



About MMC

The Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) is a global network consisting of six regional hubs (Asia, East Africa & Yemen, Europe, North Africa, West Africa and Latin America & Caribbean) and a central unit in Geneva. The MMC is a leading source of independent and high-quality data, research, analysis and expertise on mixed migration. The MMC aims to increase understanding of mixed migration, to positively impact global and regional migration policies, to inform evidence-based protection responses for people on the move and to stimulate forward thinking in public and policy debates on mixed migration. The MMC's overarching focus is on human rights and protection for all people on the move.

The MMC is part of, and governed by, the Danish Refugee Council (DRC). While its institutional link to DRC ensures MMC's work is grounded in operational reality, it acts as an independent source of data, research, analysis and policy development on mixed migration for policy makers, practitioners, journalists, and the broader humanitarian sector. The position of the MMC does not necessarily reflect the position of DRC.

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Spanish police and officials remove irregular African migrants from boat in the Canary Islands.

A Gateway Re-opens: the growing popularity of the Atlantic route

Summary report

We took the pirogues with the sole objective of arriving in Spain, working and putting our parents in the best conditions, and then returning among them safe and sound. That's what motivated us, but unfortunately, we didn't arrive at our destination.

23-year-old Senegalese man

Introduction

2020 saw a dramatic increase in the number of refugees and migrants arriving irregularly by boat in the Canary Islands, a Spanish archipelago off the coast of northwestern Africa: more than 23,000, compared to approximately 1,305 in 2018 and 2,700 in 2019. Between January and mid-November 2020, at least 511 people died or disappeared on the Atlantic route, making it the most dangerous irregular maritime route to Europe. Many who set off for the Canary Islands are intercepted at sea, and some who reach the islands are deported back to Mauritania.

This summary report explores: reasons for migrating and for the choice of this particular route; the risks, dangers, and protection incidents experienced over the course of the migratory journey; reception and screening in the Canary Islands with particular focus on implications for children and asylum seekers; experiences of return, with an emphasis on forced returns from the Canary Islands and Mauritania; and the aftermath of failed migration attempts.¹

After a record 31,678 refugees and migrants arrived in the Canaries in 2006, Spain stepped up efforts to deter migration along the Atlantic route, signing bilateral agreements with Senegal and Mauritania and enhancing maritime security cooperation. The arrivals surge in 2020 prompted a fresh burst of bilateral cooperation and diplomatic activity aimed at managing migratory flows. The European Union described the situation in the Canary Islands as “unsustainable.”

Recent visits by Spanish officials to Mauritania and Senegal appear to have focused on the security dimensions of cooperation. This is observed both in public discourse focusing on disrupting criminal networks and in terms of material assistance of police equipment and support to patrolling through boats, aircraft, and personnel. This security approach risks ignoring the economic and social factors that underlie Senegal's continuing high pressures for migration.

Meanwhile, efforts to increase *legal* migration routes, such as through establishing paths for circular migration, are more in sync with the demand and underlying migration motivations in Senegal. But legal migration paths have been limited, and a recent measure to reward legal migration through establishing portability of social security rights does not extend them. Nevertheless, recent discussions to build on Spain's pilot circular migration scheme are welcome, and such initiatives should be explored and expanded further.

1 For references, research methodology, direct testimonies of 46 interviewed refugees and migrants, and key informant insights, please read the full report [here](#).

Migration drivers and choice of route

The top three nationalities of irregular arrivals in the Canaries in 2020 are thought to be Moroccan, Senegalese and Malian. Citizens of Ivory Coast, Guinea, Gambia, Mauritania, Guinea-Bissau, Cameroon, and Comoros, among others, were also represented. In September, UNHCR noted a change in profile of arrivals, with more coming from the Sahel and Ivory Coast and “more women, more children, more profiles that would be in need of international protection.”

Economic drivers

Economic and livelihood factors play an overwhelming role in decisions to migrate along this route. Refugees and migrants have described their desire to escape poverty and to strive for greater economic security, with an inability to secure fruitful employment or a sustainable livelihood very frequently referenced as a main driver in their migration decision. In Senegal, lack of access to land, trade agreements which favor European companies to the detriment of the local economy, insufficiency of government policies related to youth employment, and poor governance of the fishing sector were also identified as factors which contribute to migration. Social and family pressure, often amplified by migration “success” stories (of uncertain veracity) from friends and relatives in Europe, or the observed contributions migrants make in local communities, are also important influences.

Decisions to migrate irregularly are rooted in the paucity of legal pathways, namely the impossibility of getting a visa to go to Europe.

Covid-19

The coronavirus pandemic appears not to have dampened people’s desires to migrate. Indeed, it seems to have spurred departures. In some cases this appears to be due to an unfounded belief that Covid-19 deaths in Europe had created a labor shortage. Additionally, the economic effects of the health crisis in departure and host countries have reduced income-generating opportunities, especially in the informal sector, damaging or destroying livelihoods and exacerbating poverty.

The ‘shortest’ route to Europe

In West Africa, the Canary Islands are widely seen as “the closest entry point” to Europe. The Atlantic route is considered by some as the “shortest and least problematic” route to Europe in the light of insecurity and other threats in countries such as Mali, Libya, Niger, and Algeria, through which some of the refugees and migrants who attempt to reach the Canaries have previously attempted to migrate. Some also have a perception that security patrols along the Atlantic route have reduced after European states increased their focus on the Central Mediterranean route several years ago, or due to the pandemic.

The Canary Islands are not seen as a destination, but rather as a stepping-stone to mainland Spain or other European countries.

Risks of the route

Perils at sea

Contrary to the perception mentioned above, the Atlantic route is in fact the most dangerous irregular maritime route to Europe. Its physical aspects, particularly the arduous, unpredictable, and often over-crowded boat journey, characterized by seasickness (which can be fatal in very severe cases), insufficient food and water, intense fear, dehydration, and exposure, put refugees and migrants in considerable danger. Interactions with authorities and smugglers are also a likely source of risk, and have resulted in protection incidents. Boat journeys along the Atlantic route typically range from a couple of days to over a week, with no access to sanitation or medical care.

Shipwrecks are common. Between January and mid-November 2020, at least 511 people died or disappeared attempting to reach the Canary Islands from the African coast in 41 documented shipwrecks occurring off the coasts of Senegal, Mauritania, Western Sahara, Morocco and the Canary Islands themselves. In just one such incident off the coast of Senegal in October 2020, the deadliest recorded that year, more than 140 people died after gasoline canisters on board exploded and the boat caught fire and sank. In the first six months of 2020 one death was recorded for every 20 arrivals in the Canaries.

Even if smugglers are reported to underplay these dangers when drumming up business, many refugees and migrants appear to be aware of them before embarking on the Atlantic route. This underscores the potency of the drivers that led them to make the attempt.

Protection incidents: extortion, scams, and mistreatment

People travelling on the Atlantic route report experiencing a wide range of protection incidents at various points of their migration journey. These include: bribery and extortion, theft and scams (mainly by smugglers), mistreatment and physical violence (including by police and other state officials), witnessing deaths at sea, and detention (which at times went together with mistreatment).

Perpetrators of protection incidents are reportedly almost always authority figures encountered either when crossing borders, or when moving internally or residing outside of one's own country. In cases of theft or scams, refugees and migrants describe smugglers swindling them, either by overbooking the boat or disappearing with their money before the crossing.

Reception and returns

Inadequate reception risks protection gaps...

The system for reception and screening of refugees and migrants in the Canary Islands was under great and increasing strain in 2020 as the numbers of arrivals continued to grow. Spain lacks a standardized or comprehensive protocol for dealing with sea arrivals, and coordination and consistency of response is a weakness. The only proactive, official screening process for those refugees and migrants reaching the Islands by sea occurs immediately after arrival and consists of basic questions. Lawyers and interpreters are not systematically present when boats arrive, meaning that refugees and migrants may not understand questions they are asked or have adequate information about their rights and available avenues for protection.

...especially for children

The abovementioned challenges contribute to a reception and screening process that may overlook children, preventing them from accessing care and assistance through the public minors' protection system. If a child is not correctly identified as a minor, s/he will not have protection against potential deportation. The specialized reception centers run under the minors' protection system ensure children receive differentiated care – a good practice – but they are not equipped to recognize those who may be eligible to apply for asylum, and indeed, very few children make asylum requests. Other child-specific protocols, such as access to specialized psychosocial support within 72 hours of arrival, are also lacking. In general, while it is positive that the reception system makes special provisions for children, the strain the system is under means that there are insufficient resources to ensure that child arrivals are supported as fully as they should be.

...and would-be asylum-seekers

These weaknesses in the screening and reception process can also mean that would-be asylum seekers are not able to make their claim. Persons arriving by sea in the Canary Islands in 2019 and 2020 were not systematically informed by authorities of the possibility to apply for asylum. UNHCR has warned of an increase in profiles in need of international protection among arrivals. Additionally, while no official figures are available, it has been estimated that 20% of arrivals to the Canary Islands in 2020 were Malians. This is cause for concern given UNHCR's Position that there are multiple areas of Mali to which people should not be returned.

Spain appears again to be poised to step up deportations from the Canaries to Mauritania, and risks expelling vulnerable individuals who might qualify for some form of protection.

Rapid expulsions

Individuals deported to Mauritania are flown to the city of Nouadhibou and immediately taken to the borders with Senegal and Mali and left to make their own way without further support. No specific screening for vulnerabilities occurs, and there is no external oversight of the process, which means there is scant opportunity in Mauritania to rectify any screening omissions that occurred in the Canary Islands.

Refugees and migrants intercepted at sea off the coast of Mauritania are also immediately taken and deposited at the Malian and Senegalese borders. While obvious medical cases may receive assistance, most of these refugees and migrants do not have a chance to recover from their difficult boat voyage before being expelled. This may lead to negative health consequences.

There is a legal basis for deportations from the Canary Islands to Mauritania. This allows for the readmission of third country nationals who have transited through Mauritania or, importantly, who are merely presumed to have done so. This presumption continues to be applied even though a growing number of people depart for the Canaries from Senegal, using a route that bypasses Mauritania. Moreover, refugees and migrants who arrive at the islands are not

asked if they have transited through Mauritania, nor does such screening occur upon arrival in Mauritania for those who have been deported there. Instead, deportees from the Canaries are generally bussed to Mauritania's borders with Senegal and Mali as soon as they land.

Unmet medical needs

Despite the physical and psychological effects of their boat journeys, those intercepted at sea for the most part also lack adequate access to international or local humanitarian actors present in Nouadhibou, except in cases of clearly demonstrated medical need. These actors only have brief access to intercepted refugees and migrants at the point of disembarkation. The authorities decide who may stay for further support, and this decision is not made by medical professionals, nor with the benefit of any systematic medical examination. Refugees and migrants showing no visible symptoms of ill-health – who may include those suffering emotional or psychological distress – are immediately taken into custody by the authorities, and then transported to Nouakchott and onward to the borders, typically within hours. There are recent indications of improvements in meeting the needs of people intercepted at sea in terms of coordination between Mauritanian authorities and aid actors. These are worth building upon.

Time spent on land – in transit or working – prior to a planned boat journey to the Canary Islands could also affect the physical health of migrants and refugees, some of whom endure long journeys and difficult working and living conditions en route.

Aftermath of failed attempts

Re-migration and the difficulty of returning home

Available evidence points to a widespread tendency towards re-migration along the Atlantic route. Refugees and migrants may find it difficult to return home after a failed migration attempt, particularly as migration journeys often require substantial family investment at the great personal sacrifice of relatives and result from collective family decisions. The prospect of returning home without money – the expected payoff of most migration journeys – is often a source of extreme shame, especially when others from the same community have made what are perceived to be “successful” migration journeys. It is the potency of this shame that drives many to persevere in their migration quest, even if it entails considerable risk or hardship.

Emotional costs of failure

Testimony from refugees and migrants who fail to reach their intended destinations indicates that such failure often brings about prolonged emotional and mental health consequences, with some conceding to feeling depressed, anxious, despondent, demoralized, or even “losing the will to live.” These feelings may be compounded by breakdowns in family relations resulting from the unsuccessful migration attempt and by the depletion of financial resources.

Recommendations

This research has underscored the strength of underlying economic and social factors which drive migration in the region, and has highlighted the stark risks and protection challenges faced by refugees and migrants who attempt the Atlantic route. It leads to the following recommendations to increase the safety of those taking the route, and to provide alternatives to the route:

For humanitarian and protection actors:

- Proactively seek out and provide psychosocial and other reintegration support to returnees whose more “informal” return from their Atlantic route voyage makes them less visible and less likely to access assistance.

For national and international policy makers:

- Establish a system that ensures a period of rest and humanitarian support to all those intercepted at sea off the coast of Mauritania, building on incipient coordination mechanisms between Mauritanian authorities and local and international civil society and humanitarian actors.
- Discontinue the practice of immediate expulsion to the borders of Mauritania and establish alternate modalities of return with greater support and accompaniment to the migrant’s country of origin.
- Strengthen screening procedures in the Canary Islands to avoid expelling to Mauritania vulnerable individuals who might qualify for some form of protection in Spain.
- States should ensure that in any process of return, human rights and humanitarian standards are respected throughout the entirety of the process.
- Systematically involve returned migrants and prospective migrants in consultation when planning development projects in West African countries.
- Increase safe and legal pathways for migration from West Africa to Europe, including through the development of opportunities for circular migration.

For researchers:

- Research further how the means of expulsion impact re-migration decisions, and the extent to which those left to make their own way home from Mauritania’s borders are more likely to re-migrate.



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