

THE MIGRANT CRISIS IN THE CANARY ISLANDS



DAHLIA - DEVELOPMENT AND HUMANITARIAN
LEARNING IN ACTION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The number of mostly undocumented migrants arriving irregularly on Spain's Canary Islands in the Atlantic Ocean last year was more than five times higher than 2018 and 2019 combined.

The impact of COVID-19 and related travel restrictions in north and sub-Saharan Africa pushed many more to embark on the dangerous journey. Additional push factors in this case comprise of the political instrumentalization of migrants by the Kingdom of Morocco (as it happened later in Ceuta), in the case of the departures from Western Sahara, and the fishing arrangements between the EU and some countries in Africa which affected traditional fishing practices and increased departures from Mauritania and Senegal.

DATA CHALLENGES FOR A MIGRANT ROUTE TO THE EU:

Obtaining reliable official data on the numbers and categories of persons involved in the Atlantic route to the EU through the Canary Islands, including on missing people, has proven challenging. Different criteria are used by different information sources which can create greater confusion. DAHLIA has researched available information and we had to rely in some cases on journalistic information based on questioning MPs, government officials, and different Ministries' portals. Moreover, access to the sites where migrants are hosted is restricted, and government officials have not answered DAHLIA's request for meeting during the mission in the Islands.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- The Canary Islands are a Spanish archipelago located in the Atlantic off the coast of Africa. The route to the islands has become a consolidated migration route from West Africa to the EU, with spikes depending on the situation of countries of origin and the permeability of other routes. Thus, in 2006, the "Cayucos crisis" saw up to 39.180 arrivals over a few months, in contrast to 11.781 registered in 2005 and 18.056 in 2007.
https://elpais.com/politica/2014/08/11/actualidad/1407754846_124185.html
- By mid 2020 Spain became the main EU destination for asylum seekers. (*German daily DIE WELT, citing unpublished numbers from the European Union's asylum agency EASO, reported that Spain has surpassed Germany in the number of asylum applications received, as the coronavirus pandemic begins to shift longstanding migration patterns. Source: <https://www.dw.com/en/spain-eclipses-germany-as-top-destination-for-asylum-seekers-report/a-53422966>*). This has added significant stress to the Spanish Asylum system, with the further complexity of the situation created by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The route from WA countries to The Canary Islands is dangerous and involves long distances through the sea; the western Mediterranean route has been consolidated as a safer alternative for migrants from those areas. From 2019, the access restrictions to Morocco and the western Mediterranean coast of Africa led to another resurgence in the Canary Islands route, mostly in fragile canoes and small traditional fishing boats (Cayucos)
- Deaths in the route: IOM estimates more than 849 missing people in 2020 in the Atlantic route to the Canary islands, and 126 up to May 2021
- <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/africa?region=All&route=1384>

SPANISH GOVERNMENT RESPONSE:

- Arrivals to The Canary Islands peaked from mid 2020, reaching 23.023 persons by the end of the year, generating social alarm and the need to articulate a response. Thousands of migrants became stranded for long periods in the docks of harbours in the islands. The initial decision was to host migrants in tourist hotels given their lack of activity due to Covid-19 restrictions, and a total of 5500 were hosted in 17 hotels. This caused resistance in host communities as it was viewed as an obstacle in attempts to revitalise tourist arrivals, and the Spanish administration decided to articulate the so called “Plan Canarias” in November 2020, providing emergency accommodation for 7.000 migrants.
- A change in internal policies was introduced in 2019 in light of the increase in arrivals and the requirements of EU migration regulations. In order to comply with EU regulations and to avoid a “call factor”, migrants were no longer referred to the mainland for assistance, and movement limitations were established within the islands and on the mainland. Bilateral agreements with West African countries and Morocco have been arranged at different stages by Spanish authorities in order to facilitate deportations to countries of origin. These arrangements have been greatly affected by COVID 19 and the related limitation of movements.
- The “Plan Canarias” established collective centres in three islands (Fuerteventura, Gran Canaria, and Tenerife), where migrants are referred after initial identification procedures upon arrival or when rescued (including COVID-19 testing and quarantines). Those sites are managed by different NGOs, intend to provide adequate standards of assistance to migrants, and identify vulnerabilities and those entitled to request international protection (as asylum seekers or persons of concern).
- The plan foresees the transformation of the emergency response into a permanent solution for 6.450 inmates to remain in the same locations
<https://prensa.inclusion.gob.es/WebPrensaInclusion/noticias/ministro/detalle/3935>.
 Funding for the emergency response (€43 Million) and the stabilization solutions (€41 Million) is provided by EMAS, and have been mobilized from the recovery fund of the EU¹. DGHOME is directly funding the facilities in La Laguna (Tenerife) managed by IOM.
- The Ministry of Migrations declared in February 2021 that the total of “plazas de acogida” in the islands is already 7.000, meaning that the objective of the Plan has been achieved.
<https://www.europapress.es/epsocial/migracion/noticia-escriva-da-cerrado-plan-canarias-creacion-7000-plazas-acogida-20210226123601.html>
- There is a deliberate institutional opacity and lack of transparency in official data in terms of the information on actual movements of migrants, arrivals, deportations and derivation to the

¹ PLAN CANARIAS Ministerio de Inclusión, Seguridad Social y Migraciones, Información adicional: <https://prensa.inclusion.gob.es/WebPrensaInclusion/downloadFile.do?tipo=documento&id=3.935&idCcontenido=3.993>

mainland. "El Pais" newspaper published research on May 6 2021, attempting to ascertain the number of migrants referred, deported, or still hosted in the islands. The result of the research is summarized as follows: "Since 2019, 30,121 people have arrived in the archipelago. During that time, The Ministry of Interior has managed to return 1,422 migrants (760, in 2019; 509, in 2020 and 153, until February 28, 2021) and a total of 6,553 referrals to the mainland have been made. If there are 4,200 people left on the islands, to which some 2,000 minors who are left in charge of the regional welfare authorities must be added, the account reveals that almost 16,000 people are either outside the reception resources and live on the islands with relatives, with friends, are on the street, or have departed to the continent on their own." <https://elpais.com/espana/2021-05-06/el-gobierno-duplica-los-traslados-de-migrantes-desde-canarias-a-la-peninsula.html>

FINDINGS

From interviews with stakeholders and migrants themselves:

- The response as rolled out in Plan Canarias evidences **tension between Humanitarian assistance frameworks and migration management/control measures**. The reality, however, is that out of more than 30.000 migrants reaching the islands, only around 5,000 remain in The Canaries. The control over the outflows and the offer of the different pathways available for migrants remains under The jurisdiction of the Government of Spain. **Criteria** for derivation to mainland, vulnerabilities to be considered, the characterization of persons of concern, referral to the available resources; all of these **are at the discretion of the central government authorities** out-posted in the islands. Furthermore, the **evidenced lack of transparency affects the credibility and the compliance** by migrants themselves and also by civil society groups and local authorities, who are engaged in addressing the consequences of the migrant crisis at local and regional level.
- All stakeholders refer to a **general perception of rights breaches** for migrants across the board, including inadequate information at the point of entry, when in accommodation services, inadequate legal support, lack of adequate translation, and excessive delays in the process (the long stays at harbour docks without adequate assistance). This is coupled with a general opinion of a **chaotic and improvised response**, with poor management and a lack of adequate standards. **No clarity of messages to migrants and to host communities, changing and contradictory messages, no consistency of the information provided**, and the actual reality experienced by migrants (they are warned of a "no-progress towards Europe mainland" policy, but most of them learn that leaving the islands is possible for many without clear criteria).
- **Trust in aid agencies and authorities is challenged** by contradictory messages provided during the different stages of the reception process.
- In addition, lack **of trust in translators** has been highlighted by all migrants interviewed. This is an important feature to be addressed if communication is to be improved.

- **AAP is basically absent in the culture of all involved** in the response. Only IOM has mentioned steps to include community engagement and feedback from migrants in their management of the site they are responsible for. In most cases, expressing complaints is felt as risky by migrants with fear of retaliation which may affect their future opportunities to be transferred to mainland. Some cases of integrated approach, including elements of AAP, could be identified in Cruz Blanca's programme within their sites, others include community engagement but still short of AAP frameworks (IOM); cases of threats and retaliation have been reported by migrants and civil society groups, including referral to detention centres (CIE) as a consequence of placing complaints.
- We can confirm the **lack of initially adapted, understandable, consistent and reliable information to migrants** reaching the islands (points of arrival) or being referred to accommodation sites in the islands.
- The mission evidenced a **willingness to hide the crisis and the solutions adopted** (hotels, reception centres), the numbers involved, and the situation in the sites (all but one of the partners implementing assistance to migrants refused the DAHLIA mission access to their premise). Apparent arbitrary solutions on ad hoc cases, especially on derivations to the mainland, create an additional sense of arbitrariness in the management of the case load.
- **Most of the vulnerable have been referred to the mainland without details offered** on their final destination, numbers, profiles. There is even a lack of aggregated data that would safeguard confidentiality and protection aspects.
- The situation has shaped a **feeling of rejection of the aid provided and frustration** over the options available; migrants are opting to live in the streets; mistrust and a lack of adequate information potentiate this issue. However, the prospect of being transferred to the mainland if migrants remain in the site without protest limits this reaction.
- **A lack of a clear leadership has become clear** (The Central Government of Spain's weak presence versus regional and local institutions, different line ministries offices, different interpretation of regulations) alongside the **absence of coordination mechanisms**. The latter is critical to ensure a common communication strategy for all involved and to ensure the harmonization of standards of care across; the role of EASO has been mentioned as potentially taking the lead, although this is currently limited to provide training to stakeholders on basis principles.
- The Foro Canario de Migracion (Canaries Migration Forum) is already an institutional platform where all organisations and CSO have participated and convened once or twice a year since 2016, and may become a basis for an effective coordination. It is still a rhetoric forum, and will require operationalization and sectorization in order to become an effective coordination tool.
- Migrants and stakeholders highlighted the **uneven standards in different sites** to DAHLIA, including quality of food and accommodation, access to WASH, access to health services, etc. Unfortunately DAHLIA's team could not access the premises, other than the ones of Cruz Blanca.

CONCLUSIONS:

- It is critical to establish coordination mechanisms, ensure adequate standards in all reception facilities, and establish a common approach to the quality of services provided.
- In the framework of the coordination established, it will be critical to address communication needs and develop a clear communication policy with adequate tools. RCCE should be incorporated in light of the current COVID-19 pandemic.
- Transparency needs to be established at an institutional level, providing transparent information on deportations, transfers to the mainland, and rules applicable in each case.
- There is a need to reinforce legal support to migrants over the expulsion claim process, including communication and information of available options and adequate translation.
- Build from the corporate experience of IOM and IFRC to establish AAP frameworks, including community engagement, feedback mechanisms, claims to management, and an extension to all partners engaged in the response.
- There is a need for a communication strategy designed to address the host population and Spanish society at large, highlighting the principled approach and the low conflictive nature of the process.
- Identify and act on rights breaches, retaliation issues in the sites, and unjustified punishment in cases of complaints of the assistance received or of lack of clear information available. The creation of an Ombudsman in charge of ensuring independent address of the gaps and problems identified may be an option to consider.

