Out of the Shadows

Shining a Light on Irregular Migration

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A Report of the CSIS Project on Prosperity and Development
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Executive Summary

Millions of people around the world live in and travel through the shadows. Compelled to leave home, they migrate irregularly without proper documentation to gain access to jobs, education, healthcare, food, and other basic services. In reality, an irregular migrant’s decision to leave home is rarely a decision at all. Upon leaving, these people not only live in the shadows but are also left in the shadows of the broader global conversation on forced migrants, which typically revolves around those with internationally recognized status such as legal immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. Irregular migration is a critical, global, and underappreciated phenomenon, hence the existence of this report.

Irregular migration exists because there are not enough opportunities for safety and prosperity at home and too few regular means through which to remedy that lack of opportunities. For those who feel compelled to move, the goal of the international community should be to afford basic human rights to everyone regardless of status, which means regularizing as much of that movement as is feasible while protecting borders and national sovereignty.

Irregular migration exists because there are not enough opportunities for safety and prosperity at home and too few regular means through which to remedy that lack of opportunities.

This report estimates that there are over 100 million irregular migrants around the world, many of them vulnerable women and children. Their motivations for migrating irregularly are varied; from fleeing violence and persecution, food insecurity, military conscription, and resource constraints to seeking better jobs, education, and health care, every irregular migrant’s journey is different and motivated by different factors. This report sheds light on some of the root causes that drive irregular migration and explains how irregular migration has evolved and will continue to evolve over time.

Irregular migration is not a new phenomenon. There is a plethora of historical cases that prove managing irregular migration is possible. Historical lessons and new big ideas and opportunities should be leveraged to address current irregular migration flows (e.g., people moving to, within, and from Mexico or Eritrea) and to prevent future problems in
areas of current stability (e.g., Ghana). By analyzing Mexico, Eritrea, and Ghana, this report highlights the complex and varied nature of irregular migration via three very different country contexts. These three countries highlight irregular migration's complexity because they demonstrate how different migration policies can affect why people leave and what happens to them on their journey while also demonstrating that the lines between countries of origin, destination, and transit are often blurred.

This report offers recommendations for those three countries and for the international community on how to leverage existing tools to address the issue of irregular migration. It also calls for bold U.S. leadership on these issues. Even in today’s political environment, ignoring the root causes of irregular migration and only focusing on people arriving in the United States is a mistake with long-term ramifications. The authors argue that U.S. leadership is critical and feasible, though realistically not on all facets of this complex global phenomenon. As such, the United States should consider:

- Convening a coalition of committed partners to address the root causes of forced and irregular migration;
- Establishing an intergovernmental approach to migration;
- Increasing foreign aid, not cutting it;
- Using trade as a tool;
- Leveraging the global system of MDBs and DFIs;
- Creating a “FEWS-NET” for forced and irregular migration;
- Extending USAID’s presence in “hot spots”;
- Leveraging and partnering with the private sector;
- Supporting cities and city leadership;
- Improving data collection and utilization;
- Prioritizing vulnerable groups; and
- Reinforcing strong congressional leadership.

It makes sense from every conceivable perspective—economic development to human rights to national security and beyond—that vulnerable people should be brought out of the shadows and that irregular migration should be talked about in policy spheres with an eye towards solutions to a real problem affecting real people. This report aims to shine a light on irregular migration and, in doing so, to contribute to an enormously consequential conversation.
Introduction

Why the Focus on Irregular Migration

This report is about those that live in the shadows. While it touches upon those that move regularly or have internationally recognized status (e.g., legal immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers), this report is meant to shine light on those who are left behind by these categories, those who exist and move outside of regular and orderly structures. These people (hereafter referred to as irregular migrants) tend to be more vulnerable to exploitation and—by virtue of their movement outside regular bureaucratic processes—can inadvertently strengthen nefarious actors and networks.

People both choose to leave home and are forced to leave home. These decisionmaking processes are often non-binary, made with insufficient information or perhaps executed without thinking about the consequences of irregular movement. Desperate people move out of desperation and often without alternatives, regardless of the barriers they encounter on the way.

The purpose of this report is to analyze and present potential future trends in irregular migration and suggest ways in which existing tools, policies, and innovations can help minimize and regularize movement out of the shadows. The report showcases three countries that represent the migration continuum—Mexico, Eritrea, and Ghana—all with different histories, current needs, and futures. While they are seldom discussed together, all are dealing with variations of the same underlying irregular migration challenges. These three countries demonstrate the challenges, possibilities, and opportunities for the international community to work together to address irregular migration.

The good news is that the global system is well-equipped with the tools to regularize and prevent irregular migration, including foreign aid, trade, diplomacy, private business, development finance, foreign direct investment, and multilateralism that, together, could address the root causes and consequences of irregular migration.¹ The difficulty is putting those tools to action in a forward-thinking and anticipatory manner without a

¹ Note that the root causes of irregular migration—discussed in detail in chapter 1—often overlap with the root causes of regular migration and, in some cases, forced displacement. Where necessary, differentiations are made between these groups of people in this report, but the reader should not assume that a root cause of one type of migration is not also a root cause of another type.
formal system in place to manage irregular migration, especially in today’s fractured and protectionist political environment where these issues are often hijacked for broader political goals.

**What Do We Mean by “Irregular” Migration?**

Irregular migration is a largely misunderstood and under-reported phenomenon. There is no universally recognized definition of the term or the underlying concept, though the International Organization for Migration (IOM) defines irregular migration as “movement that takes place outside the regulatory norms of the sending, transit and receiving countries.”

This report considers irregular migrants to be those who are at risk of being pushed into the shadows because of their legal migratory status or lack thereof: those who face uncertainty (and in many cases peril) in countries of origin, transit, or destination. This includes forced migrants that could be eligible for official status but do not currently have it, certain economic migrants, seasonal labor migrants, and others who do not fit within established regular structures. This also includes people who may have moved regularly and become irregular over time (see Textbox A), those living without appropriate legal papers in a particular place, and those working irregularly.

**Figure 1: Variations of Irregularity**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A migrant in an irregular situation may be in one or more of the following categories:</th>
<th>Migrants can go in and out of irregularity as laws and policies change</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IRREGULAR ENTRY</td>
<td>CROSSTING THE BORDER</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRREGULAR RESIDENCE</td>
<td>IRREGULAR EMPLOYMENT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRREGULAR</td>
<td>REGULAR</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors’ elaboration. Adapted from: Migration Data Portal, “Irregular migration.”

It is worth noting that irregular migrants often come from, live alongside, and travel with refugees and asylum seekers that may have more official status and access to services (see Figure 1). Refugees, for example, have internationally recognized legal status, although admittedly not every country is party to the laws governing refugees. Though classified separately from irregular migrants in this study, it is important to consider the needs of refugees and asylum seekers together with irregular migrants. It is also important to note that many refugees were irregular migrants before receiving official refugee designation. Internally displaced people (IDPs) are afforded legal status similar to refugees in only 40 countries (and the laws and policies protecting IDPs are effectively

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2. Many sources conflate irregular migration with illegal immigration, the latter of which is a subset of the former.
5. For example, Mexico boasts mixed migration flows of various types of persons on the move, including refugees and asylum seekers. Solutions to Mexico’s irregular migration issues cannot—and should not—be considered in a vacuum.
implemented in just one-third of these countries). Moreover, IDP rights and protections are outlined in the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, but unlike refugee laws, these principles are not binding. Due to this lack of legal protection, this report considers IDPs to be irregular migrants.

The issues around irregular migration are complex and context-specific. Consequently, this report deliberately shies away from establishing its own rigid definition of irregular migration. Instead, it broadly considers why people move irregularly and what the international community can do to address the underlying causes, push and pull factors, and results of that movement.

This is also meant to preemptively shed light on the gaps in the international migration system and potential future hubs of irregular migration that may deteriorate into larger crises like those in Central America, Venezuela, and elsewhere.

**Irregular Migration 101**

**HISTORY, ECONOMICS, AND POLITICS**

Throughout history, people have moved for economic, political, conflict, and other reasons. The first Europeans to arrive in the Americas did so in pursuit of religious, economic, and other freedoms. Millions of Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims migrated during and because of the partition of India. Despite its experiences during a world war that ended scarcely a decade earlier, Germany welcomed millions of Turks in the 1960s to address significant labor shortages in their economy at the time. Today, South-South migration has outpaced South-North migration, as some developing countries grow faster than developed countries and migrants explore new opportunities abroad.

The affirmative economic case for regular migration has long been argued, though not always universally accepted. Much like the case for free markets in general, allowing people the opportunity to make decisions based on their own economic self-interest has been shown to maximize overall welfare. Though there are obvious and well-documented political elements to migration that differentiate it from broader concepts of free markets and resource allocation, fewer people take fundamental issue with the merits of the economic case for migration.

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What has not long been clear nor universally accepted is the economic (or any) case for irregular migration. This is likely because irregular migration has seldom been a primary area of inquiry, at least not in policy research circles, and is difficult to study due to inaccessibility of data. Motivations of people and countries matter here, too. Very few people aspire to live in the shadows if afforded a viable option to do otherwise. But staying home is often not an option in countries with few social benefits to migrant workers and their families.¹²

Though it may be portrayed as such by politicians and the media, today’s challenges are not unprecedented. Irregular migration is actually a common phenomenon in Southeast Asia, in countries such as Thailand, which receives seasonal workers from Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar on a daily basis.¹³ What is unprecedented is the scale and irregular nature of these challenges. Weak governance and policies provide little incentives for irregular migrants to seek regular status.¹⁴ Increased media and political attention on illegal immigration—particularly from conflict-affected and impoverished nations—has elevated migration more broadly to a global debate that often ignores the realities on the ground. The costs, consequences, and root causes of migration, particularly of the irregular variety, are understudied and often misunderstood. Irregular migration should be seen as resulting from a series of interconnected crises that cause people to leave home. Irregular migration should be connected to global issues like economic disparity, insecurity and transnational crime, natural disasters, human rights violations, and climate change which are already disrupting the global system today and will do so in far more serious ways in the future.

**Though it may be portrayed as such by politicians and the media, today’s challenges are not unprecedented. . . . What is unprecedented is the scale and irregular nature of these challenges.**

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12. Hamada, “South to South migration in Asia.”
13. Ibid.
1 | Why Irregular Migrants Leave

If someone is moving “irregularly,” it means that they probably did not have access to, could not afford, chose to ignore, or were denied formal pathways by regular and orderly institutions. They may not have been aware of the need to obtain visas, work permits, and other travel documentation. They may have known but chosen to disregard this knowledge, or they may have applied for documentation or status (e.g., asylum) and been denied or never received a response. In any case, they felt compelled to leave their homes, whether or not their documentation was in order.

It is difficult to know how many irregular migrants there are around the world at any one time. The shadows are difficult places to collect data. The IOM estimates that there were 58 million irregular migrants around the world in 2017, including over 11 million in the United States.15 This figure excludes stateless persons—estimated at 3.9 million by UNHCR but probably much higher—and situations such as Venezuela, from where more than 4 million people had fled by mid-2019.16 Most of these Venezuelans are not considered refugees yet, and the over 350,000 Venezuelan asylum seekers are currently excluded from UNHCR’s statistics on asylum seekers.17 In addition, UNHCR estimates that there were 70.8 million forcibly displaced people in 2018; this figure includes 41 million IDPs, who are counted as irregular migrants in this report, and 29.4 million refugees and asylum seekers, who are considered “regular” and thus excluded from the irregular migrant estimate.18 Taking the IOM estimate of irregular migrants, stateless persons, irregular migrants from Venezuela, and IDPs together, there are an estimated 107 million irregular migrants around the world, and probably more (see Figure 2).

18. Ibid.
Figure 2: Global Estimate of Irregular Migrants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Irregular Migrants (IOM estimate)</th>
<th>58 million</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stateless Persons</td>
<td>3.9 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venezuelan Irregular Migrants</td>
<td>4 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internally Displaced Persons</td>
<td>41 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL IRREGULAR MIGRANTS</strong></td>
<td><strong>106.9 MILLION</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors’ elaboration. Data from IOM, Global Migration Indicators 2018 and UNHCR, Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2018.

All of these irregular migrants are vulnerable to human trafficking, statelessness, and a lack of dignity and fair job opportunities, especially while in transit. These are the perils of the shadows. Many migrants hire smugglers to avoid movement difficulties, but trusting a smuggler also comes with its own inherent risks. It is estimated that 2.5 million migrants were smuggled in 2016, earning an estimated $5.5 to $7 billion for smugglers.\(^{19}\) Smuggling fees range from $100 to $47,000, depending on the route, distance, and destination, with Europe and North America being the most expensive destinations.\(^{20}\) For comparison, it is worth noting that the United States spent $7 billion on humanitarian aid in 2016.\(^{21}\) These smugglers provide a service in high demand. They may be irregular migrants or in desperate need of money themselves, or they may be making money off vulnerable people and bolstering their capabilities to traffic in weapons, drugs, and any number of other illicit goods, connected with other nefarious actors that operate in the shadows.\(^{22}\)

Figure 3: People Smuggling Is No Longer a Niche Business

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21. Ibid.
22. ADB, Facilitating Safe Labor Migration in the Greater Mekong Subregion.
Root Causes of Irregular Migration

People leave home for a variety of reasons (not all bad), but they all have something in common: a need. Perhaps the most well-known reasons people leave home are conflict, religious and political persecution, lack of economic opportunity, and increasingly the consequences of climate change. These translate into needs for security, opportunity, and a proper, stable home. People fear violence from armed actors, indefinite conscription, or damage due to hurricanes and typhoons, so they move somewhere they can feel safer.

But there are other significant needs and desires that cause people to migrate irregularly. These include the need for jobs or money, reunification with loved ones, health and basic services, security, and dignity and human rights. In order to fully understand irregular migration and tackle its root causes, it is important to keep in mind what people might need in different contexts. In Eritrea, for example, a policy of indefinite military conscription has stripped people of their futures, and in Ghana, overfishing threatens to make food scarce. While these are not the typical drivers considered when assessing the root causes of migration, they can offer deeper insights into the distinction between irregular and regular migration.

TEXTBOX A: POLICY AS A DRIVER OF IRREGULARITY

This report talks about keeping people out of the shadows and about root causes primarily from an out-migration perspective. It is worth noting that a significant number of global irregular migrants are people who entered a country legally and, for example, stayed beyond the duration of their visa. The issuance of single-entry visas for guest workers can turn these people from regular to irregular if they are compelled to go home during their visa, for a funeral, for example. Another challenge is the lack of portability associated with work visas. If a person leaves a job and takes another job but the visa is tied to the first job, there will be a change in status. This means that people who moved initially through regular channels are moved into irregularity by policy. A major problem is the lack of formalized grievance redressal systems and general legal infrastructure available to support people trying to maintain a regular status.

Addressing the root causes of irregular migration requires understanding short-term causes but also looking at the longer-term picture. It is important to note that not all root causes can be addressed by increasing foreign aid. Some crises, for example, can be addressed with targeted diplomacy or better governance and public policy, as in Eritrea and Ghana. Ultimately, migration should be seen as occurring on a continuum, a natural phenomenon that has always occurred and will continue to occur; however, today’s continuum exists in an era of increased animosity towards people on the move. In this era, it is particularly important to understand and address the drivers for why people move and to better understand the act of moving itself. This knowledge can help curb migration, especially the forced and irregular variety, and help policymakers think about why and how to focus on regularization of those that do end up leaving home.
It is difficult to accurately predict future irregular migration flows. While early warning, monitoring, and information systems do exist and track migration flows in real-time, these models have much higher predictive value in the short term than in the long term. However, looking at the drivers of irregular migration today can give some insight as to what push factors may arise in the future. Push factors are what drive people from home, including violence and conflict, lack of jobs, and natural disasters, and there is rarely just one. It will also be important to address pull factors (i.e., what drives people to a new place, such as economic opportunities and better education, health, and human rights). Research suggests that there is little evidence that increasing lawful channels for migration alone can reduce irregular migration. In the case of U.S.-Mexican migration, for example, regular channels of migration succeeded in reducing irregular migration but only when accompanied by increased border enforcement and violence reduction programs, among other efforts.

The word “migrant” has (rightly or wrongly) long evoked a variety of images, from refugees risking their lives crossing the Mediterranean Sea to legal economic migrants working in developing countries. Most policymakers understand that migrants are a diverse class of people. But certain types of migrants (e.g., irregular migrants) and reasons for their movement are too often neglected. Below are some of the root causes of irregular migration that have a significant global impact but are perhaps not fully understood or appreciated.

**URBANIZATION AND URBAN DISPLACEMENT**

The world is increasingly urban. Better job opportunities, increased connectivity, and higher wages, linked to the accelerated industrialization of cities, create pull factors for individuals to migrate to cities. On the other hand, decreased job opportunities and low wages create push factors for individuals to leave rural areas. By 2050, there will be over 9.7 billion people in the world, and 70 percent of them will live in urban areas, many in fragile states and emerging economies. The world is not equipped to deal with such an increase in urbanization, given that 55 percent of the world population already lives in urban areas and that there are significant challenges to meet the needs of these populations. The increased strain on cities will lead to resource constraints, lack of job opportunities, and food insecurity if governments do not take steps to make urban centers more resilient to today’s and tomorrow’s urbanization challenges.

A lot of rural-urban and urban-urban migration is voluntary and regular, but forced and irregular migrants also seek urban lifestyles in abundance. Approximately 60 percent of forcibly displaced persons live in urban areas. Displaced populations in cities are

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25. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
29. World Bank, *Cities of refuge in the Middle East: Bringing an Urban Lens to the Forced Displacement*
vulnerable and tend to coalesce in low-income areas or informal settlements. While displaced people often face similar challenges as non-displaced persons in their host communities (e.g., poverty, violence, and insecurity), they are more likely than locals to suffer from trauma and have less access to jobs, services, education, and protection from gender-based violence.\textsuperscript{30}

Irregular migrants face similar challenges to the forcibly displaced in cities, though oftentimes with even less institutional support from, for example, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR).\textsuperscript{31} Because of their lack of official status, irregular migrants face increased vulnerability. They may not be able to sign a lease or might be forced to move often within cities upon arrival. They may not have access to local health, education, or other services nor understand the local language, making even short-term income prospects bleaker.

A good example is the Somali capital city of Mogadishu, which has the second highest urban population density in the world.\textsuperscript{32} Thirty-two percent of all displacements in Somalia in 2017-2018 were to or within Mogadishu.\textsuperscript{33} In 2017, almost 148,000 people were evicted from their homes in Mogadishu, 99 percent of whom were IDPs.\textsuperscript{34} In addition to having to find new homes, IDPs in Mogadishu are more likely to suffer from gender-based violence, poor sanitation, and reduced access to water and are at increased risk of disease. The large IDP population in Mogadishu stems partly from conflict and partly from environmental degradation: there were 858,000 new displacements in rural areas of Somalia in 2017 due to drought, particularly significant in a country that depends heavily on agriculture.\textsuperscript{35} Though forcibly displaced people and irregular migrants often seek protection in urban areas like Mogadishu, for many arrival in cities can create new challenges.

**CLIMATE CHANGE AND ENVIRONMENTAL DISASTERS**

The effects of climate change and natural disasters are increasingly felt around the world, disrupting livelihoods and producing irregular migrants. In 2018, 17.2 million people were internally displaced due to disaster, nearly 7 million more than the people displaced due to conflict. Those displaced by disaster are more often left in the shadows, in part because they are not protected under international law (see Figure 4).\textsuperscript{36}

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\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{32} UNHCR is the UN's Refugee Agency. While most of its funding is directed at the refugee program, UNHCR does have funding for a stateless program and reintegration projects, both of which can impact irregular migrants. See: "Financials," UNHCR, http://reporting.unhcr.org/financial.


\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.

Disaster-induced displacement poses significant challenges due to lack of existing infrastructure, services, and legal frameworks to deal with these scenarios and with IDPs more broadly. Some countries are taking concrete steps to develop early warning systems and emergency displacement planning. One such example is the Philippines, which had over 3.8 million new displacements due to disaster in 2018. The Philippines is implementing a protection cluster to address these issues—a coordinated effort of over 100 agencies, including the government, NGOs, and the United Nations (UN). More nations need to follow this example and develop better systems and protections to address natural disasters and IDPs. More needs to be done to address the needs of these IDPs and other irregular migrants beyond short-term emergency relief and response.

If left unaddressed, this problem could have significant implications for irregular migration. Bangladesh is on the front lines of this challenge, with nearly 700,000 people each year forced to decide between living in riverine areas devastated by climate change and the urban informal settlements of Dhaka. Research suggests that this number could reach as many as 13.3 million by 2050, with a majority making their way into informal settlements in and around Dhaka. Many believe that Dhaka, Bangladesh’s economic megacity hub already stretched by rapid urbanization and a lack of social services, will be unable to absorb the millions more that will be arriving due to climate change.

The World Bank estimates that over 140 million people just in sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America could be forced to move within countries by 2050 due to the effects of climate change. Those millions of people moving irregularly, whether they

41. Rigaud et al., Groundswell: Preparing for Internal Climate Migration.
remain displaced internally or eventually migrate internationally, will be at risk during their journeys and are in danger of falling into extreme poverty and hunger due to a loss of livelihoods. For example, in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, a study by the World Food Programme (WFP) found that members of families affected by the El Niño drought were 1.5 times more likely to emigrate than comparable non-affected households. This is an issue that will not only affect countries in conflict or low-income countries. In 2018, over 3.7 million people were displaced in China due to disaster, and 1.3 million were displaced in the United States. Hurricane Harvey alone displaced 848,000 people and incurred losses of up to $75 billion in 2017. In the same year, Hurricane Maria displaced 86,000 people in Puerto Rico, destroying 80 percent of the power grid and incurring losses equivalent to 73 percent of its GDP. As a country at significant risk itself, the United States needs to build greater community resilience to disasters and pay greater attention to disaster-induced displacement at home and abroad.

The amount of research on disaster-, climate change-, and environmental-related migration has increased considerably in recent years. More is being done to use early warning systems and to establish emergency response systems. However, a lot of attention is paid to sudden-onset events, while slow-onset processes are also important. On the one hand, migration can be a potential solution for islands like Kiribati that, facing an existential threat to their existence due to climate change, purchased land from Fiji. On the other hand, a rise in sea levels can lead to a larger number of storms and greater salinization of fresh water sources; this process can trigger sudden events that displace people while also slowly causing people to leave their ancestral homes as livelihoods reliant on fresh water disappear.

FOOD INSECURITY
The WFP estimates that 821 million people—or one in nine people—around the world go hungry. Without food, millions of people may be forced to migrate irregularly. Food insecurity is primarily caused by poverty, conflict, climate change, and lack of public investments in agriculture. Natural disasters can also affect food security through the loss of agricultural lands and income, which can lead to drastic limitations in food availability.

Food insecurity poses a heightened threat to countries that are highly dependent on agriculture. For example, in a survey among migrants in the north of Ghana, most respondents stated that they left their homes because of scarcity of fertile land, low crop

42. World Food Programme (WFP), Food security and emigration: Why people flee and the impact on family members left behind in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras (Panama City: WFP, August 2017), https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000022124/download/?ga=2.85460124.46423775.1540402016-1765178983.1540402016.
43. IDMC, Global Internal Displacement Database.
yields, and food security problems.\textsuperscript{50} Moreover, agriculture as a share of GDP value add is considerably higher in extremely fragile and fragile countries than in the rest of the world.\textsuperscript{51} In other words, those countries that are already at risk of irregular migration have an added threat of food insecurity, which in and of itself can drive people from their homes.

Through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the international community aims to achieve zero hunger by 2030. To address food insecurity, IOM recommends strategically using investments in agriculture and fishing to focus on areas where migrants originate.\textsuperscript{52} The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the UN recommends improving market functioning, such as through road repair, rather than food-based interventions to promote sustainable food security.\textsuperscript{53} IOM also highlights the need for legal responses, including measures to prevent land grabs for large-scale agriculture as well as seasonal labor migration frameworks to ensure that the human and labor rights of migrants are respected.\textsuperscript{54} Should these interventions fail or should migrants have additional motives to migrate, they can still receive assistance abroad and contribute to the agriculture sector in the countries to which they migrate. For example, Hmong refugees in the United States in the 1970s revitalized farming in Minnesota, bringing experience and new produce and flower growing techniques.\textsuperscript{55} Today, Hmong-American farmers make up half of all farmers in metropolitan farmers’ markets and contribute $250 million in sales annually.\textsuperscript{56} Solutions to irregular migration must include ways to address the root causes of food insecurity while supporting those who were forced to leave because of it.

**CRIME AND GANGS**

People who suffer from violence or threats of violence often feel like they have no choice other than to leave their homes. However, crime and gang-related violence is often not enough for migrants to be granted refugee status. This can push vulnerable people escaping violence into shadowy and irregular pathways. In the Northern Triangle of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, gang-related violence is a primary cause of migration.\textsuperscript{57} These countries have among the highest homicide rates in the world, and transnational crime and drug-trafficking organizations create challenges. The largest gangs in the region, MS-13 and M-18, which were formed in the United States, are estimated to have a combined 85,000 members.\textsuperscript{58} In Guatemala alone, criminal extortion leads to an annual loss of $60-400 million—more than 3 percent of GDP.\textsuperscript{59}
Consequently, migration (much of it irregular) from the Northern Triangle has increased significantly, with nearly 300,000 people internally displaced and over 230,000 people seeking asylum, mostly in Mexico, the United States, or Canada. The chances of obtaining asylum in these countries are slim, so Central American migrants often try to cross borders without inspection. In the United States, for example, 55 percent of illegal border crossing apprehensions in 2018 were of citizens of the Northern Triangle. But these migrants often prefer to stay home or near home. In fact, many who attempt to leave their home countries may have been internally displaced before migrating abroad irregularly. In El Salvador, approximately 5 percent of households included at least one displaced person in 2017.

Criminal groups and gangs pose a threat to other Latin American countries but have a worldwide presence. Organized crime has thrived in recent years, and people who are forced to migrate due to crime are often desperate. Their lives and their families’ lives have been threatened, and the poorer they are, the more susceptible they become to crime and extortion and the less hope they have of escaping insecurity. With no dignity and no prospects, they embark on perilous journeys, often falling victim to violence and assault in search for a better life.

There have been some successful initiatives to curb crime and violence. In the Northern Triangle, for instance, USAID has offered its support to the Office of the Attorney General of Guatemala, leading to tangible results in the number of investigations for extortion crimes. In El Salvador, USAID has funded community-based violence prevention programs that have helped reduce violence in targeted municipalities by 61 percent. Greater attention must be paid to the legal protections offered to IDPs and other irregular migrants who escape gang-related violence. Otherwise, they will move through the shadows in search of a better life—and likely find even more violence along the way.

PROLONGED CONFLICT

Civil war, terrorism, non-state actor violence, and other sources of conflict push people to move every day. Conflict is one of the earliest identified root causes of forced and irregular migration. Indeed, by the end of 2018, there were 70.8 million refugees and IDPs forcibly displaced due to conflict and violence. But technology, climate change, and geopolitical complexities have made these conflicts longer in duration. New conflicts continue to sprout while few existing ones have ended. As a result, more refugees find themselves in

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63. Ibid.
protracted displacement of five or more years: in 2018, 78 percent of all refugees—15.9 million people—were in protracted situations, of which 5.8 million had been displaced for over 20 years. This number increases when considering irregular migrants, who are often displaced internally and for equally extended periods of time but without the protections or recognition afforded to refugees.

**CHANGING DEMOGRAPHICS**

There will be more than 9.7 billion people in the world by 2050, and nearly 70 percent of them will live in urban areas. Most of the population growth will occur in Asia and Africa, areas with large youth populations and insufficient opportunities for formal employment. To absorb the number of youths entering the job market over the next 15 years, 600 million jobs will have to be created. In Africa alone, 10 to 12 million youth enter the job market every year, but only 3.1 million jobs are created. Given the growing youth population, this labor demand is expected to increase, but without increases to supply, more young people will undoubtedly migrate irregularly in search of employment opportunities abroad. Most migration is South-South, so many will not even find better opportunities in countries with similar socioeconomic status as the ones they left behind. For many, migration is not a choice. The decision to migrate due to lack of jobs is often tied to an inability to afford food, safe housing, education, and health services, which pushes many into the shadows if they feel like they will not be able to migrate regularly.

*For many, migration is not a choice.*

**HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS**

Violations of the fundamental human rights to life, liberty, security, and education occur too frequently, as do abuses of the freedoms of thought, religion, and peaceful assembly. Though some violations allow for asylum and refugee status to be given to victims, many more are forced to migrate irregularly in search of better lives and more rights abroad. Unfortunately, many irregular migrants find that their human rights are equally violated in transit and even in countries of destination, often because their irregularity does not afford them legal protections or because human rights violations are also prevalent in the places to which they migrate. Illustratively, eight countries’ democracy scores in Freedom House’s *Freedom in the World Index* have declined in recent years due to their treatment of migrants. While the UN conducts periodic country assessments and provides recommendations to prevent human rights violations, its recommendations are often ignored, and human rights violations go unchecked.

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68. Ibid.
DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

Development is sometimes seen as a solution to irregular migration, but development itself can be a source of displacement. While there is little data on this issue, dams, mines, agribusiness (e.g. palm oil plantations), urban development, transportation projects, and extractive industries, among others, could displace thousands—if not millions.73 The Internal Displacement Monitoring Center analyzed 115 resettlement plans by the World Bank in 2016 and found that 265,000 people could be affected by these projects, of which 19,000 are at risk of being displaced.74 The unintended consequences of development projects, especially on irregular migration, are significant and worthy of further study.

Spotlight: Women and Children as Irregular Migrants

WOMEN

Approximately half of international migrants are women.75 Fifty percent of refugees are women and between 75 and 80 percent of IDPs are women and their dependent children.76 Yet women are disproportionately affected by violence and insecurity when compared to male migrants and have fewer choices when they are on the move. Seventy-one percent of those affected by modern slavery are women—almost 29 million—including those in forced labor, forced marriage, and the sex industry.77

Gender considerations are often left out of migration discussions. This is partly because there is a perception that irregular migrants are young males and, more recently, due to a belief that these males may have extremist tendencies. While young males are indeed a subset of migrants, they are far from being the majority, and the number of terrorists in mass migration flows has historically been low.78 This is a particularly important topic as it pertains to gender, given that this false perception often excludes women from migration discussions and fails to recognize some of their needs and motives for migrating both regularly and irregularly.

Gender also plays a variety of roles in a woman’s decision to migrate in the country of origin, in transit, and in the destination country. At home, women may decide to migrate for several reasons. Some of these are common to men, such as escaping conflict or violence or seeking better job opportunities abroad.

73. IDMC, GRID 2018.
74. Ibid.
But there are compelling reasons that overwhelmingly drive women to migrate, such as escaping forced marriage or female genital mutilation, or cultural beliefs such as the idea that women send more remittances than men.\textsuperscript{79} Despite this, it is more difficult for women to migrate because of legal barriers. For instance, the World Bank’s Women, Business and the Law data reveal that married women cannot choose where to live in 30 countries.\textsuperscript{80} Faced with staying home under harsh circumstances or fleeing at all costs, it is no wonder that many women migrate irregularly, even at great cost to themselves and their families.

In transit, gender can influence a migrant’s experience and path. Women have less information and options for regular migration and are thus more vulnerable to trafficking and exploitation; women constitute 80 percent of all trafficking victims.\textsuperscript{81} However, women are more likely to migrate in groups or with more social support than men to avoid risks on the journey.\textsuperscript{82} Greater attention must be paid to women on the move in order to understand the dynamics of vulnerability as well as to provide gender-comprehensive response frameworks.

At their destination, female migrants must also navigate gendered norms. Women may face discrimination or unequal job opportunities in destination countries and have to learn how to navigate new social norms while perhaps having to maintain old social norms such as restrictions imposed by male heads of the household. As a result, women are less aware of their rights and end up in low-paying positions such as domestic work—75 percent of domestic workers are female—or unemployed.\textsuperscript{83} Irregular female migrants also lack adequate access to sexual and reproductive health services. For example, Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh have high at-home birth rates, low access to health clinics and services to cope with sexual assault, and fear of becoming ostracized for getting pregnant or contracting HIV as a result of rape.\textsuperscript{84}

Nevertheless, women are increasingly migrating by choice and more are moving regularly than ever before. In sub-Saharan Africa, 60 to 80 percent of international migrants are male, but this proportion is steadily evening out.\textsuperscript{85} High-skilled women especially are more likely to migrate than low-skilled women and high-skilled men, with many succeeding abroad more than they did at home.\textsuperscript{86}

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid; O’Neil, Fleury, and Foresti, “Women on the move.”
\textsuperscript{82} Fleury, “Understanding Women and Migration.”
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{85} FAO, \textit{The State of Food and Agriculture} 2018.
\textsuperscript{86} O’Neil, Fleury, and Foresti, “Women on the move.”
CHILDREN

Children are increasingly affected by forced and irregular migration. In 2016, UNICEF estimated that there were 31 million children on the move, of which 11 million were refugees and asylum seekers and 17 million were IDPs. Children are more vulnerable than adults and more susceptible to human rights abuses. It was estimated that one-third of human trafficking victims were children in 2013 and that there were approximately 152 million children in forced labor in 2016. Children represented over 30 percent of the recorded migrant deaths in the Aegean Sea in 2015, and over 1,200 deaths of children have been recorded by IOM since 2014, though the real figure is probably higher. Children are detained for migration-related reasons in over 100 countries, and their repatriation hardly ever follows the lawful principle that it has to be in their best interest. Being an irregular migrant and refugee disrupts children’s education; they are five times more likely to be out of school than other children while facing bullying and discrimination in new schools and communities abroad.

While children are only 14 percent of the international migrant stock, half of all refugees are children, and there were 300,000 unaccompanied and separated child migrants in transit in 2017, a fivefold increase from 2012. From October 2018 to May 2019, over 56,000 unaccompanied children were apprehended in the Southwest border of the United States, primarily coming from Central America.

88. Ibid.; ILO Newsroom, "40 million in modern slavery.
2 | What Irregular Migration Means In Mexico

Fading Emigration, Increasing Immigration

Mexico has historically been a country of origin for migrants to the United States. Whether legally or illegally, permanently or temporarily, alone or with families, Mexicans have long journeyed north. Since the financial crisis of 2008-2009, however, the number of Mexicans migrating to the United States has decreased dramatically, to the point that more Mexicans are returning to Mexico than emigrating to the United States. This shift has occurred due to economic growth, lower fertility rates, and improved security over the past decades, among other reasons. Partly caused by these improvements, Mexico is now dealing with its own unprecedented surge in irregular migrants, originating primarily from the Northern Triangle of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras but also including significant numbers of Nicaraguans, Haitians, Venezuelans, and others.

In a sense, Mexico is a good example of where emigration has decreased and reversed over time and where development has complicated the country’s migration picture. The current complexities in Mexico are both opportunities and challenges. Mexico has a chance to enact successful policies to help manage increases in irregular immigration, and countries of origin have a chance to learn from Mexico in terms of how to overcome the migration hump and incentivize citizens abroad to return to their country of origin after emigrating.94

Emigration from Mexico: A Fading Phenomenon

The perceived one-way migration flow from Mexico to the United States has been a driving force in U.S. policy and public discourse for decades. However, the perception that irregular migration from Mexico to the United States is still a crisis—and the only type of migration occurring—does not reflect the current reality of Mexican migration flows. For starters, the number of illegal Mexican immigrants entering the United States has decreased dramatically over the past decade, and currently more Mexicans are returning to Mexico than are going to the United States.95

94. For the purposes of this report, “immigrants” are defined as those arriving in a country of destination, and “emigrants” are defined as those departing a country of origin.
95. D’Vera Cohn, Jeffrey S. Fassel, and Ana Gonzalez-Barrera, “Net Migration from Mexico Falls to Zero—and
Migration flows from Mexico to the United States date back to the nineteenth century, but it was not until the 1940s that the United States developed comprehensive policies to deal with Mexican migration. On and off from 1942 to 1965, the United States had a pro-migration policy called the Bracero program, which was a guest worker program to attract temporary workers to the agriculture sector. At its peak in the 1950s, the Bracero program helped employ over 400,000 Mexicans, and by 1964, the program had issued 4.6 million visas. In the mid-1960s, migration policy in the United States shifted from favoring copious amounts of seasonal workers to allowing a more limited number of migrants on a more permanent basis. The end of the Bracero program saw a significant decrease in the number of visas granted to Mexicans, after which irregular migration grew enormously. This prompted Congress to pass the Immigration Reform and Control Act in 1986 to facilitate legalization for illegal immigrants that were already in the United States and to make it more difficult for additional migrants to cross U.S. borders illegally. From the 1990s onwards, further limits were imposed on the number of visas and permanent residencies granted to Mexican nationals, and priority was given to family reunification.

There is good reason that immigration from Mexico has been a big focus of the public’s attention. Annual immigration from Mexico to the United States rose during the 1990s and peaked in 2000 (770,000), as did illegal border apprehensions of Mexicans (over 1.6 million). But since the mid-2000s, both legal and illegal migration from Mexico to the United States has been decreasing (see Figure 5). In 2018, there were about 155,000 illegal border apprehensions of Mexican nationals.

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97. Ibid.
98. Ibid.
The total Mexican immigrant population living in the United States in 2017 was nearly 11.3 million, smaller than in 2010. While Mexican migrants overwhelmingly move to the United States, they have also migrated to other countries like Canada and Spain, which hosted 81,000 and 49,000 migrants in 2017, respectively; significant increases in recent years. Increasingly, Mexicans are moving internally as well, many finding opportunities domestically that did not exist before. Much research has been done on the reasons for declining migration flows, and there is a consensus that it is due to a variety of factors, including rising GDP, demographic shifts, and decreases in violence. One theory is that emigration decreases when countries reach a certain level of wealth, around $8,000 GDP per capita. Mexico surpassed this level of GDP per capita in 2005, which correlates with the beginning of major decreases in Mexican-U.S. migration (see Figure 6).


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103. Ibid.
Though obviously significant, GDP per capita does not seem to be a compelling enough factor to slow migration. Other economic factors include increased trade and employment. For example, the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), signed in 1994, had a positive impact on Mexico’s development, global exports, and foreign direct investment in the long term.\(^{106}\) Furthermore, the recession of 2007-2009 led to a decrease in jobs in construction and other sectors in the United States where illegal immigrants tended to work, which decreased incentives to migrate illegally.\(^{107}\)

Demographic, social, and security factors have also played a role in decreasing migration from Mexico to the United States. Mexico has lower birth and fertility rates and Mexicans marry older, factors which are contributing to slower population growth and therefore fewer new migrants. Crossing the border into the United States is more difficult, due to increased security and border enforcement, and dangerous, due to human trafficking and organized crime. Additionally, in 2017 and 2018 alone, there were nearly half a million deportations to Mexico.\(^{108}\) While violence continues to be a critical issue in Mexico—especially during the drug wars of the 1990s and mid-2000s—most migration has had its roots in economic and social factors and family reunification. Interestingly, research shows that little evidence has been found to link violence to migration in Mexico, even though this is often cited as a major reason for emigration from the Northern Triangle.\(^{109}\)

Despite the perception of crisis, there is ample evidence suggesting that Mexico itself is dealing with unprecedented immigration challenges rather than sending historic numbers of people north. In fact, people of Mexican descent are increasingly returning to Mexico.


\(^{107}\) Cohn, Passel, and Gonzalez-Barrera, “Net Migration from Mexico Falls to Zero.”


from the United States, so the number of emigrants from Mexico is being offset by the number of returnees back to Mexico.\textsuperscript{110} The number of Mexicans officially repatriated from the United States to Mexico has been steadily decreasing over the past decade (see Figure 5), consistent with decreasing numbers of Mexicans entering the United States.\textsuperscript{111} Some of them have returned voluntarily out of fear of deportation or lack of jobs, especially during the U.S. recession in 2008-2009. More than 600,000 children who were born in the United States have returned to Mexico and are enrolled in schools.\textsuperscript{112} This is not always smooth, as many of them speak little or no Spanish and can have difficulty in both adapting to local culture and obtaining the proper documentation to enroll in schools and receive proper healthcare.

It is well-documented that Mexican migrants in the United States make significant contributions to the economy and society more broadly. As many of 1.3 million of them—commonly referred to as “Dreamers”—arrived as children and did not even know they were irregular migrants until they sought financial aid for university or a driver’s license.\textsuperscript{113} Legal migrants earned $1.3 trillion and contributed $328.2 billion in federal, state, and local taxes in 2014.\textsuperscript{114} But undocumented immigrants also contributed approximately $11.74 billion a year (2017 estimate) to the United States in local and state taxes.\textsuperscript{115}

**Migration to and through Mexico: An Evolving Challenge**

While net migration from Mexico to the United States is now negative, there is an increasing number of migrants from Central America and elsewhere that are migrating to Mexico and onward to the United States and Canada. The number of asylum seekers in Mexico increased more than twenty-fold from 2013 to 2018, signaling that Mexico is evolving from an origin country into a destination country.\textsuperscript{116}

In the 1990s, Central American migration was mostly related to economic opportunities and civil wars. But since the beginning of the twenty-first century, and especially post-2009, migration (much of which has been irregular) has been motivated by insecurity and violence due to gangs and transnational organized crime.\textsuperscript{117} El Salvador and Honduras have some of the highest homicide rates in the world, and evidence shows that violence directly leads to increases in migration, unlike in Mexico.\textsuperscript{118} A one percent increase in the

\begin{footnotes}
\item[110] Cohn, Passel, and Gonzalez-Barrera, “Net Migration from Mexico Falls to Zero.”
\item[111] Unidad de Politica Migratoria, “Boletines Estadisticos.”
\end{footnotes}
homicide rate corresponds to increases in migration by 188 percent in El Salvador and 120 percent in Honduras.\footnote{Orozco, “Recent Trends in Central American Migration.”}

Though violence is a primary root cause, economics has played a role in migration to Mexico. For example, the average GDP per capita of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras was $3,614 in 2017, which is approximately one-third of the Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) average.\footnote{World Bank Development Indicators, GDP per capita (current US$) (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2017), https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?year_high_desc=false.} It is no wonder, then, that migrants would attempt to move to Mexico—where GDP per capita is nearly $9,000—or to the United States—where GDP per capita is nearly $60,000—in search of greater economic opportunity and, above all, the personal safety that comes with wealth.\footnote{Ibid.} It is worth noting that while migrants often cite economic reasons as primary motivations for migrating, many have also been victims of violence, extortion, and other criminal manipulation. This dimension makes migration flows in the region particularly mixed, as there is a connection between lack of economic mobility and susceptibility to violence; those with economic means can shield themselves from violence better than those without.\footnote{Peter Cuthbertson, “Poverty and Crime: Why a new war on criminals would help the most poor,” July 2018, https://www.civitas.org.uk/content/files/povertyandcrime.pdf.}

Consequently, many irregular migrants are passing through Mexico. Some of them are in transit, with the United States or Canada as a final destination of choice. It is estimated that 500,000 people cross into Mexico each year, most of them nationals of the Northern Triangle countries.\footnote{Medecins Sans Frontieres, \textit{Forced to Flee Central America’s Northern Triangle} (Mexico City: May 2017), https://www.msf.org/sites/msf.org/files/msf_forced-to-flee-central-americas-northern-triangle_e.pdf.} 55 percent of illegal immigrants apprehended at U.S. borders in 2018 came from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador.\footnote{U.S. Border Patrol, “U.S. Border Patrol Nationwide Apprehensions by Citizenship and Sector.”} However, migrants are increasingly staying in Mexico, which poses new challenges and opportunities for Mexico. On the one hand, Mexico’s economy needs migrant labor, though usually in its more northern region. On the other hand, many arrivals in southern Mexico stay in border states like Chiapas that are less developed and, in many ways, are facing similar problems as their neighbors to the south (e.g., corruption, weak institutions, limited social services, and lack of job opportunities).

For those that do want to enter Mexico, the path is not particularly challenging. There are 61 informal vehicular border crossings along Mexico’s southern border and practically infinite walking border crossings.\footnote{Key informant interview.} This makes it difficult to monitor the border, and migrants can cross irregularly if they perceive that applying for asylum or residence through Mexican embassies will be unsuccessful. This fear is not unfounded. In 2018 alone, over 107,000 Northern Triangle nationals were deported by the Mexican authorities or had assisted returns (see Figure 7).\footnote{Unidad de Politica Migratoria, “Boletines Estadisticos.”} This figure is higher than in the United States, from where 94,000 Northern Triangle nationals were deported in 2018.\footnote{ICE, “Fiscal Year 2018 ICE Enforcement and Removal Operations Report.”} In the same year, only 10,900 obtained temporary or permanent residences in Mexico, including for

121. Ibid.
125. Key informant interview.
126. Unidad de Politica Migratoria, “Boletines Estadisticos.”
family, work, or humanitarian reasons. Given the trends in the first half of the year, local NGOs estimate that 40,000 people will apply for asylum in 2019, a 50 percent increase from 2018.

Figure 7: Northern Triangle Residence Permits Granted and Deportations in Mexico

There are 61 informal vehicular border crossings along Mexico’s southern border and practically infinite walking border crossings.

Since the route to Mexico is dangerous and few are granted asylum or residence permits, some Central American migrants traveled in caravans, which were perceived to be safer (see Textbox B). However, as of mid-2019, this perception may be shifting as the phenomenon appears to have been short lived, with migrants now traveling in smaller and more dispersed groups. A 2015-2016 survey by Doctors Without Borders found that 68.3 percent of Central American migrants transiting through Mexico had experienced some form of violence and that nearly one-third of women had been sexually abused while in transit. In addition, a study by UNHCR found that 72 percent of interviewed unaccompanied minors from El Salvador would be eligible for international protection, with 68 percent citing organized crime as their primary reason for leaving and 21 percent reporting abuse at home. There are little if any services available for unaccompanied children, and many are deported. The Mexican government reported that 86,352 migrant children were deported or returned to their home countries in 2018—76.8 percent of total deportations and assisted returns from Mexico. To prevent this, some children travel

128. Unidad de Política Migratoria, “Boletines Estadísticos.”
129. Key informant interview.
131. Medecins Sans Frontieres, “Forced to Flee Central America’s Northern Triangle.”
with smugglers, but the cost of doing so is often prohibitive. A smuggler, or coyote, can charge $3,500 per person and up to $15,000 for an unaccompanied minor.\textsuperscript{134}

**TEXTBOX B: CARAVANS**

Starting in 2018, irregular migrants from the Northern Triangle started increasingly traveling in caravans. Traveling in such groups was perceived to be safer than traveling solo or in small groups. Tales of successful caravans (especially the first few in late 2018) traveled fast. If emigration was part of a future plan, why not accelerate that plan and go with the big group walking north, potentially without having to pay for a coyote? As a result, it seems that more women, unaccompanied minors, and families chose to make the trip north in the first quarter of 2019. It is unclear whether the caravans led to an increase of overall migrants or whether they simply brought into the light many irregular migrants who would have otherwise moved through the shadows. As of mid-2019, the caravan phenomenon seems to be fading, and irregular migrants are traveling in smaller and more dispersed groups, further calling into question whether the caravans caused the increase in irregular migration to Mexico and the United States in the first half of 2019.

Not much is known about caravans and misinformation abounds. It is unclear what sizes they are as numbers fluctuate along the route and not all migrants register with a formal agency along the way. The biggest caravan was formed in Honduras in October of 2018 and estimated to have surpassed 7,000 members.\textsuperscript{135} Several groups ranging from hundreds to a couple thousand people have formed since. It is not known for sure how the caravans originate and whether they have any formal leadership or funding structures. The likeliest story is that the caravans represented a new, quasi-informal modality of migration. There may be a few more opportunistic migrants among them, but it seems probable that “safety in numbers” is a significant factor for those already destined to migrate choosing to do so in a caravan.

In Mexico, the original response to the caravans was positive. The Catholic Church played a particularly important role in providing food and guidance to migrants in the caravans, many of whom were unaware of the large distance between Mexico’s southern border and that of the United States. However, this initial perception quickly changed as residents in towns along the routes bristled at the attention and support given to those migrating, especially when some of the towns themselves are underdeveloped and in need of assistance. Externally, the caravans have largely been portrayed


in a negative light. The image of large numbers of people moving north irregularly has been disconcerting to some, even though women and children make up a sizeable percentage of caravan migrants. In fact, the number of families—not single men—attempting to enter the United States irregularly has sharply increased, and over 144,000 migrants crossed the U.S. border illegally in May 2019, the highest figure in years.\footnote{136}{U.S. Customs and Border Protection, “Southwest Border Migration FY 2019.”}{136}

However, many of these are not traveling in caravans by the time they make it to the U.S. border. While traveling in caravans can give migrants more visibility and perceived security while they are in them, they do not necessarily sustain themselves throughout Mexico. Nor do caravans necessarily increase chances of integrating migrants into international migration or asylum systems. According to a recent survey, 70 percent of people in a caravan surveyed said they required protection that would have qualified them for asylum, yet only 7 percent of them had applied.\footnote{137}{Key informant interview.}{137}

While part of this may be due to lack of information (See Textbox D), this more likely suggests a distrust in the international system, even when traveling in large groups.

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**Policy Challenges, Opportunities, and Recommendations**

Multi-faceted and complex as the migration scenarios in Mexico are, there is an opportunity—with a relatively new political administration and a lack of historical baggage as it relates to acceptance of migrants—to put in place productive and supportive policies, especially ones that address migration issues in the north and south while capitalizing on economic opportunity in between.\footnote{138}{Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) assumed Mexico’s presidency in late 2018.}{138}

**INTEGRATION AND EMPLOYMENT**

A key issue will be integration. In Mexico City, there is an *interculturalidad* (multiculturalism) law that aims to integrate migrants and Mexican returnees into social programs.\footnote{139}{“Ley de interculturalidad, atencion a migrantes y movilidad humana en el Distrito Federal,” Comision Nacional de los Derechos Humanos (CNDH), April 7, 2011, http://www.cndh.org.mx/sites/all/doc/Programas/migrantes/OtrasNormas/Estatal/DF/Ley_JAMMHDFF.pdf.}{139} While policies such as this one are essential for successful integration, the *interculturalidad* law lacks the resources and institutional support it needs to be fully implemented. Nevertheless, cultural and linguistic integration is easier in Mexico than in the United States, and there are regions of Mexico that have plenty of job opportunities. In fact, there is a labor shortage across Mexico, and migrants are likely to be needed to fill tens of thousands of available low-skilled jobs (see Textbox C).\footnote{140}{Jeff Ernst and Kirk Semple, “Mexico Moves to Encourage Caravan Migrants to Stay and Work,” New York Times, January 25, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/25/world/americas/migrant-caravan-honduras-mexico.html.}{140}
TEXTBOX C: HOLA<CODE/>
Hola<code/> (Hola Code) is a social enterprise that strives to integrate returnees, deportees, and refugees into the Mexican workforce. Hola Code offers a 5-month computer science, leadership, and wellness training to migrants and helps them find jobs as bilingual software engineers. Tuition is based on placement success, meaning that students study tuition-free but pay Hola Code back when they land a job in tech. Of the first cohort, 90 percent got jobs as software engineers. Many students work in top firms and have seen their income triple or quadruple after completing the program. Initiatives like Hola Code deserve greater attention and support as ways to link skilled migrants with the companies that need their skills.

Reflecting the job-to-migrant matching opportunity, there are an increasing number of employment initiatives targeting migrants that could be assessed, strengthened, and scaled. Jobs fairs in places like Tijuana have seen large volumes of migrants, though these events are typically only available to those with official papers. Quality of work and low salaries remain concerns in these places, but there is little if any evidence that migrant workers are displacing Mexican ones. UNHCR has developed an initiative to match migrants who have been granted asylum with jobs available in the economically booming regions of Mexico. Last year, 500 migrants were sent to Saltillo for work opportunities, and UNHCR plans to scale the initiative and relocate over 1,000 people this year. Additionally, UNHCR is working with ILO to make sure that labor market standards are high enough for refugees. A challenge is that the skills mapping and matching process is expensive and will require sustained funding, which is currently not guaranteed. To alleviate this, greater support is needed for skills mapping and matching initiatives like this one, especially at scale. The Mexican government could work with UNHCR, ILO, and other international partners to meet these objectives and advance efforts to use data (like those collected by IOM’s Displacement Tracking Matrix) to map skills and where people want to go.

While helping migrants find jobs and providing them with access to healthcare and other basic services is important, Mexico must not forget its local communities. Migrants can run into conflict with host communities if the latter perceives that migrants are receiving more support from the government than they are (this happened very quickly with the caravans, see Textbox B). A November 2018 poll suggested that 49 percent of Mexicans disagree that Mexico should let migrants enter the country and grant them asylum, with Mexicans citing fear of increased crime and competition for jobs as their main reasons for responding as such.

143. Ibid.
144. Key informant interview.
145. Ibid.
146. Ibid.
POLICY REFORM

While migrants are increasingly staying in Mexico, Mexico still sees itself—both in psyche and in policy—as a producer of emigrants or, more recently, as a transit country to the United States. The Commissioner of Mexico’s migration agency, Instituto Nacional de Migración (INAMI), has stated that Mexico’s migration programs are being developed based on respect of human rights and that social and economic development is the basis of its approach to migration.148 Despite this laudable focus, the current Mexican administration has not published an official migration policy to date, and it should do so. Migration numbers, especially irregular migrants from the Northern Triangle, show no signs of decreasing in the short term, and they may even increase in the medium term if social and political turmoil, violence, and human rights abuses continue or worsen in the Northern Triangle. Mexico is not prepared for such an increase in arrivals.

In response to one of the first caravans and desiring to signal these positive intentions, INAMI began granting “humanitarian visitor cards” on the Mexican-Guatemalan border to migrants in mid-January 2019. The program was shut down after just a couple of weeks due to high demand, after granting 13,270 visitor cards.149 These cards afforded migrants the ability to travel legally through Mexico for 12 months and to access jobs, education, healthcare, and other public services. The cards were very popular and caused a short-term spike in interest in crossing the border. The initiative’s short duration signals that the system was ill-construed and not strategically positioned to accommodate future increasing migration flows. After the visitor card program was stopped, migrants wishing to enter Mexico legally now must apply for visas through Mexican embassies.

Despite the failure of the visitor card program, Mexico has given overtures to addressing the root causes of migration at the regional level. Recently, Mexico led an initiative with El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala to develop a Comprehensive Development Plan (CDP) to create regional opportunities in accordance with the SDGs and the UN-led Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration.150 The Migration Compact signatories have agreed to create a fund to implement the CDP, but an actual plan is yet to be produced as of July 2019. These initiatives—especially the CDP—are well-intentioned in their aim to offer migrants protection and formality in the short term and stem regional migration in the medium and long term. However, they have not been codified into official policy, and existing legislation is not adapted to current conditions on the ground. For example, while Mexico has a well-established system for seeking asylum, receiving a response can take up to 45 days and an additional 90 days if the application is originally rejected and an asylum seeker asks for his or her claim to be revised.151 In practice, the process can take up to 6 months.

149. Instituto Nacional de Migración, “Finaliza Programa Emergente de emisión de Tarjetas de Visitante por Razones Humanitarias,” Gobierno de Mexico, February 12, 2019, https://www.gob.mx/inm/articulos/finaliza-programa-emergente-de-emision-de-tarjetas-de-visitante-por-razones-humanitarias?id=es&fbclid=IwAR0fpUOfH-dOVIpBUpe3a6tGyfduxrTNTNaJVI6aDlSHKhZ76Lx6VJL-RI-o.
151. For details on how to seek asylum in Mexico, see: “¿Cómo solicitar la condición de refugiado en Méxi-
In mid-2019, the Mexican and U.S. governments came to an agreement to curb irregular immigration, which has driven Mexico to crack down on illegal border crossings in response to a U.S. threat of increased tariffs on Mexican exports. The deal aimed to reduce irregular migration flows by increasing enforcement in Mexico via increased U.S.-Mexican anti-smuggling operations and by expanding the Migrant Protection Protocols, which calls for sending asylum seekers in the United States back to Mexico while they wait for their asylum hearing. Within a short time, this policy led to a 50 percent increase in deportations by the Mexican government and a dramatic decrease in irregular border crossings to the United States.

Nevertheless, these policies run counter to Mexico’s stated human rights approach to migration and are not sustainable, given that they place a disproportionate amount of responsibility on Mexican authorities that have limited capacity to deal with irregular migration. There are two main agencies that deal with migration: INAMI and COMAR. INAMI focuses primarily on enforcement while COMAR handles asylum claims. Though INAMI’s leaders had originally signaled a shift in approach to enforcement under the current administration, by mid-2019 the INAMI commissioner had resigned, and all signs point toward resuming the previous administration’s antagonistic approach.

ComAR does not have enough resources to deal with all asylum applications, even if its international partner, UNHCR, were able to increase its processing capacity. Greater resources need to be allocated within Mexico to deal with complex migration flows.

The United States can play a role by allocating more resources to Mexico or to the Northern Triangle countries. Unfortunately, the U.S. government recently signaled its intention to cut foreign aid to Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador, ostensibly for not doing enough to stem irregular migration even though this action is likely to perpetuate violence and poverty in these countries and could potentially increase irregular migration to the United States. Rather than continue on this approach, the United States should restore, and even increase, funding to the Northern Triangle and Mexico in order to tackle root causes of migration. This is the best way to decrease irregular migration in the long term.

The Mexican government should also work with the private sector to provide greater Wi-Fi access in shelters and along migration routes to facilitate access to information. Services do exist for irregular migrants in Mexico; sometimes it just takes a trusted figure to point them in the right direction (see Textbox D).

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153. Ibid.
UNHCR went to Facebook Mexico with a problem. Irregular migrants in Mexico often have smartphones and regularly access Facebook to communicate with family and friends but not to seek out services. Many irregular migrants qualify for protection under international law but stay in the shadows, having little trust in international organizations; they fear that engaging with formal institutions—even UNHCR—will lead to their deportation. Enter “The Jaguar.”

Confia en el Jaguar (Trust the Jaguar) is a Facebook page leading directly to UNHCR protection officers where users can see information and videos about the asylum process. They can also ask questions to the “Jaguar” using Messenger. The page itself does not have a lot of followers (8,379 as of June of 2019), probably because users do not want to be listed as followers publicly. However, the page is visited by 1.3 to 1.6 million users each month and sparks a monthly average of 959 protection conversations. Additionally, the UNHCR hotline started getting an additional 300 calls per week after being promoted on the Jaguar page. These metrics indicate to organizations like UNICEF, IOM, UNHCR, and ICRC—all which input information into the platform—that at least some irregular migrants are receiving the information they need.

Reforming Mexico’s migration policies will require substantial effort, from the national legislature and at subnational levels. The Mexican government should create an inter-ministerial committee on drafting migration-related policies that reports directly to the president or his appointed “migration czar.” Policies should address resettlement, integration, and short-term transit assistance and help develop concrete long-term initiatives tackling regional root causes while encouraging South-South cooperation. The Mexican government should integrate NGOs and civil society into its efforts and adapt its mindset to reflect the reality that Mexico is no longer just a country of origin; it is a transit and destination country as well. Decreasing the number of migrants entering Mexico seems difficult in the short term, given continued and compounding problems in the Northern Triangle and additional flows of Venezuelan and Nicaraguan migrants. This mindset shift—and the policies that must follow—will not be easy to accomplish, especially given the López Obrador administration’s focus on austerity and corruption and the relatively small size of government entities dealing with migration.

159. Key informant interview.
One of the world’s largest per capita refugee-producing states is the small East African country of Eritrea. An astounding 10 percent of Eritrea’s population has fled the country since 2000. While many of the world’s major migration flows stem from conflict, persecution, or disaster, the mass exodus of Eritreans is different: it is primarily caused by a policy that mandates indefinite military service. The conscription was initiated during a conflict with Ethiopia that has been frozen for nearly 20 years and has led to countless human rights abuses by the ruling regime in Asmara. Those not wanting to serve in the Eritrean military indefinitely have, since the late 1990s, chosen to flee rather than serve. Though lasting peace with Ethiopia may be on the horizon thanks to a recent thawing in the relationship, it remains to be seen whether an end to the conscription policy will come with the peace. If it sticks, the historic peace could transform Eritrea and drastically reduce irregular migration. But to make it stick, certain assurances must be made. Peace must be assured and returnees must not be punished. Most importantly, conscription lengths must be shortened or eliminated altogether. In the case of Eritrea, addressing irregular migration is a question of geopolitics and diplomacy, not necessarily foreign aid.

**The Current Crisis in Eritrea – and the Prospect of Peace**

In July of 2018, a historic peace agreement was signed between Ethiopia and Eritrea, one that ended more than two decades of hostilities. Eritrea gained independence from Ethiopia in 1993, but war between the two countries broke out in 1998. The conflict, which resulted in 70,000 to 100,000 deaths and over 1 million displaced people, formally ended in 2000 with the signing of the Algiers Agreement and the establishment of an Eritrea-Ethiopian Boundary Commission to resolve the border dispute. The commission ruled in favor of granting the town of Badme to Eritrea in 2002, but Ethiopia refused to...
acknowledge the decision and tension between the two countries remained. Borders were closed, cross-border phone calls suspended, and families separated. All of this changed when Ethiopia’s Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed publicly accepted the Algiers Agreement and resumed relations with Eritrea in 2018. The borders between the two countries reopened in September of the same year, and sanctions against Eritrea, which were enacted in 2009 after UN experts alleged that Eritrea was arming and training al-Shabab militants, were lifted by the United Nations in November.162

Irregular migration from Eritrea dramatically increased during the frozen conflict from 2000 to 2018, not because of the conflict directly, but because of the harsh, indefinite conscription policy established by the Eritrean government under the pretext of potential reignited conflict with Ethiopia. As a result, there were over 507,000 Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers scattered around the world by the end of 2018.163 Countless other irregular Eritrean migrants live in the shadows regionally, in Europe and around the world.

While the peace deal with Ethiopia has brought hope that the conscription policy—and thus the need for Eritreans to flee—will end, there has been no formal cessation of the policy at the time of publication of this report. Recent recruits were told at their graduation ceremony that their military service would only last 18 months because unlimited conscription was no longer necessary, but this has not been officially confirmed yet.164 There is hope, but the delicate situation with Ethiopia originated long before the 1998 war, and some question whether peace will last, especially since Prime Minister Abiy will have to continue dealing with those opposed to his comparatively reform-minded agenda within Ethiopia.165

Eritrea has been governed by the military dictatorship of President Isaias Afwerki since independence in 1993. Under his leadership, Eritrea has been isolated in the Horn of Africa and globally, lagging behind regional peers by almost every measurable indicator. Eritrea ranks 157th in Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index and ranks as “not free” with a score of 2/100 in Freedom House’s Freedom in the World report.166 In the World Bank’s Ease of Doing Business ranking, Eritrea ranks 189th—better than only Somalia.167 Human rights abuses and poverty abound, with meager pay to conscripts, no freedom of the press, and frequent arbitrary imprisonment.168 Only a fifth of conscripts

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hold military roles, while the rest are teachers, farmers, construction workers, civil servants, and other laborers, which is arguably a form of forced labor.\textsuperscript{169} It is no wonder, then, that 88 percent of Eritrean migrants surveyed abroad cited lack of rights as the main push factor for their decision to leave.\textsuperscript{170} Of those citing lack of rights, 86 percent feared conscription or forced labor.\textsuperscript{171}

International presence in Eritrea is minimal. In 2005, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) was expelled from the country, and the activity of NGOs was severely restricted, leaving only nine international NGOs in operation in 2006.\textsuperscript{172} Foreign aid remains nearly non-existent to this day. In 2018, $13.6 million in humanitarian funding was reported to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), of which 44.9 percent went to nutrition, mainly via UNICEF.\textsuperscript{173}

Eighty-eight percent of Eritrean migrants surveyed abroad cited lack of rights as the main push factor for their decision to leave. Of those citing lack of rights, 86 percent feared conscription or forced labor.

Women and children are particularly affected by poor conditions in Eritrea. Women are more at risk of gender-based violence, including domestic violence and sexual violence at detention centers and international borders and in the military service.\textsuperscript{174} Malnutrition is a leading cause of infant mortality, and there are not enough schools in Eritrea.\textsuperscript{175} School enrollment is even lower for girls, and many are removed from school to be forced into marriage, often as a way to avoid conscription, which can begin at age 16.\textsuperscript{176} Child labor and female genital mutilation are recurrent issues. As a result, many women and children are compelled to flee Eritrea along with men avoiding indefinite mandatory conscription and other human rights abuses. The number of asylum applications in Europe is illustrative: in 2018, 38 percent of all Eritrean asylum applicants were women and 43 percent were children (under the age of 18).\textsuperscript{177} Despite the large number of Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers, many more flee the country without international protection, living in the shadows as irregular migrants.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{171} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{172} “Foreign Assistance in Eritrea,” US Department of State, 2018, https://www.foreignassistance.gov/explore/country/eritrea.
\item \textsuperscript{175} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{177} Eurostat, Asylum and managed migration data (Brussels: European Commission, 2018), https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/asylum-and-managed-migration/data/database.
The Migration Picture in Eritrea

Most Eritrean refugees, asylum seekers, and irregular migrants are in neighboring Ethiopia and Sudan (see Figure 8), generous countries that hosted 903,000 and 1,078,000 total refugees in 2018, respectively. Among them, there were over 288,000 Eritrean refugees in the two countries combined, amounting to 57 percent of total Eritrean refugees worldwide. Over 181,000 Eritrean refugees (35 percent of the total) are in Europe. This is partly because Eritrea has one of the highest recognition rates in asylum applications in Europe. In 2017, 92 percent of first instance Eritrean asylum applications were accepted, second only to Syria and well below the EU average rate of recognition of 46 percent. This acceptance rate has had the unintended consequence of non-Eritrean asylum seekers falsely claiming to be Eritrean, which has in turn caused countries such as Denmark and the United Kingdom to limit giving refugee status to Eritreans.

Figure 8: Persons of Concern from Eritrea, 2018

Another reason why so many people flee Eritrea irregularly is that it is very difficult to leave the country legally. To exit Eritrea, nationals must have a valid passport, an international health certificate, and an exit visa, the last of which is only granted to nationals who have completed their military service or who are exempt from it. This

178. In addition to Eritreans, Sudan and Ethiopia host thousands of refugees from South Sudan, Somalia, Syria, and to a lesser extent, Central African Republic. There are also a number of Sudanese refugees in Ethiopia and vice versa. See: UNHCR Population Statistics, “Persons of Concern, 2018.”

179. Ibid.

180. Ibid.


largely explains why so many Eritreans seek irregular means to exit the country: 82 percent of surveyed Eritreans left with the help of smugglers.  

**Future Steps to Curb Irregular Migration**

To curb irregular migration from Eritrea, peace must prevail. Only when peace is assured will policymakers feel comfortable ending the policy of indefinite military service; however, even with peace, there is no guarantee that the policy will end. Additionally, there needs to be greater freedom of movement in and out of Eritrea. Presently, there are doubts about this happening. When the border first opened in 2018, there was a fourfold increase of Eritreans crossing into Ethiopia, many of whom applied for refugee status. However, Eritrea unexpectedly started closing border crossings in December 2018, preventing Ethiopians from entering the country and questioning whether talks of freedom of movement would be put into practice.

Efforts must not end with the end of conscription. Returning refugees and irregular migrants must also be given protections. Currently, voluntary returnees must pay a 2 percent “diaspora tax” and sign a “letter of regret” upon return to Eritrea. Returnees risk arbitrary detention or punishment to family members upon return to Eritrea, even more so to nationals that are forcibly returned. If nothing changes, estimates suggest that up to 500,000 more people could flee Eritrea in the next 10 years.

Thus, peace alone will not suffice to stop irregular migration. Eritrea also faces acute humanitarian issues that could drive people from their home. There are approximately 300,000 children out of school, and over 23,000 children are at risk of severe acute malnutrition. UNICEF has several initiatives that respond to these needs, but the otherwise absent international presence makes it difficult to fully respond to humanitarian needs. Additionally, recent severe droughts, floods, earthquakes, and volcanic activity present an enormous challenge to Eritrea, a country where 80 percent of the population depends on agriculture. Depending on increasingly unpredictable weather patterns, Eritrea produces 20 to 80 percent of its annual cereal requirements domestically and has little access to foreign markets, meaning that the availability of food is wildly variable.

Disease, lack of education, and food insecurity can all push people to migrate, and with current laws de facto—if not de jure—in place, this migration is likely to be irregular in nature. To reduce the probability of this happening, Eritrea should reconsider allowing international NGOs to operate legally within its borders and encourage collaboration with national ministries that currently deal with humanitarian issues.

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184. RMMS, “Mixed Migration Monitoring Mechanism Initiative.”
188. Ibid.
192. Ibid.
In addition to these issues, Eritrea has a poor record on human rights and democracy. No democratic elections have been held since independence, and there is no independent media or judiciary. Only four religions are recognized in Eritrea, and practicing a non-recognized religion is punishable by law. There are numerous instances of arbitrary detention and inhumane treatment in detention centers. If the goal is to curb irregular migration, any lasting solutions must grant citizens more fundamental rights and reduce fear of reprisal for exercising these rights.

**Economic and Political Opportunities**

Eritrea has an opportunity to catch up with the world, but to do so, it must improve on its human rights record, open up its economy, and transition from isolation to regional cooperation. The new peace with Ethiopia, which could be economically beneficial for both countries, and the restoration of diplomatic ties with Somalia present opportunities for Eritrea to engage in the region. They also offer the chance for Eritrea to open up to foreign aid, trade, and investment. Eritrea has announced plans to modernize a road linking Ethiopia with its seaport in Assab. Additionally, Italy has agreed to fund a feasibility study for a railway line between Ethiopia and Eritrea, and the United Arab Emirates plans to build an oil pipeline between the two countries. These initiatives, if successful, would strengthen trade and the movement of people with Ethiopia and open Eritrea—and its attractive geographic location—to more international trade and investment. Moreover, if the peace with Ethiopia leads to the end of unlimited military conscription, Eritrean defense spending should decrease. Eritrea is estimated to spend a large portion of its budget on defense, though no data is available since 2003, when military expenditures accounted for 20 percent of GDP. Releasing some of these funds for infrastructure, agriculture, and education spending, for example, could improve socioeconomic conditions and diminish incentives for people to migrate irregularly.

The present situation also offers the opportunity to restore diplomatic ties with the international community. The United States, for example, has not had an ambassador in Eritrea since 2010. The United States has good relations with Ethiopia, so peace and restored diplomatic relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea could make way for renewed U.S.-Eritrean cooperation. Given Eritrea’s key geostrategic location, this could bolster U.S. influence in the region and open up new avenues for investment and markets for U.S. and European goods.

Eritrea has also denied the UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea access to the country for the past six years. Restoring diplomatic ties, allowing

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access to UN representatives, and adopting the recommendations made by the Universal Periodic Review in January 2019—covering “development and social equality, social sector and dignified life, administration of justice, liberties and engagement and international cooperation”—would improve the international community’s perspective on Eritrea’s human rights record and signal that the country is willing to reform.  

Cautious Optimism

Ensuring peace with Ethiopia, eliminating mandatory conscription, improving human rights, and engaging politically and economically with the international community are all feasible steps that Eritrea can and should take to reduce irregular migration. Eritrea is receiving considerable attention on the global stage at the moment, making it an ideal time to push for reform. However, Eritrea remains under the same dictatorial leadership, so it remains to be seen how much change will occur. A year has passed since Ethiopia signed the peace deal with Eritrea, and not much has changed in terms of human rights violations and forced conscription policies. The borders remain mostly closed. This is important to remember as the international community restores diplomatic ties with Eritrea. The United States deported 62 Eritreans in 2018; it is important to realize that these deportees still face serious risks upon returning home.

Nevertheless, the historic peace agreement with Ethiopia itself has the potential to shape the future of Eritrea and is cause for cautious optimism. The Eritrean case study shows that the drivers of and solutions to irregular migration are unique to the social, political, and economic circumstances of each country. While similarities exist, tailored country plans addressing the root causes and results of irregular migration are needed. For Eritrea, addressing irregular migration is less a job for foreign aid (though aid can and should be utilized where appropriate) and more a question of continued political and economic reform.


4 | What Irregular Migration Means in Ghana

Not Much, Yet

Where irregular migrants come from today may not be where they come from tomorrow. The authors of this report wanted to assess not only current cases of irregular migration (Mexico and Eritrea) but also one that could be just over the horizon: Ghana. Ghana is a good example of where South-South migration happens, given that it is a receiving country due to its relative stability and favorable economic situation. This stability, however, is vulnerable. Ghana’s dependency on agriculture and resources, coupled with overfishing, illegal mining, and a growing young population threaten the future livelihoods, jobs, and food security of Ghanaians. These are ingredients that have been present in other contexts that produced large amounts of irregular migration and forced displacement. Countries such as Ghana must pay attention to employment opportunities, availability of resources, and other needs of their citizens to ensure that future conditions do not incentivize irregular migration.

Ghana Today

Ghana enjoys more peace and greater stability than many sub-Saharan African countries and has made significant development progress over the past years. With a GDP per capita of $1,641, slightly above the sub-Saharan African average, it upgraded from low-income to lower middle-income status in 2011. Ghana also ranks among the best performing countries in sub-Saharan Africa on freedom, anti-corruption, and democracy indicators. The country was one of the few in sub-Saharan Africa to attain the Millennium Development Goal of cutting extreme poverty by half, with the percentage of people living under $1.25 a day decreasing from 51 percent to 24 percent between 1991 and 2013.

Nevertheless, Ghana has several issues that could portend economic difficulties in the future. It has a large financing gap and mobilizes only 10 percent of GDP in domestic revenue (some argue that 20 percent should be the minimum viable percentage for sustainability). There is a high unemployment rate, and the jobs that do exist tend to be informal and low-skilled. Agriculture productivity remains low. Additionally, resource constraints—which exist across Ghana's agriculture, fishing, and mining sectors—threaten to disrupt Ghana's peaceful society and could eventually force Ghanaians from their homes, either to Ghana’s urban or agriculturally rich areas or to other countries. Though irregular migration, and even forced displacement, would not be the only consequence of Ghana failing to address these constraints, it is nonetheless a very real potential consequence.

Resource Constraints

AGRICULTURE, FORESTRY, AND FISHING

One of the biggest challenges that Ghana will face in the future will be adequately feeding its people. Ghana has a wealth of natural resources and is highly dependent on agriculture. Seventy-five percent of rural households are engaged in agricultural activities, as are 22 percent of urban households. The Ghanaian agricultural sector grew by 6.1 percent in 2017, a considerable increase from 2.9 percent growth the previous year, and is expected to grow at an average of 7.1 percent over the subsequent four years. Ghana has great agricultural potential, which could attract around $2 billion in private investment to the northern region of Ghana alone. For example, Ghana is the world’s second-largest cocoa producer and produces one-fifth of the total world supply. Cocoa has an annual export value of nearly $2 billion and employs 800,000 farmers.

However, agriculture, forestry, and fishing as a percentage of GDP declined from nearly 30 percent in 2010 to 17 percent in 2017, and not just because of growth in other sectors. Agricultural production is threatened by extreme droughts and floods and other symptoms of climate change. In addition, increases in food production in recent years have been attributed to an increase in land cultivated rather than improvements in productivity and efficiency. Ultimately, these increases in land usage have proved insufficient in keeping up with food demand and have led to the importation of staple crops such as rice, onions,
and tomatoes.\textsuperscript{213} Food imports, at $13.3 billion in 2015, accounted for 16.8 percent of total merchandise imports, a figure that could increase fourfold in the next 20 years without increases to local food production.\textsuperscript{214} An inability to produce enough food domestically—especially staples—could dampen growth in other sectors of the economy that will be critical for Ghana’s overall growth.

The agricultural sub-sector that may be most impacted is fishing, a vital source of food for Ghanaians. Ghana produces 430,000 tons of fish annually and fish make up 60 percent of national protein intake.\textsuperscript{215} The fishing sector produces 200,000 direct jobs and an additional 2 million indirect jobs in processing, marketing, transportation, and other activities.\textsuperscript{216} However, illegal fishing and over-fishing have strained the fish stock and led to considerable economic losses, due in part to lack of enforcement of laws and regulations on fishing. This is an issue that not only affects Ghana but strains West Africa more broadly: West Africa loses $1.3 billion in revenue to illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing each year.\textsuperscript{217}

Food security through self-sufficiency is one of Ghana’s policy priorities, and the government of Ghana has shown its commitment to addressing issues in agriculture, forestry, and fishing through several national initiatives and international compacts.\textsuperscript{218} For example, the government pledged to invest 10 percent of government expenditure in agriculture annually through the African Union’s (AU) Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Program (CAADP) Compact in 2009, and it agreed to target the doubling of agricultural productivity by 2025 at the AU Summit in Malabo in June 2014.\textsuperscript{219} Ghana’s Planting for Food and Jobs program aims to facilitate distribution of seeds and fertilizers, to help deliver goods along the value chain, and to improve access to markets for 1 million farmers by 2020, with the intention of increasing food security, maximizing agricultural productivity, and creating jobs.\textsuperscript{220} In terms of fishing, Ghana has launched several programs through which it expects to reduce IUU fishing and increase compliance with fisheries laws by 70 percent.\textsuperscript{221} Ghana has a Ministry of Fisheries, which has produced a series of laws and regulations on fishing, monitors fishing vessels, and enforces closed fishing seasons. The Ministry of Fisheries has proactively implemented programs such as the Aquaculture for Food and Jobs (AFJ) initiative, which is expected to train 10,200 unemployed youth in aquaculture production and create an additional 7,000 jobs through the National School Feeding Program.\textsuperscript{222} If successful, these and similar efforts have the potential to stave off food insecurity that could otherwise lead to irregular migration.

\textsuperscript{213} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{214} World Bank, 3rd Ghana Economic Update.
\textsuperscript{216} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{218} Ministry of Food and Agriculture, “Planting for Food and Jobs.”
\textsuperscript{219} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{220} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{221} Ofori-Atta, “The Budget Statement and Economic Policy 2019.”
\textsuperscript{222} Ibid.
The international community has collaborated extensively with Ghana on the agriculture, forestry, and fishing sectors. Ghana is a target country for the U.S. government’s hunger and food security initiative, Feed the Future, through which it has implemented a diverse portfolio of programs to strengthen agricultural value chains, build resilience and nutrition, and strengthen research partnerships. USAID has worked with the government of Ghana from 2013 to 2019 to implement the Sustainable Fisheries Management Project (SFMP), with the aim of rebuilding fish stocks and promoting responsible fishing practices. The SFMP is a $24 million project that is expected to benefit over 100,000 people in the fishing industry by the time it concludes. The SFMP has implemented a Fisherman-to-Fisherman Dialogue with local fishermen to prevent over-fishing and promote law enforcement. The World Bank and the African Development Bank have also funded several projects on forest preservation and sustainable land and water management.

In addition, the private sector has launched several initiatives to promote agriculture and sustainable farming practices. For example, the Hershey Company, the Ghana Cocoa Board, and the World Cocoa Foundation sponsor a program called CocoaLink, which works with over 12,000 farmers in Ghana and sends useful agricultural tips to local farmers via mobile phone. In 2018, CocoaLink released a mobile app and a Facebook Messenger bot with Farmerline to encourage profitable and good practices in agriculture and to incentivize young people to engage in farming activities. In addition to working with CocoaLink, Farmerline is an information service for farmers which uses data analytics to deliver real-time information to over 200,000 farmers in 11 countries. It helps increase access to global markets and allows farmers to order inputs with mobile technology.

Despite the volume of programming described above, warning signs remain. The initiatives undertaken by the Ghanaian government, the international community, and the private sector must continue and be improved upon to prevent irregular migration as a result of food and job insecurity. Migration due to food insecurity is already a phenomenon within Ghana, particularly from the North of the country to the Brong Ahafo region; this could expand to other countries should food and fish stocks be further depleted. Nevertheless, Ghana has plentiful natural resources and the potential to attract significant investment in clean technology and renewal energy. Ghana’s food resources need to be adequately

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225. Ibid.


231. FAO, *The State of Food and Agriculture 2018*. 

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managed and regularized, not depleted, in order to prevent forced and irregular migration and to provide food and adequate livelihoods to the Ghanaian people.

**MINING SECTOR**

Despite the importance of mining for Ghana's economic growth, it could also significantly damage the country if left unregulated. Ghana is the second-largest producer of gold in Africa, and the mining industry contributed $365 million in revenue in 2016. Large-scale mining and support services employ 27,000 people in Ghana, and the small-scale mining sector employs an additional 1 million people. Nevertheless, illegal mining activities abound, and they are harming agricultural production, the environment, and health outcomes for Ghanaians. All these factors could push people to migrate irregularly if their livelihoods or well-being are threatened.

Due to gaps in mining laws, weak enforcement, high unemployment and poverty in resource rich areas, and other factors, illegal mining in Ghana is a significant issue. In 2016, it was estimated that $2.3 billion in gold revenues were lost to illegal mining and that 200,000 workers conducted illegal mining activities with little protection. As illegal mining has increased, cocoa production has decreased and there has been greater deforestation, harm to agricultural production, and water contamination. In 2017, the Ghana Water Company announced that river pollution caused by small-scale mining could push Ghana to import drinking water in the near future. Illegal mining work itself can be life-threatening, and the use of mercury in illegal gold mining can negatively impact worker health and hinder crop growth. If it continues, the failure to regulate legal mining and to limit illegal mining could lead to significant environmental degradation and loss of livelihoods, which could in turn incentivize people to migrate irregularly in search of better and safer opportunities elsewhere.

It is worth noting that much of the illegal gold mining activity in Ghana is conducted by Chinese migrants, an irregular migration flow itself. It is estimated that 50,000 Chinese migrants entered Ghana from 2000 to 2013 for illegal mining purposes. These miners brought with them technology that has increased productivity and made a handful of Chinese people rich but that has left the local population poor with diminished clean water sources. The number of illegal Chinese migrants has decreased in recent years due to lower gold prices; however, the Chinese presence and the impact that it has had on Ghana’s small-scale mining sector is still strong and will require increased regulation and monitoring to scale back successfully.

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237. Taylor, “Illegal Gold Mining Boom Threatens Cocoa Farmers.”
238. Botchwey et al., “South-South Irregular Migration.”
239. Ibid.
River pollution caused by small-scale mining could push Ghana to import drinking water in the near future.

Part of the issue can be addressed by curbing irregular migration from China. Chinese-led efforts to reduce irregular migration are beyond the scope of this report, but the Ghanaian government can also take initiative to reduce irregular migration from China. The Ghanaian government has cracked down on Chinese migrants on a few occasions. Additionally, the Ghanaian government has taken several steps to curb mining activity, such as enacting a ban on small-scale mining from mid-2017 to December 2018, which was estimated to reach 75 percent compliance. In March 2017, the government also launched a five-year plan to stop illegal mining called the Multilateral Mining Integrated Project (MMIP), which is intended to monitor illicit activity via computer software and drones, redirect licensed small-scale miners to areas where the effect of mining activities will pose the least harm, and reduce mining license acquisition by 40 percent.

Despite these efforts, there are significant gaps in regulatory and legal frameworks and enforcement in the mining sector. Licenses take over 150 days to process, there is no legal recourse for people who have been denied a mining license, and the Minerals Commission does not have enough resources to monitor, enforce, and prosecute illegal mining activity. Moreover, there are issues with corruption, such as Chinese investors bribing local officials to allow them to operate. However, the MMIP and the Ghanaian government are taking significant steps to address the issue of illegal mining, with support from international organizations such as the World Bank. If successful, these efforts could prevent irregular migration in the future, but if insufficient or abandoned, they may have adverse consequences on Ghanaians’ livelihoods and lead to greater irregular migration.

EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES
Labor migration to and from Ghana to other West African countries is not a new phenomenon, nor is it at a scale that should be considered abnormal. However, Ghana’s population is increasing faster than the number of jobs being produced, which could potentially have consequential impacts on outmigration from Ghana.

Ghana’s population is projected to surpass 51 million by 2050, up from over 28 million in 2018, with 73 percent of Ghanaians expected to live in urban areas. Such massive population growth has important implications for food security and, more broadly, has the potential to disrupt the labor market. This problem is common across sub-Saharan Africa, where the total population is expected to double to over 2.1 billion by 2050. To meet the

242. Ibid.
243. Ibid.
244. Botchwey et al., “South-South Irregular Migration.”
246. Ibid.
job demand for this population, 18 million new jobs will have to be created in sub-Saharan
Africa every year until 2035.247

In Ghana, the pressure to employ the growing population will be particularly noticeable,
due to widespread informality and job insecurity, few high-skilled job opportunities, and
a brain drain of highly educated doctors and engineers. Ghana’s strong economic growth
and prosperity relative to the sub-Saharan African average has bolstered Ghanaians’ well-
being. However, the relative prosperity has failed to create adequate job opportunities to
keep up with population growth. To illustrate, over 90 percent of Ghanaians work in the
informal sector, and only two-thirds of the working-age population is employed. 248 As a
result, incentives to migrate for job opportunities are high, especially for youth and highly
skilled workers.

The youth population in Ghana is expected to increase from 17 million in 2018 to
24 million by 2050.249 This is significant, given that up to 70 percent of internal and
international migrants in Ghana from 2013 to 2014 were under 35.250 Additionally,
educated youth in Ghana have the highest unemployment rate.251 The increase in
population and continued high unemployment are factors that could contribute to
Ghanaians’ decisions to migrate to a higher-income country, and if regular pathways for
migration are not available, many will utilize irregular means.

Though of particular concern for young people, this is not a phenomenon unique to
youth. In 2017, an Afrobarometer survey found that 41 percent of Ghanaian respondents
considered moving to another country.252 Of those considering emigrating, over 70
percent say they would do so to find work or because of economic hardship.253 This is
further reflected by the significant migration to OECD countries of health professionals,
which has led to a low doctor-to-patient ratio in Ghana, despite high numbers of well-
trained Ghanaian doctors and nurses globally.254 There is also a skills gap, with a limited
number of highly-skilled workers and semi-specialized workers in areas such as medicine,
engineering, and business.255 Without educated workers or opportunities for high-skilled
and high-paying jobs in Ghana, it is easy to see why educated and unemployed Ghanaians
would consider emigrating to countries with better opportunities, even if it requires doing
so irregularly.

247. FAO, The State of Food and Agriculture.
load/Demography/LFS%20REPORT_fianl_21-3-17.pdf.
249. UN DESA, World Population Prospects.
250. FAO, The State of Food and Agriculture.
251. William Baah-Boateng, “Youth unemployment and joblessness challenge in Ghana: Revisiting the issues,”
African Center for Economic Transformation, February 2018, https://includeplatform.net/wp-content/up-
252. Kakra Adu Duayeden and Daniel Armah-Attob, “Afrobarometer Round 7 Summary of Results,” Afroba-
sor_09042018.pdf.
253. Ibid.
Ghana’s Future vis-á-vis Irregular Migration

Ghana’s vast natural resources and agricultural potential present significant opportunities for inclusive economic growth. Unless managed effectively, these assets could turn from a blessing to a curse. The Ghanaian government has taken initiative to address food insecurity, IUU fishing, and illegal mining, but institutional weakness and ineffectiveness threaten to prevent these initiatives from reaching their full potential. The failure of government regulation on natural resources could lead to significant environmental degradation and resource constraints, leading people to migrate irregularly in search of better access to food, water, and jobs. These challenges, coupled with a booming population and lack of adequate job opportunities, could portend trouble in one of Africa’s most peaceful and better performing societies.

If Ghana successfully addresses these issues through regulation, private-sector development, and better governance, it could become an example to follow, especially for other resource-rich countries. If not, the social and economic gains that Ghana has made over the past decades could be imperiled, people will be forced to leave their homes in increasing numbers, and other countries in sub-Saharan Africa and beyond will have to accommodate Ghanaian migrants.

Figure 9: African Migration Routes and Key Third Countries

Source: Conley and Ruy, Crossing Borders: How the Migration Crisis Transformed Europe’s External Policy.
An irregular migration outflux from Ghana could have significant implications beyond the country’s own borders. It is worth noting that Ghana is already a destination country for West African migrants and provides comparatively better access to social services, education, and private-sector employment to foreign permanent residents. This is not a new phenomenon. In fact, West African intra-regional migration dates to the pre-colonial era, and 84 percent of West African migration occurs within the region. Regional migration is mostly labor-related, and it has been partly facilitated by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Protocol on Free Movement of People, signed in 1979, which allows citizens of ECOWAS member states to live and work in other member states.

Without incentives to migrate to Ghana—for example, if recent economic growth stalls or regresses—West African migrants might consider redirecting to other West African countries or journeying perilously to Europe through the Mediterranean Sea (see Figure 9). They would join the more than 800,000 migrants who reached Europe by sea from 2011 to 2017, of which two-thirds came from sub-Saharan Africa. While the number of irregular migrants arriving in Europe through the Mediterranean Sea has vastly decreased since it peaked in 2015, these figures could revert to an upwards trajectory should any further emergency situations arise in Africa, like a resource constraint crisis in Ghana.

On the other hand, a regional crisis leading to a large influx of irregular migrants into Ghana could also have adverse consequences. Ghana’s stability might be compromised if a significant number of irregular migrants journey into the country, accelerate the depletion of its resources, and increase competition for scarce employment. This increased instability could, in turn, accelerate out-migration from Ghana in the longer term.

In either scenario, irregular migrants from Ghana or neighboring countries will likely stay in the region. There is 10 times more regional West African migration than West African migration to Europe, and any changes in regional migration patterns will be more pronounced in West Africa than elsewhere. It is important to note that there is more information and less cost and travel barriers for migrants now than there were just a decade ago. Social media and diaspora support, for example, could incentivize West Africans to migrate beyond their region in search of a better quality of life. Thus, it is important to use existing tools and formulate better policies to improve West Africans’ quality of life and discourage out-of-region migration. Many of these tools and policies exist in Ghana; the key will be their quality execution.

256. EIU, 2016 Migration Governance Index.
258. ICMPD and IOM, A Survey on Migration Policies in West Africa.
261. Ibid.
5 | Addressing Irregular Migration

Few countries have national mechanisms to adequately deal with the complex nature and variations of migration, and the international system is not set up to prevent and disincentivize irregular migrants from living in the shadows. The international community must adapt attitudes and systems to deal appropriately and effectively with the rapidly evolving nature of migration, whereby increasing numbers of people are moving irregularly. The international community should leverage existing tools and best practices to address irregular migration, including trade, compacts, the private sector, civil society, policy, and diplomacy. These tools and best practices should be harmonized with efforts to address forced and irregular migration and displacement and should be tailored to country and regional contexts. Not all tools will be helpful in every context, and some solutions will necessarily be short-term in nature. However, root causes in the long term must also be addressed, including economic stability, peace, and safety.

It is worth repeating that a better understanding of how and why people are compelled to move is necessary to develop inclusive and comprehensive policy at the national and international levels. An overwhelming majority of people migrate in search of better and safer lives; people will naturally move through irregular channels if the root causes making them leave are not addressed and regular and orderly pathways are not available to them.

This chapter presents some of the responses to irregular migration, explores ways to address root causes, and then discusses what U.S. leadership on irregular migration issues could look like.

Out of the Shadows: Responding to Irregular Migration

This report estimates that there are currently over 100 million irregular migrants worldwide. Though significant effort should be made to disincentivize future irregular migration, the international community is already responding to an existing crisis. A number of international organizations monitor migrants, protect forcibly displaced persons, and shape international law relating to migrants. The IOM and other parts of the UN have done considerable work, although the global system is not currently reaching as many people—particularly irregular migrants—as it should. The system is broadly inflexible and does not recognize the fluid nature of migration. For example, by agreed-upon definitions, Syrians in Turkey and Rohingya in Bangladesh are not considered refugees by the countries hosting them, despite the large numbers of people that have fled to these countries in recent years.

While many experts and advocates would likely agree with this assessment, most would argue that the emergence of populist, protectionist, and increasingly anti-migrant political
movements in the Global North makes the current moment a very difficult one for reform. If revisiting the hard-fought global protections for people on the move means lessening those protections, many believe that it would be better to not open them up at all. This is a credible fear; however, the longer this fear persists and stalls reform efforts, the more people will end up in the shadows.

Related to these shifts in political positioning is the fact that public opinion towards migration has also shifted considerably in recent years. Public attitude towards migrants of all types is souring, particularly in places in the Global North that have received a greater number of irregular migrants compared to their neighbors, such as Italy and Greece. Nevertheless, and somewhat paradoxically, public opinion polling still suggests that migrants are perceived to make countries stronger—rather than being a burden by taking jobs and social benefits (see Figure 10).

Figure 10: Perception of Immigration as Strength or Burden, High Migrant-Receiving Countries

![Figure 10: Perception of Immigration as Strength or Burden, High Migrant-Receiving Countries](https://controls.pwrc.info/262/262.png)

Source: “Around the World, More Say Immigrants Are a Strength Than a Burden,” Pew Research Center

Despite the current political climate, there have been some recent global efforts seeking to address some of the gaps in the international system. These efforts have contributed successful best practices, although all are accompanied by significant challenges in implementation. The highest profile and most recent example is the UN-led Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration, a non-legally binding instrument.

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drafted in late 2018 that aims to address the challenges of migration for individuals and countries of origin, transit, and destination. Its companion process, the Global Compact for Refugees, produced a similar document that minimally expands on previous protections for refugees and establishes a Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework to address refugee situations (for more on what is next for the Global Compacts, see Annex A). These recent efforts, especially the latter, have complemented and built upon earlier humanitarian law and conventions on the protection of refugees. Unlike the Refugee Compact, the Migration Compact is one of the first ever global efforts to address the issue of regularizing migration more broadly.

Nevertheless, migrants—especially irregular migrants—are often unaware of the legal protections granted to them by international law, unfamiliar with the limitations placed by national law, and do not trust the institutions tasked with response (as is the case with irregular migrants in Mexico from the Northern Triangle). Irregular migrants often do not care about bureaucratic definitions or where they fall in international law; they care about issues directly affecting their daily lives, such as where to get their next meal or how to move to the next point on their route. The Global Compacts are a step in the right direction but will be most effective if they inspire national and regional binding laws and treaties designed to bring irregular migrants out of the shadows (see Annex B for all mentions of “irregular migration” in the Migration Compact).

The international community’s multilateral efforts alone are not enough to address the many challenges associated with migration, especially irregular migration. As mentioned, these global efforts are non-binding and thus less significant if not followed by regional and national efforts. This will require country-level diplomacy, bilateral and regional trade agreements, policy changes, foreign aid, and other development initiatives. Moving forward, one main focus should be how to bring irregular migrants out of the shadows, as discussed above, especially in an era when more countries are attempting to limit their rights. The other main focus should be how to afford these migrants the opportunity to stay home in the first place, and that will require addressing root causes.

**Staying Away from the Shadows: Addressing Root Causes**

It is important to respond effectively to the irregular migration that is pushing people deeper into the shadows, but it is equally important that such efforts to respond do not crowd out efforts to address the reasons why people leave in the first place. Without addressing root causes, the international community will be left responding to ever-increasing challenges.

A problem is that addressing the root causes of irregular migration—including urbanization, climate change, food insecurity, crime, over-development, prolonged conflict, changing demographics, or violations of human rights—often requires long-term commitments and the deployment of multiple soft power tools (such as aid, trade, finance, and diplomacy) in tailored and sustainable ways. Further complicating issues is the increasingly circular nature of forced and irregular migration; more often than not, people have deep connections to “home,” and many seek to return when feasible. In 2018 alone, nearly 2.3
million IDPs and 600,000 refugees returned to their countries of origin. This number is in line with years prior. However, it is not clear what many of these people are returning home to. The majority of individuals are returning to states that remain fragile, most commonly to Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Chad, Cameroon, and Syria.

Several recent efforts appear to acknowledge the longer-term nature of this challenge. The Abu Dhabi Dialogue, established in 2008, is an inter-regional forum with 18 member states that addresses governance and temporary labor mobility in Asia. Similarly, the Colombo Process, which has met yearly since 2003, is a regional process with 12 member states that addresses labor migration and migrant rights issues in Asian labor-exporting countries. In North and Central America, the Puebla Process, established in 1996, seeks regional cooperation on migration policy and management. Similar initiatives abound.

Along similar lines, during its presidency of the G20 in 2017, Germany conceived of the Marshall Plan with Africa, an effort to build closer development partnerships between Europe and Africa. This initiative is in part meant to tackle root causes at countries of origin in Africa to stem irregular migration and refugee flows to Europe. However, this plan may not achieve short-term results, which means it risks losing political and popular support and endangering long-term objectives. There are also several specific “compacts” in destination countries aimed to help them manage the influx of migrants. One such arrangement, the Jordan Compact, has increased humanitarian and development funding and job and education opportunities for Syrian refugees in Jordan in exchange for more favorable trade regulations with the European Union. The Jordan Compact still faces several challenges, such as high employment of Syrians in the informal sector and low rates of work permits granted, but the non-traditional “tools” it uses offer interesting lessons for other transit and destination countries.

Specific examples of multilateral ideas and ongoing efforts to address the root causes of irregular migration exist in all three countries of focus in this report. In Mexico, non-binding initiatives that share best practices and promote collaboration such as the Regional Consultative Process (RCP) could be introduced, especially since Mexico is party to the Puebla Process (see above), which also has the support of the United States. The Migration Dialogue for West Africa (MIDWA) was designed as a platform to encourage ECOWAS members to discuss common migration challenges and share concerns. It is worth noting that ECOWAS countries promote free mobility within member states, though the region has not seen an increase in irregular migration. Even in Eritrea, the

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269. Ibid.
African Union has an Initiative on Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling specifically designed to address irregular migration issues.272 Such multilateral efforts and fora should be encouraged, promoted, and supported by the international community. The first step to addressing irregular migration challenges is for states like these on the front lines to communicate with their neighbors. Solutions will not always come easy, but they are more likely if parties are in contact with one another.

Other initiatives of note leverage innovation, foreign aid, and local economic empowerment. The introduction of blockchain technology, for example, may significantly reduce transaction costs associated with remittance flows critical to economic growth in migrant producing countries.273 As discussed, greater food security can decrease incentives to leave home. The U.S. government’s hunger and food security initiative, Feed the Future, works with communities at risk of food insecurity to build comprehensive resilience programs, which have led to a 30 percent decrease in food insecurity in communities where they work.274 These initiatives complement longer-term development planning, showing that a resiliency approach to shorter-term aid is important. Private sector and non-profit organizations have also come up with creative solutions to help migrants find employment. For example, Talent Beyond Boundaries is a non-profit which connects highly skilled refugees living in Lebanon or Jordan with global employers. By September 2017, more than 9,500 people had registered and submitted their CVs to Talent Beyond Boundaries’ Talent Catalog.275

Development initiatives are meant to address longer-term root causes of irregular migration, but development alone will not be enough to regulate and normalize existing and proximate migration flows. Economic growth is not a short-term solution either: research suggests that economic growth can increase emigration until countries reach $8,000 to $10,000 GDP per capita.276 Thus, efforts should focus on responding to current irregular migration challenges while getting countries to that level of development as quickly and efficiently as possible.

What U.S. Leadership Could Look Like

As a leading international bilateral donor and contributor to multilateral development institutions, leadership from the United States on irregular migration is critical. Given current political winds in the United States, leadership on every facet of the phenomenon may not be feasible nor practical; however, this does not mean that the United States cannot and should not bring irregular migration issues to the forefront of the international consciousness. Irregular migration is a complex global phenomenon, one that will require the United States and other leading nations to take a leadership role in addressing its root

273. Remittances are particularly important when used for investment rather than consumption. Incentivizing the use of remittances for investment could have powerful economic impacts.
causes and consequences. Despite recent indications to the contrary, the United States does and should continue to contribute to responses to migration.

Bipartisan coalitions of members of Congress have repeatedly protected and expanded U.S. global leadership. The United States remains one of the largest bilateral contributors to IOM and continues to meet obligations to UNHCR and similar multilateral entities. The Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) at the State Department still plays an important role and is the primary responding entity within the U.S. government for international migration. The United States should continue to participate in—and lead, where appropriate—the entities responsible for responding to migration challenges. At the same time, the United States should also refocus its efforts to address the root causes of irregular migration. With arguably the strongest bilateral aid agency (USAID) in the world and many other soft power tools at its disposal, the United States can leverage its historic leadership on development to strengthen global efforts at targeting root causes of irregular migration.

Below is a necessary—though not necessarily sufficient or comprehensive—list of things that the United States should consider doing to address irregular migration.

**Convene a coalition of committed partners.** As was presented in a 2018 CSIS Task Force report on the global forced migration crisis, the international community should establish a coalition of committed partners to tackle the root causes of why people leave home.\(^{277}\) As that report stated, "no country can confront this crisis alone. A coalition led by the United States and its allies represents the best hope for leadership in the global forced migration crisis."\(^{278}\) This coalition should include a specific focus on irregular migrants—especially IDPs—in their solution sets. Building on the lessons from the Alliance for Prosperity, Plan Colombia, and efforts to combat HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria in the 1990s and 2000s, the United States can and should take a leadership role in this necessarily global exercise to address the short-, medium-, and long-term causes and solutions to irregular and forced migration in countries of origin. Countries producing and hosting forced and irregular migrants must play a key role in the coalition, especially on developing and executing country-specific solutions. Not every country is going to require the same solution.

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\(^{278}\) Ibid.
mandate local participation and ownership, addressing systemic issues through private-sector incentives, tax reform, and security commitments.

**Establish an intergovernmental approach to migration.** Similar to the U.S. organizational strategy for “Electrify Africa” (which resulted in the whole-of-government Power Africa initiative), the United States could levy an “all-agency” approach to addressing migration, with a special focus on irregular migration. All U.S. government assets should have a role in executing a broadly agreed-upon strategy to address the root causes of irregular migration. Beyond the State Department and USAID (traditional leaders of previous intergovernmental approaches to similar challenges), the Departments of Energy, Agriculture, Health and Human Services, Defense, and others should take equity stakes in addressing irregular migration challenges if and when appropriate. Similar to past U.S. approaches to combatting global challenges (e.g., HIV/AIDS, electrifying Africa, conflict in Colombia, and migration from the Northern Triangle of Central America), the United States needs to think about irregular migration in the context of underdevelopment and confront it using a whole-of-government approach.

**Increase foreign aid, do not cut it.** As discussed in Chapter 3 with regards to Eritrea, foreign aid is not the only tool with which to address irregular migration. However, it is often an important one. As is the case in the Northern Triangle, USAID and the State Department have a long history of governance, anti-corruption, economic development, and security assistance in the region. The Alliance for Prosperity, a “regional initiative grounded in tough U.S. diplomatic engagement and sustained, effective development investments,” was a direct response to the unaccompanied minor crisis at the U.S.-Mexican border in 2014. Cutting aid to the Northern Triangle—as the Trump administration signaled its intention to do in April 2019—means cutting precisely the efforts that have been targeted at the root causes of irregular migration at a time when support for these efforts in that region and around the world should be increased.

**Use trade as a tool.** The power of economic growth cannot be underplayed when it comes to irregular migration. Having a job (especially one that affords $8,000 per year or more), economic security, and stability are the best methods for eliminating the need to migrate irregularly. Many countries face migration challenges because of lagging opportunities in their country. In partnership with the United States, the creation of job markets can both create counter-incentives to migration and improve U.S. access to emerging markets. For countries hosting abnormally large irregular and forced migrant populations, one primary instrument is utilizing trade preferences that must be tailored to each context. For example, the current Jordan Compact does not adequately meet the labor market needs of Syrians and allows neither refugees nor local communities to fully benefit from the opportunities it presents. There are lessons to be learned from this and other examples. Through trade preferences, the United States can acknowledge and reward positive policies and actions by countries—many of which are dealing with economic and security challenges themselves—that are in effect providing a global public good by hosting large numbers of forced and irregular migrants.

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280. Yayboke, “Cutting U.S. aid to the Northern Triangle could drive more migration.”
Leverage the global system of MDBs and DFIs. The World Bank, other multilateral development banks (MDBs), and development finance institutions (DFIs) can be more involved in fragile states that disproportionately produce irregular and forced migrants. The World Bank, through replenishing International Development Association (IDA) resources, has made an important move in this direction, with $2 billion made available to host countries for managing long-term solutions and to prevent their collapse.281 Other MDBs and DFIs such as the International Finance Corporation (IFC) or the new U.S. Development Finance Corporation (USDFC) could pilot contingent financing schemes to help origin countries prevent forced and irregular migration and to help host countries prepare for future shocks. Significant increases in U.S. and other country funding (e.g., capital increases) to these institutions should be contingent on their adequately addressing fragile states that disproportionately produce or host irregular migrants.

Create a “FEWS-NET” for forced and irregular migration. The United States should explore expanding other early warning system successes to forced and irregular migration. A migration early warning system—similar to those in place for famine—would allow for humanitarian groups to better plan and stem the flow of migration before a crisis gets out of control. Models for such a system exist, as do multiple efforts tracking data on global migration of all kinds.282 The U.S. approach should not be to recreate these efforts but rather to aggregate and elevate their learnings and to utilize the data to predict future forced and irregular migration “hot spots.”

Extend USAID’s presence in “hot spots.” There should be more USAID missions in irregular migration “hot spots” around the world (e.g., the Sahel), and these missions should be tasked with improving understanding of forced and irregular migration producing and hosting contexts. Programming at USAID and across the U.S. interagency should utilize this information to target longer-term development programs at the root causes of irregular migration, including programs to reduce violence, reintegrate returned migrants, improve governance and social welfare, and advance economic development.

Leverage and partner with the private sector. Many of the issues associated with forced and irregular migration are rooted in lack of economic opportunity; even the extenuating factors of extremism are sometimes rooted in job growth. The United States should support the transformative power of the private sector as an additional tool for addressing irregular migration. Regional plans such as the Mexican-led CDP and initiatives to invest in Central America are critical for reducing irregular migration in the long term and should be carried out in close collaboration with the private sector. Foreign assistance should increasingly focus on governance—strengthening business environments and technical capabilities—and other reforms that create an enabling environment for private-sector growth in irregular migration contexts. The United States should recognize migrants—especially irregular migrants moving into regular pathways—as drivers of future economic growth and job creation, rather than beneficiaries of corporate social responsibility.

Importantly, programming should also consider fair treatment of and pay for migrants as standard practice, especially since so many irregular migrants earn income in the informal private sector. Increased levels of formality would undoubtedly help bring irregular migrants out of the shadows.

Support cities and city leadership. While U.S. federal-level and executive branch policy dictates migration programs in the United States, cities are increasingly the everyday actors (and leaders) when it comes to irregular migration. The United States should provide greater resources and federal support to civil society organizations, mayors, and other local leaders tasked with integration of irregular migrants, with more weight given to areas where more irregular migrants are resettling. Moreover, the United States should consider expanding the avenues for regular migration to cities that have an excess supply of jobs and housing and could use migrant talent to boost their economies.

Improve data collection and utilization. Despite being the focus of this report, the issues of irregular migrants are still largely misunderstood and deserve greater study. One of the primary issues around irregular migration is the lagging quality of data, since many people are forced into the shadows by current policy. It is crucial to understand the “how, why, when, and where” of irregular migration to normalize this phenomenon and to prevent it from becoming an even larger crisis. These data should then be made available to researchers studying ways to improve the efficient allocation of people and how best to address root causes. Existing data initiatives such as IOM’s Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM), Flow Monitoring, and the Missing Migrants project could be scaled to this effect.283 An example of productive use of data could be creating an algorithmic skills, jobs, and country matching system for global irregular migration.

Prioritize vulnerable groups. A significant number of irregular migrants, especially IDPs, are women and children. This goes against prevailing narratives that irregular migrants are overwhelmingly young, male, and nefarious (which the evidence does not support). Irregular migrants are actually the most vulnerable people in a society because they live in the shadows. The United States should prioritize protection of the most vulnerable, which often includes female heads of household and unaccompanied children. The State Department’s PRM currently funds IOM’s Regional Programs of Protection and Assistance to Vulnerable Migrants, which works with governments and civil society to strengthen their capacity to identify and protect vulnerable migrants.284 Initiatives like this should continue to be funded and expanded.

Reinforce strong Congressional leadership. The goal of Congressional leaders should be to show and even increase U.S. leadership on forced and irregular migration issues, as well as to identify appropriate targeted increases in foreign assistance, trade preferences, and partnerships with allies. Many of the recommendations above would benefit from congressional leadership; some will even require acts of Congress. Congress should work with the executive branch to maintain multilateral obligations on responding to irregular migration and provide leadership on addressing root causes.

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Annex A | What’s Next for the Global Compacts?

Note: This annex is adapted from a textbox in another upcoming paper by the authors entitled Addressing Future Trends in Forced Migration. It is included here as a relevant reference.

The Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) and the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) are the results of the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, adopted by the United Nations in September 2016. While both compacts spurred from the New York Declaration, they were developed via distinct processes. The GCR was led by UNHCR to support existing frameworks on refugees such as the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 protocol guarantee. The GCR addresses the need to improve data collection, cooperation, and support for host countries. Its emphasis on job creation and livelihoods for refugees and host community members is novel, but it does not add to the existing legal frameworks. The GCM involved much more direct participation by member states and was the first attempt to produce a seminal global framework on migration. It aims to confront root causes, reduce risks for migrants, and address concerns of host nations and communities while emphasizing the values of sovereignty, human rights, and responsibility sharing. The GCM highlights collective commitment and cooperation. Rather than impose guidelines on migration policy, it proposes frameworks for an improved coordinated response to the challenges.

The United States withdrew from the GCM negotiations in late 2017. Other countries followed suit, including Israel, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Australia, ultimately leading to 152 votes in favor, 5 against, 12 abstentions, and 24 countries not voting. The United States also withdrew its support from the GCR in November 2018. Only the United States and Hungary voted against the GCR, with 181 votes in favor, 3 abstentions, and 7 countries not voting. The United States was the first

288. Margesson, “The Global Compact on Migration (GCM) and U.S. Policy.”
289. Nayla Rush, “Global Compact for Refugees Adopted Today,” Center for Immigration Studies, December 17,
country to withdraw from the GCM, and its later withdrawal from the GCR sent a strong signal. The United States cited sovereignty concerns as the reason for withdrawal, even though the compacts are legally non-binding. In fact, it is unlikely that the compacts will ever become binding international law, given that migration is a highly divisive issue in the international community. Rather than infringe on sovereignty, the GCM calls on devising a collective effort to govern migration in a more beneficial manner.\(^{290}\) It seeks collaboration while respecting sovereignty.

Ultimately, neither compact will revolutionize global governance overnight, and their success will be contingent on signatories’ commitments.\(^{291}\) Nevertheless, they set an important basis and forum for understanding and cooperation between host, transit, and destination countries. To carry these initiatives forward, UNHCR developed the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) under the GCR, an adoptable response plan for countries to better manage refugee influxes at the global, regional, national, and local levels. Fifteen countries including Afghanistan, Mexico, and several others in Central America and Africa have already rolled out the CRRF.\(^{292}\) Moving forward, more countries can adopt the CRRF and use UNHCR’s toolkit and good practices through the CRRF Digital Portal, which is the primary repository of information for CRRF implementation.\(^{293}\) The GCR also includes important responsibility-sharing elements, including a proposal for regular ministerial meetings to review progress on financial, policy, and other pledges.\(^{294}\) IOM has a similar information bank called the Migrants in Countries of Crisis (MICIC) repository.\(^{295}\) These information-sharing initiatives are essential to advancing work on the compacts, as countries can learn from best practices to manage forced migrants within their borders.

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291. Ibid.
293. Ibid.
294. World Refugee Council, A call to action.
Annex B | Mentions of “Irregular Migration” In the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration\textsuperscript{296}

\textit{Part 15 of the Preamble}

(c) National sovereignty. The Global Compact reaffirms the sovereign right of States to determine their national migration policy and their prerogative to govern migration within their jurisdiction, in conformity with international law. Within their sovereign jurisdiction, States may distinguish between regular and irregular migration status, including as they determine their legislative and policy measures for the implementation of the Global Compact, taking into account different national realities, policies, priorities and requirements for entry, residence and work, in accordance with international law;

\textit{Part of Objective 2 from Report}

We commit to create conducive political, economic, social and environmental conditions for people to lead peaceful, productive and sustainable lives in their own country and to fulfil their personal aspirations, while ensuring that desperation and deteriorating environments do not compel them to seek a livelihood elsewhere through irregular migration. We further commit to ensure timely and full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, as well as to build upon and invest in the implementation of other existing frameworks, in order to enhance the overall impact of the Global Compact to facilitate safe, orderly and regular migration.

\textit{Part of Objective 9 from Report}

(c) Develop gender-responsive and child-sensitive cooperation protocols along migration routes that outline step-by-step measures to adequately identify and assist smuggled migrants, in accordance with international law, as well as to facilitate cross-border law

enforcement and intelligence cooperation in order to prevent and counter smuggling of migrants so as to end impunity for smugglers and prevent irregular migration, while ensuring that counter-smuggling measures are in full respect for human rights;

**Part of Objective 10 from Report**

Monitor irregular migration routes which may be exploited by human trafficking networks to recruit and victimize smuggled or irregular migrants, in order to strengthen cooperation at the bilateral, regional and cross-regional levels on prevention, investigation and prosecution of perpetrators, as well as on identification and protection of, and assistance to, victims of trafficking in persons;

**Part of Objective 11 from Report**

Review and revise relevant laws and regulations to determine whether sanctions are appropriate to address irregular entry or stay and, if so, to ensure that they are proportionate, equitable, non-discriminatory and fully consistent with due process and other obligations under international law;

**Part of Objective 23 from Report**

Increase international and regional cooperation to accelerate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in geographical areas from which irregular migration systematically originates owing to consistent impacts of poverty, unemployment, climate change and disasters, inequality, corruption and poor governance, among other structural factors, through appropriate cooperation frameworks, innovative partnerships and the involvement of all relevant stakeholders, while upholding national ownership and shared responsibility.