



World Food Programme

SAVING LIVES
CHANGING LIVES



Addressing irregular migration through principled programmatic approaches

Examining the West Africa route and WFP operations

Introduction

Irregular migration poses unique challenges to WFP and the overall humanitarian community. Tens of thousands of migrants from West Africa undertake perilous journeys each year, facing food insecurity, exploitation, abuse, discrimination, and other human rights violations. **In 2021, the EU reported a rise of irregular border crossings of 57 percent, a 38 percent increase from 2019.**¹

The most important drivers of irregular migration are wage differentials and those seeking better economic opportunities, although political instability, conflict, and climate change are also contributing factors. The lack of legal and regular pathways for migration often leads to dangerous and deadly journeys across the Sahara Desert and the Mediterranean Sea, and ultimately, thousands perish in their pursuit of a better life. [The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration](#) endorsed by Member States and the UN in 2018, outlines eleven objectives, of which this study supports objectives 1, 2, and 7.

This study is intended to lay the foundation for further analysis related to programmes and policies which support commitments made in the GCM.

Research questions:

- 1. What are the characteristics of irregular migrants and the key drivers motivating them to relocate?**
- 2. How is food security compromised for migrants, and what are the risks they face in transit?**

PROFILE OF MIGRANTS AND DRIVERS OF MIGRATION

IN LIBYA, 90% OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS CITED ECONOMIC REASONS (LOW INCOME OR UNEMPLOYMENT) AS THE MAIN MOTIVATION TO LEAVE THEIR HOME COUNTRIES.

Economic considerations emerged as the predominant driver, with migrants often seeking improved livelihood opportunities, higher wages, and better standards of living in destination countries. High levels of poverty, unemployment, and limited job prospects in their countries of origin were frequently cited as push factors leading individuals to take the risk of irregular migration. In general, the study found that irregular migrants tend to be relatively well-educated males from urban areas, who have access to resources to pay smugglers, costing upwards of US\$2000 between much of West Africa and Libya. As such, migrants tend not to be the poorest nor those likely to be most food insecure.

FINANCIAL ESTIMATES FOR SMUGGLING

According to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, migrant smuggling along those routes is estimated to be a market of US\$7 billion annually (UNODC, 2018). The migrants in the survey sample from the Libya case study report that getting to Libya cost them on average US\$ 658, and around 10% of them had to pay more than US\$1,000 for the full journey.

¹ International Center for Migration Policy Development. Migration Outlook Annual Report (Introduction & Key Figures). January 2022.

Analysing the route-based approach

AT THE ORIGIN

Available literature shows that countries with high levels of migration are also food insecure.² Consequentially, while food security is not often cited as a primary reason to migrate, it contributes to the decision-making process to migrate. Evidence and previous literature suggest that households anxious about food security, in general, are more likely to decide that an adult should migrate in search of employment.³

THE IMPACT OF REMITTANCES ON FOOD SECURITY

In each of the past ten years, remittances have tripled the volume of Official Development Assistance (ODA) to low and middle-income countries, and 2022 was no exception: remittance flows surged to US\$626 billion, a 4.9 per cent increase from the previous year.⁴ Remittances allow households the flexibility to purchase essential goods, invest in education, agriculture, and healthcare, and build resistance to future economic shocks.⁵

IRREGULAR MIGRANTS IN TRANSIT

Migrants seeking higher wages may not come from food insecure households; however, the adverse shocks and hardships they endure in transit often lead them to become acutely vulnerable to food insecurity. In the survey of migrants conducted in Libya, **17 percent suggested their primary difficulty during their travel was a lack of food at some point during the journey.** The West African countries on the migration routes to Libya all suffer moderate to severe levels of food insecurity.⁶ As routes in West Africa and elsewhere are relatively well known, clear migration transit points could serve as operational points of entry to provide food or cash assistance.

DESTINATION OR PROTRACTED TRANSIT LOCATIONS

Food security is a challenge for many migrants interviewed in Libya, and migrants in Sabha were more likely to report food insecurity than migrants in Tripoli, though, in both places, many migrants stated that they worried about or ran out of food during the journey. **Thirty-seven percent of respondents overall suggested they worried about**

having enough food to eat; 27 percent of respondents stated there were times when they had no food to eat.

It is clear from this research and related literature, that irregular migrants in transit are extremely vulnerable and while aiding this population is highly challenging, it is the responsibility of the humanitarian community to reach those in need.

INSIGHTS FROM CASE STUDIES: THE RISKS OF IRREGULAR MIGRATION

Adverse events experienced during the journey are unfortunately common, particularly for those involved in international travel. In **Mali**, these issues involve interactions with law enforcement and border patrol, as well as smugglers and loan sharks in addition to physical danger from unsafe travel.

“In fact, you cannot migrate irregularly without encountering difficulties such as lack of food, aggression, lack of money, or even losing your life along the way. Being a man is not easy, and if you decide to take the road, then you hand everything over to Allah.”

Migrants are frequently unpaid for their work or far below the rate paid to domestic labourers for the same job.

Conditions in **Libya** were reported to be especially difficult, with participants describing a “degrading and discriminatory atmosphere” that included ongoing violence.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Since the main push factor for migrants to leave their countries of origin is economic wage differentials, the international community should **work alongside national governments in developing appropriate policies that facilitate economic and employment opportunities in the country of origin.**
2. Given the extremely high levels of risk during transit, including those related to protection and food insecurity, international partners should **seek entry points for the provision of needs-based assistance to migrants where possible and feasible.** Cash transfers to meet essential needs are recommended where possible and feasible.
3. In locations where migrants settle or use as protracted transit sites, the international community should **address food insecurity and other humanitarian requirements, also considering the needs of the host population to avoid potential tensions.**

2 Deschak, Caroline Irene, et al. Journal of Migration & Health. Food Insecurity & Coping Strategies in International Migrants in Transit through Mexico. Vol. 5 2022.

3 Ibid.

4 World Bank. Migration & Development Brief. Trends in Remittance Flows. November 2022

5 Ibid.

6 CADRE HARMONISÉ 2022-2023 analyses: <https://www.ipcinfo.org/ch/>