



Mixed  
Migration  
Centre

# The impact of COVID-19 on refugees and migrants on the move in North and West Africa

MMC Briefing Paper, February 2021



**Front cover photo credit:**

© UNHCR/ Caroline Gluck. Libya, 01 December, 2020.

Refugee receives help, starts own business and employs other women.

# Acknowledgements

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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 information and views set out in this report are those of the Mixed Migration Centre and do not necessarily reflect the official opinion of the Danish Refugee Council or any of the donors supporting the work of MMC or this report. Responsibility for the content of this report lies entirely with the MMC.

This report was prepared for the Euro-African Dialogue on Migration and Development (Rabat Process) and the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) as part of the partnership between MMC and ICMPD to foster effective and sustainable migration policies and programmes.

For more information on MMC visit our website: [www.mixedmigration.org](http://www.mixedmigration.org)



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# About this report

This report is the first of a series of four papers that the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) will be publishing in 2021 as part of collaboration with the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) in the frame of the Rabat Process Dialogue. This work is in line with the MMC strategic objective to contribute to evidence-based and better-informed migration policies and debates.

## Introduction

Mobility to and through North and West Africa includes temporary, circular and more permanent movements driven by a combination of factors, including but not limited to seasonal work opportunities, personal or family reasons, the pursuit of better living conditions, and, in more extreme cases, violence and conflict. Countries in North Africa are historically destinations for sub-Saharan and North African refugees and migrants, and they are at the intersection of a number of mixed migration routes, including the Western, Central and Eastern Mediterranean Routes. West Africa is a region with a long-standing culture of migration linked to positive norms around migration enabling socio-economic mobility and, in some countries, to chronic forced displacement triggered by conflict and humanitarian crisis. While the majority of movements in West Africa are intra-regional, some refugees and migrants with increased aspirations and capabilities

move farther afield to North Africa and other parts of the continent, and a minority onward towards Europe.

As the COVID-19 pandemic took hold worldwide in the first months of 2020, countries in West and North Africa implemented various measures to limit the spread of the virus, such as border closures between countries and partial or full confinements within countries. These mobility restrictions, together with the socioeconomic impact of the COVID-19 crisis, considerably affected refugees' and migrants' needs, aspirations and capabilities to migrate within and out of the two regions. COVID-19 has multiplied risks for people on the move, with many finding themselves stranded in precarious situations, and others facing more challenging, costly and uncertain onward journeys, increasingly dependent on smugglers.

To better understand the impact of COVID-19 on people on the move, MMC adjusted its flagship data collection programme, the Mixed Migration Monitoring Mechanism Initiative (4Mi) in March 2020 and has since carried out two distinct remote data collection phases: the first between April and July 2020 to capture the immediate impact of the public health crisis on refugees' and migrants' lives; the second between July and the end of the year looking further at the medium to long term impact of the pandemic on mixed migration dynamics. Between 2 July and 30 November, MMC conducted 6,108 4Mi interviews: 2,737 in West Africa (1,019 in Mali, 882 in Niger, 836 in Burkina Faso) and 3,371 in North Africa (1,726 in Tunisia, 1,465 in Libya, 180 in Sudan). 4Mi analysis in the forthcoming sections are based on this dataset, except where it is indicated otherwise.

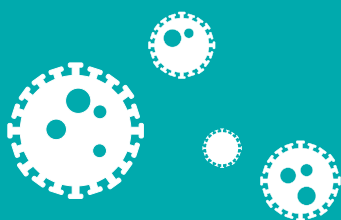
This paper offers expert insight and analysis on mixed migration trends that have emerged over the course of 2020 in North and West Africa, grounded in existing literature and MMC's unique primary data on people on the move. The aim of this paper is to raise awareness and strengthen policymakers' understanding of the challenges and risks refugees and migrants are facing since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in North and West Africa, as well as to promote policies and debate based on data, with the voices and human rights of refugees and migrants at the center.

The paper starts with an overview of existing figures on movement in North and West Africa and along the Central and Western Mediterranean Routes and continues with an analysis of 1) the impact of COVID-19 on refugees' and migrants' aspirations and capabilities to move from their countries of origin, 2) the situation of those who have become stranded while on the move, and 3) the impact of COVID-19 on smuggling dynamics. It concludes with a brief exploration of the outlook on mixed migration to highlight policy implications of the findings for the protection of people on the move, which are expected to remain highly relevant in the medium to long term. This paper presents figures on how COVID-19 has impacted migration drivers, migration journeys and access to smugglers.

## Key findings



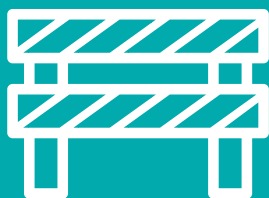
Sea departures of North Africans towards Europe have increased, as many seek out work opportunities abroad, while sea departures of sub-Saharan Africans towards Europe have seen a relative decline as their limited resources have diminished.



The short-term impact of COVID-19 has already led to increasing aspirations to migrate and decreasing capabilities to do so.



Involuntary immobility is a key risk for many refugees and migrants in transit and destination countries due to closed borders, depleted resources and fear of arrest, deportation or xenophobic violence.



As border-crossings become more challenging, people on the move may be more dependent upon smugglers, leaving them vulnerable to additional risks.

# 1. Context and trends

In North Africa, the closure of most border crossings between April and June 2020<sup>1</sup> considerably hampered mobility in the region. In Libya, IOM reported a decrease in the estimated number of refugees and migrants, in which it includes refugees, present in the country since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, from 625,638<sup>2</sup> identified between March and April 2020, to 574,146<sup>3</sup> in September and October. Further, IOM estimates that about 80,000<sup>4</sup> migrants have left Libya for neighboring countries, likely due to continued mobility restrictions and disrupted livelihood opportunities linked to the COVID-19 pandemic in the country.

With many COVID-19 related restrictions remaining in place throughout 2020, **overall arrivals to Europe through the Mediterranean routes decreased<sup>5</sup> as compared to the previous year.** That said, wide variation exists among the routes, with crossings via the Central Mediterranean Route to Italy continuing and even increasing<sup>6</sup> in 2020 as compared to the previous year, including the highest number of Tunisian arrivals recorded in the past nine years.<sup>7</sup> Available data from UNHCR up until October 2020 shows that **Tunisia surpassed Libya as the main embarkation point towards Italy<sup>8</sup>** – with not only Tunisian nationals making the crossing but also nationals of Ivory Coast,<sup>9</sup> many of whom had lost their jobs in Tunisia. On the Western Mediterranean Route to Spain, movement decreased initially as compared to numbers seen in 2019<sup>10</sup> – and then picked up<sup>11</sup> between August and November (see increasing movement along the Canary Island route below), overall featuring a high number of Algerian arrivals.<sup>12</sup> Both political and economic considerations,<sup>13</sup> exacerbated by the ongoing pandemic, are likely driving the increase of Mediterranean crossings by North African nationals.

In West Africa, as of March 2020,<sup>14</sup> COVID-19-related mobility restrictions started slowing down regional movements. This trend however seems to have changed with a relative increase in movements from April towards September<sup>15</sup> – with some fluctuation from **July onwards “indicating a return to regular mobility in the region”.**<sup>16</sup> The initial impacts of measures to slow the spread of the virus, such as border closures, also caused many to be stranded across the region, impacting up to **50,000<sup>17</sup> by the end of June, including refugees and migrants stuck at borders, in quarantine and transit centers.** Further, a trend of increasing movement along the **West African route to the Canary Islands<sup>18</sup>** emerged during 2020, with data collected by Spanish authorities and IOM indicating 17,337 individuals reached the Canary Islands between January and mid-November 2020 compared to 2,698 individuals in 2019.

A key trend observed overall, is the rise of **Mediterranean crossings from North Africa and a relative decline from sub-Saharan Africa.** The next section seeks to unpack this, by drawing upon MMC’s 4Mi data<sup>19</sup> to examine the impact that COVID-19 has had on peoples’ livelihoods, and in turn mobility: **those more economically vulnerable – largely from sub-Saharan Africa – have become too constrained to move, while those with some minimum level of resources – largely from North Africa – have sought out livelihood opportunities abroad.**

1 Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) (2020) Quarterly Mixed Migration Update Q2 2020: North Africa.

2 IOM (2020) [Libya's migrant report – July-August 2020](#).

3 IOM (2020) [Libya's migrant report – September-October 2020](#).

4 Ibid.

5 IOM (2020) [Missing migrants: Tracking deaths along migratory routes](#).

6 Ibid.

7 Foroudi, L. (2020) [COVID-19 fallout drives Tunisians to Italy despite deportations](#). The New Humanitarian.

8 UNHCR (2020) [Italy sea arrivals dashboard – October 2020](#).

9 Barigazzi, J. (2020) [Uptick in irregular migration from Tunisia worries Rome](#). Politico.

10 IOM (2020) [Missing migrants: Tracking deaths along migratory routes](#).

11 Ibid.

12 UNHCR (2020) [Operational portal: Refugee situations – Mediterranean](#).

13 MMC (2020) [Mixed Migration Review 2020](#).

14 IOM (2020) [COVID-19 mobility trends January-September West & Central Africa](#).

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 IOM (2020) [Migration in West and North Africa and across the Mediterranean: Trends, risks, development and governance](#).

18 MMC (2020) [Quarterly Mixed Migration Update Q1 2020: West Africa](#).

19 MMC (2020) [4Mi Frequently Asked Questions](#)

## 2. Impact of COVID-19 on aspirations and capabilities in countries of origin

Mobility to and through North and West Africa is motivated by a multitude of factors, including socioeconomic reasons (seasonal labour, personal or family reasons, and/or the pursuit of better living conditions) and, in some cases, violence, conflict, and lack of rights and freedoms. In general, migration is the result of a combination of someone's aspiration to move in combination with their capabilities to do so.<sup>20</sup> For refugees and migrants who have started their journeys after the onset of the pandemic, the crisis is influencing key factors which drive, constrain, and/or shape migration, such as labour market factors, political stability, and increased border controls, to name a few, and it is therefore affecting their aspirations and capabilities.

The 4Mi data presented in this section on the impact of COVID-19 on aspirations and capabilities to migrate will only consider interviews with respondents who started their migration journey after 1 April 2020, when the pandemic took hold globally, triggering various public health measures and movement restrictions. Between July and October 2020, 4,932 4Mi interviews were conducted in North and West Africa: 2,745 in North Africa and 2,187 in West Africa. In North Africa about 10% (238) of interviewees left their country of origin after April, in West Africa it was about 35% (1,185). For the analysis we look at two groups: West Africans interviewed in West Africa (n=1,185) and West Africans interviewed in North Africa (n=172).

### Aspirations

“My business no longer works with this pandemic, I lost my capital, I lost everything. So I decided to go look elsewhere hoping for a better chance.”

24-year-old man from Chad interviewed in Niger

Aspirations align with refugees' and migrants' notions of the good life and what they desire for their futures.<sup>21</sup> While we do not have 4Mi data on respondents' mobility-related hopes for their futures or how the pandemic may have affected these, we do have information on the impact of COVID-19 on their migration decision-making.

When asked whether coronavirus was a factor in their decision to leave their country of origin, about a third of West Africans interviewed in West and North Africa said it was a factor, showing that **the pandemic had become a driver of migration among our sample of refugees and migrants** (Figure 1). Further zooming in on the kind of impact that the pandemic had on drivers, 30% in West Africa as well as 24% in North Africa indicated that the **impact was mostly related to economic factors** (Figure 2). Considering that we are only at the beginning of the projected negative impact of COVID-19 on West African economies,<sup>22</sup> the fact that after just a few months into the crisis, one-third of 4Mi respondents declared that the situation influenced their decision to leave has key implications for policy.

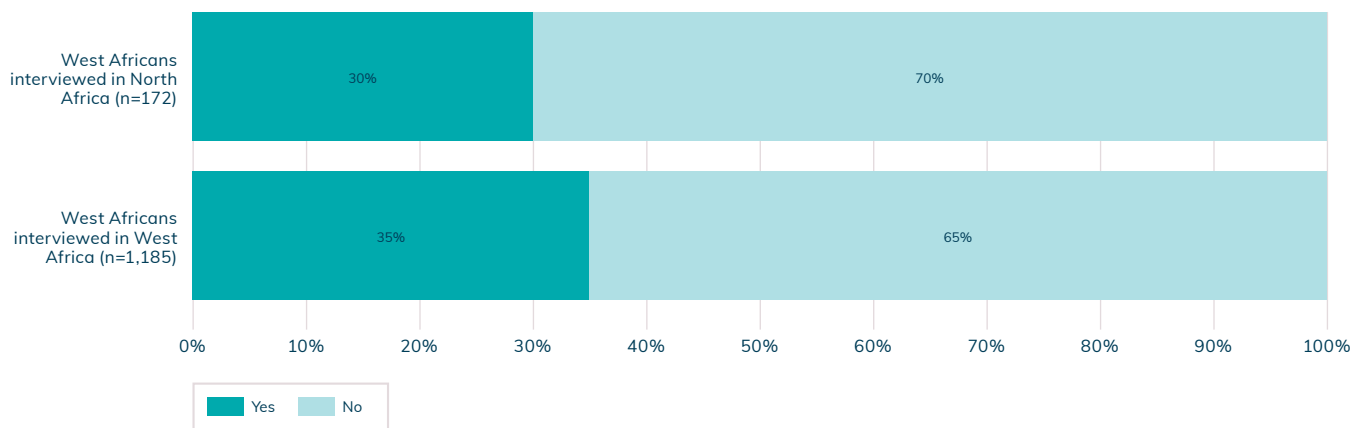
20 Carling, J., Schewel, K. (2017) [Revisiting aspiration and ability in international migration](#) Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies.

21 Bakewell, O., Bonfiglio, A. (2010) [Moving Beyond Conflict: Re-framing mobility in the African Great Lakes region](#). International Migration Institute Working Paper: Oxford.

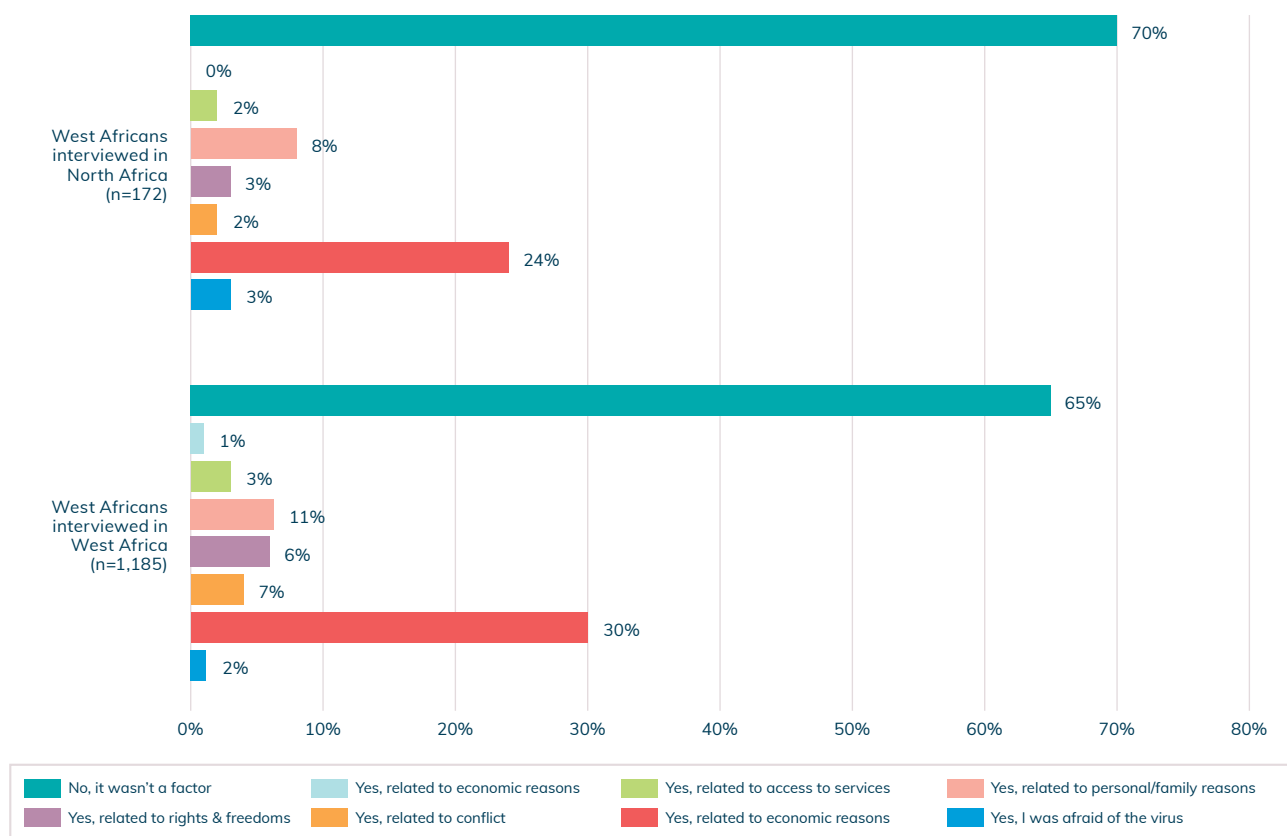
22 African Development Bank Group (2020) [West Africa economic outlook 2020 – coping with the COVID-19 pandemic](#). See also Gondwe, G. (2020) [Assessing the impact of COVID-19 on Africa's economic development](#) UNCTAD.



**Figure 1: Was COVID-19 a factor in your decision to leave your country of departure?**



**Figure 2: Impact of COVID-19 on migration drivers**



## Capabilities

**“Yes, I am used to migrating, but it has never been difficult like this period of Covid-19. We left home to have an income but now that is no longer the case. We have been robbed and once here we don’t have access to work, it’s hard.”**

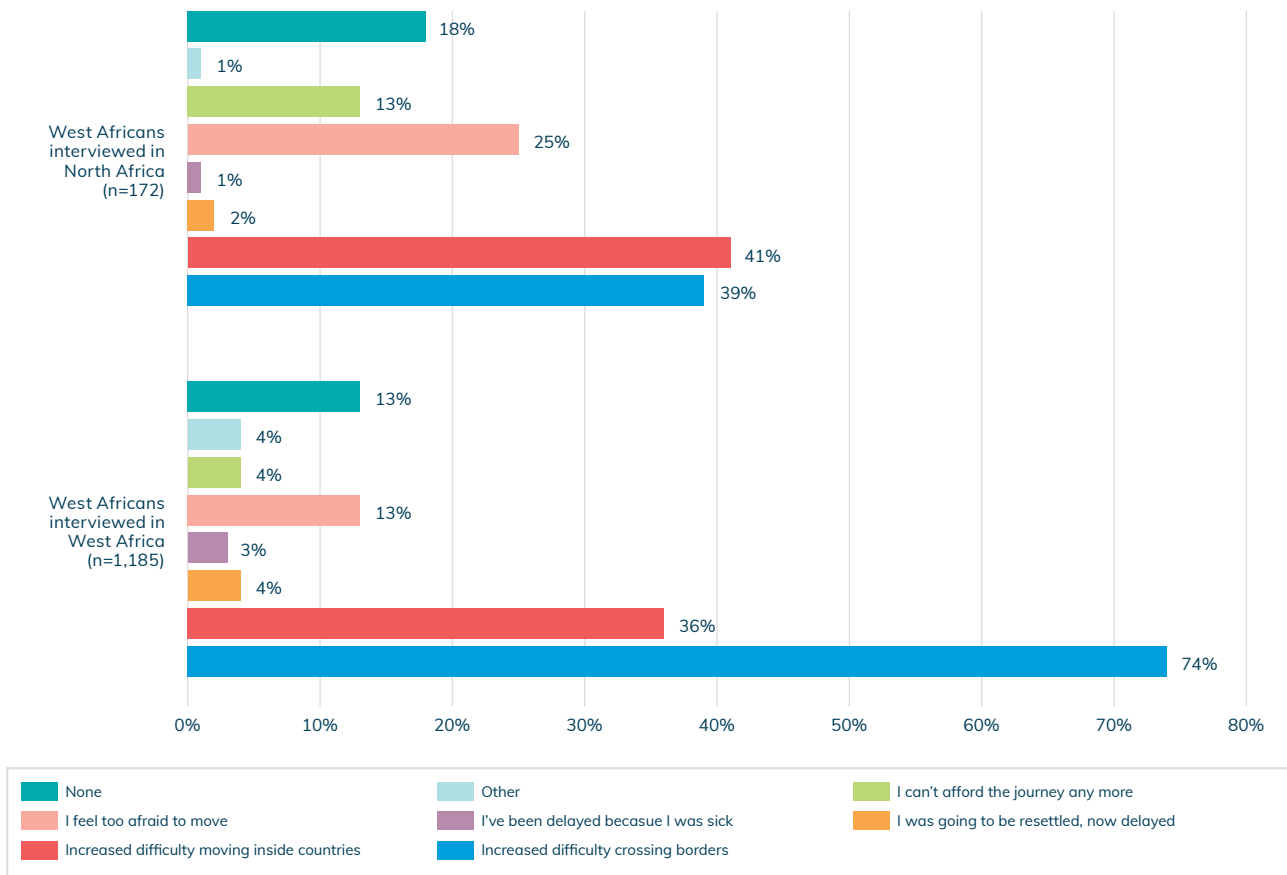
**28-year-old man from Mali interviewed in Niger**

Capabilities represent what people are able to do and is linked to people’s resources or employment status as well as the opportunities and constrains they face, such as border closures and loss of livelihood opportunities.

In this vein, 4Mi data captures what people on the move mention as barriers to their mobility. For those who left their country of origin after 1 April 2020, barriers to mobility such as difficulties crossing borders and difficulty moving inside countries, arguably, already affected their capabilities to move out of their countries of origin, though they may experience new/additional constraints along the way. This assumption is corroborated by IOM DTM’s border assessment in May 2020 covering 620 Points of Entry (PoE) and Internal Transit Points (ITPs) across the West and Central Africa region, finding that for those PoEs and ITPs for which information was available, close to half were closed both for entry and exit.<sup>23</sup>

West African refugees and migrants interviewed by 4Mi who left their country of origin after the COVID-19 pandemic hit, reported that COVID-19 affected their mobility (Figure 3): 74% of West African respondents interviewed in West Africa and 39% of West African respondents interviewed in North Africa, cited increased difficulty crossing borders as the biggest barrier to their mobility, followed by increased difficulty moving inside countries. A key informant in Gao, Mali noted “[...] it must be recognized that they [migrants] have difficulties today, since to cross borders and often even to circulate within a country will use a lot of money [...].”

**Figure 3: Impact of COVID-19 on migration journey**



23 IOM (2020) [COVID-19 Impact on mobility report May 2020 West & Central Africa](#).

Border closures and restrictions are not the only factor limiting people's mobility as a result of the pandemic. While varying across countries and depending on the destination, migration is often a significant financial investment for individual and families involved.<sup>24</sup> Against the backdrop of an economic crisis, the loss of many

livelihood opportunities, particularly but not limited to the informal sector, and the reduction in remittances,<sup>25</sup> many individuals and households, particularly the poorest and most vulnerable, may simply lack the financial resources needed to start or continue their journey.

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24 MMC (2020) [4Mi snapshot: Cost and duration of migration journey – West Africa](#).

25 Adhikari, S. (2020) [COVID-19 is reducing domestic remittances in Africa: What does it mean for poor households?](#) World Bank Blogs.

### 3. Involuntary immobility for people on the move

**“Yes, we are very anxious and stressed because of this illness that we have really been fearing. No travel, no income generating activity, even the money for the trip is finished.”**

35-year-old woman from Chad interviewed in Niger

Involuntary immobility is an issue also affecting people already in the move, both in transit and in destination countries. With the onset of the public health crisis, many on the move across North and West Africa, including those who left before April 2020, found themselves stranded in transit both at land and sea borders, due to a multitude of factors such as border closures and reduced financial resources. In some cases, returning migrants have found themselves stranded,<sup>26</sup> because of the suspension of voluntary return programmes or due to border restrictions hampering their journeys back home.

#### Stranded between closed borders

**“Yes, during my trip I encountered difficulties because of the hardness of the trip since the borders are closed, I can no longer take care of myself, as my parents can no longer send me money, they no longer have access to work because of Covid-19.”**

20-year-old-woman from Nigeria interviewed in Niger

4Mi data in Figures 4 and 5<sup>27</sup> show that in line with various mobility restrictions enacted to contain the spread of the coronavirus, including total or partial lockdowns, most refugees and migrants interviewed in North and West Africa between July and November cite increased difficulty moving between countries (40% in North Africa and 75% in West Africa) and within countries (53% in North Africa and 34% in West Africa) as the biggest impact on their migration journeys. In North Africa this

was followed by 17% noting they could not afford the journey anymore and 15% stating they were too afraid to continue moving (either onwards or home).

**“There is no free movement due to COVID, our status as migrants, and we are also facing incessant police arrests.”**

26-year-old woman from Nigeria interviewed in Libya

MMC key informant interviews in Libya and Tunisia suggest that **fear over movement is linked to fear of arrest, detention, deportation and discrimination/harassment linked to refugees and migrants being perceived as transmitters of COVID-19**. In West Africa, 21% of respondents noted they were too afraid to continue moving and 9% said they could not afford to continue moving.

**“As the pandemic has affected my plan and I have been spending my savings due to lack of constant work, so have decided to stay here much longer in order to accumulate more money if the pandemic crisis is reduced.”**

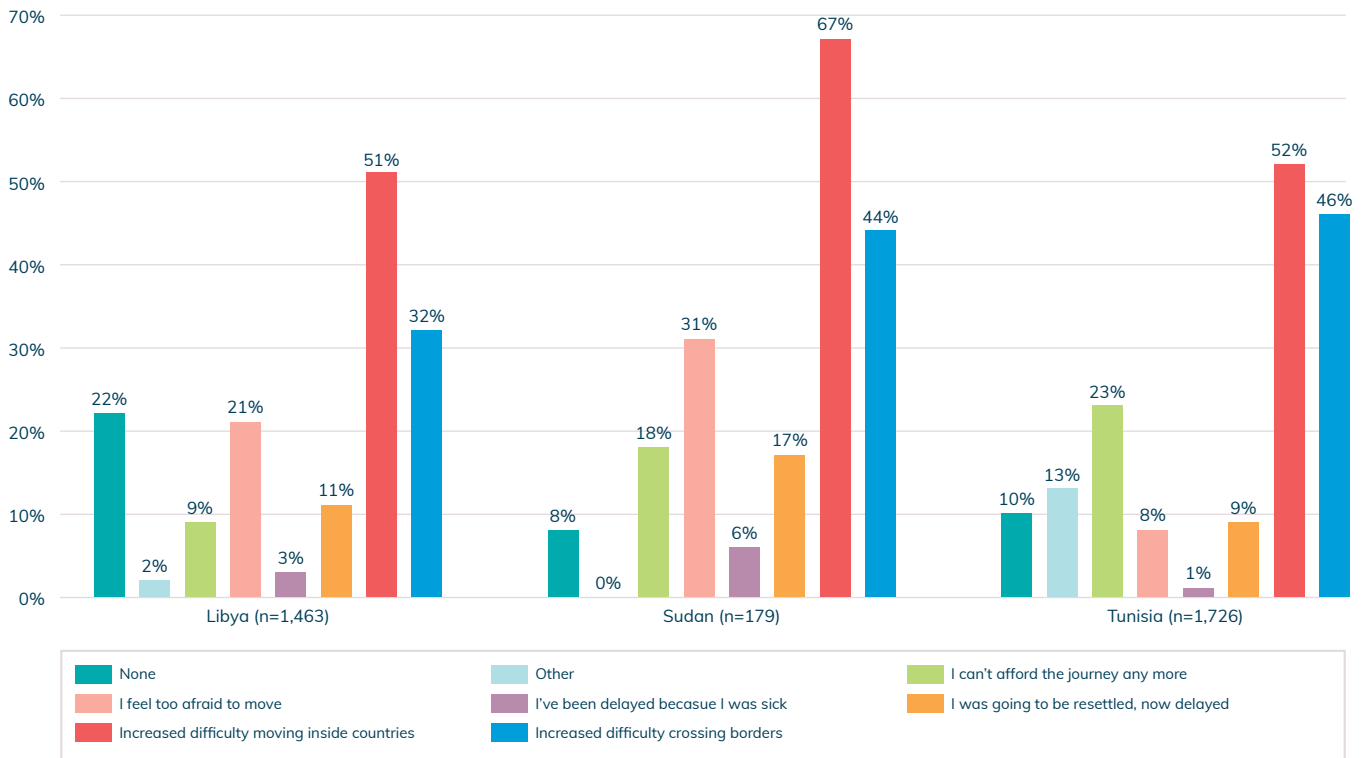
30-year-old man from Niger interviewed in Libya

Further, when respondents were asked whether they had changed their migration plans as a result of the coronavirus outbreak, a quarter of interviewees in North Africa said they had decided to stop at their place of interview for a longer period of time; this was noted by 14% of interviewees in West Africa. According to a key informant in Niamey, Niger, “it’s clear that frequently itineraries were changed in order to work and earn money before continuing – for instance a migrant coming to Niamey to work before continuing his journey via Agadez who said that his route was modified but his final destination remained the same.”

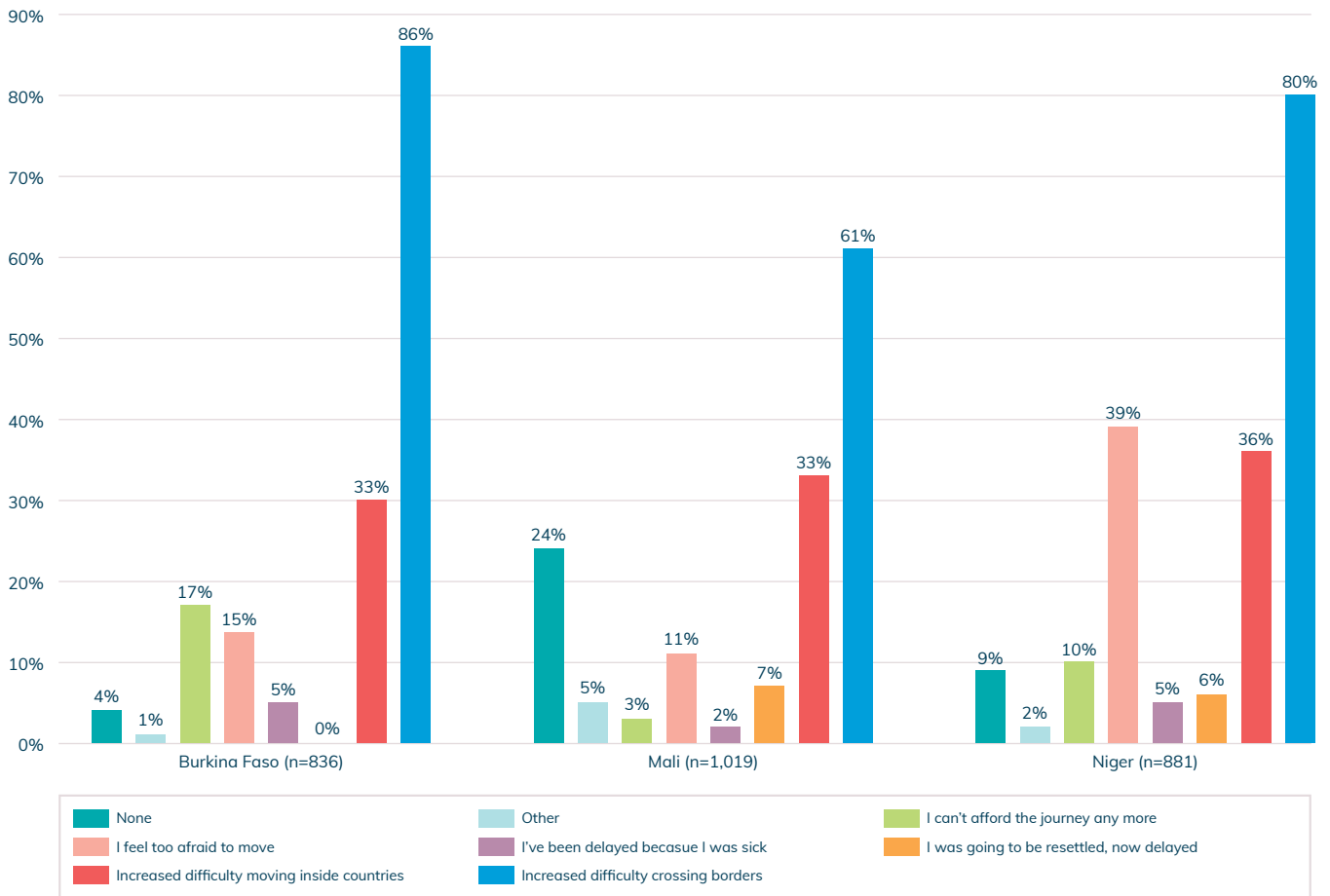
26 IOM (2020) [COVID-19 impact on stranded migrants](#).

27 From this part of the analysis onwards, we are looking at issues affecting all people on the move regardless of their date of departure and country of origin. The analysis is based on all data collected between 2 July and 30 November 2020 in West Africa and North Africa as indicated in the box displayed one page 1.

**Figure 4: Impact of COVID-19 on migration journeys in North Africa**



**Figure 5: Impact of COVID-19 on migration journeys in West Africa**



## Loss of financial resources hampering onward movements

“ We have used all our savings, and we have lost our jobs, but it is getting better now. However, a lot of migrants are still not back to work. Especially before [in the beginning of the pandemic] a lot of migrants had no money, and some could not afford to eat. ”

36-year-old woman from Mali interviewed in Tunisia

The 4Mi survey also brings into sharper focus how the economic impacts of the pandemic are shaping the mobility patterns of refugees and migrants, often hampering their onward movements. More than half of respondents in North Africa (53%), and just under half in West Africa (43%) stated they had lost financial resources due to the coronavirus restrictions, noting both loss of work (39% in North Africa and 27% in West Africa) and loss of financial support from family (14% in North Africa and 16% in West Africa). Of those respondents who stated losing income, 21% in North Africa said it impeded their ability to continue with their migration journey (24% in Tunisia, 19% in Libya). In West Africa, 30% of all respondents who stated losing income said it negatively impacted their onwards journey (49% in Burkina Faso, 13% in Mali, 27% in Niger).

“ Yes the coronavirus has been an obstacle for my trip, I feel frustrated that I cannot continue my trip. I spent my money before leaving to my destination and here in N’guigmi the situation is getting more serious harder. ”

28-year-old man from Benin interviewed in Niger

## Immobility fraught with risks

“ I arrived here just for the crossing but this crisis has upset all my plans and I lost all my travel money, I’m just trying to get over this situation right now. I only pray because if we ever get re-confined because of this pandemic then these sure as hell I will not hold and I will end up on the streets. ”

22-year-old man from Cameroon interviewed in Tunisia

In extreme cases, loss of livelihoods and prolonged immobility creates a **self-reinforcing cycle**, as refugees and migrants turn to negative coping mechanisms, such as engaging in unsafe work or borrowing money from risky lenders, which leave them vulnerable to exploitation and can further exacerbate the obstacles to their movement.<sup>28</sup> For example, MMC key informant interviews in Libya<sup>29</sup> in the first half of 2020 indicated that some refugees and migrants were turning to Libyans and smugglers for loans, who ask for travel documents as collateral. Should they be unable to pay their debts, such refugees and migrants would remain without key documentation and be stranded within the country, further exposed to the risk of trafficking and exploitation.

“ The situation in the country has forced the people to do whatever to earn something extra, and there are girls who started doing sex work during the pandemic. ”

30-year-old woman from Cameroon interviewed in Tunisia

28 IOM (2020) [COVID-19 impact on stranded migrants](#).

29 MMC (2020) [4Mi snapshot: The impact of COVID-19 on the mobility of refugees and migrants in Libya](#)

## 4. Impact of COVID-19 on smuggling dynamics

**“ Regarding smuggling currently with the closure of borders, migrants go through detours thanks to smugglers to continue their journey. ”**

26-year-old woman from Togo interviewed in Burkina Faso

Despite the movement restrictions and decreasing financial resources mentioned earlier in this report, 55% of refugee and migrant respondents interviewed by 4Mi in North Africa and 60% of those interviewed in West Africa stated they had not changed their intended migration plans as a result of the coronavirus outbreak. Some also noted they had changed their migration route but not their intended destination (12% in North Africa and 17% in West Africa). This situation leaves refugees and migration easy prey for smugglers, as predicted by UNODC at the onset of the crisis.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, while migrant smuggling seemed to be decreasing at the onset of the crisis in April 2020, due to stricter border controls and a general decrease of population movement, over time smugglers have continued their operations, as seen by increased arrivals on the West African route to the Canary Islands and the Central Mediterranean route to Italy for instance.<sup>31</sup> Further, ongoing limits on air travel may lead to an adaptation of smuggling activities to land and sea travel routes.<sup>32</sup>

**“ The routes are different now because the number of days to get to the seaside has increased because we use different towns now to beat the security forces and other militias. ”**

31-year-old man from Burkina Faso interviewed in Libya

**Smugglers increasingly needed but more difficult to access**

**“ With this crisis, it is difficult to reach smugglers because it is forbidden to move to any destination, and therefore there is strictness by the border authorities. ”**

30-year-old woman from Sudan interviewed in Tunisia

4Mi data analysis confirms that services of smugglers became more needed, but also more difficult to access. 27% of refugees and migrants interviewed by 4Mi in North Africa between July and November and up to 47% in West Africa stated the need for smuggling services had increased since the start of the pandemic. The greater need for smugglers in West Africa may be due to increased difficulties moving across borders in places where pre-COVID citizens of ECOWAS could move freely: for example, in March an increase of smuggling at the Benin-Niger border<sup>33</sup> was reported.

**“ Currently it is difficult to find a good smuggler. Borders are closed; you don't need to take risks for nothing. ”**

28-year-old man from Togo interviewed in Burkina Faso

Against the background of increasing needs, 4Mi data also indicated that access to smugglers has become more difficult. In North Africa, 42% of interviewed refugees and migrants noted that the access to smugglers has become much more difficult or somewhat more difficult since COVID-19, with 30% stating there was no difference in access. In West Africa, 47% of respondents noted access to smugglers had become much more difficult or somewhat more difficult with COVID-19, with only 18% saying there was no difference to before the pandemic.

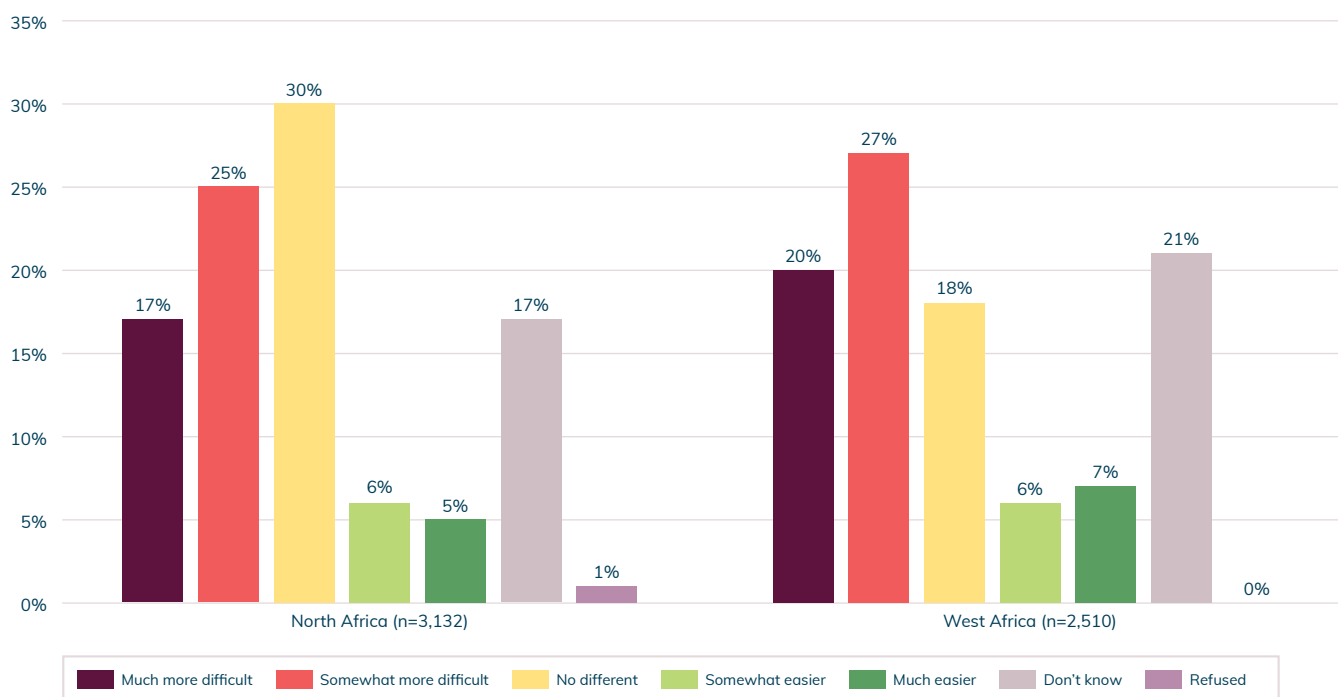
30 UNODC (2020) [How COVID-19 restrictions and the economic consequences are likely to impact migrant smuggling and cross-border trafficking in persons to Europe and North America](#)

31 Europol (2020) [European Migrant Smuggling Centre 4th Annual Report](#)

32 Ibid.

33 Bird, L. (2020) [Learning from COVID-19: Implications for the EU Response to Human Smuggling](#) Istituto Affari Internazionali

**Figure 6: Impact of COVID-19 on need for smuggling**



“Everything is as before; only crossing borders is very difficult. You have to pay a lot of money. This crisis only benefits the police officers who are on the borders.”

23-year-old woman from Liberia interviewed in Mali

Further, in line with dynamics of reduced supply, increased demand and more difficult journeys, about half of all respondents in North Africa (46%) and West Africa (56%) indicated that smuggler fees have increased since the COVID-19 pandemic began. This could further impact the financial hardship of refugees and migrants in transit, as well as those aspiring to migrate in countries of origin.

## Increased reliance on smugglers leading to increased risks

“Smuggling currently has decreased a little because of Covid-19, however smugglers are finding tortuous

ways to bypass the borders. This presents a lot of risk.”

23-year-old woman from Togo interviewed in Burkina Faso

With most refugee and migrant respondents interviewed by 4Mi in North Africa and West Africa between July and November indicating they seek to continue their journeys, an increased dependency on smuggling services, coupled with smugglers using more dangerous routes<sup>34</sup> to circumvent COVID-19 restrictions is likely to increase refugees’ and migrants’ vulnerability to protection risks along the journey. This is exemplified by the re-emergence of the Atlantic route from the coasts of West Africa to the Canary Islands – between January and mid-November there were 40 reported shipwrecks with 529 individuals<sup>35</sup> reported dead or missing (likely an undercount), rendering it the deadliest sea crossing from Africa to Europe.

“Smuggling is more dangerous than before and migrants suffer violence during the day.”

32-year-old woman from Nigeria interviewed in Mali

34 MMC (2020) [Global thematic update: Impact of COVID-19 on migrant smuggling](#)

35 IOM (2020) [Irregular migration towards Europe – Western Africa – Atlantic Route.](#)



## 5. Conclusions and way forward

This paper has explored the impact of COVID-19 on mixed migration drivers and patterns across North and West Africa. In so doing, it has shown that the dynamics we are seeing on the ground, align strongly with macro-level theories on migration and development and with micro-level theories on aspirations and capabilities.

### In summary, since the onset of the pandemic:

- Sea departures of North Africans, particularly Tunisians, towards Europe, have increased as they face greater constraints to their livelihoods brought about by the pandemic and political instability, and seek out livelihood opportunities abroad.
- Sea departures of sub-Saharan Africans towards Europe have decreased, suggesting that COVID-19 has constrained their already-limited resources, making them unable to engage in migration as a strategy to spread risk.
- The short-term impact of COVID-19 on migration drivers and cross border movements has already led to increasing aspirations to leave and decreasing capabilities to do so. Whether this will lead to increased cross-border mobility or an increased number of frustrated would-be migrants stuck in countries of origin will depend on the specific national context, the medium- to long-term impact of COVID-19, and consequent policy responses.
- Involuntary immobility is a key risk for many refugees and migrants in transit and destination countries. COVID-19 movement restrictions and economic crisis brought about by the pandemic have caused some to run out of resources and get stranded along the route.
- Others are too afraid to engage in onward movement, internal mobility in destination countries, or return out of fear of arrest, deportation, or xenophobic violence because of the stigma attached to people on the move as carriers of the virus.
- As border-crossings become more challenging, people on the move may be more dependent upon smugglers, which leaves them vulnerable to exploitation and protection abuses.

### Looking forward

Continued economic crisis linked to the pandemic as well as political instability will only reinforce the trends highlighted above. With few signs of COVID-19 transmission declining in North and West Africa – which as of January 2021 are experiencing their highest rates of infection since the start of the pandemic – migration policymakers should consider:

- How can we balance, particularly in the medium-long term, the need to limit freedom of movement to contain the spreading of the virus, against the use of mobility as a resilience strategy, sometimes to better cope with the very consequences of the pandemic, like the impact on livelihood opportunity?
- How can we effectively prepare for a scenario of increasing involuntary immobility, particularly in countries of so-called transit which would become host countries? Are current protection programmes offering enough? Do immobile populations have additional needs or concerns?
- Are there sufficient mechanisms to facilitate the return of migrants who are unable to do so themselves? How can we continue this work during future lockdowns and in the context of Covid19 health situation?
- How can we address challenges of xenophobia and fake news about refugees and migrants (e.g. as vectors of the virus), to ensure their protection?
- Are refugees and migrants being considered for inclusion in vaccination campaign as vulnerable persons, and without discrimination or exclusion linked to their legal status?
- If refugees, migrants as well as nationals are experiencing greater threats to their livelihoods, how can we protect them against exploitation from landlords and employers?
- What will the potential rising importance of, or dependence upon, smugglers mean for anti-smuggling policies? Will smuggling dynamics change to accommodate the different obstacles placed upon movement during the pandemic?

As already witnessed, future migration scenarios will play out differently across regions and all the above are key trends to monitor and key questions to explore in 2021 and will be shaped by their context, as well as migration policies alongside other policies dealing with the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on economies.



The MMC is a global network consistent 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, information, research and analysis on mixed migration. Through the provision of credible evidence and expertise, the MMC aims to support agencies, policy makers and practitioners to make well-informed decisions, to positively impact global and regional migration policies, to contribute to protection and assistance responses for people on the move and to stimulate forward thinking in the sector responding to mixed migration.

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

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