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Transit Migration and Development

Mixed Migration Centre

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*Transit Migration and Development**

Mixed Migration Centre†

Abstract

Transit migration tends to be risky and usually involves an irregular and unsafe route for at least part of the migrant's journey. Transit routes typically feature trafficking, abuse, and sexual and gender-based violence, while putting additional pressure on transit municipalities and generating tensions with transit communities. On the other hand, they may generate positive spillover effects on the local economy, creating jobs and income opportunities. This paper analyses the political, economic and social impacts, as well as pressures faced by these municipalities and communities. It considers the local economic dynamics induced by transit migration, aspects of peaceful coexistence and social cohesion between migrants and transit communities, while providing gender-responsive policy recommendations to help national and local governments address the development challenges associated with transit migration.

*This paper was produced and funded by KNOMAD's Thematic Working Group (TWG) on Special Issues. The TWG is chaired by Jason Gagnon (head of unit at the OECD Development Centre) and David Khoudour (global human mobility adviser at UNDP). The focal point for the TWG is Eung Ju Kim, World Bank. The co-chairs provided overall direction, supervision and editorial support for this project. The paper was reviewed by Roberto Forin and Bram Frouws (Mixed Migration Centre); Jason Gagnon (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development - OECD); David Khoudour and Erick Hernández (United Nations Development Programme -UNDP); and Eung Ju Kim (World Bank).

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†Giulia Testa lead this research project for the Mixed Migration Centre. She also conducted desk and fieldwork research for the project. Mixed Migration Centre (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 Geneva and Brussels. 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. The position of the Mixed Migration Centre does not necessarily reflect the position of DRC. For more information on the Mixed Migration Centre visit the website: www.mixedmigration.org.

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List of acronyms

| | |
|--------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| AGD | Age, gender and diversity |
| DRC | Danish Refugee Council |
| FGD | Focus group discussion |
| KNOMAD | Global Knowledge Partnership on Migration and Development |
| LMICs | Low- and Middle-Income Countries |
| IO | International organization |
| IOM | International Organization for Migration |
| NGO | Non-governmental organization |
| OECD | Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development |
| UN | United Nations |
| UNHCR | United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees |
| UNDP | United Nations Development Programme |

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Executive summary

Transit migration tends to be risky and usually involves an irregular and unsafe route for at least part of the migrant's journey. Transit routes typically feature trafficking, abuse, and sexual and gender-based violence, while putting additional pressure on transit municipalities and generating tensions with transit communities. On the other hand, they may generate positive spillover effects on the local economy, creating jobs and income opportunities.

It is unclear what the approach to the management of transit migration should be. As transit migrants are not expected to stay, their social and economic integration is rarely a priority for local governments in transit municipalities. Policy options are therefore limited, although transit migration does not lend itself towards social empathy with local citizens. While many transit migrants do move on to other communities and countries, for local governments the continuous arrival of such migrants means that they are perpetually facing the challenge of transit migration. In this respect, even the concept of what determines or defines transit migration has been questioned.

In this context, the KNOMAD thematic working group (TWG) on special issues, co-chaired by the OECD Development Centre and UNDP, carried out a study with the Mixed Migration Centre, on the impact of transit migration on the municipalities and communities affected by transit in low and middle-income countries (LMICs). The study analyses the political, economic and social impacts, as well as pressures faced by these municipalities and communities. It considers the local economic dynamics induced by transit migration, aspects of peaceful coexistence and social cohesion between migrants and transit communities, while providing gender-responsive policy recommendations to help national and local governments address the development challenges associated with transit migration.

The analysis and policy recommendations are based on key informant interviews and secondary sources, in four selected communities in Djibouti, Guatemala, Tunisia and Türkiye, located on different migration routes and in different regions of the world. The study provides an overview of the concept of transit migration and how it has been integrated in migration research and policy discussions in the past. The report presents the analysis of the fieldwork results, and provides a recommendations and research agenda for the way forward.

Key messages

- Although transit migration constitutes a fundamental part of migration journeys, the impacts of transit migration and the specific policies and responses towards it in **transit countries generally receive less attention compared to countries of origin and destination**. Beside mere mentions of it, transit migration is rarely included in **migration-related debates and policy discussions**. When it is, it is often approached from a **security perspective** and with the aim of blocking migrants¹ before they reach their country of destination, rather than with an economic or development focus.
- There is a **lack of data** on mixed migration trends and dynamics in transit areas and countries. Comprehensive official immigration data is not publicly available for any of the countries included in the study. The (limited) data that is available is produced by humanitarian organizations and focuses on the migrants they assist.
- While transit migration is not exclusively irregular migration, **many migrants do have an irregular status in transit countries** due to the lack of regular pathways to transit through.

Economic impacts of transit migration

- Transit migration has some **positive impact** on the local economy of most transit localities included in this study, but the specific positive impacts vary depending on the migration dynamics. In localities where transit is quick, migrants put money into the local economy by **paying for goods and services**. In places where transit is extended or protracted, they **fill labour force shortages**.
- A positive impact on the local economy typically **does not translate into direct additional revenue** for local governments, because these contributions mostly remain in informal economies. There are indirect revenues generated through spillover effects however.
- Limited evidence was found regarding whether migrants in transit represent an additional burden on public services.

Impacts on security

- In most localities, key informants **could not identify any concrete negative impact** of transit migration **on security**. Many informants mentioned a vague sense of insecurity connected to the unknown background of the migrants in transit however.

¹ For the purpose of this project, the term “migrant” refers to all persons who change their countries of usual residence, irrespective of the reason for migration or legal status. The term includes, in particular, migrant workers and their families, international students, as well as refugees and other forcibly displaced persons who are leaving their countries of origin due to persecution and other forms of violence. The term refers to people on the move who have a regular or irregular migration status in their transit or host countries.

- A perceived threat for local security was often linked not to transit migration per se, but rather the role that transnational **smuggling networks** play in it.

Social impacts

- Local communities have a **better perception of migrants who are only in transit** compared to those who decide to settle in their city or are perceived as potentially doing so in the future.
- In several localities, an attitude of **generosity and solidarity** toward migrants in transit was linked to the local population's own experience of and connections with emigration or forced displacement. However, instances of **discrimination and rejection** were also mentioned, usually in connection to the migrants who are perceived as more culturally distant from the local population and/or those accused of not respecting local customs.

Response from local authorities

- Despite being at the forefront of migration response, local authorities often have **very limited human and financial resources**, and usually **no legal mandate for a migration-specific response**. In none of the transit localities covered did local authorities have a specific local migration policy, a formal migration department or unit, or a specific budget for the response to transit migration. Therefore, local development planning does not factor in the role of transit migration, and a proactive local migration response thus depends on individual goodwill by public officials or advocacy by international organizations.
- Respondents showing such goodwill towards transit migrants consistently mentioned the **lack of an adequate legal and policy framework** on migration **at the national level** as a **major obstacle** for adequate local response, as local policies are supposed to derive from national ones.

Response from national authorities

- **National authorities rarely get involved** in the response to transit migration, except for – in some of the localities included in the project – border control and immigration enforcement, particularly when the locality was nearby such borders.
- **Formal coordination mechanisms** between national and local authorities and between the authorities, civil society and UN agencies for the response to transit migration **are either absent or ineffective**, as they serve as information sharing platforms rather than spaces to coordinate action.
- Rather than coordinating with them, **authorities** – local and national – **often delegate the response to transit migration** to civil society and UN agencies, especially regarding some assistance and services to migrants.
- Respondents often highlighted a **strong disconnect between national and local authorities** regarding the migration response, and a lack of involvement of local authorities in migration policy making at the national level.
- **Research gaps still remain** regarding transit migration, including in connection with its gender-specific aspects: whether transit migration dynamics are different for men and women for instance, or whether transit migration can generate different impacts on local communities depending on the gender of those in transit.

Recommendations

For global policy development actors:

- International policy discussions and related outputs should include substantial analysis of transit migration dynamics and their impacts, and detailed standards and guidelines for response. Only mentioning “transit countries” as a pro forma in international policy documents, such as the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM), alongside countries of origin and destination, does not provide any real guidance or standards for states to respond to transit migration.
- Discussions around transit migration and its management should go beyond attempts to reduce migration, with countries of destination offering financial and other kinds of support to transit states in exchange for them to stop migration movements. Instead, they should better incorporate a development perspective and address the economic, social and security-related impacts of migration on transit countries and localities, especially in the case of LMICs.

For national governments:

- States should consider expanding the avenues for regular migration, including by introducing short-term permits that specifically target those in transit. Access to temporary regular status for migrants in transit, together with broader efforts toward transitioning from an informal to a formal economy, would help the authorities maximize the positive economic impacts of transit migration, while minimizing the risk of abuse for migrants and limiting the role of transnational smuggling networks. On the contrary, migration policies that focus only or mainly on immigration enforcement usually do not manage to stop transit migration, but rather lead it to become more invisible and dangerous.
- Rather than perpetuating narratives that uniformly present and address the facilitation of irregular migration as criminal conduct orchestrated by transnational networks, states should recognize that the provision of services connected to migrant

smuggling is often a source of livelihoods for residents of transit localities. As such, anti-smuggling policies should include efforts to promote local economic development in these areas, including by fostering alternative ways of generating an income.

- States should strengthen their capacity to collect data on migration, including transit migration, and make it publicly available. Counting with detailed and reliable data is fundamental to develop public policies that are well informed and grounded in evidence.
- Migrants in transit should have adequate access to justice, regardless of their immigration status. Impunity of corrupt officials connected to transit migration, just as other forms of corruption, may tarnish the authority's reputation and credibility. Allegations of migration-related corruption should be taken seriously and handled swiftly.
- Authorities and political parties should refrain from exploiting migration for political purposes, and rather invest in communication campaigns targeted at local communities that address the security and economic concerns that they often have regarding transit migration, despite the lack of evidence supporting these concerns.
- National governments should systematically and adequately involve local authorities from areas strongly affected by transit migration in the development of national legal and policy frameworks on both migration and development. Incorporating the perspective of those who must manage the daily implications of transit migration in their territory is essential to developing frameworks that are relevant and comprehensive. Additionally, considering that local authorities are at the forefront of migration response, national governments should consider making additional budget allocations for the municipalities that are most heavily affected by transit migration.
- In parallel, migration-related laws and policies should go beyond addressing the legal situation of migrants who plan to settle in a country's territory to work or study, and better incorporate transit migration in their provisions. This will serve as a basis for local authorities to develop their own policies and programmes at the local level, and strengthen the response provided to transit migration.
- Governments should take advantage of the untapped potential of coordination mechanisms to go beyond information sharing and develop comprehensive migration response plans where different actors complement each other's actions.
- National governments should work in close international and regional cooperation with other potential transit states along the route to ensure a route-based, comprehensive approach that takes into account the needs and challenges of multiple countries.

For local authorities

- Local governments should invest in strengthening their planning capacities and mechanisms, and take into account transit migration within this framework.
- Local authorities should take advantage of new avenues for participation in migration-related international discussions, for instance the Mayors Mechanism of the Global Forum on Migration and Development, to increase the visibility of local perspectives and foster dialogue with national authorities.
- Municipalities and other local authorities should actively advocate with national governments to be adequately included in the development of migration-related laws and policies.
- In parallel, local governments should make good use of coordination mechanisms to set the agenda and lead the response to transit migration in their territories, while maximizing the support they can receive from other relevant actors without being replaced in their leadership role.

For humanitarian and development organisations

- UN agencies and other civil society actors with statistical expertise should encourage and support states efforts to strengthen the compilation and publication of official statistical data on migration in their territories, including transit migration.
- Within the framework of their work, humanitarian and development organisations can sometimes facilitate connection and interactions between the national and local levels. While advocating for more comprehensive responses to transit migration from national authorities, these organisations should continue to strengthen their collaboration with local governments, to capitalise on their knowledge of local needs and dynamics and increase their ability to respond to transit migration in their territory.
- UN agencies, NGOs and other civil society actors should use coordination mechanisms to their fullest potential, going beyond information sharing and developing coordinated action.

Introduction

Migration pathways are lengthy, complicated and unpredictable. This means that transit migration areas – which often adjoin international borders – can become centres of economic activity. They fill hospitality, transportation, accommodation, food, communications and other migrant needs, as well as facilitation of onward movement, often irregularly.²

People on the move usually spend savings on transportation and documentation services, and other needs in many of the transit hubs along mixed migration routes around the world. They sometimes stay for longer periods than they had anticipated, either to engage in casual labour or entrepreneurial activities to fund onward travel, or because downstream legs of planned journeys have been severely restricted or closed off entirely, sometimes under pressure from major destination countries.

Regular and irregular transit migration therefore has an impact on local development economically, socially and politically. While there are examples of these impacts, including how transit migration can boost local and regional economic development, they remain insufficiently understood and taken into account in the development of local, national, regional and global migration policy processes.

This paper presents the findings of a 10-month long research project aimed to shed further light on the positive and negative social, political and economic impacts of transit migration on municipalities and communities that witness transit in LMICs. The project was led by the World Bank's KNOMAD initiative, particularly its two thematic working group on special issues co-chairs, UNDP and the OECD Development Centre, and implemented by the Mixed Migration Centre. It proposes policy recommendations to help national and local governments maximise the benefits and address the development challenges posed by transit migration.

The project set out a certain number of research questions. These are as follows:

1. How does transit migration affect – positively or negatively – local economies and social cohesion? How do different types of transit migration affect transit hubs differently?
2. Who are the main actors that benefit from / are negatively affected by transit migration?
3. What are the implications of transit migration for municipalities (e.g., budget, infrastructure, public services, security)?
4. How have local authorities responded to the challenges of transit migration?
5. How coordinated are national and local responses to the transit phenomenon?
6. How can governments maximise the economic and social benefits of transit migration, while minimising the abuse and exploitation of migrants, and tension with local citizens?
7. How can transit migration be better incorporated into local, national, regional and global migration policy processes?
8. What are the research gaps and options going forward?

The paper first presents a review of the current state of knowledge and policy landscape on transit migration through secondary research, supported by an online expert meeting in May 2022. Based on this review, the paper presents a working concept of the term transit migration. The paper then presents its research methodology, which included key informant interviews in four transit localities across different migration routes in Latin America, Africa and Asia. The information gathered during the different phases of the project are then presented in the paper. The report concludes by providing policy implications and recommendations on transit migration.

² McAuliffe M.L. and F. Laczko (eds.) (2016), *Migrant Smuggling Data and Research: A global review of the emerging evidence base*. IOM.

Transit migration in research and policy

What is transit migration?

To answer the question of what is transit migration, the project carried out a desk review, analysed secondary data and organised an experts meeting in May 2022. The experts meeting aimed at discussing the current state of knowledge and policy landscape on transit migration and the existing research gaps on the topic (Box 1). Based on these inputs, a working definition of transit migration was established and the methodology refined. These steps also helped highlight research questions for further exploration.

Box 1. Experts meeting

In May 2022, MMC and KNOMAD organised a virtual discussion with 12 migration experts, coming from different sectors (the academia, research centres, UN agencies and civil society organizations) and covering several geographical regions (the Americas, Europe, Asia, West Africa). During the event, participants shared their inputs regarding several topics, including: the proposed working definition of transit migration; policies that have been developed to respond specifically to transit migration, or policies that relate to migration or forced displacement more generally but are relevant to transit migration; the types of impacts that migration can have on local economies and communities; existing research gaps that should be prioritised for inclusion in the project questionnaire; profiles of actors that should be interviewed as key informants; and transit localities that should be considered for fieldwork.

Transit migration is a blurred and often politicized concept

Although the term “transit migration” and similar expressions referring to migrants in transit have been in use for a couple of decades and appeared in a range of research and policy documents,³ no official definition of transit migration exists in international law or policy. Several academics have criticized the term “transit migration” for a number of reasons. One of these reasons is, precisely, the lack of a clear definition and thus the vagueness of the concept. Düvell (2010), in particular, found fault with the fact that most “interpretations and definitions [of transit migration] are either particularly narrow or rather vague and they are as confusing as incoherent”.⁴ In 1993 the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe defined transit migration as “migration to a country with intention of seeking the possibility there to emigrate to another country as the country of final destination by means that are partially, if not fully, illegal”.⁵ IOM, in turn, published a series of studies on transit migration in Eastern Europe in 1994, but did not define the concept⁶ Likewise, in 2001, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (CoE) issued a recommendation on transit migration where it did not provide a definition, but did argue that “the two major characteristics of transit migration are its illicit nature and an elaborate criminal organization”.⁷ Another definition of transit migration came out of a regional conference on transit migration organized by the CoE a few years later, in 2004. The conference proceedings defined it as the “migration of persons from a country of origin or departure to a country of destination or settlement through a transit country, often in uncertain or insecure conditions: clandestineness, tourist visa, false papers, etc. Under certain conditions (voluntarily or involuntarily) the transit country can become the place of irregular relatively long-term stay and irregular employment, or a staging post before irregular entrance to the third, more prosperous as a rule, country, or even a country of permanent residence when further migration appears impossible and return to the country of origin is risk-bearing”.⁸

³ Specifically regarding policy, see for instance Council of the European Union (1999) [Action Plan for Morocco](#); Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (2000) [Transit migration in central and eastern Europe](#); Council of Europe (2004) [Regional Conference on Migration - Migrants in the transit countries: sharing responsibilities in management and protection - Proceedings](#); [Turkish national action plan for the adoption of the EU acquis in the field of asylum and migration](#) (2005); [Commission of the European Communities \(2006\) Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament - The Global Approach to Migration one year on: Towards a comprehensive European migration policy](#); European Commission (2011) [Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions – The Global Approach to Migration and Mobility](#); European Commission (2021) [Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the Report on Migration and Asylum](#).

⁴ Düvell, F. (2010) [Transit migration: a blurred and politicised concept](#). Population, Space and Place.

⁵ United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (1993) [International Migration Bulletin N. 3](#).

⁶ See, for instance, IOM (1994) [Transit Migration in Bulgaria](#).

⁷ Council of Europe (CoE) Parliamentary Assembly (2001) [Transit migration in Central and Eastern Europe](#). Recommendation 1489.

⁸ CoE (2004) [Regional Conference on Migration - Migrants in the transit countries: sharing responsibilities in management and protection. Proceedings](#).

The fact that no single, agreed upon definition exists led to the term assuming popular uses that are not necessarily adequate. One element at the root of past concerns around the use of the term “transit migration” has been its alleged Eurocentrism and its politicized use by European authorities in the 1990s-2000s, in reference to migrants stranded in countries at the fringes of Europe and waiting to move onward. According to Collyer, Düvell and de Haas, “the label ‘transit’ has almost only been applied to particular types of migration in the European neighbourhood”⁹ – namely irregular movement heading toward Europe. Additionally, an alleged conflation of transit migration with irregular migration in some political discourse has also been noted and criticized.¹⁰

Some scholars have taken issue with the term “transit migration” to the point of suggesting avoiding its use and proposing alternative “labels” for the concept, for example “fragmented migration”.¹¹ These alternative labels do not, however, overcome the challenges posed by the inherently dynamic and multifaceted nature of the migration patterns the concept refers to, which is at the root of its vagueness and the difficulties in defining it.

Transit migration is a fundamental part of global migration

The difficulties in defining transit migration do not take away the relevance of this part of the journey. In fact, transit is what makes up most of the migration route.

Most migrants in the world migrate regularly, moving swiftly from origin to destination, and transit is just the journey. For others, however, the journey from the place of departure to the final destination can take months, if not years, and include several stops and detours along the way. Individual migration experiences vary in many different aspects including:

- the possibility to access a regular migration option for all or part of the journey
- the financial resources available to the person on the move and its support network and, therefore, the need to stop during the journey to work and earn money
- the means of transportation used and the duration of the journey
- the route taken and the stops or changes that logistics impose along such route
- migration policy changes; accidents during the journey; potential detention or deportation.

Migration from one country to another can thus take many different forms. One person might travel by bus and make two quick stops in different transit localities just to rest a couple of days, receive a money transfer and arrange the logistics of the following leg of the journey. Another migrant may stop in the same intermediate localities but decide to stay in both localities for a few months, to earn the money they need to continue. A third person might stop in the same two localities during a migration journey facilitated by smugglers and be completely reliant on them with regard to when and how they leave the locality. A fourth person might have the intention of passing through both transit localities rapidly but then unexpectedly be stranded in a transit locality there due to external factors beyond their control – for instance, a change in migration policy at destination, the deterioration of security situation in a subsequent transit locality or a pandemic. All these people are in the same transit localities, but their circumstances vary greatly.

How can transit migration be defined?

Several elements connected to this wide range of different dynamics make it difficult to define transit migration in a concise way, and have been subject of debate. They can be summarised around three different factors: duration, intention and status.

Duration of stay in the transit locality

“Transit” is, by definition, a temporary phase. The Cambridge dictionary defines it as “the movement of goods or people from one place to another”, implying that it is a process with a beginning and an end. The same applies to transit migration: it must be a temporary phase, or otherwise it would become settlement. However, can we establish a time limit for what we see as “transit” in a specific locality? Do we consider only short-term stays in one place as transit migration, perhaps a few days only, before resuming the journey? Or should stopping for a few months in a city also be considered as transit migration? What about those who have spent years in a city, but if asked they would say that their intended destination is another place? If we decided that a time limit for what can be considered as transit should be established, how could we decide where to draw the line? Would not any such limit be arbitrary, regardless of the timeframe

⁹ Collyer, M., Düvell, F. and de Haas, H. (2010) op. cit.

¹⁰ Düvell, F. (2010) op. cit.

¹¹ Collyer, M. and de Haas, H. (2010) Developing dynamic categorizations of transit migration. Population, Space and Place.

chosen? For instance, how could we objectively and effectively argue that the situation of a person who stops in a place for exactly three months is radically different from that of a person who remains in the same place for three months and a half?

Migrant intentions

If the definition of transit migration is not grounded on the duration of a person's stay in a locality, another factor that can help define the phenomenon is the migrant's intention, meaning if the person is planning to settle in the town or city where they are, or if they see their presence at the locality as a temporary stop before they continue their journey to somewhere else. These two experiences of permanence in a place can be very different, as a person who plans to settle there might apply for regular status or international protection, therefore gaining access to assistance, services and programmes aimed at local integration, while someone who sees the same locality as a temporary stop might not do any of that as they have their mind set on what they consider their final destination. Definitions of transit migration based on intentions have however been criticised in the past because, on the one hand, intention is difficult to establish and, on the other, can change over time.¹² A person might, for instance, stop at a place that they initially see as a transit locality and, after a certain time and for whatever reason, decide to abandon their plans of onward travel and actually settle there. That is, however, a possibility that is always present in all human behaviour, including what is supposed to be settlement at the end of a migration journey.

Migrant status

Lastly, as mentioned above, some have argued that immigration status is a defining aspect of transit migration. In the past, "transit migration" has been conflated, at least on occasions, with irregular migration.¹³ While migrants in transit often have an irregular status, this is not necessarily the case. Restrictive migration policies surely do make direct and safe travel unfeasible for many. Nevertheless, this does not imply that migrants make stops along their journeys solely if they are traveling irregularly. People can choose routes that include transiting through one or more localities for reasons other than not having the documents necessary to get on an international flight that would take them directly to their final destination. One such reason is the higher cost of direct air travel compared to overland travel by bus or other forms of collective transport, although cost differences between regular and irregular travel vary greatly between routes and on some stretches the cost of irregular migration can far exceed the cost of regular migration. An example of the relevance of cost and of regular overland migration is intra-regional movement within West Africa. In this region, the Free Movement Protocols of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) allow the citizens of the ECOWAS member states to cross borders within the sub-region regularly.¹⁴ Many of those who migrate regularly within the region do so in overcrowded buses, that are less comfortable but much cheaper compared to planes.¹⁵ Another relevant element is the fact that transit migration is sometimes linked to forced displacement: in these circumstances, people on the move often do not freely and carefully plan their migration route, but rather abandon their place of origin in a hurry and move through the route and with the means they have at their disposal.

Working definition of transit migration

In short, consensus around an official or generally accepted definition of transit migration it is very hard to reach. However, as for the purpose of this project a working definition of transit migration was determined as follows:

a) Temporary stay of a migrant in a locality that b) they do not view as their final destination, c) regardless of their immigration status in the country where such a locality is situated.

A part of the journey overlooked by many

Transit migration in migration research

Most research on international migration and displacement has focused on the impact of migration on countries of destination (including access to international protection, regularization and local integration of migrants, social cohesion, employment) and countries of origin (exploring, for instance, the impact of remittances, diasporic engagement, return migration). Papadopoulou (2005) noted that many

¹² Düvell, F., Molodikova, I. and Collyer, M. (ed) (2014) op. cit.

¹³ Düvell, F. (2010) op. cit.

¹⁴ Schöfberger, I. (2020) Free movement policies and border controls: regional migration governance systems in West and North Africa and Europe, and their interactions in IOM, Migration in West and North Africa and across the Mediterranean.

¹⁵ UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants (2021) West Africa, North Africa and the Central Mediterranean - Key Findings on the Characteristics of Migrant Smuggling in West Africa, North Africa and the Central Mediterranean.

studies were analysing migration as a “two stage process, with the first stage being the situation in the country of origin [...] and second the country of settlement” while there was “less empirical information on the experience and the time spent between these two ends”.¹⁶ Castagnone expanded on this idea a few years later, observing that most migration research was based on “static dichotomous categorizations”, including “conceiving migration primarily as [...] a one-off move from a departure country “A” to a destination country “B” and “entailing a permanent settlement”¹⁷ while, in reality, migration processes are much more complex.

While the term first came into use in the 1990s, transit migration is a topic of relatively recent attention in migration studies, as most research focusing specifically on transit was produced from 2010 onward.

Initially, at least until the mid-2010s, most research on transit migration had a strong focus on migration toward Europe and on EU restrictive immigration policies,¹⁸ possibly as a reaction to the context in which the term started to be used: in reference to population movements coming from and/or passing through Eastern Europe, following the fall of the Soviet Union, and heading toward Western Europe.¹⁹ To a more limited extent, studies about transit migration from Central America toward the United States (US) also started appearing.²⁰

More recent research expanded and strengthened the geographic coverage of other regions, in particular movements across Central America and Mexico toward the US, and across South-East Asia toward Australia.²¹ Much remains to be explored, however, especially regarding the thematic focus and the perspectives highlighted in research. The development impact of migration on transit localities, in particular, has been mostly overlooked. Existing research often concentrated on the one hand, on the concept of transit migration and its use in migration policy rather than reality on the ground; or, on the other hand, on protection risks and economic hardship for those in transit, rather than looking at the perspective of the local community and local authorities in transit localities.

Another constraint worth noting is the fact that, with very few exceptions,²² most existing research on transit migration is gender-blind and does not enter into detail as to whether and how transit migration implies different dynamics depending on the sex, sexual orientation and gender identity of those on the move. Additionally, most analysis of gendered experiences of migration focuses on protection risks (e.g. sexual violence), rather than other aspects of migration and its impacts.

Global and regional agendas

Transit migration has also remained at the margins of migration-related discussions in the international policy arena. International migration started attracting stronger political attention in the early 2000s. The United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan identified migration as a priority issue for the international community in 2002²³ and a Global Commission on International Migration (GCIM) was launched the following year to, among other things, “place the issue of international migration on the global policy agenda”.²⁴ The same Secretary General then repeatedly confirmed the relevance of migration – and its connection with development – as a priority for his mandate including by issuing a report on international migration and development²⁵ and organizing the first High-Level Dialogue on the same topic.²⁶ The High-Level Dialogue resulted in the creation of the Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD), an informal, non-binding and state-led platform for informal dialogue and cooperation.²⁷ While both the Secretary General’s report and the report of the first meeting of the GFMD did mention “transit countries” several times, they did not discuss transit migration in any detail.

¹⁶ Papadopoulou, A. (2005) Exploring the asylum-migration nexus: a case study of transit migrants in Europe. Global Commission on International Migration.

¹⁷ Castagnone, E. (2011) Transit migration: a piece of the complex mobility puzzle. The case of Senegalese migration. Cahiers de l’Urmis.

¹⁸ See for instance Icdygu, A. (2005) Transit Migration in Türkiye: Trends, Patterns, and Issues; Papadopoulou, A. (2005) op. cit; Castagnone, E. (2011) op. cit; Collyer, M. (2010) Stranded Migrants and the Fragmented Journey, Journal of Refugee Studies; Population, Space and Place (2012) Special Issue: Critical Approaches to Transit Migration; Düvell, F., Molodikova, I. and Collyer, M. (ed) (2014) Transit Migration in Europe. Amsterdam University Press;

¹⁹ Collyer, M., Düvell, F. and de Haas, H. (2010) Critical approaches to transit migration. Population, Space and Place.

²⁰ See, for instance: Castillo, M. A (2000) Las políticas hacia la migración centroamericana en países de origen, de destino y de tránsito. Papeles de población; Casillas, R. (2008) Las rutas de los centroamericanos por México, un ejercicio de caracterización, actores principales y complejidades. Migración y Desarrollo.

²¹ See, for instance, Frank-Vitale, A. (2020) Stuck in Motion: Inhabiting the Space of Transit in Central American Migration. The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology; Hugo, G., Tan, G. and Napitupulu, C.J. (2017) Indonesia as a transit country in irregular migration to Australia. In Mcauliffe, M. and Koser, K. (2017) A Long Way to Go: Irregular Migration Patterns, Processes, Drivers and Decision-making; Lau, B. (2021) A Transit Country No More: Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Indonesia. MMC Research Report.

²² See for instance Stock, I. (2012) Gender and the dynamics of mobility: Reflections on African migrant mothers and “transit migration” in Morocco.

²³ United Nations General Assembly (2002) Strengthening of the United Nations: an agenda for further change – Report of the Secretary General.

²⁴ UN Migration (IOM) Global Commission on International Migration.

²⁵ United Nations General Assembly (2006) International migration and development – Report of the Secretary General.

²⁶ See International Organization for Migration (IOM) (n/a) United Nations High-Level Dialogue on International Migration and Development (HLD).

²⁷ Global Forum on Migration and Development (n/a) Background.

This trend continued, as international policy discussions kept on focusing on the two ends of the migration route – origin and destination – rather than the journey in between. The debate, often led by countries from the global north that are mostly destinations of mixed migration movements, concentrated on migration management in countries of destination, countering irregular migration and fostering development in countries of origin to address migration drivers and reduce migration.

While it does mention the situation of countries of transit in more than one occasion, which does constitute an improvement compared to previous instruments, the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM), adopted in 2018, does not engage with transit migration in a detailed and effective way either.²⁸ In fact, the only section in which transit countries are specifically singled out in the GCM refers to the commitment to “[e]nhance international, regional and cross-regional border management cooperation” within the framework of broader efforts toward “ensuring security for States, communities and migrants, and facilitating safe and regular cross-border movements of people while preventing irregular migration”. The impacts of migration in transit localities are not addressed in any way.

This lack of attention to transit migration in international policy fora might be due, at least in part, to the fact that transit migration does not neatly fit into a particular box but includes different types of status and movements. There is therefore no clear mandated agency or international instrument dealing with it. It involves, among other profiles and dynamics, labour migrants – who would fall under the mandate of the International Labour Organization (ILO), smuggled migrants (UNODC), refugees in onward movement (UNHCR) and migrants more generally (IOM). Additionally, the two UN agencies with the most migration-specific mandate – IOM and UNHCR – usually approach transit migration from a humanitarian perspective, rather than with a development-focused approach.

Another possible reason behind the lack of prioritization of transit migration in policy discussions, especially seen from the perspective of transit localities, is the fact that most countries that can be considered mainly as places of transit are LMICs, which have less political weight in international fora compared to countries from the global north.

National policy concerns

National migration policies usually focus on regulating the entry and stay of foreign citizens who plan to settle, at least temporarily, within the territory of a country – including those with international protection needs connected to forced displacement. Countries with many emigrants often also include in these policies provisions on how to support their citizens living abroad, capitalize on the diaspora and manage their return. Very rarely do these legal and policy frameworks directly address the situation of those who transit through the country temporarily on their way to another destination.

In fact, national governments in transit countries often adopt a pragmatic and disengaged approach to transit migration. They will not intervene, as long as it brings some economic benefits to the country, does not cause grave security concerns or public outcry and they do not face heavy external pressure to block it from countries further along the route with strong economic or political leverage.²⁹

Even in the few instances in which transit corridors and localities have received political attention, governments mostly approached issues related to transit migration from the perspective of migration management and addressing irregular migration through securitization. This has been the case in several regions with instances of so-called “externalisation” of migration management, where destination countries enter into agreements with countries of transit to have the latter countries set up measures to prevent migrants from continuing their journey, in exchange for financial or political benefits. An example of this is the 2016 statement of cooperation in which the EU committed to giving Türkiye 6 billion euros and visa-free travel for its nationals in exchange for the transit country to “take any necessary measures to prevent new sea or land routes for irregular migration opening from Türkiye to the EU”.³⁰ Similarly, in the Americas, the US has been providing funding to Mexico in exchange for it to curb irregular migration heading north at least since 2008.³¹

The same applies to bilateral diplomatic engagement. Some countries, for instance, began adopting binational policies explicitly aimed not at stopping or containing migration, but rather at controlling and, at the same time, facilitating transit. This was the case, for instance, in Panama and Costa Rica with the creation of Operation Controlled Flow (“Operación Flujo Controlado”). The two Central American countries have been for years a corridor for mixed migration movements coming from South America and heading north. In 2016, the closure of the border between Nicaragua and Costa Rica led migrants in transit to become stranded during their journey toward North

²⁸ United Nations General Assembly (2019) [Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration](#).

²⁹ See for instance Winters, N., and Mora Izaguirre, C. (2019) [Es cosa suya: entanglements of border externalization and African transit migration in northern Costa Rica](#). Comparative Migration Studies.

³⁰ European Council (2016) [EU-Türkiye statement, 18 March 2016](#).

³¹ Frelick, B., Kysel, I.M., and Podkul, J. (2016) [The Impact of Externalization of Migration Controls on the Rights of Asylum Seekers and Other Migrants](#). Journal on Migration and Human Security.

America. To prevent this from happening again, the governments of Panama and Costa Rica then adopted a binational policy – Flujo Controlado – that would allow them to “guarantee the orderly, regular and safe transit of these migrants through the territory”.³² A similar agreement was adopted in 2021 between Colombia and Panama – the previous segment of the same migration route – following difficulties in managing transit migration during the Covid-19 pandemic.³³ In both cases, the adoption of such a policy was triggered by sudden, unexpected problems connected to transit. The governments of the countries involved had been aware of such movements for years, but did not engage with them. The government of Colombia, for instance, would limit itself to issuing a transit permit – called “salvoconducto” – to people on the move entering its territory but with no intention to stay. Mexican authorities used to have a similar approach to transit, especially in the case of “extra-regional” mixed migration, until they stopped the widespread issuance of temporary visitor cards for humanitarian reasons to those in transit in 2019, allegedly upon pressure from the US, leading to migrant protests.³⁴ More recently, Mexican authorities have begun offering humanitarian visitor cards on an *ad hoc* basis with the aim of dissolving the migrant caravans transiting across the country and convince those in transit to settle in Mexico.³⁵ Similarly, between 2015 and 2016, several states in the Western Balkans adopted forms of short-term temporary permits for those in transit and facilitated the continuation of their journey by providing them transportation across their territory and to the border with the next transit country.³⁶ These countries’ response to transit migration changed in 2016, after the EU and Türkiye issued the joint statement allowing for the return from the EU to Türkiye of irregular migrants who had transited through this country in their journey toward the Union, which led to a strengthening of border enforcement policies in the region.³⁷

On very limited occasions, states have approached transit migration from a humanitarian perspective, out of concern for the humanitarian implications and protection risks associated with transit for those involved. In the 1990s, for instance, Mexico created the so-called “Grupos Beta”, a unit within the Mexican immigration authority tasked with protecting the rights of migrants transiting through Mexican territory by providing them first aid, information and legal advice, and humanitarian assistance.³⁸

Beyond this, no record was found of national policies specifically targeted at transit migration. In particular, it was not possible to identify examples of a state addressing transit migration from a development perspective, nor any policy that aimed at evaluating and managing the impact of migration in hotspots for transit and maximise its positive potential.

Transit migration and local development

Local authorities are often at the forefront of migration response and must manage the daily, concrete implications of transit migration in their territory. Despite this, they often have very limited human and financial resources, and usually no legal mandate for migration management.

Municipalities mostly rely on the allocation of funding from the national government, which is often not sufficient to cover the needs and usually does not include funding that is specifically aimed at migration response. Additionally, formulas used to calculate the sum to be allocated to local authorities by state governments for the delivery of public services are often based on population size and tend not to consider migrant populations that are viewed as “temporary”.³⁹

Local development is an especially important angle to consider when discussing transit migration, because it is at the local level that its impact is mostly felt.⁴⁰ The interaction between local development and migration is however a very recent addition to the international policy agenda. A Mayoral Forum on Human Mobility, Migration and Development was first created in 2013, and held yearly meetings until 2018. In the Call of Barcelona, adopted at its 2014 meeting, participants in the forum highlighted that while “[c]ities are the closest level

³² IOM (2020) [Emergency Tracking: COVID19 Pandemic Migrant Receiving Stations \(MRS\) Situation Report #8, 15-21 May 2020, Panama.](#)

³³ La República (2021) [Panamá y Colombia acuerdan flujo controlado de migrantes camino a Norteamérica.](#)

³⁴ Pradilla, A. (2019) [Entregarse al INM, la estrategia de migrantes africanos en Chiapas para avanzar hacia EU.](#) Animal Político; Alianza Americas (2019) [Africans and Haitians under siege due to new restrictions on mobility in Mexico;](#) Telesur (2019) [African, Haitian Migrants Protest in Mexico's Southern Border;](#) Associated Press (2019) [Crece tensión entre migrantes varados en sur de México.](#)

³⁵ Pradilla, A. (2021) [Autoridades mexicanas regularizarán a integrantes de la caravana y permitirán su tránsito por el país.](#) Animal Político; Univision (2021) [Caravana de migrantes alcanza un acuerdo con autoridades mexicanas que pone fin a la movilización masiva;](#) Xinhua (2022) [Migrant caravan disbands as Mexico grants visas.](#) Global Times;

³⁶ Sardelić, J. (2017) [From Temporary Protection to Transit Migration: Responses to Refugee Crises along the Western Balkan Route.](#)

³⁷ Moschopoulos, M. (2019) [The “Balkan Route” Three Years after Its Closure.](#) IEMed.

³⁸ Gobierno de México (n/a) [Grupos Beta de Protección a Migrantes.](#)

³⁹ Mayors Migration Council (2022) [Municipal finance for migrants and refugees: the state of play. An overview of the barriers facing city governments and a path forward for building more inclusive cities.](#)

⁴⁰ IOM and Joint Migration and Development Initiative (JMIDI) (2015) [White Paper: Mainstreaming Migration into Local Development Planning and Beyond;](#) Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2016) [International Migration Outlook 2016.](#)

of government to citizens” and “[f]aced with the challenges of governance of migration, mobility and development and cities are in charge of achieving integration processes and ensuring social cohesion”, they also “have little or no voice in global forums where priorities on the agendas of human mobility are determined.”⁴¹

In 2018, the GFMD began formally involving local authorities in its discussions by incorporating the Mayoral Forum, converting it into its “Mayors Mechanism”. According to the GFMD’s official website, “[t]he Mechanism creates opportunities for cities to influence the GFMD discussions and provides them with opportunities for peer-to-peer learning and exchange. It establishes a platform to interact with States, civil society and the private sector and provides avenues to bolster innovative solutions.”⁴² According to the GFMD website, however, the Mayors Mechanism only held one meeting after its establishment, at the 2020 GFMD summit in Quito, due to the Covid-19 pandemic and internal governance reform processes at the GFMD.

To reflect and support the increasing involvement of city governments in migration response, the Mayors Migration Council was also established in 2018. A mayor-led organization, the Mayors Migration Council helps municipalities to influence migration-related policy decisions at the national and international level, secure financial and technical resources to implement local migration responses and generate and share knowledge grounded in local experiences.

While the recent establishment of fora and organizations specifically focusing on the impact of migration at the local level undoubtedly are a step in the right direction, much still remain to be done to adequately include the local perspective in migration and development discussions. Even more so in the specific case of migration in transit, as most local initiatives focus on the role of destination cities in local integration for refugees and migrants.

Coordination between national and local governments

The interaction between national and local authorities for the response to transit migration can be one of collaboration or one of disconnect and frustration, or a mix of both. The Nigerien city of Agadez is an example of the latter. As mentioned above, providing goods and services to migrants in transit constituted one of the main sources of income for the local population in the city until the government of Niger adopted the Law Against Illicit Smuggling of Migrants following political pressure and economic incentives from the European Union (EU). Due to the implementation of this law, mixed migration started circumventing Agadez to be less visible and avoid detection. This deprived thousands of households in the city of a source of income and, in turn, this led to resentment against the authorities “that do not dare to stand up against Niamey’s deal with the EU”,⁴³ a deal that seemed to bring no benefits whatsoever at the local level. According to one source, “local authorities [in Agadez] note that they feel confronted by an international policy dialogue that tends to be organised in consultation with Niamey rather than Agadez itself”.⁴⁴

In other circumstances, local authorities sometimes feel a lack of support by central governments in the response to and management of transit migration. This was the case for the local government of Necoclí, a small Colombian city near the border with Panama. Necoclí and the surrounding area have for years witnessed transit migration including people from South America, the Caribbean, Africa and Asia heading towards North America. These migrants usually stop for only a few days in this remote and poorly serviced coastal area of Colombia, before crossing the border into Panama. Intermittent border closures in the region triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic, however, caused the repeated accumulation of thousands of migrants stranded in Necoclí with no possibility of continuing their journey. This has caused unforeseen humanitarian assistance needs and strained local services. On one occasion, in July 2021, the mayor of Necoclí expressed his frustration to the media, stating that local authorities had been requesting support from the national government to no avail.⁴⁵

Transit migration figures and main transit routes

Detailed and reliable data are essential to develop well-informed policies. When it comes to the numbers of migrants in transit in different countries and regions, however, accurate figures simply do not exist.

UN DESA produces estimates of the number of migrants globally, based on data provided by States.⁴⁶ Official immigration statistics however do not capture the real volume of migration because a considerable share of movements occurs irregularly and is thus not

⁴¹ Mayoral Forum on Human Mobility, Migration and Development (2014) [Call of Barcelona](#).

⁴² Global Forum on Migration and Development (n/a) [The GFMD Mayors Mechanism](#).

⁴³ Hoffmann, A., Meester, J. and Nabara, H.M. (2017) [Migration and Markets in Agadez - Economic alternatives to the migration industry](#) Clingendael.

⁴⁴ Molenaar, F., Ursu, A.-E. and Ayoub Tinni, B. (2017) [Local governance opportunities for sustainable migration management in Agadez](#). Clingendael.

⁴⁵ Semana (2021) [No hay hospedaje ni comida para atender a más de 10.000 migrantes: alcalde de Necoclí](#).

⁴⁶ UNDESA (2020) [International Migrant Stock](#).

registered by immigration officers. The most accurate estimates, including attempts to cross borders irregularly, are largely limited to countries in the global north with sophisticated immigration control systems.⁴⁷ Still, even these estimates can only be considered indicative, as there is no reliable way to calculate how many irregular border crossings remain under the radar.

In the case of transit countries, specifically, a measure of the volume of transit flows could be calculated, in theory, by comparing the number of foreigners who enter the country from one border and leave it from another. In addition to the already mentioned under-registration of irregular crossings, however, another obstacle to this is the fact that border enforcement and control at border areas primarily used to leave a country are often much laxer than they are at entry points, meaning that data on those leaving the country are even more limited than data on entry.

Migration-related data in transit localities often come from non-official sources, like UN agencies and NGOs who support migrants. While these actors sometimes have a presence where the authorities do not and can manage to interact with irregular migrants because they do not engage in migration enforcement and deportations, their reach also has limits.

As a result, three inaccurate sets of data on transit migration can be found: official data, missing the irregular crossings; data on assistance provided to migrants in border regions by UN agencies and civil society organizations, failing to capture those who do not approach the organizations or choose another route; and estimates on irregular crossings, usually based on unreliable indicators. This is a major gap in migration data, considering that a good share of the 281 million migrants estimated to be living outside their country in 2020 surely did not reach their destination directly from their country of origin, not to mention those moving irregularly.⁴⁸

The transit routes used by migrants to reach their destinations across the globe are constantly changing, often in response to factors like heightened immigration enforcement in some places, security concerns, smugglers' contacts, etc. Major migration routes globally can be identified⁴⁹, however, transit migration mostly occurs overland, which is relevant when considering its practical aspects and its impacts. Information is limited regarding the details of the routes, including specific transit localities. Global migration maps often contain rough indications of the routes taken by migrants, highlighting countries and regions of origins destination, rather than the exact route used to get from one to the other.

Methodology

Research methods

The core analysis of this project is based on primary mixed-methods data collection. Primary data were collected through key informant interviews and focus group discussions, and complemented through primary quantitative data from the 4Mi project (Box 2). Additional data on transit migration in Djibouti was collected by MMC in partnership with IOM and within the framework of the regional Migrant Response Plan for the Horn of Africa and Yemen.⁵⁰

Qualitative data

Qualitative data for the project was gathered between July and November 2022 through the following field activities:

- **66 qualitative interviews** with local key informants (Table 1).⁵¹
- **Three focus group discussions** with members of the local community: one per locality in Esquipulas, Van and Medenine.

⁴⁷ The US Department of Homeland Security (DHS), for instance, gathers and publishes statistics on “immigration enforcement actions”, including “apprehensions” of and “encounters” with irregular migrants, and estimates of the “unauthorized immigrant population residing” in the US. See US DHS (n/a) [Immigration Data and Statistics](#). Similarly, the EU statistical office (EUROSTAT) publishes data on “Enforcement of immigration legislation”, including “non-EU citizens found to be illegally present” in the territory, “non-EU citizens ordered to leave the EU”, returns, etc. See EUROSTAT (n/a) 2022) [Migration and Asylum](#).

⁴⁸ UNDESA (2020) [International Migration 2020 – Highlights](#).

⁴⁹ For more information regarding South-South migration and lesser-known migration routes see Horwood, C. (2021) [Beyond the limelight: A selective overview of lesser-known irregular migration routes in the Global South](#). Mixed Migration Review 2021.

⁵⁰ Hereinafter: MMC/IOM data on transit migration. For more information regarding the findings of this project see van Moorsel, J., Ficarelli, F.T., Waithira Wachira, E. and Ali, S. (2022) [Relationships in Transit: Local communities’ interactions with transiting migrants along the Eastern Route in Djibouti and the Somaliland region](#). MMC Research Report.

⁵¹ See the section on “Localities and migration routes covered” below for more details.

Table 1. Number of key informants interviewed in each locality

| Locality | Number of key informants interviewed |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Esquipulas (Guatemala) | 19 |
| Medenine and Zarzis (Tunisia) | 15 (7 + 8) |
| Van (Turkiye) | 16 |
| Obock (Djibouti) | 16 ⁵² |

The qualitative interview questionnaire and the focus group discussions covered eight main themes relating to the research questions:

1. Prevailing transit migration trends at the research localities
2. Economic impacts⁵³ of transit migration
3. Security-related impacts of transit migration
4. Social impacts of transit migration
5. Role that smuggling plays on the economic and security related impact of transit migration
6. Response by local authorities
7. Response by national authorities
8. Coordination between actors for the response to transit migration.

The project aimed at interviewing key informants with several different profiles, including: local authorities; humanitarian and development organizations with a local presence (both national and international); business owners and/or representatives of the private sector; community leaders; traditional authorities; spiritual leaders; local journalists; smugglers (wherever possible). Because the project aimed at shedding light on the impacts of transit migration on local – rather than national – development, the vast majority of key informants had a local (i.e. municipality-level) character; in some specific cases, actors with a broader geographical scope (province or region within a country) were also interviewed.

The specific key informants who were interviewed in each locality and the balance between their profiles slightly varied depending on the actors present at each locality, the feasibility of obtaining their contact information to set up interviews, and their willingness to participate in the project.⁵⁴ At each locality, MMC relied on a local facilitator to gather the contact information for key informants and organise the interviews. More information regarding the key informants interviewed for the project is available in Annex 1.

Several limitations to the data are worth noting. The four fieldwork localities were purposefully chosen with specific criteria in mind, including elements related to practical aspects of field research. They do not represent the full scope of transit migration dynamics globally and are only meant to provide illustrative examples of the impacts⁵⁵ that transit migration can have on local development and the policy responses that this phenomenon can elicit. Additionally, although the interviews included an Age, Gender and Diversity (AGD) lens in the questions, the gender-specific information collected was very limited. More detailed data in this sense could likely be gathered through interviews that focus mainly on the gendered aspects of transit migration which has not been the case for this research.

It is also important to note that the responses and the analysis regarding the qualitative interviews, are not official responses or based on comprehensive official data (Box 2). They are insights based on either direct observation or on the data regarding assisted beneficiaries collected either by respondents themselves or by other humanitarian organizations. In fact, when asked about the existence of official data on transit migration in their territory, key informants from local authorities often answered the most reliable data available is the one collected by NGOs and UN agencies, and that the authorities rely on such data as well.

⁵² 10 interviews were conducted using the questionnaire specifically developed for this project, while six more were collected within the framework of the joint MMC/IOM research on transit migration in East Africa (see previous page for more detail).

⁵³ “Impact” here does not mean that the project aimed at quantitatively measure impact. The word is used in a more qualitative sense, to describe the effects of transit migration.

⁵⁴ Van (Türkiye) was the only locality in which no representative of the municipality was interviewed, as they declined to participate. In this locality, therefore, the findings reflect the perspective of a range of civil society actors, but not that of the local authorities.

⁵⁵ “Impact” here does not mean that the project aimed at quantitatively measure impact. The word is used in a more qualitative sense, to describe the effects of transit migration.

Box 2. Official data on transit migration in the countries included in the study

One similarity across localities was the absence of comprehensive official statistics on transit migration, which is in line with the prevalent lack of accurate data that was mentioned in the previous section of this report. The gaps in accurate and comprehensive official statistics – or, at least those that are publicly available – go beyond transit migration and relate to migration more broadly. In the case of **Guatemala**, for instance, the website of the National Migration Institute contains limited data on asylum seekers in Guatemala, the latest attempt at a migrant caravan and Guatemalan returnees. According to local actors, a formal information request to the National Migration Institute might grant access to additional immigration data, but these statistics would not be representative as they only capture regular entries into the country – a minority of those in transit. As for **Tunisia**, it was impossible to retrieve any official migration-related data on Tunisia as the website of the competent authority – the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Migration and Tunisians abroad – is not active. The website of the National Migration Observatory, which is part of the Social Affairs Ministry, should in theory include relevant data; however, the section on “immigrants” is void and the section on “foreigners in Tunisia” has not been updated since 2014. Similarly, publicly available migration-related data for **Djibouti** could not be found. The country has acknowledged the challenges it faces regarding the collection and analysis of such data both in its 2022 voluntary report on the implementation of the GCM, and its 2022 statistics yearbook, and recently created a technical working group on migration data to work on the issue. **Türkiye** was the country with the broadest range of migration-related data publicly available, although still partial. The website of the Presidency of Migration Management of the Turkish Interior Ministry contains data on:

- irregular migrants who have been intercepted in the country, by year and by nationality (but no breakdown for each border crossing or region), applications for international protection per year
- Syrian nationals who obtained temporary protection in the country, by province
- foreigners with a residence permit, by province or by nationality
- regular entries into the country by nationality or by year

Specific official statistics on transit migration through Van do not exist or, at least, are not publicly available, however. According to several key informants, the local immigration office is likely to have additional data regarding the Van province but does not publish them. As a result, local actors – including the city government – mostly rely on the data collected and shared by UN agencies and NGOs. This clearly has negative implications for policy development, as the authorities lack adequate data to use as evidence base for their migration response, especially at the local level.

Quantitative data

Primary quantitative data was collected through a parallel MMC project called 4Mi (Box 3).

The 4Mi data includes:

- **1336 quantitative surveys** with migrants, collected within the framework of the 4Mi project between February 2021 and September 2022: 89 surveys for Esquipulas (Guatemala); 436 surveys for Van (Turkey); and 811 surveys for Medenine/Zarzis (Tunisia).
- **199 quantitative surveys** with local residents collected in Obock (Djibouti), in partnership with IOM, between July and August 2022.

4Mi data was used for analysis on the following topics:

- i. The profiles of migrants interviewed in the fieldwork localities
- ii. The reasons why they stopped at the locality
- iii. Their use of smugglers for their migration journey
- iv. Their preferred final destination.

MMC/IOM data on transit migration in Obock (Djibouti), on the other hand, covered the following:

- i. Main profiles of migrants in transit
- ii. Interactions between local residents and migrants in transit, including economic interactions

- iii. Perceptions of transit migration and its impacts among the local community.

Box 3. What is 4Mi?

4Mi is MMC's flagship data collection project. Regional teams in West Africa, North Africa, East Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America collect and analyse data on mixed migration through interviews with refugees and migrants about their motivations and aspirations, protection concerns, and experiences along mixed migration routes. Launched in 2014, in 2023 4Mi consists of a network of around 120 enumerators in 15 countries. Targeting known gathering points for refugees and migrants on commonly used routes, 4Mi enumerators use questionnaires to conduct in-depth structured interviews on a continuous basis. 4Mi also conducts short-term, topic-specific surveys. To date, the 4Mi teams have conducted more than 100,000 interviews, all surveys combined. 4Mi data can be accessed via [4Mi Interactive](#), which enables users to analyse our latest data according to their own population and topic of interest. More information about 4Mi is available here: <https://mixedmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/4Mi-Introduction.pdf>.

The 4Mi sampling process is not randomized and the survey responses are not representative of the entire refugee and migrant population in a specific locality. Nonetheless, 4Mi data can provide important insights into migrants' experiences while in transit. Similar limitations apply in the case of MMC/IOM data on transit migration.

Localities and migration routes covered

The project gathered information on four migration routes:

1. From South and Central America to North America
2. From South Asia to Europe
3. From West to North Africa
4. From East Africa to Yemen and the Gulf States.

The exact fieldwork localities along these routes were selected considering several elements, including:

- In a low- or middle-income country (LMIC)
- On a major migration route
- The availability of local support for the organization of fieldwork
- Reasonable security for conducting interviews
- The size of the city, avoiding large or capital cities, where the impact of transit migration might get diluted due to concurring migration and development dynamics
- The availability of 4Mi data
- A variety in transit migration dynamics

Figure 1. Map of fieldwork localities

Esquipulas, Guatemala

The fieldwork locality selected for Route 1 (from South and Central America to North America) was Esquipulas, Guatemala. Esquipulas is a small town located in the south-eastern part of Guatemala, at the border with Honduras. Migrants coming from countries in Central America, South America (mainly, but not exclusively, Venezuelans), the Caribbean (mostly Haitians and Cubans) and, in much lower proportion, Africa and Asia, enter Guatemala through Esquipulas and then continue their journey across the country, usually toward Mexico and the US.

Data collection in Esquipulas served as pilot, to test the project questionnaire and methodology. These were slightly adjusted before fieldwork was conducted in the other three localities.

Van, Türkiye

The fieldwork locality selected for Route 2 (from South Asia to Europe) was Van, in Türkiye. Van is the capital city of the Van province, located in the far eastern part of Türkiye, near the border with Iran. It is a transit locality mainly for migrants coming from Afghanistan (and some other nationalities in much lower proportion). After passing through Van, migrants continue their journey across Türkiye and sometimes toward Europe.

The city initially chosen as fieldwork locality for Route 3 (from West to North Africa) was Medenine, in Tunisia. Preliminary field research however made clear that the dynamics between Medenine and the nearby city of Zarzis are very closely tied, regarding both the economy and migration. Medenine and Zarzis were therefore treated as two components of the same locality in the Tunisia case study.

Medenine and Zarzis, Tunisia

Medenine and Zarzis are located in the south of Tunisia, near the border with Libya. Both cities are places of transit for migrants mostly originating from countries in West, Central and East Africa, but also South Asia, the Middle East and North Africa. Most of these migrants reach Medenine/Zarzis after spending some time in the western region of Libya and fleeing violence and insecurity there. They settle in Medenine/Zarzis for some time, while they wait for a chance to cross the Mediterranean and reach Italy. Most migrants return to the Libyan city of Zvara to cross the sea, while a minority departs from Zarzis.

Obock, Djibouti

The fieldwork locality selected for Route 4 (from East Africa to Yemen and the Gulf States) was Obock, in Djibouti. Obock is a small port town located on the Gulf of Aden. It is a transit locality mainly for migrants coming from Ethiopia and trying to cross the sea to reach Yemen, and then continue their journey toward the Gulf States, particularly Saudi Arabia.

Box 3. Data collection in Malawi

The project had initially foreseen covering the migration route that goes from the Horn of Africa to Southern Africa. Mangochi, in Malawi, was selected as a locality for fieldwork along this route. 13 key informant interviews and three focus group discussions were carried out in the city but did not provide sufficient relevant information regarding the specific topic that is the focus of this project, meaning the impacts of transit migration on local development. For this reason, an alternative fourth locality – Obock, in Djibouti – was selected.

Mangochi is a crossroad for other migration movements: it is a place of origin for Malawian migrants heading to South Africa; a city of destination and transit for businessmen from Mozambique engaging in cross-border trading; and a destination for refugees (mainly Burundian nationals) previously living in the Dzaleka refugee camp. In contrast with these migration dynamics, the transit of migrants from the Horn of Africa heading toward South Africa – the migration movement that the project aimed at studying – is much less visible: these migrants mostly enter Malawi irregularly and, due to the country's focus on combatting irregular migration, their journey is organized and facilitated by smuggling networks that try to keep the migrants as invisible as possible during their passage through the country. Additionally, transit migration through Malawi tends to follow a different route and most migrants do not pass through Mangochi; as a consequence, this migration flow is most likely lower in numbers in Mangochi compared to the other population movements happening in the city, like cross-border trading and the settlement of refugees previously living in Dzaleka. As a result, transit migration is not a priority for the authorities, civil society and the local community. Key informants provided information regarding the local impact of the other migration dynamics but could share very limited inputs on transit migration specifically.

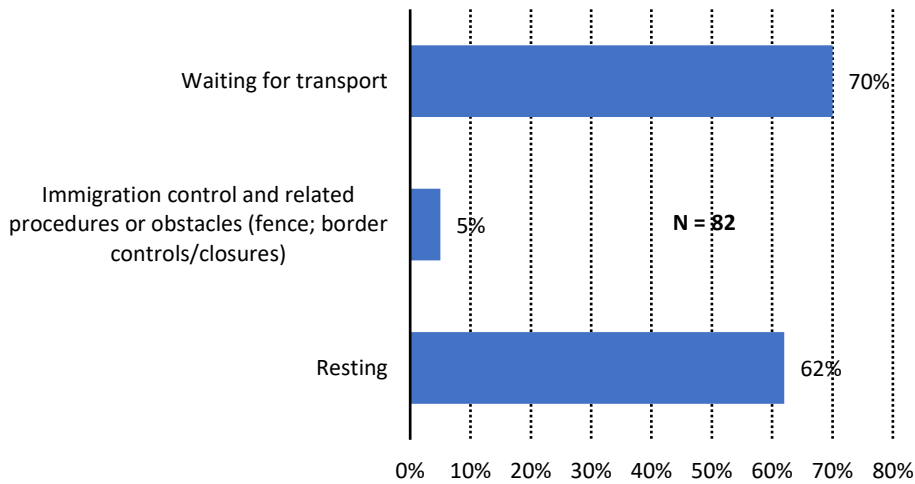
Fieldwork findings: local implications of transit migration for municipalities in LMICs

Transit migration trends

Duration of stay

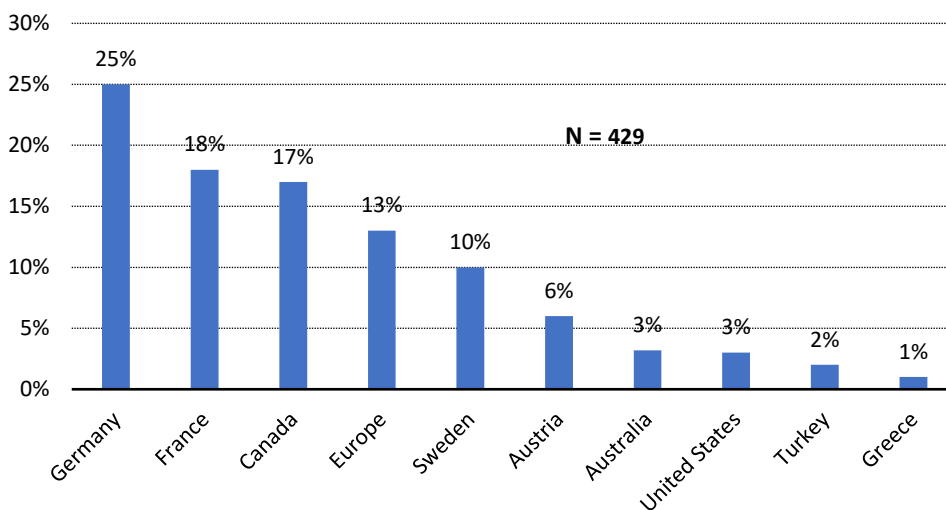
The dynamics of transit migration varied greatly between fieldwork localities, in several aspects. Regarding the duration of migrants' stay, **Esquipulas** and **Van** provided examples of localities where most of those in transit only remain for a very short time. In both cases, most migrants spend between a few hours and a few days in these cities. Those that stop for the shortest amount of time do so to find transportation for the following leg of the journey. Others take a break to rest a bit before continuing, as confirmed by 4Mi data from Esquipulas (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Reason for stopping in Esquipulas



In Van, migrants tend to stop for slightly longer, working to earn money for the following stretch of the journey. However, the great majority of migrants who transit through Van – including those who stay for a more extended period – still plan to continue their journey as soon as they can. This information is in line with 4Mi data from Van: 99,7% of those interviewed in the city stated that their destination was a country other than Türkiye (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Preferred destination for respondents in Van



The average stay in **Obock** is slightly more extended. According to a key informant, migrants in transit usually stop in Obock for about two weeks, but this can become a month or more if the weather does not allow boats to sail toward Yemen, or if they get scammed by smugglers. In contrast, in **Medenine/Zarzis** the duration of transit is much more extended. Migrants remain there for months, and in some cases, years, before continuing their journey. According to 4Mi data collected in Medenine/Zarzis, most respondents (47%) had already spent more than one year in this locality when they were interviewed, while 24% had been there for a period between 6 months and one year, and 19% had been there between one and three months (Figure 3). During their stay, some transit migrants register with UNHCR and apply for asylum. In fact, 67% of 4Mi respondents in Tunisia who reported having stopped in Medenine during their journey, reported doing so to apply for asylum (Figure 4).

Figure 3. Duration of stay in Medenine/Zaris from arrival until interview

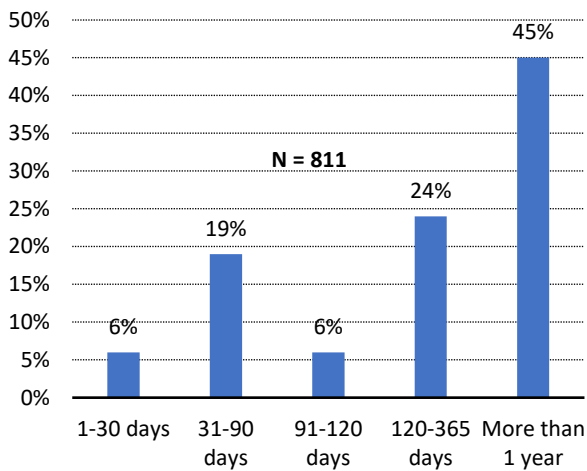
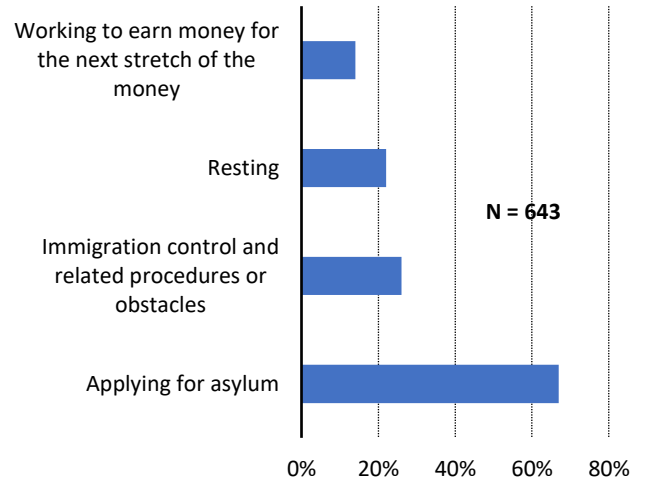


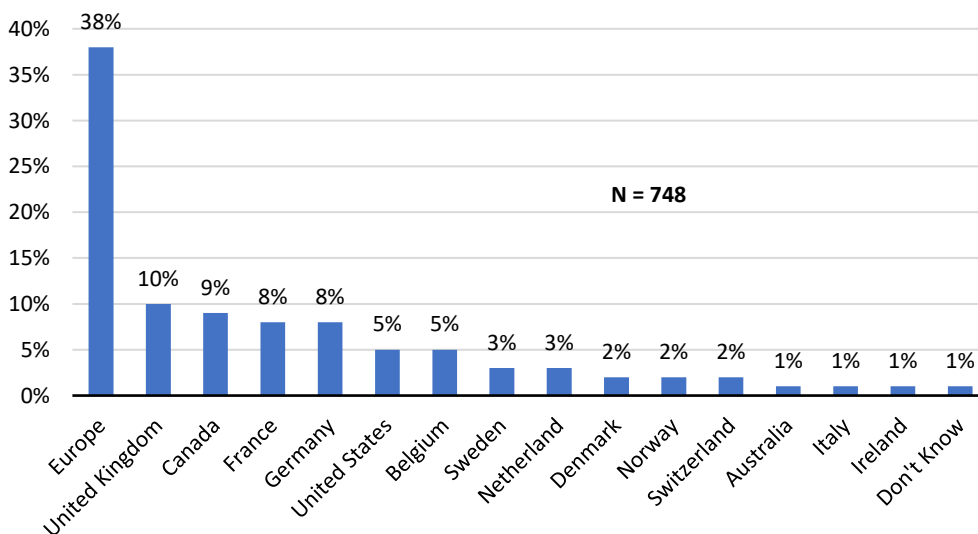
Figure 4. Reason for stopping in Medenine/Zaris



Note: The question allowed for multiple answers. Data entries with values lower than 10% were omitted in this graph.

Regardless of the extended length of their stay and of whether they apply for international protection, several key informants from different sectors stated that migrants generally see Tunisia as a temporary stop, and plan to continue their migration journey toward Europe as soon as they gather the financial resources necessary to pay a boat to cross the Mediterranean Sea and manage to find one available through smugglers, either from Tunisia or off the neighbouring Libyan coast. This is in line with 4Mi data, indicating that 92% of migrants interviewed in Medenine and Zarzis do not see Tunisia as their final destination, despite the high share of respondents who had already been there for more than one year. When asked what their preferred final destination would be, the vast majority (86%) indicated either a specific European country or Europe more generally (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Preferred destination for respondents in Medenine/Zaris



Note: Data entries with values lower than 1% were omitted in this graph

Visibility of transit migration

The degree to which transit migration is publicly visible in each locality depends on how strict the authorities of the transit country are regarding to contrasting irregular migration and deportations. In **Esquipulas**, Guatemalan authorities do not consistently enforce immigration control, and most migrants who are caught by national authorities after crossing the border irregularly do not get deported back to their country of origin but are rather escorted back to the Honduran side of the *Agua Caliente* border post. They then cross back into Guatemala through an irregular border crossing. Most migrants therefore do not make much of an effort to hide in the area between the border and the city of Esquipulas. Upon arriving in town, many migrants stop for one or two nights at the migrant shelter - which is open to everyone regardless of their immigration status - to sleep on a mattress, have a few meals, take a shower, and receive medical attention if needed. They then resume their journey, some using public transportation (buses) and others using taxis or private vehicles, depending on their financial resources. There are exceptions to this general trend, however. Migrants from Asian and African countries tend to use transnational smuggling networks to organize all aspects of their journey, keep off the radar, and invisible to the local community.

Transit migration is also very visible in **Medenine/Zarzis (Tunisia)**, where national authorities do not conduct immigration enforcement activities and often do not expel or deport migrants. In both cities, one can easily see migrants walking on the streets, drinking at cafés, going to work or to school. Similarly, in **Obock**, migrants in transit are easy to spot as they buy food and drinks from street sellers, go to the mosque, ask local residents for material support. In **Van (Turkiye)**, on the contrary, the national authorities take a strict approach to immigration enforcement at the border with Iran, with a heavy monitoring of the border and multiple checkpoints along the road leading from the city toward the Western side of the country. As a result, migration in transit through Van is always facilitated by transnational smuggling networks that keep the migrants as hidden as possible during their short transit through the city. The varying degrees of visibility of transit migration also implies different effects on the local economy and community.

Profiles of people on the move

Lastly, the profiles of those in transit also varied between localities. In **Esquipulas**, migration movements in transit encompasses many different nationalities, including nationals of other Central American countries (mainly Hondurans, but also Salvadorans and Nicaraguans), Venezuelans, Haitians, Cubans and a minority of migrants from African and Asian countries, and from South American countries other than Venezuela, like Colombia and Ecuador. Key informants indicated disparities between nationalities regarding the financial resources at their disposal. Venezuelans often travel with little money, while Haitians and nationals of African and Asian countries tend to have a bit more resources at their disposal. Those with more resources can afford to hire transnational smuggling networks. Transit migration movements in Esquipulas also include a variety of demographic profiles. Key informants mentioned a mix of men and women mostly 18-30 years old, and children either traveling with their parents or unaccompanied. They also reported the presence of some extended families with elderly people, although as a small minority of cases. While the 4Mi project did not collect data in Esquipulas itself, it provides information on transit dynamics in this city through data collected on migrants interviewed further north on the same migration route who reported having stopped in Esquipulas. The vast majority of these respondents (98%) were Honduran. Most of them (67%) were male, while the remaining 33% were female. As for their age, 40% were 18-25 years old, another 40% were 26-35 years old and 19% were above 35 years of age.

In **Van**, on the contrary, migrants in transit were described as mostly a homogeneous group, with one vastly predominant nationality (Afghanistan) and mostly young men traveling alone. This does not imply that different profiles never transit through Van, but they were described as a minority. While 4Mi data cannot provide additional information regarding migrants from countries other than Afghanistan⁵⁶, data suggests a similar picture: 93% were male, and no respondent was older than 35 years.

In **Medenine/Zarzis (Tunisia)**, transit migration movements were described as heterogeneous both regarding nationalities and demographic profiles, although the information provided by key informants on this topic was more limited, less consistent, and sometimes varied depending on their target population (for instance, some organizations only work with asylum seekers and refugees, meaning they only assist those who filed a formal asylum application or have a nationality that implies a high probability of international protection needs, such as Syrians or Eritreans). The main nationalities were reported as including Ethiopians, Eritreans, Sudanese, South Sudanese, Malian, Somalis, Ivorians, Nigerians, Guineans and, in lower numbers, Bangladeshis and Syrians. As for the demographic profiles of those in transit, they were described as mostly male but with a sizeable minority of women, and mostly adolescents and adults below 30 years old. This is in line with 4Mi data from surveys collected with migrants in Medenine/Zarzis: 73% of respondents were men, and the average age was 27 years. 4Mi data also indicates that respondents in Medenine/Zarzis mostly migrated without children (80%) while 20% was traveling or living with children under their care. Finally, according to 4Mi data, 66% of respondents were of Islamic faith, while 33% were Christians. A local NGO interviewed for the project shared a study they carried out on the health needs of migrants in Zarzis. Similar to the findings on profiles coming from 4Mi data, 68.5% of respondents in the study were men and 31.5% were women, and the average

⁵⁶ The project only interviewed Afghans in Van.

age was 27 years old. The study also indicates that 74% of respondents came from West African counties (mainly Ivory Coast and Guinea), followed by 17% from East African countries (mainly Sudan)⁵⁷.

In **Obock (Djibouti)**, most migrants in transit are Ethiopian nationals and key informants reported a variety of demographic profiles regarding gender and age. While not specific to Obock specifically, data collected by IOM at Flow Monitoring Points (FMPs) in Djibouti indicate that 99% of migrants interviewed at FMPs in the country are Ethiopian.⁵⁸ Such data also indicates that the vast majority (74%) of interviewees are adult males, while 18% are adult women and only 8% are children. Findings from qualitative and quantitative interviews conducted by MMC in Obock and another Djiboutian city within the framework of its research project in partnership with IOM largely confirm these trends, although respondents mentioned that most adult migrants in transit are very young (25 or younger).⁵⁹

Migration dynamics at the fieldwork localities often vary depending on the migrants' profiles, including their resources and vulnerabilities. In **Esquipulas**, for instance, several key informants described how those with more financial resources usually hire a smuggling network to organise their entire journey, use private vehicles, stay at hotels and manage to move around mostly unnoticed; an "intermediate" group only relies on smugglers for parts of the journey and have enough resources to pay for food, transportation and accommodation in guesthouses and cheap hotels; and finally, those with less financial resources walk for at least part of the journey, rely on migrant shelters for accommodation and sometimes beg for money on the streets. These different conditions do not only imply different levels of comfort for migrants, but also safety concerns.

Migrant status

Another common feature across localities was the fact that most migrants in transit were in irregular status in the transit country. Some exceptions were mentioned, however. For instance, Ivorians may enter **Tunisia** with no need for a visa. Many Ivorian migrants in transit in Tunisia thus have a regular immigration status during the first 90 days, but then fall into irregular status if they remain in the country for longer. Others who remain in transit in Tunisia for a long time have a regular status as asylum seekers or refugees in the country. Of the migrants surveyed in the 4Mi data in Medenine/Zarzis, 40% stated they were asylum seekers, 36% were in irregular status, 22% were refugees, and 1% were temporary residents (with a permit/visa). In **Guatemala**, nationals of Nicaragua, El Salvador and Honduras may also freely enter with their national ID card, due to the CA-4 agreement on regional free movement.⁶⁰ Many migrants, however, still cross the border into Guatemala irregularly either out of lack of knowledge regarding the regional agreement, or lack of necessary documents such as birth registration and parental authorization for children or, until August 2022, proof of vaccination against Covid-19. In Van, key informants often described migrants in transit as "undocumented" (meaning in irregular status), in contrast with those who plan to settle for longer in the city, who are "documented". In line with this, 78% of 4Mi respondents in Van had an irregular status, while 19% were asylum seekers.

Table 2. Overview of transit migration dynamics at the fieldwork localities

| | Length of stay | Visibility of migration in transit | Profiles | Legal status |
|-----------------------|--------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|
| Esquipulas, Guatemala | Short (between a few hours and a few days) | Very visible | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Many different nationalities, from the region and beyond - Mix of individuals (both children and adults, male and female) traveling alone or in family units with various compositions (extended families, single heads of household with children, parents with children, etc) | - Mostly irregular |
| Van, Türkiye | Short (between a few hours and a few days) | As invisible as possible | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Vast majority from Afghanistan | - Mostly irregular |

⁵⁷ Boughzala, I. (2020) Déterminants socio-économiques et besoins de santé des populations migrantes de Zarzis. ADDCI Zarzis, Médecins du Monde and Municipality of Zarzis. Not available online.

⁵⁸ IOM Djibouti (2022) [Migration Trends Dashboard - October 2022](#).

⁵⁹ Moorsel, J., Ficarelli, F.T., Waithira Wachira, E. and Ali, S. (2022) op. cit. MMC does not count with quantitative 4Mi data for the city of Obock to complement this information, and the MMC/IOM 2022 research project on transit migration surveyed local residents, rather than migrants.

⁶⁰ Sistema de Integración Centroamericana (n/a) [El Convenio Centroamericano de Libre Movilidad \(CA-4\)](#).

| | | | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|--------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|
| | | | - Mostly male young adults traveling alone, and a minority of women traveling alone and family units | |
| Medenine/Zarzis, Tunisia | Extended (months, years) | Very visible | - Many different nationalities from West Africa, East Africa, North Africa, the Middle East and Asia. - Mix of individuals traveling alone (both male and female) and family units | - Mostly irregular, except for asylum seekers and refugees |
| Obock, Djibouti | Short/medium (between two weeks and one+ months) | Very visible | - Mostly Ethiopians; some Somalis and Eritreans - Mostly male young adults, with a minority of women and children | - Mostly irregular |

Economic impacts

Previous studies have shown that transit migration can boost demand for services and commerce in transit localities.⁶¹ This study has further explored this aspect of transit migration, highlighting other ways in which transit migration can contribute to local development, as well as its related challenges. As expected, the impacts of migration on transit localities differ depending on the length of stay.

Positive impacts

Transit migration generates positive impact on the local economy in most of the fieldwork localities, except for the country with the most restrictive stance on migration, Türkiye. In **Van**, migrants in transit try to remain as invisible as possible to avoid being detected by authorities and potentially expelled back into Iran or deported to their country of origin. Here, migrants in transit rely on transnational smuggling network for the facilitation of their journey and for staying hidden and have very limited interaction with the local community. As a result, in the words of several key informants interviewed in the city, the only ones benefiting from transit migration in Van are the smuggling networks and the local residents involved in their activities, which are reportedly few. This was the exception rather than the rule among the localities that were part of the study. Local economies in the other four cities benefit from transit migration, although in different ways. The specific types of positive impacts vary depending on migration dynamics.

In **Esquipulas**, a locality of quick transit, migrants inject money into the local economy – especially the hospitality sector, local transportation, pharmacies and food stalls – by paying for goods and services while in transit. While these economic sectors see a direct benefit from transit migration, key informants also highlighted the indirect contribution to other sectors (e.g. catering and farming) which in turn provide services and goods to hotels and food sellers, among others. Additionally, several key informants described how transit migration kept the local economy afloat during the worst phase of the Covid-19 pandemic. Esquipulas is quite a popular destination for religious tourism for people coming from other parts of Guatemala and other Central American countries, which is the backbone of its economy. During the first months of the pandemic, however, tourism completely disappeared. More than one key informant stated that, without migration, many local businesses would have gone bankrupt during that period.

Similarly, to Esquipulas, transit migration through **Obock** has a positive impact on the local economy mainly as migrants buy goods and services in the city. Several key informants, including business owners, reported that many local residents earn a living by selling food and drinks to migrants in transit, which also indirectly benefits local businesses who supply them the goods they sell. Additionally, during their stay in Obock, migrants also spend money to rent rooms for accommodation and make international phone calls and use international money transfer services. In line with this, 60% of the residents surveyed by MMC/IOM in Obock who stated having had commercial or economic interactions with migrants in transit stated that migrants bought goods or services from them.⁶² At the same time, a restaurant owner described how the implementation of migration-related projects by NGOs and UN agencies created jobs for residents, which led to an increase in business volume for her. Lastly, those migrants who remain in Obock for more extended periods of time often work in

⁶¹ In the city of Agadez in Niger, providing goods and services to people in transit has contributed to the livelihoods of thousands of households, following the decline of previously prosperous sectors of the economy such as tourism, handicraft and mining. The local population used to generate income from a range of activities connected to the migration industry, until the adoption of a law against migrant smuggling in 2015, which implementation led migration movements to start circumventing Agadez in an attempt to be less visible and avoid detection, depriving thousands of households in the city of a source of income. See Hoffmann, A., Meester, J. and Nabara, H.M. (2017) *Migration and Markets in Agadez - Economic alternatives to the migration industry*. Clingendael.

⁶² Moorsel, J., Ficcarelli, F.T., Waithira Wachira, E. and Ali, S. (2022) op. cit.

sectors such as construction, thus providing a different contribution to the local economy as workforce. Once again referring to MMC/IOM data, 44% of the local residents surveyed by MMC/IOM in Obock who stated having had commercial or economic interactions with migrants in transit stated having had migrants working for them.⁶³

Unlike Esquipulas and Obock, **Medenine/Zarzis** (Tunisia) are localities of extended transit, where migrants remain for months or even years before continuing their journey. Here, migrants contribute to the local economy in a different way, meaning by filling labour force gaps in specific sectors of the economy. During their stay in the south of Tunisia, migrants work to sustain themselves and to gather the financial resources to pay for the sea crossing. They mostly do so in labour-intensive sectors, such as construction and agriculture, but also tourism and housekeeping (mainly for female migrants). Such contribution is particularly appreciated in a context of shortage of local workforce, whereby most of the local youth have migrated to Europe themselves or refuse to work in heavy jobs with low salaries. This positive perception is however felt much more clearly in Zarzis, which has a more dynamic economy thanks to tourism and receives higher remittances from Europe. Some key informants, in fact, have described how many migrants either moved from Medenine to Zarzis because of the greater economic opportunities there, or still live in Medenine because the rent is cheaper, but commute to Zarzis every day to work.

Negative impacts

While this research allowed to identify several different ways in which transit migration can positively impact local economies, it can also create challenges. Just as for the positive aspects, the negative impacts vary between localities.

In **Esquipulas**, key informants reported that many service providers engage in price gouging with migrants in transit, taking advantage of several things. For instance, migrants do not know the real price of services, pay in US dollars rather than in quetzales (the local currency), and the currency conversion gives room for “creative” calculations. Even when migrants do realize they are being overcharged, sellers know migrants have little choice but to go along with it. Consequently, some service providers – taxi drivers, in particular – prefer to cater to migrants rather than the local population. Some community leaders, for instance, described how moto taxis often leave them stranded because they prefer to pick up migrants, who will pay a higher fee for the same service.

Most key informants in **Obock** did not report any way in which transit migration may be negatively impacting the local economy, although one respondent mentioned an increase in rent prices due to migration. Some of them however mentioned negative social impacts, which will be described in the section below.

In localities where transit becomes protracted, the perceived negative impacts of transit migration on the local economy are different, as migrants can be seen as competitors for the local population in the job and housing market. This was the case in Tunisia, especially in **Medenine**, where there are more workers and less job opportunities compared to **Zarzis**. Many key informants argued that this competition is more perceived than real because most Tunisians do not want to work in the sectors where migrants are usually employed – especially in construction and agriculture – and employers in these sectors struggle to find workers. Others, however, argued that employers often prefer to hire migrants over Tunisians because they accept to work more hours for a lower pay, which might lead to a decrease in the availability of jobs for Tunisians and/or cuts to their salaries if they wanted to be hired.

In the case of **Van**, there was no discussion of a negative impact derived from transit migration itself, but rather from the general security response to transit migration. The former mayor of Van argued that the implementation of stricter border controls hinders cross-border trade, which had traditionally been a source of income for residents of the city. Additionally, a local NGO stated that a lot of state resources are being allocated to preventing and stopping irregular migration in transit through Van, while they could be used for better purposes.

Local revenues

One challenge that was consistently reported across localities, especially by key informants from local authorities, was local revenue collection. The positive contribution of transit migration to the local economy – be it through the purchase of goods and services, or through the provision of workforce – does not translate into additional resources for the local authorities, for a few main reasons.

1. Such contribution is to a large extent connected to the informal economy, which does not contribute to tax collection.
2. Some of the income-generating activities connected to transit migration could actually be considered as people smuggling – an illicit activity – so are even less likely to be reported to the authorities as sources of income.
3. In any case, most taxes are collected by the national government, rather than the municipality.

⁶³ Ibid.

An example of the challenge of revenue collection is the “hospitality tax” that hotels collect from their guests in Guatemala. On the one hand, many hotels in **Esquipulas** do not register their guests if they are irregular migrants in transit. But on the other hand, even when they do, the revenues from the tax go to the national government, not to the municipality. These shortcomings in revenue collection at the local level mean that the positive contribution of transit migration to the local economy does not translate into additional financial resources for the local authorities to be used, among other things, to strengthen their migration response.

Impact on public services

Lastly, an assumption could be made that migrants in transit represent an additional burden on public services. Limited evidence was found in this regard during fieldwork, as most key informants did not believe migration created an extra burden, or rather referred to the fact that public services at the localities lack the resources to adequately assist the local population anyway, regardless of migration.

One of the possible reasons behind this perception is the fact that the number of migrants in transit might be low compared to the size of the local population, meaning that their specific impact does not clearly stand out for service providers. In fact, some key informants in **Esquipulas** specifically mentioned that the only contexts in which they felt an extra burden were mass arrivals of migrants in transit at once.

Another reason might be that many migrants in transit are not able to access public services due to their irregular status, or do not want to do so out of fear of being reported to the immigration authorities. In **Medenine/Zarzis**, several key informants also reported that migrants sometimes refuse to send their children to school, because they feel they might be integrating in the country and thus giving up on continuing their journey.

A third potentially relevant element is the fact that the health sector – whose representatives were interviewed in several localities – might consider this extra burden as normal or inevitable due to their work ethics, which establishes that every person should receive medical assistance regardless of who they are.

Lastly, across the fieldwork localities, assistance to and services for migrants is often not provided nor funded by the authorities, but rather by humanitarian organizations (including, in different capacities, UN agencies as well as local and international NGOs). Only in **Medenine/Zarzis** did key informants from the municipality report facing additional expenses due to transit migration for which they have no additional or specific resources at their disposal.

Role of the facilitation of irregular movements in local economies

Reliance on smuggling is necessary for most migrants in transit at least for some parts of their migration journey, mainly to cross borders (or stretches of sea, such as the Mediterranean Sea or the Gulf of Aden) irregularly and for transportation across transit countries while in irregular status. This is often due to the lack of avenues for regular migration toward transit and, most importantly, destination countries. For instance, 4Mi data indicates that 95% of respondents interviewed in Medenine/Zarzis used at least one smuggler during their journey, with the majority using several smugglers for different parts of the journey (49%), followed by those who used only one smuggler for the entire journey (30%) and one for only part of the journey (16%) (Figure 6). Smuggling patterns vary depending on the respondent’s gender: in Medenine/Zarzis, female respondents mostly used the same smuggler for the entire journey (58%), while most male respondents (56%) used several smugglers for different parts of the journey. In Van, the share of 4Mi respondents who used a smuggler during their journey still represented the vast majority of the sample (79%), with 61% using the same smuggler for the entire journey, 12% using one smuggler for only part of the journey and 6% using several smugglers for different parts of the journey (Figure 7). Gender-specific dynamics regarding the use of smugglers also appeared in surveys from Van: female respondents were more likely not having used a smuggler compared to men (31% vs 21%), while male respondents more often used the same smuggler for the entire journey compared to women (63% vs 41%).

Figure 6. Use of smugglers among respondents in Medenine/Zaris

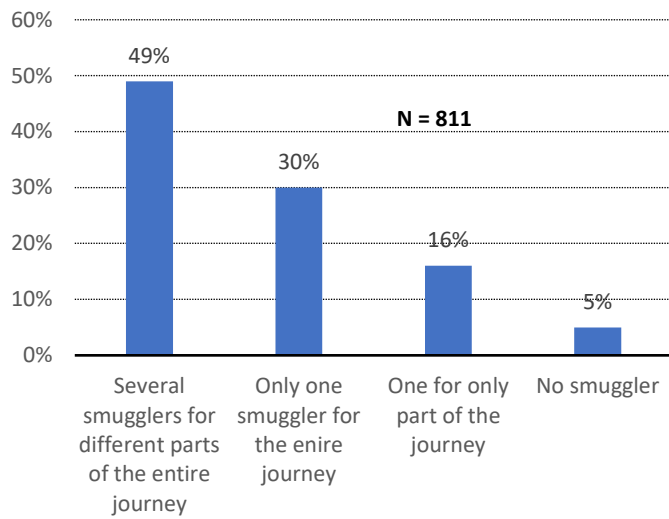
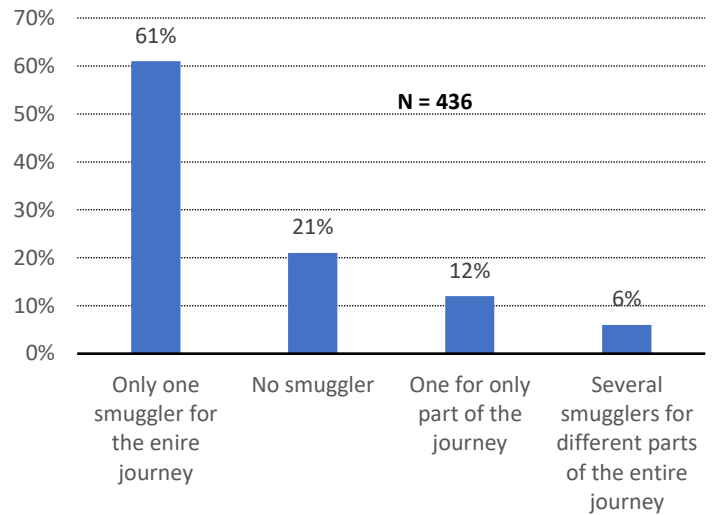
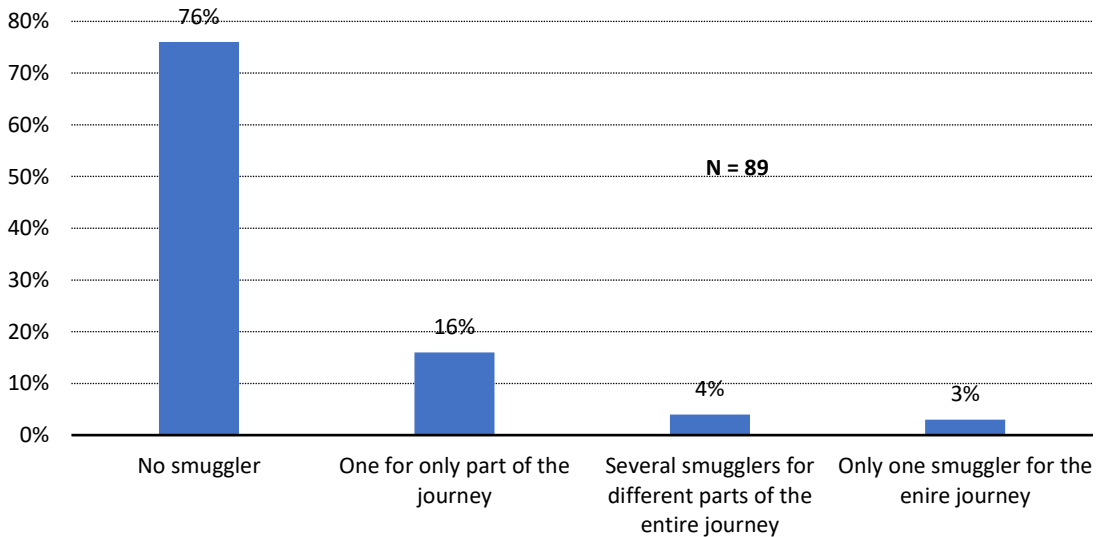


Figure 7. Use of smugglers among respondents in Van



Most 4Mi respondents who declared having stopped in the city reported not having used a smuggler during their journey through Esquipulas (Figure 8). It is however highly unlikely that a majority of migrants who transited through Esquipulas did not rely on anyone to facilitate their irregular movement at any point of the migration route. The most probable explanation is that, when asked about smugglers, many respondents in this region only think about the “coyotes” who organise every part of irregular movement from the country of origin in Central America to the place of destination in North America, as a “package”. At the same time, they do not realise that a farmer charging them to cross a border through their territory or a bus or taxi driver transporting them across Guatemala despite their irregular status is, in fact, engaging in a conduct that would be considered as people smuggling.

Figure 8. Use of smugglers among respondents in Esquipulas



Services connected to migrant smuggling constitute a source of livelihood for the local community in all the fieldwork localities although to varying extents, due to the different smuggling dynamics described. In **Esquipulas**, a range of activities associated to smuggling have surely become a source of income for many residents:

- Owners of land on the border charge migrants a sum to cross their property and avoid official border crossings
- Drivers show up with their cars and vans close to the border to offer their transportation services to those in transit and take them either to an “affiliated” hotel or the migrant shelter
- Local residents offer to receive money transfers on behalf of migrants in their local bank accounts, in exchange for a fee
- Buses heading to Guatemala City and the country’s northern border transport more migrants than locals
- Hotels do know that many of the migrants they provide accommodation to have an irregular status, but they do so anyway

In fact, smuggling related activities in Esquipulas also constitutes a source of income for taxi drivers coming from other parts of the country, who sometimes travel to the southern city to transport migrants either locally or to Guatemala's northern border with Mexico, as it pays much better than the usual taxi fees. According to a driver interviewed for the project, taxi drivers in Guatemala City have a WhatsApp group dedicated specifically to transportation services for migrants from Esquipulas to the northern border. They usually leave Esquipulas around 8pm, drive all night and reach the northern border early in the morning. For the ride from Esquipulas to Tecun Uman, at the northern border of Guatemala with the Mexican state of Chiapas, drivers charge migrants 450 USD – a sum that they would earn in 20 days with normal taxi fares in Guatemala City. Several of these activities – providing transportation and accommodation against a fee, for instance – would of course be perfectly legal, if the clients were not irregular migrants and the service providers were not aware of their own role in facilitating irregular migration. Similarly, many residents – especially local youth – are involved in the facilitation of irregular migration in **Obock**. Several key informants described how local smugglers see themselves as businessmen, and that people smuggling has become more attractive a source of livelihood compared to regular jobs for some residents.

The relevance of smuggling as a source of income for the local community was much more limited in Medenine/Zarzis and in Van, although for different reasons. In the case of **Medenine/Zarzis**, the two cities – which are very close to Libya, but much safer – are mainly used as temporary base where to work and save money to return to Libya and attempt the Mediterranean crossing from the Libyan city of Zwara, rather than a launching ground for sea crossing themselves. This means that, for most migrants, the relevant smuggling hub is Zwara, not the Tunisian city offering them temporary settlement. According to the key informants interviewed, not even the journey back and forth from Zwara creates livelihood opportunities for locals through people smuggling, because the border between Tunisia and Libya is so porous that migrants cross it irregularly without the need of any facilitation. This does not mean that activities connected to people smuggling do not exist in Medenine and Zarzis – some migrants in transit do attempt crossing the Mediterranean from here – but rather that they generate less money and for fewer residents compared to other localities. In fact, several interviewees in Medenine/Zarzis stated that it is increasingly common for groups of local residents to pool their resources together to buy a boat and migrate to Europe themselves. They sometimes offer seats on the boat to Sub-Saharan migrants living in the city, charging them a fee, as a way to lower the costs of their own migration (and often cheating other migrants by leaving without them after receiving their payment). In contrast, in **Van** people smuggling does not seem to constitute an important source of income for the local community not because it is uncommon in the city, but rather because it is managed by transnational networks rather than local actors. In fact, most key informants in this city stated that the only ones benefiting from smuggling are these networks, whose members are mostly not from Van and who do not spend their money in the city.

In any case, precisely measuring the importance of smuggling for local economies is of course an impossible task, due to the informal and illicit nature of the activities connected to it. In the past, for instance, some efforts have been made to estimate the amount of money generated by the smuggling of migrants to the US, but the resulting figures show an enormous margin of error.⁶⁴

Security impacts

In most localities, key informants could not identify any concrete positive or negative impact of transit migration on security. The one exception to this trend was **Obock**, where several key informants mentioned periodic violent clashes between migrants from different ethnicities. While this does not directly affect the local population, it does imply the intervention of security forces to police and organise medical treatment for injured migrants and contributes to making locals feel unsafe.

Across the other four localities, several key informants mentioned a vague sense of insecurity among the local community related to the unknown nature and background of transit migrants. Despite the lack of evidence and concrete data pointing to a connection between migration and crime – no key informant could point to statistics or specific crime reports in this sense – transit migration can trigger a feeling of insecurity among the local population that is purely based on perception. In **Esquipulas**, this feeling of insecurity was specifically tied to the arrival of the so-called “migrant caravans” (during which hundreds or thousands of migrants move together), in contrast with the “normal” movement of migrants in transit which does not cause concerns.

Police corruption

At the same time, interviews highlighted several different ways in which transit migration can have an indirect impact on the security of the local community. In **Esquipulas**, for instance, transit migration was perceived as contributing to police corruption, which in turn is considered as a security threat by the local community. Key informants from all sectors in Esquipulas consistently reported that officers of the national police set up several checkpoints every day on the road between the border crossing at Agua Caliente and Esquipulas, and the road that leads from the city to the capital and other parts of Guatemala, to extort money to migrants in transit in exchange for

⁶⁴ See for instance Greenfield, V.A., Nunez-Neto, B., Mitch, I., Chang, J.C., and Rosas, E. (2019) [Human Smuggling and Associated Revenues - What Do or Can We Know About Routes from Central America to the United States?](#) RAND; Kessler, G. (2018) [Are human-smuggling cartels at the U.S. border earning \\$500 million a year?](#) The Washington Post; MMC (2022) [Financing of human smuggling in West and North Africa.](#)

passage to continue their journey. More than one respondent stated knowing from good sources that, many police officers bribe their superiors to be assigned to Esquipulas because they know that they will make good money there. In addition to eroding public trust in the security forces, according to several local community leaders, this also means that police officers often prioritize working at roadblocks for immigration control over guaranteeing public safety in town.

Presence of transnational smuggling networks and anti-smuggling operations

In two localities, a perceived threat for local security was linked to the role that transnational smuggling networks play in it, rather than transit migration directly. In **Esquipulas**, several members of the community reported inadvertently passing by a hotel where a group of smuggled migrants was staying and being told by armed people to go somewhere else because that area was off-limits for the night. In **Van**, local actors described how the vehicles transporting smuggled migrants frequently drive at a speed far higher than the limit, often causing traffic accidents. Additionally, although this does not directly impact the local community, smugglers in Van also create security concerns for the migrants themselves. Among 4Mi respondents who reported having faces protection risks while in Van, 63% reported that the actor who caused this risk was a smuggler.

Lastly, interviews in **Van** also pointed toward the negative effects that efforts toward stopping transit migration can have on the security of the local community. As authorities have established checkpoints and other security checks along the roads most frequently used to transport the migrants from Van to other parts of Türkiye, members of the local community complained about the fact that these controls obstruct their movements and cause them to be searched as well, sometimes in a violent and intimidating way. Additionally, the security forces have opened fire on vehicles carrying smuggled migrants in urban settings in some occasions, exposing the local residents to the risk of being shot.

Social impacts

Key informants across localities reported a good or neutral perception towards migrants who are in transit. This contrasts with more negative attitudes toward those migrants who decide to settle in their city, who are more often perceived as potentially representing a competition for local workforce, or as unfairly benefiting from public welfare and subsidies, or as competing for scarce resources.

Empathy and solidarity

In several localities, an attitude of generosity and solidarity toward migrants in transit was linked to the local population's own experience of and connections with emigration or displacement. In **Esquipulas**, for instance, most local residents have relatives abroad and many have tried to migrate themselves. They thus empathise with those in transit and their challenges. Several interviewees from the local community stated trying to help migrants when they can, because they would have hoped for the same during their own migration journey. Similarly, in **Medenine/Zarzis**, some key informants said that the local community is empathetic toward migrants, among other reasons, because many locals have family members who migrated to Europe.

Discrimination and rejection

Despite this general trend, instances of discrimination and rejection against migrants in transit were also mentioned. This happened more frequently in connection with migrants who are more culturally distant from the local population and those perceived as not respecting local customs. In **Medenine/Zarzis**, for instance, several key informants mentioned a negative perception of Syrians because they beg on the street with their children, instead of looking for work and sending their children to school – something that is considered unacceptable for locals. Ivoirians and South Sudanese reportedly have a bad reputation because they are considered as particularly aggressive. Others are frowned upon due to allegedly dressing provocatively, engaging in sexual promiscuity and playing music very loudly, contravening the local conservative norms (no specific nationality was singled out in this respect). Similarly, in **Esquipulas**, Haitians are sometimes perceived as aggressive because they speak with a much higher tone of voice compared to Central Americans and some locals are suspicious of them because – unlike most migrants in transit in this city – they do not speak Spanish, so locals do not understand what they say.

Other factors

In several localities, the arrival of big groups of migrants has caused feelings of insecurity and sometimes triggered negative reactions among residents who otherwise mostly showed a positive attitude toward migrants. In **Esquipulas**, as mentioned above, several key informants reported that the arrival of migrant caravans made the local community feel unsafe. In **Zarzis**, the announced disembarkation of a group of 200-300 migrants rescued at sea triggered a protest by local residents asking for them to be taken somewhere else. The same happened when migrant shelters were established in central areas of **Medenine and Zarzis**, when residents requested that the shelters be moved to the outskirts of the city. Additionally, the community's perception of migrants was reportedly worse in **Medenine**, as migrants were perceived as potential competition for jobs.

Social and environmental concerns

In **Obock**, key informants identified different types of negative impact that transit migration has in their area. On the one hand, some of them mentioned that transit migration negatively affects the environment, as those in transit leave behind plastic bottles, jerricans and used clothes, burn down trees to cook their meals and contaminate the wells by washing on them. On the other hand, key informants also shared concerns regarding the fact that many local youths abandon their studies to earn a living through people smuggling, a source of income that however, in addition to being illegal, also entails many dangers – such as dying in a shipwreck.

Impact of voting behaviour

Lastly, the existence and the impacts of transit migration did not seem to have any impact on political opinions or voting behaviour in any fieldwork locality. Rather, in the only country included in the study where migration is politically sensitive – **Türkiye** – public messaging was reported as having a (negative) impact on society's perception of migrants.

Policy implications of transit migration

This section explores what has been the policy response to transit migration at local and national levels.

Local policy

Lack of legal and policy framework

In none of the fieldwork localities covered by the project did the local authorities have a formal migration department or unit, or a local migration policy. As a result, a proactive local migration response depends on individual goodwill by public officials. Local authorities however have little political incentive and unclear legal obligations to provide services to a population that:

- is not part of their political constituency
- in the specific case of migrants in transit, does not even plan to settle and integrate in their territory
- often has an irregular migration status

Even amongst respondents showing goodwill, such as those the municipalities of **Esquipulas, Zarzis and Medenine**, the lack of an adequate legal and policy framework on migration at the national level was viewed as a major obstacle for an appropriate local response, as local policies are supposed to derive from national ones.

Out of the four case studies, **Esquipulas** was the one that was most advanced in the development of a local migration response. The *de facto* focal point for migration-related issues within the municipality is the directorate for women, children, youth and elderly people. Resources, including human resources, are scarce and a small team must cover many things at the same time. The vice-mayor did take an interest in the topic, but her position is honorary – she is a full-time schoolteacher – so the time that she can dedicate to it is limited. The local government has tried to strengthen its migration response in the past, by proposing the creation of a migrant assistance office which would have been funded by international co-operation. The municipality's legal team however advised against it because, according to Guatemalan law, the authority tasked with migration response is the Guatemalan Migration Institute and municipalities lack a mandate on the issue, so the municipal council voted against the proposal. This lack of mandate also implies that the municipality does not include migration in its internal planning and budgeting exercises. According to a local key informant, the local government is working on the development of a local migration policy with the support of UN agencies. In the meantime, the response to transit migration – including humanitarian assistance, temporary shelter, information and legal advice – is almost entirely managed by UN agencies and local and international NGOs.

The migration response of the local governments in **Medenine and Zarzis** suggest similarities, but also slight differences. In both cases, the municipalities argued that they do not have a local migration policy because they cannot develop one in the absence of an adequate national legal and policy framework. Despite the absence of a formal policy and a migration focal point, the municipalities are perceived by UN agencies and civil society organizations as supportive of their work in response to migration. However, this was mostly described as passive support – for instance, with registering migrant children born in Tunisia or granting NGOs a space to work – rather than leadership. The municipality of Zarzis was described by some key informants as having a more favorable and proactive stance on migration compared to Medenine. This difference is allegedly connected to the specific dynamics of the local economy in the two cities, mentioned above: a shortage of workforce in Zarzis, amid which migrants are seen as a resource, in contrast with high unemployment in Medenine, leading the local authorities in the latter city to be more concerned about a potential competition for jobs between locals and migrants. This slightly different stance on migration between the two municipalities was confirmed in interviews with city officials.

In **Van**, local authorities are not involved in transit migration policy. The previous local administration had plans to set up migration-related programs – although focused on the few migrants who settle in Van, rather than those in transit – but these plans were interrupted by the mayor’s destitution only four months after her election. The current local government has no policy or program in place related to the issue.

The role of the local authorities in the response to transit migration in **Obock** is also very limited. Here, the Regional Council authorizes and monitors migration-related projects implemented by UN agencies and NGOs, but does not itself regularly conduct activities related to migration. An exception to this occurs when there are specific problems in which their intervention is necessary, such as accidents involving migrants.

Lack of financial resources

In addition to gaps in the legal and policy framework at the national level, another common challenge that local authorities face in their response to transit migration is a shortage of financial resources. As mentioned above, the positive economic impacts of transit migration often do not translate into additional resources for the local authorities through tax collection, because they are either linked to the informal economy or to activities considered as smuggling and thus illegal. Additionally, in the absence of a legal mandate and a local policy framework on migration, it is difficult for local authorities to separate a section in their own budget for migration-related expenses. A representative from the municipality of Medenine made this clear during his interview for the project, by saying “you give me investment, I will give you migrant integration”.

Municipalities also face broader challenges regarding their capabilities, especially if they are secondary cities, that are not specific to migration but also affect the way they respond to it. One of the main hindrances they face is the fact that they often have poor planning capacities. The municipalities of **Medenine and Zarzis**, for instance, stated that they do not have formal and regular planning mechanisms for their activities. It is important to consider, however, that the municipal capacities in Tunisia are limited also because the first attempt at decentralization in the country was carried out as recently as 2014, so the process is still recent⁶⁵ and limited. While it started earlier compared to Tunisia, the administrative decentralization process is still underway in Djibouti and the regional councils have limited capacities. This leads to a migration response that is reactive in nature, scattered and provided on a case-by-case basis, instead of being planned and comprehensive.

National policy implications

Transit migration in national legal and policy frameworks

None of the countries included in the project had a specific legal or policy framework for handling transit migration. In fact, according to the local actors interviewed at transit localities, national authorities rarely get involved in the response to transit migration except for – in some of the localities included in the project – immigration enforcement.

An interesting case is **Türkiye**, which, mainly due to its geographic position, has for long considered itself as a transit country for migrants, as clearly stated on the website of the Presidency of Migration Management.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, Türkiye does not have a specific legal framework or policy on transit migration, and its immigration policy is in general very recent. Triggered by the influx of millions of Syrian nationals fleeing the war in their country, Türkiye created a legal framework on migration in 2013, adopting the Law on foreigners and international protection.⁶⁷ While this law does not include provisions that are specifically aimed at regulating transit migration, it is still relevant for the management of this phenomenon because it details Türkiye’s immigration procedures, sanctions for irregular entry or stay and migrants’ rights in the country. For years, the Turkish government did not have a strong focus on immigration enforcement and delegated the registration, processing and integration or resettlement of beneficiaries of international protection to UNHCR. Several actors interviewed in Van however indicated that the national government has adopted a harsher stance on migration in the last few years. The restrictive measures implemented include the construction of border walls, the construction and expansion of removal centres to hold irregular migrants during deportation proceedings and an increase in deportations and pushbacks at the border. These three types of measures were also implemented in Van; although they did not manage to stop migration in transit through the city, they surely contributed to making it as invisible as possible.

⁶⁵ Elected local governments did not exist in Tunisia before the adoption of the 2014 Constitution. The first mayors were elected in 2018, so municipalities are currently in their first mandate ever. See Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (2018) [Decentralization in Tunisia: Empowering Towns, Engaging People](#).

⁶⁶ Presidency of Migration Management, [About us](#).

⁶⁷ Türkiye (2013) [Law on foreigners and international protection](#).

Guatemala also has a new migration code,⁶⁸ adopted in 2016, which – just as the 2013 Turkish law – does not specifically address transit migration. As for the policy framework, local key informants were unaware of the existence of any comprehensive national migration policy, although one of them states that such a policy is currently being developed.⁶⁹ As in most countries, in Guatemala immigration falls within the mandate of the Ministry of the Interior (Ministerio de Gobernación). According to many interviewees, however, the regional government for the Chiquimula “department” – which represents the national government in the region – limits its actions to a security response when a migrant caravan comes. Outside of mass movements, for the most part they do not intervene in the response to transit migration in Esquipulas. The other national authority with a local presence and a mandate to enforce immigration law is the national police, but the shortcomings in its actions have already been highlighted. In both Van and Esquipulas, in fact, even the response aimed at immigration enforcement is perceived by local actors as partial and jeopardized by corruption.

As for the remaining two countries, **Tunisia** does not have a comprehensive legal framework on migration and asylum, much less so a specific framework on transit migration. The piece of legislation that is most relevant for migration is the 1975 Law on passports and travel documents,⁷⁰ as modified in 2004,⁷¹ which has a very limited scope. A draft immigration law had been in the making for years before parliament was suspended in 2021 but was never approved.⁷² The reason behind this, according to several key informants, is that migration management is simply not a political priority for the national government. As for national migration policies, in 2017 Tunisia adopted a National Migration Strategy.⁷³ The document is however more of a declaration of intent than a detailed policy framework and focuses more on Tunisian nationals residing abroad than migrants in Tunisia, and no information could be retrieved regarding the extent of its implementation. The lack of a comprehensive and detailed legal and policy framework leaves it to the good will of the single government officials – for instance, the regional governor – whether to do anything about migration and what. According to key informants, the migration response by national authorities in the south of Tunisia is basically limited to search and rescue operations at sea through the Coast Guard.

Djibouti’s legal framework on migration is very recent and shows certain gaps. In 2019, the country adopted the Law relating to the conditions of entry and residence of foreigners in the Republic of Djibouti.⁷⁴ The law however focuses on visas and other residence permits and the sanctions for migration related crimes and administrative violations, but does not delve into the rights that migrants have in the country, for instance, nor does it clarify which authorities are competent for migration-related issues (with the exception of migrants expulsions) and how they should coordinate their actions. Interestingly, the law foresees the possibility of obtaining a transit visa. The requirements for its issuance however make it inaccessible for the near totality of the migrants involved in the transit movement analysed for this study, as they include the need to possess an entry visa for the destination country and a ticket out of Djibouti. The development of a structured migration response has acquired more relevance for the national government in the past few years, as demonstrated by the adoption of a national strategy on migration and the creation of a bureau for national coordination on migration, both in 2021.⁷⁵ However, the text of the strategy and related action plan could not be retrieved. Interviews with key informants in Obock also pointed to a scenario in which the involvement of the national authorities in the response to transit migration in the city is mostly limited to search and rescue operations at sea through the Coast Guard repatriations and quelling fights between migrants.

In most fieldwork localities, the prevailing perception among local actors of the role of national authorities in migration response was mostly negative. They were often described as absent, disconnected from local realities and inefficient, or even – in some cases – as perpetrators of human rights violations. Such critiques did not only come from civil society actors, but from local authorities as well. Information on this specific topic could not be retrieved for Obock.

Access to public services

The health sector stood out as an exception, at least in some localities, likely, at least in part, due to the ethical principle connected to healthcare work. In **Esquipulas**, staff from the local health centre – pertaining to the Ministry of Health – confirmed that they treat all

⁶⁸ Congreso de la República de Guatemala (2016) *Decreto Número 44-2016 - Código de Migración*.

⁶⁹ The current work on the development of a migration policy is confirmed by press releases published on the website of the Guatemalan Institute on Migration. See for instance Instituto Guatemalteco de Migración (2022) *Se Realizan Reuniones Bilaterales Con Diferentes Instituciones, En El Marco De La Construcción De La Política Migratoria*.

⁷⁰ Chambre des députés de la Tunisie (1975) *Loi n° 75-40 du 14 mai 1975, relative aux passeports et aux documents de voyage*.

⁷¹ Chambre des députés de la Tunisie (2004) *Loi n° 2004-6 du 3 février 2004, modifiant la loi n°75-40 du 14 mai 1975, relative aux passeports et aux documents de voyage*.

⁷² Natter, K. (2022) *Tunisia's migration policy: the ambiguous consequences of democratization*. Heinrich Böll Stiftung.

⁷³ Ministère des Affaires Sociales de la Tunisie (2017) *Stratégie Nationale Migratoire*.

⁷⁴ Présidence de la République de Djibouti (2019) *Loi n° 40/AN/19/8ème L du 21 janvier 2019 relative aux conditions d'entrée et de séjour des étrangers en République de Djibouti*.

⁷⁵ République de Djibouti (2022) *Rapport national volontaire - examen de la mise en œuvre du Pacte mondial pour des migrations sûres, ordonnées et régulières à Djibouti*.

patients (residents and migrants) alike, because healthcare is a universal right and is provided free of charge by the public health system. The centre has a contingency plan for migrant caravans and has developed protocols and guidelines for the provision of healthcare to migrants, documents that have later been replicated in other areas of the country. They plan monthly for medicines and services and rarely fall short of demand. UNHCR recently funded the construction of a new section of the health centre, for which the centre's staff is deeply grateful as it strongly diminished the overcrowding. The main challenges they still face are a shortage of staff – when migrant caravans come, the same staff works around the clock and with no rest, with no overtime compensation – and the lack of an ambulance to use for fieldwork along the migration route, as they only have one for all the services that the centre provides. Language barriers are also an obstacle to treating migrants who do not speak Spanish, although the health centre staff mentioned that they did translate some documents into other languages and also described how they usually get creative to try and communicate with migrants, using online translators on their phones for instance.

Similarly, in **Medenine/Zarzis**, migrants also have access to healthcare regardless of their immigration status (although it was unclear from the interviews whether this is grounded in law or just good practice).⁷⁶ Public services are however weak in the south of Tunisia, including these two cities. Hospitals thus do have the will to attend to migrants but struggle with lack of resources, so they often request support from NGOs. Language barriers are also an obstacle to migrants receiving adequate care, as hospitals do not have translators. In the case of Tunisia, an additional positive exception is the education sector: migrant children are allowed to attend school in the same conditions as Tunisian children, regardless of their immigration status. Also in this case, however, it was not clear from the interviews if this was a right guaranteed by law or only a good practice. While some secondary sources report that migrant children have a right to education in Tunisia regardless of their nationality,⁷⁷ the 1995 Child Protection Code does not indicate it explicitly.⁷⁸

As for **Obock**, the government of Djibouti argued in its 2022 voluntary submission on the implementation of the GCM that “although the legal framework [...] does not explicitly refer to regular migrants' access to public services, in practice, migrant populations have the same access as Djiboutian nationals to all health and education services. In addition, migrants have access to health care regardless of their legal status in the same way as Djiboutians, since the introduction of the Universal Health Insurance (UHI) in 2014”.⁷⁹ It was however unclear from the key informant interviews to what extent migrants in transit do have access to these services beyond first aid. One key informant stated that the subsidies that the health centre receives from the state are only for the local population, not for the migrants, and if the migrants cannot pay for the medicines, the health centre cannot help them.

Diplomacy and migration response

During the interviews, the project also asked whether foreign political pressure had any impact on their response to transit migration. While local authorities did not feel any such pressure, some key informants with a broader geographical coverage reported that it does have a relevance for migration policy development at the national level. In **Guatemala**, one key informant stated that the Guatemalan government faces pressures from several sides regarding its migration response, which includes transit migration: on the one hand, the international cooperation advocating a better treatment of migrants and respect for their rights; on the other, foreign governments demanding that it stops migration heading to North America. Likewise, in **Tunisia**, the local governments in both Medenine and Zarzis believed that the national authorities do face political pressure from foreign countries. According to the mayor of Zarzis, in particular, “[e]very time that European states increase pressure, there is a problem of blockage of departures” as the national government tries to prevent migrants from reaching Europe, leading them to spend more extended periods in Tunisia.

An interesting exception to this was reported to be **Türkiye**. Here, local actors did not believe that political pressure from abroad had an impact on how the Turkish government responds to migration in general, including transit migration in Van, but rather the other way around: they argued that Türkiye uses migrants as a bargaining chip in negotiations with Europe.

Coordination between different actors

Coordination between national and local governments

Interviews generally highlighted a strong disconnect between national and local authorities regarding migration response, and a lack of involvement of local authorities in migration policy making at the national level. In **Esquipulas**, local authorities reported not having been involved in national migration-related policy making, although this is supposed to change within the framework of the development of

⁷⁶ Article 38 of the [Tunisian Constitution of 2014](#) establishes that “health is a right for every human being”, thus providing a legal foundation for migrants access to healthcare in the country. No information could be retrieved on additional or more specific provisions on the topic in Tunisian law.

⁷⁷ Afrikyes (2012) [Tunisie: L'enfant migrant et le droit à l'éducation](#).

⁷⁸ Chambre des députés de la Tunisie (1995) [Loi no. 95-92 du 9 novembre 1995, relative à la publication du code de la protection de l'enfant](#).

⁷⁹ République de Djibouti (2022) [Rapport national volontaire](#), op. cit. Unofficial translation into English.

the new migration policy. In **Medenine/Zarzis**, there is no coordination space between the national government and the municipalities – on migration response or otherwise. The Medenine municipality stated never having heard of a meeting between the two levels of government. The interaction between local and national authority is even more limited in **Van**, where the municipality simply does not participate in migration response. To sum it up, the different levels of government are not working in the same manner in response to transit migration, nor are they speaking to each other on the issue. Information on this topic could not be retrieved for **Obock**.

Coordination between the authorities and other actors

As for broader coordination with humanitarian and development actors, formal coordination mechanisms for migration response that bring together relevant actors from different sectors, such as authorities, UN agencies and civil society organisations, either do not exist or show shortcomings in the localities included in the study. In the cities where such mechanisms exist, they mostly play the role of mere spaces for information sharing. Opportunities to make them a platform to discuss and jointly create avenues for comprehensive, harmonized and “development sensitive” migration response seem to be currently missing. In **Medenine/Zarzis**, for instance, there is no single formal coordination mechanism for migration management, although key informants mentioned the existence of several informal coordination spaces, including:

- regular meetings by NGOs working on migration among them to share information on their activities
- regular meetings amongst UN agencies and their partners to review the status of project implementation
- several actors in Medenine are part of committees working specifically on child protection and sexual and gender-based violence, but these mainly focus on refugees

Although some coordination fora do exist, many respondents agreed that they could be improved.

In **Van**, coordination spaces for migration response are also limited. Here, state authorities meet once a month with UNHCR and some civil society organizations to share information on their respective activities, while other NGOs are not allowed to attend.

In **Obock**, several actors involved in migration response – including the Ministry of Muslim Affairs, the Regional Council of Obock, other local authorities such as the Prefecture of Obock, the Red Crescent and IOM⁸⁰ – meet once a month. Key informants mentioned concrete outcomes that these coordination meetings had in specific situations, such as fatal shipwrecks involving boats transporting migrants trying to cross the Gulf of Aden and reach Yemen. In these instances, the Red Crescent provides body bags for the deceased while IOM manages burials. One of them however clarified that the meetings do not go beyond ad hoc reaction to specific events and do not include a coordinated planning for migration response.

Esquipulas was the locality with the best structured coordination platform. Efforts by UNHCR led to the creation of a refugees and migrants protection working group, coordinated by the municipality, that meets once a month. Local authorities, UN agencies, international and local NGOs participate in these meetings to keep each other informed on and coordinate activities. Neither the regional government nor the police attend, despite being invited. In parallel, the regional government holds monthly meetings called “Departmental Development Councils”, which include participation of all the mayors of the region, as well as a range of civil society organizations. However, these meetings rarely if ever cover migration among the discussion points.

One recurrent shortcoming is that, rather than coordinating with civil society and UN agencies, the authorities – both local and national – often delegate the response to transit migration to these actors, especially when it comes to assistance and services to migrants. In **Medenine/Zarzis**, for instance, several key informants argued that the Tunisian authorities do not, in fact, respond to migration, but rather consider that migrants are under the responsibility of IOM while refugees belong to the mandate of UNHCR. These actors thus believed that the national government delegates to the two UN agencies all responsibilities related to the management of mixed migration, except for rescue at sea. The representative of the Medenine municipal council interviewed for the project explicitly stated that “[t]he government is dealing with migrants through international organizations”, while a local community leader said that “they make no effort to manage migration”. UN agencies and civil society, by their mandate, should have a subsidiary rather than leading role in these areas. This abdication of responsibility risks undermining the role of the authorities. Additionally, it is not sustainable in the medium and long term, as these organizations – especially NGOs – often operate on project-based funding which is only meant to last for a few months, as a local NGO in Tunisia pointed out.

⁸⁰ This participants list is not exhaustive.

Conclusion and next steps

This study sought to spotlight transit migration and in particular its impacts on local development, a topic often left at the margins of migration-related discussions. After outlining how transit migration and its impacts have been addressed in research and policy, it analyses the economic, social and security implications of this phenomenon for communities living in places of transit, as well as the challenges and opportunities it represents for local and national authorities tasked with responding to it. Although generalisations cannot be based on the four case studies examined for this research, the findings of this study offer some overarching reflections, summarized as follows, based on our research questions.

How does transit migration affect – positively or negatively – local economies and social cohesion? How do different types of transit migration affect transit hubs differently?

While transit migration affected local economies in most fieldwork localities, the specific impacts vary depending on the migration dynamics in each city. In places of quick transit, migrants positively affect local economies by injecting money into the local market by buying goods or services that they needed to continue their journey. Where transit was more protracted, migrants provided workforce for some sectors of the economy, filling local labour shortages or providing specific skills. On the negative side, one common finding across field localities is that migrant contributions mostly remained in the informal economy meaning, among other things, that they did not generate additional revenues for the authorities. Another perceived negative economic impact, mentioned in Medenine/Zarzis - the locality of more protracted transit - is a concern that the availability of migrant workforce could imply an increase in unemployment and a worsening of working conditions for locals.

Social impacts of transit migration also varied depending on the case study, although some common features arose. Many key informants described an attitude of solidarity and empathy toward migrants among the local population, often in connection with local residents' own experiences of or connection with emigration. Such solidarity however has limits, especially in the case of migrants perceived as culturally distant from the local community or not respecting the local customs. Interestingly, in most case studies, the local population seemed to have a better perception of migrants in transit compared to those who settle in their city, as they identified more benefits and fewer burdens in connection with a short stay. Less commonly reported social impacts on communities of transit also included concerns regarding people smuggling having become more attractive as a source of income for the local youth compared to regular jobs.

The interviews conducted for this study provided limited to no evidence regarding an adverse impact of transit migration on local security. Despite this, some local residents still felt unsafe because they did not know the background of migrants in transit or due to mass arrivals. Additionally, sometimes locals perceived a negative impact on security not because of transit migration per se, but rather in connection with the role that transnational smuggling networks play in it, or with actions taken by the authorities to counter irregular migration such as tight border control or the establishment of checkpoints along the roads most frequently used by smugglers to transport migrants.

Who are the main actors that benefit from / are negatively affected by transit migration?

In Esquipulas, Medenine/Zarzis and Obock, many local actors such as business owners and service providers saw a clear positive economic impact deriving from transit migration, either because migrants pay for the products and services they sell, or because they provide labour force. In Esquipulas, transit migration creates profit for local transporters, hotels, restaurants, food stalls and other shops. In Medenine/Zarzis, migrants fill workforce shortages in sectors such as construction, agriculture and housekeeping. In Obock, restaurant owners, street sellers and suppliers have seen their earnings increase thanks to the movement of migrants in transit. At the same time, the facilitation of irregular migration has become a source of income for many local residents.

On the contrary, in Van the relative "invisibility" of transit movements made it the only case study where transit migration did not have a noticeable impact on the local economy: this seemed to imply that where transit migration goes underground to try and avoid strict immigration enforcement, migrants have very limited contact with the local community and the only actors benefiting from transit migration are smuggling networks.

What are the implications of transit migration for municipalities (e.g., budget, infrastructure, public services, security)? How have local authorities responded to the challenges of transit migration?

While they are at the forefront of migration response and must manage the needs and concerns of both their constituents and the migrants in transit, municipalities across the fieldwork localities often showed goodwill but lack the legal mandate, the capacities, and

the resources to do so. As a result, they often relied on humanitarian and development actors for the response to transit migration, in particular for the provision of services and assistance. An exception to this trend was access to healthcare. In most localities, migrants could receive medical attention at least for emergency needs, regardless of their immigration status.

While the interviews provided very limited evidence that transit migration creates a noticeable additional burden on public services, local authorities did state that financial constraints and not having a specific budget for migration response strongly limits their actions in this area.

How coordinated are national and local responses to the transit phenomenon?

The study highlighted a strong disconnect between different levels of government regarding migration response. The perspective of local authorities is rarely considered in the development of migration policies at the national level. At the same time, national authorities were often perceived by local actors as absent, disconnected from local reality and only concerned with countering irregular migration (or, in the worst-case scenario, benefiting from it through corruption).

Coordination between the authorities and humanitarian and development actors also showed shortcomings. Coordination platforms mostly serve to share information between actors or respond to urgent problems, rather than planning a comprehensive joint response to transit migration. Additionally, authorities often delegate action to non-state actors amid shortages of resources.

How can governments maximise the economic and social benefits of transit migration, while minimising the abuse and exploitation of migrants, and tension with local citizens?

Policies that are solely focused on stopping irregular movement and curbing transit migration risk giving leeway and power to transnational smuggling networks. While such policies may seem appealing from a national security perspective, they prevent transit localities from harnessing the benefits that transit migration can bring to their community. To harness the benefits, and to reduce the abuse and exploitation of migrants in transit, governments should better include a local development perspective in their migration policies and expand the avenues for regular migration, including for transit movements. When migrants have no choice but to move irregularly, part of their contribution is inevitably lost or limited to informal economies and criminal networks.

What are the research gaps going forward?

As a common theme across fieldwork localities, the findings from this study point to strong data gaps regarding transit migration trends and dynamics, especially when it comes to official data. International, national and local efforts aimed at better defining transit migration, deciding how to measure it and subsequently collecting and analysing data on transit migration should increase alongside other research initiatives from academia and other non-state actors. This will allow the authorities and other stakeholders to develop well-informed policies based on evidence to respond to transit migration, harness the benefits and minimise the risks.

Annex 1 - Key informants list

Key informants for Esquipulas

| | Organization / Institution | KI profile |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|
| Key informant interviews | | |
| 1 | Municipality of Esquipulas – Migration focal point | Local authority |
| 2 | Municipality of Esquipulas – Economic Development Office | Local authority |
| 3 | Municipality of Esquipulas – Citizen Participation Office | Local authority |
| 4 | Chiquimula Regional Government (Gobernación Departamental) | Regional authority |
| 5 | SEGEPLAN (Secretaría de Planificación y Programación de la Presidencia) | Regional authority |
| 6 | Social Welfare Secretariat (Secretaría de Bienestar Social) | National authority – Local branch |
| 7 | Secretariat Against Sexual Violence, Exploitation and Human Trafficking (Secretaría contra la Violencia Sexual, Explotación y Trata de Personas) | National authority – Local branch |
| 8 | Health Centre | National authority – Local branch |
| 9 | Plan Trifinio | Regional cooperation mechanism |
| 10 | UNDP Guatemala | UN agency |
| 11 | UNHCR Guatemala | UN agency |
| 12 | UNHCR Guatemala – Esquipulas Field Office | UN agency |
| 13 | Save the Children | International NGO |
| 14 | Plan International | International NGO |
| 15 | ASEDECHI (Asociación de Servicios y Desarrollo Socioeconómico de Chiquimula) | Local NGO |
| 16 | Casa del Migrante San José | Local NGO – Migrant shelter |
| 17 | Guatemalan Red Cross – Chiquimula Delegation | IFRC local branch |
| 18 | COOSAJO | Local business cooperative – Private sector |
| 19 | Driver | Individual business operator – Private sector |
| Focus group discussion | | |
| 1 | 26 Local community leaders (COCODES) | Local community (Esquipulas and surrounding rural areas) |

Key Informants for Medenine and Zarzis

| | Organization / Institution | KI profile |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Key informant interviews | | |
| 1 | Municipality of Zarzis | Local authority |
| 2 | Municipality of Medenine | Local authority |
| 3 | Regional Direction of Social Affairs | Regional authority |
| 4 | IOM Tunisia – Zarzis sub office | UN agency |
| 5 | UNHCR Tunisia – Field Office Zarzis | UN agency |
| 6 | Danish Refugee Council Tunisia – Zarzis Base | International NGO |
| 7 | Médecins du Monde Monde Belgique – Mission de Tunisie | International NGO |
| 8 | Tunisian Refugee Council – South Office | Local NGO |
| 9 | ADDCI (Association pour le développement durable et la coopération internationale) Zarzis | Local NGO |
| 10 | Association d'aide et d'assistance aux Migrants Medenine | Local NGO |
| 11 | Arab Institute for Human Rights – South Office | Local NGO |
| 12 | TAMSS (Tunisian association for management and social stability) Zarzis | Local NGO |
| 13 | Independent consultant | Independent |
| 14 | Radio Medenine | Media (local radio) |
| 15 | Freelance journalist and analyst | Media / Analyst |
| Focus group discussion | | |
| 1 | Five local community leaders | Local community (Medenine) |

Key informants for Van

| | Organization / Institution | KI profile |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|
| Key informant interviews | | |
| 1 | Ministry of Health | Regional authority |
| 2 | Municipality of Van | Local authority |
| 3 | Van Yüzüncü Yıl University – Sociology Department | Academia |
| 4 | VANTSO – Van Chamber of Commerce and Industry | Private sector |
| 5 | Van Bar Association | Local NGO |
| 6 | Turkish Medical Association | Local NGO |
| 7 | VIED (Van İşitme Engelliler Ve Aileleri Derneği) | Local NGO |
| 8 | KÖVED | Local NGO |
| 9 | IHD – Human Rights Association | Local NGO |
| 10 | Serhat Migration Studies | Local NGO |
| 11 | Serhat News | Media |
| 12 | Freelance Journalist | Media |
| 13 | Human Rights Activist | Independent activist |
| 14 | Residency of Religious Affairs | Religious authority |
| 15 | Lawyer who handles cases of individuals accused of people smuggling and migrants in asylum and deportation proceedings | Lawyer |
| 16 | People smuggler | Smuggler |
| Focus group discussion | | |
| 1 | 6 Neighborhood leaders (muhtars) | Local community |

Key informants for Obock

| | Organization / Institution | KI profile |
|------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Key informant interviews | | |
| 1 | Préfecture d'Obock | National authority – local branch |
| 2 | Préfecture de Khor-Angar | National authority – local branch |
| 3 | Conseil régional de la région d'Obock | Local authority |
| 4 | Chef du village de la ville d'Obock | Local authority |
| 5 | Centre médicale d'Obock | Local authority |
| 6 | Restaurant owner | Private sector |
| 7 | Business owner – local shop | Private sector |
| 8 | Association Assa Badi Difou de Khor-Angar sur le développement social | Local NGO |
| 9 | Danish Refugee Council | International NGO |
| 10 | Red Crescent | Red Cross and Red Crescent movement |
| Key informant interviews conducted by MMC ESA / IOM | | |
| 11 | Préfecture d'Obock | National authority – local branch |
| 12 | Centre médicale d'Obock | Local authority |
| 13 | IOM – Obock Migration Response Centre | International organisation |
| 14 | Restaurant owner | Private sector |
| 15 | Restaurant owner | Private sector |
| 16 | Smuggler | Smuggler |

