

A Gateway Re-opens:

the growing popularity of the Atlantic route,
as told by those who risk it

MMC Research Report, February 2021



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

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About MMC

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

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

For more information on MMC visit our website: www.mixedmigration.org



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Key findings

This study is based on the reports of refugees, migrants and key informants, and the analysis and synthesis of the Mixed Migration Centre. It does not reflect the opinions of the implementing research partners.

The research for this paper was undertaken with the intention of rapidly bringing together information and analysis related to the Atlantic route towards the Canary Islands from the coast of West Africa, in the context of an increase in departures and arrivals to the Canary Islands since late 2019.¹ It is based on interviews with 46 refugees and migrants and 16 key informants in the Canary Islands, Mali, Mauritania, and Senegal between 11 November and 17 December 2020. It seeks to improve understanding of the motivations of refugees and migrants for taking this route, as well as of the risks and challenges they face en route, including in their experiences of interception and forced return. The following key findings emerged from the MMC's analysis and synthesis of interviews with refugees and migrants, key informants, and a review of secondary literature:

- In 2020 the Atlantic route saw a sharp increase in use by refugees and migrants for a range of reasons. Some relate to the characteristics of the route itself, such as the perception that it is a **relatively short and direct way into Europe**. Others pertain to the Covid-19 pandemic, for instance **unfounded rumors that the high number of coronavirus deaths in Europe has boosted demand for labor**. At the same time, as the route's popularity grows, information spreads through social networks, with the **model of peers who have "gone before" appearing to generate momentum**.
- **Decisions to migrate are overwhelmingly influenced by a range of inter-related contextual factors: poverty and lack of opportunities, family expectations, the need to provide**. These factors are not new and are likely to endure.
- **Recent Spanish visits to Mauritania and Senegal appear to have placed an emphasis on the security dimension of cooperation regarding irregular migration**. This is observed both in public discourse focusing on disrupting criminal networks and in terms of material assistance of police equipment and support to patrolling through boats, aircraft, and personnel. This security approach does not seem to address economic and social imperatives that underlie Senegal's continuing high pressures for migration.
- Efforts to increase legal migration routes, such as through establishing paths for circular migration, are more in sync with the demand and underlying migration motivations in Senegal. Legal migration paths have been limited, and a recent measure to reward legal migration through establishing portability of social security rights does not extend them. **However, recent discussions to build on Spain's pilot circular migration scheme are welcome, and such initiatives should be explored and expanded further**.
- The shortcomings of the screening and reception process for arrivals in the Canary Islands mean that refugees and migrants have limited information about and less effective access to protection avenues, especially in the case of children and asylum-seekers. **As Spain seeks to ramp up deportations from the Canary Islands again, there is a risk that people eligible for protection will be among those deported**. Particular attention must be paid to ensuring that this does not occur.
- The deportation of third country nationals from the Canary Islands to Mauritania has a legal basis in a readmission agreement signed in 2003. However, according to key informants, there does not appear to be a clear mechanism in place to ensure that deportees have met the criteria for return. **Nor does there seem to be oversight or accompaniment of the process by which deportees from the Canary Islands are expelled from Mauritania. Refugees and migrants returned to Senegal and Mali and are left at the respective borders without further support**. Many of the deportees in 2020 have been Malians, which raises concerns due to UNHCR's Position on Returns to Mali (Update II) which prohibits returning Malians from eight regions and four administrative districts.

1 The extent to which migrants and refugees travelling on the Atlantic route manage to travel beyond the Canary Islands to continental Europe is beyond the scope of this paper, which focuses primarily on migration motivations of people on this route and on their personal experiences, including with (forced) return, along the route up to the islands themselves.

- **This study highlights clear gaps in terms of health. In particular, the boat journey towards the Canary Islands is an experience of great hardship that can have negative physical and psychological impacts – at times severe.** While those who make it to the Canary Islands seem to have more access to medical attention, **those who are intercepted and returned at sea off the coast of Mauritania are only able to access more substantial medical support in cases of obvious distress.** All other cases are sent immediately onward to the border by Mauritanian authorities, despite the presence of multiple humanitarian and civil society organizations in Nouadhibou which could provide assistance.
- **Approximately half of the respondents who failed to reach the Canary Islands, or were deported from there, spoke of negative emotional and mental health consequences following their migration attempt.** In some cases, these related to having lost resources in the attempt, and/or to the social consequences of the failed migration attempt. **This study underscores the importance of finding and providing psychosocial support and other reintegration assistance to these returnees whose more “informal” return makes them less visible.**
- **Most respondents who failed to reach the Canary Islands, or were deported from there, were outside their country of origin at the time of interview, or spoke explicitly of wanting to attempt migrating again, or both.** This suggests a substantial tendency towards re-migration along this route. Refugees and migrants may find it difficult to return home after a failed migration attempt, particularly as the migration journey often requires a substantial family investment. A useful area for further research is how the means of expulsion impact the re-migration decision, and whether and to what extent those left to make their own way home from Mauritania’s borders are more likely to re-migrate.

Introduction

We took the pirogues² with the sole objective of arriving in Spain, working and putting our parents in the best conditions, and then returning among them safe and sound. That's what motivated us, but unfortunately, we didn't arrive at our destination.

23-year-old Senegalese man

In 2020 approximately 23,000 people arrived irregularly by boat in the Canary Islands.³ Building on a slight uptick in arrivals in the last months of 2019, the trend continued and grew throughout 2020, with a pronounced spike occurring in September, October and November.⁴ A single day – November 7 – saw the arrival of some 1,400 people.⁵ While substantial migration flows to the Canary Islands are not unprecedented,⁶ 2020 stands in sharp contrast to the overall arrival numbers of the previous two years: 1,305 in 2018⁷ and 2,700 in 2019.⁸

This so-called Atlantic route comprises departures from points along the West and Northwest African coast – primarily Senegal, Mauritania, Western Sahara and Morocco, but also further south, such as from the Gambia – to Spain's Canary Islands.⁹ This route is undertaken in small fishing boats crowded with people for journeys that typically cover hundreds of kilometers: departures from Morocco or Western Sahara range from 100 to 450 kilometers over open ocean, while the voyage from Senegal is as long as 1,500 kilometers.¹⁰

While the numbers of people who reached the Canary Islands is known to have significantly increased in 2020, it is harder to gauge the numbers who set out but didn't arrive. Still, these appear to be substantial. For example, in a three-week period from mid-October through early November, approximately 400 refugees and migrants were intercepted or rescued at sea off the Mauritanian coast.¹¹ Between January and mid-November 2020, at least 511 people died or disappeared on the Atlantic route, making it the most dangerous irregular maritime route to Europe.¹²

The tragic costs that this route has exacted have been well documented, as have the challenges faced by Canary Islands authorities as they receive arrival numbers far beyond what they anticipated. The shipwrecks, deaths, and disappearances at sea that mark this route have been widely reported by the news media and other outlets. Less attention, however, has been paid to understanding the decision-making and transit experiences of refugees and migrants seeking to reach the Canary Islands, who in some cases are forcibly returned through Mauritania.

This report seeks to shed light on the motivations and experiences of West African refugees and migrants who attempted, in some cases successfully, to reach the Canary Islands between late 2019 and 2020 – a period that saw the global explosion of the Covid-19 pandemic. It focuses on: reasons for migrating and for the choice of this particular route; the risks, dangers, and protection incidents experienced over the course of the migratory journey; reception and screening in the Canary Islands with particular focus on implications for children and asylum seekers; experiences of return, with an emphasis on forced returns from the Canary Islands and Mauritania; and what may come after a failed migration attempt.

Dozens of refugees and migrants who completed or attempted the Atlantic route, as well as 16 key informants, were interviewed for this report, which also draws on a range of secondary sources. A unique research partnership with Medicos del Mundo and Save the Children made it possible to reach refugees and migrants across four countries: Mali, Mauritania, Senegal, and Spain's Canary Islands. At a time when the Atlantic route is gaining prominence in the news media and among political and humanitarian actors, this report provides an evidence-based foundation for more informed and fruitful discussion of the route. Importantly, it also brings to the fore the voices of migrants and refugees travelling this route. For their time and participation, which forms the backbone of this report, we are extremely grateful.

2 A wooden boat, akin to a large canoe, typically used by Senegalese fishermen.

3 InfoMigrants. (2021) [Four migrants found dead on arrival in Canary Islands](#)

4 Based on analysis of UNHCR's [Spain Weekly Snapshots](#).

5 Morel, S. (2020) [Les Canaries, débordées par l'afflux de migrants: "Ces citoyens dorment au milieu des rats"](#) Le Monde.

6 In 2006 31,678 refugees and migrants landed on the Spanish island archipelago (see the "Historical context" section below).

7 Mixed Migration Centre (2020a) [Quarterly Mixed Migration Update West Africa, Quarter 4 2019](#)

8 Mixed Migration Centre (2020b) [Quarterly Mixed Migration Update West Africa, Quarter 1, 2020](#)

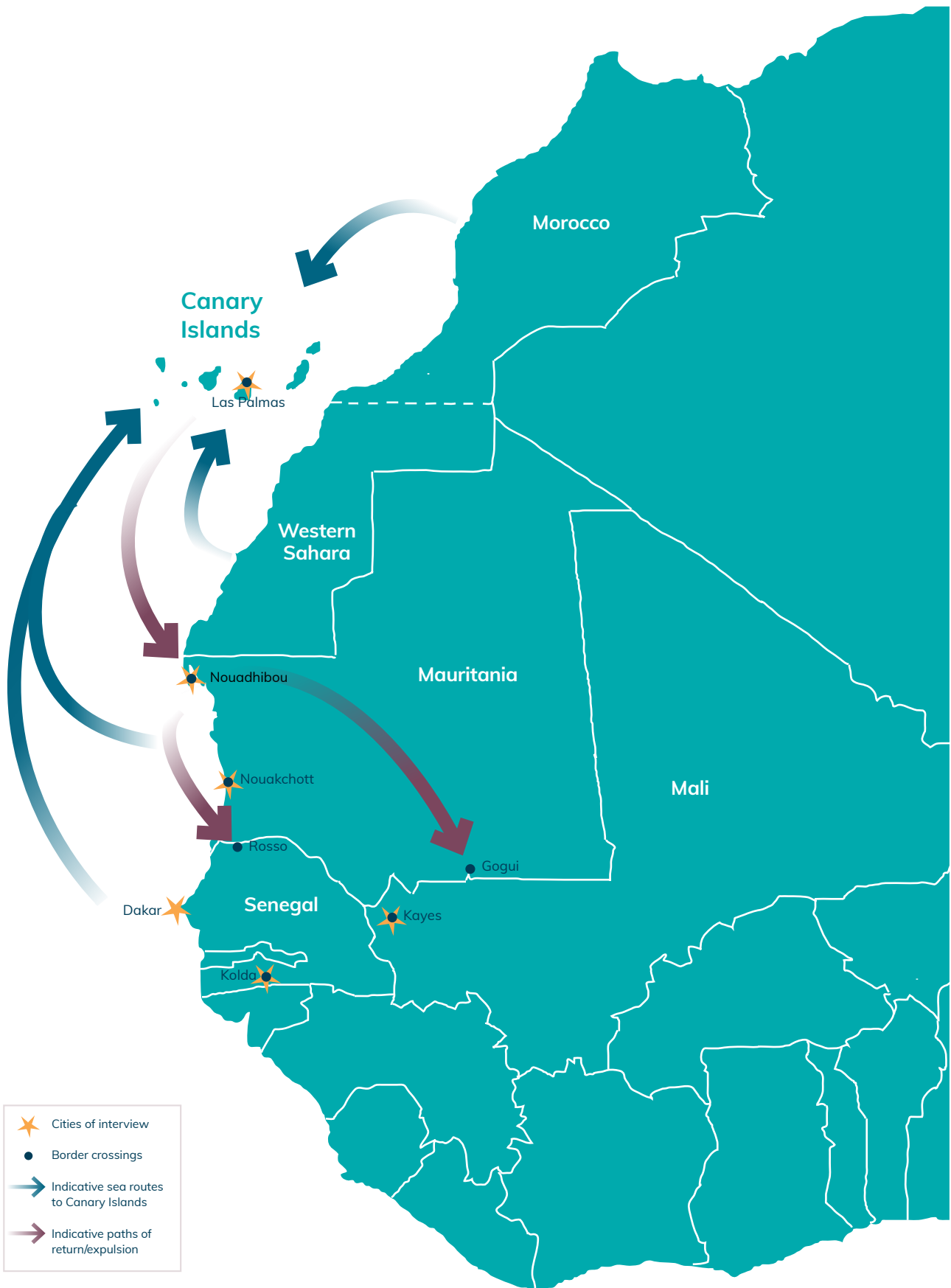
9 IOM (2020a) [Irregular Migration Towards Europe. Western African Route: Migration to the Canary Islands](#)

10 Shryock, R. (2020) [What's driving the deadly migrant surge from Senegal to the Canary Islands?](#) The New Humanitarian.

11 IOM (2020b) [Growing Humanitarian Needs Among Migrants Rescued off Mauritanian Coast](#)

12 IOM (2020a) [op. cit.](#)

Figure 1. Atlantic route sea journeys and returns



Methodology

The Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) carried out the research for this paper as part of a consortium that also includes the Danish Refugee Council, the International Rescue Committee and the Start Network, with the intention of rapidly bringing together information and analysis related to the Atlantic route. Consortium partners have been observing an increase of departures from West Africa and arrivals to the Canary Islands since late 2019 and deemed it important to better understand motivations for taking this route, as well as the risks and challenges faced by refugees and migrants in doing so, including in their experiences of interception at sea and forced return.

The primary sources for this paper are semi-structured interviews conducted with 46 refugees and migrants (henceforth referred to as “respondents”) and 16 key informants who work closely on migration issues for civil society organizations, non-governmental organizations, and international organizations. Seven of the key informants do work in or related to the Canary Islands, two work in Mali, five work in Mauritania, and two work in Senegal. The research period ran from 11 November to 17 December 2020.¹³ The situation along the Atlantic route and in the Canary Islands is rapidly evolving, and the main focus of this research is the circumstances in 2020.

The report was further guided by informal conversations with diplomats, journalists, and staff of various organizations working on migration, as well as some earlier key informant interviews which took place from February to March and in July 2020. Given the sensitivity of information shared, key informants are only referred to in general terms in the report.

The respondents were recruited through MMC’s collaboration with Medicos del Mundo and Save the Children (Spain) and their networks in the Canary Islands, Mauritania, Senegal and Mali.

Interviewers were selected by Medicos del Mundo and Save the Children from among their staff and affiliates, as well as local partner organizations. They were trained by the MMC to ensure a standardized and ethical approach. The concept of informed consent was clearly communicated to and obtained from all respondents.¹⁴

In-depth, semi-structured interviews of the respondents took place in November 2020 in four countries, as follows:

Country of interview	City of interview	Number of respondents
Mauritania	Nouadhibou	12
	Nouakchott	6
Senegal	Dakar	10
	Kolda	3
Mali	Kayes	6
Canary Islands (Spain)	Las Palmas de Gran Canaria (Reception centers of Cruz Blanca and Comisión Española de Ayuda al Refugiado (CEAR))	9

The sampling methodology was purposive. The basic criteria for inclusion were that a respondent had attempted or been actively seeking to migrate to/via the Canary Islands within the previous year. A specific emphasis was placed on finding respondents who had been forcibly returned through Mauritania, after either expulsion from the Canary Islands or interception at sea.

¹³ Additional written inputs from key informants were received on 11 and 28 January, and 2 February 2021.

¹⁴ Additional ethical safeguards included: Interviewers informed respondents that they would not benefit from the research, no harm would come to them if they decided to not participate, and they could opt out of the interview or specific questions at any time. The possibility to opt out was reiterated before particularly sensitive questions. Respondents were also informed they would remain anonymous and no information provided would be able to be traced back to them. No contact information was collected – unless interviewers deemed that the respondent needed additional and immediate assistance (e.g. suicidal thoughts). There were ethical protocols drafted in case of these instances.

Efforts were made to identify female respondents, but only two of the 46 refugees and migrants interviewed were women. While this gender distribution precluded analysis of issues that could relate specifically to women, it aligns with the overall profile of the Atlantic route, which key informants emphasized is overwhelmingly used by men and boys: of the more than 23,000 arrivals in the Canary Islands in 2020, only about 1.4 percent were women.¹⁵

Efforts were also made to identify respondents between the ages of 15 and 18 (for interview only by interviewers trained specifically by Save the Children), but this did not prove feasible, thus limiting the study's ability to speak more directly to the experience of children.

Additionally, due to constraints of time and access, only one government official (Spain) was interviewed. This is a limitation as it was not possible to complement the reports of key informants from non-governmental and inter-governmental organizations with a perspective from the governments of the countries in which they are operating.

As respondents were recruited through the local networks of Medicos del Mundo, Save the Children and their partners, some may have been on the same boat or otherwise traveled together, which could magnify certain opinions, incidents, or experiences. Nonetheless, an extremely wide variety of experiences were captured, and while this is not a representative sample, it gives important insights into the circumstances of this route.

Respondents' interviews were analyzed using NVivo software. This was an iterative and cyclical process, using both descriptive and thematic coding. The process consisted of establishing an initial framework and then adjusting and amending this framework based on the direction of the data. Depending on the thematic area, additional sub-themes or categories were explored, such as the type of protection incident described by the respondent.

15 Wolter, M. & Bathke, B. (2020) [What's the accommodation situation for migrants on the Canary Islands? \(Part III\)](#) InfoMigrants.

Historical and political background

Historical context

The ‘cayuco crisis’

The Canary Islands gained prominence in the field of mixed migration with the so-called “cayuco crisis” of 2006, a year when a record 31,678 refugees and migrants, predominantly from Senegal, arrived aboard small boats, or cayucos, at the Spanish island archipelago, which is located some 108 kilometers off the coast of Northwest Africa.¹⁶

While Spain already had some cooperation with African countries in relation to migration, including a 2003 readmission agreement with Mauritania (see below), the 2006 influx prompted significant and sustained efforts to deter migration along the Atlantic route to the Canary Islands.¹⁷ Spain acknowledges this as a moment of inflection, stating in its Country Profile for Senegal that “the real turning point in bilateral relations came in the summer of 2006 on the occasion of the ‘crisis of the cayucos.’”¹⁸

Bilateral efforts

In 2006, Spain and Senegal concluded a *Bilateral Memorandum of Collaboration on Irregular Immigration*. This agreement frames readmissions and allows for a Spanish security presence and cooperation related to migration patrols in Senegalese waters, as well as for the extension of European Border and Coast Guard Agency (also known as Frontex) operations there. According to analysis from the *Comisión Española de Ayuda al Refugiado*, an independent asylum advocacy organization, the agreement was predicated on the idea that Spain would promote foreign direct investment in Senegal.¹⁹ However, the agreement is not published on the website of Spain’s official gazette (*Boletín Oficial del Estado*), making it hard to confirm its exact provisions;²⁰ nor does it appear to be posted on the Senegalese *Journal Officiel*.²¹ In 2007, Spain established a consulate general within its embassy in Dakar, citing the need to “cope with strong migratory pressure towards our country,” and stating that this would “allow a better management of migration to Spain from Senegal and other countries in the area.”²²

Spain’s bilateral cooperation with Mauritania ramped up at the same time, with many notable milestones in relation to migration management occurring in 2006. In March of that year, the two governments issued a *Joint Communiqué of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of Spain and Mauritania on Strengthening Joint Migration Control*. In the same month, a detention center was opened in Nouadhibou, Mauritania’s second largest city, located on the Ras Nouadhibou peninsula. The center was converted from an abandoned school with the help of the Spanish army using development funds. It was used to receive people who had been apprehended in transit towards Europe or returned from Spain. 2006 also saw the launch of joint patrols by the Spanish Guardia Civil and Mauritanian authorities, including collaboration with the Mauritanian Gendarmerie under the new Project Atlantis.²³

Spain had already signed a readmission agreement with Mauritania in 2003 which allows for the return of “citizens of third countries [who] have traveled through the territory of the requested Contracting Party.” Importantly, this clause applies if the travel of the third-country national is either “verified” or “presumed.”²⁴ This element of presumption opens the door to returning people who may not actually have transited through Mauritanian territory.

Bilateral efforts regarding migration control and maritime patrols were complemented and reinforced by a Frontex mission: Joint Operation Hera has operated periodically, typically each year in the summer months, from 2006 through 2018. It seeks to halt maritime migration flows between the African coast and the Canary Islands.²⁵

16 Mixed Migration Centre (2020a) [op.cit.](#)

17 Ibid.

18 Oficina de Información Diplomática (2020) [Ficha País República de Senegal](#)

19 Comisión Española de Ayuda al Refugiado (2020a) [Externalización de Fronteras España-Senegal](#)

20 Asin, M. (2008) [Los acuerdos bilaterales suscritos por España en materia migratoria con países del continente africano: especial consideración de la readmisión de inmigrantes en situación irregular](#)

21 Secrétariat General du Gouvernement [Journal Officiel](#) République du Sénégal.

22 Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores y de Cooperación (2007) [BOE núm. 133](#)

23 Comisión Española de Ayuda al Refugiado (2020b) [Externalización de Fronteras España-Mauritania](#)

24 Amnesty International (2008) [Mauritania: "Nobody wants to have anything to do with us:" Arrests and Collective Expulsions of Migrants Denied Entry into Europe](#)

25 Frontex Operations Division, Joint Operations Unit, Sea Borders Sector (2015) [FRONTEX Evaluation Report 2015: EPN Concept JO EPN Hera 2015](#); Frontex (2020) [Annual report on the practical application of Regulation \(EU\) No 656/2014 establishing rules for the surveillance of the external sea borders in the context of operational cooperation coordinated by Frontex \(2018\)](#)

Present day cooperation

Such bilateral cooperation continues to the present day. While Spanish support related to migration control has been uninterrupted, it ramped up in the face of the 2020 surge in arrivals. The latter half of 2020 saw a diplomatic campaign on the part of Spanish and European officials directed towards West and North African sending and transit countries. In June, Spain allocated 1.5 million euros for police equipment for seven African countries, including Senegal and Mauritania, in order to support their efforts to combat irregular migration.²⁶ Additionally, in November it increased its 2021 budget for migration cooperation by 500 million euros.²⁷

Mauritania takes center stage

It is notable that as travel gradually picked up following the early months of the Covid-19 pandemic, Mauritania was an important destination for Spanish and EU officials. In late June, the Spanish Prime Minister traveled to Mauritania in his first official international visit following a Covid-related travel hiatus.²⁸ In September, the Spanish Minister of the Interior and the Commissioner for Home Affairs of the European Commission also visited. The Spanish Minister of the Interior emphasized that “Mauritania has an important relevance in the control of the irregular migratory flows towards the Canary Islands”, while the Commissioner for Home Affairs stated: “It is a priority for the Commission to strengthen cooperation and financial assistance in the area of migration with the main countries of origin and transit.” She also referred to the situation in the Canary Islands as “unsustainable.”²⁹

Since 2006, Mauritania has hosted Spanish security personnel and assets.³⁰ As of November 2020 it had 28 Guardia Civil agents posted there to carry out joint air, sea, and land patrols with Mauritanian authorities. They are supported by two patrol boats, a non-permanent ocean-going vessel, helicopters, and a plane.³¹ A key informant interviewed in Mauritania explained how this cooperation works in practice, describing how the Spanish Guardia Civil assists in patrolling off the coast. If its helicopter or boats spot a migrant vessel, they will notify the Mauritanian Coast Guard to make an interception.³² Mauritania was also one of the first two beneficiaries, along with the Gambia, of the police equipment Spain earmarked in June 2020. This is intended to strengthen capacities of local authorities to track and gather evidence of activities related to human trafficking.³³

Further cooperation with Senegal

Senegal has also come in for recent attention from Madrid. In November 2020 representatives of the Spanish government and the Senegalese government met in Dakar to discuss “joint cooperation in the orderly, safe, and regular management of migratory flows,” as “Senegal is one of our main partners in Africa and a key country for Spain in the management of migratory flows.”³⁴ The concrete outcome of the visit mentioned in a Spanish government press release is in the signing of a bilateral agreement that will allow for the portability of rights related to social security and pension contributions for Senegalese citizens who are legally resident in Spain, and vice versa. According to the Spanish authorities, this initiative “is a way to send a clear signal that Spain has the doors open for legal migration.”³⁵ However, these provisions do not address the needs of Senegalese who attempt to reach Spain without a legal entrance permit, and while the meetings also led to commitments to build on circular migration pathways, a pilot program in 2019 only had slots for 50 Senegalese.³⁶ The Spanish government also stated that “whoever uses the illegal channels will have to return to their country, therefore, use the legal channels.”³⁷

In line with the above statement about illegal entry, another important outcome of the meetings between Spain and Senegal was an acknowledgement by the Senegalese government that its citizens who have arrived in Spain irregularly can be returned to Senegal.³⁸ While some media reports portrayed this as linked to the abovementioned accord on social security, it is not clear whether this element of the discussions was ever formally enshrined; it may be

26 López-Fonseca, Ó. & Martín, M. (2020) [Interior donará 1,5 millones en material policial a siete países africanos para frenar la inmigración irregular](#) El País.

27 europapress. (2020) [El Gobierno refuerza su política migratoria en Canarias con mayor vigilancia, cesión de terrenos y diplomacia](#)

28 Martín, M. (2020a) [Mauritania recibe un tercio de los vuelos de expulsión de inmigrantes desde España](#) El País.

29 La Provincia (2020) [Marlaska y Johansson piden un mayor control de la migración a Mauritania](#); Corujeira, J. (2020) [Ylva Johansson: “El aumento del 700% de la migración en Canarias es insostenible”](#) La Provincia.

30 Comisión Española de Ayuda al Refugiado (2020b) [op.cit.](#)

31 europapress. [op.cit.](#)

32 Interview with a key informant in Mauritania, November 26, 2020.

33 López-Fonseca, Ó. & Martín, M. [op.cit.](#)

34 Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores Unión Europea y Cooperación (2020) [L’Espagne et le Sénégal renforcent leur coopération pour lutter contre l’immigration illégale et encourager les voies vers des migrations sûres, ordonnées et régulières](#)

35 El Confidencial (2020a) [España alcanza un acuerdo con Senegal para repatriar a los migrantes irregulares](#)

36 Naranjo, J. (2020) [La ministra de Exteriores cierra en Senegal un acuerdo para reactivar las repatriaciones](#) El País.

37 El Confidencial (2020a) [op.cit.](#)

38 Naranjo, J. [op.cit.](#)

an echo of the informality of the 2006 agreement on Spanish-Senegalese cooperation on migration.³⁹ In mid-December the Spanish Foreign Minister reiterated that returns to Senegal would take place soon,⁴⁰ however details of how repatriations will commence and proceed are not clear.

Beefing up offshore security

During the visit of the Spanish authorities to Senegal, they also obtained agreement from the Senegalese government to augment the Spanish security resources which are in Senegal to combat irregular migration and human trafficking. According to the Spanish government: "We work hand-in-hand with the authorities of this country and we share the concern about the existence of human trafficking networks that enrich a few and put many at risk."⁴¹ Since 2006, Spain has had two permanent Guardia Civil boats and a National Police helicopter operating from Dakar, with additional support from an ocean-going vessel and maritime aircraft that patrol regularly.⁴² This is accompanied by 15 agents of the Guardia Civil's maritime service, a liaison officer and three agents of the National Police.⁴³ It is expected that Spain will soon reinforce these capacities with the arrival of an ocean-going vessel with 25 personnel and a maritime patrol plane with 15 personnel.⁴⁴

Spain's historical and recent diplomatic interaction with Mauritania and Senegal underscore the importance of migration control to its cooperation with these countries. This is characterized by joint surveillance and patrolling, bilateral readmission agreements and an emphasis on security and crime-fighting in both Spain's rhetoric and its material assistance. It is particularly important to note that in spite of recent EU efforts to encourage Morocco to accept readmission of third country nationals,⁴⁵ Mauritania is currently the only country to which Spain can deport third country nationals from the Canary Islands.⁴⁶ This is the backdrop against which the movements of refugees and migrants from West Africa towards the Canary Islands, and importantly, back from the Canary Islands, plays out.

Profiles and journeys

According to a key informant who has worked on the situation in the Canary Islands, while there are no official figures available that give a nationality breakdown for arrivals on the islands, the top three nationalities of arrival were estimated to be Moroccan, Senegalese and Malian. This reflects the evolution of departures and routes towards the Canary Islands over the course of 2020, with arrivals from sub-Saharan Africa predominant earlier in the year, and an increased proportion of Moroccans from September onwards, as well as more boat arrivals directly from Senegal at the same time.⁴⁷ From November onwards, the proportion of Moroccans among arrivals has been particularly high, with some sources estimating it at 80 percent.⁴⁸ Estimated figures published early in 2021 by El País put the approximate breakdown for 2020 as a whole at 51% North Africans (mainly Moroccans), 20% Malians, 12% Senegalese, 7% Ivorians, 6% Guineans and 2% Gambians, with arrivals from Mauritania, Guinea-Bissau, Cameroon and Comoros also represented.⁴⁹

Respondents' demographics

This study's respondents roughly reflected the above-mentioned distribution of nationality in terms of West Africans, who were the focus of research as their migration to the Canary Islands, and returns through Mauritania, had been an ongoing trend since late 2019. This study was planned before the numbers of Moroccan arrivals picked up substantially, thus data collection was not foreseen in Morocco and Moroccans were not included in the priority list for interviews in the Canary Islands. Of the 46 respondents interviewed, 24 (52%) were from Senegal, 18 (39%) were from Mali, and there was one respondent each from the Central African Republic, Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia and Guinea.

39 de León Cobo, B. (2020) [Spain-Senegal relations: beyond the repatriation agreement](#) Atalayar.

40 El Confidencial (2020b) [El Gobierno subraya el aumento de las devoluciones de inmigrantes](#)

41 Naranjo, J. [op.cit.](#)

42 Naranjo, J. [op.cit.](#); de León Cobo, B. [op.cit.](#)

43 europapress. [op.cit.](#)

44 de León Cobo, B. [op.cit.](#)

45 While Morocco has an agreement with Spain that allows it to take back non-Moroccan citizens in very limited circumstances – if – namely, in the case of those expelled from the enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla within 24 hours of arrival – it recently pushed back against an EU request that it accept deportations of third country nationals more broadly. According to Khalid Zerouali, the Moroccan migration and border control chief at the Interior Ministry, "Morocco is not into the logic of subcontracting and insists that each country accepts its responsibility towards its nationals." See Euroactiv (16.12.2020) [Morocco rebuffs EU request to re-admit third-country migrants](#)

46 Martín, M. (2020a) [op.cit.](#)

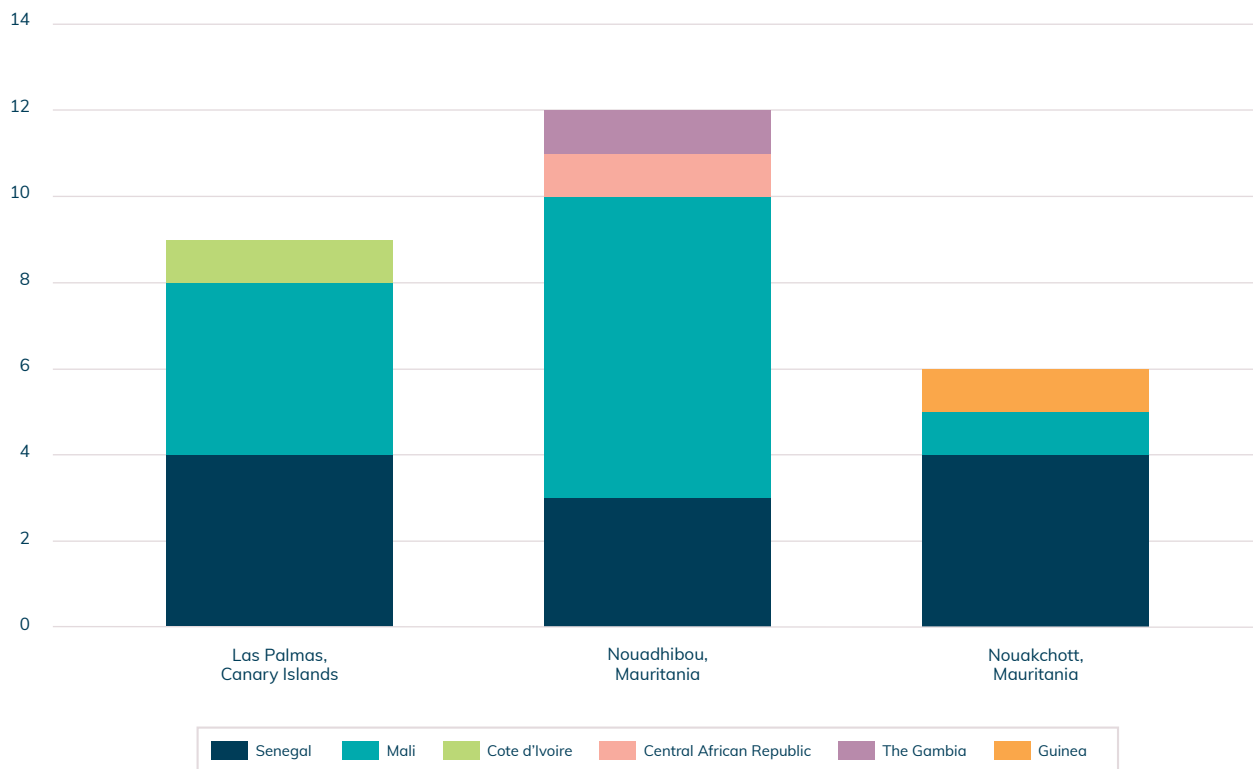
47 Interview with key informant in Spain, 19 November 2020.

48 Euromed Rights (2020) [With the forgotten migrants of the Canary Islands](#)

49 Martín, M. (2021) [España vuelve a ser la principal puerta de entrada de la UE para la inmigración irregular](#) El País.

Respondents were overwhelmingly young and male; all but two were men. This is also in keeping with the route's overall profile, which is predominantly male. The median age of respondent was 25.5 and no children were interviewed. Twenty-seven respondents were interviewed outside their country of origin, indicating that over half were in a migratory status at the time of interview. Of those 27, nine were interviewed in the Canary Islands and 18 in Mauritania. All respondents interviewed in Mali and Senegal were citizens of these respective countries, while those interviewed in Mauritania and the Canary Islands were more diverse in terms of nationalities.

Figure 2. City of interview by nationality for respondents interviewed outside country of origin⁵⁰



Sixteen respondents had reached the Canary Islands, including nine who were interviewed there and seven who had previously reached the Canary Islands but were later deported back to and then expelled from Mauritania. Thirty respondents did not make it onto the shores of the islands; of these, 17 were turned back at sea by patrol ships, six turned back at sea of their own volition (e.g. due to poor weather conditions or boat problems), and seven did not make it to a boat at all (e.g. due to smuggling scams, being caught by authorities or running out of money). Of the 24 total Senegalese respondents, only six reached the Canary Islands (25%), compared to eight of the 18 Malian respondents (44%).

⁵⁰ This graph only gives a nationality breakdown for respondents who were interviewed outside of country of origin; all those respondents interviewed in Dakar and Kolda (Senegal) were Senegalese and all those respondents interviewed in Kayes (Mali) were Malian.

Mixed motivations and complex journeys

As explored in more detail below, respondents overwhelmingly said economic factors were among their reasons for migrating (see below). Five respondents⁵¹ mentioned violence or persecution which could potentially qualify them for international protection; at least two of these five reported already having been issued a refugee card from the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR). Four of these five also mentioned economic factors, a reminder that motivations for migration are frequently mixed, and that secondary movements for economic reasons may be necessary even for those who originally migrated due to persecution or violence. This is exemplified by a respondent who already had a refugee card and had initially left home due to war:

If I had to categorize, I would say that I am in the category of economic migrants because having lost my job and coming from a poor family, I had to do everything to improve our living conditions, I had to do everything to succeed in my life. Since I had not found happiness in all the countries I had traveled through, I had to look for it elsewhere. So, I was tempted to migrate to Europe via Mauritania and the Canary Islands in the hope that once there [Europe], I would be lucky enough to find a job.

31-year-old man from Central African Republic

Some respondents' journeys started months, or even years, before they attempted to depart for the Canary Islands. Importantly, some respondents had already tried to migrate to Europe via other departure points (notably Libya). There were frequently many starts, stops, and returns in respondents' journeys. It was common for respondents to stay in one place to save up enough funds to continue their efforts to reach their intended destination. Others made the trip more directly, particularly Senegalese respondents who at times embarked on the boat journey to the Canary Islands directly from Senegal. Respondents' journeys were transnational, diverse, flexible, and of widely varying duration – at times occurring within weeks and other times occurring over years.

Migration motivations and choice of route

This research was spurred by an observed change in migration dynamics in West Africa: a significant increase in migration attempts towards, and arrivals in, the Canary Islands. It sought to shed light on why people were taking this particular route at this particular time. Respondents overwhelmingly highlighted underlying structural factors, such as poverty and lack of opportunity, societal and family expectations, and the need to provide.

Respondents also cited reasons for travel and choice of route that could help explain the spike in arrivals to the Canary Islands in 2020. Some theories related to the impact of Covid-19 – such as Covid-related border closures blocking access on other routes – were not supported by this research.⁵² However, several key informants and respondents did speak of other Covid-related push and pull factors, specifically economic hardship and a prevailing rumor that coronavirus deaths in Europe would increase labor demand.

Challenges that could make other routes less hospitable or feasible were mentioned by several key informants, but rarely explicitly by respondents. Rather, respondents perceived that the Atlantic route offered a relatively short and direct entry to Europe. In some cases, this perception was fueled by information received from friends or acquaintances who had taken the Atlantic route. The example and influence of others also appeared to be an important factor in leading people to choose this route.

Although respondents did not frequently refer to macro-level factors, such as the blockage of other routes to Europe, when discussing their decision to choose the Atlantic route, this does not necessarily mean such factors are irrelevant. Rather, respondents felt micro-level factors, such as other migrants' stories of success or the need to provide for family, more profoundly in their lives and in their decision-making process. As a result, these micro-level factors were likely better understood by respondents and thus served as their main focus.

51 Two from Mali, and one each from Senegal, Central African Republic and Guinea.

52 Jones, S. & Burke, J. (2020) [Refugee agencies call for action on people smuggling after 140 die in shipwreck](#) The Guardian.

Economic, social, and family pressures

The interviews with refugees and migrants revealed that economic and livelihood factors overwhelmingly influenced their decisions to migrate, followed by, and often connected to, personal and family reasons and social pressures. Thirty-seven respondents referred to economic and livelihood reasons when they spoke of motivations for departure, and 32 spoke of family obligations. Respondents described their desire to escape poverty and to strive for greater economic security, with an inability to secure fruitful employment or a sustainable livelihood very frequently referenced as a main driver in their migration decision. As one respondent put it:

I am trying to migrate to the Canary Islands because I want to help my family. I have tried all types of work and nothing works, and I have seen that the people who have gone to Europe have all succeeded and are living a good life.

40-year-old Gambian man

However, this motivation was frequently shaded by cultural factors, such as the need to support one's family or the desire for financial security in order to achieve socially mandated indicators of success and/or adulthood, such as a house or marriage. Related to these are the desire to attain status and avoid the stigma of being perceived as unsuccessful or unmotivated. All these aspirations are informed by conceptions and expectations of masculinity in the West African context. These complex socio-cultural imperatives are exemplified by the respondent from the Gambia, who said:

Anyone who has nothing will not be respected... I migrated to escape poverty and stigmatization, to have something of my own such as a well-built house, a vehicle. [I want] to build a better future for me and my family, to no longer ask my relatives for things, to be independent of other people, because I am seen as a jinxed but poor person who cannot provide for the needs of my relatives.

40-year-old Gambian man

Additionally, the example of others whose successful migration has had tangible outcomes in their home community can be a powerful motivating factor. This was frequently cited by respondents, and often goes together with the need to provide:

You know here in Senegal when your father has nothing, and you don't have the means that allow you to have good yields in agriculture, and you see your friends with whom you used to drink tea leave, come back, and build houses while you still live in huts, and you have nothing, you try to do like them.

21-year-old Senegalese man

Dangers disregarded

In terms of social dynamics related to the decision to migrate, several key informants engaged with the question of why the Atlantic route remains so popular despite its well-documented dangers. In Senegal, it is common for multiple people from a community to travel on the same boat, and one key informant spoke of the almost magnetic effect there can be on a village when some of its inhabitants are seen to "make it" to the Canary Islands. The counter-example of boats sinking and strangers lost at sea is not powerful enough to counteract the pull effect of one's friends or acquaintances arriving successfully. The key informant indicated that any such tragedy must hit close to home, and impact people from one's own social circle, or it will not serve as a deterrent for others in the community.⁵³ Several other key informants also spoke of the pull effect of having friends make it, as they are a source of information and encouragement – and at times rumor – for instance through the videos they send back.

⁵³ Interview with key informant in Senegal, 17 November 2020.

A key informant from Mauritania highlighted the overt social pressure that people may feel to make the trip, and the way this influences the information they are willing or able to take on board.

You've seen the boats sinking. Those who are back or who have not been able to go or who have been taken to shore, those who have been found halfway... all of them say that it was pressure. That there were friends, family who told them that they had to leave, that there was a need for manpower [in Europe]. They are told that they are young and that they must try their luck, but they are not really told what is going on.... We're trying to raise awareness among those who haven't left yet. They tell us, "You don't understand, those who are there, what they are telling us, that's the reality."⁵⁴

Many respondents stated that they were aware of how risky the journey along the Atlantic route is. Statements such as "I knew that I could die in the boat, but I wanted to leave the country" (25-year-old Senegalese man) or "I know that the journey is dangerous" (18-year-old Malian man) or "I am aware of the risks of the crossing [as] I have known many people who have perished at sea" (24-year-old Malian man) were common. However, as suggested by the key informant above, countervailing influences could affect their risk analysis. According to a 25-year-old Senegalese man "[My uncle] told me not to cross by boat, that it was dangerous, but you don't trust him because he did it before you and he's made it." Thus, in addition to overt social pressure influencing respondents' willingness and/or ability to digest information, being told not to go by someone who had "successfully" migrated could ring hollow. Respondents may disregard the information as a result. In a similar vein, a key informant in Senegal suggested that "the migrants tell themselves that 'those who risk nothing get nothing.' They tell themselves that the pirogues' captains know the sea well, have been sailing for a long time. They minimize the risks."⁵⁵

Information sources

Sources of information about the migration journey most frequently cited by respondents were personal contacts: mostly friends, but also family members and other acquaintances such as neighbors. Seventeen respondents described receiving either explicit or implicit information from such groups, with 12 stating friends provided them with information or indicating that observing such friends' migration journeys served as a source of migration information.

I met an old friend in the market, he had traveled with the pirogues and arrived in Spain. This friend had made a success of his life and I told him that I wanted to meet him at his house. We made an appointment, and I went to see him. When I got there I explained to him what I wanted to do. He encouraged me and I asked him if he knew a smuggler. It was at that moment that he put me in contact with a renowned fisherman, who knew the sea well.

27-year-old Senegalese man

While the implicit information gathered by respondents focused on the role models of migration "success" within their communities or among their personal contacts, respondents also explained they had explicitly heard about the potential boons from migration. This information repeatedly emphasized the economic opportunities available in Spain and elsewhere in Europe in comparison to those in their home communities. However, it was also clear that this information was not always complete or accurate, and that respondents were therefore making decisions without a full picture of what awaited them. For instance, five of the nine respondents interviewed in the Canary Islands said they did not know the islands existed or had not expected to end up there. According to a 30-year-old Malian man: "My goal was to go to Spain, I didn't know I was going to arrive in the Canary Islands."

⁵⁴ Interview with key informant in Mauritania, 20 November 2020.

⁵⁵ Interview with key informant in Senegal, 24 November 2020.

Seeking opportunities

We need training and employment for young people to stay in their country to work. The solidarity among migrants is very impressive, I really understood that Africa has potential, unfortunately, there is no opportunity.
31-year old Guinean man

Structural factors, often related to government policies and/or a lack of opportunities, were also mentioned by several key informants and were a recurring theme among the interview responses of refugees and migrants. Multiple key informants across countries emphasized the impossibility of getting a visa to go to Europe. A key informant from Mauritania pointed to a new law that prevents migrants from working on fishing boats, and which has taken away an important livelihood opportunity from some migrants, whose alternative means of income generation are insufficient.⁵⁶ Key informants in Senegal highlighted several factors which can drive people to leave, including lack of access to land, trade agreements which favor European companies to the detriment of the local economy, insufficiency of government policies related to youth employment, and bad governance of the fishing sector.⁵⁷

Respondents also emphasized such challenges, often mentioning insufficient opportunities and support related to livelihoods. Several respondents from Senegal also spoke specifically about challenges related to fishing, an important livelihood in the country:

If we had another choice, we wouldn't have taken the pirogue and left, and if our fishing activity was going well, we wouldn't have left. But fishing doesn't work anymore. Imagine, sometimes you stay 20 days at sea, you come back empty-handed, it hurts, it's difficult. Moreover, the government doesn't support us, it doesn't help us. It has sold all the sea to foreigners of Chinese nationality.
Senegalese man, age unknown

This issue extends beyond respondents' home countries:

The biggest concern for the migrants of Nouadhibou is to find a well-paid job. The job market remains closed to foreigners, which is very harmful to us because it is not easy to make ends meet. So, some foreigners are planning to leave Mauritania because of the lack of work opportunities here. But if they had found something to do here, they would have stayed permanently.
31-year-old man from Central African Republic

Covid-19 and migration motivations

The main reason that hastened our trip was Covid. With the number of deaths that occur mostly in Europe, we had the hope that when we got there we would find something... But we were not afraid of Covid.
21-year old Senegalese man

Multiple key informants emphasized that Covid-19 has not dampened people's desires to migrate. Two key informants in Mauritania said that there had been an expectation that with the pandemic, migration from Mauritania to the Canary Islands would slow, but that they had instead seen a significant increase.⁵⁸ Mauritania is not just a transit country but also hosts migrants who come to live and work, and two other key informants in Mauritania also noted an increase in departures from migrant communities there since the beginning of the pandemic.⁵⁹ According to a fifth key informant in Mauritania:

⁵⁶ Interview with key informant in Mauritania, 3 December 2020.

⁵⁷ Interviews with key informants in Senegal, 17 and 24 November 2020.

⁵⁸ Interviews with key informants in Mauritania, 20 and 26 November 2020.

⁵⁹ UNHCR (2018) [Crossing Paths: A Respondent Driven Sampling survey of migrants and refugees in Nouadhibou, Mauritania](#); Interviews with key informant in Mauritania, 17 December 2020 and written inputs from key informant in Mauritania, 11 January 2021.

[The pandemic] has only changed the routes, but people are very determined. Migrants would rather die at sea than remain poor in the village with all the shame of society. The objective has remained the same, but the routes are longer and the risk of exposing oneself to danger is increasing.”⁶⁰

Perceived labor shortages in Europe

Some key informants also pointed to pandemic-related factors that they believe had spurred departures. One reason advanced by key informants in Senegal, Mauritania, and the Canary Islands was the (spurious) idea that the death toll caused by the pandemic in Europe would result in a greater demand for labor. According to a civil society leader in Senegal:

The migrants say that Europe needs labor because they have had thousands of deaths due to Covid-19. Unfortunately, they did not know that the people who have died are mostly retired and are therefore not active.⁶¹

This viewpoint was stated explicitly by three respondents, all Senegalese males interviewed in Senegal. One said, “yes, the pandemic motivated us to leave, because there are many deaths in Europe, so I was convinced that if we left, with this situation in Europe, we would easily find work.” He went on to state his belief that due to Covid-19 “the Europeans have lowered their guard and the borders are less surveilled.”

Economic fallout

The economic burdens caused by the pandemic were frequently mentioned by key informants across all countries except Mali, although generally with different emphases. One in Senegal spoke of reduced economic activity, and elaborated on how lockdowns also gave young people more time to plan their departure, as there were fewer distractions or opportunities for leisure.⁶² Another from Senegal emphasized the importance of the informal economy, saying that government restrictions, such as shuttering markets, had brought the economy to a standstill, and that those in the informal sector had been worst hit, and had received little government support.⁶³ A key informant in Mauritania suggested that families had suffered due to the pandemic, and that young people were trying to meet the expectations of their parents by embarking on the trip.⁶⁴

Despite this emphasis from key informants, only three respondents, all of whom had been living and working in Mauritania, drew an explicit linkage between having experienced a Covid-related livelihoods disruption and their decision to travel. One said:

I am an only child, father and breadwinner... I moved to Mauritania where I opened my workshop. Unfortunately, the Covid 19 pandemic slowed down all our activities and I found myself with almost nothing. The pressure and family needs persisted, and also the success of my colleagues who were able to cross the Atlantic Ocean. All these factors have favored my temptation to reach the Canary Islands.

18-year-old Senegalese man

Covid-19 has clearly been a threat multiplier and has made the situation of people who are already vulnerable even more precarious. It may be that key informants, who are observing from an external vantage point, with a more macro-level perspective, more readily see a connection between the pandemic, economic disruption, and migration, whereas someone who has been affected personally is more focused on the consequences than on the ultimate cause. Thus, it is possible that more respondents' livelihoods were affected by the pandemic, but they are so focused on their economic precarity (and frequently the corresponding effects on family and social standing), that this is what they emphasize.

60 Interview with key informant in Mauritania, 3 December 2020.

61 Interview with key informant in Senegal, 17 November 2020.

62 Interview with key informant in Senegal, 24 November 2020.

63 Interview with key informant in Senegal, 17 November 2020.

64 Interview with key informant in Mauritania, 26 November 2020.

The 'shortest' route to Europe

Multiple key informants spoke of route-based reasons for refugees and migrants to choose to travel to or via the Canary Islands as opposed to taking other routes, citing it as, for instance, "the closest entry point"⁶⁵ and the "shortest and least problematic route"⁶⁶ to Europe. This was also something mentioned by 12 respondents, 10 of whom were interviewed in Mauritania. Respondents emphasized that they did not intend to stay in the Canary Islands, but rather hoped to move on to the Spanish mainland or other countries in Europe.

Several key informants mentioned perceived challenges related to other routes as a reason for people to choose the Canary Islands. The difficulties in Libya were highlighted by all who mentioned this reason. References were also made to conflict in Mali and problems moving through Niger and Algeria.⁶⁷ This explanation was not something that came up explicitly to a great extent in the interviews with refugees and migrants. However, it is worth noting that a handful of respondents mentioned previous challenges encountered on other routes, for instance through the Central Sahel and Libya, Algeria, and Morocco, which likely implicitly contributed to their more recent attempts at the Atlantic route. Two key informants also brought up reduced patrols along the Atlantic route. One pointed to less patrolling following a shift of attention from European countries to the Central Mediterranean route several years ago.⁶⁸ Another mentioned a more recent decrease attributed to the pandemic.⁶⁹

In their own words – telling individual stories

43-year-old woman from Mali

After receiving her sister's blessing, the respondent, a 43-year-old Malian woman, travelled from Kayes, Mali to Nouakchott, Mauritania and then onward to Nouadhibou, Mauritania via bus. The journey took roughly two days. Her stay in Nouadhibou was at times difficult; she ran out of money and had to raise a loan from a personal contact. She chose to migrate to the Canary Islands because of their proximity to Mauritania, as well as her perception that "there are not too many protocols with the sea crossing," and because of the perceived economic opportunities available. In Europe, she could support her needs, the needs of her family and "matter in society."

"...The economic reasons, as well as those of the family support largely explain my crossing of the sea. Also, since my marriage was no longer there, I am the only one who has to face family responsibilities and it is not at all easy."

Prepared with money, heavy clothes, information from a contact in the Canary Islands and her strong faith, the respondent eventually embarked for the Canary Islands via boat. The Spanish Coast Guard intercepted her pirogue at sea and brought her ashore in the Islands. She underwent a health check by the Spanish Red Cross immediately upon arrival where she was also provided clothes, water and food. The authorities then transferred her and her fellow passengers to the police, where there was a screening "to see those who [held] identification documents." She was then immediately transferred to a "deportation cell," which she attributed to the fact that she had her Malian passport with her. She was deported to Nouadhibou via plane. In total, she spent three weeks in the Canary Islands.

Subsequently dropped at the Malian-Mauritanian border, she decided to return to Mauritania using 200 Euros given to her by the Spanish authorities before her deportation. Her experience of being forcibly returned from the Canary Islands also had health impacts:

"I think [being deported from the Canary Islands] has offended me psychologically, so I am demoralized. Hence my somewhat critical state of health."

65 Interview with key informant in Mauritania, 20 November 2020.

66 Interview with key informant in Mauritania, 3 December 2020.

67 Interview with key informant in Senegal, 17 November 2020.

68 Ibid.

69 Interview with key informant in Mauritania, 26 November 2020.

Risks, dangers, and protection incidents

The journey from the African mainland to the Canary Islands, although generally chosen by respondents for its perceived fast and easy access to Europe, is in fact quite dangerous. The physical aspects, particularly the arduous and unpredictable boat journey, characterized by insufficient food and water, intense fear, dehydration, and exposure, put respondents at significant risk. Respondents' interactions with authorities and smugglers could also be a source of danger, and resulted in protection incidents, such as extortion, scams, and physical violence. Some respondents reported experiencing health issues due particularly to the dangers of the boat passage, as well as to protection incidents. Throughout the interviews, respondents also noted factors which increased vulnerability but also resilience to such dangers and protection incidents.

Risks of the journey

Life and death on the open sea

It was two days [at sea] and we had things to eat, but the first day everything got wet with sea water and was spoiled. There was someone who had food but didn't want to share it much. We ate it but by the second day it was finished. Luckily, that's when the ship found us, otherwise I don't know what would have happened, maybe we would have starved to death.

21-year-old Senegalese man

All but four respondents described some specific form of danger they had experienced or witnessed or which occurs commonly on their migration journey. The boat passage was the leg of the journey which exposed people to dangers most frequently and with at times deadly consequences. Thirty-one of the 39 respondents who made it onto a boat described some danger related to the boat journey. For example, respondents often detailed their intense fear and anxiety about the rough and unpredictable sea, with some particularly fearing the sea at night. Many respondents described the hot sun and salt water, as well as the damaged or depleted food and water supplies as harrowing elements of the sea journey. Two respondents said they witnessed fellow passengers perish en route to the Canary Islands, and some respondents relayed moments of intense emotional outburst on the part of others in the boat. Others required medical attention on arrival. The boat trip was almost invariably a negative experience for participants:

There were 38 of us at the beginning of the trip but only 19 arrived in Spain. The others died. They stayed three days without food or water in the boat. They died from lack of food, vomiting, they had no strength to continue. The dead were thrown into the sea. Because of the hunger I later had problems with my heart.

25-year old Senegalese man who spent five days on a boat

An 18-year-old Ivorian man described a similarly difficult journey: "The seasickness was horrible. At the beginning I was dizzy, I was vomiting. When I arrived [in the Canary Islands] they took me to the Red Cross hospital." A Senegalese man (no age given), summarized the experience: "When you're in a pirogue in the open sea, it's risky, there's no more possibility of buying food or drink, there's only life or death." Nonetheless, respondents repeatedly said that they understood the risks involved in the boat trip before taking it, underscoring the strength of the drivers that led them to make the attempt.

Multiple key informants also spoke of the dangers associated with the sea journey, reiterating the difficulties of seasickness and in accessing sufficient food and fresh water, as well as highlighting how these challenges are compounded by an inability to seek first aid while on the boat. Dehydration is a major risk, and witnessing fellow passengers die en route is a source of trauma that compounds the terrors inherent in the journey itself.⁷⁰ Boats are very crowded, and one key informant in Senegal pointed out the hygiene challenges related to a large number of people in a small space with no access to toilets.⁷¹ While some who undertake the journey do have prior experience

⁷⁰ Interview with key informant in Mauritania, 20 November.

⁷¹ Interview with key informant in Senegal, 24 November 2020.

with the sea, a key informant in Senegal highlighted the fact that many do not, and consequently do not know how to swim.⁷²

Many lost at sea

The boat passage to the Canary Islands can take several days to more than a week; a long time to spend on a small boat in the open ocean. Shipwrecks and accidents are a major source of danger on this route. Six respondents spoke of the need to turn back at sea due to problems with the boat, but this is not always possible. Figures related to those lost at sea are notoriously unreliable, due to the difficulty of collecting comprehensive data. However, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimates that from January to mid-November 2020, at least 511 people died or disappeared attempting to reach the Canary Islands from the African coast in 41 documented shipwrecks occurring off the coasts of Senegal, Mauritania, Western Sahara, Morocco and the Canary Islands themselves.⁷³ In just one such shipwreck occurring off the coast of Senegal in October 2020, the deadliest recorded that year, more than 140 people died after gasoline canisters on board exploded and the boat caught fire and sank.⁷⁴ Analysis by IOM has found the Atlantic route to the Canary Islands to be the most dangerous irregular sea route to Europe, with approximately one recorded death for every 20 arrivals from January to July 2020.⁷⁵

Lack of access to basic needs, such as food and water, was also a recurring danger beyond the boat journey. For example, six respondents described some sort of food and water deprivation during their time on land. A 29-year-old Malian man recalled: "We were two weeks in the bush, do you understand? During those two weeks we ate only cookies and milk. Often we went almost days without eating."

Covid's knock-on effects

Covid-19 did in some cases impact respondents' journeys, generally causing complications related to sanitary controls or delays en route or prior to departure due to border closures. However, the coronavirus was not generally identified by respondents as a danger in itself. Only two respondents spoke of the disease in a manner that suggested they saw falling ill as a risk. Indeed, respondents often knowingly travelled despite the threat of Covid-19, perhaps seeing it as just another obstacle in an already dangerous journey. A greater Covid-related risk seemed to be financial; several respondents mentioned that their savings had been depleted due to Covid-related restrictions such as border closures and curfews:

My plan is really affected because of the Covid-19 pandemic which I thought would not last long. Unfortunately, it continues with all the rigors that it imposes, such as cessation of activities and social distancing. With all this, my small savings have dried up.

35-year-old Senegalese man

Misinformation: smugglers and rumors

Smugglers appeared to serve as a substantial information source for a few respondents, increasing the risks they faced. Smugglers often underplayed the dangers associated with the journey, their information serving to encourage rather than to educate respondents. Common areas of misinformation included the duration of the boat journey and its associated risks, as well as the ease of achieving economic success upon arrival in the Canary Islands:

I had no information about the formalities on arrival in the Canary Islands when we entered there clandestinely. The smuggler made sure to talk only about what I would gain by migrating there. In short, it was his marketing strategy to make me feel good, which I finally understood later on.

30-year-old Malian woman

Importantly, not all respondents attributed the misinformation they received about the journey to smugglers; some referenced friends or rumors as a source of misinformation.

72 Interview with key informant in Senegal, 17 November 2020.

73 IOM (2020a) [op.cit.](#)

74 European Council on Refugees and Exiles (2020a) [Atlantic Route: People Face Death at Sea and Miserable Conditions upon Arrival in the Canary Islands. High Prosecutor's Office Prohibits Separation of Children](#)

75 Martín, M. & Naranjo, J. (2020) [La ruta canaria se convierte en la más arriesgada para llegar a Europa](#). El País.

Protection incidents: extortion, scams, and mistreatment along the way

More than half of the respondents described some form of protection incident that occurring during their migration journey or that they believed to commonly occur. It is important to note that these could occur at any time during their migration experience, including during long periods living and working abroad (particularly common in Mauritania). While several respondents described protection incidents that happened to them in Morocco, Algeria, countries in the Central Sahel, and particularly Libya at earlier stages in their migration journeys, this section focuses on protection incidents that occurred along the Atlantic route.

Bribery and extortion, theft and scams, and mistreatment and physical violence were described by a number of respondents. Five respondents also described witnessing migrant deaths during their migration experience. These instances included deaths at sea (two along the Atlantic route, one in Libya), in a camp while waiting to take the sea voyage, and in a mine in Mauritania where a respondent had worked. Instances of detention, primarily in Mauritania, were mentioned by five respondents. (There could be a legal basis for detention based on Mauritania's immigration laws.) Of the four respondents who spoke of detention in Mauritania, three alluded to instances of mistreatment or extortion. A 24-year-old Malian man said: "I was arrested for days, tortured and my phone was seized by the police before being deported to the border."

Official ill-treatment

Police raids – targeting people staying in informal camps while waiting to make the sea journey, or those heading to the point of embarkation – were a hazard mentioned by several respondents. A 30-year-old respondent from Senegal recalled: "I experienced it once in Nouadhibou when I was taking the convoy [to the sea to embark] that day we were reported. The police attacked us with their dogs. I still have a scar."

Some respondents spoke of mistreatment by the authorities during their return from the Canary Islands or the high seas. Two respondents who were intercepted at sea and taken back to Senegal reported that upon their return police tried to get information from them about who had organized the trip. One, a 23-year-old Senegalese man, said, "We were roughed up, the police wanted us to confess things we didn't have the answers to, for example, they wanted to know who had organized the trip." Two respondents also reported issues in Mauritania. One of them recalled:

After our interception by the Mauritanian authorities, we spent several days in a detention center. We were subjected to mistreatment and other kinds of racial discrimination. Thanks to an older brother living in Paris who sent me money I was able to get bail. We also had difficulties finding food. We could go a whole day without eating.

30-year-old Malian man

A key informant in Mauritania reinforced this point, saying that repatriated migrants speak of being insulted and beaten up, and generally "treated like cattle."⁷⁶

Rackets and shakedowns

Bribery or extortion was mentioned by approximately one quarter of respondents, making it the most referenced protection incident. These instances encompassed a range of locations and circumstances, although mostly taking place in Mauritania. Several people spoke of occurrences that seemed related to longer stays in the country – for instance extortion at a mine – but in general they were related to transit. According to a 23-year-old Malian man, "I was confronted by the difficulties and police hassles since I had to pay at each police station before arriving in Nouakchott. At each station I and all the foreigners had to pay MRU100 (\$2.50) to pass." One key informant related migrant accounts of authorities in both Senegal and Mauritania taking bribes to let boats depart. If the boat is later intercepted at sea, the refugees and migrants on board have no recourse.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Interview with key informant in Mauritania, 3 December 2020.

⁷⁷ Interview with key informant in Mauritania, 3 December 2020.

Perpetrators of protection incidents were almost always authority figures encountered either when respondents were crossing borders, or when they were moving internally or residing in their non-native country. A notable exception was thefts or scams, where respondents described smugglers swindling them, either by overbooking the boat or disappearing with their money before the crossing. Some scams were quite elaborate:

I'm a victim of a scam. A guy took my money saying he would send me to Spain. The day he gave us an appointment for the departure he played a trick, telling us first to dress as fishermen, and then after a few minutes he announced that the gendarmerie was arriving, so we fled. I hid around the beach. The next day, I went to the place where we had the discussion to ask him what we are going to do. He told by to stand by, that he would contact me. The next few days I called him, but I couldn't reach him anymore. I went to his house and I couldn't find him.

40-year-old Gambian man

Another respondent, a 30-year-old man from Senegal, summarized how common the experience was: "There are a lot of smugglers. There are good ones and bad ones. They often betray travelers and may run away with your money. That's the daily life there." Two respondents from Senegal who had embarked for the Canary Islands from Mauritania mentioned the power imbalance that exists between local smugglers and refugees and foreign migrants. According to one:

Sometimes you can pay the full amount and wait a long time before you can leave, or just not leave, and lose all your money. In any case, you won't be able to make any claims. It's risky, because you are a foreigner and the coxeur (smuggler)⁷⁸ is a local guy, he has more power than you. In this kind of situation what you can do is to work again and collect more money. A lot of people there have lost money, they have nothing left, they want to travel but they can't leave.

36-year-old Senegalese man

These instances were typically reported as having occurred in Mauritania, but there was also one instance reported in Senegal where a boat was overbooked and left passengers who had paid behind.

Vulnerability and resilience: why sea legs matter

Throughout the interviews, respondents repeatedly noted characteristics or experiences which made them either more vulnerable or more resilient. Nine respondents explained that being familiar with the sea (e.g. being a fisherman) or having such individuals in one's pirogue was an essential, even lifesaving, factor during the sea journey, while others described the impact of inexperience with the sea:

In the pirogue there were fishermen, captains, and fishing technicians. At one point, when the pirogue started taking on water, they told us what we had to do to stop the water.

23-year-old Senegalese man

Since it was my first time to travel by sea, I had a lot of discomfort, I suffered a lot from seasickness. I was constantly vomiting, to the point of feeling very weak. To be relieved, I had to abstain from heavy food and drink.

30-year-old Malian man

In conditions of extreme heat with limited water and food rations, sea sickness can lead to death through excessive vomiting and consequent dehydration. Some respondents said having inexperienced persons in one's boat affected all on board. For example, a 23-year-old Senegalese man recalled: "It was the seasick people who tired us out. It was their first experience at sea; they were the ones who were vomiting, talking to themselves, fighting and bothering everyone."

⁷⁸ Term used in West Africa to denote a smuggler.

Refugees and migrants undertake journeys that often start before the actual boat trip, and which expose them to multiple dangers and protection incidents. Those who embark on boat journeys are placed under severe physical and emotional stress. As the next section explores, those who are deported from the Canary Islands, or are intercepted off the coast of Mauritania, face more risks as they are summarily returned through Mauritania to its borders with Senegal and Mali.

In their own words – telling individual stories

30-year-old man from Mali

The respondent, a 30-year-old Malian man, first journeyed to Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, from where he had originally been attempting to migrate to Europe, and where he explained he had been mistreated. He then returned to Mali before departing for Mauritania via bus in order to try his luck with the Atlantic route to Spain. He paid roughly 833 USD to a smuggler, to whom he had been introduced by a personal contact, and who facilitated the boat journey. After setting out on the pirogue he was captured by Mauritanian security forces and detained for several days, and his older brother in France paid for his release. In explaining why he needed to take this risky route he stated:

“But all this is due to poverty which means that we do not have the means to take the plane. We are thus obliged to take this road here.”

The respondent's motivations for migrating were multiple. He stated that economic reasons, particularly poverty, influenced his decision. He cited that the difficulty in pursuing a traditional agricultural livelihood was an important factor. He expressed “envy” at others who had migrated before him, wanting “to leave and become like them.” He specifically referenced “the elders who have managed to reach Europe and make beautiful achievements in the village” and “older brothers who had the chance to leave before.” Additionally, the vulnerable state of his parents and desire to help them was what gave “us the heart to leave.”

He referenced various risks and dangers that occurred throughout the trip, including extortion and detainment without adequate access to food, as well as other mistreatment. Despite this, the respondent did not report health problems during his journey:

No, during the trip I didn't get sick. It should be pointed out that there were some people among us whose health was fragile. When I was expelled, it was the day after I was expelled that my malaria relapsed and I was treated at the health center here.

Having lost the money he invested in attempting to reach the Canary Islands, he had to borrow money from his father to pay for his malaria treatment. At the time of interview, the respondent did not seem to have immediate thoughts about re-migration, although this remained a possibility if he found the means to do so.

“...If I have the means to do so, I will leave, but also if I have a lot of means to settle down, I will stay to take care of my father, who is very old now.”

Forcible returns along the Atlantic route

The research for this study sought a better understanding of deportations from the Canary Islands to Mauritania carried out by Spain in conjunction with Frontex, and of Mauritania's subsequent expulsions to its borders with Senegal and Mali. The frequency of deportation flights from the islands picked up from the latter part of 2019 into the early months of 2020, prior to an interruption due to the Covid-19 pandemic.⁷⁹ After this hiatus there was just one additional flight in 2020, on 10 November.⁸⁰ The Spanish government has emphasized a broad strategy of deportations from the Canary Islands, for instance in a session of Congress in mid-December.⁸¹ Those deported from the Canary Islands to Mauritania (more specifically to Nouadhibou), are subsequently expelled, bussed by Mauritanian authorities to the Senegalese and Malian borders where they are left without further support. Such expulsions also occur in the case of migrants who have been intercepted at sea. Bearing in mind that the onward returns from Mauritania apply both to those whose deportation begins in the Canary Islands and to those who are intercepted en route, the process is broken down into its component parts below.

Inadequate reception and screening in the Canary Islands

According to a key informant in the Canary Islands, the planning for reception places there was based on arrival numbers from recent years, which had been relatively low: approximately 1,305 in 2018, and 2,700 in 2019 following an uptick towards the end of that year.⁸² Consequently, Spain's Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security and Migration had allocated financing for only 300 reception places for 2020,⁸³ woefully inadequate to accommodate the more than 23,000 refugees and migrants who arrived by boat in 2020.⁸⁴ The situation in the Canary Islands raises many challenges for humanitarian reception, human rights, and the asylum system in the islands themselves, and it also has important implications for what happens to refugees and migrants who are returned from the islands.

Surge incapacity

Even at the beginning of 2020, when the cumulative numbers of arrivals were much lower, multiple reports from news media outlets and watchdogs indicated problems with the assessment of arrivals and their profiles and potential vulnerabilities. This is an issue in its own right and also in the context of returns.⁸⁵ As the year progressed, pressure on the reception system continued to escalate, and screening systems were placed under increasingly great strain. Multiple key informants who work in the Canary Islands or on activities carried out there highlighted problems with reception and screening of arrivals related to a lack of coordination between actors in the response, trained personnel, legal aid, and centers with specialized screening capacity.

According to a key informant who has had substantial contact with humanitarian operations on the Islands:

"Spain has no standardized and comprehensive protocol for sea arrivals— no way for actors to work together to receive them. It is not clear what role everyone should play, or who should be doing what. This leaves a lot of discretion to the stakeholders who are present and means quality of reception depends on the proactivity of each actor. Every time sea arrivals come in, there is a rush to respond and a lack of coordination."⁸⁶

There is also a lack of lawyers and interpreters, who are not systematically present when boats are received. The two actors who are always involved in reception of arrivals are the Red Cross and the police. The Red Cross carries out an initial screening for medical issues and vulnerable profiles, but this can be challenging given the large numbers of arrivals, and the fact that the screening occurs at the location of disembarkation, which is not a conducive environment for in-depth assessment. It therefore consists of very basic questions, which may not always be well understood due to inadequate access to translation. This is the only proactive, official screening process for arrivals.⁸⁷

79 Mixed Migration Centre (2020b) [op.cit.](#)

80 El Día (2020) [Mauritania expulsará a los inmigrantes deportados desde Canarias](#)

81 El Confidencial (2020b) [op.cit.](#)

82 Mixed Migration Centre (2020) [op.cit.](#)

83 Interview with key informant in Spain, 1 December 2020.

84 InfoMigrants 2021 [op.cit.](#)

85 Mixed Migration Centre (2020b) [op.cit.](#)

86 Interview with key informant in Spain, 1 December 2020.

87 Ibid.

Overlooking children⁸⁸

The same key informant highlighted the challenges these shortcomings raise for the protection of children. There is no systematic questioning of arrivals about their ages, and especially when it comes to adolescents, if they don't appear to be young, they generally won't be asked whether they are a minor.⁸⁹ The disorganization of the screening process means that at times one migrant will be asked to report on the ages of others with whom s/he was traveling, which can result in misinformation. Lack of coordination between actors can also lead to children being overlooked.⁹⁰ According to another key informant, "determining age is a challenge, and there are minors who are said to be adults even if they are not over 18 years old."⁹¹

This seems to accord with the experience of one respondent, an 18-year-old (17 when he began his migration journey) Malian interviewed in the Canary Islands. When asked whether he told the authorities he was under the age of 18, he said, "I said 17 but they put 18." Young people under the age of 18 should receive special status under the protection system for minors, which gives them regular status (thereby preventing returns), as well as access to care. However, this only comes into play if they are correctly recognized as children. Those who have been so recognized are transferred to reception centers for children operated under the public minors' protection system.⁹²

While the screening process itself is an obstacle to identifying and extending protection to children, lack of information is also a factor, as there are no mechanisms in place to ensure that arrivals understand their rights and how to access them. Children may believe that they have a better chance of transfer to the Spanish mainland if they are deemed to be adults, or they might wish to avoid separation from the people with whom they have traveled. Without reliable information about the protection services that are available, they may claim to be an adult or fail to assert that they are a child.⁹³

Following a monitoring trip to the Canary Islands, Save the Children highlighted the insufficiencies of the screening and reception system in relation to children, pointing out that they should receive specialized psychosocial support within 72 hours of arrival, and warning that "minors are not guaranteed early access to specialized legal advice and are not informed about their rights and the asylum procedure."⁹⁴ According to one key informant, the extent to which mental health and psychosocial support referrals take place varies by island, but in general there are almost no psychologists trained to work with children on the move. The extent that other vulnerabilities in children are addressed also really depends, but the key informant explained that, "mostly what happens is that the whole system is collapsing and doesn't have the resources to attend to this number of children."⁹⁵

In the case of the Malian respondent mentioned above, it appears that his minor status at arrival was not taken into consideration, and it is also not clear that he has been able to apply for asylum. When asked if he knew what would happen next, he said, "I don't know, they didn't explain, I'm still waiting." He later went on to say, "What I think about is applying for asylum," suggesting that he had not already found an opportunity to do so. A key informant also spoke of challenges related to asylum in the specific case of children, explaining that very few of them request asylum as they have not received information about the possibility, and the staff in the special centers for children are not trained to conduct assessments in this regard.⁹⁶

88 As it is the preferred terminology of child-focused organizations, the term 'children' is used instead of 'minors' except in cases when sources specifically used the term 'minor,' in which case it is maintained.

89 Interview with key informant in Spain, 1 December 2020.

90 Written inputs from key informant in Spain, 28 January 2021.

91 Interview with key informant in Spain, 18 November 2020.

92 Interview with key informant in Spain, 1 December 2020.

93 Ibid.

94 Save the Children (2020) [Canarias: Save the Children pide al Gobierno un plan coordinado de acogida y protección de la infancia migrante y refugiada para evitar las vulneraciones de derechos de los niños y niñas](#)

95 Written inputs from key informant in Spain, 28 January 2021.

96 Ibid.

Undermining asylum

Other key informants highlighted similar problems in terms of potential asylum seekers or victims of trafficking.⁹⁷ One explained that there is no access to asylum procedures in the initial 72 hours of mandated detention following arrival in the Canary Islands, stating “there is no room for legal aid or interpretation; arrivals are only informed of their rights as detainees, but not of international protection or other protection schemes,” and going on to say that people do not have access to lawyers until they are given a pre-expulsion order. Additionally, persons arriving by sea in the Canary Islands in 2019 and 2020 were not systematically informed by authorities of the possibility to apply for asylum.⁹⁸ As was the case with minors, lack of information on their rights and avenues for protection can lead these other vulnerable groups to adopt strategies which may hinder their access to long-term protection. For instance, they may decide not to apply for asylum because they believe that receiving a pre-expulsion order will facilitate their onward travel to the mainland, as the order contains an identification number that allows access to the irregular migrant reception system and can be used as an identifying document in travel.⁹⁹

UNHCR has stated its belief that there is a substantial presence of refugees and would-be asylum seekers in flows to the Canary Islands. According to an August profiling exercise it carried out there, 30 percent said they left their country due to conflict and widespread violence, while 32 percent cited persecution “due to sexual and gender violence, ethnicity, religion, political reasons or forced marriage and recruitment.”¹⁰⁰ While the Spanish government does not provide data on nationalities of arrivals, a statement by the UNHCR representative in Spain echoes this sentiment: “There’s been a change in profile. We see more arrivals from the Sahel, from the Ivory Coast, more women, more children, more profiles that would be in need of international protection.”¹⁰¹

It is difficult to know for sure, due to the lack of official figures, but as of September 2020, UNHCR estimated that approximately 35 percent of arrivals in the Canary Islands were coming from Mali,¹⁰² and numbers put together by El Pais as of early 2021 suggested that for 2020 as a whole, Malians comprised approximately 20% of arrivals.¹⁰³ UNHCR currently has a Position on Returns to Mali (Update II) which calls on states not to forcibly return Malians from eight regions and four administrative cercles.¹⁰⁴ A key informant underscored once again the challenges raised due to inadequate interpretation services, and the consequences this can have for protection. Many arriving Malians only understand Bambara or Soninke, and the authorities have not been able to make provisions to support the necessary translation into these languages.¹⁰⁵

UNHCR and IOM carried out a joint monitoring mission to the Canary Islands in November, and may engage there further in the course of 2021.¹⁰⁶ As of January 2021, UNHCR had a small presence in the islands, seeking to support authorities in providing information which could assist in the identification of international protection needs among arrivals.¹⁰⁷

Deporting vulnerable persons?

Children who are missed in initial screening, or would-be asylum seekers who have not independently made a claim, are unlikely to be identified as such while in humanitarian reception centers. These centers are often staffed by people who may not be trained to look for vulnerable profiles.¹⁰⁸ Additionally, the large numbers of arrivals make everything more difficult. One key informant spoke of how “it is impossible to find resources and professionals at the moment” given the pressure the reception system is under.¹⁰⁹ In the first deportation from the Canary Islands to Mauritania following the pandemic-related hiatus, which took place on 10 November, there was no systematic screening done to identify minors or asylum seekers prior to their expulsion flight. According to a key informant, in the case of this deportation (to Mauritania), it was the judge issuing the deportation orders who took it upon himself to ask those he was ruling on whether they wished to apply for asylum or protection as a minor.¹¹⁰

97 Interviews with key informants in Spain, 11, 18 and 19 November 2020.

98 Interview with key informant in Spain, 19 November 2020.

99 Ibid.

100 Human Rights Watch (2020) [Spain: Respect Rights of People Arriving by Sea to Canary Islands](#)

101 Brito, R. (2020) [Migrants trying to reach Europe pushed to deadly Atlantic](#) AP News.

102 Ibid.

103 Martín, M. (2021) [op. cit.](#)

104 105 UNHCR (2019) [Position on Returns to Mali – Update II](#)

105 Written inputs from key informant in Spain, 2 February 2021.

106 UNHCR (2020) [IOM and UNHCR carry out joint visit to the Canary Islands amid increasing arrivals](#); EFE (2020) [ACNUR y la OIM ayudarán a Canarias a gestionar la crisis migratoria](#)

107 Written inputs from key informant in Spain, 2 February 2021.

108 Interview with key informant in Spain, 1 December 2020.

109 Interview with key informant in Spain, 18 November 2020.

110 Interview with key informant in Spain, 1 December 2020.

Written deportation notifications are typically delivered in Spanish to large groups of refugees and migrants at one time, making it very difficult to ask questions or receive input on one's personal situation. Given the prevailing lack of access to interpreters and lawyers in the Canary Islands, it is common for refugees and migrants not to understand well what is happening to them. The pre-expulsion order is written in Spanish, and it contains an identification number that is seen as a desirable thing to have. Emphasizing the disorientation inherent in the experience, a key informant explained how one can receive a pre-expulsion order, assume it is a positive thing which may facilitate access to the Spanish mainland, and then find oneself unexpectedly on a plane to Mauritania, and soon thereafter on a bus to the Mauritanian border.¹¹¹ Some sense of this was given by one deportee:

We spent more than two months [in the Canary Islands] and to my great surprise, despite several investigations, I found myself on a plane where we were disembarked at the airport of Nouadhibou, where a bus was waiting for our transfer to Rosso, the border of Senegal, through Nouakchott. After my refoulement, I stayed a few months in Senegal and returned to Nouadhibou.

28-year-old Senegalese man

As of mid-January 2021, there has only been one documented deportation flight from the Canary Islands to Mauritania following the Covid-related hiatus. However, the Spanish government seems to prefer deportations as a strategy, given its clear reluctance to transfer people to the mainland, the diplomatic overtures it has been making to governments of sending and transit countries, and statements from the government itself.¹¹² Thus, these weaknesses in screening could soon have implications for returns once more.

Expulsions to and through Mauritania: out of sight, out of mind

Key informants in Mauritania confirmed that no additional screening for vulnerabilities takes place in Mauritania, meaning that outside of exceptional cases, there is no further opportunity to rectify any omissions of screening that occurred in the Canary Islands.¹¹³ This raises concerns, particularly given the substantial number of Malians among deportees.¹¹⁴ In one documented case early in 2020, fourteen deported Malians had expressed their intention to request asylum in Spain, according to judicial sources. They were nonetheless deported to Mauritania.¹¹⁵ A key informant from Mauritania has observed deportees from the Canary Islands who later come back to Mauritania:

Some migrants from Mali, where there is a war, complain that they cannot apply for asylum in Spain. They deplore the fact that they are denied this possibility, although they have the right to do so.¹¹⁶

Rapid expulsions

Early in 2020, UNHCR made a statement on the Spanish deportations to Mauritania:

Regarding the returns, we must remember that any return to another country must be done with all the guarantees, and that the State that carries it out is responsible for ensuring with the receiving country that the return does not pose a threat to the life or integrity of the returned persons, directly or indirectly.¹¹⁷

However, according to a key informant in Mauritania, the reception and onward transfer of those deported from the Canary Islands is carried out without oversight (humanitarian and civil society organizations working with refugees and migrants are not even notified of return flights except in rare cases, such as medical need).¹¹⁸ And while the Spanish Interior Minister initially sought to defend the practice by saying that deportees “are not going to Mali, but to

111 Ibid.

112 Wolter, M. & Bathke, B. [op. cit.](#); El Confidencial (2020b) [op. cit.](#)

113 Interviews with key informants in Mauritania, 26 November and 3 December 2020.

114 Wallis, E. (2020) [Back to Mauritania: Frontex repatriates migrants arriving on Canary Islands](#) InfoMigrants.

115 European Council on Refugees and Exiles (2020b) [Spain: Authorities Denounced for Indirect Returns to Mali](#)

116 Written inputs from key informant in Mauritania, 11 January 2021.

117 Martín, M. (2020b) [La Comisión Española de Ayuda al Refugiado condena la expulsión de malienses a Mauritania](#) El País.

118 Interview with key informant in Mauritania, 26 November 2020.

Mauritania,”¹¹⁹ key informants and respondents alike describe the way deportees are taken immediately to the borders of Senegal (via the border town of Rosso) and Mali (via Gogui in the cercle of Nioro), where they are left without further official support. The precise details of what happens next is an area that would benefit from further study. One key informant in Mauritania stated that: “All deported migrants are dropped at the borders and left there without handing over to anybody, without food, clothes or onward transportation.”¹²⁰ A key informant in Senegal, in contrast, indicated that returnees are handed over to Senegalese border police, who might at times direct them to seek out civil society support, but who do not provide assistance themselves.¹²¹

While the exact mechanisms of the expulsion at the borders are not entirely clear, and may indeed not be consistent, the lack of support given at this point was underscored by respondents. A 24-year-old Malian man said: “When I was turned back at the border, I didn’t have a penny on me, and I had to contact a relative who sent me money to return to Bamako.” Others spoke of needing to “make our way home without any accompaniment” (43-year-old Malian woman), stating that upon arrival at the Malian border, “everyone manages as they can there” (25-year-old Malian man). This respondent went on to draw a contrast between the assistance he received at the different stages in his deportation, saying: “the Spanish authorities gave us each a sum of 200 euros before we embarked for Mauritania; on the other hand the Mauritians just gave us sardines, bread and water, and not one cent.” A respondent who was returned to Senegal stated that the only thing he had received from the Senegalese border police after his expulsion from Mauritania was a little water.

Untested presumptions

Deportation flights from the Canary Islands to Nouadhibou occur under the auspices of the 2003 Accord between the Kingdom of Spain and the Islamic Republic of Mauritania on immigration (see p. 4). This accord is the basis for Mauritania to readmit third country nationals who have transited through Mauritania or, importantly, who are merely presumed to have done so.¹²² While one key informant in Mali stated his belief that “Mauritania has become the transit location ‘par excellence’ for the majority of youth in the Kayes region,”¹²³ it nonetheless cannot be assumed that every refugee or migrant who arrives in the Canary Islands has passed via Mauritania. Media reports on these deportations from early in 2020 documented cases of people who were deported to Nouadhibou without having passed through Mauritania en route to the Canary Islands.¹²⁴ As the year progressed there was a sharp increase in boat departures from Senegal;¹²⁵ this suggests a sizable number of people travelling whose route should, by its very nature, bypass Mauritania. Notably, the 10 November deportation flight from the Canary Islands to Mauritania was almost entirely comprised of Senegalese.¹²⁶

However, multiple key informants in the Canary Islands indicated that refugees and migrants who arrive there are not asked if they have transited through Mauritania,¹²⁷ nor does such screening occur upon arrival in Mauritania for those who have been deported there. A key informant in Mauritania pointed to the substantial cooperation Spain has with Mauritania to explain the willingness of the Mauritanian authorities to accept deportations regardless of whether there is a legal basis to do so.¹²⁸ When asked about the cooperation between Spain and Mauritania, one key informant said:

Spain has signed an agreement with Mauritania to bring all these people back to Mauritania, which is then in charge of bringing all these people back to the borders. All we know is that when people are repatriated, Mauritania does not have the possibility to take care of them well and to do the job of repatriation to their destination.¹²⁹

119 Subsequently the [Interior Minister](#) seemed to backtrack somewhat. In February he told the Spanish Congress, “The situation in Mali is complex, as in other countries of the Sahel, but there are areas of Mali that do not have a real effective risk for people. UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration are also working on voluntary repatriations to Mali.”

120 Interview with key informant in Mauritania, 26 November 2020.

121 Interview with key informant in Senegal, 24 November 2020.

122 Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores y de Cooperación [op.cit.](#)

123 Interview with key informant in Mali, 25 November 2020.

124 European Council on Refugees and Exiles (2020b) [op.cit.](#)

125 Shryock, R. [op.cit.](#)

126 El Día [op.cit.](#)

127 Interviews with key informants in the Canary Islands, 11, 12 and 19 November 2020.

128 Interview with key informant in Mauritania, 26 November 2020.

129 Interview with key informant in Mauritania, 3 December 2020.

This is underscored by the speed with which onward deportation from Mauritania occurs. According to the same key informant:

*The strategy is: when they arrive, evacuate as quickly as possible, otherwise afterwards there will be the media, civil society... Evacuation is automatic. There are buses that are already ready and waiting for them.*¹³⁰

Five of the seven respondents who were deported from the Canary Islands to Mauritania also alluded to this, again frequently speaking of buses waiting at the airport to transport them to the Malian and Senegalese borders where they are expelled from Mauritania. Of these seven respondents six returned to Mauritania, either immediately or eventually.

Unmet medical needs

While key informants in Mauritania spoke of medical grounds as one basis upon which they may be able to intervene in cases of return through Mauritania, there were nonetheless multiple concerns raised around the health of the refugees and migrants being returned.¹³¹ When it comes to deportation flights from the Canary Islands, international organizations and local partners are generally not notified, and only have access to the people being returned if Mauritanian authorities specifically reach out to them, which may occur in cases of medical distress.¹³²

For those being intercepted at sea – some 344 in October and November 2020 – humanitarian access by international and local non-governmental actors is still limited despite efforts to secure authorization for more extensive provision of assistance.¹³³ Current arrangements allow for a basic screening for severe medical cases, provision of food, and a brief opportunity to identify unaccompanied minors or other vulnerable profiles. This occurs at the point of disembarkation in Mauritania, after which refugees and migrants are immediately taken into custody by the police, and then taken to Nouakchott and onward to the borders, typically in a matter of hours.¹³⁴

Given that refugees and migrants who are intercepted at sea in Nouadhibou will have been packed into a small boat on the open ocean – often for multiple days – their physical and mental state is likely to be under great strain. Speaking of the expulsion process for those who are intercepted at sea, one key informant stated their belief that these refugees and migrants need more time to rest before onward travel, but indicated that the Mauritanian authorities say they don't have places to keep people. However, there are multiple international organizations, NGOs and civil society organizations operating in Nouadhibou with capacity to provide support. According to this key informant and another key informant from Mauritania, the consequences of not meeting the medical needs of deportees can be grave:

*While we don't have data from the authorities, I'm sure that people do lose their lives while being taken to the border, because the way they leave here, they are not in good shape to travel.*¹³⁵

*According to the migrants, there are deaths of repatriated people between Nouadhibou and Senegal. Someone returns from the Canary Islands tired from the boat trip, but the police say that he must pass by.*¹³⁶

The same key informant also highlighted other health-related weaknesses in the screening and reception process for people intercepted at sea. While the Red Cross can provide first aid for refugees and migrants upon disembarkation, and referrals to local civil society organizations take place in some medical cases, whether someone can stay for further support is decided by the authorities. Thus, the decision is not made by medical professionals, nor with the benefit of any systematic medical examination. If a person does not have visible symptoms, they will be sent onward, regardless of their actual state of health. This poses a particular challenge for people who need psychological support. The key informant spoke of vivid examples of seeing refugees and migrants in psychological distress.¹³⁷

Key informants did indicate that there seems to be greater flexibility demonstrated by the authorities vis-à-vis women

¹³⁰ Interview with key informant in Mauritania, 3 December.

¹³¹ Interviews with key informants in Mauritania, 20 and 26 November, 3 December 2020.

¹³² Interview with key informant in Mauritania, 26 November 2020.

¹³³ Interview with key informant in Mauritania, 26 November 2020 and written inputs from key informant in Mauritania, 11 January 2021.

¹³⁴ Interview with key informant in Mauritania, 26 November 2020.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Interview with key informant in Mauritania, 3 December 2020.

¹³⁷ Interview with key informant in Mauritania, 3 December 2020.

and youth, which gives organizations in Nouadhibou working on humanitarian and migration-related programming a greater opportunity to assist.¹³⁸ Several key informants mentioned that specific programming for youth in mobility exists in Nouadhibou.¹³⁹ Another stated that coordination around disembarkation between authorities and actors providing aid had improved.¹⁴⁰ A respondent also mentioned that upon showing his refugee card to officials, he was referred to UNHCR in Nouadhibou and assisted with food, shelter, and modest financial support through a civil society partner. Thus, there appear to be elements to build upon in terms of improving reception of people intercepted at sea.

Aftermath of failed attempts

Re-migration and the difficulty of going home

Multiple key informants across all the African countries of interview spoke in some form or another about significant re-migration among the refugees and migrants they observe or have had contact with. Generally, they touched on this when speaking of people being deported from Mauritania, emphasizing how common it was for those expelled to the border to turn back and try to re-enter Mauritania immediately or at some later point. A key informant in Mauritania spoke about migration as “a family decision with a lot of investment behind it. People can go back, prepare themselves and take the same route again.”¹⁴¹ Another in Mali stated:

Often we receive young people who do not want to go back to the village after their return. There are cases where they want to immediately leave again... Sometimes we even feel like crying when someone tells us about their life because you see a mother who has sold all her possessions so that her only son can go on an adventure and is sent away without anything. It hurts. It really causes disappointment. Often there are people who after being sent back they go to Bamako to try to go again. It's a disaster, I tell you. We don't know what to do to stop it. They are left behind and there is no strategy to accompany the young people who have been expelled by the state.”¹⁴²

Although a question about re-migration was not included in the interview guide, and was not frequently asked explicitly, almost half of the 37 respondents who were not in the Canary Islands at the time of interview spoke of wishing to attempt a journey again. Eight of these were interviewed in Mauritania, and nine in their country of origin. In addition to these, there were ten respondents (from Mali, Senegal, Guinea, CAR) who did not express an explicit desire to re-migrate in their interview responses, but who were also interviewed in Mauritania. Some of them had spent time in Mauritania prior to their departure to the Canary Islands, and it is not clear to what extent they may see staying in Mauritania as an alternative to once again trying for the Canary Islands or mainland Europe. Nonetheless, it is notable that they did not return to their countries of origin, and they could be seen as likely to migrate again.

No turning back

Confirming the perceptions of key informants, respondents who expressed a desire to re-migrate or who were interviewed outside their country of origin also alluded to social pressures and expectations, and ensuing feelings of shame. According to one who was deported from the Canary Islands and then to the border with Mali, “Not being able to go home without money, one of my friends and I decided to return to Mauritania, more precisely here to Nouadhibou, because my friend has an uncle here.” Another respondent, a 24-year-old Malian, explained, “Without any goods, I cannot return home. I called a friend in Mauritania who had transferred me an amount of MRU2,500 (about \$65) which allowed me to return to Nouakchott.”

Respondents also spoke of their own personal determination to carry out their objective, for instance stating that “nothing in the world will make me give up my dream” (19-year-old Malian man) or “I am determined to continue on my way no matter what situation I face. I'd rather die trying than stay without doing anything to change my situation” (40-year-old Gambian man).

138 Interviews with key informants in Mauritania, 20 and 26 November 2020.

139 Interviews with key informants in Mauritania, 20 November and 3 December.

140 Interview with key informant in Mauritania, 26 November 2020.

141 Interview with key informant in Mauritania, 26 November 2020.

142 Interview with key informant in Mali, 26 November 2020.

Emotional costs of failure

Ah! Yes...it's hard to digest... to this day I still haven't been able to digest my refolement from "Paradise" to "Hell." I have lost the taste for life.

30-year-old Malian woman

The migration experience had lingering emotional and mental health consequences. Almost half of respondents interviewed outside the Canary Islands (18 of 37) described negative emotional impacts of the migration process. Those who elaborated on their feelings frequently did so in relation to their return experience and the implications of having failed in their attempt. Multiple respondents spoke about their sadness and disappointment, with many using words such as “depressed” and “demoralized” to describe their emotional state.

While some indicated that their emotional state had since improved, the majority spoke about negative mental health consequences in the present tense, suggesting that they had persisted:

[The return] really affected me a lot because I could not achieve my travel goals. I spent a lot. I lost everything. I am too discouraged and aggressive often. I am discouraged in the rest of life. I am currently facing mental problems often.

25-year-old Malian man

Another respondent, a 26-year-old Malian, simply summarized it as “everything has remained gloomy since our refolement,” appearing to speak to a general hopelessness felt by both himself and other returnees. Such emotional duress at times had physical implications as well, with multiple respondents reporting that they were having trouble sleeping.

Weighed down by stigma

The shame and stigma attached to a failed migration journey may also partially explain respondents' feelings of demoralization and sadness at the time of interview. Throughout the research, it was clear that an important risk in their migration journey was “failure,” and that this was related in part to the heavy social pressures that can accompany migration, and the investments, often made by loved ones, to finance the journey. Again, such sentiments could be one explanation for the substantial numbers of respondents who spoke of re-migration or had already begun the process. One respondent, described how his “failure” damaged his relationship with his family:

I no longer have the same relationship with my family...I lost everything I had and I didn't bring anything back... If your trip is partly financed by your family and you come back like that with nothing, that's a problem.

36-year-old Senegalese man

In a similar vein, multiple respondents spoke of their lost resources, and clearly this weighed on them emotionally as well:

So far I have not been able to accept this sad experience. This migration project has made me lose money that I would have used to do something else... Sleep has taken leave of me. I have lost the will to live. It is as if I carry the weight of the world on my shoulders. In other words, I am morally down, always anxious. Very revolted against myself, and against nature that offers me the world upside down”

30-year-old Malian woman

Another respondent spoke of this loss of resources in a context of social expectations as he compared himself to what his peers have already achieved:

Since [my return] my life hasn't been the same. I have been caught up in my thoughts. I tell myself that several young people my age have left and I am still here. With all the efforts I made to save money, earnings of several months and years invested in this trip that did not succeed, all this money that sank into the sea.

23-year-old Senegalese man

All told, while the migration experiences of respondents had many clear dangers and consequences for physical health, it appeared to be the mental health consequences that were the most enduring.

Conclusion

This research aims at providing a more comprehensive picture of dynamics along the Atlantic route, as well as before and after the journey.

Migration motivations and choice of route

Motivations for travel of West Africans along the Atlantic route are varied and multiple. Economic factors, frequently linked with social considerations, were by far the biggest emphasis of respondents. People want and need to provide for their families and themselves, and a lack of prospects and limited opportunities in their country of origin or host country are primary reasons for migrating. In this regard, government policies, or lack thereof, were often highlighted. Examples of others' migration successes and the pull effect of local acquaintances making it to the Canary Islands are powerful influences that are not tempered by the frequently well-known dangers of the route. It appears that these generated momentum for the usage of this route. Covid-19 was only occasionally referred to specifically as a migration push factor by respondents, though key informants emphasized the damage it has done to the informal economy. The pull of perceived labor needs due to Covid deaths in Europe was also mentioned. Certain route-related factors which have been part of the prevailing conversation about Atlantic departures were not emphasized by respondents as a factor in their decision-making. For instance, very few respondents spoke explicitly about taking the Atlantic route because of dangers or difficulties with other routes (e.g. through Libya), although this was mentioned by several key informants. Opting for this route due to Covid-19 related border closures elsewhere was not brought up at all. The route-related element that was emphasized by respondents was the perception that this is the shortest and most direct route to Europe.

Risks, dangers and protection incidents

Insufficient food and water, exposure to the elements, intense seasickness, dehydration, and unsanitary conditions make the boat journey to the Canary Islands physically dangerous. It is also mentally taxing, with no recourse for the abovementioned physical challenges, fear caused by rough seas and the prospect of sinking, and in some cases the trauma of seeing fellow passengers die. Indeed, this route claimed hundreds of lives in 2020, and the full magnitude of the loss will probably never be known. Beyond the boat journey, refugees and migrants also report running out of food and water, exhausting their money, and receiving misinformation, frequently from smugglers. They also faced a variety of protection incidents, with bribery/extortion and scams/theft being most commonly reported. While authorities were most frequently mentioned as perpetrators of most protection incidents (particularly in Mauritania), scams and associated theft of money typically occurred at the hands of smugglers.

Focus on health

The migration journey along the Atlantic route impacts refugees' and migrants' physical and mental health. Thirty-five respondents referenced some physical ailment beyond fatigue in their interview. The boat journey towards the Canary Islands was the time when respondents' physical health was most threatened, due to cramped conditions on pirogues, treacherous sea conditions, exposure to weather and salt water, and insufficient food and water supplies. Seasickness was a particular issue, and dehydration a major risk. Returns through Mauritania of those intercepted at sea appeared to be a major gap in accessing needed health support. Time spent on land, in transit or working, could also affect the physical health of respondents, who spoke of long journeys and difficult working and living conditions en route. Lack of food and water could also be an issue beyond the boat journey. While the above challenges could lead to health problems, at times serious, and even result in death, it appears that the most long-lasting health impacts are related to the emotional and mental health of refugees and migrants who had attempted this route. Approximately half of those who didn't make it to the Canary Islands, or were deported from them, spoke of the negative emotional consequences of their migration experience. Respondents referred to depression over the resources they lost in making the trip, feelings of shame and failure, and demoralization caused by their experience of forcible return.

Forcible returns along the Atlantic route

Reception and screening of refugee and migrant arrivals in the Canary Islands is informal and limited, and characterized by a lack of interpreters and lawyers and inadequate information for those arriving. It is likely that children and potential asylum seekers are being overlooked. Spain seems poised to step up deportations to Mauritania once more, and risks deporting vulnerable individuals who might qualify for some form of protection. This is a particular concern given the large number of Malians among arrivals to the Canary Islands. Individuals deported from the Canary Islands to Mauritania are immediately taken to the borders with Senegal and Mali and left to make their own way without further support. No further screening occurs, and there is no external oversight of the process. Refugees and migrants intercepted at sea off the coast of Mauritania are also immediately taken and deposited at the Malian and Senegalese borders. While extreme medical cases may receive assistance, most of these refugees and migrants do not have a chance to recover from their difficult boat voyage before being expelled. This may lead to negative health consequences.

Focus on children

A lack of standardized or comprehensive protocol for managing sea arrivals and an intense pressure of arrivals in the Canary Islands contribute to a reception and screening process that may overlook children, preventing them from accessing care and protection through the public minors' protection system. This problem is compounded by the fact that lawyers and interpreters are not systematically present when boats arrive, meaning that refugees and migrants may not understand questions they are asked or have adequate information about their rights, including the right of children to access protection. If a child is not correctly identified as a minor, s/he will not have protection against potential deportation. The specialized reception centers run under the minors' protection system mean that children receive differentiated care – a good practice – but are not equipped to recognize those who may be eligible to apply for asylum, and indeed, very few children make asylum requests. Other child-specific protocols, such as access to specialized psychosocial support within 72 hours of arrival, are also lacking. In general, while it is positive that the reception system makes special provisions for children, the strain the system is under means that there are insufficient resources to ensure that child arrivals are supported as fully as they should be.

Aftermath of failed attempts

Most respondents who failed to reach the Canary Islands, or were deported from there, were outside their country of origin at the time of interview, or spoke explicitly of wanting to attempt migrating again, or both. This seems to indicate a substantial tendency towards re-migration. Respondents and key informants alike spoke of the challenges of returning home empty-handed, particularly when the migration journey entailed a significant family investment. In a similar vein, approximately half the respondents who did not reach the Canary Islands spoke of negative emotional and mental health consequences following the experience. In some cases these related to having lost resources in the attempt, and/or to the social consequences of not making it.



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

The MMC is part of and governed by the Danish Refugee Council (DRC). Global and regional MMC teams are based in Copenhagen, Dakar, Geneva, Nairobi, Tunis, Bogota and Bangkok.

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