GMDAC Briefing Series:
Towards safer migration on the Central Mediterranean Route

AFRICAN MIGRATION TO THE EU:
IRREGULAR MIGRATION IN CONTEXT
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• Regular, not irregular, entry has characterized arrivals of African nationals to the EU between 2011 and 2017. Numbers of nationals from key countries in Northern and Western Africa legally entering the EU have mostly exceeded irregular sea arrivals via the Central Mediterranean Route from the same countries to the EU every year between 2011 and 2017.

• The majority of EU residence permits issued to Northern and Western African nationals over 2011–2017 were for family reunification reasons.

• The number of EU residence permits issued to Northern and Western African nationals for work purposes fell significantly over the same period.

• While irregular migration of Northern and Western African nationals to the EU via the Central Mediterranean Route increased in the years leading up to 2016, it has fallen considerably since.

• Availability of quality and timely data on regular and irregular migration dynamics, African migrants’ socioeconomic profiles and other related topics needs to be improved.

INTRODUCTION

Over recent years, African nationals have been travelling through the Central Mediterranean Route (CMR) for diverse and multiple reasons, ranging from lack of economic opportunities, poor governance, livelihood stressors, violence and human rights violations. Migratory journeys across the Mediterranean to the southern shores of the EU have attracted much political and media attention and polarized debates across the EU. Images of irregular migration have dominated the conversation and there is a common perception that migration from Africa to Europe is “out of control.”

However, irregular migration to Europe is one small piece of a much larger story, and a deeper understanding of the dynamics of regular and irregular migration from Africa and the EU is often missing from public debates. Without communicating accurate information on this, alarmist narratives of migration “crisis” will continue to prevail – even despite the significant decrease in irregular arrivals by sea to the EU – making it difficult to develop sustainable, humane and effective responses.

This briefing provides a comparative analysis of regular and irregular migration flows from Africa to the EU, focusing on countries on the CMR (Northern and Western Africa) over the period 2011–2017. The aim is to contextualize different types of flows to support evidence-based policy and programming, balance predominant narratives of migration between these regions, and suggest ways to improve data on these. The briefing does this by offering original analysis of statistics on residence permits issued to African nationals in the EU between 2011 and 2017, and comparing these to irregular sea arrivals to Europe in the same period. This briefing does not provide a description of trends in particular countries, detailed breakdowns of migrant characteristics within the broad “regular” and “irregular” categories, or a comprehensive set of policy recommendations.

1 The CMR covers migration routes from Africa to Europe via the Central Mediterranean crossing. To this date, this has come to signify mostly migration from sub-Saharan Africa towards Italy, though it can also mean migration originating in other regions, such as South Asia or North Africa, and towards Malta. This policy brief will focus on countries in Western and Northern Africa (UN regional classification), given these are the regions of focus of the CMR project. These countries are: Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Tunisia, Sudan (Northern Africa); Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Côte d’Ivoire, the Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, the Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo (Western Africa).

2 The time period was selected based on availability of reliable data from various organizations.

3 IOM defines irregular migration as “movement that takes place outside the regulatory norms of the sending, transit and receiving country.” This includes individuals who a) may enter a country irregularly, b) may reside in a country irregularly or c) may be employed in the country irregularly. For further information, see https://migrationdataportal.org/themes/irregular-migration. This brief only considers irregular arrivals (entries) by sea.
Most aspects of regular migration of African nationals to the EU are managed by the EU’s Global Approach to Migration and Mobility (GAMM), the main framework of migration and asylum policy for non-EU countries. This is composed of various political and legal instruments and programmes, as well as other cooperation frameworks, such as Mobility Partnerships for bilateral cooperation, and Common Agendas for Migration and Mobility (CAMM). Currently, legal migration pathways to the EU are predominantly geared towards family reunification and migration of the highly skilled.\footnote{For example, shortage lists are increasingly being used, labour market tests have been eliminated.}

Policy related specifically to undocumented cross-Mediterranean migration in the period 2011–2017 has included search and rescue operations, law-enforcement-based reduction of irregular migration, and voluntary and forced returns of migrants from transit and destination countries. The EU manages a number of resettlement schemes to provide protection to the most vulnerable including, for example, provisions included in the EU-Turkey statement of 2016, as well as Member States’ individual resettlement mechanisms.

To address irregular migration in particular, in 2016 the EU initiated the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) of €3.4 billion, creating initiatives in various African countries through job creation and vocational training, combating human trafficking and more. Meanwhile, the EU has made commitments to create more legal migration pathways, including through the 2015 “Valletta Political Declaration and Action Plan,” the 2016 framework “Towards a reform of the Common European Asylum System and enhancing legal avenues to Europe,” among other avenues.

**WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT AFRICAN MIGRATION TO THE EU**

**MIGRATION FROM KEY COUNTRIES IN NORTHERN AND WESTERN AFRICA TO THE EU IS PRIMARILY REGULAR**

The number of first residence permits\footnote{The figure includes first residence permits with a duration equal or longer than 12 months issued by the EU 28, for “Family reasons”, “Education reasons” and “Remunerated activities reasons”. Residence permits issued for 3–12 months have been excluded because of the potential overlap between this category of migrants and those reported below as arriving irregularly to Europe who might be granted the permit upon entry. The “other” category is not counted since it includes both humanitarian and non-humanitarian reasons, with a majority issued for humanitarian reasons. More details on residence permit statistics published by Eurostat are available from \url{https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Residence_permits_statistics}.} issued by EU Member States to non-EU nationals is a useful proxy for regular migration flows to the EU. The number of irregular arrivals by sea to Italy indicates how many migrants took the CMR route to Europe, the most popular migratory route to Europe in recent years.\footnote{This does not include counts of those who entered the EU regularly, but whose status may have become irregular, for example after expiry of a visa. There are no reliable data on these individuals. African migrants have also traveled to the EU via the Eastern and increasingly the Western Mediterranean routes, but this brief focuses on the Central route only, given the focus of the project and the fact that this has been the most significant route to date overall.} A comparison of irregular arrivals by sea to Italy from main countries of origin in the period 2011–2017 with first residence permits granted during the period to nationals of the same countries shows the number of permits was higher than that of irregular crossings for seven out of the top ten nationalities of migrants arriving irregularly to Italy from Northern and Western Africa.\footnote{First residence permits granted in EU Member States are only a proxy indicator of regular migratory movements to these countries: migrants arriving irregularly may be issued first-time residence permits, and such permits may also be granted to migrants already present in these countries, either to those on a regular status – under different types of permits – or on irregular status. There may also be double-counting in first residence permits issued, as the same individual could obtain a first residence permit twice if the period between two consecutive permits is longer than six months. It should also be noted that irregular sea arrivals on other routes (Western and Eastern Mediterranean routes) were not considered given the relatively small numbers of African nationals arriving to the EU via these routes in the period considered.} The selected ten countries are those that...
most consistently appear among the top ten countries of origin of migrants arriving irregularly by sea to Italy each year over the period considered.⁸ Between 2011 and 2017, 324,587 irregular arrivals from these top ten countries of origin were reported in Italy (IOM, 2017a), while 1.15 million first residence permits were issued in the EU to nationals from the same countries, either for family, education or work purposes (see Figure 1).⁹

Figure 1: Irregular arrivals to Italy and residence permits issued to nationals of selected countries in Northern and Western Africa in the EU, 2011–2017

Source: GMDAC analysis based on EUROSTAT, 2019a and internal IOM data based on data from the Italian Ministry of the Interior.

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⁸ These countries were, in descending order: Nigeria, Tunisia, Mali, the Gambia, Côte d’Ivoire, Senegal, Ghana, Morocco and Egypt. To see these for 2016, see IOM 2017b.

⁹ Figures for 2017 provided by IOM, based on data from the Italian Ministry of the Interior.
BOTH REGULAR AND IRREGULAR MIGRATION OF NORTHERN AND WESTERN AFRICAN NATIONALS TO THE EU HAVE FALLEN IN RECENT YEARS.

Total EU residence permits issued to nationals of the 22 countries in Northern and Western Africa fell over the period 2011–2017, mainly due to a decrease in the number of permits issued for work purposes over this period (Figure 2) (Eurostat, 2019a). Irregular arrivals to Italy diminished considerably in the second half of 2017 and into 2018, with figures down 80 per cent in the first half of 2018 compared with the same time period the year before. Other data on migrants transiting along the CMR support this trend; for example, IOM’s Displacement Tracking Matrix counted around 70,000 migrants travelling north through Arlit and Séguedine – key transit points in the Niger – in 2018 (January–October), compared with over 330,000 in 2016 alone (IOM, 2017c).

Information about socioeconomic profiles of migrants from Africa in Europe is extremely limited. A 2017 analysis conducted by IOM’s Displacement Tracking Matrix examined the characteristics of over 4,000 migrants who had arrived in Italy irregularly from Nigeria, Guinea and the Gambia, among other countries. Among migrants of the top five nationalities of respondents surveyed, which made up over half of the total, only 17 per cent of adults had completed upper secondary school or tertiary education, about one third had completed lower secondary, and the rest (44%) had completed primary school or had not completed any formal education. Children (aged 14–17), who accounted for 12 per cent of migrants of the top five nationalities, tended to have relatively low education. Such findings, however, cannot be generalized to migrant populations travelling through the CMR to Italy at large and these studies are not conducted regularly.

DATA AVAILABILITY

Reliable and timely data on all types of migration from, between and to African countries are scarce. There is often a lack of national statistical data. For example, in 2017, for 17 per cent of countries in Africa the most recent data available from censuses referred to years prior to 2005, while 43 per cent and 31 per cent of countries did not have recent data on the age or origin of international migrants, respectively (Juran and Snow, 2016). National statistical offices (NSOs) are often underfunded, sharing of migration-related data even within the same country can be limited, and differences across countries’ data collection systems hamper international comparison. It is difficult to monitor irregular migration, as data on the stock, flows and characteristics of irregular migrants are unreliable and patchy. Those with an irregular migration status are not easily identified through traditional data sources, such as administrative records, censuses and surveys. It is also difficult to access and monitor information on migrants’ legal status, as this can change depending on national and regional legislative frameworks. Meanwhile, figures of recorded undocumented migrant flows across the Mediterranean underestimate total numbers, as only apprehended migrants are counted.

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These were Nigerian (14%), Guinean (8%), Pakistani (8%), Gambian (8%) and Bangladeshi (8%) nationals.
Figure 2: EU residence permits to nationals of Northern and Western African countries, 2011–2017, by reason

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FAMILY PERMITS</th>
<th>EDUCATION PERMITS</th>
<th>WORK PERMITS</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>102,993</td>
<td>115,013</td>
<td>16,434</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43,736</td>
<td>43,350</td>
<td>19,397</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: GMDAC analysis based on EUROSTAT, 2019a.
MORE RESIDENCE PERMITS WENT TO NATIONALS OF NORTHERN AFRICAN COUNTRIES AND MOST WERE ISSUED FOR FAMILY REUNIFICATION PURPOSES. KEY DESTINATION COUNTRIES WERE IN WESTERN EUROPE.

Of all residence permits issued to nationals of the 22 countries in Northern and Western Africa, over 2011–2017, most were granted to nationals of Northern African countries (980,475 out of approximately 1.44 million). Over this period, the largest portion went to Moroccans, followed by Algerians and Tunisians, and the majority were issued by France, Spain and Italy (Eurostat, 2019a). Family reunification was the main reason for the issuance of first residence permits to nationals of Northern and Western African countries in 2011–2017 (73 and 59%, respectively), and numbers of family permits remained on average constant over the same period. Permits issued for education purposes rose for Northern Africans and fell slightly for Western Africans; between 2011 and 2017 the number of education-related residence permits issued to Northern Africans rose by 71 per cent (from 16,434 to 28,027), while those issued to Western Africans decreased by 8 per cent (from 19,397 to 17,752). For nationals of countries in Western Africa in 2011–2017, the largest numbers of permits went to Nigerians, Senegalese, Ghanaians and the majority were issued by the United Kingdom, France and Spain.\(^\text{14}\)


The number of permits issued for work reasons to nationals of Northern African countries fell by 46 per cent between 2011 and 2017 (from 28,567 to 15,513). Those issued to nationals of Western African countries declined by 58 per cent (from 18,256 to 7,741). As there are no data available on the skills of these migrants or their employment type from official EU sources, it is difficult to learn more about what type of employment African migrant workers are involved in. There is some information on high-skilled labour migration; for example, only about 7 per cent of the total (92,885) number of EU Blue Cards – a work permit initiative designed for high-skilled non-EU/EEA migrants – issued between 2012 and 2017 went to nationals of countries in Western Africa (481) and Northern Africa (6,383) (Eurostat, 2019b).

Data are even more limited on low-skilled\(^\text{15}\) African migrant workers in the EU. This is partly because many low-skilled migrants in the EU do not have regular status and thus remain statistically invisible, and also as many have arrived in the EU through family reunification pathways, rather than specifically for labour, which limits data availability on their activities (IOM, 2011). Additionally, there are less EU-wide harmonized policies regarding low-skilled migration, which can impact relevant data collection.\(^\text{16}\) Further, many of the low-skilled migrant workers in the EU are short-term seasonal workers, making it more difficult to monitor these movements (ibid). Where there are relevant frameworks on low-skilled migration in place, they may not yield a lot of information on African migrants in particular; out of the nine existing EU Mobility Partnerships, which often manage low-skilled migration, only three are with African countries (Cabo Verde, Morocco, Tunisia). At the same time, there is a recognized need for low-skilled migrant workers in the EU. Research shows many Member States have significant labour gaps, often in sectors such as agriculture, forestry, construction, domestic help, and these sectors are increasingly filled by migrant workers who are often on irregular status (EC, 2015; OECD and EU, 2016).

Finally, it should be noted that existing data on low-skilled migrants can be misleading as many high-skilled migrants perform low-skilled jobs, and are thus counted as low-skilled migrants. Collecting data on migrants’ educational attainment would help improve this (ibid).

\(^{14}\) Note that methodologies are not always fully harmonized between the reporting countries.

\(^{15}\) “A less or low-skilled worker is considered to be a person who has received less training than a semi-skilled worker or, having not received any training, has still acquired his or her competence in the job.” See http://publications.europa.eu/resource/cellar/9f6bf74f-59ed-4c86-83c7-1876b1006d13.0001.03/DOC_2

\(^{16}\) See also EUR-LEX (EU Law database).
Figure 3: EU first residence permits to nationals of countries in Northern and Western Africa, 2011–2017: reason and origins

1,445,228 residence permits were issued by the EU to nationals of Northern and Western African countries in 2011–2017 for family, education and work purposes.

- **472,597 (33%)** residence permits were issued to migrants from **Western African countries**
- **980,475 (67%)** residence permits were issued to migrants from **Northern African countries**

### Reasons for Permits

- **13%** to nationals from **Northern Africa**
- **73%**
- **25%** to nationals from **Western Africa**
- **59%**

### Top Three Origin Countries

- **545,132** in **Morocco**
- **197,322** in **Algeria**
- **125,606** in **Tunisia**
- **138,297** in **Nigeria**
- **89,571** in **Senegal**
- **52,967** in **Ghana**

Source: GMDAC analysis based on EUROSTAT, 2019a.
CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Contrary to common perceptions, migration from Northern and Western Africa to the EU between 2011 and 2017 has been primarily regular. Numbers of African nationals settling legally in the EU — proxied by first residence permits issued for family reunification, education or work purposes — have exceeded irregular sea arrivals for most of the top ten countries of origin of irregular migrants arriving in Italy over the period considered.

At the same time, both total regular and irregular entries of African nationals to the EU have fallen since 2016, based on available data. First EU residence permits to nationals of countries in Northern and Western Africa have mostly been issued for family reunification over the years. While these have remained stable on average, residence permits granted for work purposes have fallen sharply in the period considered.

It should be noted that a comparative analysis of regular and irregular migration from Africa to the EU can hardly be comprehensive, due to the difficulties of quantifying irregular migrant stocks and flows, and the lack of information on socioeconomic profiles of African migrants in the EU, among other data issues.

Despite these limitations, the analysis presented here could help contextualize irregular migration to the EU and balance narratives on African migration to the EU. This can be viewed in tandem with the latest international migrant stock figures from 2017, which show that most African migrants in fact remain in Africa; in 2017, 53 per cent of Africa’s migrants resided on the continent and four out of five migrants residing in Eastern, Middle and Western Africa came from that same region (see UN DESA, 2017; UNCTAD, 2018; EC, 2018; Flahaux and De Haas, 2016).

To work towards a comprehensive and sustainable approach to addressing migration between Africa and the EU, policymakers should concretely focus on improving migration data and analysis on relevant topics. Limited evidence is a key constraint to the design of effective and forward-looking policies and programmes.

For example, better and more timely data and evidence are needed on:

- **Regular and irregular migrant flows and stocks.** For example, to enhance information on regular migration flows, more administrative data sources in EU Member States could be leveraged and data could be harmonized and shared. Measuring regular migration movements to the EU remains difficult despite growing efforts by Eurostat in this direction, in light of the 2018 Progress Report on the European Agenda for Migration. Residence permit statistics analysed in this brief only provide an approximation of actual regular migration flows and suffer from issues such as double counting. For better data on irregular migrant stocks, there could be efforts to estimate numbers of irregular migrants from African countries in specific EU Member States, based on existing migration statistics.

- **Migrants’ socioeconomic profiles.** For example, systematic data collection on this could be expanded for regular African migrants in EU Member States, so that data on residence permits could be disaggregated by variables such as educational attainment, skill profile, and current and previous employment, apart from basic characteristics such as sex and age (which are already provided by Eurostat). Data on these variables and others are collected through the EU Labour Force Survey but statistics are not frequently available and may therefore be difficult to use for changing policy needs. Similarly, existing data collection methods on irregular migrants along the CMR and on arrival in the EU could embed questions on socioeconomic variables. This information would help inform appropriate integration measures and


identify responses that could benefit both migrants and destination communities. New data sources such as social media could also be explored in certain contexts, to fill some of the current gaps in information and gain more timely insights into migrants’ socioeconomic profiles.\(^\text{19}\)

- **Migrant labour demand and effects in the EU.** To better understand skill and labour needs across the EU, particularly in low-skilled industries, systematic labour market analysis and forecasting in specific sectors could be undertaken, bringing together employers and policymakers. Given the widespread consensus on the need to increase legal migration pathways from Africa to the EU, it would also be helpful to analyse the reasons behind the significant decrease in residence permits issued in EU Member States for work purposes between 2011 and 2017 – a period when undocumented sea migration to the EU increased significantly. Further, there could be efforts to extend data collection and analysis on remittances, recruitment costs, and undocumented migrant labour in the EU to better understand these dynamics as well as their relationship to development.

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United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD)