

“If I had known it would be this hard, I wouldn’t have taken the risk”

Examining onward and mixed movements
along the Western Indian Ocean Route

MMC Research Report,
May 2025



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Photo credit: © William Daniels / Panos Pictures (2020)

Dozens of 'kwassa kwassa' or small boats are stored in Petite Terre, Mayotte.

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

MMC is a leading source for independent and high-quality data, research, analysis and expertise. MMC aims to increase understanding of mixed migration, to positively impact global and regional migration policies, to inform evidence-based mixed migration responses for people on the move and to stimulate forward thinking in public and policy debates on mixed migration. MMC's overarching focus is on human rights and protection for all people on the move.

MMC is part of the Danish Refugee Council (DRC). While its institutional link to DRC ensures MMC's work is grounded in operational reality, it acts as an independent source of data, research, analysis and policy development on mixed migration for policy makers, practitioners, journalists, and the broader humanitarian sector.

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UNHCR leads international action to protect people forced to flee because of conflict and persecution. We deliver life-saving assistance like shelter, water and other basic necessities; help safeguard fundamental human rights; and develop solutions that ensure people have a safe place to call home where they can build a better future.



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Acronyms

BNLTEH	Bureau National de Lutte contre la Traite des Êtres Humains (National Office to Combat Human Trafficking)
CBO	Community-Based Organisation
CDA	Centre de Développement d'Andohatapenaka
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DRC	Danish Refugee Council
DR Congo	Democratic Republic of the Congo
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GRF	Global Refugee Forum
IOM	International Organization for Migration
MMC	Mixed Migration Centre
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OFPRA	Office français de protection des réfugiés et apatrides (French Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons)
RSF	Rapid Support Forces (in Sudan)
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
USD	US Dollars

Summary and key findings

The Western Indian Ocean Route runs from mainland Africa and from island countries in the Indian Ocean towards Mayotte.¹ Journeys along this route are often long and perilous, involving extended sea crossings with limited food and water, insecure boats, and a heavy reliance on smugglers. Compared to other routes on the African continent, the Western Indian Ocean Route remains understudied. This report examines the drivers of onward and mixed movement for refugees and migrants, routes and intentions, smuggling dynamics, and key risks along the Western Indian Ocean Route. It is based on 54 interviews and five focus group discussions with refugees and migrants in Tanzania, Madagascar, Comoros, and Mayotte and 26 key informant interviews with mixed movement stakeholders. This report aims to fill a critical evidence gap and inform onward and mixed movement policies and programming along this route. The key findings include:

- **Congolese, Burundians, and Somalis identified conflict, violence, persecution, and terrorism as shaping their movements, and limiting decision-making and preparation for their journey.** At the same time, some also reported economic drivers, noting the insecure environment had negatively affected their livelihoods. **Comorians and Malagasy expressed moving mainly for economic reasons and access to better education and health services, as well as socio-cultural ties.**
- **The Western Indian Ocean Route is comprised of several routes or branches, some of which involve long, complex, and unsafe journeys over land and at sea.** For people from the Great Lakes, key countries of transit include Tanzania and Comoros, while another segment of the route involves transit through Madagascar. Somali respondents engaged in the longest sea journeys from southern Somalia to Mayotte, with some journeying at sea for over a month and one reporting a brief stop at the Kenyan coast.
- **Smuggling networks between Tanzania and Comoros appear well established, primarily targeting people from the Great Lakes.** Contrary to other African mixed movement routes where smugglers play a limited role in influencing movement, Congolese and Burundians reported being influenced to move onward along the Western Indian Ocean Route by smugglers in Tanzania, in Kigoma and Dar es Salaam (in particular Kariakoo market), which appear as smuggling hubs.
- **Arrest and detention in Tanzania were cited as key risks while transiting the country.** Moreover, a majority of interviewed Congolese and Burundians believed they could not access asylum in Tanzania, based on information received from co-nationals and Tanzanians with links to smuggling networks, which spurred them into engaging in onward movements.
- **Perilous sea journeys pose great risks to the lives of refugees and migrants,** and respondent testimonies included the witnessing of the death(s) of fellow passengers. **Some respondents noted additional dangers linked to abuse and robbery at the hands of smugglers.**
- **Refugees and migrants reported facing considerable constraints in Mayotte with regards to access to livelihoods and housing, and to the risk of xenophobic violence.** A number of respondents noted direct experiences of xenophobia in school, at work, and in other public spaces.

¹ This study, including all graphs and maps, does not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of MMC and UNHCR concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city, or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

1. Introduction

The Western Indian Ocean Route runs from mainland Africa – primarily East Africa and the Great Lakes – and from island countries in the Indian Ocean towards Mayotte. Journeys along this route are often long and perilous, involving extended sea crossings with limited food and water, insecure boats, and a heavy reliance on smugglers. Over the past years, there are indications the route has become more important for primarily those departing from the Great Lakes region. Yet, compared to other routes on the African continent, the Western Indian Ocean Route remains largely understudied and underreported by news media. The lack of attention likely stems from the relatively low volume of movements along this route, which number in the thousands each year, as compared to the tens of thousands observed along the Mediterranean Routes to Europe, or over a hundred thousand along the Eastern Route from the Horn of Africa towards the Arabian Peninsula.

This study aims to provide policymakers and protection actors with greater insight into the onward and mixed movement dynamics along the Western Indian Ocean Route to Mayotte and serves as a first step towards generating a largescale evidence base on this route. In particular, it seeks to learn:

1. What factors drive movements along the Western Indian Ocean Route?
2. What specific trajectories do refugees and migrants follow and how do they arrange their journeys?
3. How do people on the move enter countries along the route, and what is their access to asylum in these countries?
4. What do smuggling dynamics look like along this route?
5. What are the dangers that refugees and migrants get exposed to and what are their needs?

The study begins by synthesising the limited information available on the number of people moving along the route. It then outlines this study's in-depth, qualitative research design. The findings are analysed across four sections: drivers of movement, routes and intentions, smuggling dynamics, and protection risks and needs along the journey.

Photo credit:

© Sandy Ravaloniaina / Unsplash.
Nosy Be, Madagascar.

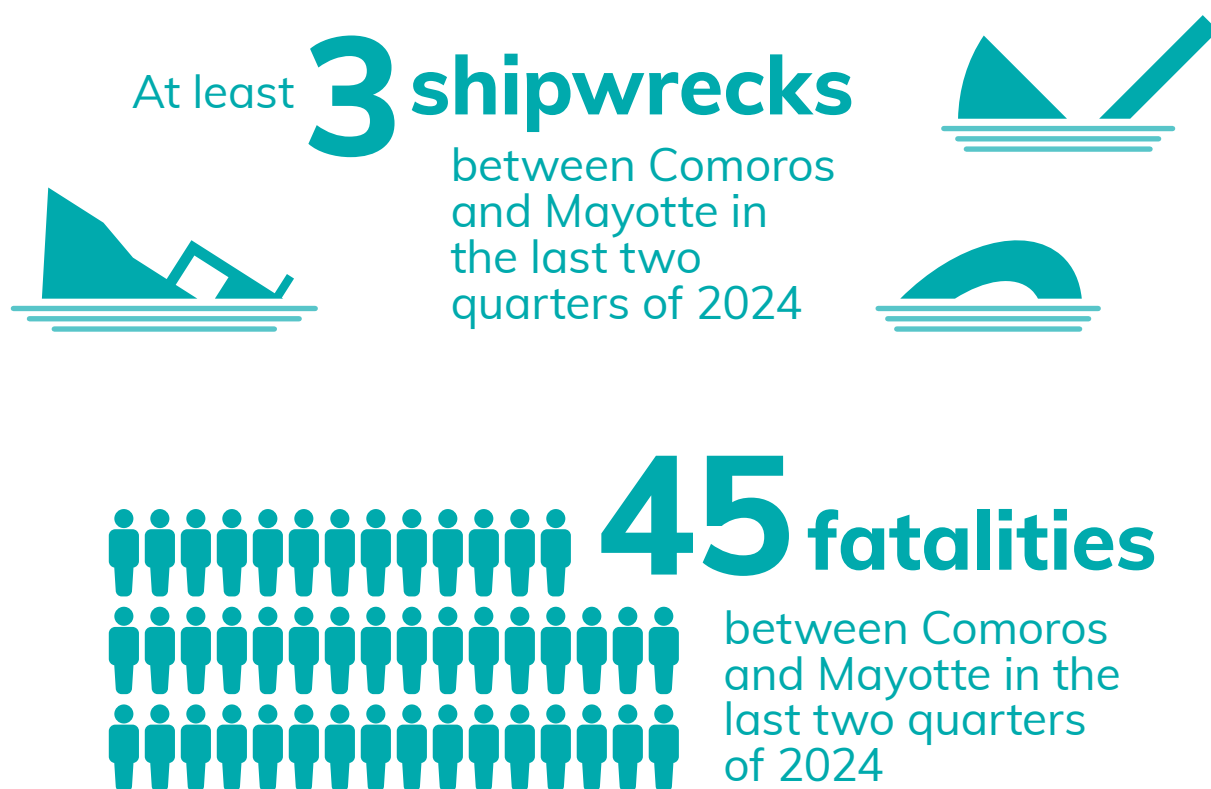


2. The numbers at a glance

No official figures or estimates exist on people moving along the Western Indian Ocean Route, apart from the number of asylum applications lodged in Mayotte. In 2023, Mayotte received 2,650 asylum applications, representing a 26% decrease compared to 2022.² That said, French authorities announced that 2023 was a record year in terms of the number of boats – totalling 661 – intercepted by the coastguard in Mayotte.³ Local media reports have linked the decrease in asylum claims to 'Operation Wuambushu' ("take back"), suggesting the operation deterred new arrivals. The operation, ongoing since 2023, aims at improving security, and has seen authorities destroy hundreds of informal homes, also inhabited by asylum seekers and migrants without access to formal housing, and propose alternatives in housing several hundreds of asylum seekers, refugees, and citizens.⁴

Data on movements earlier on in the route in locations of transit remains scarce, except for reports on interceptions and shipwrecks. Between Comoros and Mayotte, in the last two quarters of 2024, there were at least three shipwrecks, resulting in 45 fatalities, reported by news media.⁵ A 2012 report from the French Senate estimated that 7,000-10,000 people died at sea between the Comorian island of Anjouan and Mayotte from 1995-2012.⁶ Comorian government estimates, while not indicating a time period, have put the figure much higher, from 20,000-50,000, dubbing this stretch between the two islands as 'the largest sea cemetery on earth'.⁷ Off the coast of Nosy Be, Madagascar, in November 2024, an accident involving two boats left at least 24 Somalis dead and 46 survivors brought to shore.⁸ Testimonies from survivors revealed that they had been at sea for over a month since their departure from Somalia.⁹ Over the course of 2024, MMC identified at least 144 interceptions at sea in Comoros and 109 in Madagascar.¹⁰

Figure 1. Incidents between Comoros and Mayotte in the last two quarters of 2024



2 Le Journal de Mayotte (2024, 24 January). [OFPRA : diminution des demandes d'asile à Mayotte en 2023](#).

3 Hamza, D. (2024, 6 May). [Lutte contre l'immigration clandestine : 661 kwassas arrêtés en 2023 à Mayotte](#). Gazeti.

4 Le Journal de Mayotte (2024, 24 January). Op cit.

5 IOM (2024, 4 November). [IOM Statement: At least 25 dead in latest tragic shipwreck off Comoros Islands](#).

6 Sénat (2012). [Rapport d'information fait au nom de la commission des lois constitutionnelles, de législation, du suffrage universel, du Règlement et d'administration générale \(1\) à la suite d'une mission effectuée à Mayotte du 11 au 15 mars 2012](#), p. 76.

7 BBC (2015, 19 October). [France's migrant 'cemetery' in Africa](#).

8 Sheikh Nor, M. (2024, 25 November). [Migrant boat sinkings off Madagascar highlight desperation felt by many Somalis](#). VOA News

9 Mohamed, B. (2024, 1 December). ['They threw her body into the ocean' - woman dies on boat headed for French island](#). BBC

10 See MMC (2024). [Quarterly Mixed Migration Update Eastern and Southern Africa - Q2 2024](#); and MMC (2024). [Quarterly Mixed Migration Update Eastern and Southern Africa - Q3 2024](#).

3. Methodology

This study adopted a multi-sited, qualitative research design to examine onward and mixed movements along the Western Indian Ocean Route, focusing on different locations of transit (in Tanzania, Comoros, and Madagascar) and destination (in Mayotte). The qualitative approach served as a first step towards filling a considerable information gap, aiming to map key features and dynamics of the route. It also aimed to identify local stakeholders and to scope data collection locations for future, largescale quantitative data collection.

Site selection

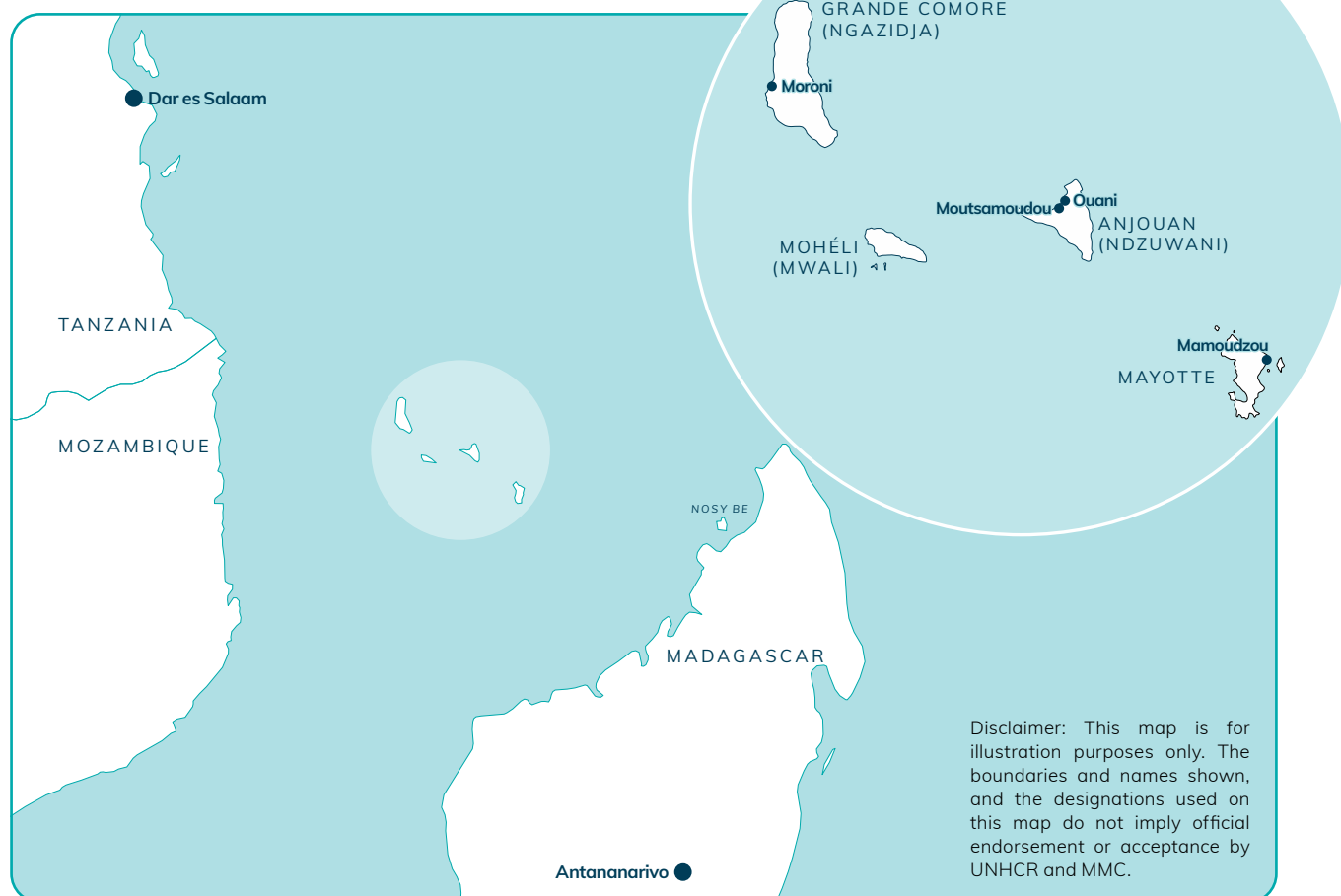
Data collection was carried out in locations of transit and destination along the Western Indian Ocean Route from August-December 2024.¹¹ The sites were chosen in collaboration with UNHCR, based on available information from news media, the presence of local assistance providers, and profile data from UNHCR's existing case management. Interviews in Mayotte took place prior to the occurrence of the cyclone Chido, which is believed to have severely impacted the lives of refugees and migrants on the island.¹²

In **Tanzania**, interviews with people on the move took place in collaboration with UNHCR Tanzania in **Dar es Salaam** through their existing case management. This strategy was chosen to ensure access to respondents who (had) intended or had attempted and failed to move along the Western Indian Ocean Route, and because of a lack of access to known departure locations along the coast. In **Comoros**, interviews with refugees and migrants took place in **Anjouan** in collaboration with the non-government organisation Caritas, at the Catholic Mission in Moutsamoudou, and at a shelter in Ouani. Additional interviews took place in Moroni (**Grande Comore**). In **Madagascar**, a limited number of interviews were conducted remotely with Yemeni asylum seekers who formed part of the caseload of UNHCR SAMCO in **Antananarivo**. In Mayotte, UNHCR France conducted interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) with the support of the local NGO Solidarité Mayotte and local authorities in **Mamoudzou**. Additionally, UNHCR France organised two FGDs in mainland France with refugees and asylum seekers who had been airlifted from Mayotte by the French authorities in early 2024.

11 Two FGDs in France were conducted in April 2024 with refugees and asylum seekers who had been airlifted from Mayotte.

12 Philips, R. (2024, 19 December). [Aftermath of Mayotte cyclone 'will be complicated,' say fearful migrants](#). InfoMigrants.

Map 1. Overview of the East African coast and Indian Ocean highlighting locations of interview along the Western Indian Ocean Route



Data and sampling strategy

A total of 54 semi-structured interviews were conducted with refugees and migrants along the Western Indian Ocean Route, covering their profiles, onward and mixed movement drivers, routes and intentions, protection risks, interactions with smugglers, and assistance needs. Some 26 interviews were conducted in Comoros,¹³ 21 in Mayotte, four in Tanzania, and three in Madagascar. Additionally, five focus group discussions (FGDs), three with women and two with men, including a total of 35 people and covering the same topics, were organised in Mayotte and mainland France. As mentioned previously, respondents were identified through the caseloads of UNHCR, Solidarité Mayotte, Caritas, CDA, and the local French authorities, and through referrals from key informants.

Respondents were mainly adults, aged 18 years and older; five were children aged 15-17 years old, interviewed in Tanzania and Comoros, in an effort to gain insight into the experiences of young people on the move. Interviews with children were conducted on the premises of UNHCR and Caritas, where caseworkers or support staff were onsite. Respondents were sampled based on the following broad criteria:

- Had the intention to move along the Western Indian Ocean Route or had received information about this route.
- Balance between men and women (where possible).

The sample size was determined based on access to respondents within the timespan of the research, and on when a point of saturation with the themes and issues highlighted during the interviews was reached in certain locations (in the case of Mayotte and Anjouan). Tables 1-3 provide detailed breakdowns of the sample.

¹³ Of these 26, 17 were conducted by Caritas in November-December 2024 with a shortened semi-structured questionnaire primarily focused on onward and mixed movement drivers, locations along the journey, and intentions.

Table 1. Number of interviews and FGDs per location

Location	Interviews	FGDs	Countries of nationality
Dar es Salaam (Tanzania)	4	-	Burundi and Democratic Republic of Congo (DR Congo)
Moroni (Grande Comore, Comoros)	4	-	Sudan
Moutsamoudou & Ouani (Anjouan, Comoros)	22	-	Burundi, Cameroon, DR Congo and Rwanda
Antananarivo (Madagascar)	3	-	Yemen
Mamoudzou (Mayotte)	21	3	Burundi, Comoros, DR Congo, Madagascar and Somalia
France (Île-de-France)	-	2	Burundi, DR Congo and Sudan
Total	54	5	

Table 2. Gender of interview respondents and FGD participants per location

Location	Women		Men		Total
	Interviews	FGDs	Interviews	FGDs	
Tanzania	2	-	2	-	4
Comoros	5	-	21	-	26
Madagascar	-	-	3	-	3
Mayotte	12	9	9	15	45
France (Île-de-France)	-	8	-	3	11
Total	19	17	35	18	89

Table 3. Countries of origin of interview respondents and FGD participants

Country of nationality	Interviewees / FGD participants
DR Congo	35
Somalia	26
Burundi	16
Sudan	5
Yemen	3
Comoros	1
Madagascar	1
Rwanda	1
Cameroon	1
Total	89

Interviews were also conducted with key informants (local civil society, authorities, and assistance providers) in locations along the route, where it proved challenging to access refugees and migrants, owing to their highly transitory and more hidden movements. A total of 26 key informant interviews were conducted in Tanzania, Comoros, and Madagascar (see Annex I for a full list of key informants).

Limitations

Owing to the limited sample size and largely hidden nature of movements along the Western Indian Ocean Route, the data in this report does not represent the profiles and the experiences of all individuals moving along this route. Instead, it aims to provide rich information on dynamics along this route.

While the research design sought to conduct an equal number of interviews across all locations, this proved challenging to achieve over the project's time period, owing to the periodic nature of boat arrivals and highly transitory nature of movements. Hence, in Mayotte, as a place of final destination, it was relatively straightforward to access and interview people on the move, as they were no longer engaging in movements, while the opposite was the case for Tanzania, Comoros, and Madagascar. Future research would benefit from a longer timeframe to extend presence in locations of transit and not be dependent upon boat arrivals. Moreover, considering the complexities of travelling to the different islands of Comoros, which lack frequent air travel, multiple data collection teams operating simultaneously would be needed for full coverage of this archipelago.

In addition, obtaining research authorisation to conduct data collection with intercepted groups of people on the move posed a challenge and required more time than the study's three-month inception period allowed. This resulted in fewer respondents being accessed in Grande Comore and Mohéli in Comoros, and in coastal areas of Tanzania and Madagascar. Finally, particularly in Tanzania and Madagascar, which are countries with highly diverse mixed movement landscapes, it was more difficult to identify people on the move with clear intentions to reach Mayotte. Future research would benefit from more time in coastal departure points and from largescale data collection from which to identify relevant subsamples.

4. Drivers and movement decision-making

Drivers of movement from mainland Africa and Yemen

Most Congolese said their movements were directly linked to conflict and violence in their locations of origin. Eight Congolese had witnessed extreme violence, including the killing of family members or relatives, which triggered their sudden departures. Out of these eight, seven originated from North and South Kivu and had left between 2022-2024. In general, Congolese respondents described their departures as sudden, unplanned, and a measure of last resort, directly linked to conflict dynamics. Some noted they had lived under threat from rebel or militia groups for some time until their situation came to be perceived as untenable. In various instances, respondents' departures led to family separation, with some having lost trace of their spouse and/or children during their flight. For most, their initial movements were forms of cross-border displacement with the sole objective to find safety for themselves and family members. Their initial decision-making typically did not include considerations about subsequent onward movements from countries of first displacement.

It was my landlord who called me: "if you are nearby, don't come back here. These people [the Mai Mai]¹⁴ are still here...They had already killed my younger brother, who was in the shop, and they killed my elder brother in the compound. We had no choice but to leave, as I wanted to put my children in safety. It was sudden, I had not thought about it before. It was not my intention or my plan.

(38-year-old Congolese man in Tanzania)

Burundians similarly reported being driven from Burundi by political repression and persecution. While some respondents left during conflicts in the country in 2015-16, others had departed more recently, between 2020-24.¹⁵ **A majority of Somali respondents, all but one originating from Mogadishu, cited violence or threats of violence from Al Shabab as a factor triggering their sudden departures.**¹⁶ Similar to some Congolese respondents, a majority of Somali men said that they had experienced multiple attacks (from Al Shabab) prior to their departure, mostly after refusing to be recruited or to provide financial support. Seven out of 27 Somalis had experienced the killing of at least one family member by Al Shabab, causing their sudden departures. Furthermore, one Somali woman noted she had to escape the country due to an honour-related family issue. Most explained that their departures from Mogadishu first involved a period in hiding within the country, while buying time to gather information and arrange their journeys out of Somalia.

I fled Somalia after Al Shabab killed my father and brother. Fearing for my own life, I made the decision to escape. I considered moving to another city, but Al Shabab is present throughout the country, and I knew they could find me wherever I went.

(25-year-old Somali woman in Mayotte)

Four Sudanese and three Yemeni respondents interviewed in Comoros and Madagascar left their countries of origin because of conflict and insecurity, and a subsequent lack of economic opportunities. Their movement drivers were described alongside their reasons for moving to Comoros and Madagascar, indicating that these respondents had more time to plan their journeys and had clear destinations in mind. In addition to social networks guiding their movement trajectories, they also cited the (relative) affordability of travel along the Western Indian Ocean Route, compared to other mixed movement routes. In contrast to some reports citing the presence of Sudanese and Yemenis

14 The Mai Mai is commonly referred to as an umbrella of over 130 small militia groups in eastern DR Congo. Refer to: Hoffmann, K. & Verweijen, J. (2018, 3 October). [Rethinking rebel rule: How Mai-Mai groups in eastern Congo govern](#). London School of Economics.

15 Two Burundians interviewed in Comoros cited they had left Burundi in early 2024. This is notable given that in November 2023, the Burundian government, the Tanzanian government, and UNHCR [reaffirmed](#) their agreement to continue the voluntary repatriation of Burundian refugees from Tanzania, 'in accordance with the provisions of the Tripartite Agreement of May 2001'. Furthermore, following the recommendations from the December 2023 meeting, UNHCR's support [shifted](#) from facilitating to promoting voluntary repatriation.

16 International Crisis Group (2014). [Somalia: Al Shabaab – It Will Be a Long War](#). Africa Briefing 99.

among people on the move to Mayotte,¹⁷ these four respondents sought to remain in Comoros and Madagascar, given the perceived safety of these countries.

My decision to leave was sudden. I had never planned it before. I had to leave because the situation became dangerous for me when the RSF [the Rapid Support Forces in Sudan] gained more power. While doing my own research, I spoke to someone who was here in Comoros. He had also retired from the Sudanese navy. He said it was quiet and peaceful here. So, I started making plans to come here and bring my family.

(47-year-old Sudanese man in Comoros)

Photo credit:

© Jeremy Horner / Panos Pictures.

Antananarivo, Madagascar.



¹⁷ In 2023, Sudanese and Yemenis were not among the top five nationalities to claim asylum in Mayotte, according to OFPRA (2024). [Rapport d'activité 2023](#). With the top five cumulatively covering 92% of all asylum claims, Sudanese and Yemenis may be included in the 'Other' eight percent. Other reports of Sudanese and Yemeni movements to Mayotte include: L'Info Kwezi (2024, 21 February). [Après les Somaliens, les Soudanais arrivent à Mayotte](#); Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (2019, 17 July). [The road from Yemen: Part 4. Mayotte: 'Asylum in France for less than \\$1,000'](#).

Drivers of onward movement towards Comoros and Mayotte

While some key informants noted the presence of brokers working for smugglers in the Great Lakes region to recruit people to join the Western Indian Ocean Route, testimonies from Congolese and Burundians did not corroborate this finding. Among these respondents, **intentions to move towards Mayotte emerged only after arriving in neighbouring countries**. In particular, after their arrival in Tanzania, some Congolese respondents had received information from locals that it would not be possible for them to access asylum in the country, and that they would be better off moving onwards. Similarly, Burundian respondents received information from co-nationals living in Tanzania that their asylum applications there would not be considered, and that their informal stay in Tanzania would mean they would be at risk of being deported to Burundi. These accounts align with reports of Tanzania restricting access to its territory and to asylum, which contrast with the country's pledges during recent rounds of the Global Refugee Forum on protecting access to asylum.¹⁸ In the case of Burundians, accessing asylum remains a challenge as the Tanzanian government views Burundi as a safe country, and is promoting voluntary returns of existing Burundian refugees in the country, in partnership with the Government of Burundi and UNHCR. In the case of Congolese, they added, as well as for other nationalities, a 'first of country of asylum' principle applies, where asylum seekers must provide proof that they have not passed through a safe country, where they could have sought asylum, prior to entering Tanzania.

Encounters in which respondents received information about their (perceived) limited options in Tanzania appear to serve as a turning point for those fleeing the Great Lakes region, whereby their plans transitioned from cross-border displacement to joining the Western Indian Ocean Route. As will be argued in Section 6, **the spreading of (dis) information by locals may be part of smugglers' modus operandi in Tanzania** to recruit people fleeing conflict and persecution and to drive them to engage in onward movements.

"We spent two days in Kigoma. We came there, so that we may register ourselves as refugees. I just asked people there on the streets in Kigoma. However, they informed me that they are no longer receiving new arrivals there. They also said, because I had three children, we could not register as refugees."

(38-year-old Congolese man in Tanzania)

[W]e stayed there [in Tanzania] for six months. We tried to go to the camps in Tanzania and register with UNHCR, but they were not accepting Burundians at that time. Many Burundians were deported back to Burundi by the authorities.

(45-year-old Burundian woman in Mayotte)

Several Burundians described moving onward along the Western Indian Ocean Route after their perpetrators had identified their whereabouts in neighbouring countries in Eastern and Southern Africa and they continued to feel under threat of persecution. These respondents had first sought refuge in Rwanda, Zambia, and Mozambique with the intention to eventually return to Burundi. They ultimately had to move on, driven by the same concerns which had triggered their departures from Burundi. For some, this meant they decided to not pursue asylum in these locations, while others had already received their asylum status by the time they felt under threat and subsequently engaged in onward movement.

I did not stay in Zambia because there was no security there, and it was too close to Burundi. I did not seek asylum because I was planning to leave. Besides, my friend was killed in Zambia.

(39-year-old Burundian man in Mayotte)

18 Refer to: UNHCR (n.d.). [Global Focus - United Republic of Tanzania](#), and UNHCR (n.d.). [Submission by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights' Compilation Report. Universal Periodic Review: Third Cycle. 39th Session. United Republic of Tanzania](#). Also see Ruzibiza, Y. and Turner, S. (2023). [Tanzania's Open Door to Refugees Narrows](#). Migration Policy Institute.

We fled from Burundi to Rwanda in 2015, where we obtained refugee status. However, we were also threatened by the intelligence services. We stayed in Rwanda until 2022, then we went to Tanzania informally...

(45-year-old Burundian woman in Mayotte)

Drivers of Comorian and Malagasy movements

Key informants detailed that the movements of Comorians and Malagasy to Mayotte were primarily driven by economic reasons, but also motivated by additional drivers, including family reunification. Older Comorians were described as being driven to reach Mayotte to access healthcare, while younger Comorians moved to access economic opportunities, and sometimes better education. Despite shared social, historical, and cultural ties, Comorians have had to increasingly rely on irregular pathways to reach Mayotte, since the introduction of the Balladur Visa in 1995, which significantly restricted their movements.¹⁹ A key informant representing an NGO in Comoros perceived that it was almost easier to request a visa to mainland France than to Mayotte, and that such restrictions push Comorians to engage in irregular journeys. They stated: “People get denied numerous times. Many resort to using the unsafe boats.” Several civil society actors noted that visa restrictions related to Mayotte may have an impact on movement decision-making and intentions. They explained that those who arrive in Mayotte irregularly may seek to stay permanently, having already risked the crossing between Anjouan and Mayotte, while those who arrive via authorized channels are more likely to engage in circular movements.

According to key informants at UNODC and IOM, for Malagasy nationals, the journey to Mayotte is sought by (young) women seeking to work in domestic labour abroad, with Mayotte often seen as an access point towards France, and Europe in general. They also explained that Mauritius was an attractive destination for Malagasy men, looking to avail themselves of the greater opportunities there for work within the construction sector. Furthermore, key informants representing Malagasy authorities and Comorian civil society noted that a considerable number of Malagasy arrive in Comoros without necessarily having the (initial) intention to move onwards to Mayotte. Their movements are driven by the perception of greater economic opportunities and the need to remit money back home, with the Comorian Franc being a stronger currency than the Malagasy Ariary.

My mother has been living in Mayotte since 2006, but she left me with my aunt in Madagascar. My aunt treated me poorly and would beat me. Eventually, my mother had me brought to Mayotte in 2011. [...] I don't really remember much because I came here 13 years ago. All I recall is being accompanied by someone I didn't know, and we took a boat from Madagascar to Mayotte. The trip lasted about four to five hours.

(24-year-old Malagasy woman in Mayotte)

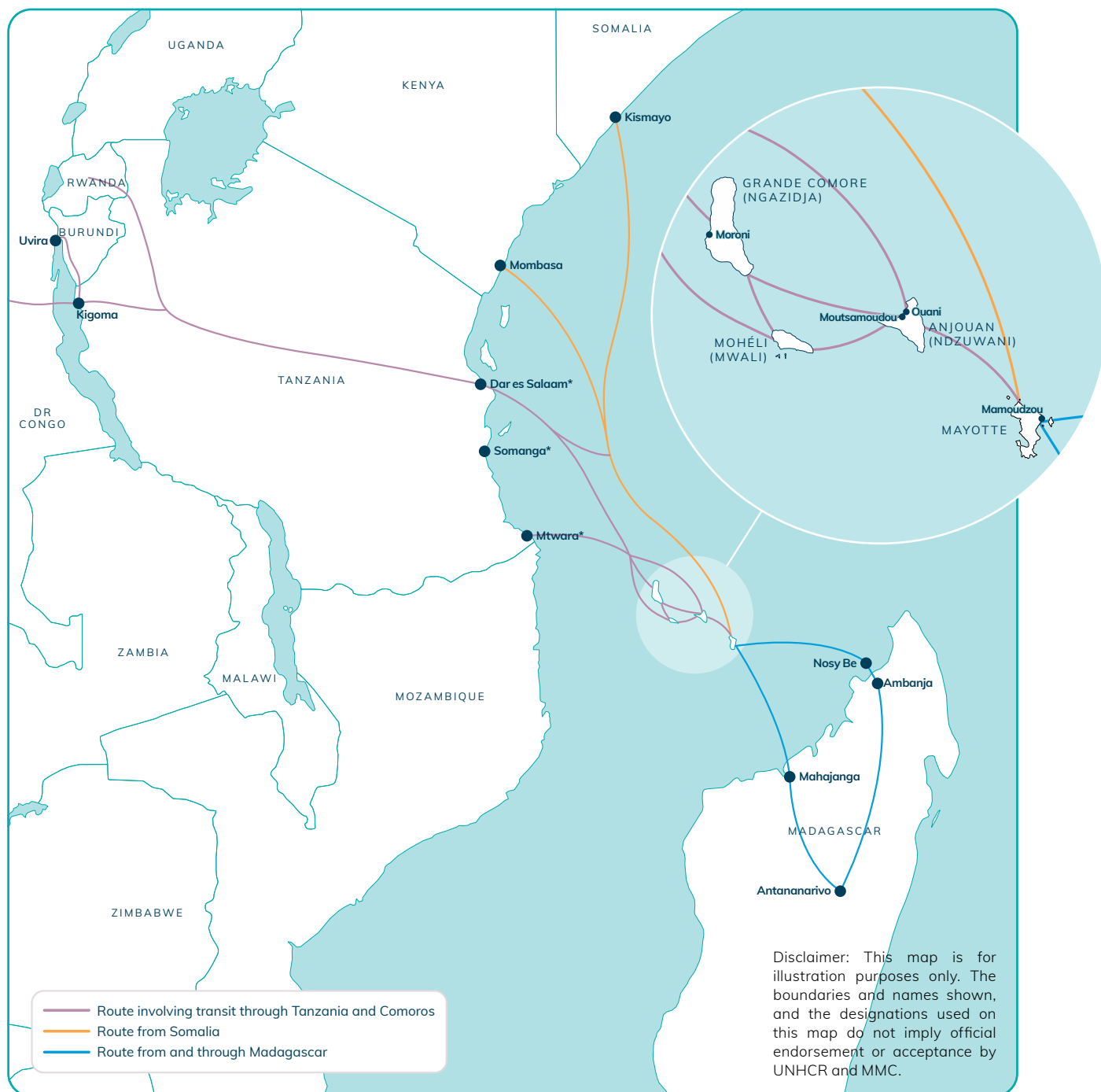
The reasons are economic, people are fleeing poverty in Madagascar. They find that in Comoros you can earn a bit more. They can save money and send it back home to their families. Eventually, even those who work here [in Comoros] may want to go to Mayotte, though. Malagasy who come here usually do find work sooner or later. Those who end up in irregular working situations may face poor working conditions and get underpaid. There are Malagasy intermediaries who intervene to support their case and demand for better conditions.

(Key informant representing the Malagasy Diaspora Association in Comoros)

19 France Info (2024, 31 October). [DECRYPTAGE. Qu'est ce que le visa Balladur qui fait à nouveau polémique parmi les élus mahorais ?](#)

5. Routes and intentions

Map 2. Overview of the different branches of the Western Indian Ocean Route, including key locations of transit and destination



* Departures were reported to take place along the Tanzanian coast, including from remote locations, with Dar es Salaam, Somanga, and Mtwara being cited as key locations of transit.

Transit through Tanzania and Comoros

Refugee and migrant respondents from the Great Lakes region, primarily Congolese and Burundians, often crossed Lake Tanganyika prior to entering Tanzania through the Kigoma region, after which most transited through Dar es Salaam (37), followed by Mtwara (8) and Somanga (6). The coast between Dar es Salaam and Mtwara served as the departure point for those taking the sea route to Mayotte. The majority of smuggler boats appeared to depart from remote locations along this coastline, with respondents noting they were not able to pinpoint exactly where they had departed from.

Boat journeys from the Tanzanian coast appeared to take two different forms, based on respondent accounts: travel by smaller to mid-size smuggler boats, and by stowing away on larger commercial vessels. For the latter, two respondents cited using cargo boats transporting cement and wood from Mtwara to Comoros, and they implied that smugglers had entered into agreements with the captains. While it remains unclear how many refugees and migrants take such journeys on cargo boats, and these cases appeared more exceptional, one 34-year-old Congolese woman detailed how she travelled on such a boat to Comoros.

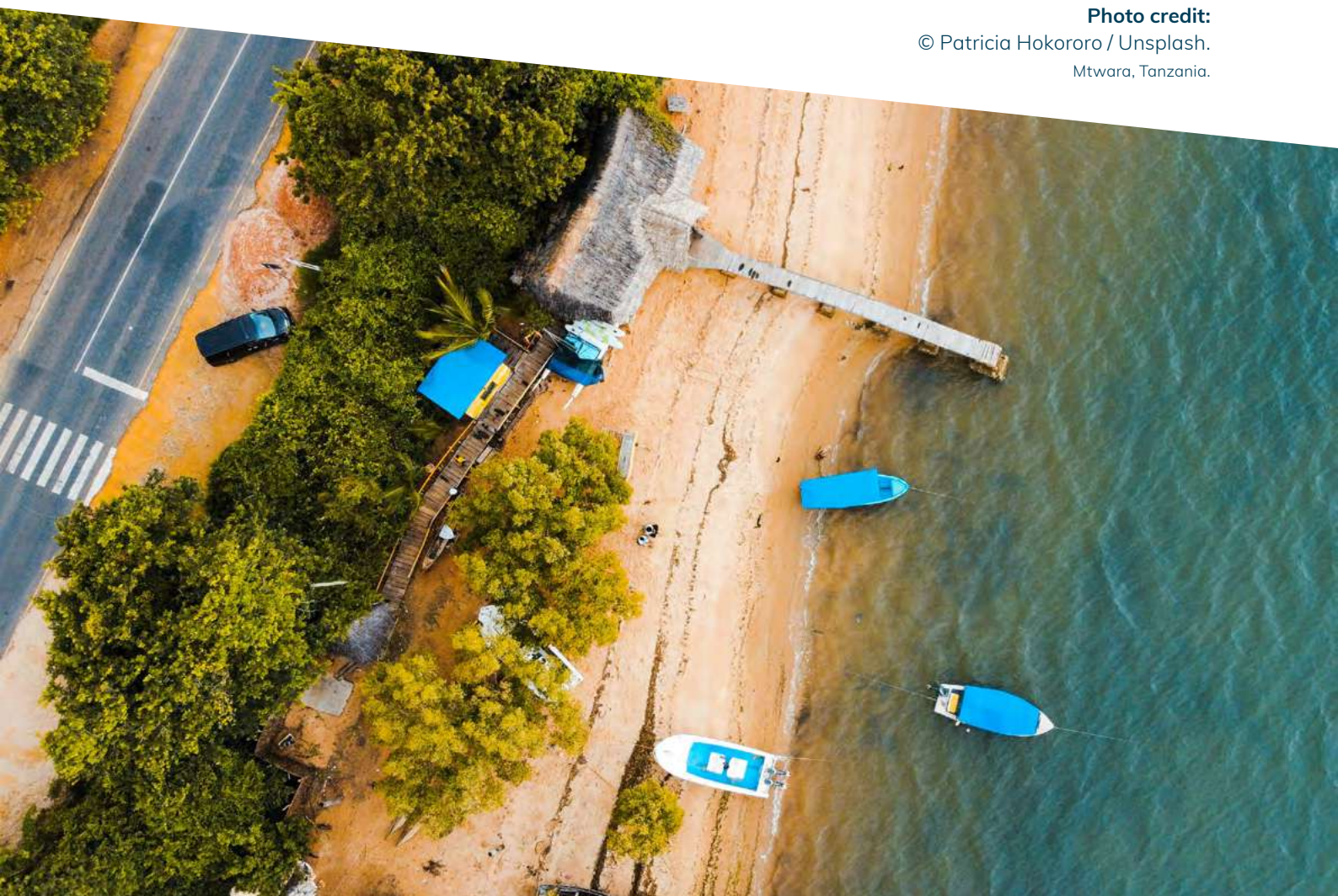
I got on a boat that was transporting wood. We were a small group. When we were at sea, it got some problems, and we were stuck. Some Comorians came and helped us. They fixed the boat and then we were brought here [in Anjouan]. The people in charge of the boat told us that they were taking us to Mayotte, but they left us here.

(34-year-old Congolese woman in Comoros)

Photo credit:

© Patricia Hokororo / Unsplash.

Mtwara, Tanzania.



Most accounts from interviewed people on the move revealed that smugglers had transferred them into smaller boats once in Comorian waters, in proximity of Grande Comore, to mitigate the risk of being intercepted by the Comorian Coast Guard. Many of these smaller boats disembarked in the islands of Grande Comore, Mohéli, or Anjouan, while some boats directly moved onward to Mayotte and avoided transit through Comoros. A key informant representing the Comorian Coast Guard noted that most boats departing from Tanzania did not reach Mayotte in one journey as they would run out of fuel, although interviews with refugees and migrants in Mayotte reveal that direct journeys from East Africa to Mayotte do sometimes occur without transit in Comoros. These different accounts suggest the existence of different smuggling networks along these routes and/or of smugglers devising diverging pathways to avoid detection and arrest.

For those who arrived in Grande Comore, Mohéli, or Anjouan, refugees and migrants described being brought by smugglers to remote, inland locations and temporarily housed until the next segment of their sea journeys. Moroni, the country's capital city on Grande Comore, was not a preferred transit point as respondents perceived a greater risk of being arrested by authorities. Key informants representing both the Comorian Coast Guard and the National Police reported an increase during the last years in the arrival of boats in Mohéli, which they considered to be the least controlled island out of the three. They framed this as a strategic shift in the route by smugglers to avoid detection.

The same key informants explained that refugees and migrants' eventual departures from Comoros to Mayotte are mainly organised from Anjouan, which is geographically closest to Mayotte. In this way, those arriving in Grande Comore or Mohéli must transit to Anjouan, often on ill-equipped small boats, better known as *kwassa kwassa*. These short, inter-island transits are organised by the same smugglers who disembark refugees and migrants in Comoros. The last stretch of the journey from Anjouan to Mayotte, they added, tends to be organised separately and dominated by independent local smugglers. Refugees and migrants are often joined by Comorian nationals to make this crossing.²⁰ These sea journeys are highly perilous and carried out on the same *kwassa kwassa*.

We left Dar es Salaam on a motorcycle with the smuggler, traveling through rough roads until we reached a forest. After walking for several kilometres, we arrived at a beach where we boarded a small boat. After three hours, we switched to a larger boat, on which we spent three days without food or drinking water. [...] Eventually, we transferred to a smaller boat, a kwassa kwassa, along with 60 other people—men, women, and children—most of them were Congolese. We had to change boats a fourth time, with women and children in one kwassa and men in another. We thought we were headed for Comoros, but we ended up in Mayotte instead.

(26-year-old Congolese woman in Mayotte)

Refugee and migrant respondents reported that the journey to Mayotte sometimes get interrupted by arrest and detention in Comoros. A 34-year-old Congolese woman in Anjouan detailed how the Comorian Coast Guard arrested her and others upon their arrival in Anjouan. After her arrest, she was detained for three days at a police compound, after which she was brought to Caritas to receive assistance. Key informants stated that Comoros does not have largescale detention facilities and, as such, larger groups of refugees and migrants intercepted by authorities may be divided over several police facilities, including make-shift detention centres and available shelters.²¹ Based on key informant accounts and interviews with refugees and migrants in Mayotte, it appears that most who are arrested sooner or later do find a way to continue their journey towards Mayotte, although the process of their release is not clear. One key informant suggested that people either escape their shelters or manage to pay bribes to secure their release, or they are released by authorities who are unable to afford to keep them in custody.

Lastly, while much less common, those with sufficient financial means may opt to fly directly to Comoros from key connecting airports on the continent, primarily Addis Ababa. A Sudanese man interviewed in Moroni noted that he and his family had arrived using air travel and obtaining a tourist visa on arrival. Later on, they were able to extend their stay and apply for residency, although he described this as a long and arduous process. He noted that their arrival prior to the war in Sudan meant that it had been relatively easy and straightforward to obtain a tourist visa at the airport. He had heard from others that in 2023-24 it had become more difficult for Sudanese to go through this process, as they would be categorised as refugees and asylum seekers with 'a potential interest in onward movement to Mayotte', in a similar way as Congolese and Burundians.

20 RFI (2021, 6 October). [Comores : des migrants du continent arrêtés à Anjouan en tentant de rejoindre Mayotte](#).

21 It should be noted that Comoros is not a signatory to the [1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees](#) and, hence, those apprehended are not assessed for any asylum claims.

Transit through Madagascar and from Madagascar to Mayotte

The second route runs from Madagascar to Mayotte, at times via Comoros. It is used mainly by Malagasy seeking to leave their country and by other nationals who use the country as a point of transit.²² Madagascar serves as a point of transit not only because of its proximity to Mayotte, but also because most nationalities can benefit from a tourist visa on arrival. As a result, arrivals are largely authorised and occur by air to the airports of Antananarivo, the country's capital, and Nosy Be, an island off the northwest coast. Key informants reported that refugees and migrants arrive in the country on a tourist visa with a return ticket to avoid detection and then journeys become irregular and more precarious once they embark on sea crossings towards Comoros and Mayotte.

Madagascar's northwest coast is where boat departures primarily take place, from remote locations in proximity to the cities of Mahajanga, Ambanja, and Nosy Be.²³ Alongside Malagasy nationals, who are mostly from the northwest coast themselves, other nationalities engaging in these journeys have included Somalis, Ethiopians, and Kenyans,²⁴ as well as Yemenis, Syrians, and Iraqis.²⁵ It is likely that because of the visa-on-arrival policy, and Antananarivo's connectedness to other key airport hubs, the onward and mixed movement landscape in Madagascar is more diverse than in Comoros, in terms of the variety of nationalities. In Antananarivo, a key informant representing a local civil society organisation supporting refugees and asylum seekers, Centre de Développement d'Andohatopenaka (CDA), noted that their caseload included West and East African nationalities, as well as Yemenis, Syrians, Pakistanis, and Afghans.

Similar to movements between Anjouan and Mayotte, which involve both Comorians and other nationalities, Malagasy nationals appear to be using the same routes and smuggling networks as refugees and migrants transiting the country. More evidence is needed on the experiences of refugees and migrants in transit within Madagascar as little is known about their routes within the country, after landing in the capital, and the time spent in coastal areas prior to their departure.

It should be noted that not all people on the move intend or are able to transit Madagascar for Mayotte. Madagascar has no national asylum system in place, while work on formulating refugee legislation has started, but it does protect refugees and asylum seekers from expulsion or forced return to their origin countries.²⁶ The same key informant representing CDA explained that a considerable number seek to access asylum with UNHCR, rather than engage in irregular and precarious onward movement across the sea. In this way, locations deemed points of transit along the Western Indian Ocean Route can also serve as points of destination or temporary destination.

We arrived here in Madagascar, and we first applied for asylum here.... We are staying here only by the grace of God, but we have no source of income and nowhere else to go. Our only hope is to get resettled somewhere else.
(19-year-old Yemeni man in Madagascar)

22 Ambassade de Madagascar en France (2021). [Visas d'entrée et de séjour à Madagascar](#).

23 IOM (2023). Cartographie des points de vulnérabilités en matière de gestion de la sûreté maritime et la sécurité des approches maritimes sur les côtes Nord-Ouest de Madagascar.

24 L'Info.Re (2024, 2 April). [Départ clandestin vers Mayotte : 25 personnes interpellées à Ambanja \(Madagascar\)](#).

25 L'Info Kwezi (2024, 1 April). [Immigration africaine : nouvelle voie migratoire de Madagascar vers Mayotte](#).

26 UNHCR (2025). [UNHCR Submission for the Universal Periodic Review - Madagascar - UPR 48th Session](#).

From Somalia to Mayotte

All 26 Somalis who were interviewed in Mayotte reported arriving there directly without transiting through Tanzania or Comoros, although one individual had briefly stopped at the Kenyan coast. They all had departed from Kismayo, in southern Somalia, and had used different sea vessels, including larger and smaller boats and at times making several transfers between boats while at sea, to complete their journeys to Mayotte. They detailed the particularly harsh conditions of these long journeys, with some citing spending over a month at sea. Some were eventually rescued or intercepted at sea and brought to Mayotte thereafter. While further research is required to shed light on these journeys undertaken by Somalis, the harsh conditions and considerable time spent at sea appear to make it the riskiest branch of the Western Indian Ocean Route. A shipwreck involving two boats with Somalis off the coast of Madagascar in November 2024 corroborates the occurrence of movements from Somalia across a vast stretch of the Indian Ocean. Survivors from these wrecks explained that they had to survive on raw fish and sea water, while one woman who passed away following these extreme conditions was thrown overboard by smugglers.²⁷

I came directly from Somalia to here. I spent over a month at sea before arriving. I hadn't set foot on land during that time and changed boats multiple times. At some point, while we were in the small boat, a big boat came to rescue us and since then I do not remember anything. I think we were brought here.

(23-year-old Somali woman in Mayotte)

Photo credit:

© Tommy Trenchard /
Panos Pictures (2019).

Anjouan (Ndzwanii), Comoros – A
boat with Comorian migrants arrives
back in Anjouan, from Mayotte.



²⁷ Mohamed, B. (2024, 1 December). [Op Cit.](#)

Future intentions and aspirations

Respondents interviewed in transit locations in Tanzania, Comoros, and Madagascar demonstrated diverse movement intentions and aspirations. While some noted that they still intended to reach Mayotte after the challenges encountered along the route, others had changed their destination intentions and no longer sought to move onwards along the Western Indian Ocean Route. For those in the latter group, they mostly noted they were not willing to endure additional risky boat journeys. At the same time, however, many of these respondents explained that remaining in their current location and seeking asylum was not a viable option, owing to limited protection and assistance regimes in these countries. None of the respondents intended to return home, reiterating the persistence of their initial drivers of departure, often linked to conflict, violence, and persecution. As such, most aspired to be resettled or to find alternative legal pathways out of countries of transit, counting on the support of UNHCR, other protection actors, and governments to assist them.

I am waiting for UNHCR to tell me the way forward. I want to go to a place where people don't discriminate against me. I don't want to stay here as there is no assistance for refugees. I don't think that they plan to give someone asylum here.

(34-year-old Congolese woman in Comoros)

For those interviewed in Mayotte, all intended to remain and many aspired to move to mainland France over the long-term. Respondents in Mayotte represented a variety of different cohorts: some had already been on the island for more than two years, while a majority had arrived in 2023 and 2024, with some having arrived only days or weeks prior to being interviewed. Despite this diversity, respondents revealed a number of similarities with respect to their intentions. All had either applied for asylum or were intending to do so, while ten respondents noted their asylum applications had been rejected at least once and sought to appeal or stay without authorisation in Mayotte. 14 out of 45 respondents in Mayotte actively voiced mainland France was their preferred destination because they perceived greater opportunities there in the long-term and better protection from xenophobic incidents (also see Section 7). Similarly to respondents interviewed in transit locations, none in Mayotte expressed an intention to return to their countries of origin.

While movements of Comorians and Malagasy to Mayotte were primarily driven by economic and socio-cultural reasons, a considerable number of them also sought asylum in Mayotte, demonstrating their mixed drivers. In 2022, 50% of the 4,000 asylum claims in Mayotte were filed by Comorians, and just over 20% by Malagasy. However, in 2023, these numbers shifted and 49% of asylum applications were filed by people from the Great Lakes region, including 38% from DR Congo, 7% from Rwanda, and 5% from Burundi.²⁸ This suggests the rising importance of the branch of the Western Indian Ocean Route running from mainland Africa through Tanzania and Comoros.

28 OFPRA (2024). [Rapport d'activité 2023](#).

6. Interactions with smugglers and smuggling dynamics

Smuggling networks in Tanzania along the Western Indian Ocean Route extend to the Kigoma region, a major refugee-hosting location where refugees and migrants from the Great Lakes Region often enter the country. In some cases, interviewed refugees and migrants highlighted they were approached by smugglers directly in Kigoma (see Map 2), after which they transited through Dar es Salaam prior to being brought to a more remote location along the Tanzanian coast where a Comorian smuggler organised the sea crossing. A 30-year-old Congolese woman interviewed in Dar es Salaam detailed that after she arrived in Kigoma, she did not have information about where to go in order to seek assistance and protection, and she fully relied on a smuggler whom she met to make the decision to leave Kigoma and move onwards to Dar es Salaam.

When we got to Dar es Salaam, the old man [smuggler from Kigoma] was on the phone. Then we got out of the car, and he told this new person that I was the one he had told him about. [...] He came back two days later and told me that he deals with people who have money and takes them to Comoros. After I told him that I had no money, he offered me an alternative where he would facilitate my transport and then I would pay him back once I had found a job.

(30-year-old Congolese woman in Tanzania)

I took a boat from Uvira [Democratic Republic of the Congo] to Kigoma, which took 24 hours. Once I arrived in Kigoma, I took a bus to Dar es Salaam. I did not pay for my trip [from Goma to Tanzania]. There were [Congolese] smugglers helping many persons like me to flee [DR Congo] for free.

(32-year-old Congolese woman in Mayotte)

In other cases, Dar es Salaam, and particularly the Kariakoo market, appeared as a key hub for recruitment. 21 respondents interviewed in Tanzania, Comoros, and Mayotte reported that they had been approached by smugglers at this market, and some detailed how they had first learned about the possibility of onward journeys to Mayotte there. A 31-year-old Congolese woman interviewed in Mayotte explained she had lived in a constant fear of detention in Tanzania because of her unauthorised status. She had decided not to apply for asylum after a Tanzanian smuggler she met in Dar es Salaam told her it would be impossible to get refugee status, and that her only option was to leave the country. The same person subsequently persuaded her to travel by sea and organised her boat journey.

Such accounts suggest that smugglers and their brokers are playing a key role in prompting onward movements along the Western Indian Ocean Route, to a point where they are actively shaping decision-making, routes, and intended destinations. This stands in stark contrast with other mixed movement routes transecting East Africa, such as the Northern Route (or Central Mediterranean Route) towards North Africa and Europe, and the Eastern Route towards the Arabian Peninsula, where smugglers have little to no influence on movement decision-making. Instead, on these routes, smugglers are proactively engaged by refugees and migrants to carry out their pre-identified movement plans, with many having an intended destination in mind from the moment of their departure.²⁹

Overall, respondents' accounts reveal that they lacked access to information on their rights, the protection environment, and assistance in Tanzania. Combined with information received from fellow refugees and migrants on a shrinking protection space and the risk of deportation (see Section 4), respondents appeared more reliant on information from smugglers and were vulnerable to disinformation. Smugglers appeared to make use of this information vacuum by promising to bring respondents somewhere where they could access protection and jobs, at times not specifying the destination, and telling respondents they could pay after getting settled at their destinations.

29 See, for example, MMC (2024). [4Mi Snapshot: Role of smugglers in decision-making and journeys of Eritrean, Ethiopian, and South Sudanese migrants in Port Sudan](#); MMC (2024). [Necessity rather than trust: Smuggling dynamics on the Eastern Route through Yemen](#).

It was on one day when I was in Kariakoo market... I was helping somebody there, doing some work [...] This person called me to come to him and said that he could hear me talking another language. This man asked me a lot of questions. He said there was a place where he would like to take me, a place where we would be assisted. But still, about Mayotte, I had no idea. Up until now I don't even know where it is.

(38-year-old Congolese man in Tanzania)

A number of respondents across the various branches of the Western Indian Ocean Route noted they were not aware they were going to Comoros and/or Mayotte prior to getting on a boat. Testimonies from Mayotte reveal that some continued to be unaware of their geographical location until the point of arrival. Indeed, 48 respondents, including Somalis who undertook sea journeys directly to Mayotte, reported not being aware of their destinations.

I didn't make any decision; my uncles arranged the trip and assured me that I would be in a safe place far from Somalia. Even they didn't know where the smugglers were taking me. [...] I had never heard of Mayotte before arriving here.

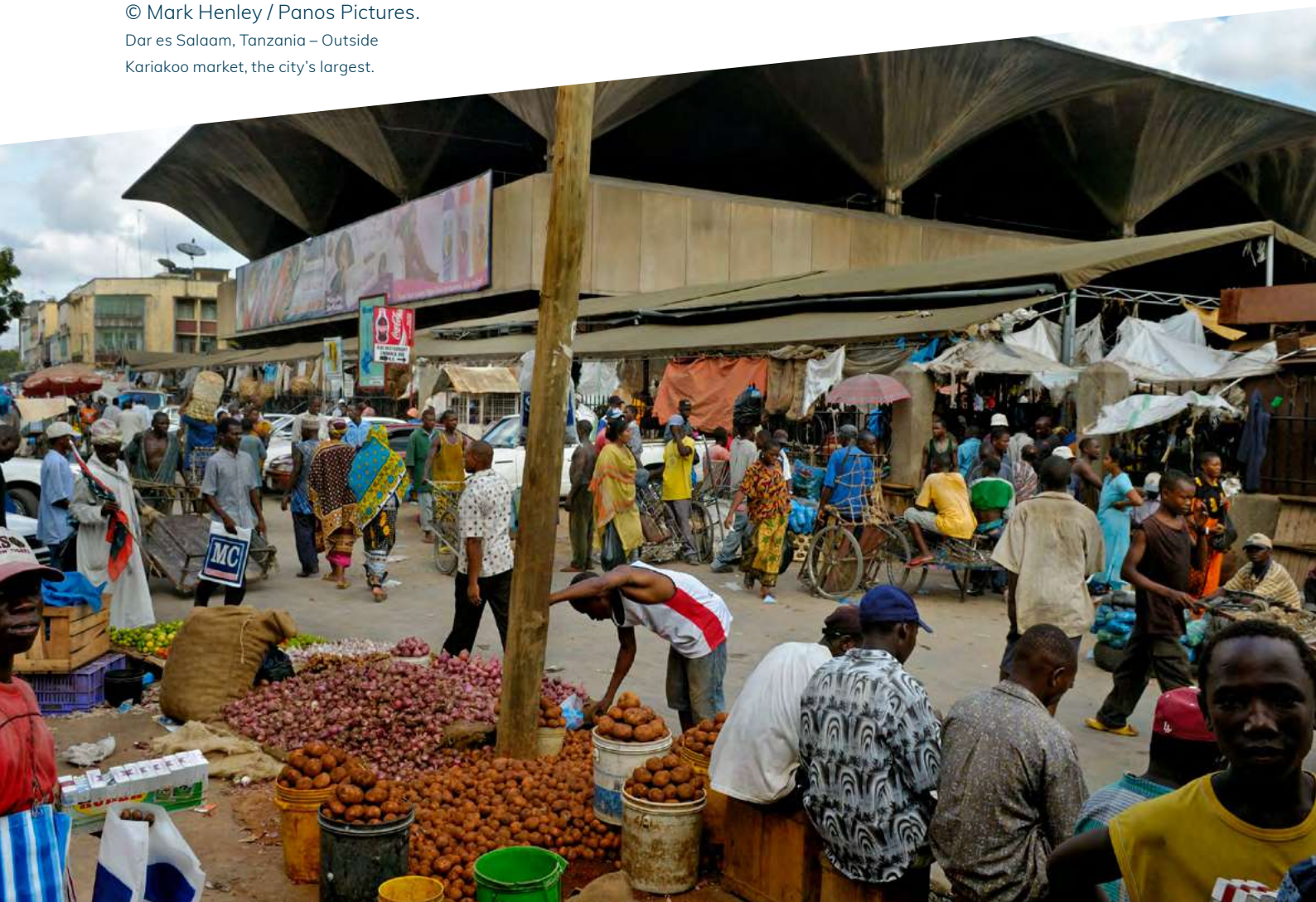
(20-year-old Somali man in Mayotte)

Photo credit:

© Mark Henley / Panos Pictures.

Dar es Salaam, Tanzania – Outside

Kariakoo market, the city's largest.



Interviews with people on the move suggest that their smugglers in Tanzania had transnational connections, primarily with Comorian smuggler counterparts, who controlled the sea crossings between the Tanzanian coast and Comoros. Moreover, smuggling dynamics between these countries appear highly organised, with people on the move transiting quickly through locations, further limiting the accurate pinpointing of the numbers of people moving along this route. As mentioned previously, smugglers facilitated departures from Tanzania in larger smuggling boats, or on cargo ships, towards the Comorian waters. Upon reaching Comorian waters, refugees and migrants were transferred to smaller boats for shorter journeys to land. Depending on decisions taken by smugglers, the boats might reach any of the three Comorian islands or directly travel to Mayotte. Both respondents and Comorian key informants stated that smugglers took decisions about the route and stopping points 'on the spot' to avoid detection. As the below quote demonstrates, at departure points in Tanzania, and at sea when shifting to smaller boats, there is a risk of family separation, with smugglers not taking care to keep family members on the same boats. In some cases, this led to children becoming separated from their families and remaining behind in Tanzania or in Comoros, exposing them to great risk.

It was me, my mother and my siblings. We left Rwanda together, but we got separated here in Tanzania, in Dar es Salaam. I am now all alone. We got separated at the boats. They went on the first one, but it got full, so I had to wait for the next one. That one had some technical issues [and had to return], and I did not speak Kiswahili then.

(16-year-old Burundian young man in Tanzania)

Refugees and migrants' interactions with their smugglers were at times marked by abuse and misinformation.

Some recounted instances in which smugglers did not honour their agreement to bring respondents to Mayotte. These instances seemed more common among respondents who had entered into 'pay later agreements' with their smugglers, involving refugees and migrants' paying for their journeys after their arrival in Mayotte, upon finding work. Along other mixed movement routes, particularly the Central Mediterranean Route, such agreements increased refugees and migrants' vulnerability to forced or exploitive work at the hands of smugglers, and in more extreme cases, trafficking in persons.³⁰ In the case of three Congolese in Dar es Salaam, the 'pay later' business model led to disagreement between the smugglers themselves en route. The respondents explained how, after having been at sea for several days, the boat returned to the Tanzanian coast after the smuggler in charge decided that he had not received enough advance payments to carry on with the journey to Comorian waters.

Even among respondents who had paid smugglers all or part of the costs of the journey up front, some recounted how smugglers had assured them that they were headed to Mayotte, only to abandon them in Anjouan. Since respondents were unfamiliar with the geography of the islands, they would disembark the boats believing that they were in Mayotte, only to realise that they had been abandoned without instructions on how to complete their journey. This implies that any kind of payment arrangement with smugglers is risky and subject to abuse.

From Tanzania, I got on a boat that was transporting wood. We were a small group on the boat. When we were on the boat, it got some problems, and we were stuck. Some Comorians came and helped us. They fixed the boat and then we were brought here [to Anjouan]. The captains told us that they were taking us to Mayotte, but they left us here.

(34-year-old Congolese woman in Comoros)

In other cases, respondents detailed how their smugglers guarded them in secluded, inland locations in Comoros to avoid getting caught by the authorities. Some respondents described being abandoned by their smugglers in these locations, while others mentioned being housed there for short periods while they waited for smugglers to arrange the next phase of their journeys. Respondents' lack of access to information in Comoros markedly increased their vulnerability to being coerced into taking risky *kwassa kwassa* journeys onwards.

30 See, for example, Save the Children (2022). [Tipping Points to Turning Points: How can programmes and policies better respond to the risks of child trafficking and exploitation on the Central Mediterranean Route?](#)

Once in Comoros, I tried calling a contact number given to me by my friend's husband, but I began to panic because the people around me were saying that we might be caught by the Comorian authorities. Eventually, a bus came to pick us up, taking us to a secluded location behind the mountains, where we hid for three days. Later, we were told that there was no place for us in Comoros, and that we would be taken to Mayotte.

(32-year-old Congolese woman in Mayotte)

Key informants interviewed in Comoros overall agreed that smugglers in Anjouan generally operate independently from the networks that run between Tanzania and Comoros. This meant in practice that some respondents in Anjouan found themselves having to negotiate the last leg of their journeys with new smugglers. Following the discussion above about refugees and migrants being kept for brief periods in secluded locations, the same key informants suggested that during this waiting period, the smugglers responsible for journeys from Tanzania to Comoros passed their refugee and migrant clients over to different smugglers operating between Anjouan and Mayotte, with whom respondents had had no prior contact.

The cost of the journey from Anjouan to Mayotte was reportedly higher than the other legs because the risk of being intercepted was perceived as greater. Smugglers who are caught have their boats confiscated and risk jail time. In addition, according to anti-smuggling legislation in Comoros in 2024, smugglers can face sentences of up to ten years imprisonment.³¹ As a result, smugglers appear to factor in these risks when setting their prices. Insights on the ground revealed that smugglers may try to avoid arrest by recruiting minors as 'captains' on the *kwassa kwassa*, while they themselves pretend to be among the refugee and migrant clients who are trying to reach Mayotte, in case of interception.

As for journeys originating from and transiting through Madagascar, an independent network of Malagasy smugglers appears to arrange journeys for both Malagasy nationals and foreigners from the northwestern coast to Mayotte. The number of boats intercepted by the Malagasy Coast Guard at coastal departure points has reportedly increased in recent years, according to key informants, which could indicate a growing popularity of this segment of the route via Madagascar. Similarly to Comorians, Malagasy nationals intercepted in Mayotte risk deportation back to Madagascar.³²

In the case of departures from Somalia directly to Mayotte, Somali smugglers also seem to operate with a certain degree of independence in locations of origin. At sea, Somali respondents noted they had to switch vessels, at which point they encountered refugees and migrants from other countries. As noted, many had no idea that the destination was Mayotte and would change boats at the directive of the smugglers. Four Somali FGD participants disclosed that they were (mis)informed they were headed for Kenya, instead. Some reported they experienced a language barrier with the smugglers, who would only speak in Swahili. **While more evidence is needed to confirm these findings, it appears that departures from Somalia to Mayotte could be connecting at sea with the smuggling network established in Tanzania and Comoros, confirming the regional scope of the Western Indian Ocean Route across a vast section of the Indian Ocean region.**

We had communication problems with the smugglers because they spoke Swahili, especially when I had to switch boats four or five times. I believe they were from Tanzania or Kenya. We had a few arguments because we couldn't understand each other.

(29-year-old Somali man in Mayotte)

31 Le Journal de Mayotte (2024, 24 June). [Comores : les députés adoptent une loi sévère contre le trafic de migrants.](#)

32 Moov. (2024, 7 November). [Tentative de migration clandestine - 25 individus rapatriés après une interception à Mayotte.](#)

7. Protection risks and needs along the journey

While transiting through Tanzania, a majority of Congolese and Burundian respondents perceived detention as a major risk they had to navigate due to a lack of (valid) documentation. In order to mitigate this, respondents recounted strategies for staying hidden to avoid encountering law enforcement, while inadvertently also staying hidden from providers of protection, assistance, and information about their rights in the country. Their challenges in Tanzania were compounded by not knowing how to navigate the asylum application process or having received information that they would not be eligible for asylum, as mentioned in earlier sections. Respondents became vulnerable to smugglers who used this information gap to their advantage to recruit refugees and migrants for journeys along the Western Indian Ocean Route, and to pressure them into more precarious ‘pay later’ arrangements which left them vulnerable to being abandoned in places of transit later on in the route.

I did not register [as an asylum seeker] in Tanzania because I never heard about it. After spending a year and a half in Tanzania, we had to leave because [our host's] neighbours found out that she was hosting us illegally and she was worried about getting into trouble with the authorities.

(30-year-old Congolese woman in Mayotte)

We stayed hidden because we were afraid of being caught by the Tanzanian police. [A] woman advised me to go to Comoros, as it would be safer for us. We stayed there for 3-4 months. We had taken a boat from Goma to Tanzania, and then a bus to Dar es Salaam. Leaving Tanzania for Comoros was a terrible experience.

(38-year-old Congolese woman in Mayotte)

Aside from the risks of arrest and detention, other perceived risks in Tanzania were mostly gender specific, and highlight the high protection risks faced by women on the move, particularly in places of transit. Four Congolese women stated that they were forced to engage in sex work and that they experienced sexual harassment and abuse while in Tanzania. A 23-year-old Congolese woman interviewed in Mayotte detailed her experiences while working as a housekeeper in Dar es Salaam. Because of sexual harassment by her employer, she had to leave her job, which was also her source of shelter. Eventually, the fear of being homeless with no valid documentation triggered her to move onwards. In addition, children on the move faced risks such as a lack of access to basic needs, which was primarily linked to the limited access to livelihood opportunities for their caregivers. As mentioned earlier, children also experienced family separation during sea crossings with some being left behind in Tanzania with no protection safeguards in place.

After staying there for two months, my mother informed us that we were going to leave but she did not have money to pay for all of us to take the trip. So, one person had to stay behind. I volunteered to stay behind because I was the oldest. I was 14 years old. I couldn't let one of my brothers stay behind as they still needed to be with our mother.

(17-year-old Burundian young man in Comoros)

After leaving Tanzania, **respondents noted that the harsh sea journeys further increased their vulnerabilities.** Most reported they had faced starvation and dehydration when supplies on the boats ran out. In such cases, respondents fully relied on the smugglers who were transporting them to provide food and water. One respondent noted that their smugglers sourced their food on board through fishing, while another detailed he had to pay an additional fee of 30 USD in exchange for some food and water. A 23-year-old Somali woman noted she had to survive on drinking sea water for days. **Some added that their smugglers were physically violent and robbed them once supplies on the boat had run out, adding on to the already perilous nature of these long sea journeys.**

I witnessed mistreatment and violence during my journey. The smuggler, in the middle of the sea, stole our belongings, beat us, and threatened to throw us into the ocean if we refused to hand over our jewellery and other valuable items. Women and children were beaten and had their hands tied because they tried to defend us.
(30-year-old Burundian woman in Mayotte)

Some people were mistreated by the smugglers, as we weren't given enough food or water, and there were occasional quarrels.
(29-year-old Somali man in Mayotte)

Photo credit:

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Anjouan (Ndzواني), Comoros – A man who did not want to be identified at his home in Anjouan. He was once deported from Mayotte, has family currently living there, and lost one of his best friends when fire broke out on a 'kwassa kwassa', a fast fishing boat used to smuggle people from Comoros to Mayotte.



A lack of access to basic needs including food, water, and medication during these sea journeys, as well as the often-unsafe conditions of the boats themselves, ultimately increased the risk of fatalities. A 25-year-old Somali man reported that a woman with diabetes had died onboard and mentioned that another woman had been thrown overboard by smugglers, without providing additional details. Two Somalis relayed that they were packed on top of each other in the smaller boats, with many of the women and children on board falling ill and having no space to distance themselves.

The journey was difficult and terrifying. If I had known it would be this hard, I wouldn't have taken the risk. I feel like I'm on the edge of losing my mind. This was the most painful and horrific experience of my life.

(25-year-old Somali woman in Mayotte)

Comorian and Malagasy key informants noted that refugees and migrants transiting through Comoros and Madagascar risked arrest and detention upon interception. This was corroborated by respondents detailing their experiences of arrest in Comoros. A key informant from UNHCR noted that the standard practice is for authorities to detain unauthorised arrivals in informal detention facilities, leading to elevated risks of abuse, malnutrition, and a lack of basic hygiene. They added that detention in Comoros is especially harmful to children, negatively impacting their overall development as well as their mental, physical, and psychological well-being. For Madagascar, more evidence is required to shed light on the risks of arrest and detention while transiting the country. A key informant representing UNODC noted that upon carrying out arrests, Comorian and Malagasy authorities are unlikely to check for the presence of vulnerable refugees and human trafficking victims among those intercepted, leaving them at particularly high risk and without access to services.³³ In Anjouan, intercepted respondents eventually found an alternative to being held by police at Caritas, which offered them shelter.

When we got to Anjouan we were arrested by the Coast Guard. They took us to their office. We were not put in jail, but we were not allowed to leave the compound. We were there for three days. They would feed us, but we slept outside. Then we were brought to Caritas.

(34-year-old Congolese woman in Comoros)

Furthermore, Comorian key informants argued that the small Comorian civil society does not have the capacity to support and offer protection services to vulnerable refugees and migrants, who are then left with little other recourse than to engage in onward movement. Key informants in Madagascar also perceived a limited presence of civil society actors to respond to the needs of vulnerable refugees and migrants in areas of transit in northwest Madagascar, contrary to Antananarivo, where CDA aids a diverse cohort of asylum seekers and refugees. More research and a mapping of service providers in areas of transit in both countries could further determine how refugees and migrants' protection experiences might be shaped by persisting needs due to a lack of access to services.

Upon arrival and during their stay in Mayotte, refugees and migrants continue to face risks. **Those who end up in an irregular situation or whose asylum applications are rejected receive an order to leave the French territory.** Subsequently, Comorians and Malagasy in particular are subject to immediate deportation. In the case of Comorians, key informants representing the Comorian National Police and the Coast Guard detailed that deportees are brought back to Anjouan by boat on a daily basis, after which most are likely to continue trying to return to Mayotte. In October 2024, the French Interior Minister Bruno Retailleau ordered the authorities in Mayotte to work on the return of Congolese (DRC) in irregular situations or whose asylum claim was rejected; at the same time, partnerships with Burundian and Rwandese authorities on the return of their nationals were also being established.³⁴

Key informants noted the limited access of refugees and migrants in Mayotte to safe and durable housing, which was corroborated by several respondents who had lived in slum-like conditions. The earlier mentioned 'Operation Wuambushu' disproportionately affected refugees and migrants by demolishing their informal settlements.³⁵ Media reports have argued refugees and migrants were also particularly hit by the impact of cyclone Chido, in December

³³ The qualitative data collected along this route did not demonstrate a particular incidence of human trafficking dynamics along this route as, for example, the case along the Eastern Route. However, further in-depth research would be required to further firm up evidence on the existence of such dynamics along the Western Indian Ocean Route.

³⁴ France24 (2024, 3 October). France orders more deportation flights to Africa from Indian Ocean island of Mayotte.

³⁵ Jesuthasan, M. (2023, 31 May). ['Insulted, humiliated, hunted': plight of migrants as slums razed in French territory of Mayotte](#). The Guardian.

2024, as most were living in informal housing, which was destroyed.³⁶ In some cases, respondents noted they had been able to avoid staying in informal housing after having received shelter support from the local authorities and the NGOs Solidarité Mayotte and Coallia.

We did not stay there [in an informal situation in the Cavani stadium]. Two weeks after our arrival in Mayotte, Solidarité Mayotte secured a room for us.

(31-year-old Congolese woman in Mayotte)

Furthermore, **respondents noted that lack of access to resources and employment in Mayotte increased their vulnerabilities and made them dependent on assistance**, while others cited that they faced challenges when trying to obtain work permits, even after their asylum cases had been processed.³⁷

I believe that what people truly need is stability rather than just housing. They should be provided with residence permits and given the opportunity to work. Ensuring stability and allowing them to work would reduce the burden on the government.

(39-year-old Congolese man in Mayotte)

Given limited access to livelihood opportunities in Mayotte, three women reported feeling that sex work was their only option. These accounts demonstrate that a lack of access to livelihood opportunities not only made some respondents more reliant on aid, but also generated gender-specific risks, particularly for caregivers who hold the responsibility of providing for their children.

At times, I resort to prostitution to provide for my children, as I don't have the means to support them otherwise.

(45-year-old Burundian woman in Mayotte)

Life here is very difficult, especially for single mothers. Many women are forced into prostitution to provide for their children.

(38-year-old Congolese woman in Mayotte)

A key informant representing UNODC noted that unaccompanied and separated Comorian children are at high risk of experiencing sexual exploitation in Mayotte while living in informal housing without caregiver(s) and with no access to a support system. This is corroborated by the 2024 Report for France of the US Department of State Trafficking in Persons Office, which noted that government efforts to address trafficking risks for these children remained 'inadequate'.³⁸

Finally, respondents pointed to xenophobia and violence against refugees and migrants as another key risk in Mayotte that they had to navigate. Seven out of 45 respondents in Mayotte had experienced xenophobic attitudes and attacks at work, in schools, and in other public spaces that had made them fear for their safety. Over the years, media reports have documented the xenophobic attacks against immigrants in Mayotte.³⁹ A number of respondents noted that their aspirations to move onwards to mainland France were driven by their perceptions of insecurity linked to xenophobia and perceived lack of opportunities for integration in Mayotte. Despite limited pathways out of Mayotte, respondents' onward movement aspirations persisted.

36 Tembe, J. & Chibelushi, W. (2024, 17 December). [Dozens in Mozambique killed by 'intense' cyclone](#). The Guardian

37 Also see: Iwanska, E., Shumasi, M., Lacombe, S-F & Wald, C. (2020). [Claiming their rights: Mayotte's asylum seekers demonstrate in the streets. Accounts from the Demonstrations](#). EMMIR.

38 US Department of State Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Office (2024). [2024 Trafficking in Persons Report: France](#).

39 InfoMigrants (2024, 26 January). ['I belonged in Congo. Here, what am I?': Claude, asylum seeker in Mayotte](#).

I have faced many challenges, including being attacked by delinquents twice. Additionally, I have been a victim of xenophobia and racism, simply because I am African. Many of the locals see themselves as French and consider themselves superior to us.

(32-year-old Congolese woman in Mayotte)

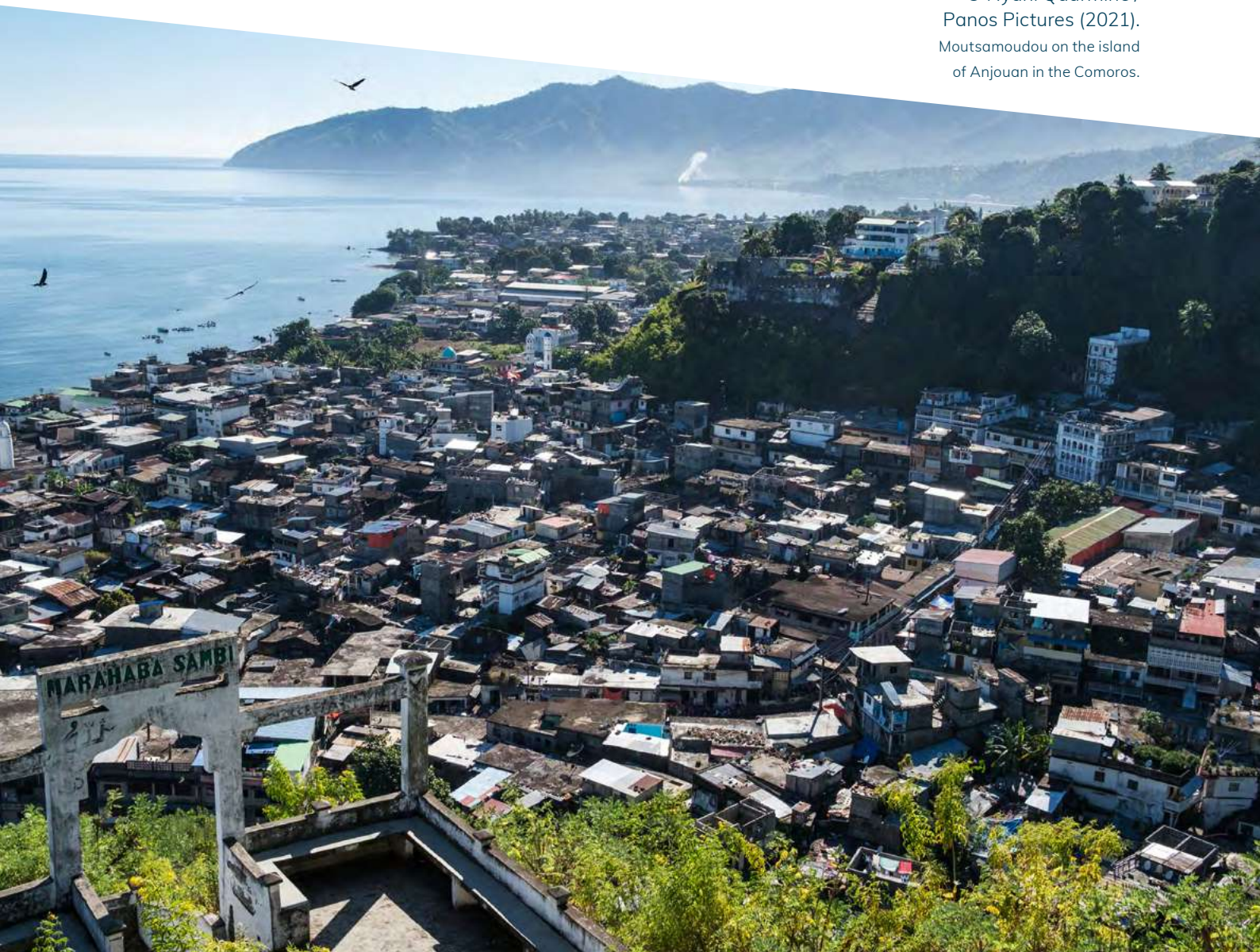
The locals here hate refugees, and there's a lot of xenophobia. I want to go to mainland France. I want to leave Mayotte because it reminds me of my home country.

(37-year-old Somali man in Mayotte)

Photo credit:

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Panos Pictures (2021).

Moutsamoudou on the island
of Anjouan in the Comoros.



8. Conclusion and preliminary recommendations

The recent media reporting on shipwrecks off the coast of Madagascar and Comoros in October and November 2024 has exposed a wider audience to discussions of the Western Indian Ocean Route. Yet the route remains understudied and underreported in comparison with other African mixed movement routes towards Europe and the Arabian Peninsula, and the Southern Route to Southern Africa. To respond to this evidence gap, this study set out to define and provide insight into onward and mixed movement dynamics along the Western Indian Ocean Route, studying movements originating in the Great Lakes region, Somalia, and Madagascar, and transiting through Tanzania and Comoros. It examined key drivers of movement, the trajectories and transport modalities of refugees and migrants en route to Mayotte, their interactions with smugglers to arrange these journeys, and their exposure to risks and needs along the route. In so doing, this study aimed to help lay the foundation for an evidence base for policy actors and practitioners providing protection to people on the move along this route in Eastern Africa and the Indian Ocean region. Based on the study's key findings, the following is a list of recommendations for local, national and regional authorities, protection actors, and researchers and academic institutions.

For local and national authorities in the Western Indian Ocean:

- **Strengthen or adopt asylum systems in countries of transit** to ensure fair access to asylum, and timely and fair processing of refugee claims.
- **Work together with research institutions to increase the evidence base** on refugees and migrants moving along the Western Indian Ocean Route, including granting researchers access to (intercepted) people on the move.
- **Ensure a protection-sensitive rescue-at-sea coordination mechanism, disembarkation process, and referral mechanism** to ensure timely and effective emergency rescue and overall support for vulnerable individuals. Collaborate with local civil society and NGOs to coordinate the provision of protection services to refugees and migrants, starting with mapping available and needed services.
- **Counter misinformation promoted by smuggling networks in Tanzania** seeking to recruit refugees and migrants for irregular onward journeys through awareness-raising initiatives on rights to asylum and access to assistance and services in the country.
- **Support alternatives to detention of intercepted people on the move in Comoros and Madagascar** through collaborating with regional bodies, UN agencies, and NGOs in promoting access to legal aid and humanitarian assistance and seeking Alternatives to (temporary) Detention (ATD).
- **Taking into consideration the local context, develop suitable programmes in Mayotte to facilitate the socioeconomic inclusion of refugees and migrants, or explore alternative options in collaboration with the host community.**
- **Develop community engagement initiatives adapted to the local context to combat xenophobia** and promote social cohesion in Mayotte.

For regional bodies in the Western Indian Ocean:

- **Work towards harmonising asylum and migration policies across SADC and IOC Member States** to ensure consistency and fairness in the treatment of refugees and migrants.
- **Create regional protection mechanisms to safeguard the rights of refugees and migrants**, particularly those transiting through multiple countries.

- **Establish a regional database to share information on mixed movement patterns and trends**, linking up with the African Union's continental migration and displacement data and research centres and initiatives, improving the ability to respond to emerging challenges.
- **Provide training and capacity-building programs for Member States** through thematic meetings on mixed movement and protection, focusing on the Western Indian Ocean Route.
- **Advocate for the rights of refugees and migrants at regional and international forums**, highlighting the specific challenges faced along the Western Indian Ocean Route.
- **Encourage regional research and analysis on mixed movement trends** to inform policy decisions and improve responses.

For UN agencies and NGOs working in Eastern Africa and the Western Indian Ocean:

- **Adopt a route-based and coordinated approach to reach refugees and migrants** in locations of (early) transit, including in Kigoma, Dar es Salaam, Anjouan, and Nosy Be, through mapping available services along the route, setting up information points and services, and providing targeted services to women and children on the move.
- **Promote and advocate for increased visibility and attention for the Western Indian Ocean Route** and the rights of refugees and migrants along the route with donor institutions, governments, international organisations, and communities of origin and transit.
- **Strengthen the capacity of local NGOs and community-based organisations** working with refugees and migrants, providing training and resources, particularly in hard-to-reach locations in Comoros, Madagascar, and Tanzania.
- **Enhance protection for women and children on the move in transit locations** through providing targeted protection services addressing risks such as sexual exploitation and family separation.
- **Expand assistance to refugees and migrants in emergency situations**, including after rescue from shipwrecks and after interceptions, particularly around access to shelter, food, and medical care.
- **Work with local communities in transit locations and in Mayotte** to support the socioeconomic inclusion of refugees and migrants and promote social cohesion.
- **Based on the local context, implement suitable livelihood programmes** to support the economic self-sufficiency of refugees and migrants in Mayotte, also benefitting the host community.
- **Develop psychosocial programmes** for refugees and migrants in Mayotte, including mental health support and services for survivors of violence and sexual exploitation.

For researchers and academic institutions:

- **Increase data collection and research along the Western Indian Ocean Route**, with special attention on locations of transit, where people on the move are more difficult to access.
- **Study the specific needs and vulnerabilities of women and children on the move** along the Western Indian Ocean Route, including risks of sexual exploitation and family separation.
- **Examine interactions with host communities and public perceptions of refugees and migrants** in transit locations and in Mayotte, and the factors influencing these views.
- **Study the skills, education levels, and employment aspirations of refugees and migrants** on the move, to inform livelihoods and economic integration programming in countries along the route and Mayotte.

Annex 1. List of key informants

Date of Interview	Organisation/Institution	Location
30/07/2024	UNHCR Tanzania	Dar es Salaam
31/07/2024	IRC Tanzania	Dar es Salaam
06/08/2024	UNODC Madagascar	Antananarivo
06/08/2024	US Department of State Trafficking in Persons Office	Online
07/08/2024	BNLTEH	Antananarivo
07/08/2024	CDA	Antananarivo
08/08/2024	NGO Door of Hope Tanzania	Online
08/08/2024	UNICEF Madagascar	Antananarivo
08/08/2024	IOM Madagascar	Antananarivo
08/08/2024	Ministry of Foreign Affairs Madagascar (Migration and Diaspora Department)	Antananarivo
09/08/2024	Save the Children Madagascar	Antananarivo
12/08/2024 & 10/09/2024	IOM Comoros	Online and Moroni
19/08/2024	United States Embassy in Madagascar	Online
22/08/2024	UNDP Madagascar	Online
09/09/2024	Caritas Grande Comore	Moroni
10/09/2024	Red Crescent Comoros	Moroni
10/09/2024	Association de Diaspora Malagasy aux Comores (Malagasy Diaspora Association in the Comoros)	Moroni
11/09/2024	NGO Salam	Moroni
11/09/2024	UNODC Comoros	Online
11/09/2024	UNICEF Comoros	Moroni
12/09/2024	Ministry of Foreign Affairs Comoros	Moroni
16/09/2024	Caritas Anjouan	Moutsamoudou
17/09/2024	Comorian National Police (1)	Moutsamoudou
17/09/2024	Comorian Coast Guard	Moutsamoudou
15/10/2024	University of Dar es Salaam	Dar es Salaam
23/10/2024	Comorian National Police (2)	Online



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

MMC is a leading source for independent and high-quality data, research, analysis and expertise. MMC aims to increase understanding of mixed migration, to positively impact global and regional migration policies, to inform evidence-based mixed migration responses for people on the move and to stimulate forward thinking in public and policy debates on mixed migration. MMC's overarching focus is on human rights and protection for all people on the move.

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

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