

What a life in the host country: Narratives of immigrants in Morocco amid the pandemic

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The novel pandemic, COVID-19, has acutely affected the lives of countless people worldwide, particularly people with mobile livelihoods such as migrants. Due to border closure, restricted mobility, and economic paralysis, immigrants are left stranded. Neither are they able to return to their homelands, nor are they able to pursue their informal businesses to feed themselves and send remittances to their families. Thus, the labour situation of migrant minorities in Morocco has worsened significantly due to the lockdown. Moreover, they seem to be able to get support and assistance only from the civil community, including charitable organisations and philanthropic associations. It is therefore worthwhile taking a closer look at Morocco's migration policy vis-à-vis regular and irregular migrants, and the role of civil society organisations (CSOs) that defend the rights of immigrants, especially in the current circumstances.

Over the last few years, [Morocco](#) has been both a transit hub for sub-Saharan African migrants questing for economic prosperity in Europe, and a destination hub for refugees and asylum seekers, mostly Syrian and Yemeni families, escaping from the war and looking for long-term settlement in Morocco. In response to the needs of the migrant population, the Moroccan government launched a pioneering policy in 2013, which was ratified in 2014: the National Strategy for Immigration and Asylum (NSIA). It is a humanitarian and

tolerant policy based on a set of recommendations issued by the Royal Guidance, the National Council of Human Rights, the Moroccan Constitution of 2011 and the International Conventions on Migration. The main migratory issues that the NSAI targets include: (1) the management of migratory flows upholding human rights (respecting migrants' rights and fighting against discrimination and human trafficking); (2) the integration of regularised migrants in terms of facilitating their access to the healthcare system, education, training, housing and employment; (3) updating the legal national framework of immigration in compliance with international migration policies; and (4) establishing appropriate economic, social and cultural frameworks reflecting immigration as a source for economic growth and cultural diversity within the country.

There is a plethora of Moroccan civil society associations and international organisations based in Morocco that are active in the area of protection and integration of immigrants and refugees. These national and international NGOs focus their objectives on migration-related issues ranging from legal, humanitarian and social support to free access to health, education and housing services. However, the outreach and impact on immigrants these NGOs manage to have remain unclear and most likely limited.

The coronavirus outbreak has worsened the livelihoods of the migrant population in Morocco by making the labour market even less accessible. It becomes more difficult for migrants to ensure their food supplies in the absence of financial aid from the state. As is the case with Moroccan nationals, many regular migrants have also lost their jobs and irregular migrants can no longer work in informal sectors or beg due to the lockdown. They have no choice but to rely on the assistance offered by residents and civil society associations as the state seems unable to help despite the NSAI. For example, the East-West association and the Federation of Sub-Saharan Associations in Morocco have distributed food baskets, hand sanitisers and masks to migrants. In a similar vein, Moroccan associations such as GADEM (Anti-racist Group of Support and Defence of Foreigners and Immigrants) and its partner, AMS (Association of Moroccan Solidarity) have endeavoured to identify immigrants in need and send them money orders. However, sociologist Mehdi Alioua underlined that 'the challenge is that without a residence permit or a passport with an entry stamp from less than 3 months ago, money transfer companies refuse to issue the money orders of 300 MAD (about £25) sent weekly to needy people'.

Two Nigerian migrants have volunteered to anonymously share their experience as part of the marginalised community in Oujda during COVID-19. The first interviewee is a regularised migrant and a member of the Federation of the African Community in Rabat. He used to work in the informal sector selling accessories and other items. He recently lost his job because of the lockdown. Recounting his experience, he said,

'We are in a terrible situation, with very few food supplies. We people who have residence papers lost our jobs. We used to sell accessories or handkerchiefs in the street. Now we are stopped. The only thing we do is begging or looking for help from people or associations. But it is more difficult for people who have no residence papers here. They cannot move because they are afraid of the police. Very few people who know associations can benefit from food and other things.'

The second interviewee is an irregular migrant who has been living in Oujda for six months and is waiting for the right moment to cross to Europe. The following is an account of his experience during the pandemic:

'This is my sixth month in Morocco. Mm.. Actually, what I see is that Moroccan people are good. All clothes, shoes are given by Moroccans. Actually, during this pandemic coronavirus period, I myself experience very hard experience because we cannot go out to get some money. We stay inside. We thank God we are alive. We only receive help during Ramadan by Moroccan women. They are good and caring, helping blacks like me.'

In light of these testimonies, it is obvious that migrants are having a tough time in the absence of adequate social and humanitarian assistance. This case does really necessitate immediate humanitarian and social interventions by the Moroccan authorities.

To conclude, the pandemic has a great impact on people all over the world, especially those who are on the move. Thus, migrants are terribly affected as they are left stranded in unfamiliar places, living on the verge

of poverty and statelessness. In Morocco, they have to rely on host residents and welfare associations for support and access to necessary services.

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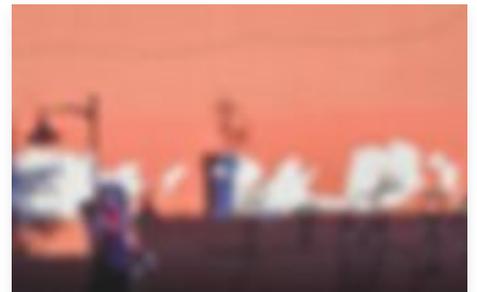
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