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JULY 2021

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Labour Migration Responses to the COVID-19 Crisis in Europe and North Africa

THAMM Paper - Short Version



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Report produced with the support of:



# Labour Migration Responses to the COVID-19 Crisis in Europe and North Africa

The current COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the salient and often overlooked failures of migration governance within and between Europe and North Africa. On the one hand, North African countries of origin - mainly Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Libya and Algeria - are facing new challenges: job losses, social tensions and returning migrants who need to be reintegrated, all of which add to already high unemployment rates, especially among young people. On the other hand, European destination countries are grappling with the question of how to ensure that labour shortages in critical sectors are filled quickly, in order to avoid another economic downturn. In this respect, COVID-19 could be an opportunity to reflect on how cooperation on migration can better take into account the interests and priorities of African countries and their citizens. In this regard, and in preparation for the first THAMM regional conference, this working paper on labour migration responses to the COVID-19 crisis in Europe and North Africa aims to gain a better understanding of the key trends currently shaping the governance of labour migration in times of crisis and affecting the socio-economic integration of foreign workers into labour markets, in order to inform the design and implementation of THAMM programme activities in North Africa.<sup>1</sup>

## MOBILITY DYNAMICS IN NORTH AFRICA

North African countries have historically been important destination, transit and departure countries for migrants. Economic, social and political instability, as well as climatic instability, contribute to the mixed migration patterns observed in the region. Since the 1950s, labour migration policies have encouraged mobility and made it a cornerstone of national and regional socio-economic development. However, local labour markets remain fragmented due to several cleavages (public/private,

formal/informal and modern/traditional) and are still '*characterised by high informality and precariousness, very low female participation, high unemployment and high agricultural employment*'.<sup>2</sup> The share of the population under 30 years of age has exceeded 60%, and the working age population (15-64 years) is approaching 70%.<sup>3</sup> The main factors explaining the region's endemic unemployment are 1) lack of demand and low job creation, 2) demographic pressure with a working age population of 70% for the area as a whole; and 3) the persistent '*skills mismatch between the education system and the labour market contributing to limited employability*'.<sup>4</sup>

## Socio-economic and migration dynamics in North Africa: a comparative analysis

In order to better illustrate the similarities and differences between the North African THAMM partner countries, a comparison using ILOSTAT data allows us to identify some of the reasons for labour migration not only within the region, but even more so across the Mediterranean. The following graphs focus in particular on three key dimensions: the labour force participation rate (disaggregated by gender), the sectoral shift from agriculture to services, and finally the vulnerable employment rate. The size of the labour force follows population growth trends. With the exception of Egypt, North African countries have a stable labour force with very low growth. This factor is mechanically correlated with demographic variables and the size and composition of migration flows. Data on labour force participation reflect the ageing of populations and the migration trends of young people. Only Tunisia shows a stable participation rate, suggesting low net migration. Decreases are observed in countries with higher migration rates: Morocco and Egypt.

<sup>1</sup> Raty, T. and Shilhav, R. (2020) The EU Trust Fund for Africa, Trapped between aid policy and migration politics, OXFAM.  
<https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/620936/bp-eu-trust-fund-africa-migration-politics-300120-en.pdf>

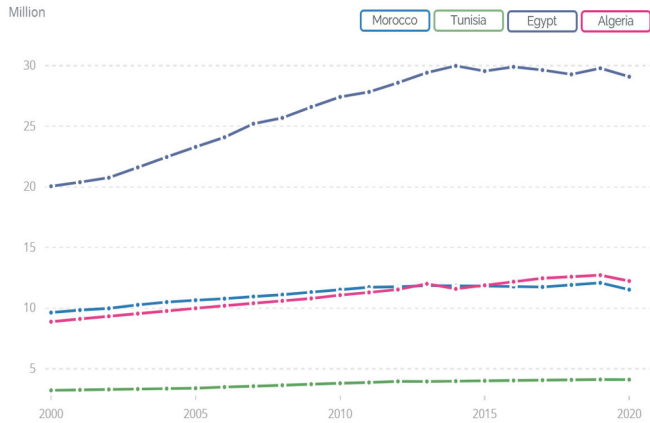
<sup>2</sup> Castagnone, E. and Termine, P. (2018). Chapter 7 - Mediterranean rural youth migration: socio-economic determinants, challenges and opportunities for targeted policy making. In: CIHEAM ed, MediTERRA 2018:

Migration and inclusive rural development in the Mediterranean (pp. 145-167). Paris: Presses de Sciences Po.

<sup>3</sup> UNDESA (2020) Data for North Africa  
<https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock>

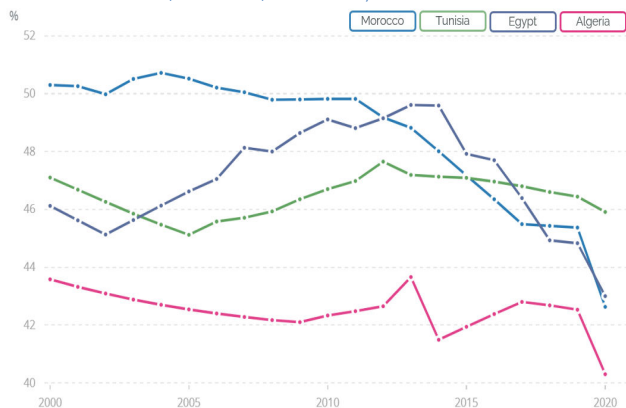
<sup>4</sup> Castagnone, E. and Termine, P. (2018). Ibid.

Figure 1: Labour force (ILO estimate) in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Egypt (Source: World Bank, DataBank, 2000-2020)



The activity rate is a 'measure of the proportion of a country's working age population that is actively engaged in the labour market, either working or looking for work'.<sup>5</sup> As the graph below shows, significant declines are observed in countries with higher migration rates - Morocco, Algeria and Egypt in particular. Libya has not been included due to uncertainties in the available data.

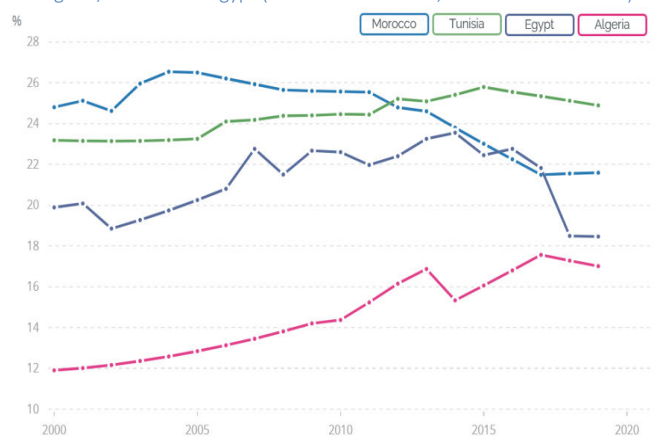
Figure 2: Activity rates (ILO estimate) in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Egypt (Source: World Bank, DataBank, 2000-2020)



The gender distribution of the labour force<sup>6</sup> provides a good profile of the distribution of the labour force in each North African country. It is also a good socio-cultural indicator: estimates of female labour force participation and employment are generally lower than those of men, reflecting social, legal and cultural trends and norms. Although Algeria has seen a strong improvement in women's labour force participation, it remains quite low, reflecting both current trends (pre-COVID-19) and the persistence of a highly gendered society. In contrast, Tunisia has steadily increased the number of women in its labour force.

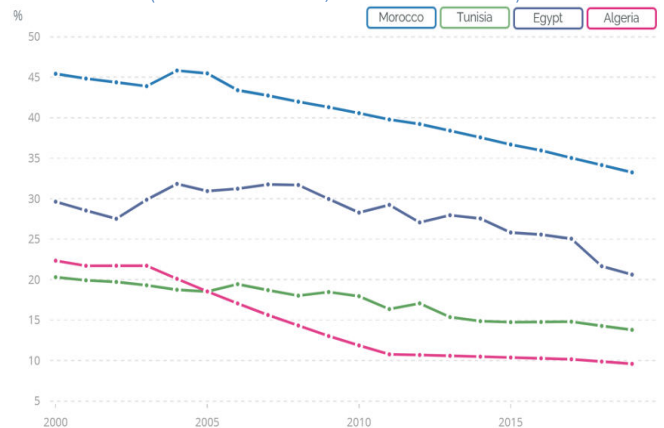
5 This indicator is useful to give an indication of the size of the available labour supply relative to the working age population (15-64). This allows for an assessment of ageing populations as well as patterns of youth migration.

Figure 3: Female participation rate (ILO modelled estimate) in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Egypt (Source: World Bank, DataBank 2000-2020)



The sectoral information allows the identification of employment changes and stages of development: from agriculture to the more labour-intensive industrial sectors (construction) and the informal service sector (especially its low-productivity segments). It also reflects a major trend in most developing countries, particularly in Africa: the phenomenon of rapid and sprawling urbanisation, driven by rural-urban migration, forced internal displacement and the conversion of land into built-up urban areas. The graph below shows that employment in the agricultural sector declined steadily between 2000 and 2020: from 45% to 33% in Morocco, from 23% to 10% in Algeria, from 20% to 14% in Tunisia, and from 30% to 21% in Egypt. Conversely, World Bank data confirms the reorientation of the economy towards the manufacturing sector, particularly in Morocco and Tunisia. Interestingly, female labour force participation appears to have shifted from agriculture to the service sector.

Figure 4: Employment in agriculture in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Egypt (Source: World Bank, DataBank 2000-2020)



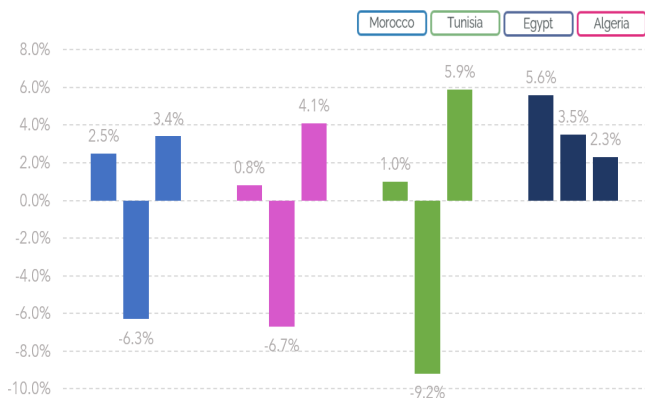
As economist Mehdi Lahlou points out, with reference to Morocco and Algeria in particular: North African countries 'are faced with a dual challenge of preserving their respective interests at home and vis-à-vis sub-Saharan African countries and the European Union, while

ILO - ILOSTAT Glossary (2016) <https://ilostat.ilo.org/resources/concepts-and-definitions/glossary/>

6 Formerly known as the economically active population.

recognising that the problems posed by irregular migration - which will worsen in the coming years - are resolved in the countries of departure'.<sup>7</sup> However, according to the World Bank, the socio-economic situation after seven months of the pandemic in this region has been marked by a recession affecting all the countries in the area except Egypt, with growth of +5.6% in 2019, +3.5% in 2020 and a forecast of +2.3% in 2021. All other countries are struggling.<sup>8</sup>

Figure 5: Real GDP growth in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Egypt (2019-2021) - WB 2021 estimates.



The informal sector usually acts as a buffer to negative shocks, temporarily absorbing labour pushed out of the formal sector. But in the context of the COVID-19 crisis, social distancing policies and containment measures have reinforced the vulnerabilities of the informal sector due to the nature of most jobs in this sector, where remote work is often not an option. As the epidemic continues to disrupt several key sectors (tourism, logistics, catering and retail), unemployment in the MENA region is thus expected to increase by at least 1.2% in the near future, resulting in a potential total loss of 1.7 million formal and informal jobs, of which 700,000 are for women.

### Migration dynamics from North Africa to the European Union

In order to understand the dynamics of mobility - and in particular all issues related to labour migration - between North Africa and the EU, it is essential to take into account three temporal components:

- On the one hand, the long history of colonial domination, liberation struggles and privileged bilateral relations (notably with France for Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia; with Libya for Italy). Beyond purely economic or

commercial exchanges, this long period is notably at the origin of partnerships in the field of mobility with university exchange programmes, collaboration in technical training, as well as more recent agreements for the employment of Moroccan or Tunisian seasonal workers, notably in Spain or Italy.

- On the other hand, the shorter timeframe and contemporary global dynamics of mobility, strongly influenced by the "Arab Spring" which led to social reforms in Morocco, protracted demonstrations in Algeria and the fall of the governments in place in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt; but also by migration from sub-Saharan countries, the war in Syria, have profoundly altered the composition, routes and volume of migratory flows to Europe. Over the last twenty years, countries on both sides of the Mediterranean have put in place numerous programmes and interventions to better control, manage and analyse "mixed" migration flows from North Africa.
- Finally, the pandemic has played an interrupting and accelerating role, with disastrous effects on employment, certain sectors of the economy and the most vulnerable individuals (women, informal workers, economic migrants, etc.).

### Understanding historical dynamics: Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Egypt

North Africa and Europe are linked by history and geography. The complex colonial history and socio-economic relations between France on the one hand and Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia on the other constitute one of the most recent episodes in several centuries of mobility across the Mediterranean. Moreover, Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia are often presented - from a European perspective - as a homogeneous block and the historical and national differences between them are not taken into consideration. Natter's historical analysis distinguishes three main distinct phases to analyse the - mainly economic - migration from North Africa to Europe:<sup>9</sup>

- 1964-1973, Recruitment of foreign workers and promotion of emigration ;
- 1974-1995, Consolidation of migrant communities in Europe ;
- From 1995 to the present day, Multiplication of migration patterns.

Although since the 1960s there has also been organised labour emigration to other European countries, such as Germany, Belgium or the Netherlands, it was only from the 1980s onwards that North African emigration shifted

7 Lahlou, M. (2018) Morocco and Algeria in European Migration Policies, ECDPM Great Insights magazine, Autumn 2018 (Volume 7, Issue 4) <https://ecdpm.org/great-insights/north-africa-hope-in-troubled-times/morocco-algeria-european-migration-policies/>.

8 Arezki, R., Moreno-Dodson, B., Yuting Fan, R. Gansey, R., Nguyen, H., Nguyen, M.C., Mottaghi, L., Tsakas, C., and Wood, C.A. (2020) Trading together: towards a revival of Middle East and North Africa integration in the post-COVID era. MENA Economic Newsletter (October), Washington,

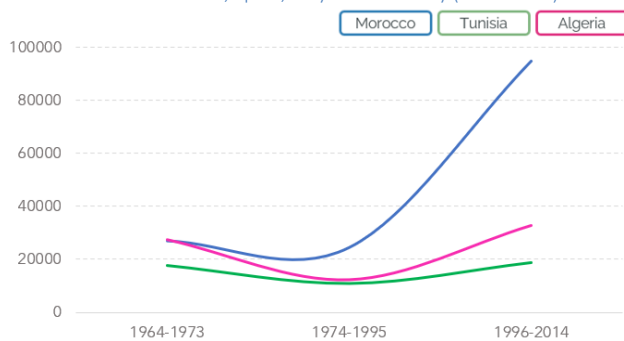
D.C., The World Bank Group.

<https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/34516/211639FR.pdf>

9 Sources: for France, Spain and Italy: DEMIG C2C Database (DEMIG 2015a); for Germany: 1965-2009, DEMIG C2C Database (DEMIG 2015a); for 2010-2014, the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees / Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge (BAMF 2016: 172)

more to other destinations, especially to Spain and Italy. Until the 1980s, France was the main destination because of the historical links, the colonial period, the close economic and political cooperation that developed over the decades between France and these three countries. The figure below gives an overview of the geographical diversification of North African emigration over the last decades, showing that the share of France is decreasing, while the shares of Spain and Italy are strongly increasing.

Figure 6: Trend in total annual emigration from Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia to France, Spain, Italy and Germany (1964-2008)



Historically, Egypt has been a country of emigration, most of which occurred in the wider Arab region. Until the mid-1970s and the oil crisis, Egypt supplied Libya, Iraq and the oil-producing Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) mainly with low- and medium-skilled workers in public administration, education, health or agriculture. From the mid-1970s onwards, international migration provided an external outlet for Egyptian labour, mainly to the Gulf region, notably Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Iraq.

### Contemporary perspective: Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia

The strongest criticism of the EU's position - particularly with regard to the permanent European border and coast guard, FRONTEX, and the general lack of policy coherence between Member States - came in particular from civil society actors and NGOs, who highlighted the extent to which the EU had gone from being 'a promoter of human rights in North Africa to an actor that prioritises its own interests over the needs and rights of people'.<sup>10</sup>

Conceptually and politically, the process of border redefinition, which has been at the centre of EU internal politics for decades, is now at the heart of the problems, as Europe exports its borders - to North Africa, but also to sub-Saharan Africa, Turkey and Central Asia. The pressures of border redefinition result from widening gaps at the EU's external borders, exogenous shocks to cross-border transactions, growing EU deficits in border redefinition

and politicisation.<sup>11</sup>

It is therefore necessary to understand the current dynamics and characteristics of labour migration from North African countries to Europe. If we consider the ranking of residence permits granted by EU countries between 2014 and 2019 (in terms of volume of valid, renewed and new permits), Morocco tops the list with almost 2 million active permits. Algeria also makes the list with over 0.7 million active permits over the period. In relation to its population, Tunisia also has a proportionally comparable number of residence permits.

### Seasonal migration of workers from North Africa to EU countries

Most current EU employment programmes target migrant workers in specific sectors, such as IT, construction, tourism or agriculture. Some of these sectors have been negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in severe job losses (UNCTAD 2020). A key sector that has been strongly affected by the crisis is agriculture. In the EU, agriculture is a main source of employment and income for less than 4% of the population, and this rate is falling. This is partly due to the arduous nature of agricultural occupations and the fact that they generate less income than other activities. This creates the need for a versatile, temporary and flexible workforce.

In the context of the pandemic, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on the protection of seasonal workers on 19 June 2020, calling on the Commission and Member States to ensure the proper implementation of relevant EU legislation and the issuing of new specific and long-term solutions. The resolution recognises that cross-border and seasonal workers have been particularly affected by the crisis and the measures taken to contain the spread of the disease - many of them being '*stranded in the country of employment without income, protection, transport (...) and sometimes even without shelter or access to health care and food*'.<sup>12</sup> The situation of Moroccan women employed in the strawberry fields of the province of Huelva (Spain) and the precariousness of Moroccan seasonal workers in Piana del Sele (Italy) have thus been the subject of severe criticism. In February 2020, the UN rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Philip Alston, stated that some of these migrant workers were living in shanty towns '*with conditions far worse than those of a refugee camp, with no running water, electricity or sanitation facilities*'.<sup>13</sup>

10 Uzelac, A. (2020) The Real Common Interest: The Converging Agendas of the EU and North Africa on Migration - Where do the interests of the people lie? Oxfam International.

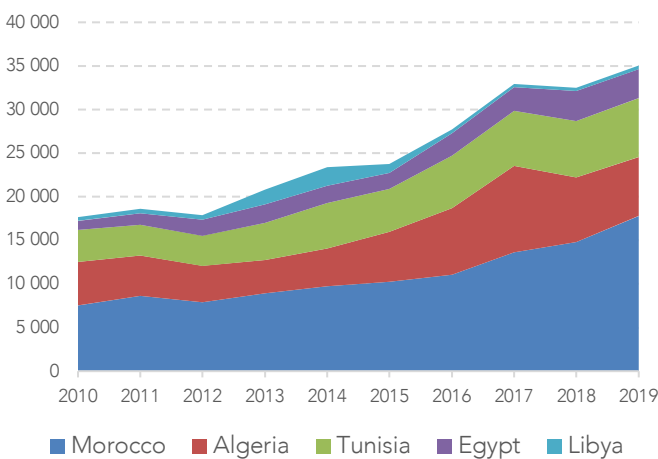
11 Vicente Ruffi, J., Richard, Y., Feliu, J. and Berzi, M. "Editorial: Peripheral borders, soft and hard re-bordering in Europe", *Belgeo*. See also: Bélanger, M., and Schimmelfennig, F. (2021). Politicization and Rebordering in EU

Enlargement: Membership Discourses in European Parliaments. *Journal of European Public Policy*.  
 12 [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/689347/EP\\_RS\\_BRI\(2021\)689347\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/689347/EP_RS_BRI(2021)689347_EN.pdf)  
 13 <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25524&LangID=E>

## International students from North Africa

The demand for technical skills and qualifications - particularly in the engineering, new technology and service sectors, and even more so in the health care sector - is constantly increasing. This reality has accelerated and modified existing dynamics in tertiary and higher education, as well as in the migration of skilled workers from North Africa to Europe. In terms of education, the geographical and cultural proximity and the advantage of accessible French-language education make French universities an opportunity to plan a career abroad or to return to North Africa for many young Moroccans, Algerians and Tunisians. In contrast, Egyptians largely attend universities in Egypt and only migrate for their first job or postgraduate training to Europe (Italy, France, Germany), the UK or North America. The graph below shows the dynamics over the last decade, with a doubling of the number of first permits issued for education reasons between 2010 (17,500) and 2019 (35,000). When broken down by country of origin, Morocco provides about 50% of the quotas, Algeria and Tunisia more than 20% each and Egypt just over 5%.

Figure 7: First permits issued for education reasons, by nationality (2010-2019) North Africa, including Egypt and Libya



A quick look at the comparative youth unemployment rates in Egypt and Tunisia reveals important nuances that are due both to socio-cultural differences and to the local labour market situation. In both cases, the inability of highly skilled (tertiary) youth to enter the labour market is largely due to the lack of real opportunities for the type of skills they have to offer in a sluggish and largely informal market. In the Tunisian case, it is noted that highly qualified young people do not find it easier or more difficult to enter the market - unlike young Moroccans, Algerians or Egyptians - which contributes more to keeping them in the country. Finally, the very high proportion of highly qualified women who cannot enter

the labour market (nearly 60%) is linked to socio-cultural obstacles, particularly in times of crisis or recession. For all the countries covered by this study, the difficulty of integrating the most highly qualified people runs the risk of a talent and skills drain; it is also an indicator of more structural issues in countries where informality and underemployment remain endemic.

Figure 8: Unemployment rate by education level and gender (Egypt - OECD 2020)

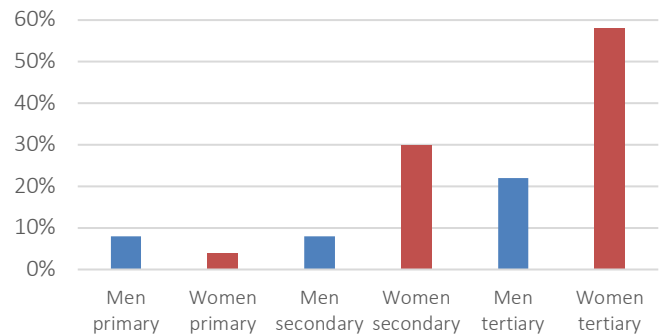
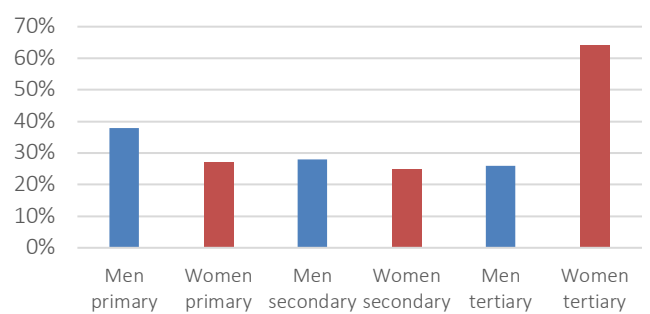


Figure 9: Unemployment rate by education level and gender (Tunisia - OECD 2020)



## Highly skilled workers

In the labour market, qualified or highly qualified North Africans are often particularly exposed to unemployment: 30% for Morocco (2003), 29% for Tunisia (2017), and 22% for Egypt (2018) according to the World Bank and ILOSTAT.<sup>1415</sup> The causes generally mentioned, beyond the difficult economic context, are often the same: mismatch of skills and lack of opportunities, low salaries and lack of valuation, nepotism and lack of network. The socio-economic situation and the lack of job opportunities are important push factors for international migration from North Africa. In an analysis published in 2010, CARIM had already identified a significant brain drain in Egypt, with negative consequences in terms of social and economic development for the country and the region: *'Migrants to OECD countries are highly skilled professionals, mainly doctors, engineers and teachers. (...) Egyptian permanent migrants have increased as a percentage of total migrants from 9.6% in 1983 to 38.0% in 2006. They increased at a higher rate (9.7%) than total migration (2.2%)'*.<sup>16</sup> This

14 <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.ADVN.ZS?locations=MA-TN-EG-DZ>

15 Focus Group Discussion, Tunisian and Moroccan students - virtual discussion conducted in June 2021.

16 Nassar, H. (2010) 'Migration of Skills, the Egyptian Case', CARIM - Consortium for Applied Research on International Migration, EUI - Robert Schumann Center for Advanced Studies.

trend of brain drain<sup>17</sup> has not been reversed, in a context of unemployment of highly skilled North African youth and a sustained economic crisis.

The case of the medical professions is undoubtedly the most widely publicised, especially at a time when societies seem to be unequally affected. In relation to the population, France has one doctor for every 304 inhabitants; Morocco has one for every 520, Algeria one for every 1720, and Tunisia one for every 780. While Morocco is not the worst off country, it has been singled out by the World Health Organisation for serious health care deficiencies and 'deep geographical and socio-economic inequalities'.<sup>18</sup> According to Najib Akesbi, not only does Morocco not train enough doctors (1,900 per year as opposed to the stated objective of 3,300) but 'doctors are trained for export': low salaries, lack of equipment and infrastructure, etc. all the conditions are there for the exodus.<sup>19</sup> In such a context, it goes without saying that the question of the mobility of the most qualified professionals is even more topical, with consequences that are not only economic but also political and societal: nearly 15 000 Moroccan doctors work in France, according to official figures<sup>20</sup>, with a considerable number having graduated in their country of origin.<sup>21</sup>

## MIGRANT WORKERS' CONTRIBUTION TO THE RESPONSE TO COVID-19

The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the key role of migrants in the global workforce. Non-EU migrants are indeed over-represented among key workers, which is particularly true for low-skilled non-EU migrants. Disaggregated by gender, the 2018 EUFL data analysed by Fasani and Mazza, show that six categories of key occupations (personal care workers, cleaners and helpers, professionals associated with health, teaching professionals, health professionals and personal service workers) are significantly dominated by women, with the proportion of women exceeding 50 per cent, while all other occupations are predominantly male.<sup>22</sup>

Faced with a shortage of key workers due to mobility restrictions, many EU Member States have implemented measures to facilitate access to the labour market for third-country nationals already residing on their territory,

in order to address labour shortages in key sectors, such as agriculture and health care. A few have granted or extended the right to work in key sectors to asylum seekers; allowed seasonal workers to extend their residence status; facilitated changes of status (e.g. from student to worker); or introduced flexibilities to improve access to work in key sectors. Regularisation of third-country nationals employed in certain key sectors has also been allowed on a case-by-case basis. Finally, as the European Commission has pointed out, 'low-skilled third-country workers are particularly over-represented in a number of key occupations that are essential in the fight against COVID-19, underlining their often overlooked value within European economies'.<sup>23</sup>

### Impact of COVID on migrant workers

The COVID-19 pandemic has refocused attention on the difficult working conditions of migrants in certain sectors, in particular the agricultural sector. Despite their essential role in most EU countries, seasonal and key workers from Morocco, Tunisia and, to a lesser extent, Algeria, still suffer from very low wages and poor living and working conditions. This is also the case for many Egyptian migrants in the Gulf countries.

**A non-existent social safety net:** North African migrant workers (in both the formal and informal sectors) face additional challenges in European countries compared to native workers. In addition to the lack of access to health care and information on the prevention of COVID-19, many migrant workers are at increased risk of contracting and transmitting the virus, due to often precarious working conditions. This situation is compounded by inadequate access to health care, vaccines and social security services.<sup>24</sup> In these circumstances, gender is an aggravating factor, as the lack of access to social safety nets puts migrant women at increased risk of contracting the virus, human trafficking and exploitation. Egyptian migrant workers have also been directly affected, as the pandemic has coincided with the collapse of oil prices in the Gulf countries and, consequently, oil revenues, which boosts the demand for migrant labour in the Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. As Ibrahim Awad notes, '*the combined impact of the pandemic and falling oil prices on Egyptian migrant workers has spread to Jordan, their current second largest destination after Saudi Arabia*'.<sup>25</sup>

17 De la Croix, D., and F. Docquier. (2012). "Do brain drain and poverty result from coordination failures?". *Journal of Economic Growth* 17:1: 1-26; and Docquier, F., (2014). *The brain drain from developing countries*. IZA World of Labour.

18 WHO (2016) WHO-MAROC Cooperation Strategy 2017-2021. World Health Organization. Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean.

19 Quote from the Moroccan economist Najib Akesbi in Verdier, M. (2020) *Au Maghreb, des systèmes de santé exsangues*, in La Croix, 8 April 2020 - <https://www.la-croix.com/Monde/Afrique/Au-Maghreb-systemes-sante-exsangues-2020-04-08-1201088418>.

20 INSEE (2012). *Evolution et structure de la population, RP exploitations complémentaires*. National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies.

21 Zehnati, A., (2017). *The medical brain drain from the Maghreb to the North: for a new social dialogue? The electronic journal of economics and complexity*, volume 2 (2016) issue 1 May 2017.

22 Fasani, F. and Mazza, J. (2020) *Immigrant Key Workers: Their Contribution to Europe's COVID-19 Response*. IZA Policy Paper No. 155.

23 <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/librarydoc/inform-3-maintaining-labour-migration-in-essential-sectors-in-times-of-pandemic-covid-19>

24 Gagnon, J. (2020) *COVID-19: consequences for international migration and development* (Paris: OECD).

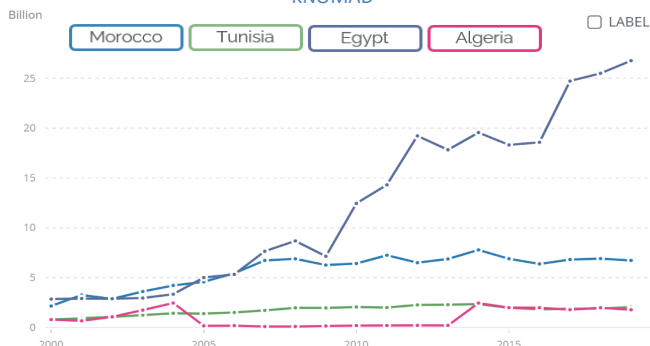
25 Awad, I. (2021). *Ibid.*

**Increased risk for irregular migrants:** The closure of borders in North African countries has affected traditional irregular migration routes, changed strategies and increased risks and uncertainties. The mobility constraints imposed by the pandemic have not deterred migrants from risking their lives to reach Europe: since the beginning of 2021, 10,000 migrants and refugees have arrived on the Italian coast and almost 4,300 on the Canary Islands.<sup>26</sup> Official estimates of the number of deaths, according to the UNHCR, are, as of mid-May 2021, more than 550 deaths, an increase of more than 200% compared to the previous year. While this component is essential for understanding the challenges of migration between Africa and Europe in terms of protection and humanitarian aid, it is no less essential in terms of labour market analysis. In a context of increased precariousness of work, whether formal or informal, partly linked to the current crisis, the abuse and exploitation of the situation of irregular migrants represents a legal, ethical and societal challenge.<sup>27</sup>

### Remittances: a counter-intuitive resilience?

Remittances play a vital social and economic role, especially in Egypt, as Awad further points out: *'They help the families receiving them meet their subsistence needs [and contribute] to the current account balance, which helps to bridge the gap resulting from Egypt's chronic trade deficit'*.<sup>28</sup> Egypt receives the largest inflows in North Africa and the sixth largest of any country in the world, totalling \$26 billion in 2020. Inflows to other countries are much lower, with \$7 billion to Morocco, \$2 billion to Tunisia and \$1.8 billion to Algeria. These remittances from both diaspora and migrant workers to Egypt in 2019 were equal to 9% of the country's GDP, 6% for Morocco, 5% for Tunisia and 1% for Algeria.

Figure 10: Volumes of remittances per country (2000-2020) - Source WB-KNOMAD



26 <https://news.un.org/fr/story/2021/04/1094972>

27 <https://www.unhcr.org/fr/news/briefing/2021/5/60915977a/hcr-lance-alerte-nombre-croissant-deces-refugies-migrants-mediterranee.html#:~:text=By%20other%2C%20the%20HCR%20is,more%20than%20200%20per%20cent.>

28 Chaabita, R. International migration, remittances and socio-economic development in Morocco: An empirical analysis, International Union for the Scientific Study of Population (IUSSP), 2017.

While preliminary World Bank analysis in 2020 predicted a decline in remittances for all low- and middle-income countries of 7% in 2020, followed by a further decline of 7.5% in 2021,<sup>29</sup> remittances to Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia actually increased in 2020 compared to 2019 by 6.5%, 6.5% and 2.5% consecutively, while remittances to Algeria remained virtually unchanged. As Gagnon suggests, such a surprising trend may result from the *'counter-cyclical nature'* of remittances, with migrants tending to increase during economic downturns, regardless of their own circumstances, to contribute to the well-being of their families or communities.<sup>30</sup> For policymakers on both sides of the Mediterranean, this unexpected news in today's chaotic and uncertain environment calls for targeted support linked to the development of digital means of payment as well as better financial inclusion in both destination and origin countries - throughout the migration cycle and in relation to diasporas.

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR DISCUSSION

Analyses of the pandemic situation at regional and transnational levels have highlighted the lack of a concerted, multilateral approach. According to Schöfberger and Rango, COVID-19 and migration require transnational approaches, but *'the diverse impacts of the pandemic on national societies and economies may lead to wider divergences in migration-related priorities for states within regions, and further hinder the identification of common approaches on migration that are currently being discussed at the level of the African Union, ECOWAS, the Arab Maghreb Union and the European Union. In this way, it could reinforce current trends towards tighter border controls.'*<sup>31</sup>

In this regard, a common and alternative policy goal seems appropriate, with a shift from politicised 'migration management' to a more collaborative socio-economic paradigm focusing on protection, skills, jobs and legal channels. As Kumar et al. point out, the questions are: *'How do we sustain these reforms beyond the pandemic? How do we move beyond the usual emergency/crisis narrative that so often taints migration debates and leaves us little space for a balanced, rational and politically viable*

29 World Bank (2020) Migration and Development Brief 32: COVID-19 World Bank (2020) Crisis Through a Migration Lens (Washington DC: World Bank Group and KNOMAD).

30 Gagnon, Jason (2020) COVID-19: Implications for International Migration and Development. Paris: OECD.

31 Fargues, P., Rango, M., Borgnas, E. and Schöfger, I. editors (2020) Migration in West and North Africa and across the Mediterranean: trends, risks, development and governance, IOM Geneva.



*approach to reform?*<sup>32</sup> This final section presents perspectives to inform the THAMM conference debates and future dialogues between actors on both sides of the Mediterranean on the issue of mobility and labour migration.

## I. Existing labour migration frameworks: challenging strategy and narratives

### Opportunity 1: From politicisation to political dialogues

In this respect, what legal, administrative and formal arrangements could facilitate the mobility and integration of North African migrant workers in the EU? How can the social partners (including the RSMMS network, as well as civil society organisations) be better involved in this dialogue?

### Opportunity 2: Assess the reality of brain drain phenomena

How can EU countries avoid triggering a de facto brain drain and help highly qualified North Africans to better contribute or return to their countries of origin? How could North African countries of origin improve the living and working conditions of academics and researchers, facilitate the circulation of students and researchers, encourage the return of graduates and help them form a diaspora?

### Opportunity 3: A broader understanding of mobility in the Mediterranean

Beyond the current and traditional focus on criminal networks and the use of smugglers by migrants, what formal mechanisms could enable these migrants to contribute - according to their qualifications and skills - to local labour markets on a temporary or regular basis?

### Opportunity 4: Rethinking the concept of 'key workers' in the EU

How can we move from a narrow conception of chosen (high-skilled) migration to a more sustainable and balanced notion of skills? What legal migration pathways and mechanisms should be designed - for various categories of skills and qualifications, including low- and high-skilled professionals - to optimise a mutually beneficial labour mobility process?

## II. A new deal for countries of origin, destination and migrant workers

### Opportunity 5: Operational Knowledge Platform

What regional and transnational bodies can be used to develop greater harmonisation and centralisation of definitions, data collection and sharing, identification of

data gaps? How can the current under-representation of migrant workers - in the formal or informal sector of the economy - in most studies and information collections be avoided?

### Opportunity 6: Stricter ethical standards for seasonal work (decent work) involving the diaspora

Could bilateral and multilateral cooperation frameworks, involving countries of origin (mainly Tunisia and Morocco) and destination (mainly Spain, Italy and France) of migrants contribute to this effort? What could be the role of the diaspora, of diasporas - in terms of economic resilience but also of solidarity?

### Opportunity 7: Mutually beneficial exchanges in university education and vocational training

Therefore, how should EU Member States and their North African partners create positive incentives that would benefit North African students, EU universities, academic and TVET institutions? What would be the appropriate combination of scholarships, flexible mobility conditions and tailored individual mentoring?

### Opportunity 8: Assessing the migration cycle

How can the migration cycle be better taken into account in policy and programme-making? What roles can employers, social partners (trade unions) and other actors play in promoting the integration and reintegration of migrants into local markets throughout the migration cycle?

### Opportunity 9: Promotion of formal economies in North African countries

How to fully exploit the potential of the labour market while ensuring decent work and extending social protection safety nets? How to promote the development of a formal employment and sector post COVID-19?

## III. Protection mechanisms and decent work

### Opportunity 10: Mainstreaming social services - regardless of immigration or visa status

How should bilateral and multilateral agreements be reviewed to mitigate the risks and challenges faced by migrant workers under COVID-19?

### Opportunity 11: Social protection and access to localised services, in collaboration with the RSMMS and other relevant social partners.

How can North African and European levels of local government and leadership, such as local councils and mayors, be better resourced to implement health, education and social protection services on the ground?

32 Kumar, C., Oommen, E., Fragapane, F. and Foresti, M. (2021) Beyond gratitude: Lessons learned from migrants' contribution to the Covid-19 response, ODI, London.

How can trade unions and civil society organisations be involved in this effort?

**Opportunity 12: Expanding digital and financial infrastructure to support the crisis resilience of migrant workers and communities of origin.**

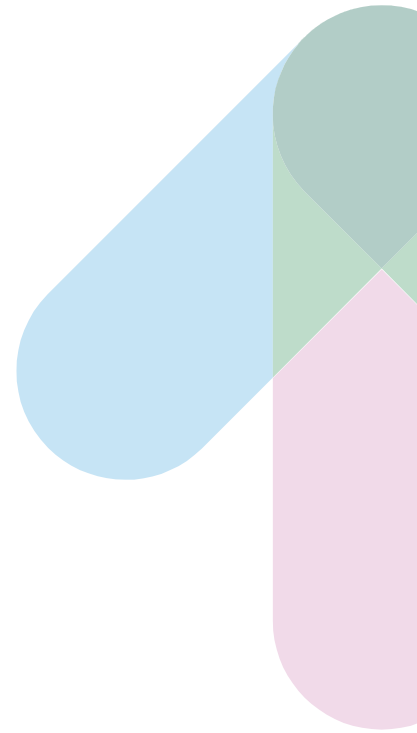
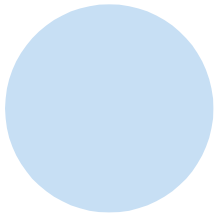
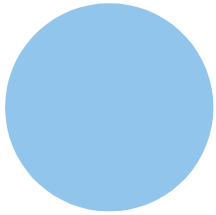
What research, analysis, policies and programmes are needed to better anticipate and support the contextual uses of remittances between countries of residence and origin?

**Opportunity 13: Legal protection and decent work**

How to provide services on employers' obligations and workers' rights, register complaints and help migrant workers to benefit from legal protection and decent working conditions throughout the mobility cycle?

**Opportunity 14: Towards gender equality**

Given that the COVID-19 pandemic has made women particularly vulnerable - both in North Africa and Europe - how can policymakers ensure that women's rights are respected and protected, in line with decent work standards and basic human rights?



# THAMM

This publication was produced with the financial support of the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.

Comments are welcomed and should be directed to the author(s).

Suggested citation: International Labour Organization in collaboration with International Organization for Migration. (2021) THAMM Discussion Paper No.1. *We are in this together, Labour Migration Responses to the COVID-19 Crisis in Europe and North Africa*. Hervé Nicolle, Samuel Hall.

ISBN xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

