

## **COVID-19 and mixed population movements: emerging dynamics, risks and opportunities**

### **A UNHCR/IOM discussion paper**

#### **1. Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic, and the different measures States have taken to contain and respond to it, have the potential to shape human behavior at the individual, family or community level, and to impact the ways in which our societies function, in unprecedented and far-reaching ways. This paper explores the implications for human mobility – drawing on the trends that IOM and UNHCR are already observing in our field operations, as well as data in the public domain. The focus is on the irregular flows of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers linking Africa and Europe, but the paper also notes some emerging trends in relation to population flows towards Europe from south-west Asia and the Middle East.

The purpose is to take stock of what we are already observing, and what we anticipate developing as the COVID-19 crisis evolves – and hopefully subsides – in countries of origin, countries hosting large refugee and migrant populations, countries of transit and countries of destination – noting that in many cases, these categories overlap and change over time. In doing so, the paper seeks to shed light on how the COVID-19 crisis is interacting with the complex and fluid dynamics shaping mixed population movements, and how these might evolve.

What matters, of course, is what should be our collective response. As the two organizations dealing with population flows, we want to ensure that the potential impact of the crisis on refugee flows and human mobility is understood and factored into wider responses – especially those addressing its socio-economic consequences through bilateral and multilateral recovery instruments and development cooperation. We want to draw attention to the risks and opportunities that are emerging, and the potential implications if these are overlooked.

Our aim is to provoke dialogue and early action. What key considerations should help shape responses by States, the African Union, the European Union, other regional entities, civil societies and other stakeholders? Can they find ways of leveraging existing Europe-Africa cooperation frameworks, and their interface with the two Global Compacts, to cope with the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on human

mobility?<sup>1</sup> And can governments steer away from stand-alone, introverted responses, and find ways of engaging based on solidarity and partnership, which address the broader drivers of population flows?

## 2. Current trends

### (i) Mixed population movements continue by land and sea.

Movements by land to Greece from Turkey, from Mali to Mauritania and from Chad/Sudan/Niger to Libya have reduced, but not stopped. After a significant reduction of the flows along the central and western Mediterranean Sea routes in 2019, movements by sea increased by 13% in the first quarter of 2020 as compared to the same period in 2019, with significant variations along the three routes.<sup>2</sup>

The overall number of people embarking on journeys across the Mediterranean remains quite small and should be manageable. Yet, the number of individuals departing from Libya between January and April 2020 increased by 290% over the same period last year, with 6,629 departures, and by 156% from Tunisia with 1,227 departures. While sea movements to the Spanish peninsula decreased, movements to the Canary Islands went up by 735% with 1,995 arrivals between January and April 2020, including from “new” locations such as the western Sahara territory and Senegal. While the majority of those trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea are adult men, women and children continued to form a notable proportion that should be considered in the response.<sup>3</sup>

The fear of the pandemic and the economic slowdown also led to unquantified “reverse” regular and irregular migration” from Spain to Morocco.<sup>4</sup>

The drivers of onward refugee and migrant flows from host and transit countries are in certain respects intensifying and continue to outweigh concerns regarding mobility due to fear of the virus. As a result, movements continue, where practically possible considering widespread border closures<sup>5</sup>, even if the people concerned now have greater uncertainty as to final destinations and the duration of journeys.

Securing quantitative data on mixed movements has been complicated by the limited availability of current data from national authorities. Border closures have limited the capacity to seek asylum. In many countries, registration and asylum procedures have been effectively suspended, and unquantified backlogs are developing. Yet in UNHCR and IOM field operations, we are observing worrying trends. For instance,

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<sup>1</sup> See also: <https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/mpp-41.pdf> Migration Policy Institute, *Migration policy practice*, Vol. X, Number 2, April–June 2020. *COVID-19: a new challenge for migration policy*.

<sup>2</sup> 22% of those leaving by boat during Q1 2020 are likely to get international protection in Europe. The percentage for those leaving Libya is higher (32%). Others – for example victims or potential witnesses of trafficking – may also need some form of protection.

<sup>3</sup> Between January and April 2020, 16% of those crossing the Mediterranean Sea were adult women and 25% were children. The ratio of women and children has decreased by 1% and 2% respectively, compared to 2019. The ratio of women and children among arrivals in Greece is much higher as compared to Italy and Spain.

<sup>4</sup> <https://elpais.com/espana/2020-04-23/mas-de-5000-euros-por-escapar-de-espana-en-patera.html>. See also <https://thearabweekly.com/pandemic-sparks-reverse-migration-spain-morocco> Pandemic sparks reverse migration from Spain to Morocco.

<sup>5</sup> 43 countries in Africa officially closed their borders during the crisis. <https://www.dw.com/en/africa-when-closed-borders-become-a-problem/a-53311669>. See also: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/05/coronavirus-border-closures-strand-tens-of-thousands-of-people-across-africa>

violent attacks in the Sahel's hotspots rose by 37% percent between mid-March and mid-April 2020<sup>6</sup>, and the number of IDPs in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger increased by 370,000 people (33%) in March alone. These developments, while unrelated to the pandemic, may affect movements not only towards North Africa, but also towards coastal States in west Africa.

(ii) The situation of many refugees and migrants has become more precarious.

The struggle for survival by refugees and migrants outside their own countries has intensified, as the socio-economic consequences of the pandemic and containment measures are felt.<sup>7</sup> The COVID-related death toll in African countries has been limited so far, and it is too early to predict the extent of its public health impact. It is, however, already clear that jobs and livelihoods, especially in the informal sector, have been severely affected. The consequences are particularly grave for the millions of people living in countries or regions where welfare services, social safety nets and other social protection mechanisms are weak or even absent,<sup>8</sup> including in geographically remote areas where the majority of refugees, internally displaced persons and their host communities are located. In terms of the global poverty impact, sub-Saharan Africa might be the hardest impacted<sup>9</sup>.

Blunt measures for health protection purposes, such as broad shutdowns (as opposed to targeted social distancing), carry a particularly high human price in Africa. Some 85.5% of Africans work in the informal sector – and for many, lockdowns, border closures and curfews have closed their jobs and revenue streams. Migrants, refugees, stateless persons are particularly vulnerable in these circumstances, not benefiting in the same way as nationals from formal or informal safety nets.<sup>10</sup> Progress made in self-reliance has been severely undermined.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Source: *The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED)*; see also the report of the Center for Strategic and International Studies on irregular armed groups stepping up operations during COVID: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/extremist-groups-stepping-operations-during-covid-19-outbreak-sub-saharan-africa>

<sup>7</sup> The World Bank estimates that a 1% decrease in GDP brings 14 to 22 million people below the extreme poverty line (USD 1.90 a day). The current projected global decrease of the GDP for 2020 is estimated at 3% and may be higher for several African countries.

<sup>8</sup> Including both welfare services and social safety nets.

<sup>9</sup> <https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/impact-covid-19-coronavirus-global-poverty-why-sub-saharan-africa-might-be-region-hardest> See also : <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/poverty/brief/poverty-and-distributional-impacts-of-covid-19-potential-channels-of-impact-and-mitigating-policies>

<sup>10</sup> 70% of refugees globally live in countries with restricted right to work and 95% are self-employed. 50% of them are employed in temporary/transient jobs (on a daily or weekly basis).

<sup>11</sup> Limited available research suggests that 75% of the migrants and refugees in Libya have reportedly lost their informal/temporary jobs in March/April 2020. It is too early to know how quickly they can be re-employed given the current security situation in and around Tripoli. <http://www.mixedmigration.org/resource/4mi-snapshot-understanding-the-impacts-of-covid-19-on-refugees-and-migrants-in-tripoli/>. The security situation is also a contributing factor. The percentage of those who have lost their job is 53% for migrants and refugees in Tunisia. <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/24614/53-of-migrants-lost-jobs-in-tunisia-in-covid-19-lockdown>. See also: COVID-19 lockdown worsens migrants' suffering in Libya. For migrants who have left African countries for Libya, life was already a struggle before the coronavirus pandemic, and now lockdown <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/05/covid-19-lockdown-worsens-migrants-suffering-libya-200502141654890.html>measures are leaving many without work. 2 May 2020.

Hostility towards foreigners has become (more) visible in certain countries – in some case linked to stigma and misinformation around virus transmission. While there has been no notable increase in xenophobic attacks, difficulties in accessing services owing to nationality, race, or other characteristics have been surfacing. Many migrants and refugees have no documentation, or face difficulties in renewing documents, with negative consequences for their ability to access basic services including medical care. This situation presents the additional risk that people on the move may become vectors of COVID-19 contamination in host communities. At the same time, we have also seen a surge of new initiatives and solidarity by civil societies in some countries to assist vulnerable asylum-seekers, migrants and refugees.

Expulsions of non-nationals continue to take place in a limited number of countries. Mass expulsions from Eastern/Southern Libya have occurred during the outbreak, with several groups of hundreds of migrants and refugees being dropped at the borders of Niger, Chad and Sudan. Migrant workers have also been expelled from Nigeria to Niger and some expulsions from Algeria to Niger and from Morocco to Algeria also took place beginning of March 2020<sup>12</sup>.

Access to education has always been a stabilizing factor for refugees, displaced persons, migrants and host communities. School closures are triggering negative coping mechanisms for children and creating additional risks for girls – including sexual, gender and other forms of violence, teen pregnancies, early and/or forced marriages. Many children, adolescents, and youth, especially girls and those with disabilities, will never return to education after schools reopen, with lifelong negative consequences for their health, cognition, and earnings. Globally, one child in five is no longer receiving the daily school meals that they were able to count on before the outbreak; for children in Africa, the figure is undoubtedly higher.

### (iii) Additional risk factors are emerging.

Food insecurity in Africa has increased over the last year. Seventy-three million people are affected in 36 countries. The cases range from conflict/insecurity (12 countries/37 million people), weather extremes or locust infestation (20 countries/26 million people), to pre-COVID economic shocks (4 countries/10 million people).

Security is deteriorating in certain key countries of origin and in neighbouring countries of migration or refugee, and some extremist groups are using pandemic-related fears to expand their influence and weaken fragile State authority. These groups are leveraging the outbreak to spread misinformation, using diverse social media platforms to point to the inability of States to address the needs of their citizens and to portray themselves as first responders in order to foster trust, submission and/or recruitment.

Smugglers and human traffickers are capitalizing on opportunities arising from official border closures. While restrictions on cross-border movement have a significant impact on trade and livelihoods, their impact on the movement of people is more difficult to ascertain at this stage, with government efforts to control borders often hindered by geography or lack of capacity. Many borders remain porous, and

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/24426/stop-deportations-and-release-detained-migrants-in-libya-un-urges>. At least 500 persons were expelled to Niger. <https://www.iom.int/news/iom-steps-response-migrants-stranded-niger-amidst-covid-19-lockdown>. Expulsions from Algeria to Mali and Niger of nationals from these two countries, as well third country nationals were later suspended in March. Around 100 third country nationals were taken from Morocco to the Algerian border during the same period.

smugglers and traffickers are adapting their business model and diversifying their offers to potential takers<sup>13</sup>.

In some communities, discontent, social disorder and unrest are being fueled by restrictions on freedom of movement, curfew enforcement measures, lockdowns and human rights derogations<sup>14</sup>.

The suspension of resettlement & family reunification departures, and already limited legal migration options affect not just those eligible for these solutions, but also create despair in communities.

Owing to movement restrictions and transmission concerns, voluntary repatriation programmes for refugees, and voluntary humanitarian return programmes for migrants have been almost entirely suspended, impacting access to solutions. Some return movements of refugees have taken place in less than ideal circumstances, for example to Mali and Burundi. For migrants, some countries carried out organized returns of their nationals, while others opted not to do so, or did not have the capacity.

Urban IDPs are at risk of further marginalisation and (potentially) “forced” return to their places of former residence, in the context of efforts to decongest urban areas<sup>15</sup>. The fear of the pandemic is not the root cause of this trend, but an aggravating factor. In other locations, including Mali, Burkina Faso, and South Sudan COVID-related insecurity and / or concerns regarding virus transmission have also played a contributing role in decisions by IDPs to return home.

We know that remittances from European, North African and Middle Eastern countries to Africa will drop as a result of the economic downturn, impacting the overall resilience or even the survival of millions of families who depend on this direct source of income, and reducing access to health and education<sup>16</sup>. The World Bank’s initial estimate is that remittances to Africa will decrease by 23% in 2020. For some diaspora communities who foster mixed population movements from their home countries towards Europe, the impact may be even higher. For example, it is estimated that the 250,000 Somalis in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland send approximately one billion pounds in remittances to Somalia each year, exceeding the amount received by Somalia in humanitarian aid. Social media reports suggest that the remittances have already dropped by two-thirds in several African countries<sup>17</sup>.

### 3. Future scenarios – towards a perfect storm?

Cross-border and cross-regional population movements are likely to increase, owing to a mixture of economic and security factors where forced displacement or survival migration becomes the option of last

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<sup>13</sup> <https://globalinitiative.net/smuggling-covid-19/>. See also: <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/impact-covid-19-pandemic-trafficking-persons-preliminary-findings-and-messaging-based> *Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Trafficking in Persons: Preliminary findings and messaging based on rapid stocktaking*. UNODC, Posted 3 May 2020. See also: <http://publicanthropologist.cmi.no/2020/04/19/the-real-transformation-of-migrant-smuggling-in-the-time-of-covid-19/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://observers.france24.com/en/20200428-migrants-niger-protest-quarantine-without-end-covid19>

<sup>16</sup> <https://blog.geographydirections.com/2020/04/22/coronavirus-pandemic-could-hit-the-billions-migrant-workers-send-home-in-cash/> *Coronavirus pandemic could hit the billions migrant workers send home in cash*. Vincent Guermond, Royal Holloway and Kavita Datta, Queen Mary University of London, April 22, 2020.

<sup>17</sup> *In some countries like Mali, remittances have reportedly almost stopped. Formal remittances in 2017 from the Malian diaspora accounted for 6,7% of the GDP of the country (approximately 1 billion USD). With the more “clandestine” remittances, it is estimated that the contribution from the diaspora amounts to 11% of the GDP.*

resort. These movements are likely to be multi-directional, both within Africa and northwards towards Europe. An increase in irregular sea departures from North Africa and Djibouti is likely, in the absence of legal opportunities for mobility and for reasons explored in more detail below. Without robust measures to address pervasive gaps in rescue-at-sea capacity, the number of deaths in the Mediterranean could rise.

Several potential contributory factors can be identified, in both countries of origin, and countries along migration routes.

(i) Factors to watch – countries of origin

The socioeconomic consequences of COVID-19 will lead to increased fragility in some African, Asian and Middle Eastern countries affected by internal displacement (now or in the past), or by population outflows<sup>18</sup>.

The socio-economic consequences of the pandemic may create the conditions for social tensions, discontent and political unrest, especially in the most vulnerable food-crisis and climate-affected countries. While governments struggle to find ways to combat the virus, tensions may be further triggered or aggravated by sustained restrictions on movement, use of excessive force in ensuring lockdowns, spikes in food and commodity prices, and/or loss of income.

Stimulus measures and social protection schemes may neglect remote areas – such as those where refugees are often hosted – in favour of large urban centres which are considered to bring more complementary political benefits and popular legitimacy/support.

International mediation efforts could be sidelined, and peace processes stall in in some conflict-prone countries such as Somalia, South Sudan and Cameroon<sup>19</sup>.

Social unrest may facilitate the spread of more organized criminality, leading in turn to further displacement in and from countries/regions such as Nigeria, western Sahel, the Lake Chad Basin, north-west Sudan, southern Libya. Cross-fertilization between criminal groups and extremist groups can also lead to renewed terrorist attacks building on anti-foreigner sentiments.

Election-related violence is a risk, with some autocratic leaders potentially taking advantage of the pandemic to entrench themselves beyond their constitutional terms of office limits. Fifteen major elections are due on the African continent this year. Whether these go ahead or are postponed, there is a risk that election-related violence could result in the flight of people both internally and into neighbouring countries, increasing virus transmission risks.

If access to grazing or agricultural land and water is affected by restrictions on freedom of movement, and/or livestock is depleted, this may fuel further intercommunal conflicts, leading to internal displacement or refugee flows.

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<sup>18</sup> See also <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mapping-risk-factors-spread-covid-19-africa/>

<sup>19</sup> *COVID-19 and Conflict: Seven Trends to Watch*, Crisis Group Special Briefing N°4, New York/Brussels, 24 March 2020



## (ii) Factors to watch – countries affected by refugee and migration flows

Reduced livelihood opportunities for migrants and refugees in north African countries, along with despair owing to a lack of solutions at home, are likely to drive an increase in sea departures. In the case of Libya, additional factors come into play: insecurity in and around Tripoli, the new military situation to the west of Tripoli which has enabled human traffickers to resume their business with total impunity, reports by migrants and refugees of increased discrimination against them, and the suspension of legal pathways to return home or be resettled.

It is too early to assess whether the financial constraints of migrants and refugee to attempt onward movements may be “compensated” through adjustments in “offers” from smugglers and human traffickers along the routes and the expansion of existing schemes such as “go now, pay later” or “collect five people and you can all travel free and work on arrival.” There is a real risk that misinformation from smugglers will continue to gain wider currency than the scattered information channels available through physical or digital outreach by governments and humanitarian organizations. The degree to which the smuggling business along these routes is able to respond to demand will depend on profitability and the degree of impunity which prevails.

Large numbers of nationals from sub-Saharan countries may also become stranded in ‘transit’ countries in North Africa and elsewhere – unable to afford the costs of the sea crossing and onward journeys, and unable to count on the immediate support of diasporas living in Europe and elsewhere. Some of these countries have only recently realized that they are also now ‘destination’ countries (by intent or by default) for many migrants and refugees, and are largely unprepared, or even unwilling, to receive and protect new migrants and refugees. The socio-economic impact may also prompt more citizens from North African countries to leave their countries. They currently account for 29% of the sea crossings from the western and central Mediterranean Sea.

In some countries, measures to release foreigners in immigration detention were partially or fully implemented to avoid risks of cross-contamination, but the stay of the people released was not necessarily temporarily regularized<sup>20</sup>.

Fewer migrants and refugees may be interested in any form of voluntary return, given the increased uncertainty about the conditions prevailing in their home countries and reduced reintegration prospects. On the other hand, voluntary returns in adverse circumstances, shaped by extreme hardship in host countries, may continue to countries like Afghanistan, Burundi, Somalia, Nigeria, Mali, and Sudan.

Reduced access to humanitarian aid owing to funding constraints by key donors<sup>21</sup>, security, or logistical impediments, leading to shortages of food or other essential assistance in refugee and IDP locations may aggravate fragile living conditions. They may be perceived as competing for access to limited services, with

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<sup>20</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/04/tunisia-release-immigration-detainees-amid-covid19-pandemic/>  
*Tunisia: Release immigration detainees amid COVID-19 pandemic. 29 April 2020. See also:*  
<https://www.euronews.com/2020/04/29/countries-suspending-immigration-detention-due-to-coronavirus-let-s-keep-it-that-way-view>

<sup>21</sup> *While the exact impact on the possible reduction of development/humanitarian aid is difficult to forecast at this stage, the Spring 2020 Economic Forecast projects that the euro area economy will contract by a record 7¾% in 2020 and grow by 6¼% in 2021. The EU economy is forecast to contract by 7½% in 2020 and grow by around 6% in 2021. Growth projections for the EU and euro area have been revised down by around nine percentage points compared to the [Autumn 2019 Economic Forecast](#).*

a negative impact on social cohesion, potentially triggering spontaneous onward movements<sup>22</sup>. This could be compounded by a drop in development aid and/or private investment in host countries or countries of origin<sup>23</sup>.

Further stigmatization of foreigners may occur, with the perception that foreigners are responsible for a resurgence or the spread of the virus. This may affect protection space for refugees and vulnerable migrants, and could lead to stricter encampment, confinement measures, and the increased use of detention, leading to loss of opportunity for socio-economic inclusion, self-reliance and contributing to the development of host communities.

Competition for more limited employment opportunities can also fuel xenophobic attitudes, leading to increased discrimination and social exclusion<sup>24</sup>, particularly in areas hosting displaced or migrant populations. It may also lead to the mass expulsion of foreigners irrespective of their status, links with the country, family or health situation.

In the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan, diminished access by Afghan refugees and migrants to local services and economic opportunities could trigger irregular movements towards Turkey and beyond. Decreased remittances in Afghanistan could also trigger departures. In the absence of positive changes in countries of origin enabling voluntary repatriation, Turkey's capacity to aid Syrian<sup>25</sup> and other refugees on its territory, with predictable sustained support from the international community, will remain highly relevant, potentially impacting sea and land crossings.

Other movements from Asia to Europe in the context of COVID-19 and beyond may include migrants from Bangladesh who have lost jobs either in North Africa<sup>26</sup> or in the Middle East or in the garment sector in Bangladesh, with the poverty rate in Bangladesh expecting to increase by over 50% in 2020<sup>27</sup>. Although Rohingya refugees and stateless persons will likely also face more difficult socioeconomic circumstances post COVID-19, they are not expected to move towards Europe, as there have never been any substantial Rohingya movements or communities any farther west than the Middle East.

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<sup>22</sup> A combination of acute security problems, limited funding and access for aid organizations led to the loss of access to two Malian refugee camps in Burkina Faso in March with some refugees deciding in despair to go back home, while others remained dispersed in the country or moved to neighbouring countries.

<sup>23</sup> See for instance: <https://africanarguments.org/2020/04/16/aid-has-failed-coronavirus-covid-19-both-exposes-this-and-offers-the-chance-for-a-reset/> and <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/analysis-covid-19-pandemic-great-danger-awaits-africa/1789840>

<sup>24</sup> Including reported risks on mental health and psychosocial distress.

<sup>25</sup> This remark also applies to other countries hosting Syrian refugees. See <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Rapid%20Basic%20Needs%20Phone%20Survey%2C%20DR%20March%202020.pdf>

*Rapid Basic Needs Phone Survey. Danish Refugee Council Jordan, March 2020. "COVID-19 mitigation measures and restrictions dramatically decreased the number of households with a working member. 9% of Syrian households had a household member working at the time of the survey."*

<sup>26</sup> Sea crossings by Bangladeshi nationals leaving from/through Libya are likely to continue, if no renewed efforts are made to address this specific flow in Bangladesh, Libya and in Europe through effective returns when the individuals in question have no need for international protection. They currently constitute the 2<sup>nd</sup> nationality in terms of sea crossings through the central Mediterranean Sea.

<sup>27</sup> Although Rohingya refugees and stateless persons will likely also face more difficult socioeconomic circumstances post COVID-19, they are not expected to move towards Europe, as there have never been any substantial Rohingya movements or communities any farther west than the Middle East.



In Europe, increased migration pressures on southern sea and land borders, as well as from some of the South-East Europe countries could – in the absence of a collective, solidarity-based response – lead to deeper tensions among European States, affect the authority and credibility of the European Union, and have political implications for member States.

The measures taken (or not taken) by the European Union at its external borders will also impact other key countries of transit/migration along the three Mediterranean routes, including inside Europe.

Securing the return of people not in need of international protection is likely to be increasingly challenging, as some countries of origin may even be less willing to readmit their nationals owing to the increased burden on their infrastructures related to COVID-19 or other aspects of their socioeconomic situation.

## 4. Is Europe ready?

### (i) Progress since 2015

EU member States and institutions have substantially increased their early warning surveillance and data collection capacity. FRONTEX has been further strengthened (through budget and staff increases and a more robust mandate), and EASO has also been capacitated, albeit to a lesser extent, to support “first line” States at the external border of the Union, some Balkan countries and Turkey to respond to mass movements. Investments have also been made in Europe’s neighborhood partners to try to improve border management.

Some EU member States have also significantly increased their intake of refugees through resettlement channels, complementary pathways and family reunification <sup>28</sup>.

The number of irregular arrivals via the Mediterranean routes and by land to Greece and Spain stood at 123,663 in 2019 - down from more than one million people in 2015. For the first time in recent years, there was a 13% increase in the number of asylum applications in 2019, as compared to previous years, despite a slight drop in irregular arrivals. The first quarter of 2020 nonetheless saw a drop of 21% in new applications as compared to the same period in 2019.

EU member States and institutions have substantially increased their support to refugee hosting countries through their contributions and engagement with the World Bank’s Global Concessional Financing Facility for Middle Income Countries (GCFF) in the MENA region, roll out of the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) in the East and Horn of Africa, the World Bank’s IDA-18 sub-window for refugee-hosting countries, and several programmes led by their bilateral development agencies.

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<sup>28</sup> In absolute figures, resettlement submissions to Europe went from 17,209 in 2015 (in 19 countries) to 33,838 in 2019 (in 20 countries). Resettlement arrivals went from 11,175 in 2015 to 29,066 in 2019. Regarding complementary pathways, no recent data is available, besides the humanitarian corridors operated by Italy. See also available data on family reunion at <http://www.oecd.org/migration/mig/safe-pathways-for-refugees-2019-update.pdf>

## (ii) Areas of vulnerability

Intra-EU solidarity measures have had limited success. The EU has regrettably moved from a limited, but potentially effective mandatory scheme of relocation to assist first line countries in place in 2016, to a limited voluntary *ad-hoc* arrangement. The promising steps taken by a few States through the “Malta process” have not met with wider support. They have proven unable to secure the timely relocation of those disembarked on a sufficient scale with the onset of the larger arrivals due to improved weather/sea conditions in April 2020.

Onward movements from some countries of entry in the EU continued on a significant scale until the COVID-19 outbreak, with implications for progress on mandatory solidarity schemes.

There has been no significant progress in ensuring efficient, yet fair, asylum processing for the mixed arrivals at EU’s external borders. Gaps in reception systems remain acute. Greater tolerance by EU institutions for “push-backs” by European States at Europe’s external borders has also been observed. Returns of those found not to in need of international protection or not eligible for some form of legal stay remain limited<sup>29</sup> - despite being clearly essential to secure public confidence in the capacity of States to responsibly manage asylum systems and legal migration channels.

EU policy on migration and asylum has remained focused on limiting irregular entries as much as possible, despite the evidence that a policy excessively focused on control and security alone cannot bring sustainable results, and does not improve overall governance of mixed flows.

Despite a reduced number of arrivals in Europe, opportunities to improve through new European legislation mobility management, and enhance the well-being of refugees and migrants have not been taken. Instead, the strain on many countries of origin and along migration routes has increased. Furthermore, measures aimed at discouraging irregular movements by limiting access to basic services in countries of destination have increased pockets of vulnerability and marginalization – with public health implications for European countries in the current context.

## (iii) Preserving asylum and migration management amidst the COVID-19 response

Nearly two thirds of European countries have found ways to manage their borders effectively while allowing access to their territories for people seeking asylum. This is encouraging. Measures put in place include medical screenings at borders, health certification and temporary quarantine upon arrival<sup>30</sup>. These are important positive precedents for other States in Europe and beyond.

Measures to mitigate the COVID-19 spread, such as physical distancing and restrictions on movements and gatherings, have impacted the functioning of asylum systems in Europe – including the registration of new asylum claims, provision of documentation, refugee status determination and judicial reviews.

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<sup>29</sup> *Frontex 2019 Annual Risk Analysis report estimates that only 47% of those with a return decision (298,190 persons) have returned; i.e. 6% less than in 2018. However, not all EU Member States necessarily document in their statistics the number of voluntary returns, which have increased.* <https://frontex.europa.eu/publications/frontex-releases-risk-analysis-for-2020-yp0TZ7> Frontex releases Risk Analysis for 2020. 2020-04-28

<sup>30</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/news/covid-19s-impact-on-migrant-communities> COVID-19’s impact on migrant communities.

The consequences can be serious - for the individuals concerned, but also for States. For example, where new asylum claims are not registered, people's stay is not regulated, and they have no access to basic assistance and health services. The suspension of asylum procedures inevitably presents significant challenges upon resumption, and risks reversing past investments.

Recognizing such risks, most European countries have adapted their asylum systems (at least in part) to the current situation. Registration procedures have been simplified, adjusted to permit written or electronic submissions, or frontloaded to coincide with medical screenings, and the issuance of documentation has been automated. Others have adjusted the physical infrastructure for interviews, or are testing and upscaling remote interviewing techniques, such as through videoconferencing.

Many regular migrants are facing challenges – especially those whose visas or temporary labour permits have expired during the period of lockdown and border closures. This has de facto brought entire groups of people into an irregular situation who would not otherwise be in such circumstances.

Onward movements have virtually disappeared, with restrictions on freedom of movement affecting entire populations. Returns to countries of origin or readmission in third countries, including based on the Dublin III Regulation, have to a large extent been suspended.

Action to decongest overcrowded reception facilities or immigration detention centres has been inconsistent and has met with varying degrees of success. Measures are urgently needed to ensure adequate reception conditions at times of crisis, and to address the systemic gaps in some countries that are causing unnecessary human suffering, tensions and secondary movements. An urgent review is required.

While rescue-at-sea capacity remains more managed at the bilateral level in the western and eastern Mediterranean Sea, recent events, including over the 2020 Easter weekend, demonstrated the ongoing vacuum in the central Mediterranean Sea, which continues to place lives in peril.

Some European countries (as well as north African ones) have also “re-discovered” “ghost populations” – large migrant communities<sup>31</sup> living in total limbo, often exploited by unscrupulous employers for years with no permission to stay<sup>32</sup>. Some countries have chosen to include undocumented migrants and asylum seekers

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<sup>31</sup> *This population include different types of irregular migrants, including some who had initially come legally and overstayed their visa/residence permit, foreigners not allowed to remain on the territory but not removed sometimes for years, asylum seekers refusing to request asylum in the country where they are for a significant period of time to avoid being subject to a Dublin “take back” decision.*

<sup>32</sup> *See also: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/making-migrants-visible-covid-19-counting-dilemma/> Making migrants visible to COVID-19 counting: the dilemma. Stefania Milan (University of Amsterdam), Annalisa Pelizza (University of Bologna), Yoren Lausberg (University of Bologna), 28 April 2020. See also: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/the-corona-crisis-has-made-us-value-migrants-heres-how-to-build-on-that/> The corona crisis has made us value migrants: here's how to build on that. Rosie Carter (Hope not Hate), 25 April 2020. See also: [https://www.icmpd.org/news-centre/expert-voice-series/news-detail/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=685&cHash=214bd317a1f1a1cc486cdca2f116266a](https://www.icmpd.org/news-centre/expert-voice-series/news-detail/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=685&cHash=214bd317a1f1a1cc486cdca2f116266a) Expert Voice: Labour migration – Five priorities for the EU and its Member States. Martin Hofman, 29 April 2020. See also: [https://elpais.com/elpais/2020/05/02/3500\\_millones/1588412499\\_348286.html](https://elpais.com/elpais/2020/05/02/3500_millones/1588412499_348286.html) Aprovechemos el virus para cambiar un modelo migratorio roto. El Gobierno de España está obligado a utilizar una ventana de oportunidad que ha traído la pandemia y que no durará mucho. Gonzalo Fanjul, 2 May 2020. See also: <https://www.eurovia.org/open-letter-on-urgent-and-necessary-measures-for-rural-workers-in-the-context-of-covid-19/> Open letter on urgent and necessary measures for rural workers in the context of COVID-19. European Coordination Via Campesina (ECVC), 30 Apr 2020.*

in their public health response regardless of legal status. In a welcome step, Portugal has even temporarily regularized their stay. In contrast, some other countries continued to ignore this issue.

## 5. What next?

### (i) Redefining priorities – inside Europe

Forthcoming discussions on the new [EU Pact on Migration and Asylum](#) are opportune. [Access to asylum in Europe must be preserved and strengthened](#). For decades, Europe has been a global leader in ensuring access to protection for millions of people fleeing war and persecution. In the face of an unprecedented global pandemic, with potential consequences far beyond the immediate health sphere, renewing and reinforcing that commitment is more necessary than ever.

Time and events have shown that the application of geographical location as the prime criteria for determining responsibility for managing irregular arrivals at the EU's external border has disproportionate and inequitable consequences. Fairer criteria must be considered and redefined, based on an efficient and equal implementation of the EU acquis across the region.

[Solidarity mechanisms for managing mixed movements must be redefined](#). This should be a priority for States in the coming period. Solidarity is not just a moral value; it is a founding principle enshrined in EU Treaties. Failing to implement it or respect it undermines the very legal and political fabric of the EU. Following the recent decision from the European Court of Justice on the mandatory nature of the relocation scheme from Greece agreed upon in 2015, consequences for those refusing to participate should be considered.<sup>33</sup>

Obviously, the meaning of solidarity and priorities in Europe will also be influenced by the political impact of COVID-19 from a public health perspective, as well as economic recovery. Emerging divisions on the meaning of solidarity in the context of economic recovery should not be at the detriment of the reforms Europe needs in the area of migration and asylum management.

A robust regional [rescue at sea and predictable disembarkation system](#) is needed along all the routes but attempts to transfer the responsibility only to a few north African States are doomed to fail. The “theatre of avoidance”, as witnessed during the Easter weekend in the central Mediterranean Sea, cannot be Europe's response. Libya cannot be regarded as a safe place for return. A predictable distribution of responsibilities and fair and efficient processing, building on the progress made through the informal arrangements of September 2019 among a small group of EU member States for those rescued at sea, must happen at a faster pace. Capacity-building efforts for competent authorities in North Africa to operate rescue services must also be pursued.

Significant, coordinated efforts are required to [return people found not in need of international protection](#), or without an alternative basis to remain. This is critical to rebuilding public confidence in asylum systems, and migration management and to creating the space for a comprehensive range of measures to facilitate integration and social inclusion.

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<sup>33</sup> <https://www.asylumlawdatabase.eu/en/content/cjeu-joined-cases-c-71517-c-71817-and-c-71917-commission-v-poland-hungary-and-czech-republic-2>

Family reunification should be enhanced by removing current obstacles put in place in the wake of the 2015 crisis. Family reunification channels help discourage communities from resorting to smugglers, ensure more gender equity in terms of access to protection, and enable better integration outcomes. Increased resettlement for refugees by States and through community-sponsored programmes vetted by States may help mobilize communities and encourage diasporas to trust and invest in more legal pathways, thus restoring a more predictable social contract between refugees and host communities<sup>34</sup>. The participation of refugees in many countries in different sectors to the response to the pandemic underscores the potential for this new social contract<sup>35</sup>. Pathways for managed “migration” for education and labour purposes, with clear benchmarks and incentives are also needed. Measures are also needed to facilitate lower transaction fees for remittances from diasporas. Additional efforts are also needed to combat xenophobia.

Evidence-based policy discussions must be held to determine the size and the different options available to address the situation of “ghost populations” in Europe. Forced returns cannot be the only solution. Some have families, have lived and worked in their communities for years. They should not have to remain forever “underground”, making them easy prey for various forms of human trafficking and profitable, exploitative schemes in some economic sectors to which Europe has largely turned a blind eye.

The pandemic has also brought to light the vital role played by migrant workers in some economic sectors in the EU (including in essential services such as health). This includes many in an irregular status who nonetheless constitute the backbone of several productive activities, including agriculture and domestic help<sup>36</sup>. Recognizing this objective fact should lead the EU to fundamentally change its approach to migration and labor mobility and to a serious effort to regularize those whose contribution to the economic recovery will be essential.

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<sup>34</sup> A recent editorial of the *New York Times* suggested that “the .... pandemic has injected a sense of togetherness into polarized societies.” There is abundant evidence that physical distancing is spurring social-communing—in apartment blocks, neighborhoods, civil society organizations, cities—and vivid displays of social solidarity and volunteerism”. <https://www.ft.com/content/7eff769a-74dd-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca>

<sup>35</sup> See for instance: <https://www.msn.com/en-au/news/coronavirus/refugees-in-germany-rally-to-help-in-virus-battle/ar-BB13vuOe>. Refugees in Germany rally to help in virus battle. 3 May 2020. “Engaging in volunteer work is helping them to strengthen their ties with the community, improve their language skills and build confidence, said the 36-year-old from Iran.” See also: <https://www.infomigrants.net/fr/post/24635/des-refugies-a-la-rescousse-d-exploitants-agricoles-en-aquitaine>

<sup>36</sup> <https://euobserver.com/opinion/148161>. See also: [https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2020/04/21/coronavirus-notre-nation-doit-montrer-sa-gratitude-envers-les-etrangers-qui-affrontent-cette-crise-avec-nous\\_6037272\\_3232.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2020/04/21/coronavirus-notre-nation-doit-montrer-sa-gratitude-envers-les-etrangers-qui-affrontent-cette-crise-avec-nous_6037272_3232.html)

## (ii) Redefining priorities – Europe-Africa cooperation

Over recent years, IOM and UNHCR, together with partners, have developed better tools to monitor trends in mixed population flows. There is no shortage of fora and uncoordinated research on the topic. However, there is a need to re-think how trends and emerging risks (which affect everyone) could be better analyzed in a spirit of partnership, to facilitate a more substantive conversation. This could help operationalize the [Global Compact on Refugees and the Global Compact on Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration](#) with clear action plans and less dispersal among various funding streams (development aid, humanitarian aid, support for migration management both bilateral and multilateral). The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the need for better donor coordination, as well as internal coordination and less fragmentation between the different funding streams and modes of action within governments.

In this context, the [EU Strategy with Africa](#) issued on 8 March 2020 is useful, as it sets out proposals to intensify cooperation through partnerships in five key areas: green transition; digital transformation; sustainable growth and jobs; peace and governance; and migration and mobility. On the latter, it aims at ensuring a balanced, coherent and comprehensive partnership. These efforts could be tied to a strengthened focus on a more comprehensive implementation of the [Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration](#).

In the area of migration and asylum management, the current updating of the 2015 joint [Valetta Plan of Action](#) and the related ongoing work under the [Khartoum and Rabat Processes](#) also provide an opportunity to revisit, with a new impetus and more equal attention and funding, its five pillars root causes; legal migration and mobility; protection and asylum; return, readmission and reintegration. Pledges made in the context of the [Global Refugee Forum](#) could be drawn upon also in this context, including pledges to strengthen, and support the strengthening, of asylum processes under the umbrella of the [Asylum Capacity Support Group](#).

Along the same lines, the 4th pillar on fighting more effectively human smuggling and all forms of trafficking domestically and through cooperation between European institutions/member States and with countries in Africa and the AU must be refocused and take more prominence. Strengthened means to extend protection to victims of trafficking could also be considered. The importance of the Joint Valetta Action Plan resides in the recognition of an equal partnership between the EU, the AU and participating African countries, which translates in establishing common actions to achieve common priorities. That spirit of partnership needs to be revitalized.

The [Africa – EU Migration and Mobility Dialogue](#) is also an important process of intercontinental dialogue on migration management and the forthcoming [EU-AU October 2020 Summit](#) which will also include discussions on related topics should also address new needs as outlined in this paper.

Further, the next [Multiannual Financial Framework \(MFF\)](#)<sup>37</sup> creates a concrete opportunity to translate the spirit of equal partnership into financial instruments that provide predictable financial support to countries and communities that are affected by large movements of people and host the majority of forcibly displaced globally – often for decades.

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<sup>37</sup> *i.e. the EU's seven years budget for 2021-2027.*



The response to the COVID-19 has badly exposed fear the failure of aid in terms of Africa's infrastructural deficit particularly in the health sector<sup>38</sup>. Large-scale funding has worked in promoting development, but only when employed in an environment defined by good governance and local ownership. The coming phase in AU-EU cooperation may be an opportunity to [reset aid/cooperation/development policies](#) and make good governance a priority for all. The COVID-19 crisis is also showing the innovative response capacity of many small and medium enterprises in Africa. It has also highlighted once more the key role local authorities play. Redefining development cooperation must factor in these elements.

Pre-empting and mitigating the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 in fragile countries and those affected by food crises countries is possible through the targeted and accelerated implementation of the SDGs<sup>39</sup>. In that regard EU's global COVID response issued on 8 April 2020, up to the amount of 15.6 billion Euros, is welcome in that it focusses on Africa and on vulnerable populations - including specifically on forcibly displaced, refugees, migrants and host communities. The [post-Cotonou process](#) also offers a key opportunity in this respect.

## 6. How can UNHCR and IOM help?

IOM and UNHCR stand ready to assist States in managing the pressures – in addition to existing programmes and activities.

### (i) In Europe, we can:

- Provide effective technical expertise/case management support to countries of disembarkation/arrivals and/or European Agencies (EASO/FRONTEX/EUROPOL) to facilitate fair and effective post-disembarkation/post-arrival processing, including faster operationalization of agreed solidarity mechanisms.
- Facilitate dialogue with States and relevant entities on rescue-at-sea and disembarkation responsibilities.
- Assist States to achieve quantified objectives in the field of legal opportunities to migrate or enjoy protection through refugee resettlement, easier access to family reunification, building on lessons learnt from existing programmes, effectively developing labour migration opportunities for migrants and refugees, improving labour integration through better recognition of diplomas and previous working experience, through the managed regularization of some categories of irregular workers and a more robust implementation of seasonal migrant workers schemes.

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<sup>38</sup> *E.g. Africa has the lowest number of doctors per capita in the world, Uganda 1 per 10.000 persons, Sudan, with a population of 42 million had just 80 ventilators. Nigeria's 200 million less than 500, the CAR has 3 and Liberia none.*

<sup>39</sup> *COVID 19 is unfortunately likely to have a negative impact on SDG achievement in the short-term which also have further implications in countries of origin, but not only. For further reference, please see also at: <https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/SG-Report-Socio-Economic-Impact-of-Covid19.pdf>*

- Stepping up mediation efforts at “good offices” level to facilitate dialogue with specific countries of origin on the humane/incentivized return of individuals not entitled to legal residence following due process.
- Advise governments on critical measures needed to facilitate and lower remittances costs for migrants and refugees in Europe.

(ii) In Europe’s neighbourhood, we can:

- Expand the provision of operational support where needed or appropriate in key countries in European Neighbourhood Policy partners (including Turkey, some countries in South-East Europe and north African countries) to ensure a better management of migration and asylum challenges based on shared responsibility and solidarity principles.

(iii) In Africa, we can:

- Provide technical support to States to strengthen their migration and asylum policies, systems and structures;
- Provide support (material assistance, referral systems, tools for joint communication with communities) to people on the move with a view to helping them where they are and providing them in an orderly manner with access to essential services while discouraging them from undertaking dangerous irregular journeys;
- Develop joint community sensitization programs to prevent xenophobia and stigmatization of foreigners, as well as infected and recovered patients and their families;
- Support the establishment of community-based protection networks to facilitate communication with communities on migration and asylum procedures and associated risks, as well as facilitate access to effective protection;
- When refugees or migrants decide to return to their country of origin even when the conditions there are very difficult, UNHCR/IOM will continue to assist them to exercise their right to return, through the provision of adequate support;
- Participate, in line with our mandates, in collaborative efforts to share information, enabling a more effective fight against human traffickers, while protecting victims;
- Support States to engage in strong, proactive innovative and well-coordinated inter-governmental action to address the root causes of onward movement, and to identify and to prioritize the best ways to further operationalize existing regional or sub-regional agreements or protocols on the free movement of people or other “mobility agreements”. The perspective of increased movements on the continent should be approached with the understanding that intra-regional mobility<sup>40</sup> (whether circular, cross-border or more permanent) can be managed for the benefits of individuals and their countries of origin and migration. Finding innovative ways to manage borders that are pandemic-sensitive should not be an impediment for safe and legal migration, nor for access to asylum.

UNHCR/IOM 14 May 2020

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<sup>40</sup> Possibly through one or more regional entity (EAC, ECOWAS, ICGLR, IGAD, AU).