

Southbound: Mixed migration routes, experiences and risks along the journey to South Africa

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Musina (Limpopo Province), South Africa, 2009 – A pickup truck with three passengers standing in the back drives along a road near the Zimbabwe border. A fence has been built to try and prevent the movement of illegal migrants into South Africa.

Acknowledgements

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About MMC

MMC is a global network engaged in data collection, research, analysis, and policy and programmatic development on mixed migration, with regional hubs hosted in DRC regional offices in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Europe and Latin America, and a global team based across Geneva and Brussels.

MMC is a leading source for independent and high-quality data, research, analysis and expertise. 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. MMC's overarching focus is on human rights and protection for all people on the move.

MMC is part of 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.

For more information visit: www.mixedmigration.org and follow us at [@Mixed_Migration](https://twitter.com/Mixed_Migration)



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Summary and key findings

This report examines the key drivers and intentions, routes, and vulnerabilities of refugees and migrants traveling along the Southern Route, from East and the Horn of Africa, the Great Lakes, and Southern Africa to South Africa. The following key findings aim to inform migration policy and programming stakeholders working in various points along the route and in South Africa.

- **The majority (85%) of the surveyed respondents identified economic reasons shaping their decision to migrate.** At the same time, over a **half of respondents (50%) identified multiple reasons for leaving**, highlighting the mixed nature of their migration decision-making. After economic factors, personal or family reasons (28%) and violence, insecurity and conflict (21%) were most often mentioned as migration drivers.
- **South Africa is a destination for those seeking employment opportunities at a range of skill levels.** Respondents were relatively highly educated, with 54% having completed secondary and 28% tertiary education (19% vocational training and 9% university degree).
- Respondents from East and the Horn of Africa (47%) and Great Lakes (38%) **more often cited violence, insecurity and conflict as a reason for leaving their origin countries** than those from Southern Africa (1%).
- **Refugees and migrants from East and the Horn of Africa engage in complex and varied journeys towards South Africa**, involving multiple stops and modes of transport. Many mentioned Dar Es Salaam and Maputo as key locations along the route to stop to look for smugglers to organize the next stretch of the journey, followed by waiting for transport.
- Over half (51%) cited using one or several smugglers for a part, multiple parts or the entirety of their journey. **However, the share of those using a smuggler was higher among respondents from East and the Horn of Africa (73%).**
- **56% reported having been in one or more dangerous locations while on route to South Africa.** Beitbridge, in Zimbabwe on the border with South Africa, is one such location, where respondents cited bribery, robbery, and detention as associated risks.
- **Among the dangerous locations cited, robbery (54%) was the most mentioned protection risk (54%), followed by bribery and/or extortion (52%) and detention (34%).** Respondents from East and the Horn of Africa more often cited risks of detention (56%) in the dangerous locations they identified than those from other regions of origin.
- While **a majority (81%) maintained South Africa was their intended destination**, several respondents explained that the **conditions in-country were not as they were told or had expected**, particularly in relation to overall insecurity, fewer economic opportunities, and issues related to work and residency documentation.

1. Introduction

The Southern Route encompasses a complex array of mixed migration journeys running from East and the Horn of Africa, as well as the Great Lakes region, to South Africa. Compared to other mixed migration routes on the African continent, most notably the Central and Western Mediterranean Routes towards Europe and the Eastern Route towards the Arabian Peninsula, the Southern Route remains understudied.¹ This is perhaps linked to the fact that movements along the Southern Route are considerably smaller than the other routes, just 9% of movements out of the Horn of Africa go southward,² and the route encompasses so-called 'South-South' movements, which may be less of a priority for donor governments of the 'Global North'. Yet, South Africa, as one of the largest economies of Africa, remains a major migration destination within the African continent and attracts thousands of refugees and migrants who are seeking refuge and/or better life opportunities.

In 2009, an IOM report estimated that there were around 17,000-20,000 men moving along the Southern Route annually,³ whereas a 2017 MMC study under its previous name, the Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat (RMMS), estimated the figure at that time to be around 13,000-14,000 annually.⁴ In 2021, IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) in Moyale (at the Ethiopian – Kenyan border) estimated there were more than 10,000 migrants headed in the direction of South Africa.⁵ Movements to South Africa are also a relatively recent phenomenon. It was not until the end of apartheid in the 1990s and the introduction of domestic refugee legislation and signing of international human rights laws that South Africa opened itself up to refugees and migrants from the rest of the continent.⁶

A 2022 IOM report finds that "vulnerabilities are rife" for refugees and migrants from the Horn of Africa undertaking the journey south. The report argues that long distances through a diversity of transit countries and border crossings and a "reliance on a multiplicity of brokers, intermediaries and smugglers" play a role in people on the move's vulnerability to protection abuses.⁷ The conditions of travel can be harsh and the journey can take weeks or months. Parts of the journey take place at night and people are sometimes forced into cramped spaces or compelled to travel in sealed, airless containers and overcrowded boats, with minimal access to basic requirements. There are reports of robberies, beatings and arrests and journeys may involve stretches where refugees and migrants have to travel by foot, passing through rough and risky terrain, including national parks. In October and November 2022, mass graves of Ethiopian migrants presumed to be traveling south were discovered in Malawi and Zambia, respectively, and, in 2020, dozens of bodies of migrants traveling on the same route were found in a shipping container in Mozambique.⁸ RMMS highlighted in 2017 that refugees and migrants are not only subject to human rights violations along the Southern Route, but also after their arrival in South Africa.⁹ In South Africa, refugees and migrants are subject to xenophobic violence and racial discrimination. 2008 and 2015 saw peaks in such violence and, more recently in 2022, the UN's High Commissioner for Human Rights reported a rise in xenophobic attacks.¹⁰

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- 1 Amuhaya, C. (2022). [Conceptualising Externalization Migration Management Strategy in the East and Horn of Africa Region](#). The Horn Bulletin V (V) (pp. 33-44).
 - 2 IOM (2022). [A Region on the Move 2021: East and Horn of Africa](#).
 - 3 IOM (2009). [In Pursuit of the Southern Dream: Victims of Necessity. Assessment of the irregular movement of men from East Africa and the Horn to South Africa](#).
 - 4 RMMS (2017). [Smuggled South. An updated overview of mixed migration from the Horn of Africa to southern Africa with specific focus on protection risks, human smuggling and trafficking](#).
 - 5 IOM (2022). [Migrating in search of the Southern dream. The experiences of Ethiopian migrants moving along the Southern route](#).
 - 6 Bonfiglio, A. (2020). [Student Migrant, Refugee or Both? Exploring refugee agency and mobility through tertiary education in Kenya, South Africa and Uganda](#). [Doctoral Thesis, Maastricht University]. Maastricht, The Netherlands: ProefschriftMaken Maastricht.
 - 7 IOM (2022). [Migrating in search of the Southern dream. The experiences of Ethiopian migrants moving along the Southern route](#).
 - 8 Aljazeera (2022, 13 December). [Ethiopia to investigate after 27 bodies discovered in Zambia](#).
 - 9 RMMS (2017). Ibid.
 - 10 OHCHR (2022, 15 July). [South Africa: UN experts condemn xenophobic violence and racial discrimination against foreign nationals](#).

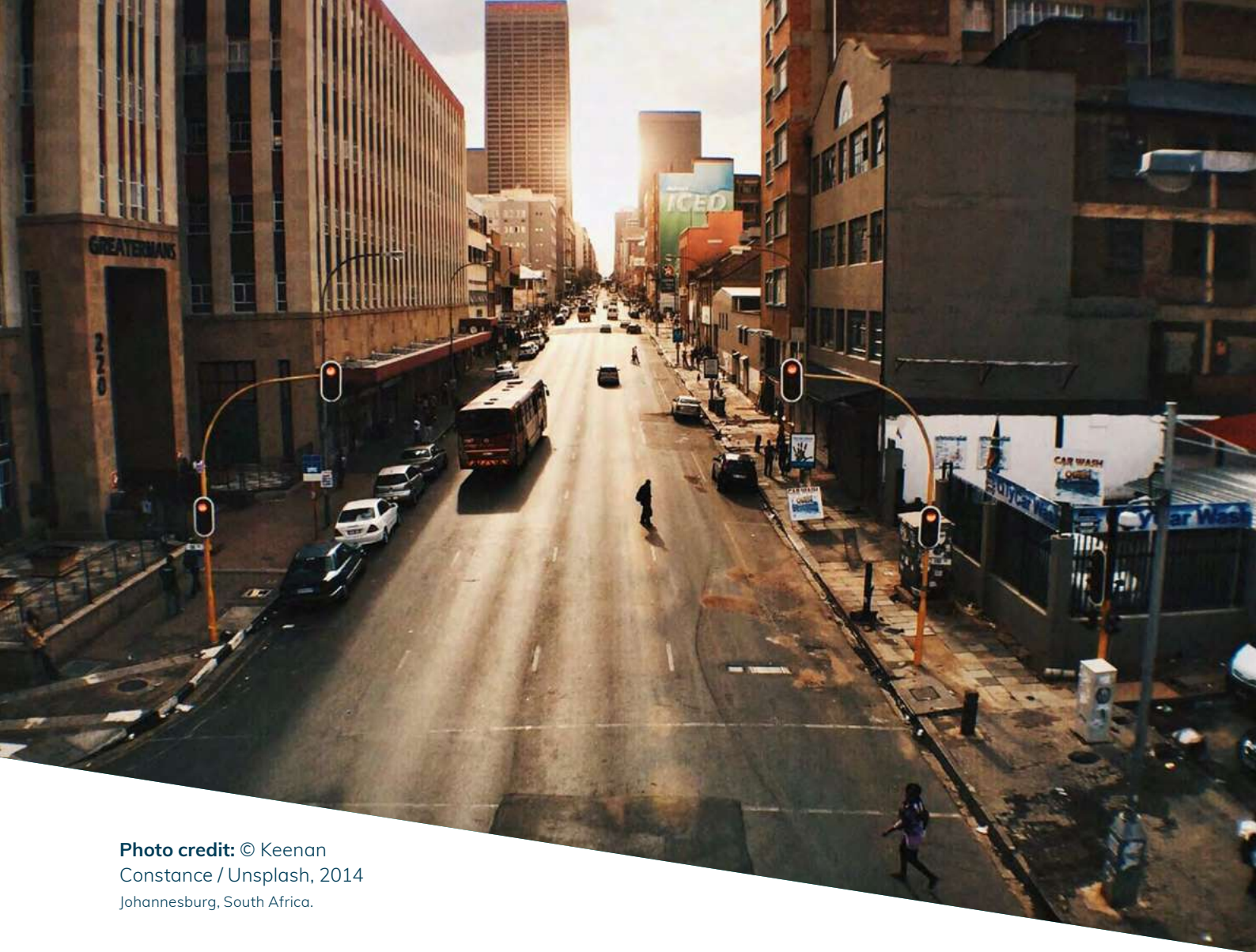


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Johannesburg, South Africa.

This study seeks to provide an overview of the mixed migration dynamics along the Southern Route to South Africa, from East and the Horn of Africa, the Great Lakes, and Southern Africa. In particular, it asks:

1. What are the factors that drive mixed migration along the Southern Route?
2. What are the various routes that refugees and migrants use to journey south and what are the most dangerous locations on those routes?
3. What are the kinds of protection violations to which refugees and migrants get exposed and who are the key perpetrators?

By answering these research questions, this study aims to increase the evidence base on the experiences of refugees and migrants traveling along the Southern Route for policy actors and those providing protection and assistance to people on the move. After outlining the methodology, this report begins by putting forth a definition of the Southern Route and is then divided into four main findings sections: migration drivers, the routes taken by refugees and migrants before arriving in South Africa as well as their intended destinations, interactions with smugglers, and protection risks along the journey.

2. Methodology

This study is based on primary quantitative data from 468 surveys collected in South Africa between September and October 2022 through MMC's 4Mi project, focusing on the experiences and movement decision-making of refugees and migrants. Respondents were surveyed in Durban (55%), Pretoria (38%), Ekurhuleni (5%), and Johannesburg (2%), as these locations are notable places of transit and settlement for refugees and migrants. Three locations in Gauteng province (Pretoria, Ekurhuleni and Johannesburg) are sites where registration for new arrivals in South Africa is reportedly faster than elsewhere in the country, driving a large number of new arrivals to urban centres in this province.¹¹ Durban, the main city in eThekweni province, is perceived as a location of employment opportunities for refugees and migrants to work in the city's port, or to set up small businesses.¹²

About 4Mi

MMC collects data with refugees and migrants using a core survey tool known as 4Mi. The 4Mi survey is standardized and implemented across different MMC regions worldwide, allowing for cross-country and cross-regional analysis on the experiences and movements of these populations. It collects data on a wide range of themes, including but not limited to, refugees and migrants' profiles, migration drivers and intentions, routes and modes of transportation, interactions with smugglers, and experiences with and perceptions of protection abuses.

4Mi enumerators are often refugees and migrants, themselves, who have unique access to members of their co-ethnic or co-national communities and who speak the required languages. MMC enumerators benefit from comprehensive trainings as well as continuous supervision to ensure data quality, integrity and security. Enumerators are trained on safety guidelines; data protection, research ethics, consent and safeguarding; gender-centered approaches; protection; and DRC's code of conduct and code of conduct complaint mechanism. In particular, enumerators are trained to clearly communicate informed consent and the anonymity of survey data with respondents before, during and after the surveys. In South Africa, MMC worked with TK Research Consulting and a team of 10 recruited senior enumerators to collect 4Mi data. For more information on 4Mi visit mixedmigration.org/4mi/.

Surveys were conducted with refugees and migrants who were 18 years old and above and who had been in South Africa for less than two years, to capture recent experiences and increase the likelihood that respondents would be able to better recall their migration experiences. As much as possible, enumerators aimed to identify both men and women respondents to examine any differences in their experiences, acknowledging that IOM reports that the Southern Route is predominantly used by men (99%, based on data collected in Tanzania¹³). Additionally, enumerators sampled respondents from a diversity of regions of origin, particularly East and the Horn of Africa, the Great Lakes region, and Southern Africa, to get a comprehensive picture of movements south. The following is an overview of this study's sample.

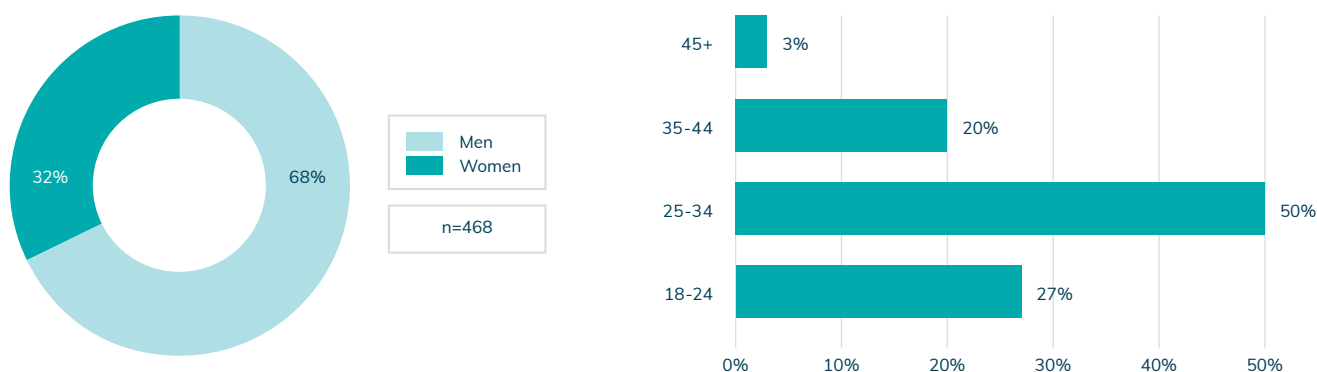
Of the 468 refugees and migrants surveyed, 68% were men and 32% were women. Half of respondents (50%) were between the ages of 25 and 34, while 27% were between 18 and 24, 20% between 35 and 44, and 3% were 45 and older (Figure 1).

11 Smit, R. & Rugunanan, P. (2014). From precarious lives to precarious work: The dilemma facing refugees in Gauteng, South Africa. *South African Review of Sociology* 45 (2), pp. 4-26.

12 Sidzatane, N.J. & Maharaj, P. (2013). On the Fringe of the Economy: Migrant Street Traders in Durban. *Urban Forum* 24, pp. 373-387.

13 IOM (2022). [A Region on the Move 2021: East and Horn of Africa](#).

Figure 1. Distribution of 4Mi respondents by gender and age



The analysis carried out for this paper focuses on the country of departure of respondents rather than the country of nationality. Countries of departure and countries of nationality were matching for 99% of the sample, with only 6 respondents having started their journeys in countries that were not that of their nationality. Countries of departure were grouped into regions of departure as outlined in Table 1 below. Most respondents had departed from Southern Africa (53%), followed by East and the Horn of Africa (26%), and the Great Lakes region (21%).

It is important to note the differences in sample composition by place of interviews. 38% of respondents in Pretoria were female, as compared to 29% in Durban, 23% in Ekurhuleni, and no respondents in Johannesburg. In terms of nationality: all respondents in Ekurhuleni were Malawian, and all respondents in Johannesburg were Somali. In Durban and Pretoria, there was a mix of nationalities. As a result of the small and partial samples in Ekurhuleni and Johannesburg, analysis by location of interview is not included in this study.

Table 1. 4Mi respondents by country of nationality and by region and country of origin (n=468)

Region of departure	Country of departure	% of 4Mi surveys
Southern Africa (53%)	Zimbabwe	23%
	Mozambique	16%
	Malawi	14%
	Lesotho	<1%
East and Horn of Africa (26%)	Ethiopia	14%
	Somalia	9%
	Eritrea	3%
	South Sudan	<1%
Great Lakes (21%)	Democratic Republic of the Congo	14%
	Burundi	7%
	Rwanda	<1%
	Tanzania	<1%

Respondents from Southern Africa most often described their legal/migration status in South Africa as irregular (34%), in possession of temporary permits (23%), having expired permits (21%), or asylum seekers (10%), among others (12%). A higher proportion of those from East and the Horn of Africa self-reported as irregular (63%), followed by asylum seekers (22%),¹⁴ and other statuses (15%). Respondents from the Great Lakes, on the other hand, more frequently described themselves as asylum seekers (29%), irregular (23%), in possession of expired permits (16%), having temporary permits (16%), or other (16%).

Several limitations to the data are worth noting. As the 4Mi sampling process was not randomized, the data are not representative of the entire refugee and migrant population traveling along the Southern Route. Moreover, as is evident from media reports of deaths along the route, many do not arrive in South Africa. This study only examines the experiences of refugees and migrants who have managed to arrive in the country. Nevertheless, the findings from this study can provide important insights into the diversity of experiences of refugees and migrants traveling along the Southern Route to South Africa and, as much as possible, results are triangulated with existing studies.

3. Defining the Southern Route

This section synthesizes the efforts by migration practitioners (i.e., programming actors) and scholars to define 'the Southern Route'. It explores conceptual gaps within existing research and puts forward its own definition of the route to guide this study's analysis.

Much of the research produced by migration programming actors and researchers alike maintains a focus on the Southern Route's starting point in the Horn of Africa. For instance, the aforementioned 2009 report published by IOM examined migration from the Horn of Africa to Southern Africa, predominantly by Ethiopian and Somali men, and was the first report to focus on this route.¹⁵ A research paper by Long and Crisp (2011) sheds light on the risks for those moving from the Horn as well as from the Great Lakes region to Southern Africa.¹⁶

The term "Southern Route" first appeared in a 2013 RMMS publication. This study, which examined the political economy and risks behind migrant smuggling,¹⁷ revealed the different profiles of Ethiopians taking this route versus those traveling in other directions. The route is described as containing many points of transit, including – most often – a first phase from Addis Ababa to Nairobi, and transit through one or more capital cities in a neighboring country of South Africa, such as Harare or Maputo. A 2017 RMMS study entitled "Smuggled South", provided an updated analysis of the Southern Route, zooming in on protection risks, human smuggling, and trafficking.¹⁸

Reports published by IOM in 2016 and 2022,¹⁹ identify the Southern Route as originating in the Horn and running through Kenya, Tanzania, Malawi, and Mozambique, before reaching South Africa. Marchand, Reinold and Dias e Silva (2017)²⁰ define the Southern Route as an overland route connecting the Horn of Africa with Southern Africa and name Kenya as a key country of transit. Being "particularly popular with Ethiopians and Somalis", other countries of transit

14 This number represents a departure from earlier research claiming a higher percentage of refugees and asylum seekers among people from the Horn and East Africa moving towards South Africa. RMMS' 2017 study argued, based on 2015 field observations as well as 4Mi data, that most Somalis and Ethiopians arriving in South Africa applied for asylum on arrival. It was based on this trend that RMMS estimated the number those traveling from the Horn and East Africa to South Africa in 2015 and 2016. The present report's sample, showing roughly a fifth of those from the Horn and East Africa self-identifying as refugees or asylum seekers, makes it more difficult to extrapolate overall Southern Route movements based on figures on asylum seekers. Khan & Lee (2018) maintain that South Africa's turn towards more exclusionary asylum policies has led to an increase in hidden, unregistered populations who are residing in the country irregularly and unprotected. This shift in policy would explain why the sample distribution by legal status varies considerably between 2017 and 2022 (the time of data collection for this report). Already in 2017, RMMS' study already hinted at policy changes which likely would make it harder in the future for those arriving in South Africa to be granted asylum.

15 IOM (2009). Ibid.

16 Long, K. & Crisp, J. (2011). *In harm's way: The irregular movement of migrants to Southern Africa from the Horn and Great Lakes regions*. New Issues in Refugee Research, Research paper no. 200.

17 RMMS (2013). *Migrant Smuggling in the Horn of Africa & Yemen. The political economy and protection risks*.

18 RMMS (2017). Ibid.

19 IOM (2016). *Migrant Smuggling Data and Research. A global review of the emerging evidence base* and IOM (2022). *Migrating in search of the Southern dream. The experiences of Ethiopian migrants moving along the Southern route*.

20 Marchand, K., Reinold, J. & Dias e Silva, R. (2017). *Study on Migration Routes in the East and Horn of Africa*. Maastricht, The Netherlands: Maastricht Graduate School of Governance.

include Tanzania, Malawi and Mozambique. Davy (2017)²¹ also argues that the Southern Route is primarily used by refugees and migrants of these two nationalities, with South Africa as the major destination. Gebre-Egziabher (2019)²² presents a list of countries through which Ethiopians most commonly transit: from Ethiopia through Kenya, Tanzania, Zambia, and Malawi to South Africa.

Amuhaya (2022)²³ maintains that in addition to being used by refugees and migrants from the Horn of Africa, the Southern Route is also used by people from the Great Lakes region, predominantly from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Burundi. They connect with others traveling along the Southern Route in Tanzania. Mawire, Mtapuri, Kidane and Mchunu (2020)²⁴ maintain an even wider view of the countries of origin of people moving along the route: “[t]he Southern route is in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region,²⁵ where migrants from countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Tanzania, Malawi, Mozambique, Zambia, and Zimbabwe move south to reach South Africa.” Passport-bearing nationals of the SADC countries are entitled to freedom of movement around the region for periods not exceeding 90 days. The reality at border posts, however, maybe somewhat different as Mauganidze and Formica (2018) contend.²⁶ Moreover, not everyone moving from Southern Africa has a passport and can therefore find themselves in clandestine situations.

Exploring different modes of transportation, Estifanos and Freeman (2022)²⁷ argue that Southern Route trajectories are increasingly including sea travel for parts of the journey. Such shifts may be explained as a result of intensified border control measures in Kenya and Tanzania, with smugglers increasingly facilitating sea journeys on the Indian Ocean. IOM’s 2009 study found 30% of journeys to include movements by sea and RMMS’ 2017 study identified stretches of the journey on the so-called “Indian Ocean Route”. Sea movements pose additional protection risks in the form of shipwrecks.²⁸ Aduugna, Deshingkar and Ayalew (2019) identify the ports of Kismayo and Mombasa as key in the facilitation of the sea journeys of Ethiopians moving southwards, connecting with Pemba in Mozambique en route to South Africa.²⁹ Davy (2017) asserts that Somalis are more likely to bypass overland journeys through Kenya and Tanzania and directly travel to Mozambique by air or sea.

In terms of the route’s destination, unlike other main mixed migration routes originating within the African continent, the Southern Route has one principal destination according to the aforementioned studies: South Africa. That being said, RMMS’ 2017 study as well as IOM’s Regional Strategy 2020-2024 for Southern Africa³⁰ explore the extent to which Southern Africa is used in turn as a point of departure for locations in Europe, the Americas, and/or Australia. However, scarce data are available on this phenomenon, making it difficult to assess the extent and whether this speaks more to refugees’ and migrants’ long-term movement aspirations rather than their short term plans or intentions.

Traditionally, South Africa has been the intended destination of the vast majority of refugees and migrants traveling along the Southern Route given its former relatively progressive asylum policy, which allowed asylum seekers and refugees to freely self-settle in the country and access education, healthcare, and the labour market. South Africa is also the continent’s economic and educational powerhouse, having the highest level of human development and highest-ranked tertiary educational institutions among African countries.³¹ While these rights, services, and economic opportunities are likely to attract people on the move, recent reports have argued that changes in South Africa’s immigration and asylum policies have made the country less inclusive for those seeking refuge and asylum, and have created a larger hidden and irregular refugee and migrant population.³² Further research should explore whether such policy shifts have also impacted refugees’ and migrants’ perceptions of South Africa as a preferred destination, or whether the relatively better socio-economic conditions in the country outweigh these shifts. Limited data are available on the refugee and migrant population in South Africa. According to the Migration Policy Institute, South

21 Davy, D. (2017). [Unpacking the Myths: Human smuggling from and within the Horn of Africa](#). RMMS Briefing Paper 6.

22 Gebre-Egziabher, K. A. (2019). All or Nothing: The Costs of Migration from the Horn of Africa – Evidence from Ethiopia. In: M. van Reisen, M. Mawere, M. Stokmans and K.A. Gebre-Egziabher (Eds.), *Roaming Africa: Migration, Resilience and Social Protection* (pp. 37-55). Bamenda, Cameroon: Langaa RPCIG.

23 Amuhaya, C. (2022). *Ibid*.

24 Mawire, C., Mtapuri, O., Kidane, T. & Mchunu, K. (2020). [Socio-Economic Effects of Migration on the Family: Evidence from the Zimbabwean and Congolese Families Living in Durban, South Africa](#). *Mankind Quarterly* 61 (1), pp. 117-135.

25 The Southern African Development Community is a regional economic community consisting of [16 member states in Southern Africa](#).

26 Mauganidze, O. A. & Formica, J. (2018). [Freedom of movement in Southern Africa. A SADC \(pipe\)dream?](#) Institute for Security Studies.

27 Estifanos, Y. S. & Freeman, L. (2022). Shifts in the Trend of and Nature of Migration in the Ethiopia-South Africa Migration Corridor. *Zanj: The Journal of Critical Global South Studies* 5 (1/2). Special Issue: Migration and (In)Equality in the Global South (pp. 59-75).

28 See RMMS (2013) and RMMS (2017).

29 Aduugna, F., Deshingkar, P. & Ayalew, T. (2019). [Brokers, migrants and the state: Berri Kefach “door openers” in Ethiopian clandestine migration to South Africa](#). *Migrating Out of Poverty Research Programme Consortium Working Paper* 56.

30 IOM (2020). [Southern Africa Regional Strategy 2020-2024](#).

31 Bonfiglio, A. E. (2020). *Ibid*.

32 Khan, F. & Lee, M. (2018). [Policy Shifts in the Asylum Process in South Africa Resulting in Hidden Refugees and Asylum Seekers](#). *African Human Mobility Review* 4 (2), pp. 1205-1225.

Africa hosts around 2.9 million refugees and migrants as of 2021, which represents less than 5% of the overall population of 60 million people. Yet, the figure might be higher in reality due to the exclusion of irregular migrants and unregistered refugees, particularly from neighbouring countries, from these figures.³³

A recent report from IOM³⁴ opens up the definition slightly, framing that those along the Southern Route are moving towards “the southern countries in the continent”, and particularly South Africa. Additionally, as detailed in RMMS’ 2017 study³⁵ and MMC’s Quarterly Mixed Migration Update from Q4 of 2022,³⁶ a recurrent trend sees some refugees and migrants leaving South Africa in favour of other southern African countries due to upticks in violence against foreigners and systemic xenophobia. A particular increase was noted in mid-2022, when the UN issued a statement condemning targeted attacks against refugees and migrants in the country.³⁷ In October 2022, the authorities of Botswana noted the arrival of hundreds of asylum seekers who said they were driven out of South Africa by xenophobic attacks and had encountered poor conditions in Zimbabwe.”³⁸

While refugees and migrants from the Horn of Africa may indeed comprise one of the larger populations moving along the Southern Route, although not exceeding the volume of movements by people from SADC countries along this route, this fact does not set the terms for how the Southern Route should be defined. For the same reason, while migration programming actors may overwhelmingly focus on refugees and migrants from the Horn of Africa undertaking precarious overland journey to South Africa, given the particular vulnerabilities and needs that this group presents, institutional mandates and priorities do not define the Southern Route. The exclusion of people on the move from the Great Lakes or southern African regions risks obscuring how vulnerabilities may shift overtime and how and why vulnerabilities may differ among nationalities that occupy the same key points of transit along the journey south. In addition, a lack of understanding of the different modes of transit along the Southern Route, in particular by sea and air, obscures the sheer diversity of journeys south and the varied ways in which smuggling networks operate or in which individuals who have some measure of resources make strategic decisions and reduce their vulnerabilities.

Therefore, MMC defines the Southern Route as *a collection of multiple migration routes that connect different parts of the African continent with Southern Africa, particularly South Africa. In reality, the Southern Route consists of several migratory routes running from: 1) East and the Horn of Africa to South Africa, often through Kenya, Tanzania, Malawi, Zambia, Mozambique, and/or Zimbabwe, and 2) the Great Lakes region to South Africa, joining similar routes from Tanzania and/or Zambia onwards. Movements from countries included in the SADC overlap with these routes, particularly at Tete and Maputo (Mozambique), and in Zimbabwe towards Beitbridge, and can also be considered movements along the Southern Route. Sometimes the two routes from the Horn of Africa and Great Lakes intersect, especially when refugees and migrants heading south face constraints to their movement and must consider alternative trajectories. Importantly, like all migration routes, the Southern Route is not linear and encompasses stepwise, reverse, and circular movements as plans change and opportunities and constraints arise along the journey.*

4. Drivers of movement

This section focuses on the mixed migration drivers of refugees and migrants who journey to South Africa from East and the Horn of Africa, the Great Lakes, and other parts of Southern Africa. Acknowledging that movement decision-making can be complex and multi-layered, respondents had the opportunity to cite multiple reasons for their departure. This section examines the sample as a whole, before zooming in to analyze how responses differ by gender, age, and region of origin.

Most respondents (85%) identified economic reasons behind their decision to migrate. In particular, respondents reported that they were not earning enough in the job they had before leaving (41%), that they or the main earner of their household were unemployed (31%), and/or it was difficult to do business in their departure country (24%).

33 Migration Policy Institute (2021). [South Africa reckons with its Status as a top immigration destination, apartheid history, and economic challenges.](#)

34 IOM (2022). [Migrating in search of the Southern dream. The experiences of Ethiopian migrants moving along the Southern route.](#)

35 RMMS (2017). *Ibid.*

36 MMC (2023). [Quarterly Mixed Migration Update Eastern and Southern Africa – Quarter 4 2022.](#)

37 OHCHR (2022). [South Africa: UN experts condemn xenophobic violence and racial discrimination against foreign nationals.](#)

38 Dube, M. (2022, October 19th). [Botswana Expresses Concerns over Influx of Asylum Seekers.](#) VOA News.

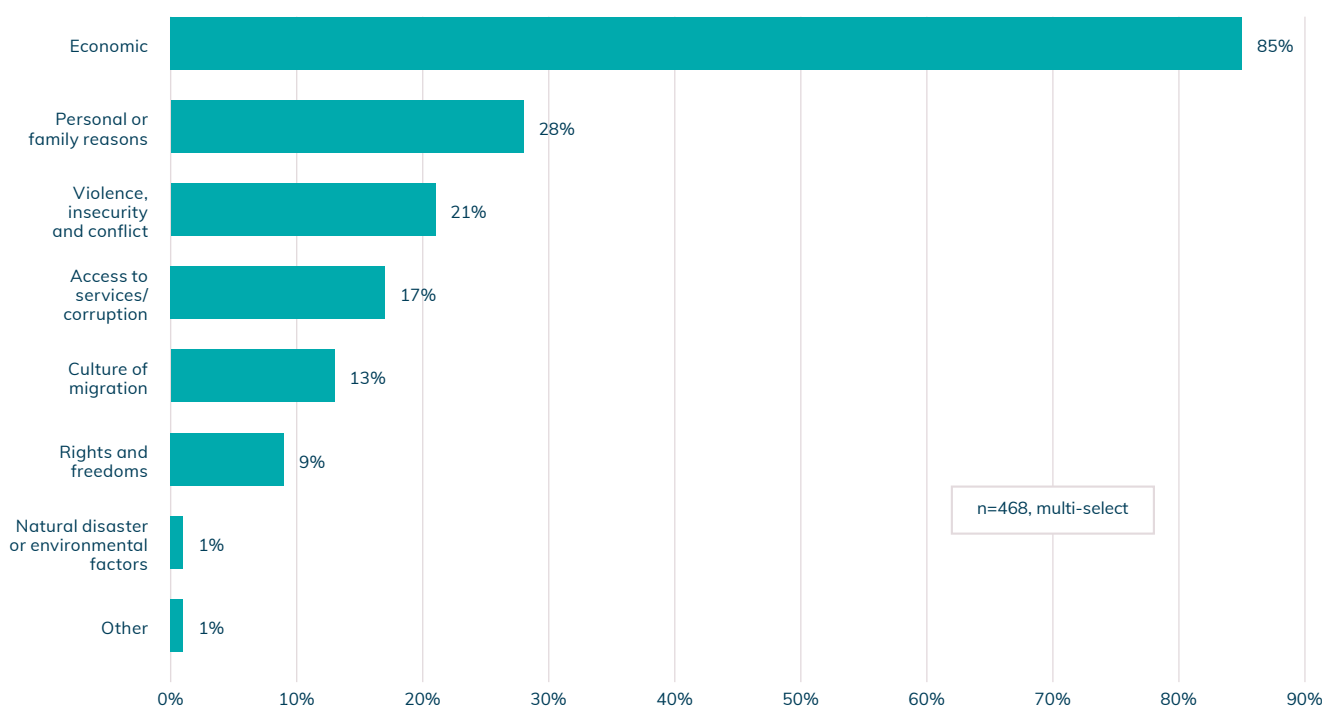
Delving further into the data, 63% of respondents were earning some form of income in the 12 months prior to their departure, with considerable variation in the types of income activities: 44% were working in casual, daily labour, 32% had regular paid jobs, and 24% were business-owners/self-employed.

Discussing the poor livelihood and employment opportunities in her country of origin (and departure), Zimbabwe, a 25-year-old woman in Pretoria noted:

“If our situation is bad in our country, we should go to other countries to seek employment.”

Exploring the education levels of respondents prior to their migration journeys revealed that 54% had completed secondary or high school, 19% had finished vocational training, 15% had completed primary school (11%), and 9% had completed a university degree. To put this into context, the level of tertiary education attainment is aligned with the continental average for nationals (9.4% in 2018)³⁹ and is slightly higher than the global average for refugees (6% in 2023).⁴⁰ The overall distribution of respondents’ education levels suggests that those seeking to work in South Africa would be suited for a variety of lower, mid-skilled, as well as skilled labour. A 20-year-old Mozambican man interviewed in Pretoria highlighted the need for educational qualifications before traveling to South Africa, while a 36-year-old man from Zimbabwe likewise mentioned that “in South Africa... they want proper documents and qualifications.”

Figure 2. “For what reason did you leave?”



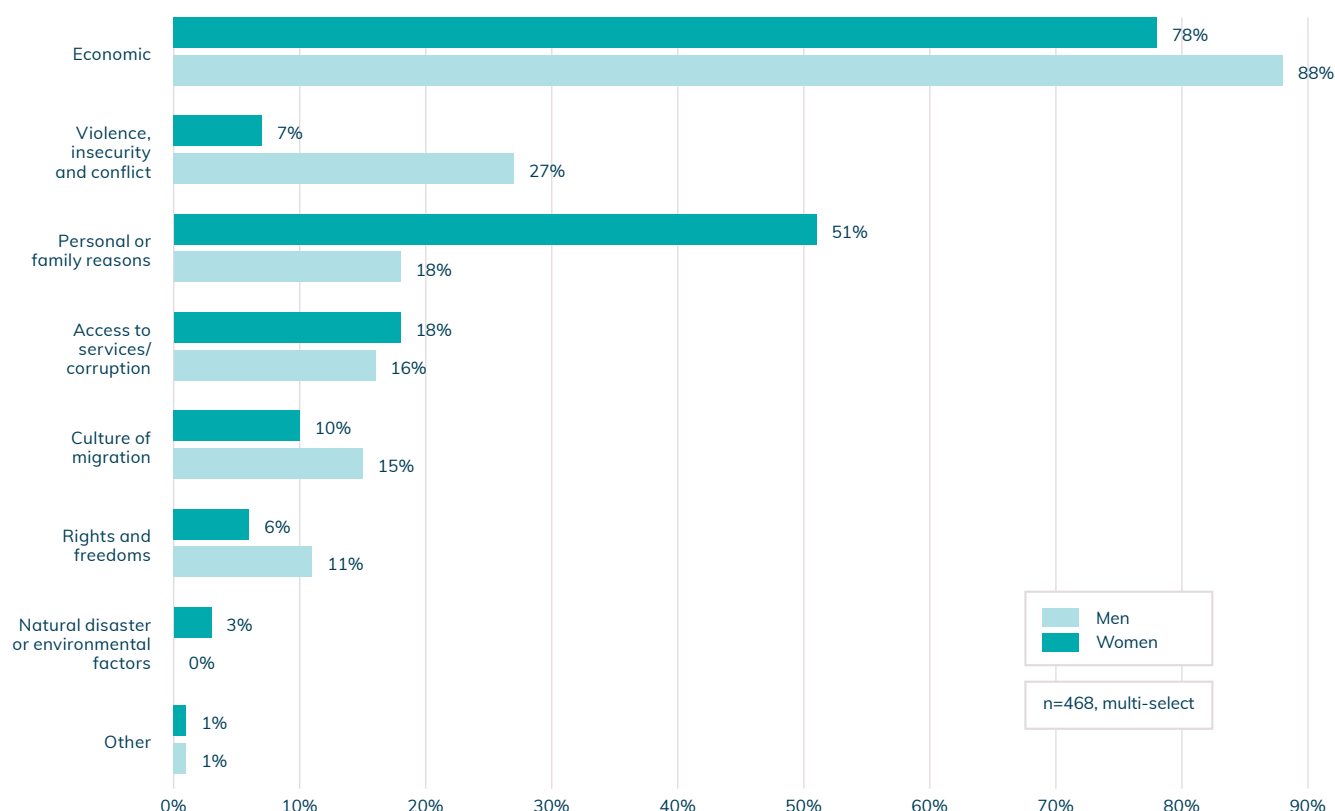
The most-cited group of migration drivers after economic reasons was personal or family reasons, reported by 28% of respondents. Just over half of those moving for personal reasons mention doing so to reunite with family (56%), followed by joining friends abroad (47%) and getting married abroad (20%). The third most-reported reason for leaving was violence, insecurity and conflict (21%), which comprised of those citing departure due to political unrest and riots (74%), followed by war, armed conflict and terrorism (69%). On average, respondents cited 2 migration drivers and many more within each category of migration driver. Among the 99 respondents self-reporting as asylum seekers or refugees, 81% also identified economic migration drivers, underscoring the multiplicity of factors that can drive the movements of those seeking international protection.

When analysing the data by gender, economic reasons were the main migration drivers of both women and men, with no notable gender differences in the specific economic-related drivers mentioned above.

39 World Bank (2020) [COVID-19 Response: Tertiary Education in Sub-Saharan Africa](#).

40 UNHCR (2023) [Tertiary Education](#).

Figure 3. “For what reason did you leave?” – by gender



Women respondents more often mentioned personal or family reasons as a migration driver than men (51% vs. 18%, respectively). When examining specific personal or family reasons, family reunification and marriage abroad were more often reported by women, while men more often intended to join friends abroad. This speaks to the fact that women on this route less often migrate as the first members of their households to reach a given destination, and more often reach South Africa after husbands, fathers or brothers have settled and started to establish their livelihoods,⁴¹ mirroring dynamics observed along the Central Mediterranean Route from East Africa towards Europe, but not the Eastern Route from East Africa towards the Arabian Peninsula, where women often migrate alone as domestic workers. Indeed, a 27-year-old Burundian woman in Durban stated:

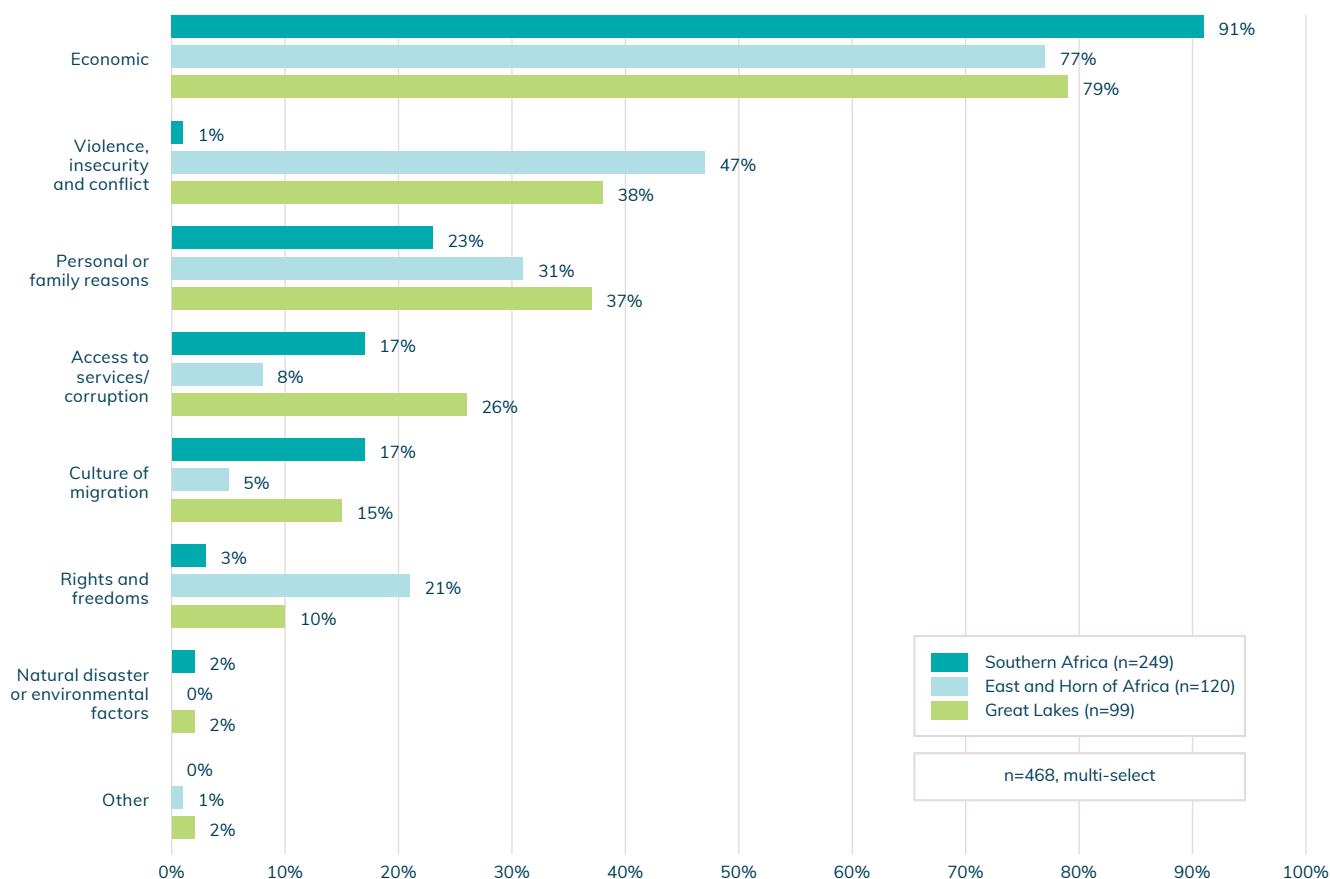
“My husband was already in South Africa, so he planned my journey and knew the agents who assisted me in different countries.”

Women less often reported violence, insecurity and conflict as a reason for leaving their departure country than men, even when comparing responses from the same countries of departure. While it is not clear why this was the case, it might suggest that women respondents were more indirectly impacted by conflict whereas their male counterparts were more directly impacted. Ormhaug et al. (2009) note the more direct impact of conflict and fatality resulting from armed conflict on men: “men are more likely to die during conflicts, whereas women die more often of indirect causes after the conflict is over.”⁴²

41 Masanja, G.F. (2012). [The Female Face of Migration in Sub-Saharan Africa](#). *Huria: Journal of the Open University of Tanzania* 11.

42 Ormhaug, C., Meier, P. & Hernes, H. (2009). *Armed Conflict Deaths Disaggregated by Gender*. PRIO Papers. Oslo, Norway: International Peace Research Institute.

Figure 4. “For what reason did you leave?” – by region of departure



While economic reasons remain the main driver for all respondent groups disaggregated by departure region, **respondents from East and the Horn of Africa and Great Lakes more often mentioned violence, insecurity and conflict as a reason for leaving (47% and 38%, respectively)**. This aligns with the prevalence of violence and conflict in Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, South Sudan, Burundi and the DRC – all of which being the specific departure countries of respondents. In particular, respondents from East and the Horn of Africa who cited violence, insecurity and conflict (n=56), reported leaving owing to political unrest and riots (41/56) and war, conflict and terrorism (38/56). Respondents from this region also stood out because they cited a lack of rights and freedom (21%) as a migration driver more often than respondents from other regions. This was largely driven by the responses of surveyed Eritreans and may reflect Eritrea’s policies of forced conscription and poor human rights record.⁴³ Additionally, respondents from the Great Lakes region cited a lack of access to services and corruption (26%) as migration drivers more than their counterparts from other regions. This was largely driven by the responses of surveyed Burundians.

Despite the fact that climate change and the current ongoing drought in East and Horn of Africa, as well as recent floods and cyclones in Mozambique, have deeply affected livelihoods and access to resources across regions, **respondents interviewed in South Africa did not often cite natural disasters or environmental factors as a key reason for their departure**. MMC research in eastern and southern African countries found that, “environmental factors are rarely cited among main migration drivers by respondents, making them challenging and hard to address.”⁴⁴ When explicitly asked whether issues relating to climate or the natural environment played a role in their decision to leave their country of departure, 90% of respondents maintained this was not a factor influencing their decision to migrate, and 5% did not know whether that was the case. It can therefore be assumed that those most affected by natural disasters either do not move (because they do not want to or are unable), move internally or cross-border to nearby locations in search of assistance and livelihood opportunities, move along the Southern Route but do not reach South Africa, or are from communities whose social networks are linked to other migration routes. In contrast, along the Eastern Route, MMC has observed environmental drivers linked to drought interact with economic and political migration drivers to yield

43 See also: Belloni, M. (2020). Family project or individual choice? Exploring agency in young Eritreans’ migration. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 46 (2), pp. 336-353.

44 MMC (2022). [4Mi Snapshot: Climate-related drivers of mixed migration in East and the Horn of Africa](#).

movements from Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia to coastal cities in Djibouti and Somalia, with the intention of reaching the Arabian Peninsula. Movements along the Southern Route to South Africa are arguably longer in distance, costlier, and further away from areas affected by environmental disasters in East and the Horn of Africa, which may explain why they less often feature drivers linked to climate change, as compared to movements along the Eastern Route, which are shorter, less costly, and closer to drought-affected areas of origin. Moreover, previous research has pointed out that very specific profiles of particularly Southern Ethiopians travel along the Southern Route.⁴⁵ As such, drought-impacted populations in Oromia, Somali Region, and Amhara may not have a history of migration towards Southern Africa, amongst other factors, that would make movements south move tenable as compared to movements east.

Lastly, examining the specific drivers to South Africa, of those citing the country as their preferred destination (72%; 339/468), respondents described the economic opportunities it offered (82%; 277/339) and the generally better living standards there (54%). A 32-year-old Zimbabwean woman in Durban said, “Things are better in South Africa than back home”, and a 20-year-old Zimbabwean man in Pretoria stated, “South Africa is not bad when it comes to economy”. Some respondents outlined they had chosen this destination to reunite with family (31%) or friends (20%) already located there. Respondents’ reasons for selecting South Africa as their preferred destination were similar across regions of departure.

5. Journeys and migration intentions

Given the lack of data and research around defining and understanding the movement dynamics along the Southern Route, this section analyzes 4Mi data on the various routes that refugees and migrants use to journey south, key transit points and reasons for stopping along the journey as well as respondents’ intended destinations. Given the diversity within the sample, this section will examine data on journeys and migration intentions by region of departure, focusing on East and the Horn of Africa, the Great Lakes region and Southern Africa.

Respondents from East and the Horn of Africa (n=120) exhibited a wide range of trajectories to South Africa, which can be loosely categorized into the following groups: 1) Flights mainly from East to Southern Africa combined with overland travel at the end of the journey at the crossing into South Africa, 2) flights for the entirety of the journey, and 3) exclusively overland journeys. Despite this range, the data reveal some similarities at the start of the journey. **40% of respondents transited first through Kenya**, which aligns with existing studies and anecdotal evidence highlighting Kenya and in particular Nairobi as a key point of departure south.⁴⁶ Somalis, in particular, often transit through Eastleigh – a neighbourhood in eastern Nairobi with a well-established Somali community – before they continue further south.⁴⁷ Of the 37 respondents who cited stopping in Nairobi during their journey, most said this was to wait for transport (28/37) or to look for a smuggler to organize the next stretch of the journey (18/37). 13% of respondents first transited through the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and stopped there to wait for transport to continue their journey (12/15). This likely reflects the flight itineraries undertaken by respondents and the lack of direct flights connecting African cities. Estifanos (2020) maintains that those moving along the Southern Route increasingly travel along different trajectories to avoid immobility and/or detention in transit countries, particularly Kenya and Tanzania. Connecting flights through the UAE are in this context perceived as a less risky option for those who have the adequate resources and documentation.⁴⁸

Almost a third of respondents (32%), mainly from Ethiopia and Somalia, only took flights to South Africa, including all those transiting through the UAE before arriving at the destination. Not surprisingly, respondents exhibiting this trajectory had the shortest journeys at an average of 4 days.

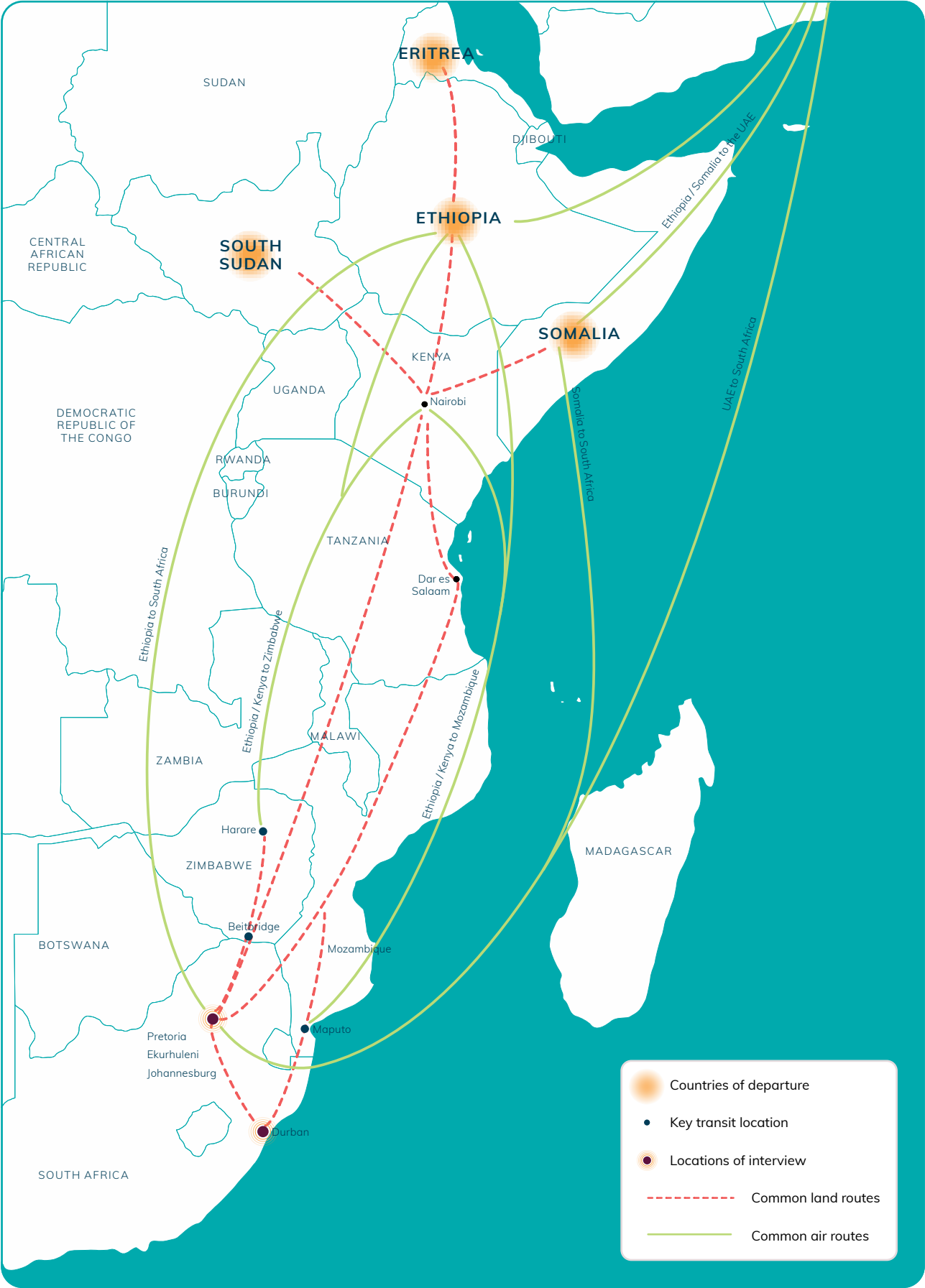
⁴⁵ RMMS (2017). *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ See also: Aduana, F., Deshingkar, P. & Ayalew, T. (2019).

⁴⁷ Bonfiglio, A.E. (2020). *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Estifanos, Y.S. (2020). [Social Networks, Dreams and Risks: Ethiopian Irregular Migrants into South Africa](#). [Draft] United Nations Economic Commission for Africa – Social Development Policy Division.

Map 1. Most common routes from East and the Horn of Africa to South Africa



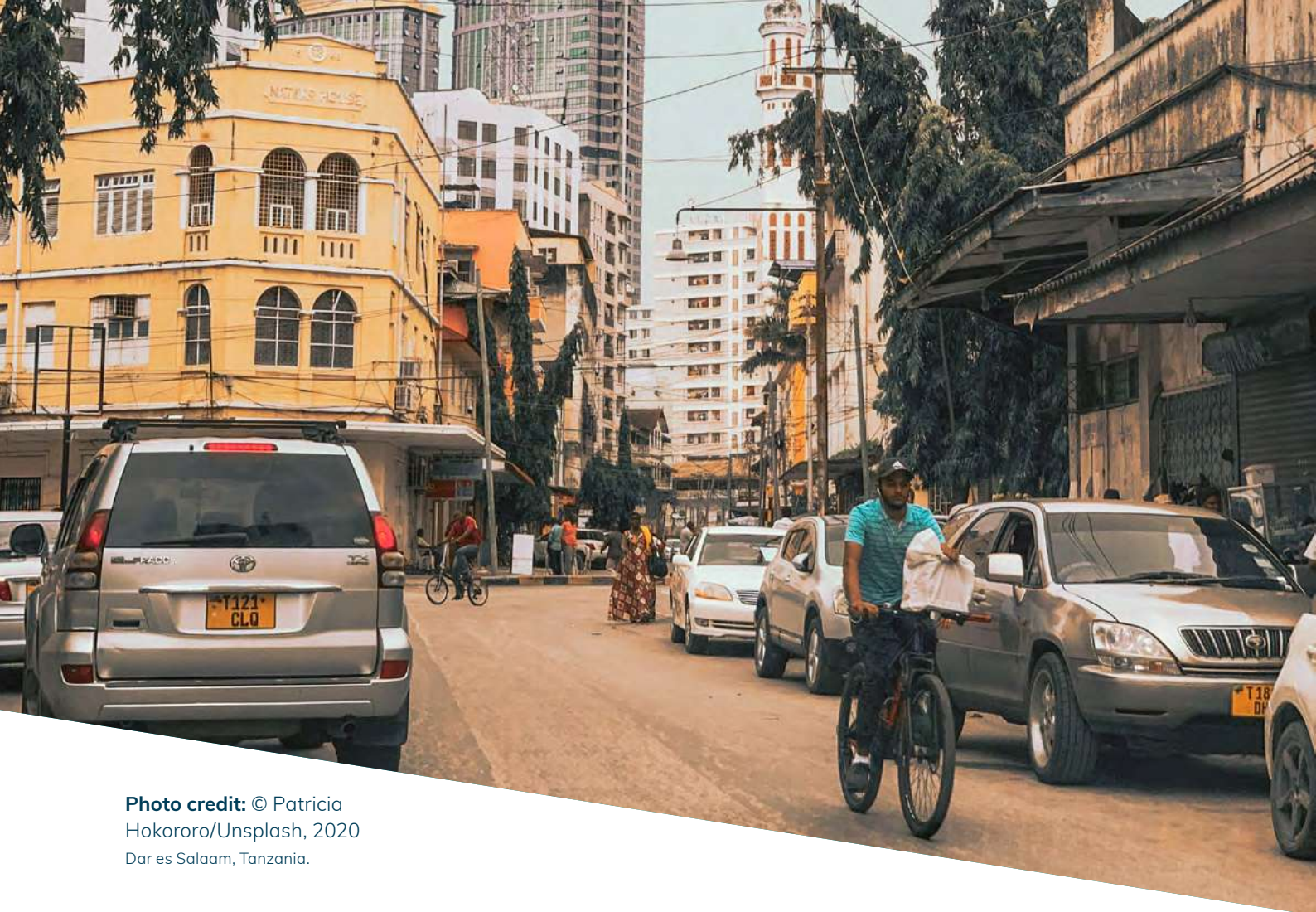


Photo credit: © Patricia
Hokororo/Unsplash, 2020
Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

The use of flights combined with overland travel to reach South Africa was the most common trajectory among respondents departing from East and the Horn of Africa, employed by 47% of respondents. Respondents frequently flew from Ethiopia, Kenya or the UAE to Mozambique or Zimbabwe, and from there continued overland to cross into South Africa. Mozambique and Zimbabwe are often countries that refugees and migrants reach by plane because of visa-free access or entry through visa on arrival. For Mozambique, all East African nationalities can obtain a visa on arrival for a visit of up to 30 days.⁴⁹ For Zimbabwe, Ethiopian nationals can obtain a visa on arrival for up to 3 months, while Eritreans, Somalis and South Sudanese are required to apply for an eVisa before arriving.⁵⁰ Conversely, South Africa's entry requirements are stricter, with Ethiopians being able to apply for an eVisa, while Eritreans, Somalis and South Sudanese have to go through longer visa procedures.⁵¹ On average, respondents from the East and the Horn of Africa who used a combination of air and overland travel spent 45 days to reach South Africa.

22% of respondents from East and the Horn of Africa took exclusively overland journeys, often transiting Kenya, Tanzania, then Malawi and/or Mozambique, and some Zimbabwe, before entering South Africa. All respondents departed from East African countries and took an average of 97 days to complete their journeys, representing the longest and, as we shall see in Section 6, most precarious trajectory. For those traveling overland for all or part of their journey, capital cities such as Nairobi (Kenya), Dar Es Salaam (Tanzania) and Maputo (Mozambique) were the most common locations for stopping along the way. For those who stopped in either Dar Es Salaam or Maputo, or both, most reporting doing so to look for smugglers to organize the next stretch of the journey, followed by waiting for transport.

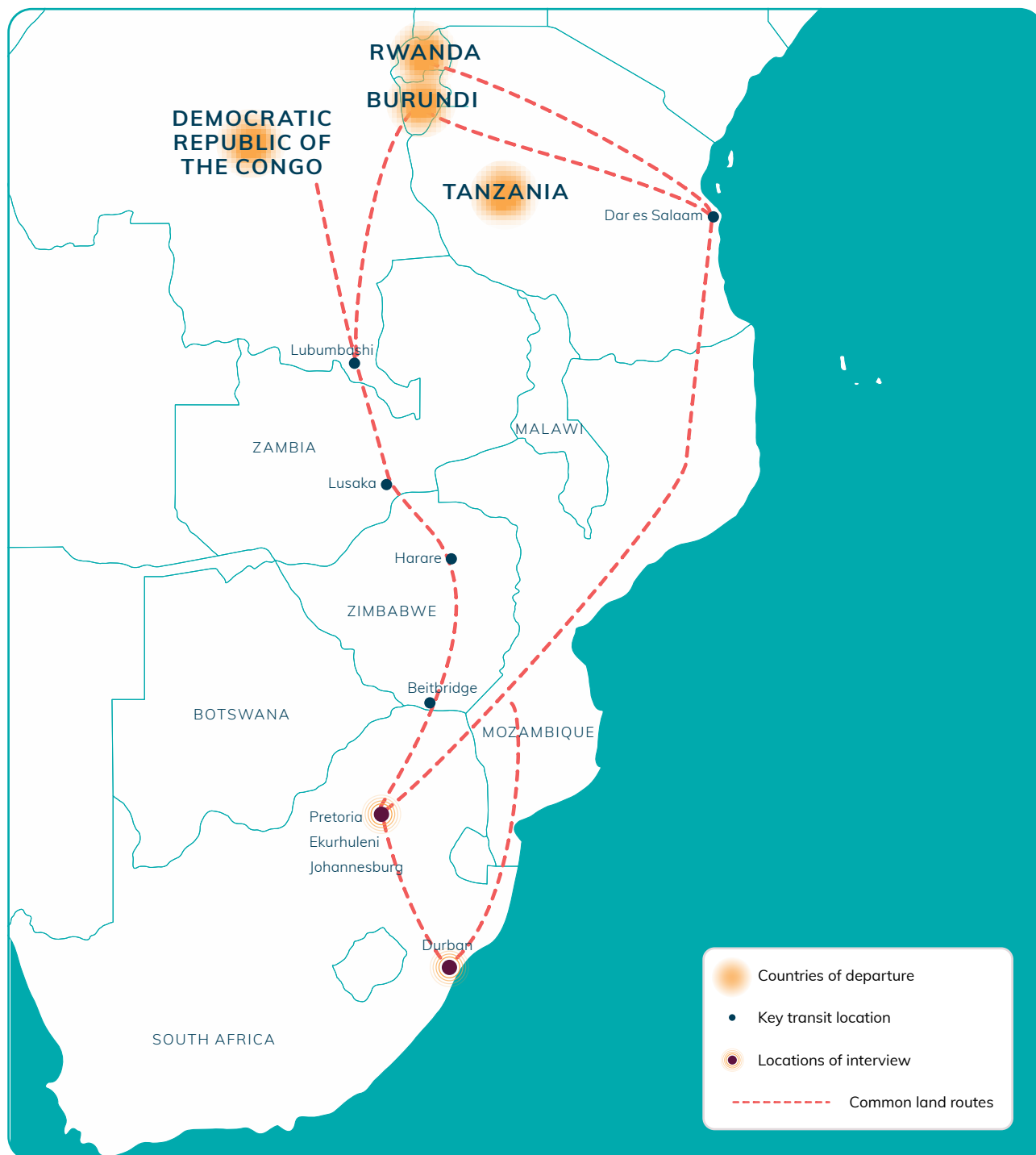
While 46% of both men and women took a combination of air and land travel to reach South Africa, it was more common for women to undertake flight-only journeys (46%) than it was for men (28%), who more frequently took overland only journeys (25%) than did women (8%). Qualitative data reveal that women often travelled after their husbands, suggesting they received support for their journey from their spouses who were already established in South Africa. No apparent trends could be observed regarding the type of journey based on respondents' level of education.

49 MINEC – Ministério dos Negócios Estrangeiros e Cooperação (2023). [Vistos de Entrada](#).

50 eVisa – Government of Zimbabwe (2023). [Visa Regime](#).

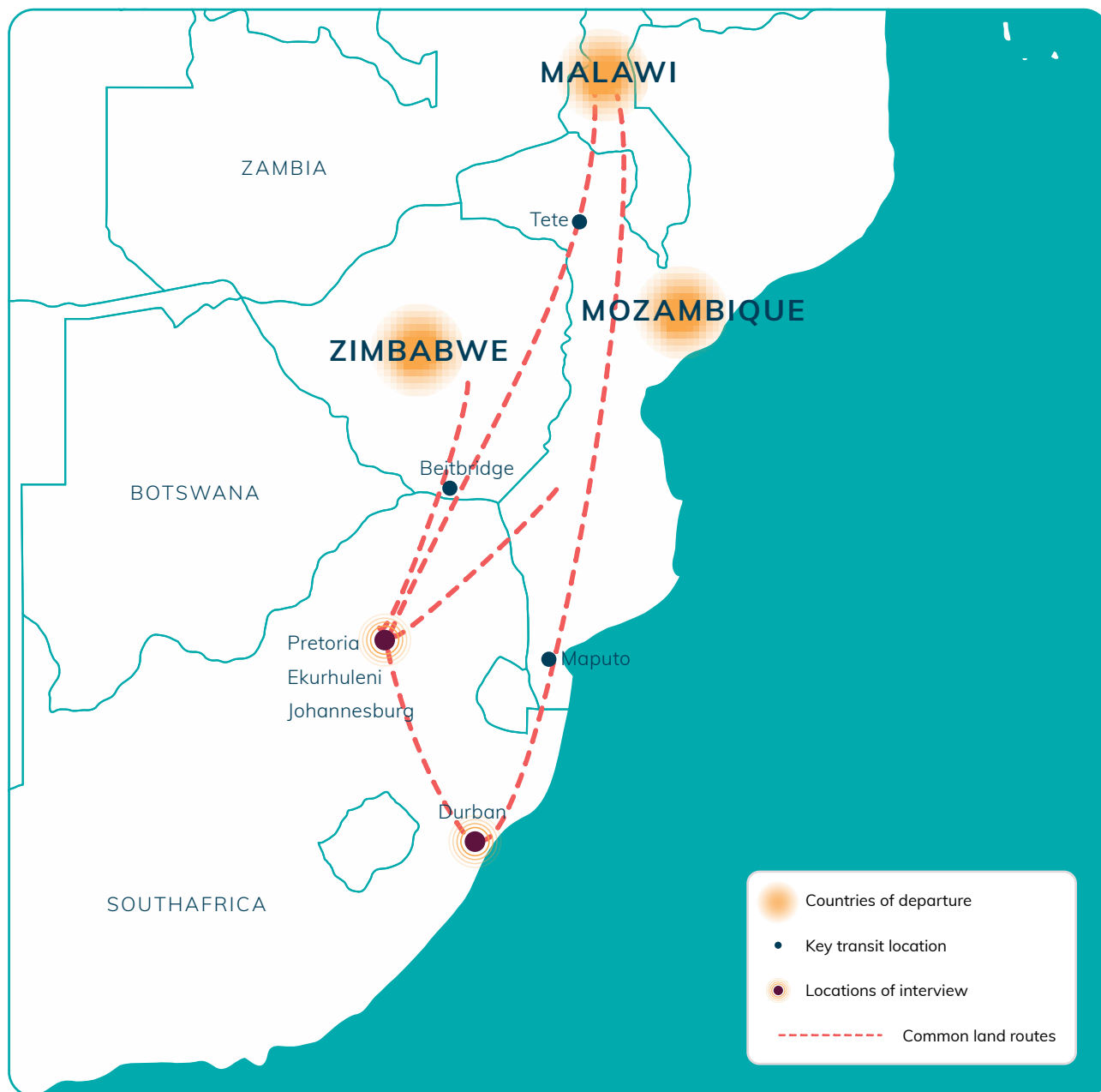
51 Department of Home Affairs – Republic of South Africa (2023). [Countries Exempt from South African Visas](#).

Map 2. Most common routes from the Great Lakes region to South Africa



Contrary to respondents from East and the Horn of Africa, **those departing from the Great Lakes (n=99), particularly from DRC, Burundi, Rwanda and Tanzania, mainly travelled overland.** Congolese respondents most often travelled within DRC towards the southern city of Lubumbashi, before crossing into Zambia and then Zimbabwe. On their journeys, the most cited locations for stopping along the way were Lubumbashi (DRC), Lusaka (Zambia), and Harare and Beitbridge (Zimbabwe). Other stopping points included Kapiri Mposhi and Chirundu (both in Zambia). Burundian respondents often transited Tanzania, via Dar Es Salaam, before joining the route through Zambia and Zimbabwe. Those stopping in Dar Es Salaam, Lusaka and Harare mostly cited doing so because they were waiting for transport, followed by looking for smugglers to organize the next stretch of the journey, and resting. On average, respondents departing from the Great Lakes took 31 days to journey to South Africa. Women, on average, had shorter journeys (23 days) compared to men (34 days).

Map 3. Most common routes from Southern Africa to South Africa



Respondents from Southern Africa (n=249) in general used very direct routes overland into South Africa, except for those departing from Malawi who often reported transiting Tete (Mozambique), before either traveling through Zimbabwe or crossing from Maputo directly into South Africa. Overall, the most reported location for stopping along the journey was Beitbridge (Zimbabwe), followed by Maputo and Tete (Mozambique). 93% of respondents who stopped in Beitbridge, at the border with South Africa, noted they did so because of immigration controls and related administrative procedures or obstacles. Some repeatedly visit Beitbridge to renew their documents. A 25-year-old man from Zimbabwe in Pretoria explained:

"I planned my journey well, but the problem is I can't go to Beitbridge every 3 months to renew a permit, because it's a lot of money to go there."

Of those who stopped in Maputo, 45% reported stopping for immigration controls, 38% were resting, and 28% were waiting for transportation for the next leg of their journey. Respondents from Southern Africa more often benefited from visa-free movement agreements within the SADC region, which are often enshrined within bilateral agreements

between SADC countries. This arguably led to a lower number of respondents making use of a smuggler (also see Section 6). Yet, visa-free movements in the SADC region are dependent upon respondents' having the right identification documentation and stays of up to 90 days, as longer-term stays often fall outside the scope of existing agreements.⁵²

Once in South Africa, respondents from all regions of departure cited the Gauteng region as a key transit location in the country. As both an administrative centre and important economic hub, home to Pretoria and Johannesburg, this is an important location for respondents to apply for asylum and seek out economic opportunities.⁵³ When asked about the reasons for stopping in Gauteng, respondents mostly mentioned resting (50%), waiting for transport (37%), staying with friends or relatives (35%) and intending to settle there (31%). Additionally, Limpopo region, located in the northeast of the country and bordering Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Botswana, was often reported as a transit location within South Africa for respondents coming from Southern Africa.

To understand whether South Africa is the intended *final* destination of refugees and migrants moving along the Southern Route and, by extension, whether respondents aspire to move onward, respondents were asked if they had reached the end of their journey in their current location in South Africa. **81% of respondents reported they had reached the end of their journey and 72% said that South Africa had been their preferred destination.** This might suggest that while some respondents had not intended for South Africa to be their final destination, they decided nevertheless to end their journey there. 17% had not reached the end of their journey, indicating their aspiration to move onward, and 2% did not know. Of the respondents citing they had not reached the end of their journey or did not know (n=89), 21 had noted South Africa as their preferred destination, indicating they may be intending to move to another location within the country. Figure 5b provides a breakdown of the preferred destinations of respondents who had not reached the end of their journey, providing some evidence of potential or desired movement beyond South Africa.

Figure 5a. “Have you reached the end of your journey?”

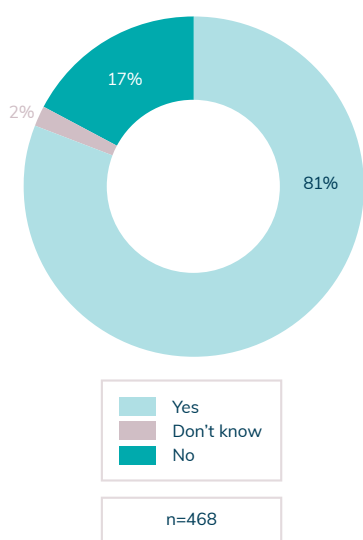
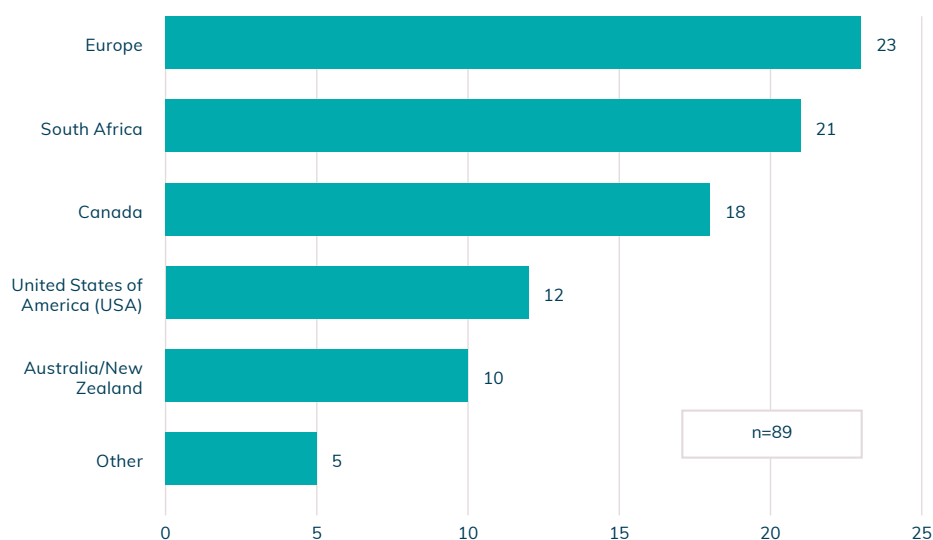


Figure 5b. “What country is your preferred destination?” (Among those who said “No” or “Don't know” to “Have you reached the end of your journey?”)⁵⁴



Disaggregating the data by region of departure, 33% of respondents from the Great Lakes region and 26% from East and the Horn of Africa mentioned not having reached their final destination, as compared to 6% from Southern Africa. This may be linked to respondents from these regions more often citing conflict and violence as drivers of their movement and, hence, their desire for resettlement. Additionally, younger (18-24) respondents more frequently reported having reached the end of their journey in South Africa (90%) than did those aged 25-34 (83%), 35-44 (67%) and 45+ (69%). This seemingly contradicts previous studies on migration, which point to the greater mobility of younger age cohorts linked to high aspirations and fewer constraints related to family life or employment opportunities. Instead, the data might indicate that older cohorts seek to move further away to Europe and North America, especially if they have family and community members who previously moved or were resettled.

⁵² See also: Mauganidze, O. A. & Formica, J. (2018). *Ibid.*

⁵³ See also: Smit, R. & Rugunanan, P. (2014). *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Other destinations include Mozambique, Kuwait, Israel, and Turkey.

While a large majority cited having reached their final destination in South Africa, many explained the conditions were not what they had expected, or according to the information they had received from others. A 43-year-old woman from Zimbabwe interviewed in Durban mentioned:

“My journey was OK, but the living conditions here are not like the information I was sold by my husband and other returnees.”

While challenges with xenophobia and violence against foreigners will be briefly examined in Section 6, it is important to add here that as a result of the socio-political and economic conditions within South Africa, some recent media reports have noted that refugees and migrants who had initially intended to move to the country are making the decision to move onward, including to other countries in Southern Africa. In October 2022, the authorities of Botswana noted the arrival of hundreds of asylum seekers who said they were driven out of South Africa by xenophobic attacks and had encountered poor conditions in Zimbabwe.”⁵⁵

6. Interactions with smugglers on the journey

This section zooms in on refugees' and migrants' interactions with smugglers along the journey, comparing the various regions of origin. It first explores the use of smugglers among respondents, and then focuses on the various services that smugglers provided to them. It should be noted that the sub-samples based on region of departure are comprised of different migration trajectories, as outlined in Section 5, and therefore cannot be used to compare the occurrence of smugglers along a particular route or route segment.

Smuggler use was the highest among respondents from East and the Horn of Africa (73%), as compared to the total sample average of 51%. This may result from the longer distances that people on the move from East and the Horn of Africa have to travel south and the greater legal and socio-cultural barriers they face with the various countries they must transit, requiring the services of a smuggler. 73% is also lower than a figure reported by the aforementioned 2017 RMMS study, which found that 97% of Ethiopian and Somali respondents in South Africa had used one or more smugglers during their journey.⁵⁶ This may be explained by the fact that this study's sample, in contrast to RMMS, is not exclusive to overland journeys. On the use of smugglers, a 26-year-old Somali woman and a 28-year-old Ethiopian woman interviewed in Pretoria argued that using a smuggler was a costly affair, but at the same time it did help them move forward and provided some sort of safety (also see Section 7).

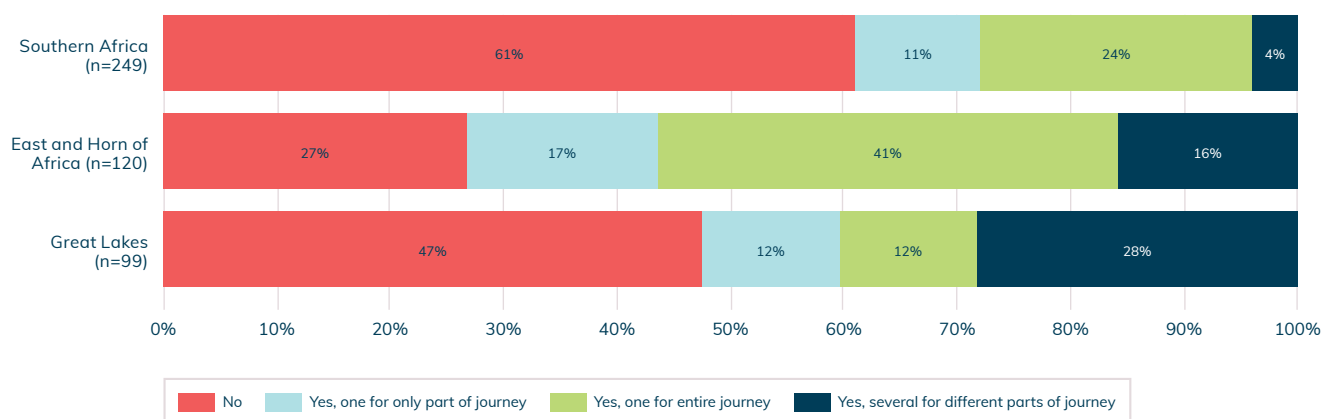
Just over half (53%) of interviewed refugees and migrants **from the Great Lakes region reported using at least one smuggler during the course of their journey**, while just over a third (39%) of respondents from Southern Africa reported using at least one smuggler. This similarly aligns with the relatively greater proximity of these regions to South Africa and the freedom of movement that those from SADC countries who have the requisite documentation enjoy. That said, it is notable that more than a third of respondents from SADC countries, despite free movement arrangements, still use a smuggler to get to South Africa.

Overall, respondents who had used smugglers along their journey most often had used only one, either for the entirety of the journey or for only part of the journey. The use of several smugglers for different parts of the journey was more common among respondents from the Great Lakes (28%) than it was for those from the East and Horn of Africa (16%) or Southern Africa (4%) (Figure 6).

⁵⁵ Dube, M. (2022, October 19th). [Botswana Expresses Concerns over Influx of Asylum Seekers](#). VOA News.

⁵⁶ RMMS (2017). *Ibid*.

Figure 6. “Did you use a smuggler?”



Zooming in on respondents from Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia and South Sudan who used at least one smuggler (n=88), they **most often reported using one to transit borders**, followed by providing documents and in-country transportation (Table 2). On average, respondents cited multiple services provided by their smugglers. More than a third (33/88) cited paying the smuggler in full upon arrival in South Africa, while most mentioned paying for specific services or for facilitating specific legs of the journey (35/88). The data on payment modalities may shed light on why smugglers do not feature highly as perceived perpetrators of protection violations (discussed in the next section). A 2020 MMC study revealed that refugees and migrants who pay for their journeys by working for their smugglers are more vulnerable to exploitation and other protection violations.⁵⁷

Respondents from the Great Lakes (n=52) and Southern Africa (n=98) described the same top three smuggler services: to transit across borders, deal with authorities, and facilitated in-country transportation. As with respondents from East and the Horn of Africa, most described using multiple services. In terms of payment arrangements, those from the Great Lakes often reported paying in full upon service delivery (20/52), paying in full before departure (15/52), and payments in instalments along the way (12/52). In most cases, respondents from Southern Africa had paid smugglers before departure (66/98), while others paid upon arrival at destination (10/98), in instalments along the way (9/98), or upon service delivery (8/98).

Table 2. 4Mi respondents' use of different smuggler services

Smuggler services	East & Horn of Africa (n=88)	Great Lakes (n=52)	Southern Africa (n=98)	Total
Transit across borders	77	41	82	200
Dealing with authorities (e.g. checkpoints)	50	40	62	152
In-country transportation	44	38	49	131
Food or water	31	19	26	76
Access to communication (phone/internet)	27	24	25	76
Facilitated money transfer	15	15	10	40
Introduced me to other smugglers	23	18	7	48
Provision of documents	56	20	2	78
Accommodation	41	14	2	57
Medicine	10	4	2	16
Helped me find a job	0	3	2	5
Facilitated release from detention	6	5	0	11

⁵⁷ MMC (2020). [A Shaper Lens on Vulnerability. A statistical analysis of the determinants of vulnerability to protection incidents among refugees and migrants in North Africa.](#)

While the use of smugglers can increase refugees' and migrants' exposure to protection violations along the journey,⁵⁸ at the same time, refugees and migrants may use smugglers on long and complex routes to avoid other protection risks including detention (also see Section 7). On this, a 28-year-old Somali woman interviewed in Pretoria noted:

"Detention and dangerous places can be avoided with the use of smugglers."

In terms of points of arrival in South Africa for refugees and migrants who used one or more smugglers for their journey, RMMS found in 2017 that the vast majority entered the country through Zimbabwe.⁵⁹ Indeed, 4Mi data collected for this research show that 50% of respondents who used one or more smugglers along their journey entered South Africa through Zimbabwe, while 38% entered through Mozambique.

7. Protection risks along the journey

This final section details respondents' perception of the most dangerous locations along their journeys, the types of protection violations associated with such dangerous locations and the perceived perpetrators. It zooms in on experiences per region of departure, and looks at the diverging experiences of women and men. It should be noted that the data presented herein focus on perceived protection violations and not direct experiences with such violations. When cross-referenced with 4Mi data on direct experiences, the data follow similar trends in terms of the relative prevalence of certain violations. That being said, perceived risks are slightly more often cited than direct experiences with violations. It is also key to highlight that this section focuses on protection violations along the route and not on experiences while living in South Africa, which is extensively documented in the existing literature.⁶⁰ Some locations in South Africa are examined within this section in so far as they served as key transit points and hence experiences with xenophobia are discussed.

56% of all respondents reported transiting one or more dangerous locations over the course of their journeys south.

The main protection risks associated with these dangerous locations were robbery (54%), bribery and extortion (52%), and detention (34%). It should be noted that this figure includes the trajectories of those who exclusively traveled by air to South Africa. As we shall see later in this section, the perceptions of risk increase if we confine our analysis to overland journeys along the Southern Route.

As a basis of comparison, 66% of refugees and migrants traveling along the Central Mediterranean Route and surveyed by MMC in 2022 in Libya and Tunisia and 57% traveling along the Eastern Route and surveyed by MMC in 2022 and January 2023 in Somalia and Djibouti cited having been in one or more dangerous locations.⁶¹ Delving into the types of protection risks, UNHCR cites⁶² the main protection risks associated with the Central Mediterranean Route are sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), physical violence, and kidnapping and (arbitrary) detention,⁶³ while the main protection risks associated with the Eastern Route are exposure to violence and conflict, SGBV, labour exploitation and arbitrary detention.⁶⁴ While there is a lack of recent studies on the type of protection violations along the Southern Route, IOM cites that dependence on smugglers for facilitation of travel "exposes those on the move to violence, exploitation and abuse."⁶⁵ Risks along the Southern Route may be underestimated, as they less often make media headlines; although refugees and migrants may perceive this route as dangerous.

58 MMC (2020). *Ibid.*

59 RMMS (2017). *Ibid.*

60 There is an extensive literature on refugees' and migrants' experiences in South Africa and the hardships they face, particularly in relation to xenophobia. See, for example, Hiropoulos, A. (2020). South Africa, migration and xenophobia. Deconstructing the perceived migration crisis and its influence on the xenophobic reception of migrants. *Contemporary Justice Review* 23 (1), pp. 104-121; Murenje, M. (2020). Ubuntu and xenophobia in South Africa's international migration. *African Journal of Social Work* 10 (1).

61 MMC 4Mi data collected in Libya, Tunisia, Djibouti and Somalia.

62 UNHCR (2022). [Protection, Saving Lives & Solutions for Refugees in Dangerous Journeys, Routes Towards the Central & West Mediterranean Sea and The Atlantic](#).

63 MMC & UNHCR (2020). ['On this journey, no one cares if you live or die'. Abuse, protection, and justice along routes between East and West Africa and Africa's Mediterranean coast](#).

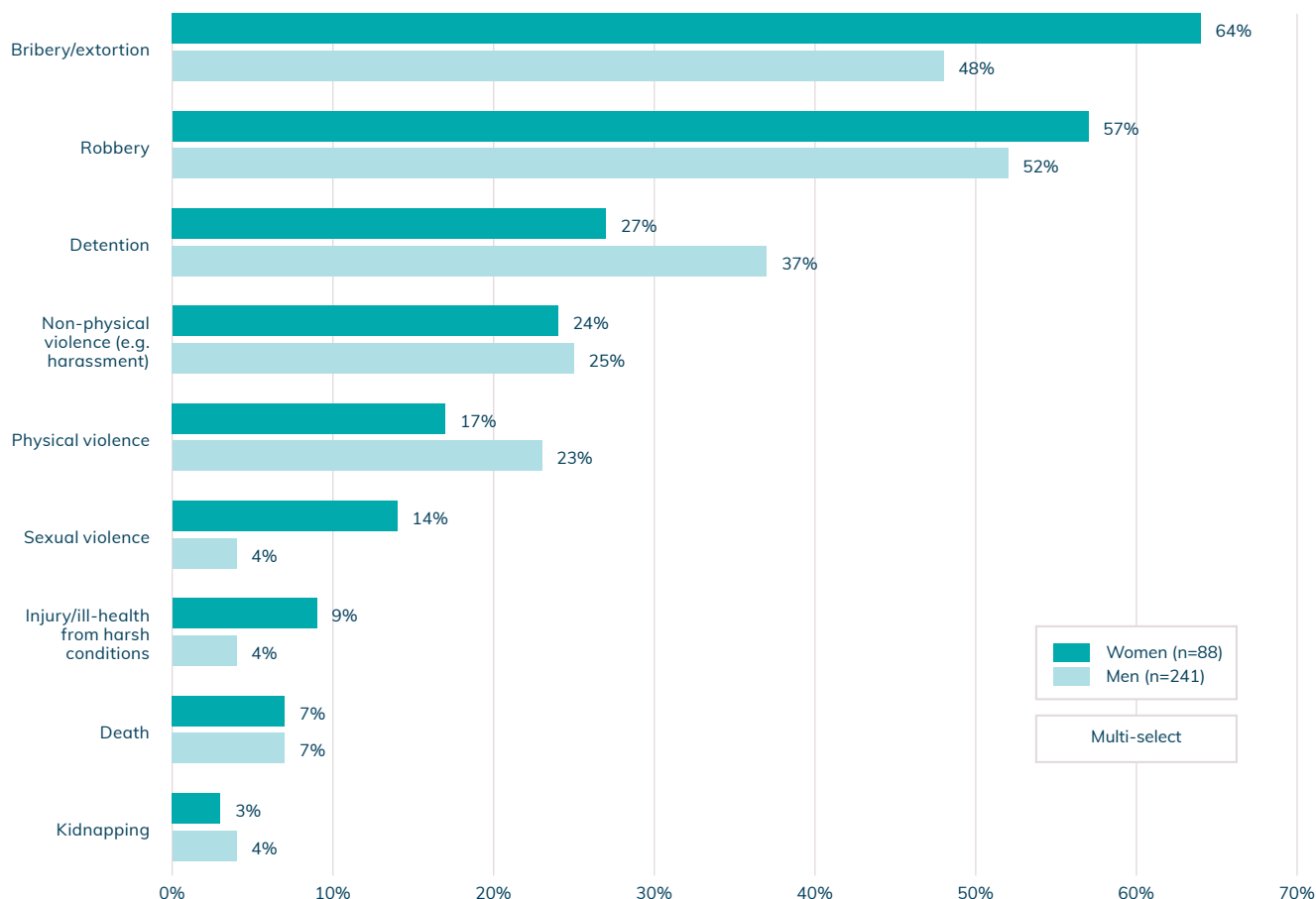
64 IOM (2021). [Regional Migrant Response Plan for the Horn of Africa 2021 – 2024](#).

65 IOM (2022). [Migrating in search of the Southern dream. The experiences of Ethiopian migrants moving along the Southern route](#).

Examining the differences between men and women reveals that both genders perceive the same top five protection risks, in roughly the same order (Figure 7). However, men appear to more often perceive the risk of detention (37% vs. 27%) and physical violence (23% vs. 17%), while women more often perceive bribery/extortion (64% vs. 48%) and sexual violence (14% vs. 4%). A 27-year-old Ethiopian woman interviewed in Durban mentioned:

"If you are a woman, don't travel alone or use smugglers, because they can abuse you sexually. My journey was [therefore] painful and stressful. Put your documents in order and have visa and permits to be safe."

Figure 7. "What were the main risks there?" – Compiled for all dangerous locations identified by men vs. women



Turning to examine the protection risks perceived by respondents departing from East and the Horn of Africa, **53% mentioned at least one dangerous location along their journey**, which aligns with the total sample average. If we disaggregate the data by the type of trajectory outlined in Section 5, we see that 22/26 of those who undertook exclusively overland journeys reported stopping in at least one dangerous location, compared to 8/38 who only traveled by air and 33/56 who traveled using a combination of flights and then overland movements either from Mozambique or Zimbabwe. This reveals that **overland travel along the Southern Route from East and the Horn of Africa to South Africa is indeed the most dangerous**. By extension, assuming they can mobilize sufficient resources and possess adequate documentation, respondents can reduce their exposure to protection risks by flying parts of their migration journey.

A total of 82 reports of dangerous locations were cited by the 120 respondents who journeyed from East and the Horn of Africa. Detention (46/82), robbery (31/82), and bribery/extortion (26/82) were the most commonly cited protection risks in those locations. In terms of specific locations of risk, **Maputo (Mozambique) was most often named as a dangerous location (13/82), followed by Gauteng region (South Africa) (12/82), Beitbridge (Zimbabwe) (10/82), and Dar Es Salaam (Tanzania) (9/82), among others**. Detention and bribery and extortion were the main risks cited in Maputo, while military and police were perceived as the main perpetrators of such incidents. In Gauteng, detention, robbery, and extortion were the main risks and both the military and police and criminal gangs were perceived as the

main perpetrators. Respondents from East and the Horn of Africa cited the risk of physical violence 14 times in various locations along the journey, and most often perceived criminal gangs, followed by border guards and immigration officials, as the main perpetrators.

Map 4. Most commonly cited dangerous locations along routes from East and the Horn of Africa to South Africa



The findings on protection risks align with a 2022 study by IOM⁶⁶ on the experiences of Ethiopian migrants who ended up detained in Tanzania. Further, reports published since 2015 demonstrate the risk of detention and immobility for those traveling along the Southern Route, particularly for Ethiopians and particularly in key transit hubs including Dar Es Salaam, Lilongwe⁶⁷, and Maputo.⁶⁸

In October and November 2022, media outlets reported on the discovery of the bodies of Ethiopian migrants in mass graves in Malawi⁶⁹ and Zambia,⁷⁰ respectively, who were thought “to have suffocated or died from hunger and exhaustion, while being smuggled in perilous conditions.” While locations in Malawi and Zambia are not among the most dangerous reported in the 4Mi dataset, and respondents did not notably report on the risk of death along the Southern Route from East and the Horn of Africa (out of 82 reports, 4 were on the risk of death), further research should be carried out in transit countries along the Southern Route to learn about the experiences of the most vulnerable who never arrive in South Africa or who are rendered invisible because they are trafficked south. A 2021 report by IOM’s

66 On detention in Tanzania, also see: IOM (2022). [Migrating in search of the Southern dream. The experiences of Ethiopian migrants moving along the Southern route.](#)

67 MSF (2015, 24 July). [Ethiopian Migrants: Trapped in Malawi Prisons.](#)

68 Cascois, A. (2022, 22 November). [Imigrantes ilegais em Moçambique: “A situação é dramática”.](#) Deutsche Welle.

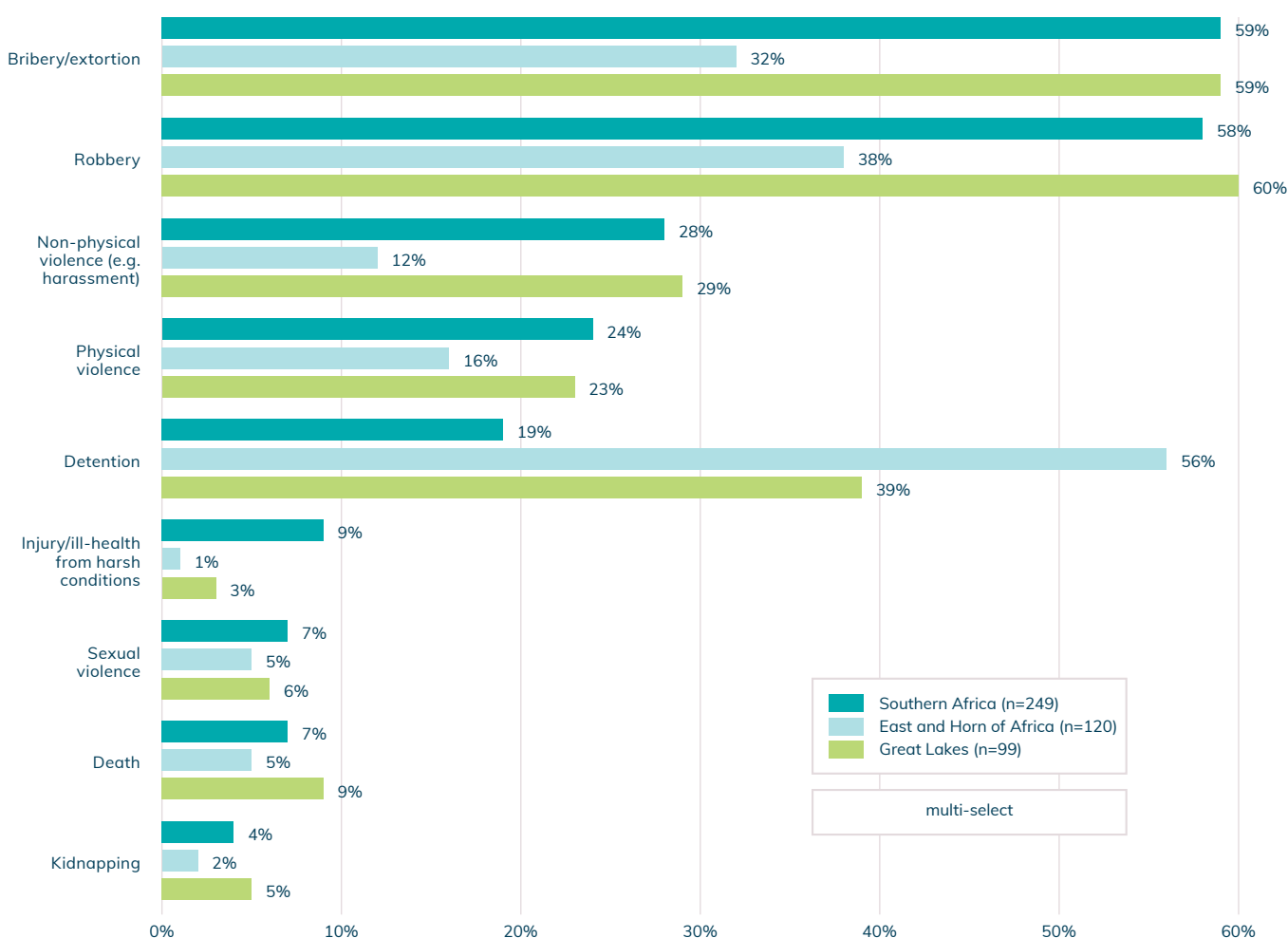
69 Burke, J. and Pensulo, C. (2022, 1 November). [Ethiopians found in mass grave thought to have suffocated.](#) The Guardian.

70 Deutsche Welle (2022, 12 December). [Zambia: Dozens of suspected Ethiopian migrants found dead.](#)

Missing Migrants Project (MMP) also highlights the poor documentation of deaths and disappearances along the Southern Route, with MMP recording 685 deaths and disappearances from 2014 – 2021, mostly in DRC (304) and Mozambique (174).⁷¹ The report mentions that the main source of data for MMP had been MMC's 4Mi project, which had paused its activities along the Southern Route in 2020.

Examining the experiences of respondents who journeyed from the Great Lakes region to South Africa, most of whom traveled overland, 69 out of 99 perceived at least one dangerous location along their journey. These 69 respondents made 94 reports of dangerous locations along their journeys. Robbery (56/94), bribery/extortion (55/94), and detention (37/94) were the most common protection risks cited. Interestingly, Gauteng region (25/94) as a key point of transit within South Africa, and Beitbridge (14/94), the main border crossing from Zimbabwe to South Africa, were the most-cited dangerous locations. This suggests that journeys through DRC, especially for Congolese refugees and migrants, and through Tanzania were less risky for those from the Great Lakes region, than for their counterparts from the Horn of Africa in the case of transiting Tanzania. Both the DRC and Tanzania are home to larger populations of Burundian, Congolese and Rwandese refugees and migrants, which may make it easier for their co-nationals to transit the country. The main reported risks in Gauteng for respondents from Burundi, DRC, Rwanda, and Tanzania were robbery (24/25), bribery and extortion (21/25), and detention (16/25). In contrast with respondents from other regions of departure, this group more often identified people from the local community (17/25) and other migrants (16/25) as perpetrators of protection abuses, in addition to criminal gangs (17/25) and military and police (18/25). Compared to those from East and the Horn of Africa, there were more reports (25) from respondents from the Great Lakes citing physical violence as a risk in dangerous locations, most often perpetrated by military / police, followed by people from the local community, criminal gangs, and other migrants. Most reports citing the local community as perpetrators were linked to reported dangerous locations in South Africa, while those citing military / police were mostly divided among locations in Southern Africa (South Africa, Zimbabwe, Zambia, and Mozambique).

Figure 8. “What were the main risks there?” – Compiled for all dangerous locations identified by respondents, disaggregated by region of departure



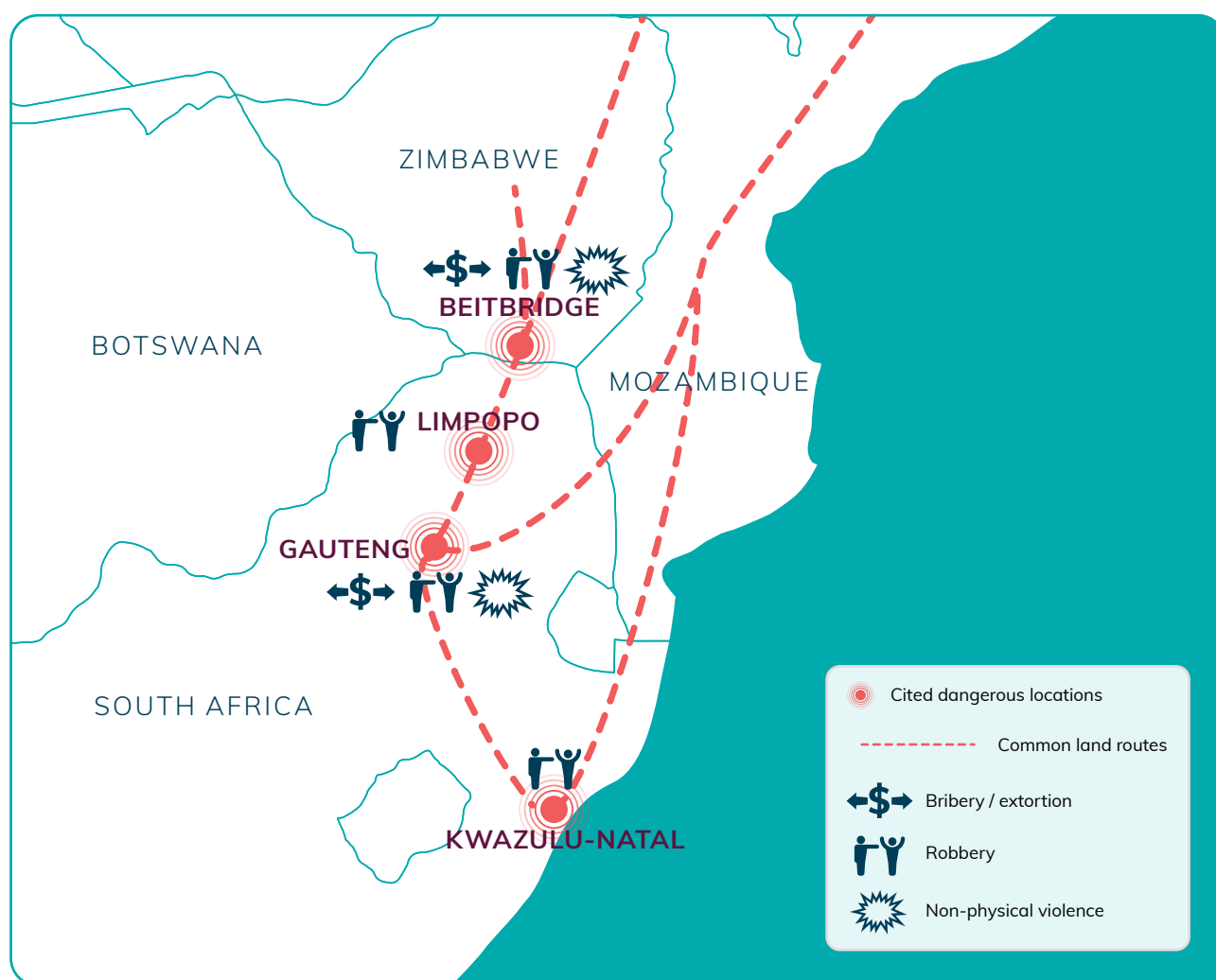
71 IOM (2021). [Missing Migrants Project – Annual Regional Overview Southern Africa](#).

Lastly, examining the experiences of respondents who journeyed from Southern Africa to South Africa, almost all of whom traveled overland, more than half (53%) cited having stopped in at least one dangerous location, mirroring the findings from East and the Horn of Africa. A total of 153 reports on dangerous locations were documented by the 249 respondents that journeyed from Southern Africa. Bribery/extortion (59%), robbery (58%), and non-physical violence (e.g. harassment and verbal abuse) (28%) were the most commonly perceived protection risks along their journeys. It stands to reason that detention was not a main risk perceived by respondents from Southern Africa given the free movement policies within member states of the Southern African Development Community.

Turning to the examine the specific locations of risk, similar to respondents from other regions of origin, Beitbridge (Zimbabwe) was most often named as a dangerous location by this group (36/153), followed by three regions in South Africa: Gauteng (29/153), KwaZulu Natal (17/153), and Limpopo (12/153). Over the course of 2022, media reports have detailed increases in the already high tensions between South African nationals and refugees and migrants in the context of increasing unemployment in South Africa, leading to further increases in xenophobia and violence towards foreigners.⁷² According to a survey reported on by *The Economist* in June 2022, one in eight interviewed South Africans cited having participated in physical and/or non-physical violence against foreigners.⁷³

For Beitbridge, bribery/extortion was the main risk faced by respondents, followed by robbery and non-physical violence (verbal abuse). In this location, border guards and immigration officials and military and police were most often cited as perpetrators. Robbery was cited as a risk by almost all respondents identifying Gauteng as dangerous location, followed by bribery/extortion, and non-physical violence. Criminal gangs were most frequently reported as perpetrators in Gauteng, as well as military and police and people from the local community.

Map 5. Most commonly cited dangerous locations along routes from Southern Africa to South Africa



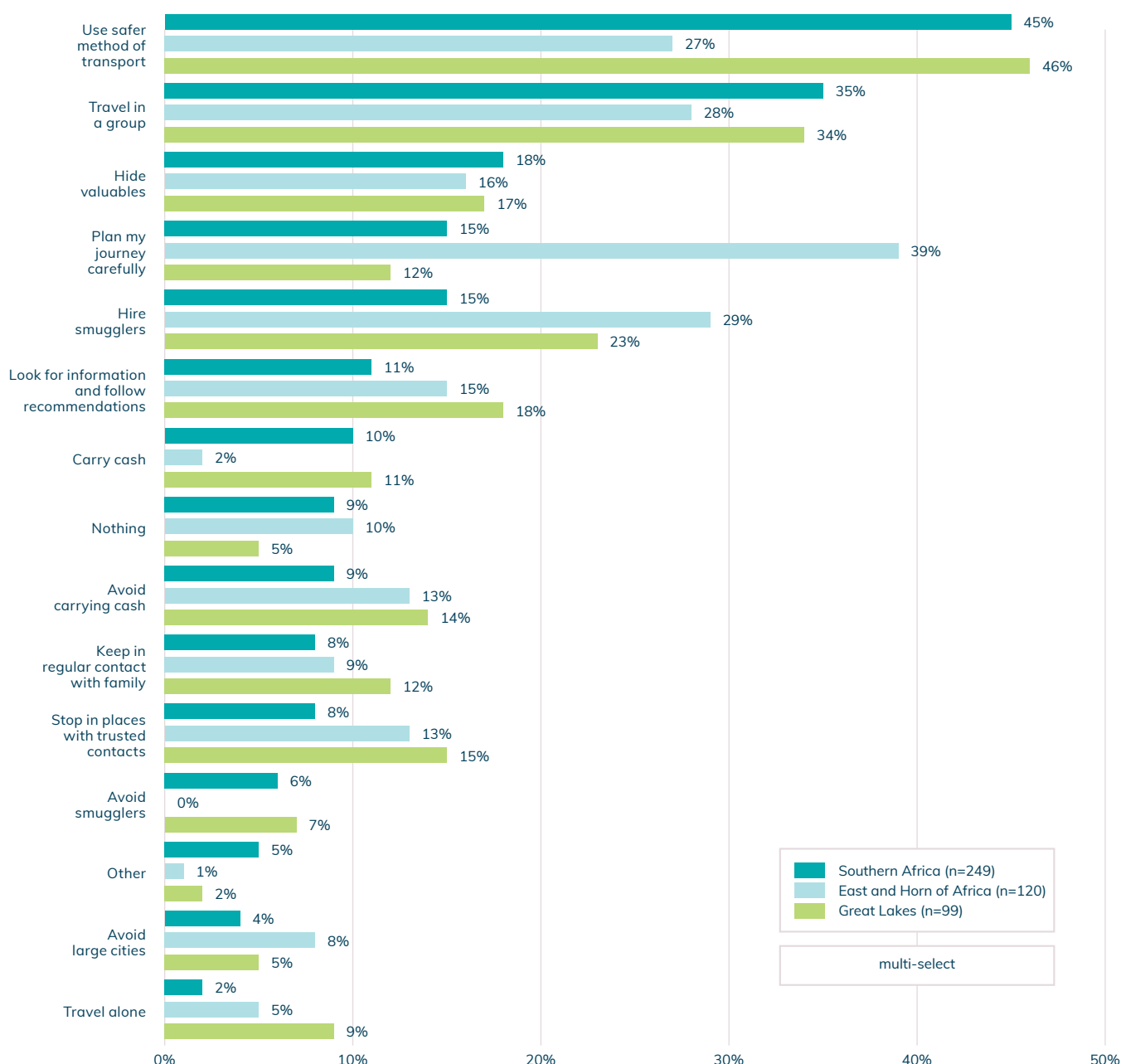
72 Myeni, T. (2022, 16 June). [S African minister suggests foreigners are to blame for no jobs](#). Aljazeera.

73 The Economist (2022, 9 June). [South African xenophobes run amok](#).

Physical violence was identified as a risk in Beitbridge (6/36) and in Gauteng (6/29), followed by various locations in Mozambique, and most often perpetrated by criminal gangs, military / police, and people from the local community. A total of 11 reports noted death as a risk along the journey, in locations in South Africa and Zimbabwe, mostly perpetrated by criminal gangs, followed by people from the local community. Where respondents reported sexual violence – 9 reports in locations in South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique – smugglers were most often identified as the perpetrators.

Responses demonstrate that those traveling along the Southern Route engage in complex itineraries, choosing multiple strategies to mitigate potential risks. Using safer modes and methods of transport was most often cited as a method to keep safe (40%), followed by traveling in a group (33%), carefully planning the journey (21%), and hiring smugglers (20%). The data point on smugglers corroborates the results presented in Section 6 that smugglers are not perceived as the main perpetrators of protection abuses along the Southern Route among the sampled respondents. Instead, smugglers may more often be seen as a means of protection from state officials and/or detention. 8% of all respondents cited not applying any particular methods to mitigate risk. Women more commonly reported travelling in a group (42% vs. 29% of men) and using safer methods of transport (51% vs. 35% of men). Respondents from East and Horn of Africa more frequently mentioned planning their journey carefully (39%) and hiring a smuggler as a measure to protect themselves (29%) than did those from other regions. The mention of careful planning could be linked to the longer journeys these respondents undertake and the different modes of transportation they use; hence, the greater preparation needed.

Figure 9. “What do you do to protect yourself from abuse and crime on your journey?”



8. Conclusion and recommendations

While the Southern Route has recently regained attention with the discovery of the bodies of Ethiopian migrants in transit countries Malawi and Zambia, it has traditionally received less focus from media, policy actors, and donors than other African migration routes leading to Europe and the Arabian Peninsula. At the same time, the Southern Route has lacked definitional clarity and data on the variety of routes and trajectories that compose it. Therefore, based on MMC's 4Mi data collection in South Africa, this study set out to define and examine mixed migration dynamics along the Southern Route to South Africa, predominantly from East and the Horn of Africa, the Great Lakes, and Southern Africa. It examined key drivers of migration, the varied trajectories and modes of transport undertaken by refugees and migrants to journey south, and the different protection violations to which refugees and migrants get exposed along the way. In so doing, this study sought to increase the evidence base on the Southern Route for policy actors and those providing protection to people on the move. The following is a list of key recommendations based on the findings of this study for local and national authorities in South Africa, protection actors working along the Southern Route, and researchers and academic institutions.

For local, national, and regional authorities in South Africa and the SADC region:

- Work together with research institutions and existing projects, such as the Southern African Migration Management Project,⁷⁴ to improve data and research on refugee and migrant populations residing in South Africa and traveling along the Southern Route to South Africa;
- Work together with local civil society and NGOs to bolster refugee and migrant access to protection services;
- Promote collaboration among cities in South Africa and along the Southern Route to share good practices and methods on how to strengthen service delivery and outreach to refugees and migrants in their localities.

For protection actors working in Southern Africa:

- Work on coordinated routes-based approaches to increase efforts on reaching vulnerable refugees and migrants with mixed profiles and protection needs along the Southern Route, in transit countries and upon arrival in South Africa;
- Collaborate with researchers to ensure more coordinated and updated evidence is publicly accessible for all actors working on mixed migration along the Southern Route;
- Strengthen and coordinate advocacy efforts on risks and protection violations along the Southern Route, taking advantage of recent media coverage.

For researchers and academic institutions:

- Increase data collection and research activities in key points of transit along the Southern Route where refugees and migrants find themselves stranded and at risk of protection violations.
- Carry out large-scale data collection to afford a probabilistic analysis of the determinants of vulnerability to protection violations along the Southern Route, to test assumptions about the impact of journey length, gender and use of a smuggler, for instance, on the likelihood of experiencing a protection violation.
- Conduct more targeted research on refugees and migrants engaged exclusively in riskier overland journeys to South Africa.
- Increase studies on the smuggling networks that operate to facilitate journeys from East and the Horn of Africa as well as the Great Lakes region.

⁷⁴ [Southern African Migration Management Project](#).



MMC is a global network engaged in data collection, research, analysis, and policy and programmatic development on mixed migration, with regional hubs hosted in Danish Refugee Council regional offices in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Europe and Latin America, and a global team based across Copenhagen, Geneva and Brussels.

MMC is a leading source for independent and high-quality data, research, analysis and expertise. 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. MMC's overarching focus is on human rights and protection for all people on the move.

MMC is part of the Danish Refugee Council (DRC).

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