

# CITIES, BORDERS AND WOMEN'S TRADE NETWORKS

OLIVIER WALTHER

My research in 2018 was divided into two main parts: a network study of women's trade networks, and a study of border cities, both in West Africa. This work builds on the 2017-18 program of work of the OECD Sahel and West Africa Club, whose main objective is to contribute to enhancing policy frameworks that can better respond to the needs and specificities of women's economic activities, particularly those involved in cross-border trade. Our multidisciplinary and international team included the Sahel Research Group (SRG) of the University of Florida, the Department of Geography of the University of Niamey and Chatham House for the survey work, and the University of Wageningen for the computer modelling.

Women play a key role in West Africa's food economy. However, few studies adequately describe the functioning of their networks. In this new project funded by the OECD Sahel and West Africa Club, our objective is to address this gap by mapping the social and spatial structure of women's trade networks in the region. Focusing on a local rice trade network between Nigeria and its neighbors, we studied the distribution of activities between 1997 producers, traders and wholesalers, identified gender roles and shed light on the nature of relationships between actors. This network is the largest ever mapped in Sub-Saharan Africa using social network analysis. The network analysis shows that men are structurally more central than women in the food economy, due to their ability to bridge producers and consumers. These brokers are particularly crucial to the development of cross-border trade, which relies on a rather limited number of well-connected traders, mainly from Nigeria. The spatial analysis confirms that most traders tend to do business in their own country and that few actors are able to bridge nationally-organized markets. It also confirms that most of the rice produced in the region



is informally exported to Nigeria, by far the largest market in the region, despite Nigeria's official ban on rice imports.

Our study provides a systematic analysis of the role border cities play in the process of regional integration in West Africa. Based on a multidimensional mapping of 18 countries, our team analyzed the demographic, morphological, social, economic and political specifics of border cities in the region. A number of indicators shed light on the local dynamics that have developed in urban areas, the impact distance has on national cohesion and the impact territorial divisions have at the international level. The analysis also outlined the key obstacles that limit the integration potential of border cities in terms of socio economic interaction and institutions. The study of these fundamental aspects constitutes a preamble to the institution of place based development policies suited to the potential and constraints of West African urban areas.

*Olivier Walther is visiting associate professor of geography. Funding provided by OECD Sahel and West Africa Club.*