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## Migration on the Western Mediterranean Route as “new nomadism”: focus on Mauritania<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** *This chapter explores the links between modern migration and long-standing transhumance movements in Mauritania. In the country, livestock farmers have for a long time practiced internal and cross-border transhumance, to optimize access to water and pasture. This has allowed them to cope with harsh environmental conditions. However, in recent decades, transhumance has been affected by challenges such as climate change and violent conflicts. As a result, livestock farmers have abandoned it and are instead migrating to the urban centres. Mauritania’s economic hubs are also magnets for regional migrants, mostly from other West African countries. This chapter draws on data collected through IOM’s Displacement Tracking Matrix in three Southern regions of the country where transhumance practices are frequent as well as in Nouakchott and Nouadhibou.*

Flanking the Atlantic Ocean and the sprawling Sahara Desert, the semi-desertic<sup>3</sup> country of Mauritania, linking North and sub-Saharan Africa, has traditionally attracted flows of people and goods. A process of urbanization, leading to a boom of the construction sector in its cities since the 1950s, has made this vast country (1,030,000 km<sup>2</sup>) an important magnet for people seeking economic opportunities (Tanguy, 2003).

In addition, the approximately 4 million inhabitants of the country are to a large extent of nomadic origins (Frérot, 1997). The rapid development of its cities, accompanied by the impact of climate change, such as prolonged droughts in the second half of the twentieth century, led progressively to urbanization and a decrease in nomadic life, as a growing number of transhumants, nomads or farmers see themselves forced to migrate to the cities to escape poverty.<sup>4</sup>

While the country’s infrastructure has also rapidly expanded over the past decades, Mauritania’s economy continues to be largely dependent on the agriculture and livestock sectors. Twenty-six per cent of the gross domestic product is derived from the agricultural sector, and both agriculture and livestock provide a means of subsistence to 62 per cent of the Mauritanian population.<sup>5</sup> Specifically, transhumance, defined as “the action or practice of moving livestock from one grazing ground to another in a

<sup>1</sup> The author is grateful to Laura Lungarotti for useful comments and suggestions on this chapter.

<sup>2</sup> IOM Mauritania.

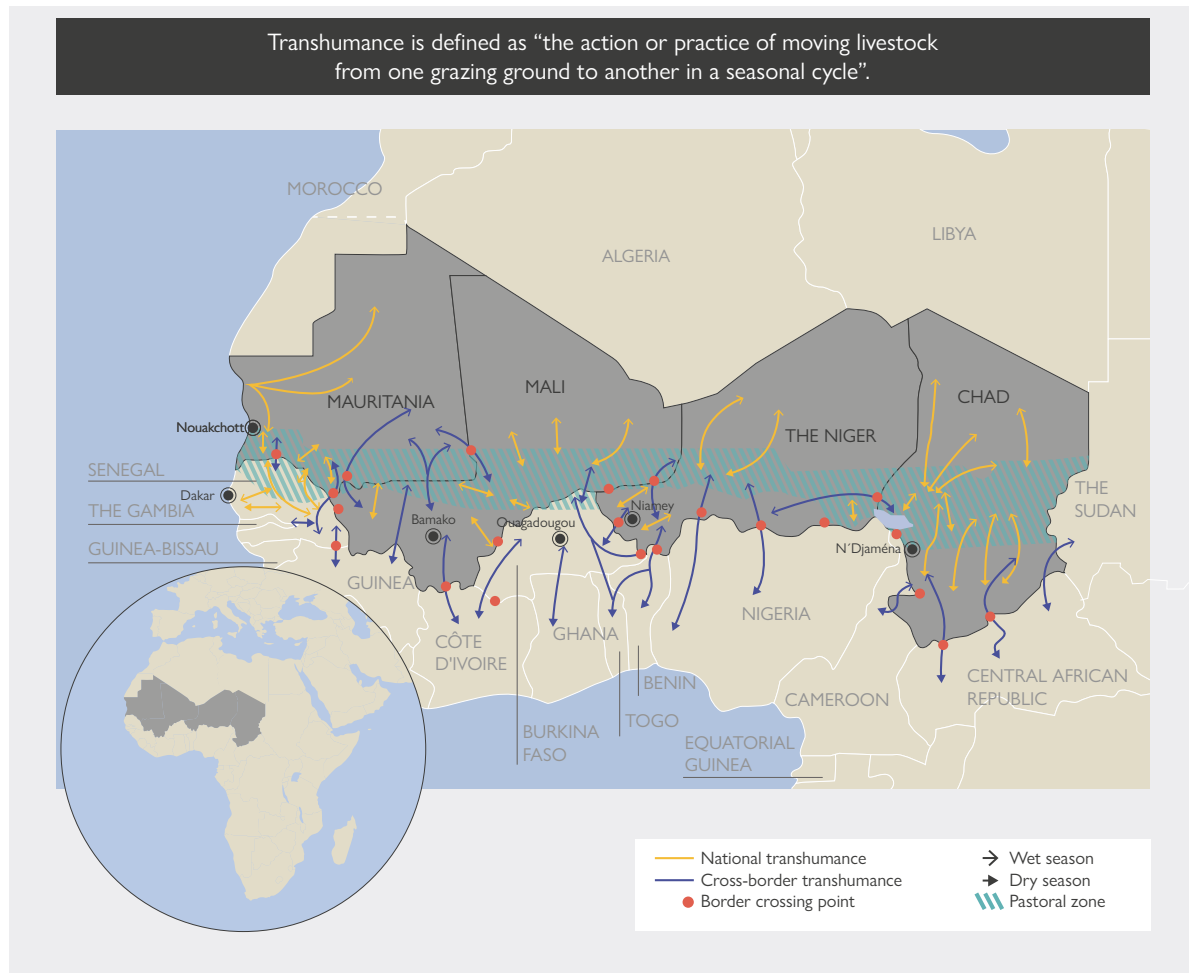
<sup>3</sup> The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) estimates that more than 80 per cent of the surface of the country is desert.

<sup>4</sup> Fahem (1993) explores additional reasons for the decrease of nomadism in Mauritania, such as the creation of iron and copper mining in Fderick and Akjouj attracting a growing workforce; political events, such as the establishment of new States after the fragmentation of French West Africa; and the abolition of slavery in 1980.

<sup>5</sup> FAO, “Family Farming Knowledge Platform”, available at [www.fao.org/family-farming/countries/mrt/en/](http://www.fao.org/family-farming/countries/mrt/en/).

seasonal cycle”,<sup>6</sup> continues to be one of the country’s central sources of income in the twenty-first century. These seasonal movements are undertaken by herders in search of grazing land and water for their animals towards Mauritania’s southern regions, and in its neighbouring countries, Senegal and Mali.

**Map 9.1.** Transhumance movements in the Sahel belt.



Source: OECD, 2014. Sahel and West Africa Club Secretariat (SWAC/OECD). An atlas of the Sahara-Sahel: Geography, Economics and Security. OECD Publishing, Paris.

Note: This map is for illustration purposes only. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the International Organization for Migration.

IOM’s Transhumance Tracking Tool, a new IOM data collection method, aims to study those movements in Mauritania and other countries in the region, to understand their evolution, origin and impact on social cohesion, livelihood and other key development indicators. During a first data collection phase<sup>7</sup> conducted by IOM Mauritania from 18 March to 16 May 2019, 2,200 herds were counted in 10 locations, accompanied by approximately 8,600 people – Mauritians (95%), Senegalese (4%) and Malians (1%) – and 450,000 animals during this two-month period (IOM, 2019a, 2019b). Similarly, later the same year,<sup>8</sup> 9,100 herders and over 713,000 animals were counted in 22 locations<sup>9</sup> during a period of two months (10 November 2019–8 January 2020). The strong seasonality of transhumant

<sup>6</sup> Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries. Transhumance (Definition). Available at [www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/us/definition/english/transhumance](http://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/us/definition/english/transhumance).

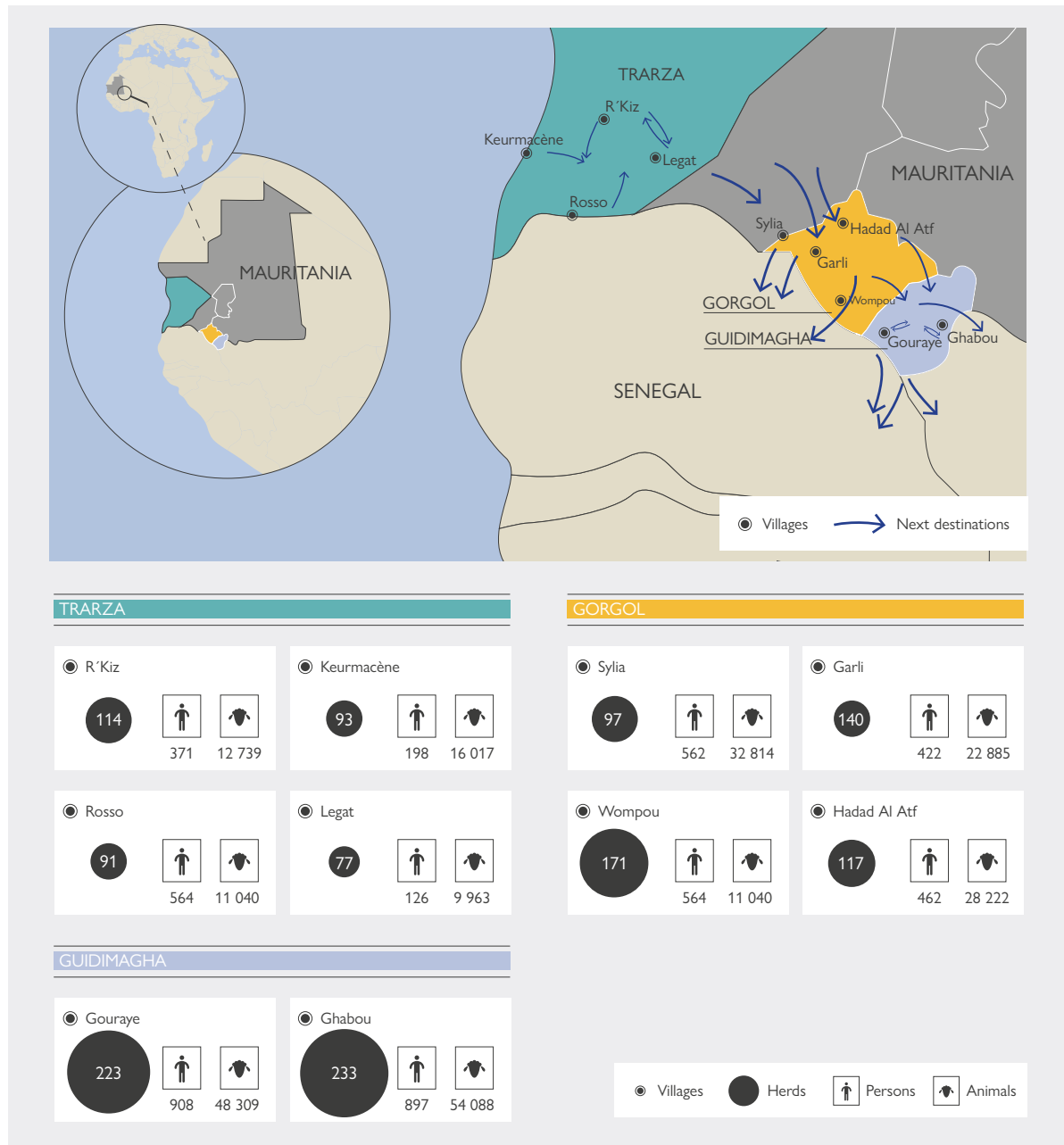
<sup>7</sup> Herds were counted through short interviews for eight hours a day, four days a week.

<sup>8</sup> Between November and December 2019 (IOM, forthcoming (a)).

<sup>9</sup> Accompanied by, on average, 238 people (per day, in all 22 locations). Counting is conducted for five days per week.

movements – with more herders moving south from March to May – is also reflected in the numbers: The average daily number of herders counted *per location* decreased from 18 from March to May, to 2 from November to January. Similarly, the number of animals changed from 1,183 animals *per day and per site* to 721 animals *per day and per site*.

**Map 9.2.** Transhumance movements counted in the regions of Trarza, Gorgol and Guidimagha, Mauritania between March and April 2019.



Source: IOM, 2019a.

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Transhumance has been a long-standing practice in Mauritania and has been practiced by all ethnicities present in the country,<sup>10</sup> involving at times entire families, including children. Livestock farming allows the population to subsist in hostile environments marked by climatic imbalances, which affect plant and animal production, as well as food security. Given the harsh environmental conditions in Mauritania, livestock production depends particularly on internal and cross-border mobility in order to optimize access to water and pasture. As a result, the timing and routes of transhumance reflect the variability of rainfalls, as well as the distribution of water and pasture, which varies from season to season.

In recent decades, transhumance herders are continuing to experience long-standing challenges in addition to facing newer ones. While in many cases farmers let animals pasture on fields after crops, conflicts may arise when sedentary farmers and transhumants use the same resources, when agricultural fields are damaged by herds passing through, or when farmers see themselves forced to expand the area used for cultivation, clashing with traditional transhumance routes (Sy, 2015; Bruckmann, 2017). In addition, transhumance practices in the Sahel are highly vulnerable to climate change (Hellendorff, 2012), which can to some extent be explained by the precarity of a primary sector that is hardly diversified.<sup>11</sup> Recurrent droughts in recent decades (Yacoub and Tayfur, 2016) reduce the availability of resources, increase health problems for both humans and animals, while also changing the routes taken by the transhumants (Maman Moutari and Frédéric, 2013).

IOM Mauritania's Transhumance Tracking Tool (TTT) activities conducted in three regions characterized by strong transhumance presence highlighted one key message: 62 per cent of the interviewed herders mentioned that severe environmental challenges over the previous month affected their migration in a number of ways.<sup>12</sup> In addition, 6 per cent confirmed having gotten into conflict with communities. In recent years, clashes between herders and farmers – spurred in some cases by arms proliferation, and mostly triggered by contested land use and access to water – have been on the rise in neighbouring countries such as Mali and Senegal (UNOWAS, 2018; ECC Platform, n.d.; Velturo and Dick, 2020). In Mauritania, the escalation of conflicts between sedentary farmers and herders, in combination with the vastness of Mauritania's borders,<sup>13</sup> might thus pose a risk for the stability of a country surrounded by security-wise unstable countries across the Sahelian Belt (ECA, 2017).

The reduced availability of resources and the increased risk of clashes in certain areas have led to a growing number of herders on the move seeing themselves forced to cover longer distances to find water and grazing grounds, while others migrate to the city to take up work opportunities in an urban context. The separation between these lifestyles and the transition from transhumance to urban migration is, however, far from clear cut. Many families have adopted mixed strategies to adapt to those new challenges, with activities other than livestock farming contributing to the household's income, such as agriculture and trade, as well as internal or international labour migration (Thébaud, 2017).

Economic hubs within the country are not only attracting an increasing number of (former) livestock farmers, but have also become important magnets for regional migration, mostly from other West African countries (IOM, 2019c). Mauritians – accustomed to populations transiting through the country as part of the intraregional transhumance movements – are now witnessing an increased number of foreigners reaching Mauritania's cities in search of employment opportunities. An estimated 84,000 sub-Saharan migrants are living in Mauritania's capital Nouakchott of 1.2 million inhabitants, while an estimated 29,000 sub-Saharan and 2,900 North African migrants were part of Nouadhibou's<sup>14</sup> landscape, as of October 2019.

The continuously high demand in the cities' construction, fisheries and services sectors, coupled with the country's geographically strategic location,<sup>15</sup> have made Mauritania an important transit and destination country on the Western Mediterranean Route. While little official data are available on this prior to 2018, a majority (75%) of the

<sup>10</sup> Moors, Fula, Tuareg and other ethnic groups account for less than 1 per cent of the total population.

<sup>11</sup> The agriculture and livestock sectors in the Sahel are characterized by an almost complete dependence on rainwater, a limited use of additional external inputs such as fertilizers, an absence of mechanization, and weak links to markets (Hellendorff, 2012).

<sup>12</sup> Lack of water sources and pasture led to the death of some animals, the increase of malnourishment and fatigue. Some herders decided to do cross-border transhumance (to Senegal or Mali), while others mentioned their change in direction within the country.

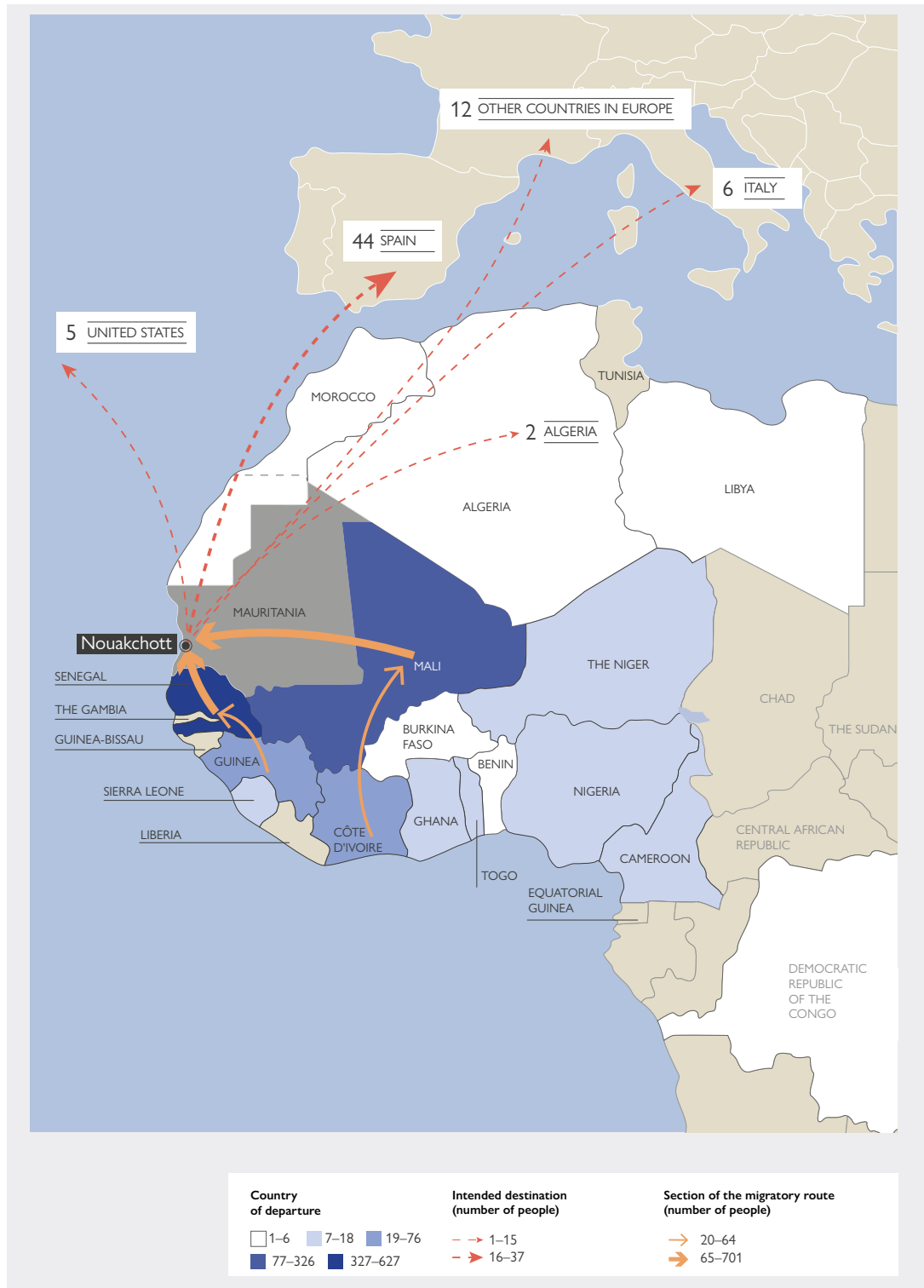
<sup>13</sup> These include 5,074 km of borders with Mali, Senegal, Algeria and Western Sahara.

<sup>14</sup> Population size of 142,000 (Office National de la Statistique, 2019. Nouadhibou en chiffres, 2014-2018).

<sup>15</sup> Mauritania is located 800 km from the Canary Islands (a point of entry to the European Union) and neighbouring Morocco.

migrants interviewed by IOM in Nouadhibou in March 2019 arrived in or after 2016. This could be explained in different ways: either the city hosts mostly short-term or transit migration and/or the overall number of migrants moving to Nouadhibou has increased in recent years.

**Map 9.3.** Countries of origin, countries of transit and final destinations at the moment of departure of individuals surveyed in Nouakchott, June 2019.



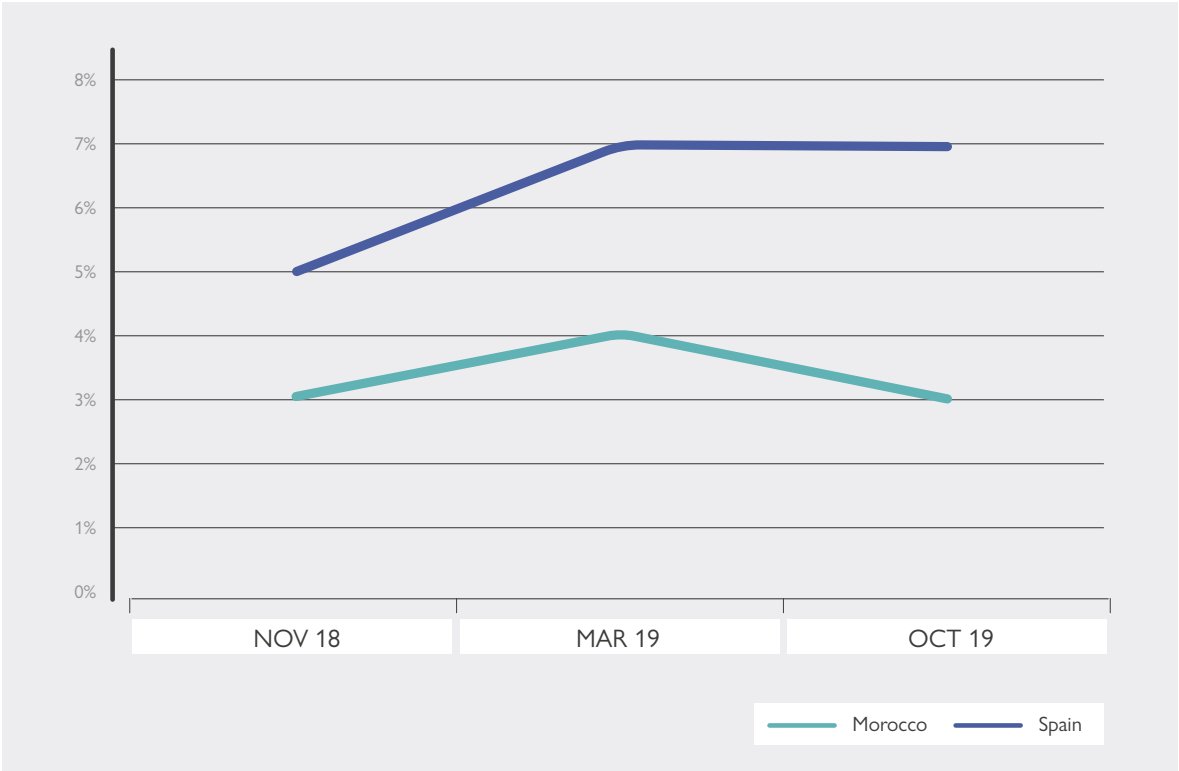
Source: IOM, 2019c.

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Mostly young male individuals from Senegal, Guinea, Mali, Côte d'Ivoire and the Gambia migrate to or through the country. Over two thirds of the almost 1,200 migrants surveyed<sup>16</sup> in Nouakchott in June 2019 were between 18 and 35 years of age, highlighting the fact that the migrant population is essentially composed of youth. In addition, they also indicated being mainly in search of economic opportunities.

Almost two thirds (63%) of the individuals interviewed as part of data collection activities in Nouakchott (IOM, 2019d) left their countries of origin for economic reasons, while another 14 per cent left to join family members. Although some stay in this Northern Mauritanian city for the latter reason, others hope to continue their journey towards Europe or Northern Africa. Most recent data on future movement intentions have been collected during individual surveys, with samples of almost 1,200 migrants in Nouakchott and around 600 migrants in Nouadhibou (ibid.). While 39 per cent of persons interviewed in the capital mentioned they planned on staying, a similar proportion (38%) of migrants interviewed in the Northern Mauritanian city of Nouadhibou intended to leave within the next few weeks in March 2019 (16% to move to a different country). The proportion decreased half a year later, when a sample of over 800 migrants was interviewed in Nouadhibou. At this point, 21 per cent of interviewed individuals planned on leaving, either to go to a different country (13%) or to return to their countries of origin (8%), for instance due to challenges in finding a (stable) job or security-related issues (IOM, forthcoming (b)).

**Figure 9.1.** Intended movements from Nouadhibou to Morocco and Spain



Source: Calculations by the autho based on IOM 2018 and 2019d, and forthcoming (b).

Note: Intended movements from Nouadhibou to Morocco and Spain during the month following the survey, for individuals interviewed by DTM Mauritania. Interview sample: 544 individuals in November 2018, 597 in March 2019, 804 in October 2019.

<sup>16</sup> The number of migrants surveyed per identified area is calculated to represent proportionally the distribution of migrants as estimated during the baseline assessment (84,000 sub-Saharan migrants in the nine departments of Nouakchott).

Mauritania is a country of transit for migrants intending to reach Europe, North Africa or other destinations. It is also a country of origin, as 325,400 Mauritians are estimated to be living abroad, mainly in other West African countries<sup>17</sup> (70%), in the Gulf States (11%), in the Maghreb (9%), and in Europe (8%) (Jiddou and Brahim, 2010; Thiam, 2018). The Mauritanian diaspora contributes to the socioeconomic development of the country through the transfer of remittances as well as of qualifications and skills, particularly in cases where they eventually return to their countries.

These multifaceted recent migration trends in Mauritania highlight the co-existence of different movements, towards the South and the North as well as intranational and international. Mauritania is a country of origin, transit and destination, where long-standing internal and cross-border mobility-based practices are observed alongside more recent migration flows to urban economic hubs. In the wake of modern-day challenges, Mauritania's cities, rapidly developing over recent decades, offer important opportunities for both former herders as well as individuals from Mauritania and the broader Western African region in search of new livelihood opportunities.

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