



## Research and Policy Briefs Series

### Globalization and Migration Processes: African Populations in Spain and Central Americans Crossing Mexico

By Talina Contreras Dávila

#### Introduction

In the current context of globalization, the insertion of countries in the global economic system depends on the degree of accumulation of national capital, their historical role in the international division of labour, technological development, and geographical location. Regions in North America, Asia, and Europe have high concentrations of capital, while some countries in Africa and Latin America maintain new forms of accumulation through the penetration of transnational capital and the acquiring of natural resources (Harvey, 2004).

The competitiveness among rich countries in a context of recurrent crises of the global system accelerates the growing inequality between these and the poor countries, the latter of which fall into serious economic, social, and security crises. Such is the case of the countries of the Northern Triangle in Latin America, formed by Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador, whose economies have been in decline since the 1990s with the implementation of neoliberal economic policies and political interventions led by the United States.

It is in this context that global migration patterns can be understood. In regions under the influence of rich countries, the mobility of the population abroad is inevitable, especially from rural areas where capital has managed to consolidate land tenure and mechanize production, destroying traditional systems, weakening agrarian communities, and expelling rural populations to another way of life (Massey et al., 1993).

This research summary contributes to discussions about the relationship between global inequalities and migration patterns. It is part of a broader work that distinguishes the causes, the routes, and the integration of specific populations in transit or destination, seeking a comparative approach between groups in different geographies. The groups that are focused on include the African populations of Morocco, the Gambia, and Senegal to Spain and Central Americans of the Northern Triangle that cross Mexico towards the United States.

In Morocco and in West African countries such as Gambia and Senegal, economic policies that were implemented during the 1980s and 1990s through structural adjustment programs led to privatization, exploitation of natural resources, environmental degradation, poverty and unemployment (Khachani, 2008, Maris and Nin, 2015). This contributed to the exodus of these African groups to Spain. In 1995, 95,725 Africans resided in that country and, in 2017, they increased to 1,041,513. In addition, until May 2018, 1,063 Africans had arrived to Spain irregularly across the Mediterranean (IOM, 2018).

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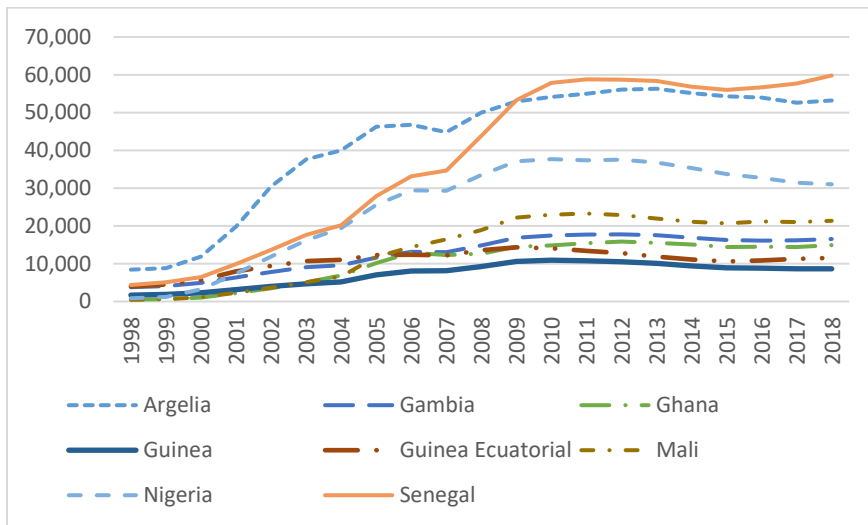
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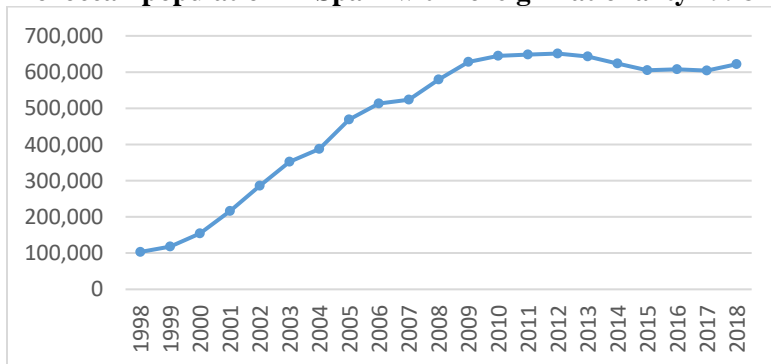
**African population in Spain with foreign nationality by country of birth 1998-2018**



Derived from a national database. National Institute of Statistics of Spain

In the 1990s, the Moroccan population became the largest population of foreign-born residents in Spain. Since then, Moroccan residents increased from 103,225 people in 1998 to 604,347 in 2017. The population of Senegalese immigrants is the second largest, with 4,381 in 1998 and 57,735 in 2017. Also, Gambian arrivals to Spain have accelerated since the 1990s with 3,772 arriving in 1998 and 16,165 in 2017. In Catalonia, these three populations have been the most numerous since the 1990s and are currently concentrated in Barcelona.

**Moroccan population in Spain with foreign nationality 1998-2018**



Derived from a national database. National Institute of Statistics of Spain

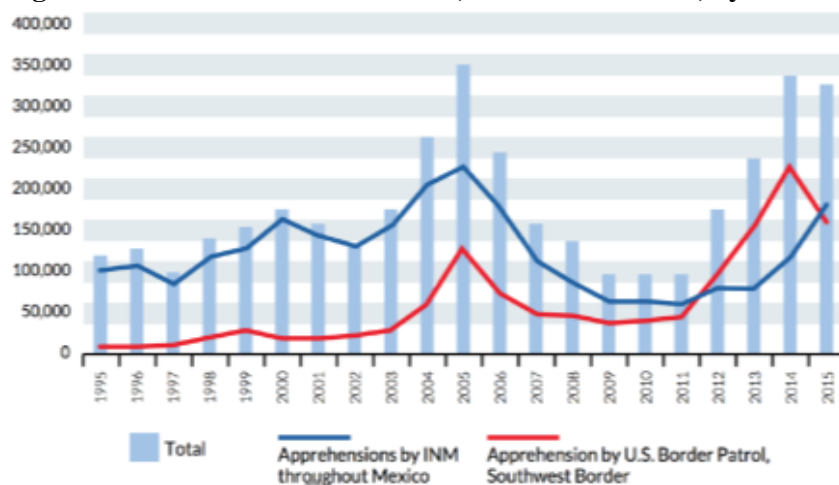
The same structural adjustment programs that have motivated African migration to Spain have impacted Central America since the 1980s. Effects have included the destruction of rural economies, the privatization of companies, public indebtedness, the stagnation of growth, unemployment, poverty, and inequality, which have all generated emigration to the United States through Mexico (Flores, 2016; Kay, 2016).

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Unlike in Spain where Africans are officially registered as residents independently of their legal status, in Mexico the number of Central Americans in transit can only be estimated by looking at the numbers of undocumented migrants detained. In 1995, there were around 10,000 arrests of persons crossing Mexico, and almost 200,000 in 2015, while there were almost 300,000 imprisoned on the US border in the same year (Wise, 2017). Recently, since October 19, 2018, caravans of people from the Northern Triangle have arrived continuously, crossing through Tecún Umán, which is the Mexican border with Guatemala. On October 22, 2018, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) reported 7,233 people who were part of the caravan of undocumented immigrants in Mexico, to which approximately 4,000 were added until the arrival of the last group on January 19, 2019.

Despite the humanitarian visas granted by the new government of Mexico, which gives migrants legality in the country and allows them to access the labour market, their situation at the border with Mexico and the US remains vulnerable. Also, their passage through the Mexican territory requires greater protection against kidnappings by criminal groups and more resources for their refuge.

### Undocumented Central American migrants apprehended by the Mexican National Institute of Migrations or the U.S. Border Patrol, Southwest Border, by calendar year 1995-2015



Delgado W.R, 2017. Based on Data from Mexico's SEGOB, UPM, INM: Migratory statistics bulletin and U.S. Border Patrol, Southwest Border

### Purpose

This research summary is derived from a larger study that investigates the differences and similarities that may exist between the aforementioned groups with different origins, routes, and destinations. It searches to answer the following questions: What is the process of migration of these populations from their exodus to their arrival and their integration in the country of transit or destination? What are the causes of the migration of these groups? What are the trends of global international migration, caused by inequality between countries in the short term?

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### Methods

This summary contributes to answers for the first and second questions with data derived through consultations of secondary sources and structured interviews with migrants, observing their reasons to leave, route history, migratory networks, arrival conditions, and integration processes (i.e., regularization, labour market, and policies towards migrants).

The larger study includes field work with the following groups:

- 43 interviews with migrants from Morocco, Gambia, and Senegal in the Comarcas of Barcelona (Maresme, Valles Oriental and Valles Occidental) where they are concentrated.
- Staff of the Spanish Commission for Assistance to Refugees (CEAR) in the Canary Islands, Ceuta, and Barcelona.
- People responsible for Migrant Houses in the following cities in Mexico: Aguascalientes (Way of Life), Mexico City (Adolescents on the Road and Casa Tochán), Monterrey (Casanicolás), Guadalajara (Dignity and Justice on the Way to BC), Saltillo (Border with Justice A.C), San Luis Potosí (Home of the Migrant), Tenosique, Tabasco (Refuge of Migrants "La 72") and Ixtepec, Oaxaca (Brothers on the Road).
- 32 Central American migrants in the cities where the Casas del Migrante were visited.

For this report, to date, primary sources have been consulted and 14 interviews have been completed with African migrants in the Vallés Occidental, 12 with Central Americans in the cities of Mexico and Monterrey, and with leaders of the Migrant Houses of Ixtepec, Oaxaca, and Monterrey.

### Findings

The policies imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank through structural adjustment plans have led to the privatization and liberalization of strategic sectors for economic development, as well as the securing of natural resources through the dispossession of existing populations of land, the lack of opportunities for well-being and employment, poverty and inequality. In the African economies of Morocco, Gambia, and Senegal, and Central America's Northern Triangle, the complicity of governments in the implementation of these policies and the lack of democracy, and the repression and violence that have accompanied these processes have contributed to emigration. Particularly in the case of the economies that make up the Northern Triangle, violence and crime are presented as the most serious result of poverty and as the main reason for emigration. However, there are noted differences in reasons to migrate depending on whether people live in rural or urban areas.

In the case of those living in rural areas, their primary reason for emigration is based on employment. Of the 14 Central Americans interviewed (ten men and four women), nine are of rural origin from Guatemala and Honduras and five from marginal areas in the capital of El Salvador. Those of rural origin expressed that they had to emigrate because there is no work in their field. Agricultural production has declined as a result of the implementation of structural adjustment programs and adverse climatological factors. The work is hard to find and very poorly paid, providing not enough money to cover basic needs.

Those residing in urban regions, particularly in El Salvador, fled because of violence. Extreme poverty, dissatisfaction, and frustration has led to the formation of criminal gangs of extortion that charge exorbitant 'fees', which are typically not payable and therefore settled with death. As such, those leaving urban areas in El Salvador decide to migrate because they were threatened with death.

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Such rural and urban differences are also observed among African migrants in Spain. Of the 14 Africans interviewed, 11 are of rural origin (five from Gambia and six from Senegal) while three from Morocco are from urban cities in the northern region of the country. Rural migrants said they had no alternative of well-paid employment in their place of origin. In Senegal, the elimination of agricultural subsidies as part of the adjustment plan imposed by the US and France and successive droughts have led to an increase in production costs, a food deficit, and the destruction of employment (Wehbe, 2010). In Gambia, the privatization of peanut marketing, which constitutes the country's main crop, in the 1990s led to a lack of employment and poverty (IMF, 2002). The Moroccan interview participants said that their emigration was driven by a desire to improve their economic wellness and flee from the repression of the state for expressing their ideas.

Both the African and Central American groups of migrants experience similarly poor treatment at the borders, insufficient humanitarian aid, and a lack of information about their immigration status or destination. However, journeys from Gambia and Senegal are longer than the rest of the groups studied and migrants are exposed to more severe physical violence at the borders than Moroccans and Central Americans, and experience extortion by traffickers, unpaid work, cold temperatures, and hunger.

Another common characteristic among the two groups' experiences is the existence of social networks of family or friends in Spain and the US that serve as supports throughout the migratory process, which then can reduce vulnerabilities in the conditions of arrival and permanence. There are also civil society networks that support transit and destination. For example, upon arrival, African immigrants receive primary care from associations such as the CEAR or the Red Cross. Then, they are usually channeled to Immigration Detention Centers where they live, on average, three months and are finally deported to their countries of origin or taken to a community in Spain where they are abandoned to their fate. In Central America, the network of Migrant Houses is the most important support in transit, but their resources are scarce. Those responsible for these Houses stated that normally they cannot keep migrants for more than three days due to lack of space and resources and they must give priority to those who are most vulnerable. In addition, they do not have the possibility of giving support for legal counseling or psychological treatment.

Once in the country of destination, migrants attempt to integrate, often by seeking employment soon after their arrival. For Africans in Spain, access to the labour market is the first step in the integration process because it conditions entry to legality. However, getting a stable job in a country with high rates of unemployment and with much temporary employment is practically impossible. In their journey, the Central American migrants traveling through Mexico only seek temporary shelter and do not necessarily look for work because their final destination is the US. However, the long road often forces them to get a job and consider the possibility of permanently establishing themselves in Mexico. Of the 12 interviewees, eight expressed that they already had work and explained that if their situation was regularized they would abandon the American dream.

One of the main differences between the African and Central American groups is that, for the first group, despite an initial abandonment in the process of socioeconomic integration, there are programs, including resources from the European Union, that support the continuity of integration once the migrant formally enters the labour market. In Mexico, the socioeconomic integration of migrants has not been the result of public policies, although the situation has changed with the new government, which is beginning to grant residence permits and finance spaces for reception and attention in health and education.

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### Conclusions

Migration patterns can be defined by the inequality that exists between countries, which accelerates with globalization and the recurrent crises of the economic system. The lack of opportunities and exposure to violence have led to continuous, urgent, and even forced migration. Since their jobs and salaries are totally insufficient for a decent life or they may live with the constant threat of death and violence, emigration becomes inevitable for many living in regions of this study. The growth of inequality is the result not only of the policies promoted by the richest countries, but also of the submission of the governments of the poor countries, which accept and intensify policies for the benefit of specific groups and to the detriment of the population. Therefore, national policies directed to growth and development of the countries of origin are urgent.

More specifically, at a smaller scale, the findings from the interviews conducted in this project help to further identify motivations for migration as they illustrate the lived experiences of broader global processes. In particular, the interviews have demonstrated differences in the reasons for migration between those who reside in urban and rural areas. Violence is the most important reason for urban residents to emigrate, while rural poverty, food insecurity, and a lack of employment and opportunities to generate income motivate rural residents to emigrate.

The findings from this research also lead to the conclusion that it is urgent to protect and respect the human rights of migrants throughout the migratory process, which includes conditions during departure, transit, arrival, and integration. It seems that efforts in this regard, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights or the United Nations International Convention on Migration (in which Spain does not participate, but Mexico does), have not yet achieved such purposes. Specifically, it is urgent to modify migration policies in Spain and Mexico to improve the organized humanitarian reception of migrants and their integration. In this task, the policies of regularization of residents and access to employment are fundamentally important. Furthermore, the participation of civil society organizations such as CEAR and the Red Cross in Spain and the Migrant Houses in Mexico has been important in the care and protection of migrant populations in transit and destination. Therefore, continued governmental and societal support of these groups must be reinforced.

### Author's Biography

Talina Contreras has a PhD in International Economics and Development from the Complutense University of Madrid and studied International Migrations at the Ortega y Gasset University Institute, and Economics at the Autonomous University of Zacatecas, Mexico. She is a member of the Gender, Identity and Diversity Research Group of the University of Barcelona and is currently working on her postdoctoral project on African and Latin America migration in Spain and North America.

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