers was difficult, because the only knowledge the adjudicators could draw on in their decision-making were applicants’ own stories, as they did not usually meet them.

In resonance with the figure of the adventurer, refugees like the South Sudanese or Abdi sought a better future while having fled a past of civil war or persecution. In their resettlement suspicions, however, Nigerien officials highlighted applicants’ future visions while backgrounding their past life of persecution or conflict as well as their present protection needs. As other research has shown (Thomson, 2018; Menetrier, 2021), African officials were jealous of refugees’ privileged avenue to the Global North that was not available to themselves and many of their co-citizens. Confronted with such justice issues, temporal reordering was a mode of future-making available to state officials that could foreclose this future for those they did not see as deserving despite their limited discretion in the resettlement selection. Yet it likely had severe consequences, including not providing legal protection in cases of police detention and deportation for rejected or unregistered applicants. As a mode of future-making, temporal reordering can elicit how state officials manipulate time in (asylum) procedures by altering the relationships of past, present, and future. It thus contributes a temporal perspective to the literature on adventurer suspicions in West African asylum bureaucracies (Fresia, 2014: 548) and on deservingness classifications in migration bureaucracies more largely (Borrelli et al., 2022). The following section analyzes the experimentation with alternatives when resettlement promises failed.

### **Experimentation**

When Jonathan’s resettlement hopes failed, he felt stuck and clueless on how a future life in Niger should look like. Yet in contrast to Abdi, he did not favor migrating towards Libya because of the risks associated with it. This section develops experimentation with alternative futures (Feldman, 2016) as an affective and relational mode of future-making when resettlement eschews.

On one morning, Jonathan, another refugee, and I ran into each other on our habitual walks to organize support from the administration for obtaining resettlement, assistance, or a research authorization. His fellow’s cordial question how he was incited Jonathan to challenge the sense of the question: “I am not okay. How can you be okay in this country?” His fellow replied empathically: “It can work. Things can change. It depends on you. You can make it work.” Jonathan retorted: “It needs four Jonathans to move things here just a little bit!” His acquaintance still insisted: “With time it will be okay.” While Jonathan openly expressed his suffering in the present and deduced an impossible future in Niger from it, our mutual contact suggested that efforts in the near future could build a better distant future. These encouragements that things would turn out alright (“*ça va aller*”) had a proverbial quality in Nigerien everyday life.

In a critical reading, they could be considered as “cruel optimism” (Berlant, 2011). By mixing a neoliberal logic of building a brighter future through individual efforts and the

waiting for the context to become more favorable, they stood on unlikely imaginaries of a hospitable environment that rewarded personal effort. Like Jonathan, his fellow refugee neither had a stable home nor income, but he had spent more time in Niger. He showed a great ingenuity in establishing and working relations to obtain assistance beyond the formal rules. I repeatedly met him in office buildings where he charged his phone, shaved himself, or received staff support for his funding applications (fieldnotes Refugee Directorate, 2019). Through establishing and working relations with officials, he managed to receive preferential treatment in a clientelist bureaucracy where family, friends, and acquaintances were key to receiving services (Lambert, 2022) and, ultimately, resettlement. Through his example, Jonathan's fellow refugee provided concrete inspirations to other refugees on how to create a brighter future in Niger and beyond by building relationships inside the administration.

During our discussion, a UNHCR officer stepped out of the building and joined us. He told me he had initially worked on Jonathan's resettlement file. When I asked what went wrong, he restrained himself: "Well, something has not worked with the file." Left in the dark about the concrete reasons for rejections, I then enquired about Jonathan's future. Jonathan nodded and his eyes filled with tears. The UNHCR officer replied: "I think it should be complementary pathways, but it is an own procedure. You should go to UNHCR and do an in-depth interview." Then he quickly left us (fieldnotes One-Stop Shop, 2019). In his advice, the UNHCR official introduced another procedure as a further repository for a decent future in the Global North that the resettlement rejection had just foreclosed. In 2018, UNHCR had commissioned an NGO to assist refugees with procuring visas for family reunification, community sponsorship, humanitarian reasons, education, or labor mobility. Only the officials' quick departure hinted to his unease with presenting this solution. He did not mention to us that the NGO had only obtained one visa in the first year of operation. "The consulates only want the sons of ministers", its staff regretted the near impossibility for refugees to fulfil the visa requirements, such as a guarantee to return to Niger (interview NGO-1). When resettlement promises failed, Jonathan's relational and affective work out of his feeling stuck translated into our collective pressuring UNHCR staff who presented complementary pathways as another elusive promise. As another temporal border, they risked reproducing his containment. Embassies in the Global North largely restricted them to privileged Africans who can credibly claim sedentariness in Africa because of the decent futures available to them there.

The following day, Jonathan found me in the office court over lunch. He complimented me that I looked better today than usually and started sharing corruption theories about the administration to catch my interest. After a series of challenging encounters I only unwillingly listened to him this time. Then he asked me for phone credit. He had people to call. This time, I declined and started my retreat to the office. I told him I was angry with the situation. Dryly, he replied: "Then you have to go back to your country." I agreed. We remained silent. Then he asked: "Will you take me with you?" I muttered that I had heard this question many times and withdrew to the office where I found the civil servants hiding from other refugee requests in the dark (fieldnotes One-Stop Shop, 2019). By pointing to the privilege of my European passport and the underlying global "birthright lottery" (Shachar, 2009), Jonathan confronted me with the injustice in our research relation that I could attend to his struggles for a decent future while I could bear it and leave anytime when things got dicey. With structural solutions failing him,

Jonathan pressured an individual researcher to act up to her decolonial ethics and find individual fixes for her research participants' futures.

As Millar (2025) and Pekşen (2025) discuss for Kenya and Turkey in this paper cluster, refugees make alternative plans while waiting for resettlement and often do so collectively. By establishing social contacts and affectively addressing them with his despair about being stuck, Jonathan drew on their capacities to widen his panorama of available futures to find a way out. Jonathan mobilized the different resources of his contacts, namely the official's counseling on alternative procedures, more experienced refugees' best practices, and researchers' ethics to provide individual fixes for structural issues. They emerged in Jonathan's relational, affective work out of his existential immobility based on empathy, reciprocity, or responsibility. The affective relations refugees sustained with others and their practices of care can thus be an important resource for recreating futures and moving beyond containment.

### **Conclusion**

The establishment of resettlement in Niger as an element of EU externalization policies certainly reinforced durable solutions for refugees. However, it also contributed to the European rationale of containing African migrants already in Niger. Complementary to the criminalization of transit migration, resettlement infrastructures did not violently hold them back, but did so tacitly through the future imaginaries they carried. Resettlement promised refugees the safe access to a decent future life in the Global North upon condition that they waited in transit for the outcome of often year-long asylum and resettlement procedures to realize these futures. As a temporal border, resettlement promises reoriented and delayed migrants' mobility and thus (temporarily) contained them in transit.

Conceptualizing resettlement as a temporal border allows to examine the performative effects of resettlement promises on migrants and officials' future-making practices. As a relational and practice-oriented concept (Scharrer et al., 2024), future-making helps analyzing actors' practices of envisioning and realizing the future in relation to other actors, materials, and their contexts. Although rarely realized, resettlement promises alter migrants and officials' future orientations and practices to realize or control these futures. In Niger as a context struck by a shortage of decent futures for most people, the introduction of resettlement partly exacerbated conflicts between migrants, civil servants, and UNHCR officers on these comparatively privileged refugee futures. Migrants' resettlement hopes and the resulting conflicts on resettlement between officials and migrants thus represent yet another of many unintended consequences of external migration governance (Lambert, 2022) in the cooperating partner state.

Differentiating modes of future-making in response to the temporal border of resettlement also highlights actors' vigorous, creative practices of envisioning and making their own or others' future. As the cases of Jonathan and Abdi suggest, migrants recreate their futures by using their bodies in particular environments, by affectively engaging with their social contacts, and by gathering practical information. The article identifies three such modes of future-making, namely risk assessment, temporal reordering, and experimentation. First, exchanges with other migrants helped weighing the risk of losing time while waiting for resettlement against the risks of its alternatives, notably the harm of transiting Libya or of the bureaucratic classification as a troublemaker when

pushing one's resettlement case too much. Second, civil servants suspected asylum seekers of seeking resettlement and, in acts of temporal reordering, foregrounded these hopes over their pasts of persecution and present protection needs. This could result in excluding those considered undeserving from resettlement already during the asylum procedure. Third, migrants experimented with their futures by sharing their fears and seeking advice in conversations with migrants, officials, and, occasionally, researchers. Such relational practices of care can be an important resource for recreating futures and moving beyond feeling stuck.

Examining resettlement as a temporal border and its effects on the future-making of migrants and officials makes two central contributions to the study of resettlement and temporal borders. First, beyond being a selective filter that prompts tense negotiations in host countries in the Global South, resettlement can be analyzed regarding the temporal containment it envisages through promises and their effects on migrants' future-making. Yet, such containment is likely temporary and can be replaced with alternative future plans. As we also discuss in our joint theoretical introduction of this paper cluster (Scharer et al., 2024), future-making related to resettlement and spatiotemporal containment are therefore in a complex and evolving relationship.

Second, the article suggests to the literature on temporal borders to consider promises as a particular practice of spatiotemporal containment. Promises allude to a better future for migrants. They are carried by (humanitarian) border infrastructures and conveyed tacitly through a larger assemblage of actors and materials. Most importantly, in contrast to laws or contracts, they do not provide guarantees for their realization. Despite this elusive character (Abram & Weszkalnys, 2013), they reorient migrant hopes and actors' future-making practices. In Niger, this performative effect on migrants was actively intended by UNHCR and the EU to contain transit migration.

Further research should continue exploring different modes of engaging with the future in the everyday that relate to resettlement and other migration control policies. More generally, it remains a task to study the future imaginaries that borders carry and the way migrants, civil society actors, and civil servants support or challenge them and how these future visions and practices contribute to or undermine containment. This extends particularly to the role of promises, with their elusive character, for governing migration. Further resettlement research may also examine whether such temporal bordering extends beyond transit spaces like Niger to camp and urban settings in major settlement countries in the Global South.

Situating anthropological discussions on future-making in containment practices uncovers the asymmetric power relations and politics that inform everyday engagements with the future. As Appadurai (2013: 299 f.) pointed out, research should side with those at the margins and foster an "ethics of possibility" that expands the horizon of imagination and equity in the capacity to aspire and— I would add— to realize such aspirations. In this perspective, resettlement certainly contributed to increasing the protection for a minority in Niger. Yet, it exacerbated conflicts between refugees and officials in Niger and further contained and delegitimized refugees' trans-Saharan mobility which represented a rare way out of existential immobility. Resettlement promises should therefore be critically assessed against the containment context they are situated in.

#### Abbreviations

EU (European Union)

IOM (International Organization for Migration)  
UNHCR (United High Commissioner for Refugees)

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### Availability of data and materials

The data is not made publicly available due to its sensitive nature.

### Declarations

#### Competing interests

The author declares that she has no competing interests.

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