

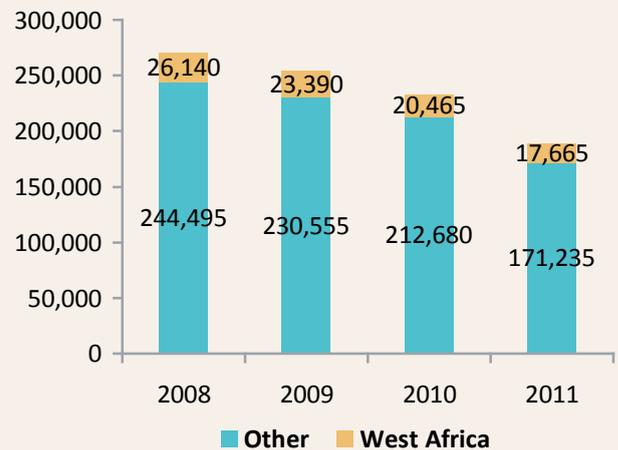
## SMUGGLING OF MIGRANTS FROM WEST AFRICA TO EUROPE

Migrant smuggling occurs most frequently along the fault lines between two regions of vastly different levels of development, such as West Europe and West Africa. Though the Sahara Desert and the Mediterranean Sea pose formidable obstacles, thousands of people cross them each year in order to migrate irregularly. Almost all of those who choose to do so require assistance, and the act of rendering this assistance for gain constitutes the crime of migrant smuggling.<sup>40</sup>

In recent years, about 9% of irregular migrants detected in Europe came from West Africa. Due to the economic downturn, this flow has declined, but unpredictable geopolitical events (such as the recent crisis in Libya) can rapidly increase the demand for smuggling services. The easiest way to migrate illegally is to fly into a country with a fixed-period visa and simply overstay that visa. The visa itself may be legitimate, fraudulently acquired, or completely forged. It remains unclear what share of irregular migrants do, in fact, take this route, but estimates typically range from 75% to 90%.<sup>41</sup> Migrant smugglers make money by helping people to fraudulently acquire visas and coaching them to pass the inspection of border officials.

For a variety of reasons, though, some migrants prefer to make the overland journey to Europe, and migrant smugglers are present all along the popular routes to facilitate their crossing. Some migrants earn the money needed to pay the smugglers during their journey, and may linger for extended periods at various points along the way. Many choose to attempt some parts of the journey unassisted – within the ECOWAS area, for example, no visa is required to cross borders. But today, nearly all irregular migrants

Figure 19: Region of origin of irregular migrants detected in Europe



Source: EUROSTAT<sup>42</sup>

attempt to cross the Mediterranean in the final leg of their journey, and for this, professional assistance is required.

### What is the nature of the market?

Migrant smugglers feed on the pathways of irregular migration – the number of smuggled migrants is necessarily a subset of the number of irregular migrants. The share of migrants who employ smugglers varies in proportion to the perceived threat of interdiction. In other words, migrants only pay smugglers when they believe that they are likely to be apprehended if they don't. As a result, the scale of migrant smuggling is dependent on two things: the number of people who want to migrate irregularly and the barriers to be overcome in successfully making the journey.

Migrant smuggling from Africa to Europe is relatively new,

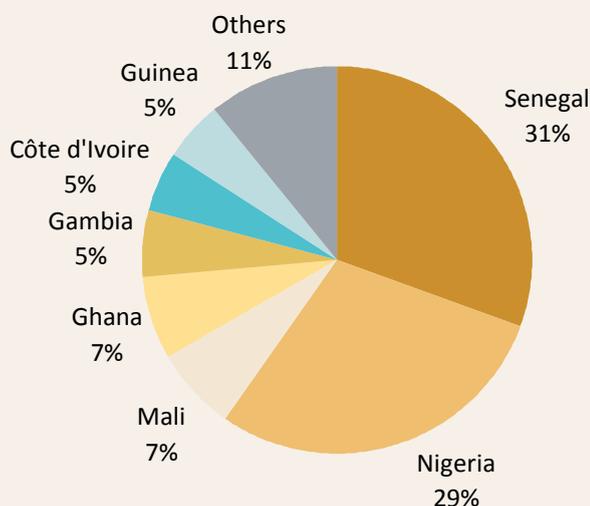
and seems to have taken off in the 1990s when Spain and Italy implemented stricter visa regimes. It was North Africans, rather than West Africans, who initially bore the brunt of the tightened controls, since historically they had migrated in much larger numbers. At first, they chose the easiest route, entering Europe from Morocco across the tiny Strait of Gibraltar, less than 13 kilometres across at its narrowest, or through the Spanish enclave cities of Ceuta and Melilla. With increased Spanish vigilance, the number of routes diversified. As the North Africans changed routes, so did the West Africans who followed them.

The routes taken have varied greatly over time, in response to law enforcement initiatives and shifts in the geopolitical climate. To a large extent, demand for smuggling services relocates whenever there is a blockage. Those who live near a popular smuggling route will travel thousands of kilometres to access a clearer thoroughway if the route near their home becomes blocked. But there may also be an element of opportunism involved. When a route becomes popular, even those who would not otherwise consider migrating may take advantage of the open door.

For example, Senegal is situated 839 nautical miles from the Canary Islands, which is legally European soil. In 2006, a surge of at least 8,000 Senegalese took advantage of this proximity and embarked for the islands, up from 30 the previous year. UNODC research in Spain suggests that many of these migrants were either fishermen or from fishing communities.<sup>43</sup> More than half of the irregular migrants from West Africa arriving in Spain around that time had never gone to school (58% according to one study) and only 50% were literate,<sup>44</sup> which differs from the typical migrant profile (see Box: Who migrates?).

Once migration and concomitant remittances start in a community, smuggling can take on a momentum of its

**Figure 20:** Nationality of West African irregular migrants detected in Spain, Italy, Malta and Greece, 2008-2011



Source: EUROSTAT

### Who migrates?

In 2009, UNODC conducted a survey of migrants in six of Nigeria's 36 states. Most of the migrants heading north were male, 20 to 30 years of age, and single. Most (63%) had completed secondary school, and 13% were college graduates. A UNODC survey at the same time in Mali also found that the majority of migrants interviewed had completed secondary school. More than half of intended Nigerian migrants said they are not poor by local standards. Some two-thirds were farmers, taxi-drivers or petty traders before their departure. More than 80% had family members living in Europe. Most were not fleeing utter destitution, but were making "a conscious choice...to enhance their livelihoods."<sup>45</sup> As a result, the decision to buy smuggling services is likely to be reached after a rational assessment of the costs and benefits of doing so.

own. Since 2006, migrants from Senegal have been greatly over-represented among the irregular migrants detected in Spain, Italy, and even Greece. Looking at all irregular migrants detected in the traditional countries of clandestine entry (Greece, Italy, Malta, and Spain) between 2008 and 2011, Senegalese were the single largest national group, comprising 31% of the migrants detected. Senegalese comprise only 4% of the regional population.

Smuggled migrants are extremely vulnerable to exploitation, both during their journey and upon arrival. It is unknown how many are lost crossing the Sahara, but hundreds die every year crossing the Mediterranean or off the coasts of Senegal and Mauritania.<sup>46</sup> They aspire to invisibility, and this is often their undoing. Unwilling to report abuses to the authorities, they may be victimised with impunity.

### How is the smuggling conducted?

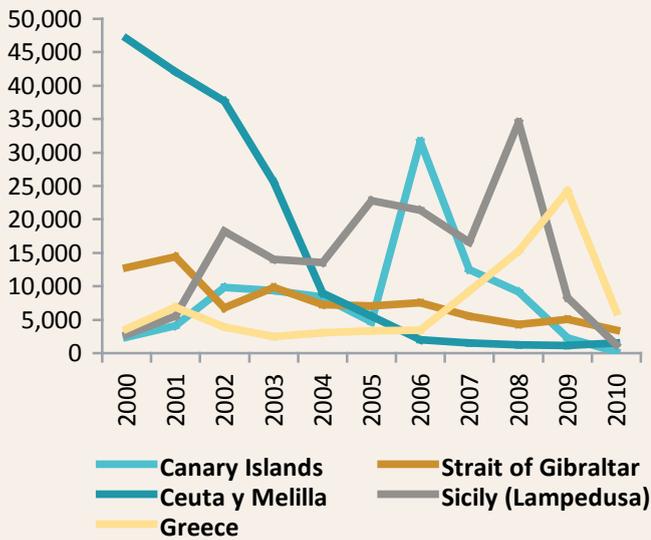
There are at least five routes along which smugglers have historically moved migrants from West Africa to enter Europe without a visa:

- By sea to the Canary Islands (Spain)
- By land to Spanish North African enclaves (Spain)
- By land and sea across the Straits of Gibraltar (Spain)
- By land and sea across the Mediterranean to Lampedusa (Italy) or Malta
- By land and sea across the Mediterranean to Greece

The prominence of these routes has shifted quite a bit over the past decade.

- In 2000, the chief points of entry were the Spanish enclaves (Ceuta and Melilla), small bits of Spanish soil along the coast of Morocco. Over 47,000 irregular

**Figure 21:** Irregular migrants detected entering through key points of entry



Source: UNODC elaboration on national sources and FRONTEX<sup>47</sup>

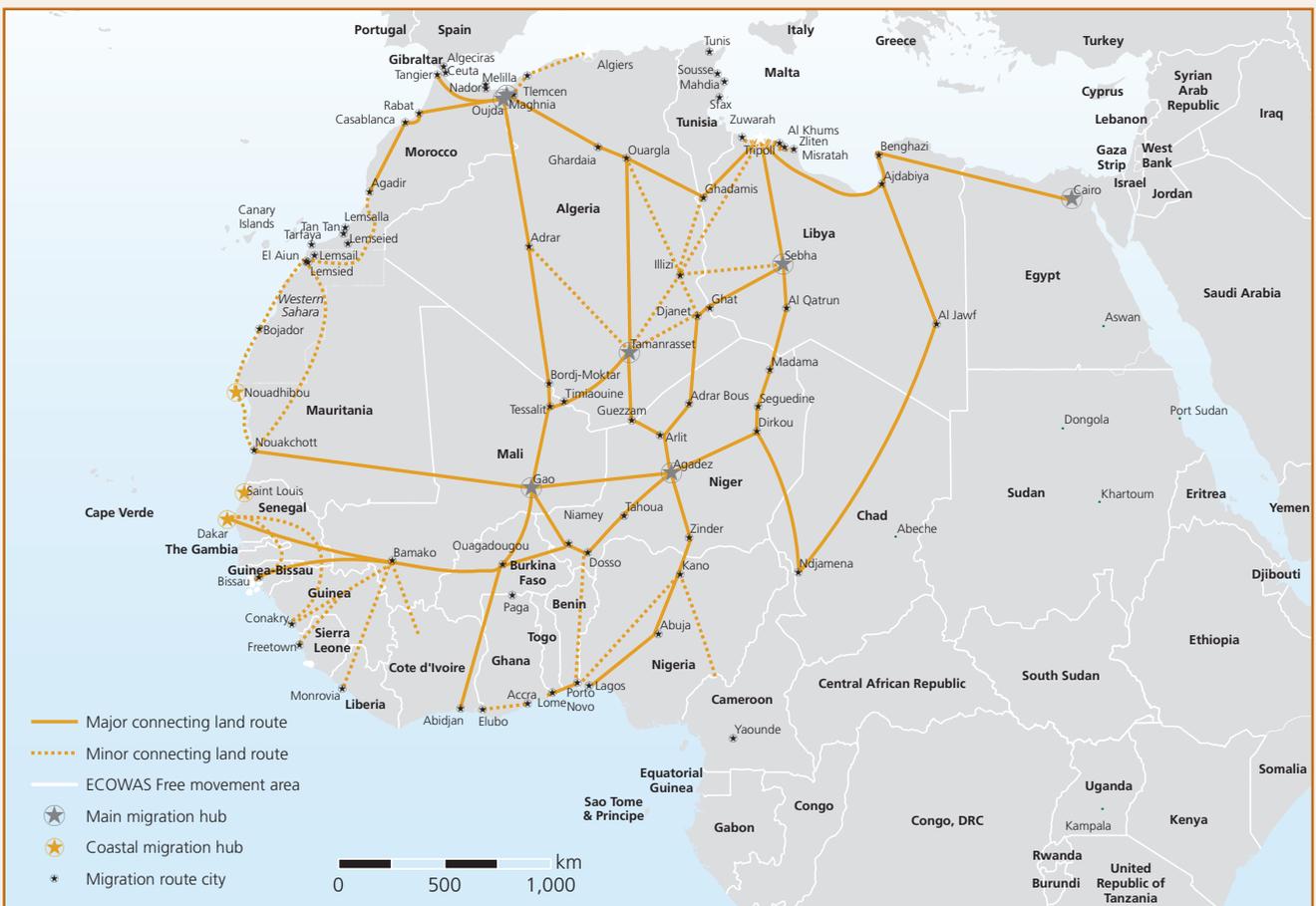
migrants were detected entering the enclaves in 2000. The ease of entry encouraged smugglers to move migrants from as far away as South Asia to attempt the route, until additional fencing was added and controls strengthened. Another 13,000 irregular migrants were detected making the short dash across the Straits of Gibraltar to the Spanish mainland in 2000.

- As the Spanish authorities focused attention on these obvious vulnerabilities, the smuggling routes shifted to the Canary Islands (peaking in 2006 with some 32,000 irregular migrants detected), and Lampedusa (peaking in 2008 with some 35,000 irregular migrants detected). Malta is a place migrants wind up when they “miss” Lampedusa, since being detected there means no trip to mainland Europe. The number of irregular migrants entering Malta also peaked in 2008 (at 2,500).
- Changes in policy in both the Canaries and Italy pushed the flow further east. Irregular migrants from West Africa are now heading towards Egypt with a view to crossing by sea to Greece, or travelling to Turkey in order to enter the European Union by land from the southeast. Detections in Greece peaked at more than 24,000 in 2009.

In effect, the key points of entry have been pushed further and further eastward as enforcement measures blocked the most popular channels. Past routes could become current again if circumstances change.

The route to get to these entry points depends on where you start. Citizens of ECOWAS countries can visit any other ECOWAS country for 90 days before requiring a residence permit, so there is no need to pay smugglers before entering North Africa or departing the West African coast. To access the Canaries, irregular migrants moved to coastal towns like Saint Louis (Senegal) or Nouadhibou

**Map 4:** Irregular and Mixed Migration Routes, 2012



Source: Dialogue on Mediterranean Transit Migration

(Mauritania). For the Mediterranean embarkation points, West Africans need to cross the Sahara. Along the way, they generally rally at several key hubs, including Gao (Mali) and Agadez (Niger), which have been gateways to the Sahara for centuries. To get to the Strait of Gibraltar, they usually proceed via Tamanrasset, Algeria. To get to the Libyan coast, they have historically transited Sebha (Libya) and Dirkou (Niger). Even before the recent violence in the Sahel, the road from Agadez to Dirkou had become hazardous, and smugglers were compelled to follow the monthly military convoy between the two cities. To reach Greece, migrants have moved through north-eastern Nigeria and Chad to Egypt, proceeding to Turkey by land or directly to Greece by sea.

These routes can be clustered into two distinct groups: direct departure from West Africa (Senegal and Mauritania) to the Canary Islands, and the various points of departure along the Mediterranean coast in North Africa.

### *via the Canary Islands*

Only 340 irregular migrants arrived in the Canary Islands by sea in 2011. Although it is not an active smuggling route at present, it could be re-activated if vigilance were to drop or if instability prompted large-scale migration. The situation on the Senegalese coast is probably the best studied, a market that clearly grew in sophistication over time. In the early years, fishermen were simply subsidising their income by dropping migrants off in the Canaries. In the run-up to 2006, though, migrant smuggling became a serious business, involving dedicated Senegalese smugglers and businessmen, not always Senegalese, often with backgrounds in the fishing industry. These businessmen bought cayucos (small boats) from fishermen and used networks of coxeurs (touts) to recruit customers. Several pilots, usually Senegalese fishermen, were recruited for each cayuco in return for a free passage. When these fishermen were unavailable, other migrants were trained for the task. Bailers, usually minors, were also recruited from among the migrants.<sup>48</sup>

After 2006, due to growing law enforcement vigilance, the business moved north to Mauritania. Here, as in Senegal, the heads of the smuggling organizations bought *cayucos* from local fishermen and assured safe passage by bribing the authorities.<sup>49</sup>

Law enforcement pressure has sent the remaining business south again, south even of Senegal, to places quite remote from the Canaries. The length of the journey may necessitate more sophisticated and better-resourced smugglers.<sup>50</sup> Since 2007, there has been a shift from the wooden cayucos to inflatable motorized boats purchased for the sole purpose of smuggling migrants.<sup>51</sup> A greater range of nationalities has become involved: the 208 people prosecuted by the Spanish courts for migrant smuggling via the Canaries in 2008 included Senegalese (72), Gambians (37), Mauritians (25) and Guineans (14).<sup>52</sup>

### *via North Africa*

While smuggling via the Canaries became more sophisticated over time, it remained relatively informal compared to the business along the Mediterranean, where professional brokers negotiate all passage. These brokers, known as “connection men,” are West Africans responsible for collecting groups of migrants and arranging transport with North African boat-owners, known to migrants as “Arabo men.” Certain ports are dominated by certain nationalities, such as Tangiers (Nigerians) and Nador (Ivorians). Malians are said to be prominent at other ports along the northern coast of Morocco.<sup>53</sup>

The handling of finance has evolved into an established ritual. Once the migrant and the connection man agree on a fee, a “banker” known to both is designated to collect and hold the money. The migrant pays normally a third of the fee to the connection man and gives the remaining two-thirds to the banker, to be paid only when the migrant arrives safely in Europe. The agreement generally grants the migrant several attempts for the agreed fee if the first one fails for some reason.

With this upfront money, the connection man arranges the transport, including the necessary bribes for the authorities. One Nigerian connection man, working out of Tangiers, reported paying half the fee to a Moroccan shipper, with the shipper being responsible for bribing the navy and police.<sup>54</sup>

Since it takes time to gather enough migrants to fill a boat, migrants are massed at a safe house for some time prior to departure. Here, they pay perhaps 20 euros per day for their food and lodging, further income for the connection man. They are cared for by employees of the connection man, known as “guide men,” who will eventually be given free passage for their assistance. Their SIM cards are removed from their mobile phones to assure security. Waiting time varies greatly – boats are generally overbooked, so some migrants may linger for weeks. All this time, they remain uncertain whether a boat will ever depart, because fraud is common.

When the time for departure comes, they pay for the trip to the embarkation point, typically a remote beach controlled by the boat owner. There have been cases of rival firms battling over particular stretches of beach.<sup>55</sup>

For the most part, migrants pay for the journey piecemeal, seeking help only when faced with insurmountable obstacles. Francophone Africans may even cross the Sahara bit by bit, paying as they go.

### **Who is doing the smuggling?**

Those who participate in migrant smuggling can be pictured in a pyramidal hierarchy. At the bottom are people whose participation is temporary or peripheral, and this includes a number of active migrants. Above them are the many touts

## One migrant's journey

One Ivorian migrant was interviewed in Algeciras in November 2009, shortly after crossing to Spain. He made the crossing with 67 others in a boat piloted by a Senegalese. He said his Nigerian connection man regularly brought in experienced sailors from Senegal and The Gambia specifically for this purpose. The boat was detained by a Moroccan coast guard vessel, but was allowed to proceed once it was determined that only migrants were being transported. The Moroccans took pains to ascertain that only the one vessel of migrants was being moved that day, as apparently this was all they had been paid to allow.<sup>56</sup> Other migrants interviewed asserted that the vessels on which they were transported were actually owned by officers of the Moroccan navy.

and  *passeurs*, often former migrants who have learned to make a living from the activity. They are surmounted by professional businesspeople who themselves have little contact with the migrants, whose role is to negotiate the means of transport and the bribes necessary to ensure successful passage. It is debatable whether the officials they corrupt should be placed above or below them in this hierarchy, since their relationship is essentially symbiotic.

Under the Smuggling of Migrants Protocol,<sup>57</sup> anyone who facilitates illegal entry for profit can be deemed a smuggler, and thus a large number of people along the route could be considered complicit. Those who drive the trucks, maintain the safe houses, and provide the food all make the business of smuggling possible. Many of the drivers who take the migrants through the Sahara are from nomadic groups, some of who lost their livestock in the droughts of the 1970s and subsequently made a living transporting people and goods across the desert. Examples include the Tuareg in Niger and Mali, the Toubou in Chad and Libya, and Zaghawa in Chad and Sudan. Some Tuareg guides may be tied to the rebel groups or may be veterans of former Libyan leader Gadaffi's Islamic Legion. Also at this level are the many active migrants who aid the smugglers in a variety of ways in exchange for various types of compensation, often smuggling services. As discussed above, migrants may be recruited as touts, "guide men," boat captains, bailers, and brothel recruiters.

The next stratum is the public face of migrant smuggling, the full time operators. Many of these are former successful migrants who have transformed their experience into a livelihood. In Kano, Nigeria, they are known as 'burgers,' a reference to a successful sojourn in Germany. On the Mediterranean coast, these are the connection men; further south, they play a similar role. They organize the trade on the ground, running the touts to gather the migrants, lodging the migrants in the safe houses, collecting the fees, and

generally keeping the business running. Some of the most successful are Nigerian and Ghanaian.

At the top are the business owners, those who make the high level arrangements necessary for the smuggling to continue. In some areas, these people are well-known and respected for their work. In Agadez, for example, they are known as *In Tchaga*, a Hausa expression meaning "business operator." There are perhaps a dozen major *In Tchaga* in Agadez, including West Africans from a range of nationalities. Many of these are former migrants who returned from Algeria or Libya. The *In Tchaga* own the safe houses, known as "ghettos," and so are also called *maassou ghetto*. They often run a side business in procuring sex workers for North African brothels. In Gao and Kidal, in northern Mali, many of the business owners are traders who import goods from Algeria and return the trucks full of migrants.

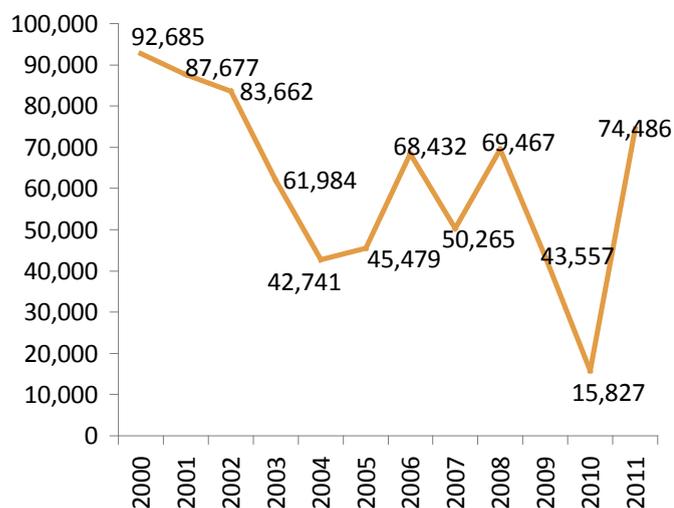
## One smuggler's story

One researcher working in the early 2000s recorded his conversations with a professional transporter of migrants, a Tuareg working for a Nigerian Arab. The Tuareg driver had for fifteen years made his living by hauling millet over the desert roads from Bilma to Dirkou and returning with salt. Since the 1990s his boss, like many others in his line of business, had switched to transporting migrants, hiring his lorry to the travel agencies that had already sprung up in Agadez. "Since then," the driver stated, "I have transported more people in my lorry than all the grains of salt I carried in fifteen years."<sup>58</sup>

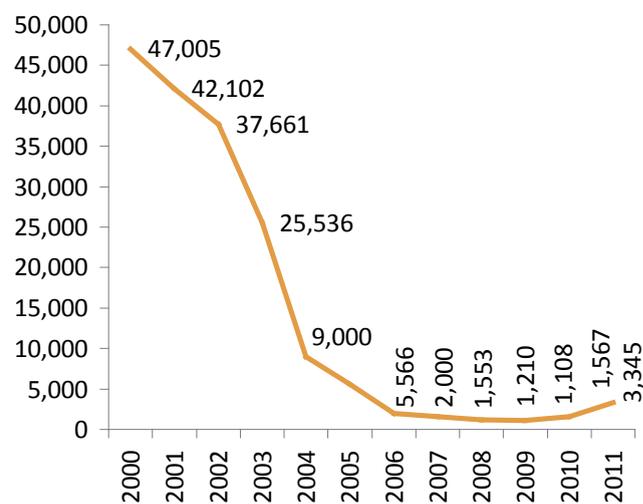
Official corruption occurs at all stages of the route but is particularly obvious on the desert crossing. In addition to looking the other way, officials can be bribed to procure fraudulent paperwork. Of 50 migrants interviewed by UNODC in Mali, 22 men and three women said that they acquired fraudulent documents through corrupt officials. These documents may be sold-on to other migrants after their initial use. Malian passports are particularly sought after because they convey the right to enter Algeria, a right not shared by other ECOWAS nationals.

## How big is the flow?

In the recent past, the number of smuggled migrants detected by the European authorities was very close to the number entering, because migrants wanted to be detected. Being detected usually meant being transported to a major city in mainland Europe, being issued a return decision, and being released. But as European governments have worked to tighten the loopholes, more and more migrants may be seeking to avoid detection. As a result, it is more difficult to ascertain the number entering without paperwork.

**Figure 22:** Migrants detected entering Spain, Italy, Malta, and Greece by sea<sup>59</sup>


Source: UNODC elaboration on official figures<sup>60</sup>

**Figure 23:** Irregular migrants detected entering Ceuta and Melilla


Source: Ministerio del Interior, Spain<sup>61</sup>

All indications are, however, that the number has diminished in recent years. The flow of migrants has been knocked eastward over the last decade. From the Canaries to Lampedusa to Greece, each route was addressed, and smugglers were running out of options. Then came the economic downturn in 2008-2009. In addition to a sharp dip in the number of irregular migrants entering, there were qualitative indications that the downturn deterred migration. Migrants interviewed by UNODC mid-way to Europe were electing to turn around, as they had been told that opportunities were drying up. By 2010, the number of irregular migrants detected entering Europe by sea plunged to less than 16,000, one-sixth the number of a decade before.

But 2011 brought the unexpected: conflict in Libya and regime change in both Tunisia and Egypt. All the established points of entry experienced an increase in arrivals between 2010 and 2011, but the most striking was Lampedusa, which was overwhelmed with nearly 60,000 incoming migrants. But it appears few of these were from West Africa: Italy as a whole experienced a sharp decline in detected West Africans, with less than 4,000 recorded.

In total, just over 17,000 irregular migrants from West Africa were detected in Spain, Italy, Malta, and Greece in 2011. This includes all migrants detected, not just those arriving without paperwork. This is about one-third less than the figure in 2010, when UNODC last assessed the flow. The flow at that time was assessed at 55,000, which would suggest a figure of some 37,000 migrants in 2011.

Not all of these migrants will have paid smugglers, but the vast majority will have. Those who manage to acquire a visa on their own may overstay it without help, but few face the

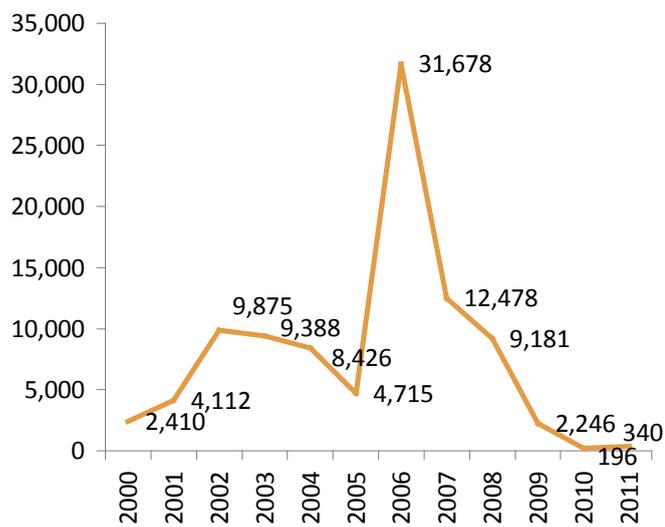
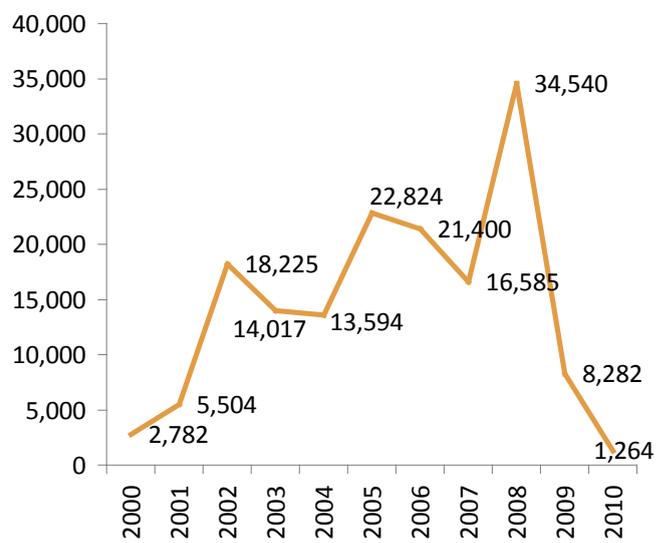
dangers of the Sahara and the Mediterranean without some paid help. The amount paid varies greatly between migrants, but the total was placed at US\$155 million in 2010, suggesting a total of about US\$105 million in 2011.

### Implications for policy

The discussion above highlights the fluid nature of the smuggling routes. They have shifted from the Atlantic coast to points spanning the entire Mediterranean in the course of a decade. The primary driver of these shifts has been successful enforcement efforts. As the routes become more difficult to cross, the share of migrants employing assistance in traversing them will surely increase.

Spain was able to decimate migrant smuggling through the enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla simply by holding the migrants there indefinitely. Since the migrants wanted access to the continent, not the enclaves, this measure (teamed with stronger fences), cut irregular migration by 95%. Spain resolved smuggling through the Canaries through agreements with the Senegalese and Mauritanian authorities for the immediate return of detected irregular migrants emanating from those countries, whatever their nationality. And when, in 2008, the governments of Libya and Italy agreed to a similar return policy, smugglers based in Libya lost most of their market overnight.

But in each case, enforcement efforts displaced the flow somewhere else. What sharply reduced smuggling opportunities was the economic downturn in 2008. In the course of two years, the number of migrants detected entering Spain, Italy, Malta, and Greece by sea dropped by over 75%.

**Figure 24:** Irregular migrants detected entering the Canary Islands by seaSource: Ministerio del Interior, Spain<sup>62</sup>**Figure 25:** Irregular migrants detected entering Sicily (mainly Lampedusa) by seaSource: Camerai dei deputati, Italy<sup>63</sup>