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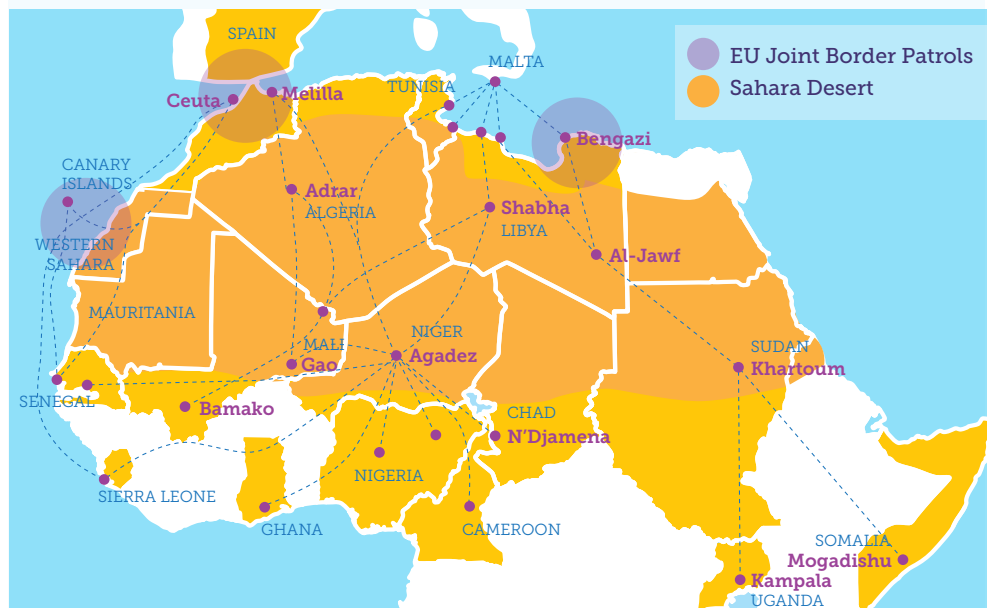
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EXPERIENCES IN TRANSIT COUNTRIES

Migration does not necessarily involve a direct move from a home community to a final destination. Some international migrants transit through a third country on their way to a preferred destination. Many of them remain in transit locations for a considerable length of time—sometimes several years. This is most apparent in certain migration corridors; for example, migrants from sub-Saharan Africa often transit slowly through North African countries as they make their way towards Europe, and South American migrants must endure a long journey through Mexico to get to the United States of America.

FIGURE 3.1

KEY MIGRANT ROUTES FROM AFRICA TO EUROPE



Source: British Broadcasting Corporation News (2007).

Some researchers refer to transit migrants as sojourners, focusing attention on their journey and what happens to them during that period. In travel terminology, the term transit is typically used in contexts that imply a relatively rapid transfer; transit visas are usually issued for three days or less, and transit passengers generally expect to remain in an intermediate country for no more than 24 hours. These examples might suggest that transit migration is, by definition, a short-term phenomenon—a brief stop along a migrant’s pre-planned route. That is sometimes the case. However, with the increase in the scope and scale of human movement, transit migration has correspondingly become more complex and diverse, and there are now wide-ranging categories of transit migrants moving willingly or unwillingly, regularly or irregularly, from one country to another over a period of time. Such growing complexities have drawn increased attention to irregular migration—perhaps diverting attention away from regular forms of transit migration and the situation of youth migrants—and the risks to which transit migrants are exposed in the migration process.

This chapter focuses on the factors that

influence the choice of transit countries in the migration process, the features of transit migration, and the challenges and opportunities young migrants are presented with while in transit. Special attention is given to the unique vulnerabilities of certain categories of young migrants in transit and how they should be addressed.

TRANSIT DECISIONS AMONG YOUNG MIGRANTS

Whether youth migrants choose to transit through certain countries on their way to a final destination depends on factors such as available travel routes, travel and visa regulations, legal barriers to exit, travel costs, and the presence of family members, existing diaspora communities and organized travel networks they might rely on for support. Visa restrictions may compel migrants to resort to irregular migration, which may involve at least partial dependence on informal travel agents, including smugglers.

For many of the international youth migrants who shared their stories during the consultation on transit migration,

the choice of a transit country was often based on perceptions of socio-cultural similarities and consequent expectations of an easy transition. Their transit decisions were also strongly influenced by factors such as visa costs and the processes associated with obtaining visas for transit and destination countries.

**LONNEKE VAN ZUNDERT, FEMALE,
AGE 34 YEARS
THE NETHERLANDS -----> HONG KONG
SAR CHINA**

[One goes] by choice... because ... the transit country is visa-free, easy on issuing visas, or known to have a flexible entry policy. [It also helps if there is] a large community of citizens from the home country, or if the migrant has contacts. [It is best if the] the geographical location [of the transit country] is close to final destination (with the possibility of entering the destination country illegally), and if opportunities are available to save up/prepare for the final destination.

Young migrants who are aware of the support options available in transit improve their chances of safe travel. Youth often follow traditional migration

routes where there are certain ethnic or transnational networks that furnish accommodations on arrival in a transit country and provide employment assistance to young migrants who have to work to finance the next stage of their journey. While in transit, youth migrants can maintain contact with their family members at home or with other contacts at various destination points along the way using mobile phones and e-mail. Financial transfer services are now widely available in most transit countries, making it easy for families to send funds to young migrants to help cover their expenses along the way. Young migrants should give careful consideration to their choice of travel mode; although air travel is comparatively expensive, it offers greater safety and ease, especially for those accompanied by young children, and it may even prove more cost-effective when the expenses of a long overland journey are factored into total transit costs.

Although careful planning may reduce some of the travel risks, evidence suggests that the transit journey can be the most dangerous part of the migration process, as many migrants have limited social networks and support and are therefore vulnerable

to threats that could affect their well-being and their ability to move to a destination country.

At the beginning of their journey, some young migrants are not sure what their final destinations will be. For others, countries initially intended as final destinations can turn out to be transit countries, as young migrants sometimes realize that other countries might offer them even better opportunities or easier integration. During the pre-migration stage, many young people decide on a destination based on a perceived sense of social and cultural continuity and similarity between the country of origin and the destination country. Such expectations can actually interfere with integration. For example, a young migrant may assume that a common language and shared history will make socio-cultural challenges easier to overcome; when they expect to be considered ‘insiders’ but are instead treated as ‘outsiders’, they are often unable to develop a sense of belonging and may then decide to move again—transforming what was once considered the destination into a transit point. In the accounts below, several young migrants share their experiences of trying to find countries best suited to their needs.

TIMOTHY

NIGERIA -----> UNITED STATES ----->

NIGERIA -----> GERMANY -----> LIBERIA

-----> UNITED STATES

On the 17th of April, 2008, I travelled to the United States for the very first time. After a not-too-long flight—it was one of the first direct Lagos-to-Atlanta flights—I ended up at Disney World, where I spent an entire week. Before I knew it, I was back in Nigeria. A year after Florida, I was in Germany for three months. Seven months after Germany, I moved to Liberia for a year. Six months after that, I was back in the U.S. for a few months, and then I returned to Liberia for another year. After that, I returned to the U.S., where I currently live and study. All together, I was on the road for five years, which is not necessarily a long time, but in our jet age, where a day equals a decade, it is a long time to roam around away from home, and enough time to feel displaced and slightly disoriented. For free-movers like me, the prominence of one’s place as an outsider leads to an overwhelming sense of displacement—a feeling that is not necessarily the result of one’s relocation, but an awareness of one’s identity in a new place, and

the urgent need to adjust in order to make progress.

AUSRINE, FEMALE, AGE 27

LITHUANIA -----> UNITED STATES

I call it my... journey in quest of finding myself in a 'best fit' country.

VICTORIA, FEMALE, AGE 24

REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA -----> ROMANIA

I am originally from the Republic of Moldova, and I moved to Romania, a neighboring country, for my studies. My home country is not part of the European Union, while Romania is. I chose Romania as a final destination, but I have been here for almost five years, and it has now become a transit country. The Republic of Moldova and Romania have the same historical background. At one point in history they were even the same country. So, the social and cultural life of these two countries is almost the same, and we are considered to be Romanians abroad. We speak the same language, but with different accents and even some different words. It seems [like it would] be easy to be integrated in this society, but it hasn't been. The fact that I have a

different accent from the rest of the Romanian population makes me feel like an immigrant all the time, even if we speak the same language and share the same ethnicity. Of course, [on paper] I am an immigrant, because I have different citizenship. However, because of Romanian citizenship policy, I have obtained Romanian citizenship. Now I am a citizen of this country, but I still do not consider myself integrated. I cannot say that this country is my home. I want to emigrate again.

THE VARIABLE DURATION OF TRANSIT MIGRATION

Migrants can spend a day or several years in transit. Prior to their departure, migrants may have detailed travel itineraries with specific arrival times, a general idea of how long their journey should take, or a flexible schedule with no set end point. Even with the most careful plans, changes may occur. In some instances, as illustrated above, the intended final destination may turn out to be a transit country, while a planned transit stop might become a place of permanent or long-term settlement.

Migrants frequently find themselves stranded in certain countries because they run out of money, fail to make it across a border, or are abandoned by the smugglers transporting them.

Most of the participants in the consultation on transit migration confirmed that the time they actually spent in transit was not consistent with their pre-set plans. In their experience, the concept of being 'in transit' took on different meanings, depending on the circumstances. As one participant pointed out, young migrants do not always choose to be in transit; for those seeking legal access to the next destination, bureaucratic red tape and the lack of essential information and support can result in their being 'stuck in transit' for an indefinite period.

DANIELA, FEMALE, AGE 28

ITALY -----> SWITZERLAND

I would like to focus on a new type of transitional migration: the one done because of university studies. In particular, I would like to focus on a situation experienced here in Switzerland. It is full of young graduates that keep moving from one place to another to study for years because this is the only legal

way for them to stay in Switzerland.

A number of participants said they felt that they were in a constant state of transit as they sought the destination country best suited to their needs. For some, this might have reflected a degree of flexibility with regard to the final destination, while for those who had a preferred destination country in mind, lengthy transit stops were likely required until it became feasible to progress to the next stage. The amount of time spent in a transit country typically depends on a migrant's ability to make use of available opportunities and support structures to prepare for travel to another transit point or the destination country. This may involve learning the basics of the language, working until enough money is saved for the next leg of the journey, acquiring the necessary legal documents, and re-establishing or strengthening social connections in the destination country.

HEALTH CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED BY YOUTH MIGRANTS IN TRANSIT

A common myth is that migrants are carriers of disease and are a burden on health services. The reality is that most migrants travel when they are young and healthy. Nonetheless, there are travel-related health risks, particularly for transit migrants living in distressed circumstances. Dealing with challenges such as substandard accommodations, poor sanitation, and food deprivation can take its toll on the physical and mental health of young migrants. In some cases, female migrants may be coerced into engaging in transactional and unprotected sex with unscrupulous individuals such as travel intermediaries and corrupt border officials in order to facilitate their cross-border passage, putting them at risk for sexually transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancy. In any case, few migrants utilize non-emergency health-care services while in transit because they are unsure about their health rights as non-citizens or do not know how to access the services they need. Many are unaware of the fact that countries often have policies covering the provision

of certain services to all those in need, regardless of their legal status, language proficiency, or cultural background.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL SUPPORT FOR YOUTH MIGRANTS IN TRANSIT COUNTRIES

A number of participants in the online consultation affirmed that various forms of support had made a difference in their transit migration experience. Assistance ranged from strangers translating labels in the grocery store to others facilitating access to emergency health-care services and diaspora communities providing transportation and accommodations. Some help came from family and friends back home, but much of the assistance originated in the transit country.

**NICOLA, FEMALE, REFUGEE
GHANA -----> PHILIPPINES**

In Ghana, the most useful support I received when I first arrived was a childhood friend I knew from Liberia sheltering me in his house. In the Philippines, [I was helped by] a friend

I knew in Ghana. The Filipino guy I was sharing a room with stole my cell phone and money when I was ... taking a bath. When I told my friend about it, he sent me some cash.

ZANDILE, FEMALE, AGED 20-35 YEARS
SOUTH AFRICA -----> THE
NETHERLANDS

I had problems understanding the language in my transit country, but it was made pretty easy [for me] because the institution I was affiliated with handled all the paperwork.

DANIEL, MALE, AGE 35
-----> NIGERIA

The most [valuable] support my wife and I received when we first arrived in Makurdi was care and concern. The family we met were so hospitable. This family helped us with health care, as we had had a terrible accident and they swiftly took us to a nearby hospital for immediate medical attention. Besides [that,] they helped us in getting around our transit community.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- Agunias, D. R., Calderon, J., Rijks, B. (2012). *Asian Labour Migrants and Health Exploring Policy Routes*. International Organization for Migration. Available from <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/MigrationandHealth.pdf> (accessed 04 Jun 2013).

This paper examines health within the context of Asian migration. It dispels a number of myths while addressing the real health issues associated with the migration process at every stage. It concludes with a concise five-step plan integrating policy solutions and improvements.

- Pitea, R. (2010). *Transit Migration: Challenges in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon*. CARIM Research Reports 2010/02. International Organization for Migration. Available from http://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/15290/CARIM_RR_2010_02.pdf?sequence=1 (accessed 24 May 2013).

A number of case-studies highlight transit migration issues in the Middle East. The report defines the concept of transit migration and addresses the special risks and dangers associated with this stage of the migration process.

- Schapendonk, J. (2009). *The Dynamics of Transit Migration: Insights into the Migration Process of sub-Saharan African Migrants Heading for Europe*. *Journal for Development Alternatives and Area Studies*, 28(2): 171-203. (Accessed 07 Jun 2013).

The article explores how sub-Saharan African migrants share information to ease the process of migrating to Europe. An effort is made to highlight the challenges faced by transit migrants as well as the role of travel intermediaries at this stage of the process.

- *Summary of Week 2 Online Discussions: Young Migrant's Experiences in Transit Countries*. 2013 UN World Youth Report- Youth Migration and Development

This report summarizes the challenges and opportunities associated with transit migration as related by youth migrants around the world.