Strategy Notebook 232-B

Global demographic outlook: impact of migration and demographic trends in the 21st century

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Global demographic outlook: impact of migration and demographic trends in the 21st century

Cecilia Estrada Villaseñor

Summary

The following is an overview of the main trends shaping the demographic and migration landscape of the 21st century. It starts from a clear premise: population transformation and human displacement are not marginal phenomena, but central dynamics in shaping contemporary political, economic, social and cultural challenges (United Nations, 2022). In this context, the text offers a critical reading of the role that both demography and migration play in reproducing or challenging the global order.

From a cross-cutting and interdisciplinary perspective, it highlights the need to move beyond the technical and depoliticised treatment of these phenomena, reclaiming their human, conflictive and situated nature. The chapters of the book are contextualised as part of a broader conversation on global justice, governance, human rights, climate change, ageing, forced mobility, access to health and sustainability.

The approach is committed to articulating empirical data and critical analysis, without resorting to alarmism or technocracy. It raises the urgency of constructing new narratives about population and migration, based on the recognition of the real people behind

the figures. It proposes an interpretative roadmap that invites us to collectively rethink the demographic future of the planet from a perspective of rights, equity and shared responsibility.

Keywords

Global demography, International migration, Governance, Human rights, Forced mobility.

Introduction

Since human beings began to travel the world, population movements have been part of their history. But never before, as in this 21st century, have population changes and migration directly affected the way we live, work and understand ourselves as a society. The aim of this paper is to discuss demography and migration in order to understand how we are building the future, how we are protecting human rights and how we are adapting to the new times (International Organisation for Migration [IOM], 2014).

Demography, as a discipline that studies the dynamics of human populations, takes on special relevance in the current international context, characterised by rapid and profound changes in its fundamental components: fertility, mortality, marriage and, increasingly, migratory movements. In recent decades, the demographic transition—a process initially confined to the most developed countries—has spread universally, albeit at very unequal rates and with very different characteristics across regions and countries (Castles, De Haas and Miller, 2020).

In this scenario, the world population has grown from 2.5 billion in 1950 to over 8 billion in 2022 and is projected to reach 9.7 billion in 2050, with a possible peak of 10.4 billion by the 2080s. However, this growth is not uniform: while regions such as Europe are experiencing stagnation and population ageing, the African continent continues to have high fertility rates and rapid population growth, which suggests significant imbalances in the global distribution of the population (UN News, 2022).

In this context, international migration emerges as a central phenomenon for understanding contemporary demographics. Not only does it help to mitigate population decline in ageing regions, but it also poses challenges in terms of social integration, rapid urbanisation and the management of cultural diversity. Furthermore, factors such as climate change, political instability and armed conflict intensify the displacement of people, creating an increasingly complex and changing international demographic landscape (Bonet Pérez, 2003).

Thus, addressing demography in an international context involves analysing not only quantitative trends in population growth and

distribution, but also human mobility processes and their social, economic and political implications.

Comparison of population growth rates between regions of the world

Population growth rates vary between regions of the world, reflecting differences in fertility, mortality, ageing and, of course, migration. Africa has the highest annual growth rate, at 2.29% in 2025. This growth is driven by a high fertility rate (3.95 children per woman) and a young population (median age of 19.3 years). Africa is the only major region that continues to experience rapid population growth1.

Asia, although home to most of the world's population, has a much more moderate growth rate of 0.59% per year. Its fertility rate is 1.87 children per woman, close to or below the replacement level in many countries, and the median age is 32.5 years2.

Europe stands out for its negative growth: by 2025, the European population will decline at an annual rate of -0.09%. Fertility is low (1.41 children per woman) and the median age is the highest in the world (42.8 years), reflecting a marked ageing of the population3.

Latin America and the Caribbean have an intermediate growth rate of 0.67% per year, with a fertility rate of 1.78 children per woman and a median age of 31.7 years. Population growth has been declining steadily in recent decades4.

North America (United States and Canada) is growing at a rate of 0.58% per year, with a fertility rate of 1.59 children per woman and a median age of 38.7 years. Growth depends largely on immigration5.

Oceania shows an annual growth rate of 1.13%, with a fertility rate of 2.13 children per woman6.

[1] See: global meter in figures. [Accessed: 8 May 2025]. Available at: https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/population-by-region/

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] *Ibid.*

Region	Annual growth rate (2025)	Fertility (children/ woman)	Median age (years)
Africa	**2,29 %**	**3,95**	**19,3**
Asia	**0,59 %**	**1,87**	**32,5**
Europe	**-0,09 %**	**1,41**	**42,8**
Latin America and the Caribbean	**0,67 %**	**1,78**	**31,7**
North America	**0,58 %**	**1,59**	**38,7**
Oceania	**1,13 %**	**2,13**	**33,4**

Table 1. Annual growth in comparative demographic terms by continent. *Source:* own elaboration. [Accessed: 8 May 2025]. Available at: https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/population-by-region/

In this context, a question arises: how do these demographic changes manifest themselves in the societies of countries receiving immigrants? And more importantly, what is the relationship between migration policies, security and national stability?

Migration policies have been the subject of numerous studies that highlight their close relationship with regional security and stability, as they have a direct impact on risk management and international cooperation mechanisms. In a global context marked by intensified migration flows and the diversification of their causes, migration governance has become a strategic focus for states and regions, especially in scenarios of political polarisation and demographic challenges (Arango, 2003).

One of the predominant approaches in recent decades has been the securitisation of migration. Many states have associated migration, particularly irregular migration, with threats to national security, such as terrorism, organised crime or human trafficking. This perspective has justified the adoption of increasingly restrictive policies and the strengthening of border controls. However, evidence shows that these approaches do not always succeed in reducing migration flows or guaranteeing higher levels of security and, on occasion, generate counterproductive effects, such as increased vulnerability of migrants and the proliferation of irregular routes (Castles, De Haas and Miller, 2020).

On the other hand, migration has been used as a political tool in international relations. Some countries, such as Morocco, have

used the control of migration flows to Europe as a tool for negotiation or political pressure with the European Union and its member states. This instrumentalisation can lead to diplomatic and humanitarian crises, increasing regional instability and hindering effective cooperation (Estrada Villaseñor *et al.,* 2023).

Restrictive migration policies also have a direct impact on social challenges and the vulnerability of migrants. By limiting legal channels of mobility, they encourage the emergence of trafficking and exploitation networks and generate social tensions in receiving countries. Furthermore, the lack of cooperation and comprehensive policies can overwhelm asylum and social protection systems, affecting internal cohesion and the stability of states (IOM, 2014).

Effective management of migration flows requires strong regional cooperation, aimed at addressing the structural causes of migration, protecting human rights and sharing responsibilities. This cooperative approach contributes to regional stability and security, while enabling a more balanced and sustainable response to the demographic and social challenges posed by international migration (Bonet Pérez, 2003).

With this idea in mind, this monograph aims to offer a broad and intimate view of the major changes we are experiencing. We look not only at the cold numbers, but also at the human stories behind them. We are interested in understanding the risks, yes, but also in discovering the opportunities that this unique moment offers us to build more just and open societies.

The data speaks for itself: at the end of 2024, there were more than 8.1 billion people in the world (UN, 2024), and more than 120 million had been forced to leave their homes (UNHCR, 2024). At the same time, we see how Europe and Asia are ageing, while Africa is bursting with youthful energy; how more and more people are living in cities; and how wars and climate change are moving millions of people from one place to another.

This monograph is organised into three parts. First, we review general trends in the world's population. Then, we focus on migration and its impact on different regions. Finally, we address the challenges that these changes bring in terms of human rights, the economy and social cohesion. Each chapter, written by researchers and academics, offers a different perspective, from the most general to the most everyday. The aim is that, by the end of the

book, we will have a better understanding of the world we live in and the one we are building.

To achieve the goal of portraying the complexity of demography, especially in the case of people in situations of mobility facing different security challenges (for people in transit and for the receiving population of immigrants), we aim to address the issue by presenting the international and structural frameworks within which the circumstances take place. The legal framework is indispensable, as are the conceptual frameworks and international treaties.

Furthermore, this monograph proposes, from its initial presentation, to provide different perspectives given the current circumstances through the presentation of several case studies.

As a guest contributor to this material, we have Joaquín Leguina, who offers a critical look at the demographic situation in Spain and Europe in his chapter entitled "Demography and the politicisation of immigration", warning about the ageing population and the paradox of rejecting migration when it is most needed. Based on specific data, he analyses the consequences of a persistently low birth rate and suggests how migration could be part of the solution if it is approached with a forward-looking vision rather than with fear.

He begins by highlighting how the demographic transition, characterised by declining fertility and mortality, has spread to almost the entire planet. Although there are still regions with high birth rates, such as Central Africa, the global trend is downward. This phenomenon has led to a growing imbalance between regions: while Europe and East Asia are ageing and declining, Africa is growing rapidly.

It highlights the drastic decline in fertility worldwide, with special mention of Spain, where the rate is among the lowest in the world (1.29 children per woman in 2024).

The author describes how Spanish demographics have entered a period of population decline that has only been offset by the arrival of immigrants. Added to this is the ageing population, low marriage rates and a changing family model. He also analyses the impact of COVID-19, which disproportionately affected the elderly population and caused a notable drop in life expectancy.

Leguina contextualises the European case as an ageing region which, without immigration, would have seen its population

decline in recent decades. He mentions the cases of Eastern European countries, with population losses due to low birth rates and emigration, and attempts to reverse the situation through pro-natalist policies.

He analyses how immigration has become a central theme in political discourse, especially with the rise of parties such as Vox. He emphasises the gap between the optimistic projections of official bodies (such as the INE) and the real difficulties in achieving these levels of effective integration. He warns that the problem is not immigration itself, but the lack of integration and social cohesion.

Nuria Ferré titles her chapter "A global view of demography and the refugee population". In it, she focuses on the millions of refugees and displaced people who are often invisible in studies and policies, despite being an essential part of the new human map of the planet. By showing how most refugees are in impoverished countries, her chapter forces us to rethink what we mean by "international solidarity" and what the responsibilities of more developed countries are.

This chapter offers a multidimensional analysis of forced displacement around the world, highlighting its demographic magnitude, social consequences and the challenges it poses for reception systems and international protection frameworks. The author argues that, despite their growing relevance, forcibly displaced people continue to be ignored in traditional demographic studies.

Although more than 120 million people are displaced (UNHCR, 2024), this population is not usually included in censuses or projections, making it difficult to include them in public policies. Ferré points out that this omission exacerbates their exclusion and vulnerability, as they are not considered in health, education or employment systems.

Five categories of displaced people are presented: refugees, asylum seekers, people in a refugee-like situation, internally displaced people and those with similar needs. It highlights that more than 70% of the refugee population are women and children, reflecting gender dynamics and specific violence. In addition, internally displaced people are the largest group, with 68.3 million people, often invisible to their own states.

Seventy-five per cent of refugees are in low- or middle-income countries, creating a disproportionate burden. Countries such as

Iran, Turkey, Colombia and Germany host millions, while others such as Aruba and Lebanon have high per capita proportions. The challenges of registration, lengthy asylum processes and the existence of refugee camps that perpetuate exclusion are highlighted.

In this chapter, Ferré examines the three traditional pathways to durable solutions: local integration, voluntary return and resettlement, as well as new complementary pathways (humanitarian visas, work programmes, etc.). All of these are progressing at a much slower pace than the growth of displacement and depend on the political will of states. He provides statistics: only 1% of displaced people manage to return to their country.

In the next chapter, Óscar Garrido, with "Africa, rise up! The 22nd century will be African", takes us to Africa, a young and growing continent that could be the heart of the world in a few decades. His analysis shows the hopes and challenges that this demographic energy brings, and how it can influence migration to Europe and other regions. He also highlights the importance of taking advantage of the demographic dividend to invest in education, health, technology and energy transition.

It offers a comprehensive analysis of population growth in sub-Saharan Africa, addressing its social, economic and geopolitical implications. The central thesis is that, far from being a problem, the continent's demographic dynamism can become its greatest asset if accompanied by appropriate policies that promote industrialisation, education and regional integration.

Sub-Saharan Africa is the only region in the world that will continue to grow in population until the end of the 21st century. It is projected to reach between three and four billion inhabitants by 2100. This *population explosion* contrasts with the stagnation or decline of regions such as Europe, China and Latin America.

Although fertility rates remain high, they are already declining. Countries such as Kenya have gone from 6.7 children per woman in 1989 to 3.1 in 2024, with clear differences between urban and rural areas. Education and delayed motherhood are key factors in this process.

The chapter highlights the potential of the demographic dividend: a window of opportunity for economic growth, thanks to the high proportion of young people of working age.

In Europe, Andreu Domingo and Gemma Pinyol-Jiménez, in their chapter "Demography and Migration Governance in the 21st Century in the European Union: A Challenge for Democracy?", explain how population ageing and fear of migration are reshaping politics and testing the common European project. They focus on the tension between the real need for immigration to sustain the productive and pension systems, and the political use of migration as an instrument of polarisation and fear.

This chapter addresses the complex demographic challenges facing the European Union in the context of population ageing, low fertility and strong regional development asymmetries. In this context, migration becomes a key variable for the sustainability of welfare systems and the balance of European economies. However, the management of migration is marked by a high degree of political polarisation, making it difficult to reach consensus on a common approach.

The authors analyse how the migration debate in the EU oscillates between two opposing narratives: one that defends the potential of immigration as a driver of repopulation and economic revitalisation, and another that instrumentalises it as a threat to identity or security. This polarisation has been reinforced by the rise of populist and Eurosceptic parties, which hinder the implementation of inclusive and sustainable migration policies.

The chapter also examines the tensions in the multilevel governance of migration within the EU, where national governments dominate border control, while local administrations are responsible for integration. Against this backdrop, the chapter raises a crucial question: can the current management of migration and demographic flows be sustained without undermining the democratic quality of the European project?

The chapter by Domingo and Pinyol-Jiménez acts as an analytical hinge between the macro-demographic debates in the monograph and the political implications of migration in contemporary democratic states. Their focus on political polarisation around migration in Europe perfectly complements the warnings raised by Joaquín Leguina, who also analyses the electoral instrumentalisation of the migration phenomenon in the Spanish case.

Rocío de los Reyes brings us closer to Latin America, a region marked by migration between neighbouring countries and the exodus of millions of people. Her perspective highlights the enor-

mous challenges faced by both those who migrate and the countries that receive them, which often lack ready-made systems.

She also highlights the solidarity networks that emerge between communities and the importance of building fair and sustainable regional reception systems. Her chapter, entitled "Latin America and the Caribbean on the Demographic Board: Ageing, Migration and Regional Power", addresses the region in its various dimensions.

The Latin American and Caribbean region is undergoing a rapid demographic transition that has radically transformed its population profile in recent decades. Historically characterised by high growth and birth rates, it is now facing a process of progressive ageing. This change is evident in the dramatic decline in fertility, which has fallen from 5.9 children per woman in 1950 to 1.85 in 2023, falling below the replacement level in most countries. At the same time, life expectancy has increased steadily, exceeding 75 years on average in the region, while mortality has declined, slowing population growth. Projections indicate that countries such as Cuba and Uruguay could experience negative population growth before 2070, anticipating challenges similar to those faced by ageing European societies.

This process of demographic transformation is not homogeneous across the region but rather coexists with very different realities. On the one hand, there are countries with ageing population structures, such as Chile, Uruguay and Cuba, and on the other, nations that are still young and demographically dynamic, such as Guatemala and Bolivia. Ageing is occurring in a context of marked structural inequalities and without the consolidation of solid social protection systems. More than 55% of the regional workforce is employed in the informal sector, which weakens tax collection and jeopardises the sustainability of social security and health systems. This structural vulnerability is exacerbated by the lack of universal coverage and the inadequacy of public policies aimed at protecting the sectors most affected by the demographic transition.

In this scenario, migration emerges as a central geostrategic variable. It is no longer just a social or economic phenomenon, but a structural and political factor that affects the stability and international positioning of countries. Latin America is simultaneously a region of origin, transit and destination for migratory flows, which complicates the management and impact of these movements.

The Venezuelan exodus, which exceeds 7.7 million people, and the mass migration from the Northern Triangle of Central America are paradigmatic examples of how political, economic and security crises generate large-scale displacement. In addition, there is a growing migration of skilled young people to Europe and Asia, a phenomenon that contributes to the so-called "brain drain" and poses additional challenges for regional development.

The demographic reconfiguration of Latin America and the Caribbean poses unprecedented challenges for social sustainability, governance and the international integration of states. The interaction between ageing, inequality and migration makes population a strategic variable of contemporary power, forcing a rethinking of public policies and development strategies in an increasingly competitive and uncertain global context.

From Spain, Yoan Molinero addresses the answer to a question in his chapter: "Who works in Spanish agriculture? Fragmentation, partiality, opacity and lack of reliable data on migrant workers in a key sector for the State and the EU", in which he analyses how the Spanish countryside depends on migrant workers and how the lack of clear data makes it difficult to improve their working conditions. His chapter sheds light on a key sector for the economy, which functions thanks to the efforts of thousands of migrants, often in precarious conditions, and on establishing fair, transparent and sustainable recruitment systems.

This chapter analyses the structural link between migration and agricultural work in Spain, highlighting how the sector has become a major employer of migrants, mostly young men, in precarious conditions and with little statistical visibility. The author offers a rigorous study of the available data sources, denouncing their fragmentation and opacity, which limits understanding and governance of the phenomenon.

However, Spanish agriculture has undergone a profound structural transformation in recent decades, moving from a traditional family farming model to an intensive industrial one. This change has been strongly driven by the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and integration into the European common market, which has favoured modernisation and productive specialisation. The new model requires large numbers of low-cost seasonal workers, which is why the hiring of migrant workers has become a structural and essential element for the functioning of the entire sector.

Provincial analysis reveals different profiles of migrant agricultural workers in the main recruitment areas, such as Murcia, Huelva, Jaén, Almería and Seville. Moroccan men between the ages of 25 and 44 predominate, although in Huelva there is a significant female presence, as a result of recruitment programmes in the countries of origin aimed at harvesting red fruits. The differences in gender, age and national origin highlight the diversity and complexity of the migratory phenomenon in the agricultural sector, as well as the need for policies that guarantee decent working conditions and effective social integration.

The demographic and migratory sphere also encompasses religion, which is why Juan Mora, in his chapter entitled "Religion and migration: Interactions and their influence on integration", reflects on religion and migration, showing how human flows also transform our beliefs, customs and ways of living together. Far from the stereotypes often associated with immigration and religion as sources of conflict, Mora explores spaces for dialogue, coexistence and mutual enrichment, where migrants bring new forms of spirituality and ways of living their faith.

This chapter explores how religion influences the entire migration process, from the decision to migrate to integration in the host country. The central thesis is that religion not only accompanies the migration experience, but also acts as an identity, social and political channel that can facilitate—or hinder—integration.

It shows how religion is present from the moment of migration to arrival and settlement. Migrants tend to move to regions where their religion is dominant, but they also generate new religious expressions and reconstruct practices in adverse contexts. It mentions the "circulatory territory" (Tarrius, 2000), where migrants symbolically inhabit two worlds.

Shreya Srivastava and Adam Dubin remind us that migration is not the same for everyone: in India, many migrant women see their reproductive rights violated, highlighting the need for fairer and more gender-sensitive policies. Their chapter, entitled "Access to reproductive rights in India: a socio-legal analysis of the challenges faced by migrant populations," highlights the intersection between migration, health, rights, and inequality, showing that major global debates also have consequences for the bodies and lives of specific individuals.

The chapter offers a socio-legal analysis of the challenges faced by migrant women in India in accessing their reproductive rights,

with a special focus on the right to abortion. The text starts from the premise that, although international human rights frameworks guarantee the protection of socio-economic rights for all people, regardless of their migration status, in practice, migrant women—both internal and international—experience exclusion, discrimination and significant barriers to accessing health services, housing and labour protection.

It highlights that migrant women tend to be overrepresented in informal and precarious jobs, lacking legal protection and effective access to sexual and reproductive health services. Factors such as lack of documentation, constant mobility, discrimination and the absence of inclusive public policies exacerbate their vulnerability. In the case of India, internal female migration is closely linked to marriage, which increases their economic and social dependence and limits their autonomy in accessing reproductive health services, including safe abortion.

The authors emphasise that migrant women face double discrimination: because of their gender and because of their migration status. This translates into greater risks of labour exploitation, gender-based violence and difficulties in accessing justice. They conclude that the lack of access to safe abortion services is a manifestation of reproductive injustice, where economic marginalisation, social exclusion and legal vulnerability combine to restrict the autonomy and rights of migrant women.

Finally, after reviewing all the material, the author of this conclusion poses the question: how can we manage the coming changes in a humane, sustainable and supportive manner? Their chapter invites us to think about a world where mobility is not synonymous with fear, but part of a context of citizenship integration. And it reminds us that the way we treat those who migrate today will say a lot about who we are as a society tomorrow.

All the chapters in this book talk about a world that is changing rapidly. And that these changes require new responses from us: policies that are committed to inclusion, discourses that defend human dignity, and decisions based on data rather than prejudice. Migration and population change are not threats. They are realities that can be our best allies if we know how to look at them with intelligence and humanity.

As warned by the IOM (2024) and the UN (2024), countries that welcome, integrate and harness the potential of migrants will be best placed to face the challenges of the future. It is essential to

build a narrative based on respect, mutual recognition and global justice.

With this book, we want to offer tools to better understand our changing world and to build responses that put people, their rights and their dreams at the centre, because the 21st century will not only be defined by its numbers, but also by our ability to put a face and a name to those who are on the move, and by the way we choose to accompany them.

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Guest author

Demography and the politicisation of immigration

Joaquin Leguina Herrán

Abstract

Demographics have changed rapidly in recent years: falling fertility, mortality and marriage rates, an ageing population and the emergence of strong migratory movements.

This paper reviews these changes and concludes by presenting, from a European perspective, the problems and solutions that the social integration of immigrants and the politicisation that this phenomenon has brought with it have caused in Europe, and especially in Spain.

Keywords

Fertility, Life expectancy, Immigration, Employment of immigrants, Educational level.

1 Failed predictions

In 1968, a biology professor at Stanford University named Paul Ehrlich published a book (Ehrlich, 1993) in which he wrote: "In the coming years, hundreds of millions of human beings will die of starvation due to overpopulation [...] no one will be able to prevent a huge increase in mortality."

It did not take long for the predictions of the UN, MIT and Ehrlich to be proven completely ridiculous, as that "terminal" demographic crisis never existed and today we are facing a crisis of food distribution, but not of production. In fact, more is produced than is consumed, and we can even talk about an epidemic of overeating on the one hand and food waste on the other. Moreover, the population needed for agricultural production has decreased dramatically. Not long ago, between 30% and 40% of the working population worked in the fields, and now, with 3%, more food is produced than is needed.

Demographers have long warned that fears of an unlimited explosion in the world's population are unfounded. Fertility is declining in all countries of the world, and the United Nations' regularly updated population projections show that, although the population will continue to grow in the coming decades, especially in some regions of the planet, there is a date on the horizon, which this organisation places in the forthcoming decade of 2080, when the population will stop growing.

2 The demographic transition is spreading across the globe

What the evolution of the world's population since the middle of the last century shows is that the demographic transition, a process that until now has been completed only by the most developed countries, is universal in nature. The changes, which have already occurred at different times and at different rates in rich countries, can be divided into three phases: the first is one of population stagnation, with high fertility almost offset by high overall mortality and catastrophic mortality caused by famines, wars and epidemics; a second phase characterised by high population growth, as mortality declines and fertility remains high; and a third phase, in which both fertility and mortality decline and population growth is moderate.

Following the generalised (but uneven) increase in life expectancy, recent evidence of the spread of declining fertility in virtually all countries, including many in Africa and the Islamic world, confirms the general nature of this trend, although the specific conditions in each society vary. However, the still high rates of population growth and, above all, the sharp imbalances anticipated in the distribution of the world's population still keep alive the alarm about overpopulation.

Around 1950, the world population was around 2.5 billion, and since 2022, it has exceeded 8 billion. The United Nations estimates that by 2050, the population will reach 9.7 billion and that the human population will peak at around 10.4 billion in the 2080s (United Nations, 2022a). In any case, these forecasts may fail miserably, so I will stop this line of research/forecasting. This does not mean that we should not address population-related issues, of which we would like to highlight two: a) some countries have been left behind in this transition process, and b) the enormous diversity in the rates of demographic change has led to huge imbalances in the spatial distribution of the world's population.

3 Sharp decline in fertility. Some countries are left behind

Since 1970, fertility rates have fallen dramatically, and the latest United Nations projections (from 2022) predict that this indicator will fall below the replacement level (approximately two children per woman) from 2050 onwards. From that point on, the world population will not be replaced, although the inertia generated by a high proportion of women of childbearing age and declining mortality will cause the population to continue growing until approximately 2080, as mentioned above. It should be noted that, at the end of the projection period (2100), the estimated fertility rate is 1.75, which is higher than that currently found in many European countries, particularly in the United Kingdom, where the fertility rate in 2024 was 1.29 children per woman, one child less than the global average for that year (2.32).

Africa was the only continent where, in 2021, there were countries with a fertility rate of more than five children per woman (ten countries), and of the twenty countries with the highest fertility rates, eighteen are in Africa. Overall, it is the continent with the highest fertility rate in 2021: 4.31 children per woman, compared to 6.59 in 1950.

In terms of the progression of life expectancy at birth, it has risen globally from 46.5 years in 1950 to 71.0 in 2021. At birth, the difference between men (68.4) and women (73.8) is 5.4 years. The global average for men was reached in Spain (currently one of the countries with the highest life expectancy) in 1966 and for women in 1988: the delay is clearly greater among men. The lowest levels are also observed in Central Africa: from 37.1 years in 1950 (approximately the level in Spain around 1900) to 59.2 in 2021 (lower than in Spain in 1950).

The African continent, and especially its central part, has been left behind in this process of demographic modernisation. These conditions, combined with climate deterioration, political instability and local armed conflicts, make this region a humanitarian challenge and fuel emigration and displacement of people that are difficult to manage.

4 Growing imbalances in the distribution of the world's population

While, at the global level, overpopulation is no longer a credible prospect for the vast majority of experts, imbalances between regions and countries have become more pronounced over the last fifty years and will increase in the future, according to the latest United Nations projections for 2022. Already today, the centre of gravity of the population has shifted to Asia, and in the future, it is possible that it will shift to Africa.

Between 1950 and 2021, the population of Europe as a whole has grown by just under 200 million, while India alone has 1.05 billion more inhabitants, and China, thanks to its one-child policy, only 887 million more. In relative terms, while Europe's population has grown by 0.4% per year (0.7% in Spain), Africa's has grown by 2.6% (2.8% in Central Africa). To give an idea of the significance of this difference, let us say that, at Europe's growth rate, it would take 159 years for the population to double, and only 27 years at Africa's growth rate.

In a century, from 1950 to 2050, the distribution of the world's population will have been turned upside down. The most populous country, which was initially China with 539 million inhabitants, will be India in 2050 with 1.669 billion. In China, after strong growth (in 2021, with 1.426 billion, it still slightly exceeded India), the United Nations projection forecasts a real collapse, to 778 million

in 2100, although in 2050 it would still have 1.317 billion inhabitants. The most spectacular growth will be in Africa, which will go from 225 million in 1950 to 2.466 billion in 2050, and will continue to grow, according to the projection, to almost four billion in 2100, accounting for nearly 38% of the entire human population. In contrast, the weight of the European continent has continued to decline, and projections indicate that this trend will continue. In 1950, it accounted for 22% of the world's population. Today (2021), it stands at 9.5%. It will fall to 7.3% in 2050 and 5.7% in 2100.

The demographic concentration in which the world is immersed extends, within each country, to growing urbanisation, which is reaching unprecedented proportions and will intensify in the future. According to the World Bank, around a 56% of the world's population, 4.4 billion people, currently live in cities, and by 2050, almost seven out of ten people are expected to do so. Addressing the challenges posed by this trend requires tackling the growing demand for housing and the increasing proportion of those who cannot access it due to a lack of solvency. It also requires greater investment in transport infrastructure, basic services and strong job creation. On the other hand, the number of displaced people is increasing, crowded into substandard housing that lacks basic public services (World Bank, 2023).

Urban concentration is one of the key phenomena of our time. Its consequences extend to all areas. It is undoubtedly one of the driving forces behind the sharp decline in fertility worldwide. Children, who were an asset and an investment on family farms, have become a burden in the city, with increasing costs**.**

5 What happened in China is worth noting

The Chinese population had grown significantly between 1949 (founding of the communist state) and 1979, and after three decades of "brilliant socialist construction," China remained a rural society. Rural and hungry (more than 77% of Chinese people in the mid-1970s had less than USD 1.25 a day to live on).

This was the situation in September 1979, when all members of the Chinese Communist Party received a letter from the party leadership urging them to set an example and have no more than one child. A year later, in September 1980, the one-child policy

was imposed on the entire population, and anyone who did not comply with the order would receive heavy fines. Later, in the 1990s, women who had had more than one child were forced to undergo sterilisation.

This policy had immediate disastrous consequences: first, a wave of infanticide, the outright killing of newborn girls, as well as the existence of 'clandestine' women whose births were concealed by their parents. In fact, in early 21st-century China, the number of males between the ages of 0 and 35 was already significantly higher than that of females in the same age group. Specifically, in 2016, according to official Chinese data, the ratio of boys to girls aged 5 to 15 was 118 boys to 100 girls. In other words, over the last thirty years, some thirty million more boys than girls were born in China. It is therefore not surprising that the marriage rate there has been falling significantly for some years now.

Hereafter, to refer to any estimate about the future population, we will use the term 'projection', thus removing from these calculations the predictive burden that is often attributed to them.

Today in Europe there is talk of the "catastrophe" of ageing. And one might ask: how can we know for sure that this will be the reality of the future? In any case, it is sensible to make "projections" rather than "predictions". What gives demographic projections greater robustness than other branches of the social sciences is that much of the future, especially the next fifteen to twenty years, is already contained in the current population structure, and the rest depends largely on the evolution of fertility and mortality, which have great temporal inertia. However, any population projection is nothing more than the quantification of hypotheses about the future behaviour of fertility, mortality and migration. It is important to bear this in mind.

6 Spanish demographics on the decline

The decline in marriage rates, the increase in divorce rates and the fall in fertility to very low levels have led to a decline in the Spanish population. This decline has been tempered by the arrival of immigrants (a topic we will address at the end of this study).

The following data used are from before the pandemic.

In a generation subject to the rates of first marriage1 by age observed in Spain in 2018, 54% of Spanish men and 50% of Spanish women would remain single. These proportions were unimaginable just 45 years ago, when the proportion was around 10% or even lower.

In 1976, the average age of women in Spain when they entered their first marriage was 24.1 years (26.6 for men). In 2018, these ages were 33.6 for women and 35.6 for men. The trend towards marrying less and doing so at an older age is therefore clear. This has been accompanied by less marital stability. Let's look at the latter:

- In 2016, there were 101,294 marital breakdowns, including 96,824 divorces, 4,353 separations and 117 annulments. The average duration of these marriages was 16.3 years.
- In 2016, the average age of men at the time of divorce was 44.8 years and that of women was 42.2 years.

The change that has taken place in society is twofold in terms of marriage-related demographics. Firstly, there has been a gradual decline in marriages, accompanying the spread of the idea that marriage is no longer necessary for couples to live together. And, at a later stage, with cohabitation without marriage becoming socially accepted, the idea of children in unmarried couples has been introduced. Hence the rapid increase in the proportion of children born outside marriage.

Although there may not be public records of all couples who have chosen to be *de facto* couples—although the INE's Continuous Household Survey gives us a good numerical estimate of this phenomenon—it is clear that the family model consisting of a married couple with children has been partially diluted. How have these changes influenced fertility patterns? Does the stability of the couple favour fertility? There are contradictory theories when it comes to answering these questions, and empirical studies carried out at European level are far from conclusive.

Oral contraceptives have had a remarkable impact on fertility control. Used—especially in the early days—by married women who did not want more children (stop contraception), they were later used by married women in the early stages of marriage (spacing

[1] Primonupciality indicates the theoretical probability of marrying at least once in a lifetime, based on the percentage of people of various ages who marry for the first time each year. It is usually calculated annually for people under the age of sixty.

contraception) and, finally, by young women before marriage. However, it should also be noted that when oral contraceptives arrived in Spain in the mid-1970s, fertility was already 40% to 50% lower than it had been a century earlier, a decline in the number of children per woman in which contraceptives played no role. In Spain, according to the Fertility Survey published at the end of 2000, 53.2% of women of childbearing age reported using reliable contraceptive methods.

Something similar, *mutatis mutandis*, can be said in relation to induced abortion. In 1986, just before the first full year with the abortion law in force, and with fewer than 500 legal abortions in Spain, the average number of children per woman was already only 1.56, a very low fertility rate. The conclusion from observing these sharp declines in fertility prior to widespread access to contraceptives and abortion would be as follows. There is no doubt that the easy availability of contraceptives and abortion physically facilitates having fewer children, devalues the significance of pregnancy and helps to trivialise sexual relations and their possible consequences. But if a society does not want to have children, even if they are not available, they will not have them.

Table 1 shows that Spanish fertility has been lower than that of the EU as a whole for many years. Furthermore, in none of the

Cuadro 1. Hijos por mujer (ISF) 2007-2018

Año	España	UE a 27 (sin RU)
2007	1,38	1,52
2008	1,45	1,57
2009	1,38	1,56
2010	1,37	1,57
2011	1,34	1,54
2012	1,32	1,54
2013	1,27	1,51
2014	1,32	1,54
2015	1,33	1,54
2016	1,34	1,57
2017	1,31	1,56
2018	1,26	1,55

Fuente: Eurostat

countries that make up the EU does fertility reach the replacement level (2.05). In 2018, metropolitan France had the highest fertility rate (1.84), followed by Sweden and Ireland (both 1.75).

The changes that accompanied the decline in fertility do not answer an important question: why is Spanish fertility lower than the European average?

According to the results of the INE's Fertility Survey, the number of desired children was much higher than the number of actual children. Thus, 48% of women aged 25 to 34 wanted to have two or more children, and only 13% did not want to have any.

Eight per cent of women aged 35 to 44—again according to the INE Fertility Survey—stated that they had not had more children because they had not had the right partner, and approximately 50% cited economic, work and work-life balance reasons. According to data from the Natural Population Movement (MNP), which classifies births by the mother's economic activity, in Spain there were 204,656 births to economically inactive mothers (52.6% of the total) and 188,525 to economically active mothers (47.4% of the total).

The two most commonly used indicators for measuring mortality are the probability of death between birth and one year of age (known as the infant mortality rate) and life expectancy at birth, both of which have evolved very positively in Spain. In other words, the former has fallen sharply and the latter has risen to enviable levels—the highest in the European Union, despite Spain not being one of the leading countries in terms of GDP per capita and other economic indicators—which represents a great success for Spanish society as a whole and gives an idea of the high degree of quality and social cohesion in everything that affects life expectancy, such as food, the healthiness of the air we breathe and the water we drink, physical habits and lifestyle , social habits and health services (in terms of quality and universal coverage).

In 2018, the infant mortality rate was 2.7% (3% for boys and 2.4% for girls). It should be noted that in 1976, this rate was 17.1% and in 2000, it was 4.3%.

This indicator narrows the significant differences in life expectancy at birth between women and men, to such an extent that in some European countries, men have more healthy years than women (see Table 2).

Cuadro 2. España: años de Vida Saludable. 2017

	Hombres	Mujeres
Total e_0	80,6	86,1
e_0 saludable	69,0	69,9
% saludable e_0	85,6%	81,2%
Total e_{65}	19,3	23,4
e_{65} saludable	12,3	12,4
% saludable e_{65}	63,7%	53,0%

e_0 = esperanza de vida al nacer

e_{65} = esperanza de vida a los 65 años

Fuente: Elaboración propia con datos de Eurostat

At the age of 65, men and women in Spain in 2017 had practically the same number of healthy years ahead of them: 12.3 versus 12.4.

If, instead of taking a single year, we take a decade as a reference, for example, 2007-2016, at age 65 it would be 9.2 years for women and 9.7 years for men, which shows us that Spanish women's old age is more "ailment-ridden" than that of men, perhaps because they have been "selected" more rigorously by mortality prior to the age of 65, or because women's physical wear and tear is paid for with greater deterioration.

In Western Europe, the healthy life expectancy of Spanish women in 2017 (66.5) is surpassed by five countries: Sweden (73.3), Ireland (69.8), the United Kingdom (67.8), Germany (67.3) and France (67.2). As already noted, this is not the case for life expectancy at birth.

The 65.9 years of healthy life expectancy for Spanish men are only surpassed by three European countries: Sweden (73), Norway (72) and Ireland (67.3).

It should be noted, however, that while life expectancy at birth or at any age can be estimated very accurately—because death is an unmistakable event and must be recorded—"healthy" life is a concept that can be measured with much less accuracy.

7 COVID-19

As in so many countries, the coronavirus has claimed the lives of many thousands of people in Spain. Behind the data lies a reality: the ageing of the Spanish population. The older the person, the greater the risk of dying from coronavirus.

This was the case with this disease, which reached a death rate in Spain per 100,000 people that doubled every five years above the 40-44 age group.

Cuadro 3. Mortalidad Covid por edades y sexos de marzo 2020 a 30/06/2022

	Fallecimientos por Covid		Muertes por 100.000		Tasa de muertes hombres / tasa de mujeres
	Hombres	Mujeres	Hombres	Mujeres	
De 0 a 24 años	53	42	0,9	0,7	1,2
De 25 a 29 años	55	32	4,3	2,6	1,7
De 30 a 34 años	73	56	5,3	4,1	1,3
De 35 a 39 años	140	89	8,9	5,6	1,6
De 40 a 44 años	302	138	15,7	7,2	2,2
De 45 a 49 años	577	279	29,1	14,3	2,0
De 50 a 54 años	1.156	483	62	26	2,4
De 55 a 59 años	1.967	910	116	52	2,2
De 60 a 64 años	3.539	1.396	241	90	2,7
De 65 a 69 años	5.196	2.114	434	161	2,7
De 70 a 74 años	7.495	3.487	727	291	2,5
De 75 a 79 años	10.346	5.685	1.288	565	2,3
De 80 a 84 años	12.742	9.456	2.425	1.246	1,9
De 85 a 89 años	15.721	16.156	4.279	2.549	1,7
90 y más años	13.633	22.599	7.734	5.487	1,4
Total	72.995	62.922	314	260	1,2

Fuente: INE. Defunciones por Causas y Cifras de Población

In Spain, there were about seven waves of COVID-19 infections. And since deaths usually occur two or more weeks after infection, some of these waves have overlapped in terms of deaths.

The pandemic also brought statistical confusion surrounding the causes of death, and with the confusion came speculation, not only in the media, leading to the establishment of figures in the public opinion that do not correspond to reality.

Between March 2020 and the end of 2022, there have been well over 100,000 deaths from COVID-19 in Spain. Unfortunately, the two main official national sources of information on this subject, the Ministry of Health and the National Institute of Statistics (INE), present a notable discrepancy regarding the total number of deaths. According to the Ministry of Health, there were approximately 117,000 more deaths than would have occurred without COVID-19. According to the INE, there were approximately 145,000 deaths, including 15,000 suspected COVID-19 deaths in which the presence of the virus was not verified. Eighty-three per cent of those 15,000 suspected COVID-19 deaths occurred in the first three months of 2020, and most of them were elderly people living in nursing homes.

To these deaths must be added the temporary or persistent suffering of hundreds of thousands of survivors who were seriously affected by the Wuhan coronavirus, which, in an as yet undetermined number of people, has led or will lead to a shortening of their lives, as well as various ailments, such as fatigue or loss of memory, smell or taste. The pandemic has also had a high economic cost due to the closure of many businesses and the large increase in public debt.

There were temporary restrictions on personal freedoms. Remember, for example, the curfews or the obligation to wear a face mask, even for those going on a solo mountain hike. And the states of emergency were subsequently deemed illegal by the Constitutional Court.

In 2021 and 2022, the number of deaths above what would have occurred without COVID-19 has been significant, but considerably lower than in 2020.

How many people have died in Spain from COVID-19? Unfortunately, the two main national data sources, the Spanish Government and the INE, disagree on this point by a wide margin, especially in 2020, the most tragic year of this drama, as shown in Table 4.

The data in Table 4 are current as of 30 June 2022. Subsequently, according to the Ministry of Health, in the second half of 2022, there were some 9,000 more deaths from COVID-19, which would bring the total number of deaths due to the pandemic in the period 2020-2022 in Spain to 117,000, according to the Government, or 145,000, according to the INE.

Cuadro 4. Defunciones por Covid-19 de 2020 a primer semestre de 2022

	Según el Mº de Sanidad	Según el INE	Diferencia INE vs Mº Sanidad	INE vs Mº Sanidad (%)
2020 - Muertes totales	**50.837**	**74.839**	**24.002**	**47,2%**
Con el virus identificado	N/D	*60.358*		
Sospechoso, sin virus identificado	N/D	*14.481*		
2021 - Muertes totales	**38.610**	**40.083**	**1.473**	**3,8%**
Con el virus identificado	N/D	39.444		
Sospechoso, sin virus identificado + síndrome inflamatorio multisistémico asociado	N/D	639		
Primer semestre 2022 - Muertes totales	**18.595**	**20.995**	**2.400**	**12,9%**
Con el virus identificado		20.915		
Sospechoso, sin virus identificado + síndrome inflamatorio multisistémico asociado		80		
Total muertes de 2020 a 30/06/2022	**108.042**	**135.917**	**27.875**	**25,8%**

Fuente: Actualizaciones de Covid-19 (Ministerio de Sanidad) y Defunciones por causas (INE)

NB. Los datos de Sanidad de 2021 y 2022 son estimaciones con los del boletín anterior y posterior al último día del período

For our part, we give more credibility to the INE data, obtained from death certificates. For its part, the data presented by the government comes, according to the government, from data provided by the autonomous communities.

With the INE's death data, in 2020, Spain would have had the highest COVID-19 mortality rate per million inhabitants in Europe, which is in line with the fact that life expectancy in Spain recorded the largest drop in Europe, with the Community of Madrid as the Spanish and European region with the largest decline, according to Eurostat.

In 2021 and 2022, although still terrible for our country in terms of COVID-19, there were fewer deaths, which has allowed for a noticeable recovery in life expectancy.

8 A continent of old people

Before continuing, we will take a brief look at European demographics in modern times.

The old continent, traditionally synonymous with Europe—although geographically it is not a true "continent" but rather the western edge of Eurasia—has been the world leader in many things in recent centuries, including demographic trends. Between the 17th and 19th centuries, inclusive, European population growth was much higher in relative terms than in the rest

of the world. But in the 20th century, the tide turned, mainly due to the collapse in fertility, and the European population grew proportionally less, a trend that has become more pronounced so far in the 21st century.

Population growth is also slowing down in the rest of the world because the decline in fertility since 1960-1970 has been universal, including in sub-Saharan Africa. Persistently low fertility has made Europe the geographical region with the oldest population in the world. On the other hand, its life expectancy is at the top of the list.

The Old Continent is now the "aging continent". Without the abundant net immigration from Africa and Asia (and to a lesser extent, from Latin America) since the mid-20th century, Europe's population would have been declining for decades.

Germany and Italy, among the large European countries, have high levels of ageing and persistent negative differences between births and deaths.

Special mention should be made of Russia and Ukraine, sadly in the news since the brutal invasion of the latter by the former and the countries that made up the former Soviet Union. The former Soviet republics that belong to what we commonly call "Europe", i.e. those with Christian roots, have experienced enormous population declines due to having more deaths than births. In the vast majority of them, these losses have been exacerbated by emigration to the Russian Federation or other European countries.

In contrast, the former Soviet republics with Muslim majorities and Asian geographical locations have experienced strong population growth since the fall of communism, due to having a fertility rate higher than the replacement rate (estimated at 2.05 children per woman), despite the fact that part of that population has been drained by emigration.

In Eastern Europe (in what were formerly known as "satellite countries" of the Soviet Union), there have been large deficits in births relative to deaths in recent decades as a result of low fertility rates. For this reason, some of these countries, specifically Hungary and Poland, have launched very ambitious plans to stimulate the birth rate.

Finally, in terms of marriage and divorce rates, there has been a trend across Europe over the last 50-60 years towards far fewer

marriages per thousand inhabitants than in the past. On the other hand, those who do marry do so at a much older age than was traditional. There are also high divorce rates.

In 2020, Europe, including Russia (some 35 million of whose inhabitants live in Siberia, which is geographically located in the Asian part of Eurasia), is currently home to almost 750 million people, just under 10% of humanity. The European Union of 27, even after the departure of the United Kingdom, remains the largest bloc in Europe in demographic terms (60%).

Cuadro 5. Población mundial en 2020. Principales regiones y países

Zona geográfica	Total (millones)	En porcentaje %
Mundo	**7.795**	**100**
Europa	**748**	**9,6**
UE-27	445	5,7
Reino Unido y otros Europa Occidenta	82	1,1
Rusia	146	1,9
Ucrania y otros Europa oriental	75	1,0
África	**1.341**	**17,2**
Norte de África	246	3,2
África Subsahariana	1.094	14,0
Asia	**4.641**	**59,5**
China	1.439	18,5
India	1.380	17,7
Indonesia	274	3,5
Resto de Asia	1.548	19,9
América	**885**	**11,4**
Estados Unidos	331	4,2
México	129	1,7
Brasil	213	2,7
Resto de América	212	2,7
Oceanía	**43**	**0,5**

Fuente: ONU. World Population Prospects 2019

Since the Renaissance, and especially since the 19th century, Europe has made a giant leap forward in technological and economic development. This has also been true in demographic terms, due to the greater abundance of food resources and better living and health conditions. Europe's population doubled in the 19th century, with an estimated percentage growth of almost twice that of the rest of the world, and more than double that of

the rest of the world excluding America, because America experienced a population explosion, mainly due to the massive arrival of Europeans. It is estimated that the population of the United States and Canada increased more than tenfold in the 19th century, and that of Latin America tripled.

As for Spain, its nineteenth-century population growth, although appreciable, was somewhat lower than the European average. The war against Napoleon's troops, the three Carlist civil wars, the wars of independence in America and emigration to Latin American countries and others such as France, as well as a somewhat lower life expectancy, would explain Spain's lower population growth in the 19th century compared to Europe.

It is estimated that around 1900, shortly before Europe began its suicidal descent into two bloody wars, the European population, including Russia, accounted for around 25% of the world's population.

In the 20th century, the loss of human life due to the aforementioned world wars that began in Europe (1914-1918 and 1939-1945) was partially offset—in demographic terms—by improvements in hygiene and universal access to drinking water, improvements in nutrition, advances in medical science and access to good health services for virtually the entire European population, but Europe's demographic weight in the world plummeted from the middle of the 20th century onwards.

The explosive population growth in the second half of the 20th century in the countries of the then-called "Third World" explains most of the radical decline in the percentage of human beings living in Europe.

9 Immigration welcome

The arrival of foreign-born people from the mid-2010s onwards was perceived as good news by the Spanish media, experts and politicians. And there were reasons for this.

In the second quarter of 2018, Spain had 4.6 million people who were actually unemployed (3.4 million officially unemployed plus 1.2 million). Despite so many millions of unemployed, from mid-2018 to the first quarter of 2023, the resident population in Spain born abroad has increased by two million people (more than

2.1 million non-EU citizens, because the foreign population from the EU has decreased during that period). Clearly, such an influx of new immigrants into a country with so many unemployed is not exactly what is needed to drastically reduce unemployment. This not only has economic effects on public accounts, but also contributes, among other things, to the current problems of saturation of public health services and tensions in the housing market in cities with the highest influx of immigrants, such as Madrid (in the first half of 2022 alone, 46,000 additional foreigners registered, according to data from the city council).

From the second quarter of 2018, in a Spain that was still recovering from the high levels of unemployment reached during the Great Recession, to the first quarter of 2023, the number of native Spaniards in employment rose from 16.148 million to 16.387 million (an increase of 239,000), according to the EPA. The number of foreigners in employment rose from 3.196 million to 4.066 million (870,000 more). And if we discount the net new jobs created in the public sector during that period (406,000, almost 37% of the net new jobs created in those years, more than 90% of which were filled by Spaniards), the result is that, in the first quarter of 2023, there are fewer native Spaniards working in the private sector than in the second quarter of 2018, and that more than 100% of net new private employment since then has been filled by immigrants.

The main theoretical basis for justifying mass labour immigration, and specifically the fact that more than 7.2 million people born abroad have come to live in Spain between May 1996 and April 2023, is to fill vacancies in the labour market with foreign labour. This has made it possible to fill gaps in the Spanish labour market, gaps created by the persistently low birth rate, which has meant, among other things, that for years more people have been retiring than entering the labour market as young people. Immigration has also served to fill certain occupations in the absence of Spaniards willing to perform certain low-paid tasks, such as caring for young children or the elderly, or garbage collection.

Main conclusions:

– Immigration has a significant and growing weight in the labour force (more than 20% of jobs in 2024 were held by immigrants), especially in certain types of jobs and sectors of activity, such as agriculture and construction.

- In recent years, the vast majority of new net employment has been taken up by foreigners, close to 100% in new private sector jobs.
- Spain is managing its migration flows very poorly, given its extremely high structural levels of unemployment, both among native Spaniards and (even more so) among foreigners—which are underreported in official statistics—despite which new immigration continues to arrive en masse, which in recent years has been almost exclusively from outside the European Union.

In January 1976, foreigners accounted for just under 0.5% of Spain's population (around 160,000 out of 35.9 million inhabitants), more than 60% of whom were Western Europeans. A significant proportion of the foreign community at that time were European retirees who lived mainly, as they do now, in the Canary Islands, Alicante, Malaga and the Balearic Islands. The participation of foreigners in the Spanish workforce was minimal, apart from executives in multinational companies. Twenty years later (1996), their share of the population was greater (over one million in a Spain with 39.9 million inhabitants), as was their presence in the workforce, although it remained very small (1.3% of those in employment, representing 2.6% of the population in total). Currently, foreign-born individuals, with or without dual nationality, represent a very significant percentage of the employed population. As of 1 April 2023, there were 8.3 million foreigners living in Spain, of whom just over 4 million, according to EPA microdata, were employed in the first quarter of 2023, representing 19.9% of all "employed" people in that quarter.

By origin, half of foreign workers in the first quarter of 2023 were Latin American. Thirty per cent were European or North American (the latter relatively few), of whom more than 70% were from the EU. Fourteen per cent were African (more than 70% Moroccan) and 6% were Asian.

Immigrants as a whole have much higher unemployment rates than Spaniards, and during the Great Recession that began in 2008, their unemployment levels reached extremely high levels. However, in recent years, the increase in the number of employed foreigners has been much higher than that of Spaniards, so that the vast majority of new net employment is occupied by foreigners.

According to the EPA, between the first quarter of 2022 and the first quarter of 2023, in a Spain recovering from the "old normal" after the pandemic, 368,100 jobs were created. According to INE data, the increase in employment among foreign-born workers, including those with dual nationality, was 284,400 (i.e. 77% of the jobs created). However, analysing the EPA microdata, and counting only those who are Spanish by birth (i.e. excluding those who have acquired Spanish nationality), it can be seen that the increase in employment among foreigners—a group that also includes immigrants who have exchanged their nationality of origin for Spanish nationality—was 348,600: almost 95% of the net employment created.

The vast majority of foreigners who arrived in Spain in recent years initially stayed here irregularly—that is, "unauthorised"—but their status was regularised because they had acquired "roots" in our country and had a job. From 2008 onwards, unemployment rates among Spaniards, not to mention foreigners (especially non-EU nationals), skyrocketed, reaching extremely high levels in subsequent years.

In the following two years, there was a first major anomaly in relation to the immigration model. Let's see: between 2008 and 2009, 400,000 immigrants arrived in Spain, and immigration only began to decline from 2012 onwards. In 2013, there were just over six million unemployed according to the EPA, more than seven million unemployed if we include those who wanted a job but were not actively looking for one. Despite this, the immigrant population fell by less than 7% between early 2012 and mid-2015. And from the second half of 2015 onwards, despite the fact that official unemployment was then at 24%—and 32% for immigrants—and unemployment has never fallen below double digits and three million people in the last eight years, a large number of immigrants returned, virtually all from outside the EU (the current EU plus the United Kingdom): a net increase of 2.4 million foreigners between July 2015 and April 2023, according to the INE's Continuous Population Statistics.

Overall, immigrants, who held 16.5% of all jobs in 2022, occupied 26.4% of jobs in the agricultural sector, 11.6% in industry, 24.8% in construction and 16.7% in services.

By gender, there are significant differences in the percentages of employed persons by nationality, as shown in Table 6.

Cuadro 6. ¿Se siente discriminado en su empleo actual? (porcentajes por sexo y país de nacimiento)

	Ambos sexos			Hombres			Mujeres		
Lugar de origen	Sí	No	NS/NC	Sí	No	NS/NC	Sí	No	NS/NC
Total	3,6	95,3	1,1	2,8	96,0	1,2	4,6	94,4	1,0
España	3,4	95,8	0,8	2,8	96,4	0,8	4,2	95,1	0,8
Extranjero - Total	4,7	92,9	2,4	3,0	94,3	2,8	6,5	91,5	2,0
Europa	5,2	92,2	2,6	2,5	94,9	2,6	8,0	89,5	2,6
Iberoamérica	4,3	94,5	1,3	2,0	96,3	1,7	6,2	92,9	0,9
África, Asia y resto del mundo	4,8	90,1	5,1	5,3	89,8	5,0	3,9	90,7	5,5

Fuente:INE-EPA. Módulo 2021. Situación de los inmigrantes y sus hijos en relación con el mercado laboral

The overwhelming majority of foreign women work in the service sector, which is also the majority sector for Spanish women. Most foreign men also work in services, but in a smaller percentage than Spanish men. By gender, regardless of nationality, 54% of service jobs in 2022 were held by women.

Foreigners have a much greater relative presence in agriculture, where women are in the minority, as only 23% of the total number of people employed in agriculture in 2022 were women.

In industry, 72% of jobs are held by men.

In construction, where there are very few women (only 9% of jobs in 2022), there is a large presence of foreigners, particularly from Eastern Europe, Latin America and Africa.

There are significant differences in the educational level of foreigners living and working in Spain, which is closely related to the types of jobs they do. Those with the least education are Africans, with significant illiteracy rates, followed by Asians, Latin Americans and Eastern Europeans. Western Europeans and North Americans, as might be expected given that they come from countries that are richer than Spain, have a higher level of academic training than Spaniards themselves.

A corollary of these data is that, as virtually the only immigrants Spain has received since 2015 are Africans, Latin Americans or Asians, it will be difficult to fill many highly skilled and productive jobs with them. This is one of the reasons why the mantra that "it doesn't matter if Spaniards don't have children, immigrants will come" is fallacious. And the worst thing is that many Spanish politicians and intellectuals seem to subscribe to this fallacy of immigration as the only or main strategy against the Siberian-

like demographic winter that has been ravaging Spain for forty years.

We are therefore facing a problem that will become serious in the near future: the educational level of the children of immigrants, who today barely reach university level. A policy of educational equality will benefit them, but above all it will benefit Spanish society as a whole.

10 Immigration and politics

Europe (and Spain) is undergoing a very worrying ageing process, and immigration can be a mitigating factor (never a solution, as immigrants also grow old). In any case, the EU lacks a common migration policy. Josep Borrell reminded us of this in an interview: "Europe has not been able to build a common immigration and asylum policy that is commensurate with the economic and demographic imbalances of our time".

Journalist Ramón González Férriz, referring to a European Council meeting where the issue of immigration was discussed, recalled that in 2022, 330,000 illegal immigrants crossed the European Union's external border. That figure represented a 64% increase over the previous year.

Whether because of its volume or because of the ideological drift it has brought about in recent years, immigration has invaded political discourse.

In Spain, there are more than 8.2 million people born in other countries, accounting for 17.1% of the population, according to the latest data available from the INE. Such high figures have never been seen before. In its latest study, the CIS ranked immigration as the main problem for Spaniards, ahead of unemployment and housing.

Since the late 1990s and the immigration *boom* of the early 21st century, the foreign population in Spain has grown rapidly. The economic crisis slowed arrivals and pushed departures, but with the recovery, the pace of migration resumed. The growth seen in the last year (2023) had not been seen for two decades, driven mainly by the arrival of Latin Americans.

Morocco is by far the largest foreign community in Spain. According to the census, there are more than one million Moroccans. Colombia follows with more than 700,000; Romania

and Venezuela with more than half a million; Ecuador with more than 400,000; and Argentina and Peru with more than 300,000.

Among the fifteen countries of birth with the largest populations, there are nine Latin American countries (Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Argentina, Peru, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Bolivia and Honduras), four European countries (Romania, the United Kingdom, France and Ukraine), one African country (Morocco) and one Asian country (China).

National policies within the EU are, in truth, impossible to reconcile. Sweden, for example, is in favour of a hard line. The Dutch Prime Minister wants southern countries to take in immigrants and prevent them from continuing north. Greece and Italy feel, as they did in 2016, that the rest of the Union is doing nothing to help them cope with the extra number of new arrivals. The Austrian chancellor wants a wall to be built on the border between Bulgaria and Turkey, etc.

González Férriz's conclusion is quite true: the fear of politicians, reflecting that of citizens, is real. Of all the identity shifts that Western politics has undergone in the last decade, the anti-immigration shift has been the most influential in politics.

Let us now look at Spain, using the latest projections made by the INE (2022-2072), which project eight scenarios. Of these, two seem to us to be the most significant and useful for analysing what might happen: the central scenario (understood to be the one the INE considers most likely) and the zero net migration scenario (what would happen if there were no immigration or emigration, i.e. how the current population would evolve without foreign contributions or departures abroad).

In summary, the main conclusions drawn from these projections in their central scenario, based on the assumption that no significant upturns in fertility are expected, only very moderate ones, are as follows:

1) The total population of Spain will grow moderately in the coming decades (more than five million people in fifty years), but only due to the arrival of immigrants.
2) The native Spanish population—the descendants of Spaniards of origin—will decline alarmingly in the coming decades: by around 14-16 million over the next fifty years.

3) Depopulation, i.e. the demographic decline of the regions and provinces that have seen the greatest decline in recent decades, will intensify over the next fifteen years.
4) The ageing of the population, whether measured as the percentage of people aged 65 and over or by the average or median age of the population, will continue to increase until it reaches very high levels.
5) Loneliness, measured by the percentage of people living alone or the average number of residents per dwelling, will continue to grow.
6) Life expectancy will continue to increase over the next half-century, but at a slower rate than that observed from the late 19th century to the present day.

The INE's projections are very optimistic with regard to immigration, so it seems appropriate to point out that, if the population were closed (without migration), the number of inhabitants in Spain would fall to 33.6 million in 2072, and that in the INE's central hypothesis, net immigration between 2022 and 2072 would be 13.9 million people. This is a figure that is difficult to achieve. Let us see: given that immigrants in Spain have a higher fertility rate than Spaniards, of the 32 million inhabitants in Spain in 2072, eight to nine million would be immigrants or their descendants. This would imply a decline in the native Spanish population of some fourteen to fifteen million people. In other words, over the next fifty years, the native population would fall from the current approximately 38 million to only twenty-three or twenty-four million.

It is safe to say that the problem in Europe is not immigration, but the social integration of immigrants, and this is not an easy problem to solve. The ghettos of foreigners that abound in Europe show the seriousness of this integration problem.

The first party to launch an offensive against irregular immigration was Vox. According to analyst María José Fuenteálamo (2024):

> "[...] to say that those who profit most from illegal immigration are the mafias that organise the dangerous, sometimes deadly routes is a rhetorical trope. Sometimes, the immigrants themselves also profit. Those who survive the journey find a job, settle down and send money home. But that is just the monetary aspect. With immigration, there are other

> collateral winners. [...] My goal must be to analyse the situation better. I return to the CIS statement: 'The main concern of Spaniards is immigration'. This could be a great statement for immigrants. When someone cares about another person, they take better care of them, help them, give them a hand. But here the key is not what people are concerned about, but who is concerned—because that is what they vote for. The subjects are Spaniards and residents of Spain. People are concerned, the government takes care of it. Also because of the votes.

Data on migration flows exist with varying degrees of credibility. I will cite a study by Fedea (Finotelli and Rinken, 2025): the European Social Survey (ESS), which provides, for Spain and dozens of other countries, some indicators on perceived impacts and preferences regarding the management of flows.

11 The Neos Foundation and immigration

Proper management of immigration can prevent xenophobia and ensure integration. It is important for society to understand the medium-term effects of immigration, beyond the immediate benefits. The experience of other European countries should serve as a guide for Spain to implement necessary reforms.

The Neos Foundation has just published a report on immigration in Spain, which is well worth reading. To encourage its reading, below is a summary of the proposals with which the study concludes:

1) The government must communicate to the public the effects of the migration process, the benefits and the costs and risks.
2) Society must demand that those in power manage immigration flows strategically in order to avoid economic and social imbalances, as well as disruptions to coexistence that may be caused by alien values.
3) Spain must effectively implement the EU Directives on foreign nationals.
4) The Spanish Parliament must standardise immigration rules with those approved by other European states and avoid new extraordinary regularisation processes. At the same time, the government must prevent immigration fraud and

other factors that may attract secondary migration from other countries that apply restrictive policies.

5) Net migration should be set at zero for three to five years in order to reorganise existing immigration and reabsorb the millions of unemployed people in Spain. This objective should only be waived for professions and activities that are in short supply in the labour market.

6) Reinforcement programmes should be implemented in the education system to improve the schooling of foreigners, thereby reducing school failure and raising training levels.

7) To improve the recruitment of immigrants, it is necessary to ease the rigidity of administrative authorisation, expanding the list of activities that are difficult to cover and facilitating recruitment for SMEs. It is suggested that large companies be allowed to make direct selections at source for positions with a shortage of supply. The new Single Permit Directive for combining work and residence needs to be explained. It is recommended that a combined 12-month visa for tourism and job seeking be implemented for citizens of Latin American countries exempt from visas in the EU, which would help to prevent labour irregularities.

8) Agree on a state policy that avoids the *pull factor* and guarantees regular and selective immigration. Abolish extraordinary regularisations of foreigners in an irregular situation.

9) With regard to the authorisation of long-term residence in Spain, the income and health insurance requirements established for the EU long-term residence card should be applied.

10) Reform the EU Directive and Spanish regulations to prevent abuse of the asylum system.

11) Reverse the 2015 amendment to the EU Directive, which broadened the scope of the group eligible for family reunification from the traditional scope of parents and children under the age of 21 to the "extended family".

12) Reserve full social benefits and welfare income for immigrants with residence permits.

13) Prevent extraordinary means of regularisation and tighten the current rules on long-term residence.

14) The set of measures to improve compliance with the law, reduce illegal arrivals and situations of fraud and non-compliance includes a wide range of measures.

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Chapter One

An overview of demographics and refugee populations: challenges and trends by region

Nuria Ferré Trad

Abstract

This chapter provides a comprehensive analysis of forced displacement as a global and structural demographic phenomenon, highlighting its unprecedented growth—more than 120 million displaced persons in 2024—and its limited consideration in traditional demographic studies. The text explains the need to overcome statistical invisibility in demographic censuses of displaced populations to ensure their inclusion in humanitarian planning frameworks. Through a detailed characterisation of the different categories of displaced populations (refugees, internally displaced persons, asylum seekers, among others), it examines their sociodemographic profiles, the main host countries, and the challenges associated with access to rights, the chronic nature of crises, and limited access to durable solutions established in international refugee law. It also examines institutional responses to forced displacement, emphasising the lack of effective international cooperation mechanisms and the disproportionate burden borne by low- and middle-income countries. The chapter also provides a comparative overview of the phenomenon of forced displacement by region (Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, Latin America and North America), showing how displacement

affects different geographical, political and economic contexts in different ways.

Keywords

Forced displacement, Demography, Durable solutions, Protracted crises, Regional perspective.

Introduction

Over the last few decades, forced displacement has reached unprecedented levels, both in scale and complexity. At the end of April 2024, around 120 million people worldwide were forcibly displaced, meaning that approximately 1 in every 69 people on the planet had been forced to leave their home (UNHCR, 2024a). This figure is double the proportion recorded just ten years ago, showing that we are in a "decade of increases" in forced displacement.

Although displacement dynamics have a direct impact on global demographic patterns—altering compositions by age, sex, and territorial distribution—the displaced population remains, to a large extent, largely overlooked in traditional demographic studies. Classical demography has focused its attention on variables such as fertility, mortality and population growth (Hugo *et al.*, 2018), leaving phenomena such as migration and, even more so, forced displacement in the background.

This omission is due, among other factors, to a series of challenges inherent to the phenomenon: under-registration and invisibility in host countries of many forcibly displaced persons, situations of prolonged forced mobility that make it difficult to track them, and the different protection statuses granted to displaced persons, migrants and asylum seekers, among many other factors. In addition, official statistics often lack stable mechanisms for integrating this entire population into their census records.

The main causes of forced displacement are multiple and, in many cases, cumulative: protracted armed conflicts—such as in Syria, Afghanistan, or Ukraine—widespread violence, ethnic or political persecution, massive human rights violations, and natural disasters exacerbated by climate change. These crises are the cause of both flows of refugees—people who cross international borders seeking asylum—and internally displaced persons—those who flee but remain within their country without crossing any international borders.

In the following pages, I will provide a comprehensive overview of the demographics of forced displacement: I will analyse the demographic characteristics of forcibly displaced persons, identify the main host countries, study the obstacles they face in accessing rights and durable solutions, and examine

the regional trends that explain the current distribution of this phenomenon.

1 Demographic data on the forcibly displaced population worldwide

As already mentioned, forced displacement has reached historic levels, profoundly altering global demographic dynamics. At the end of 2024, more than 120 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide, equivalent to approximately one in every 69 people on the planet. This figure represents an increase of 19 million from the previous year, the highest annual increase ever recorded, driven by acute crises such as the conflict in Sudan and the ongoing war in Ukraine. In proportional terms, 1.5% of the world's population is currently living in a situation of forced displacement, illustrating the enormous scale and severity of this phenomenon (UNHCR, 2024a).

1.1 Forcibly displaced populations: the forgotten ones of demography

Despite their magnitude, forcibly displaced persons remain largely overlooked in demographic studies. Traditionally, demography has focused its attention on phenomena such as birth rates, mortality rates and population growth, relegating migration and, in particular, forced displacement to the background. This omission has profound consequences: displaced persons are often not counted in national censuses or regular population surveys, making it impossible to know their actual number, their sociodemographic characteristics and their specific needs (World Bank, 2023a).

This demographic invisibility has major practical consequences: by not being fully included in population projections or national development plans, displaced persons also risk being marginalised from public policies that determine access to education, healthcare, employment or housing. The lack of demographic integration thus reinforces their vulnerability and perpetuates their exclusion. In addition, the statistical management of forced displacement faces significant technical challenges, such as under-reporting due to unsafe contexts, multiple and prolonged mobility, the existence of fluid legal categories, and changes in national and international legal frameworks.

1.2 Demographic characterisation of the forcibly displaced population

According to the traditional categorisation used by UNHCR, the generic term "forced displacement" encompasses several categories (UNHCR, 2024c):

1) Refugees: includes those recognised under the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees; its 1967 Protocol; the 1969 Convention of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), which regulates specific aspects of refugee issues in Africa; the definition of refugee contained in the 1984 Cartagena Declaration on Refugees, incorporated into national legislation; persons recognised in accordance with the UNHCR Statute; persons who have been granted complementary forms of protection; and those who enjoy temporary protection. The refugee population also includes persons in situations similar to that of refugees.
2) Persons in situations similar to that of refugees: groups who are outside their country or territory of origin and face protection risks similar to those of refugees, but for whom, for practical or other reasons, refugee status has not been determined.
3) Asylum seekers: persons who have requested international protection and whose applications for refugee status have not yet been determined.
4) Other persons in need of international protection: persons who are outside their country or territory of origin, usually because they have been forcibly displaced across international borders, who have not been included in other categories (asylum seekers, refugees, persons in a refugee-like situation), but who are likely to be in need of international protection, including protection against forced return, as well as access to basic services on a temporary or long-term basis.
5) Internally displaced persons: persons or groups of persons who have been forced or compelled to flee or abandon their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalised violence, human rights violations or natural or man-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognised state border.

6) Persons in a situation similar to that of internally displaced persons: groups within their country of nationality or habitual residence who face protection risks similar to those of internally displaced persons but who, for practical or other reasons, have not been able to be declared as such.

1.2.1 Refugees or persons with needs similar to those of refugees

According to UNHCR data, at the end of 2023, there were 31.6 million refugees under its mandate, along with 5.8 million persons in situations similar to that of refugees. In addition, there are some 6 million Palestinian refugees registered with UNRWA, mainly in the Middle East. In total, nearly 44 million people were outsi r their country of origin in need of international protection, an unprecedented figure in contemporary history (UNHCR, 2024a).

This population comes mainly from a few countries: Syria, Venezuela, Ukraine, Afghanistan and Sudan. For example, more than 6.4 million Syrians remain refugees in other countries, the Venezuelan diaspora exceeds 6.1 million, and Ukraine has generated nearly 6 million refugees in Europe following the Russian invasion. Afghanistan has around 6.4 million refugees and asylum seekers, mainly in Pakistan and Iran (UNHCR, 2024a).

From a demographic point of view, the refugee population has a unique structure. Approximately 40% are under the age of 18. In contrast, people over the age of 60 make up only 5% of the refugee population (UNHCR, 2024a).

In terms of gender distribution, it is estimated that women and children make up about 70% of the global refugee population. This composition is due, among other factors, to patterns of forced recruitment of adult men in armed conflicts and the disproportionate impact of violence and persecution on women and children (UNHCR, 2024a).

1.2.2 Internally displaced persons

Internally displaced persons represent the largest group within forced displacement. According to combined data from UNHCR and IDMC, at the end of 2023, there were some 68.3 million internally displaced persons (UNHCR, 2024a).

Unlike refugees, internally displaced persons remain under the jurisdiction of their own state, which often limits their visibility

and the international protection available to them. Many contemporary conflicts generate more internally displaced persons than refugees. In Syria, an estimated 7.2 million people remain internally displaced after more than a decade of war (UNHCR, 2024a). In Colombia, more than 5 million people have been internally displaced due to a protracted armed conflict, constituting one of the world's longest-running situations of internal displacement (IDMC, 2024).

In addition, natural disasters and extreme weather events cause millions of internally displacements each year. In 2023, more than 26.4 million new internally displacements associated with disasters were recorded, mainly floods, tropical storms and droughts (IDMC, 2024).

Demographically, internally displaced persons share many characteristics with refugees: a high proportion of minors, a significant presence of women and a relatively low representation of older people. However, their legal situation is more fragile, as they lack a specific international protection framework comparable to the refugee protection regime. Furthermore, the lack of formal registration in many contexts makes it impossible to accurately quantify the true extent of the phenomenon and hinders the planning of appropriate responses. Despite this, at the end of 2023, women and girls accounted for 51% of the total internally displaced population and around 49% were children (UNHCR, 2024a).

2 Main host countries for forcibly displaced persons

Most refugees are hosted by countries neighbouring their country of origin, which are often low- or middle-income countries. In 2023, 75% of refugees worldwide were hosted by developing countries (low or middle income) (UNHCR, 2024a). Similarly, around 69% of refugees were in countries bordering their country of origin (UNHCR, 2024a). This reality highlights the disproportionate burden placed on countries that are least prepared to meet complex humanitarian needs, in contrast to the limited reception by those with greater resources.

Notable examples include Iran, which hosts 3.8 million refugees; Turkey, which hosts 3.3 million; and Colombia, which hosts 2.9 million. In terms of Europe, Germany stands out, hosting 2.6 million refugees (UNHCR, 2024a). In relation to the national

population, it is worth noting the case of Aruba, where one in five people are refugees, and Lebanon, where one in six people are refugees (UNHCR, 2024a).

In terms of reception, there are several issues that require special attention: the registration of forcibly displaced persons as a first step towards accessing their rights; pending asylum applications, which increase the limbo in which they often find themselves; the increase in protracted crises, which also keeps entire populations in limbo; and the situation in refugee camps.

2.1 Registration: the first step towards recognition and access to rights

When a refugee crosses an international border into a host country or when a person is internally displaced, registering their situation is a key step in accessing protection (UNHCR, 2023c). Registration refers to the documentation of their identity, family unit, and needs. Registration is carried out by the authorities of the receiving country or UNHCR, and provides formal recognition and protection against forced returns, as well as facilitating access to humanitarian aid to which they are entitled. It also makes it easier to identify vulnerable cases, such as unaccompanied minors, victims of trafficking, people with special medical needs, etc. (UNHCR, 2023c).

In the main refugee-hosting countries, registration is usually carried out jointly by governments and UNHCR. In contexts of large population movements, such as the Syrian crisis, mass biometric registration implemented in countries such as Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan made it possible to document millions of people and better organise the humanitarian response. However, it is worth noting the case of Lebanon, where registration was suspended by the national authorities in 2015, resulting in thousands of people remaining invisible to the authorities, hindering their access to basic services and increasing their vulnerability to exploitation and abuse.

On the other hand, in contexts of internal displacement or in countries with fragile institutions, there are often greater obstacles to registration. In countries such as Syria and Yemen, difficulties in accessing certain areas make it impossible to register all displaced persons exhaustively, resorting to indirect estimation methods.

In addition to enabling access to the most basic rights and, therefore, to certain levels of protection, registration data is used internationally to complete global statistics, which in turn improves cooperation and shared responsibility among all states in this area.

In order to adequately include the refugee population in the demographic data of a given country, UNHCR can be used as a source of data collection, although certain limitations should be mentioned, as UNHCR often depends on different states to provide such data and, in many cases, they do not. It is also important to remember that, in contexts of mass arrivals, there may be delays or limited capacity to register all persons as quickly as possible, leaving some persons temporarily undocumented. This occurred, for example, during the Syrian exodus to Lebanon and Jordan in 2013-2014, when registration offices were overwhelmed.

2.2 Pending asylum applications

At the end of 2023, there were nearly 6.9 million asylum applications still pending (UNHCR, 2024a). Delays by the various administrations of different states in processing applications for international protection result in uncertainty about the future of asylum seekers, who are once again left in limbo, with their plans for the future paralysed. These are people who have already fled their countries of origin and are waiting to obtain formal recognition as refugees from the host country.

Often, they are unable to work regularly at the outset or face limited access to certain services, which hinders their integration. At the same time, host countries bear the administrative and reception burden while processing cases. Integration is made even more difficult when, after lengthy periods of examination, applications are rejected, leaving the applicant in a situation of administrative irregularity.

2.3 The increase in protracted crises

A protracted crisis is one in which 25,000 people of the same nationality have been in exile for at least five consecutive years (UNHCR, 2004). These situations are becoming increasingly common, tend to become chronic and, once again, leave forcibly displaced persons in limbo. According to UNHCR data, in mid-

2022, there were 59 protracted crisis situations affecting nearly 23.8 million refugees (UNHCR, 2024b).

The lack of conflict resolution in contexts such as Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia and the Democratic Republic of Congo has meant that entire generations of people are born, grow up and grow old in displacement, often in camps or informal settlements. The absence of political solutions to the crises of origin, combined with limited access to durable solutions, perpetuates the marginalisation of these populations and tests the resilience of host communities.

However, without the political will to resolve the underlying conflicts, these populations will remain in limbo. In short, the increase in protracted crises reflects the difficulty of resolving current conflicts and the inadequacy of the durable solutions available. Reversing this trend requires not only greater diplomatic efforts to achieve peace, but also a stronger commitment to sharing long-term hosting responsibilities, thereby preventing the burden from falling indefinitely on the same countries neighbouring the war zones.

2.4 Refugee camps

The establishment of refugee camps has been the traditional solution provided by host countries to situations of forced displacement. Today, although many refugees are settled in urban centres, millions of forcibly displaced people still live in refugee camps. Life in refugee camps also has certain limitations, such as freedom of movement and the fact that many camps lack basic services for all the people they house, often resulting in overcrowding.

However, it should also be noted that the majority of refugees today do not live in refugee camps but in urban or peri-urban areas. In fact, it is estimated that around 78% of refugees worldwide live outside camps, often in urban or peri-urban areas of host countries (UNHCR, 2013).

Some of the world's largest refugee camps are home to populations equivalent to entire cities. For example, in Kenya, the Dadaab camp, which was created in 1991 and is now home to nearly 200,000 people (RTVE, 2021), stands out. In this camp, after more than 30 years of existence, younger generations of Somali refugees face restrictions on leaving the camp or work-

ing formally, which leads to dependency and frustration. Many of these people only know life in a refugee camp. These situations are also difficult for host countries to manage, as over time they receive less attention from the international community and therefore less aid. Prolonged dependence on camps can lead to exclusion, a lack of opportunities for a dignified life and frustration among the new generations born in exile. Faced with these challenges, UNHCR has for years promoted a policy of "alternatives to camps," encouraging states to allow the integration of refugees into the host society, rather than their prolonged segregation (UNHCR, 2017).

3 Access to durable solutions

The ultimate goal of international protection for forcibly displaced persons is to enable them to achieve a durable solution that allows them to rebuild their lives in safety, dignity and stability. The term "durable solutions" refers to situations in which displacement is ended, and forcibly displaced persons are given the opportunity to resume their lives in a safe and stable environment. There are three durable solutions established by UNHCR: local integration in the host country, voluntary return and resettlement in a third country1. In recent years, so-called complementary pathways have also gained importance as additional tools to facilitate access to protection and integration.

However, the current reality shows that durable solutions are progressing at a clearly insufficient pace compared to the continuous growth in displacement figures. Most displaced persons remain trapped in protracted situations of vulnerability, with no clear prospects for a sustainable solution in the near future.

3.1 Local integration

By local integration, we mean that a refugee can settle permanently in the host country and gradually obtain an administrative status similar to that of other residents, i.e. access to the right to work, public services and even nationality. According to UNHCR, effective integration means ensuring access to livelihoods, public services such as education and health, inclusion

[1] See: https://eacnur.org/es/actualidad/noticias/desplazados/soluciones-duraderas-refugiados

in the labour market and the possibility of social and political participation.

The problem is that many major host countries do not consider long-term solutions that facilitate the local integration of refugees, and there are numerous legal and social obstacles to this, such as limiting access to employment or not allowing access to permanent residence (World Bank, 2023b). One example of this is Lebanon, which does not consider the permanent integration of Palestinian or Syrian refugees under the pretext of not altering its religious demographic distribution or preserving the right of return.

The Global Compact on Refugees, approved by the UN General Assembly in 2018 (UNHCR, 2018), recognises the importance of promoting local integration as a key tool for providing long-term stability and fostering the resilience of refugees and host communities. Although it is a non-binding instrument, reaching this agreement shows, at the very least, a willingness to try to achieve greater social integration of the refugee population in host countries, which, in the long term, also has consequences for the demographics of the host population.

3.2 Return

Return to the country of origin is the preferred durable solution. With regard to returns, according to international refugee law, it is essential that they are carried out voluntarily, safely and with dignity. Voluntariness means that refugees can decide to return in complete freedom, based on objective and reliable information. This decision must be personal and free from any form of coercion, whether physical, psychological or economic. On the other hand, safe return requires the absence of discrimination, the existence of legal guarantees (such as the implementation of amnesties), as well as conditions of physical safety (without risk of attack) and material safety (including access to assets such as land or housing). As for dignified return, this means that returnees must have access to basic services and be able to exercise their fundamental rights, such as access to education or healthcare, without this leading to family separation, and that they must be treated with respect and recognised by the authorities in their country of origin (UNHCR, 1996).

In practice, voluntary return faces enormous challenges. Many countries of origin continue to be scenes of violence, insecurity

or lack of guarantees for the exercise of fundamental rights. As a result, spontaneous or assisted returns have declined significantly. According to UNHCR data, in 2023, nearly 1.1 million refugees returned to their countries of origin, a figure representing less than 1% of the total displaced population (UNHCR, 2024a).

Currently, following the end of the war in Syria, we have witnessed an increase in calls for refugees to return to their country of origin, but it is clear that the absence of war does not mean that the above-mentioned conditions for returns to take place in accordance with international law are being respected. Furthermore, many Syrians fled because of specific individualised persecution, the causes of which still persist today. Therefore, it can be said that, although return is the most desirable solution in theory, it is the least achievable in practice.

3.3 Resettlement and complementary pathways

Resettlement involves transferring a refugee from the first country where they initially sought asylum (e.g. a Syrian refugee in Lebanon) to a third country that agrees to admit them permanently as a refugee (e.g. Canada, Australia, France) (UNHCR, 2024a). Unlike local integration or return, resettlement depends entirely on the willingness of third countries to offer places to receive refugees. It is a fundamental practice that involves implementing the principle of shared responsibility among the entire international community, also enshrined in international refugee law.

However, resettlement is available only to a small fraction of those who need it. In 2023, UNHCR estimated that more than two million refugees required access to resettlement, but only just under 100,000 people were actually able to benefit from this route (UNHCR, 2025a). The limited availability of places reflects the lack of commitment by many states and the need to strengthen mechanisms for shared responsibility at the international level.

On the other hand, in recent years, in addition to resettlement, so-called "complementary pathways" of access have been promoted. These are legal pathways that allow refugees to access a third country through tools such as humanitarian visas, family reunification, study grants, access to work programmes, humanitarian corridors managed by religious entities, etc. These path-

ways should be additional to the right to asylum and resettlement and not replace them. Although they still represent a small percentage of the total, complementary pathways offer legal and safe alternatives that help to expand protection opportunities and reduce dependence on dangerous and irregular routes (UNHCR, 2023b).

Strengthening resettlement and developing complementary pathways are essential elements of the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees, which states that an effective response to forced displacement must be based on international cooperation and the expansion of opportunities for durable solutions.

4 The current situation of forced displacement: regional perspectives

Forced displacement is a global phenomenon, but its manifestation and specific characteristics vary significantly between regions. The nature of conflicts, state responses, reception capacity and demographic trends shape different realities in Africa, Asia-Pacific, Europe, the Middle East, Latin America and the Caribbean, and North America. Analysing these regional perspectives allows for a better understanding of the complexity of the phenomenon and the design of more appropriate responses to its specific dynamics.

4.1 Africa

The African continent faces multiple sources of forced displacement, resulting from armed conflict, ethnic violence, struggles over natural resources, revolutions and climate disasters. Almost a third of the global displaced population is located on the African continent (UNHCR, 2024a). In this region, the situation of the internally displaced population is particularly noteworthy. Africa is home to 35 million internally displaced persons, almost half of the global total. 32.5 million of these internally displaced persons were displaced by conflict and violence, and 80% are concentrated in just five countries. Displacement due to disasters has increased almost sixfold, mainly due to floods and droughts (IDMC, 2024).

There are many conflicts that could be mentioned on this continent, such as those in Sudan, Burkina Faso and the Democratic

Republic of Congo. In addition, many areas of this continent are significantly affected by the effects of climate change, such as the entire Sahel region. Although there are many situations worthy of detailed analysis, which unfortunately receive very little attention, we will focus on the case of Sudan.

4.1.1 Featured case: Sudan

The conflict that erupted in Sudan in April 2023 has caused one of the worst humanitarian crises in recent times. The violence, which spread rapidly from Khartoum to other regions, forced more than six million people to flee within the country and 1.2 million to flee to neighbouring countries. Violence between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces has led to mass displacement to neighbouring countries such as Chad, South Sudan and Egypt. By the end of 2024, more than 10.8 million Sudanese people remained displaced, and displacement continued on a large scale. From April 2023 to May 2024, there were more than 7.1 million internally displaced persons and 1.9 million refugees abroad. Before the current conflict, Sudan was already facing a serious humanitarian crisis, with 3.6 million internally displaced persons, a figure that rose to a record 9.1 million by the end of 2023. Food insecurity is also critical: 42% of the population suffers from acute hunger, especially in conflict areas that are difficult to access (UNHCR, 2024a).

Unfortunately, this crisis is not receiving the attention it deserves, making the prospects for peace increasingly remote. The scale of the numbers of people affected is of particular concern.

4.2 Asia, Pacific and Oceania

The vast Asia-Pacific region is also home to large-scale forced displacement. The main conflicts in Asia over the last few decades have been in Afghanistan, Myanmar and Sri Lanka, among others, while countries such as Pakistan, Iran, Bangladesh, India and Australia have been prominent host countries.

In 2023, the two main displacement situations in this region became more challenging and attracted less funding: Afghanistan and Myanmar. On the other hand, 2023 was the deadliest year for maritime movements in the region since 2015, with nearly 4,500 Rohingya undertaking dangerous sea journeys and 569 dead or missing. It should be noted that this region is also affected by

climate change, which exacerbates the vulnerability of displaced persons and their host communities (UNHCR, 2023a). In this case, we will focus on the situation in Afghanistan.

4.2.1 Featured case: Afghanistan

During more than four decades of war (from the Soviet invasion in 1979, through the civil wars and the Taliban regime in the 1990s, to the conflict of the last twenty years), millions of Afghans have sought refuge outside their country. At the end of 2023, nearly 10.9 million Afghans remained displaced worldwide, most of them within Afghanistan or in neighbouring countries. During 2023, the number of registered Afghan refugees worldwide grew by 741,400, reaching a total of 6.4 million, mainly due to new population figures provided by the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan. The prospects for a durable return remain slim, as nearly half of Afghanistan's more than 40 million inhabitants face severe food insecurity, and millions remain displaced within the country (UNHCR, 2024a).

Following the Taliban's takeover of Kabul in August 2021, there was another wave of people trying to flee Afghanistan. While there was not an immediate mass exodus as some feared, more than 1.6 million Afghans have arrived in neighbouring countries since 2021, adding to the existing numbers. In addition, within Afghanistan, there is still a large internal displacement: approximately 3.25 million Afghans are internally displaced by recent conflicts, in addition to displacement due to natural disasters (Afghanistan suffers from earthquakes, droughts and floods that also force population movements) (UNHCR, 2025c).

4.3 Europe

At the end of 2023, Europe was home to a population of 13 million refugees (UNHCR, 2022). In this region, perhaps the most important thing to note is that, between 2022 and 2023, Europe experienced the largest forced movement of people within its territory since the Second World War, as a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This is the prominent case on which we will focus in this section.

In addition, since 2015, the continent has received significant flows of asylum seekers and migrants from the Middle East, Africa and Asia, posing significant political challenges for the European Union.

4.3.1 Featured case: Ukraine

By the end of 2023, nearly 3.7 million Ukrainians had fled their country because of the Russian invasion, and another 1.3 million were internally displaced within Ukraine (UNHCR, 2024a). Today (April 2025), 6.3 million Ukrainian refugees remain in Europe, mainly in Poland, Germany and the Czech Republic (UNHCR, 2024d).

Unlike in other cases, on this occasion the European Union's response was united and swift, activating the Temporary Protection Directive, which had never been used before and was designed to be used in cases of mass population displacement such as this. As a result, Ukrainians arriving in European Union member states were automatically granted residence and work permits. These measures have greatly facilitated the social integration of the Ukrainian population in the host countries.

In terms of demographic distribution, the profile of Ukrainian refugees is unusual, as the vast majority are women and children, since men between the ages of 18 and 60 were prohibited from leaving Ukraine due to the imposition of forced conscription.

4.4 Middle East and North Africa

The Middle East has been experiencing various types of forced displacement crises for decades. Currently, the two most worrying situations are in Syria (although the war may be over, this does not mean that it is possible to live in peace in this country) and Palestine, which also has certain specificities that only apply to this nationality. Other situations include the various conflicts in Iraq, which have generated millions of internally displaced persons and refugees (some returned after 2017, but many Iraqis still live in Jordan, Turkey, etc.), and the war in Yemen, which has displaced 4.5 million people internally. In total, in the entire region, by mid-2024, there were 16.6 million forcibly displaced persons (UNHCR, 2025d).

The countries in the region itself have been heavily impacted: Turkey and Lebanon now have the highest per capita refugee densities in the world, while Jordan and Egypt are also hosting hundreds of thousands.

4.4.1 Notable cases: Syria and Palestine

The war in Syria, which began in 2011, triggered the largest human displacement in recent decades. This amounts to more than 13 million refugees at the end of 2023, out of a pre-war population of 22 million. As for internally displaced persons, they totalled 7.2 million (UNHCR, 2024a). Turkey hosts the largest number of Syrian refugees (about 3.2 million), followed by Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq. The situation of Syrian refugees illustrates the chronic nature of forced displacement in contexts of unresolved conflict.

Demographically, the Syrian diaspora is predominantly young (many school-age children, which has overwhelmed schools in Lebanon and Jordan) and includes a large number of women with children, as many men have remained behind, died or been forcibly recruited.

The situation of Palestinian refugees is unique in terms of its duration, dating back to 1948. These original refugees and their descendants are recognised under the mandate of UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East). Today, more than 5.9 million Palestinians are registered as refugees by UNRWA in the occupied Palestinian territories (Gaza and the West Bank) and neighbouring countries (mainly Jordan, Lebanon and Syria). This makes them one of the largest refugee populations in the world (UNRWA, 2019).

The situation of Palestinian refugees is intergenerational: there are great-grandchildren of the original refugees who still have refugee status. In general, this is a young population that has grown up with limited access to certain rights depending on the country (in Lebanon, for example, they face restrictions on certain professions and property ownership, and most still live in refugee camps). Jordan is the country that hosts the most Palestinians (more than two million, many of whom have obtained Jordanian citizenship). The absence of a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict means that this group remains in limbo.

4.5 Latin America and the Caribbean

The Latin American region has experienced significant forced displacement in recent years, although of a somewhat different nature than that of conventional wars. Two main phenom-

ena stand out: the mass exodus of Venezuelans to neighbouring countries due to the severe political, economic and social crisis in Venezuela, and internal displacement and forced migration due to criminal violence and disasters in countries in Central America, Mexico and Colombia. As a result, by mid-2024, this region was home to 20.3 million forcibly displaced persons. In the first eight months of 2024, 240,000 refugees and migrants crossed the Darien jungle, a significant decrease from the record 520,000 who made the dangerous journey in 2023 (UNHCR, 2025b).

Although Latin America has not historically been a major source of refugees (except in specific cases, such as refugees from dictatorships in the 1970s and 1980s, or the forced displacement of Colombians), today the Venezuelan diaspora is one of the largest in the world, transforming the region's migration landscape. On the other hand, Central America and Mexico have seen an increase in the exodus of people fleeing gang violence, persecution or economic collapse in countries such as Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Haiti, fuelling flows of asylum seekers to North America. It is also worth noting situations of internal displacement, such as in Colombia, among others.

Although I will focus on the case of Venezuela, it is worth briefly highlighting the situation in Colombia. This is one of the longest-running situations of internal displacement in the world. We are talking about nearly eight million Colombians who have been forcibly displaced internally as a result of the armed conflict that has been going on for decades (IDMC, 2024).

4.5.1 Featured case: Venezuela

For years, the situation in Venezuela has rapidly become one of the world's largest displacement crises, comparable to Syria. Since 2015, Venezuela has experienced a mass exodus due to the acute political, economic and social crisis that the country has been experiencing for some time. Currently, more than 5.8 million people have left Venezuela in search of protection and a better life. The vast majority are being hosted in countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. This means that it is the region itself that has taken in almost all of this influx (UNHCR, 2024a).

It should be noted that not all Venezuelans who have fled their country are formally recognised as refugees, as their situation does not fall within the traditional definition of a refugee under

the 1951 Geneva Convention. However, due to the scale and repercussions of this situation, many states have chosen to grant Venezuelans some form of temporary or humanitarian protection, thanks to which they have been able to regularise their situation in many places and integrate better while they await the possibility of a voluntary, safe and dignified return. It is also worth mentioning that UNHCR considers them to be "refugees or people with refugee-like needs", given that they fled from conditions that compromise their rights.

Demographically, many Venezuelan migrants are of working age, including professionals, which has had a double effect: for Venezuela, a huge "brain drain" and a decline in its population; for host countries, an unexpected population increase that has disrupted labour markets and demanded integration policies.

In short, the Venezuelan crisis has transformed the demographic map of the region: Latin America has gone from being mainly an area of moderate economic emigration to being the scene of one of the largest forced displacements in the contemporary world.

4.6 North America

In North America, the dynamics of forced displacement are mainly evident in the reception of people fleeing from other regions. The United States and Canada are among the developed countries that receive the most requests for protection worldwide. Unlike other regions, North America does not generate large flows of refugees of its own (its migratory movements are mainly economic), but it does face the arrival of forcibly displaced persons from Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa and Asia.

The United States has been the largest recipient of asylum seekers in the Americas and one of the leading countries for refugee resettlement worldwide. Canada, for its part, has stood out for its innovative resettlement policies and is a notable example of commitment to durable solutions for refugees.

4.6.1 Featured case: Canada

Despite Canada's geographical distance from many conflict zones (which limits spontaneous mass arrivals), Canada has used resettlement as its primary means of providing protection to thousands of forcibly displaced persons.

As of 2025, Canada has welcomed approximately 50,000 resettled refugees per year, maintaining its position as one of the world's leading refugee resettlement countries. This figure reflects Canada's ongoing response to global crises, including conflicts in Syria, Afghanistan, Ukraine and climate-induced displacement in vulnerable regions. Refugees are resettled in all provinces and territories, with Ontario, British Columbia and Alberta receiving the largest numbers due to established support networks and economic opportunities. Demographically, most refugees arriving in Canada are families, a significant proportion of whom are women and children. Increasingly, LGBTQ+ refugees and people with disabilities are being resettled, recognising their greater vulnerability (Refugee Centre, 2025).

In addition, since the 1970s, Canada has been running a pioneering private (or community) sponsorship programme for refugees, in which groups of local citizens, churches or various organisations take responsibility for supporting resettled refugees who arrive (in addition to government quotas). This is one of the complementary approaches that have also been encouraged since the adoption of the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees.

In demographic terms, Canadian immigration policy (which includes refugees) seeks to provide a solution to its problem of low population growth and ageing, while also meeting humanitarian objectives. In this way, the reception of refugees is aligned with national development interests in certain rural regions that need population, for example (Papademetriou and Benson, 2025).

In conclusion, Canada is an example of how a high-income country can take an active and innovative role in providing solutions to the various refugee crises occurring elsewhere in the world through avenues such as large-scale resettlement and the implementation of various effective integration policies (its programmes include language classes, employment guidance, etc. for newcomers). Nevertheless, there are major challenges related to the cultural and economic integration of refugees who come from very different backgrounds, which requires investment and follow-up.

Conclusions

Forced displacement has reached unprecedented levels, establishing itself as a global demographic phenomenon. At the end

of 2024, around 120 million people worldwide were forcibly displaced, representing not only an ongoing humanitarian emergency but also a substantial transformation of contemporary population dynamics, especially in host countries. This rapid growth, which has doubled the figures in just a decade, highlights both the severity and special nature of current conflicts and crises and the profound shortcomings in the international response to prevent, manage and resolve the causes of forced displacement. Given the current nature of conflicts and the lack of real access to lasting solutions, we can say that the phenomenon of forced displacement will continue to increase.

From a demographic perspective, the impact of forced displacement is very significant. It alters age and gender structures both in countries of origin, which see large segments of their population decline, and in host countries, which face unexpected increases in vulnerable populations in contexts that were often already strained due to other specific factors. However, despite their relevance, forcibly displaced persons remain largely "forgotten" in demographic terms, which ultimately hinders their inclusion in the design of various public policies and development plans. Closer collaboration between specialised agencies such as UNHCR and national statistical authorities is essential to remedy these shortcomings and ensure that the needs of forcibly displaced populations are fully integrated into development agendas and international commitments 2.

Furthermore, as explained above, analysis of current responses reveals a profound inequality in the distribution of responsibilities at the international level. While low- and middle-income countries host nearly 75% of refugees, more developed countries, despite their economic capacity, maintain proportionally lower levels of reception. This asymmetry underscores the urgency of strengthening mechanisms of solidarity and shared responsibility, promoting a more just and equitable distribution of protection. In this regard, the promotion of legal and safe pathways and real access to durable solutions established by the legal framework of international refugee law, such as resettlement or complementary pathways, is a legal, ethical and practical imperative to prevent people from risking their lives on dangerous routes and also to reduce the pressure on countries bordering conflict zones, as well as to ensure that those affected

[2] As proposed in Hugo *et al.* (2018).

can rebuild their lives in dignity by integrating appropriately into their host countries.

Thus, with regard to durable solutions, the data show that progress is clearly insufficient, given the pace of new displacements. Voluntary return, traditionally considered the most desirable solution, faces enormous obstacles due to persistent insecurity, the destruction of basic infrastructure and the lack of protection guarantees in countries of origin. Syria is an example of this. Local integration, while a viable option in many contexts, requires a firm commitment on the part of host states to ensure effective access to fundamental rights and to promote the social and economic inclusion of refugees. Resettlement in third countries, meanwhile, continues to fall far short of actual global needs, limited to a tiny fraction of the forcibly displaced population in need of international protection. However, there are examples of success, such as Canada.

Given the magnitude of the challenges, it is necessary to adopt a comprehensive international vision that combines actions at multiple levels. It is essential to strengthen conflict prevention efforts by addressing their root causes through the promotion of peace, justice and respect for human rights. At the same time, international protection systems must be strengthened, ensuring respect for the principle of non-refoulement and access to asylum.

On the other hand, regional analysis of forced displacement reveals significant disparities. In Africa, forced displacement continues to be driven by protracted armed conflicts, ethnic violence, climate crises and territorial disputes, with emblematic cases such as Sudan. Africa is home to almost a third of the world's displaced population and represents one of the greatest challenges for international protection in terms of volume, duration of displacement and precariousness of solutions. Kenya is an example of a chronic reception crisis, where generation after generation of refugees are condemned to live in refugee camps, with all that this implies in terms of the protection of their human rights.

In Asia, the case of Afghanistan symbolises the persistence of long-term crises, where entire generations have also lived between exile and internal displacement, and where neighbouring countries, such as Pakistan and Iran, continue to bear a disproportionate burden of reception compared to other countries with greater economic and logistical resources.

In Europe, forced displacement took on a new dimension following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which triggered the largest movement of refugees on the continent since the Second World War. The European response, with the activation of the Temporary Protection Directive, demonstrated that coordinated and supportive reception is possible when there is political will, but it also highlighted the disparity in treatment compared to other displacement crises.

The Middle East remains the epicentre of some of the most protracted and complex situations, such as the crises in Syria and Palestine, where displacement has become intergenerational and where millions of people remain trapped in situations of insecurity, humanitarian dependence and, no prospects for safe return, as well as a total lack of access to dignified local integration in their host countries.

Latin America and the Caribbean, historically a region of economic migration, has undergone a radical shift in recent years with the Venezuelan exodus, which has become one of the largest contemporary displacements, profoundly affecting the social, economic and demographic structure of several host countries. In addition, organised violence and natural disasters have intensified the flows of forcibly displaced persons in this region, as has been the case in Colombia.

North America, for its part, continues to receive a significant number of asylum seekers and refugees, mainly from Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa and Asia, with Canada standing out as an example of active commitment to resettlement and community sponsorship. This shows, once again, that with political will, durable solutions can be used in a way that benefits all actors involved in this phenomenon of forced displacement.

A review of the situation in all these regions shows that, despite the specific contexts, one constant remains: forced displacement is becoming increasingly prolonged, more urban, more complex and requires responses that go beyond emergency humanitarian approaches to anchor themselves in long-term development strategies. Durable solutions remain insufficient: voluntary return is limited by the persistence of conflict and the lack of security; local integration faces legal, economic and social barriers that hinder effective inclusion; and resettlement in third countries, although essential for the most vulnerable cases, remains a scarce tool reserved for a minority.

The management of forced displacement therefore requires a paradigm shift. Displacement must be recognised not as a one-off crisis, but as a structural feature of the 21st century, requiring inclusive reception policies, effective mechanisms for shared responsibility, sustained efforts to prevent conflict and promote stable political solutions. It is also essential to fully integrate displaced persons into the demographic and development frameworks of states, including their inclusion in censuses, their access to basic rights and their participation in decisions that affect their lives.

In conclusion, forced displacement is shaping a new global demographic landscape, to which the international community must adapt with foresight, shared responsibility and ethical commitment. The protection of displaced persons cannot be considered an option, but rather a universal legal and moral obligation.

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Chapter Two

Africa, arise! The 22nd century will be African

Óscar Garrido Guijarro

Summary

After centuries on the periphery, sub-Saharan Africa is set to play a much more prominent role in the global economy and governance. Asia's economic and demographic boom may continue to dominate the first part of this century, but the African continent's influence will grow in the second half, and the 22nd century may become Africa's century.

The demographic growth of sub-Saharan Africa will become highly significant in the coming decades and will have consequences for both the continent and the rest of the world. Regardless of whether the final magnitude of the population increase matches the highest or most moderate forecasts, it will first and foremost have an impact on the lives of Africans themselves. This impact can be beneficial if states implement the appropriate reforms to enable the demographic dividend to materialise.

Population growth will also have an impact on other regions, mainly neighbouring Europe and the Middle East, due to possible migratory pressures. The repercussions will not necessarily be negative, given the lack of human resources in the labour market that will affect, above all, European countries stuck in a demo-

graphic winter. For centuries, migration has benefited millions of people around the world, providing opportunities and enriching the human life of both sending and receiving societies.

Keywords

Sub-Saharan Africa, Demographics, Immigration, Fertility rates, Demographic dividend.

Introduction

After centuries on the periphery, sub-Saharan Africa is set to play a much more important role in the global economy and governance. Asia's economic and demographic boom may continue to dominate the first part of this century, but the weight of the African continent will grow in the second half, and the 22nd century may become the century of Africa.

Forecasts suggest that, as early as the next decade, the percentage of the African population relative to the world population will exceed 20%, compared to 13% in 2000 and 9% in 1950. As the rest of the world ages, Africa is becoming a crucial source of labour: more than half of the young people entering the global workforce in 2030 will be African (*The Economist,* 2025a).

Future demographic trends are generally uncertain. However, compared to other social, economic or political trends, the speed and direction of demographic change, at least in the short to medium term, is more predictable. Forecasts for African population growth may vary, but not substantially, because much of the growth is already due to what demographers call "demographic momentum", i.e. sub-Saharan Africa has so many women of childbearing age that, even if a significant proportion decided to have fewer children, the population would continue to grow.

Although African states are diverse in their geographical conditions and socio-political circumstances, they nevertheless face common socio-demographic challenges, with variations in the degree and capacity of resilience to them. These challenges include high levels of youth unemployment, high rates of informal employment, poor industrialisation, rapid urbanisation, the growing impact of climate change, food security issues, the fight against hunger, and inadequate education and healthcare systems (Granados, 2024).

However, although African countries have a long way to go in terms of socio-economic development metrics, the continent is at its best. Since 1960, average life expectancy has increased by more than half, from 41 to 64 years. The proportion of children dying before the age of five has fallen by three-quarters. The proportion of young Africans attending university has increased ninefold since 1970. African culture is being recognised around the world. In the 2020s, African authors have won the Booker

Prize, the Prix Goncourt and the Nobel Prize for Literature. All these advances bode well for the world's youngest continent (*The Economist,* 2025b).

1 African population explosion

In 1885, when the colonial powers divided up Africa, the continent had less than 100 million inhabitants, or one-third of the population of Europe. Today, there are almost two Africans for every European (*The Economist,* 2020a). According to the latest edition of the United Nations study, *World Population Prospects 2024*[1], in the 22nd century, sub-Saharan Africa will be the most populous region in the world.

2024		2100	
World	8,161,972,573	**World**	10,180,160,752
East Asia	2,351,264,830	**Sub-Saharan Africa**	3,351,458,670
Central and South Asia	2,146,282,360	**Central and Southern Asia**	2,639,257,310
Sub-Saharan Africa	1,243,009,510	**East Asia**	1,448,796,860
Europe and North America	1,130,378,929	**Europe and North America**	1,067,216,669
Latin America and the Caribbean	663,466,070	**North Africa and Western Asia**	987,038,330
North Africa and Western Asia	581,482,160	**Latin America and the Caribbean**	613,447,220
Oceania	46,088,719	**Oceania**	72,945,698

Table 1. World population by international regions in 2024 and projections for 2100. *Source:* United Nations.

World Population Prospects 2024 reports that the number of countries in the world where fertility has remained at very low levels for several decades and where, as a result, the population size has already peaked has increased. In the 1980s, only

[1] This is the twenty-eighth edition of the world population estimates and projections published by the United Nations since 1951. *World Population Prospects* is one of the most authoritative and comprehensive sets of demographic data for assessing population trends at the global, regional and national levels. [Accessed: 2025]. Available at: https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/world-population-prospects-2024

fourteen countries were in this category, almost all of them in Europe. Today, the number has risen to 63 and covers a wide geographical area that includes countries in East Asia and Latin America, as well as, of course, Europe and North America. In the case of sub-Saharan Africa, only Mauritius is in this group. Among the countries that have already reached their maximum size are some of the most populous in the world, such as China, Germany, Japan and the Russian Federation. China, currently the country with the second largest population in the world, is expected to experience the largest absolute population loss over the next thirty years (204 million), followed by Japan (21 million) and the Russian Federation (10 million). In addition, twenty-four countries in this group are currently experiencing what are known as "ultra-low" fertility levels, with less than 1.4 births per woman on average. These include China, Italy and Spain, for example.

Another group of countries analysed in the aforementioned United Nations study is those whose population will continue to grow over the next thirty years, reaching its peak by the middle of the century. This classification of 48 countries includes some of the most populous countries today, such as Iran, Brazil and Turkey. There are three sub-Saharan African states in this group: Réunion, Seychelles and Cape Verde.

Finally, *World Population Prospects 2024* analyses the group of countries that are expected to reach their peak population by the end of the 21st century or even later, and this includes all countries in sub-Saharan Africa, except for the island states mentioned above. Thus, the United Nations study predicts that, over the next thirty years, the countries of sub-Saharan Africa will increase their population by 79%, so that by 2054 sub-Saharan Africa will have between 2.1 and 2.4 billion people, and between three and four billion by 2100. According to the same data, five countries in sub-Saharan Africa—Angola, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Niger and Somalia—will grow exponentially, with populations more than doubling in size over the next three decades.

As a result of this population explosion, the *ranking* of the most populous countries on the planet at the start of the 22nd century will include four African states in the top positions (United Nations, 2024).

	2024	Forecast 2054	Forecast 2100
1	India (1451)	India (1692)	India (1505)
2	China (1419)	China (1215)	China (633)
3	United States (345)	Pakistan (389)	Pakistan (511)
4	Indonesia (283)	United States (384)	**Nigeria (477)**
5	Pakistan (251)	**Nigeria (376)**	**Democratic Republic of Congo (431)**
6	**Nigeria (233)**	Indonesia (322)	United States (421)
7	Brazil (212)	**Ethiopia (240)**	**Ethiopia (367)**
8	Bangladesh (174)	**Democratic Republic of Congo (238)**	Indonesia (296)
9	Russia (145)	Bangladesh (219)	**Tanzania (263)**
10	**Ethiopia (132)**	Brazil (215)	Bangladesh (209)

Table 2. Ranking of the ten most populous countries in the world. Data in millions. *Source:* United Nations

2 High fertility rates, but declining

In terms of fertility, the current global rate is 2.25 live births per woman, compared to 3.31 births in 1990 and more than five in 1950. More than half of the world's countries have fertility below the replacement level of 2.1 live births per woman. This is the level necessary for a population to maintain a constant size in the long term (without migration), with each generation followed by another of approximately the same size (United Nations, 2024).

In Asia and Latin America, the total fertility rate has fallen from around six in 1950 to almost the replacement level. In sub-Saharan Africa, the decline in fertility has been slower and later: from 6.5 in 1950 to 4.6 in 2020 (Lam, 2019). As things stand, the countries with the highest fertility rates are currently in sub-Saharan Africa, specifically Chad, Niger, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Somalia (United Nations, 2024).

The number of countries with fertility rates above the replacement level will be 49 in 2050 and only six in 2100, three of which

are African: Samoa, Somalia, Tonga, Niger, Chad, and Tajikistan (Hay, 2024).

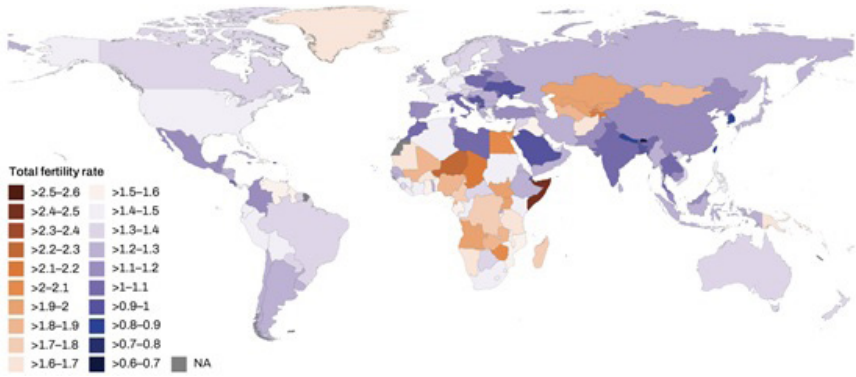

Figure 1. Projected fertility rates by country in 2100. ***Source: The Lancet***

It should be noted that the population projections published by the United Nations in recent years contain lower estimates than those considered a decade ago. In this regard, the world population in 2100 is now expected to be 6% smaller—or about 700 million people fewer—than predicted a decade ago, partly due to slightly faster-than-expected fertility declines in some parts of sub-Saharan Africa (United Nations, 2024).

Compared to other regions, the fertility rate in sub-Saharan African countries is generally high, and although there is still a long way to go in terms of population growth, the data suggest that a significant slowdown in birth rates is already underway. In this regard, a number of countries in the southern and eastern regions stand out, where in 2024 the fertility rate was approximately three, or even below three: South Africa (2.2), Botswana (2.3), Namibia (2.8), Kenya (3.1), Rwanda (3.1) and Malawi (3.1) (CIA, 2024).

Furthermore, across almost the entire continent, fertility rates are lower for urban women, who tend to have between 30% and 40% fewer children than rural women. The shift away from agriculture towards urban economic activities, where intellect is often more useful than muscle power, reduces the economic advantage of having many children.

If we consider the case of Kenya, its fertility rate has fallen from 6.7 children per woman in 1989 to 3.1 in 2024. Furthermore, it also exemplifies what has already been noted: the marked dif-

ference between the city and the countryside. On average, urban Kenyan women have 2.8 children each, one less than the 3.9 of rural women (The Economist, 2023a).

Delaying the age at which women have their first child can make a significant contribution to slowing population growth. According to United Nations statistics, if African girls did not have children before the age of eighteen, the projected population size of sub-Saharan African countries would be 85 million lower in 2054 and 292 million lower in 2100 (United Nations, 2024).

In addition, there is a pattern that is replicated in sub-Saharan Africa and in any region where it has been analysed: the close relationship between education and fertility rates. Thus, African women without formal education have, on average, six or more children. This figure drops to around four for women who have completed primary education and to around two for those who have completed secondary education (*The Economist,* 2020b). More education means marrying later, having fewer children and delaying motherhood. In addition, with higher education, women are more likely to pursue a professional career (Ahn, 2023).

Figure 2. Girls and boys at an African school. *Source: The Economist.*

3 Reasons to contextualise demographic behaviour

But while it is true that there has been a slowdown in birth rates and a general improvement in income, health and education levels, why has the decline in fertility rates in sub-Saharan African countries not been as rapid and pronounced as it has been in the rest of the world? This question has led some

scholars to seek explanations of a socio-demographic, but also cultural, nature.

Thus, in the opinion of Chukwuma Chinye of the Centre for Democracy and Development in Nigeria, the prevailing discourse on the continent's demographic evolution is negative and stems mainly from a Eurocentric viewpoint focused on the fact that fertility rates in Africa are not declining fast enough compared to demographic models in Southeast Asia. A common misconception among those responsible for analysing and proposing public policies is to want to transfer policies that have been tried and tested in other regions to the different demographic contexts in Africa. This approach ignores socio-cultural differences. Predicting Africa's demographic trajectory on the assumption that it will follow the same pattern as other regions of the world is misguided.

According to Chinye, the basis of this misconception is the use of fertility rates as almost the sole criterion for measuring demographic transition, without first assessing the prominent role played by infant mortality figures in the African case. Thus, a fundamental reason why fertility rates in Africa do not match Western estimates is that infant mortality on the African continent is still high compared to other regions. There is an intrinsic relationship between fertility rates and infant mortality rates in sub-Saharan Africa; they go hand in hand. The real problem is not that fertility rates are disproportionately high, but that families are choosing to have more children to compensate for comparable infant mortality rates (Chinye, 2022).

In wealthy countries, it is rare for children to die. In developing countries, unfortunately, this continues to happen. As a country's socio-economic and health status improves, families can expect more children to survive to adulthood, so they do not need to have as many children. In general, infant mortality is a good indicator of these trends. Based on this assumption, African fertility is basically what one would expect, based on the continent's current infant mortality rates (Stone, 2018).

Niger is a prime example: this country has the highest fertility rate in the world, as well as very high poverty and mortality rates. There, women have an average of 6.7 children, but only 2.7 sons will still be alive as adults when their parents are no longer of working age. Furthermore, it is the sons that parents can rely on most to provide material and financial support.

The extended family plays a more important role in African life than elsewhere; children may be raised by cousins or aunts. This reduces the burden of child-rearing on parents and lowers the implicit cost of children. In addition, many African cultures have communal social structures that shift the cost of having more children to the community rather than the family. In this sense, where communal land ownership predominates, having a large family is economically beneficial, as resources are distributed according to family size.

Another explanation is the relatively low use of modern contraceptives, which is partly explained by a reluctance to accept family planning assistance due to mistrust of practices imported from Western countries (Ahn, 2023). This is complemented by the fact that, in African cultures, marriage and procreation continue to be valued as desirable options in people's lives (Lemag.ird.fr, 2024).

Gountiéni D. Lankoandé, director of the Groupe de Recherche et d'Analyse Appliquées pour le Développement de Burkina Faso, when asked for this analysis what he believes are the reasons for the high fertility rates in sub-Saharan African countries, considers that there are several reasons that explain this:

> "In rural areas, which tend to account for 60% of the population in most countries on the continent, women and children represent an important labour force in agricultural production. Having many children also remains a sign of prestige in many countries. Religion also plays an important role. In the cultures, traditions and religions most prevalent in sub-Saharan Africa (Islam, Christianity, etc.), a child is a gift from God. Changes are taking place in urban areas, but in most cases, attitudes have not changed."

4 Towards the desired demographic dividend

According to the report published in January 2025 by the African Development Bank on the continent's macroeconomic performance and outlook, real GDP growth in Africa will accelerate to 4.1% in 2025 and 4.4% in 2026. In 2024, it was 3.2%, slightly higher than the 3% recorded in 2023. With these figures, the African continent is consolidating its position as the second fastest growing region in the world after Asia. However, despite it 's positive trajectory, the report highlights that Africa's growth remains below the 7% threshold needed

for a substantial reduction in poverty (African Development Bank Group, 2025).

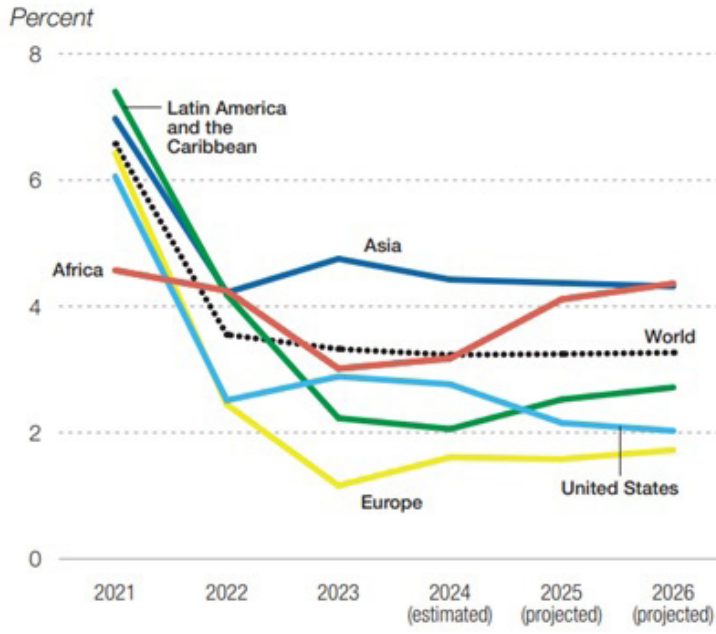

Figure 3. Percentage GDP growth by international region.
***Source:* African Development Bank Group statistics**

According to International Monetary Fund forecasts, in 2025, twelve of the twenty fastest-growing economies in the world will be African.

	GDP growth
South Sudan	**27.2**
Guyana	**14.4**
Libya	**13.7**
Senegal	**9.3**
Palau	**8.5**
Sudan	**8.3**
Uganda	**7.5**
Niger	**7.3**
Macau	**7.3**

	GDP growth
Bhutan	**7.2**
Mongolia	**7**
Zambia	**6.6**
Benin	**6.5**
Ethiopia	**6.5**
Rwanda	**6.5**
India	**6.5**
Ivory Coast	**6.4**
Philippines	**6.1**
Vietnam	**6.1**
Djibouti	**6**
World average	**3.2**

Table 3. Twenty fastest-growing economies in 2025. *Source:* International Monetary Fund

If GDP growth parallels population growth, economies such as Nigeria's could surpass European powers in size (adjusted for purchasing power). According to a report by PwC, which forecasts that Nigeria's GDP will reach USD 6.4 trillion in 2050, the country would surpass Germany, the United Kingdom, France and Saudi Arabia in the global rankings (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2016).

Population growth in the 20th century was concentrated in Asia, while in the 21st century it is concentrated in sub-Saharan Africa. Most of the increase in the working-age population between 1960 and 2020 occurred in Asia, while most of the working-age population between 2020 and 2100 will be concentrated on the African continent (Lam, 2019).

While much of the world is ageing, Africa is becoming a crucial source of labour. More than half of the young people entering the global workforce in 2030 will be African (*The Economist*, 2025a). This trend represents perhaps the region's greatest opportunity: a large pool of human talent, a large market and significant reserves of natural resources. However, the economic dynamism that may accompany the continent's current circumstances will not automatically translate into reality, and sound policy decisions will be required to ensure that the potential is realised (Selassie, 2021).

Sub-Saharan Africa can take advantage of what demographers call the demographic dividend, i.e. the economic benefit that countries obtain when the proportion of the working-age population increases in relation to that of children and the elderly. In many countries on the African continent, the proportion of the working-age population (aged 20 to 64) will continue to grow faster than the total population, providing an opportunity for the aforementioned dividend and accelerated economic growth (United Nations, 2024).

Gountiéni D. Lankoandé considers that:

> "[...] population growth should be an opportunity and a driver of socio-economic progress in sub-Saharan African countries given the young profile of their population, which is synonymous with dynamism, innovation, strength and good health. However, from an economic point of view, per capita wealth creation remains low and a large part of the population continues to live below the poverty line compared to other regions. In addition, rapid urbanisation is exacerbating pressures on cities in terms of access to natural resources, public services, housing and infrastructure, and in rural areas, increased competition for water and forest resources is creating tensions between farmers and pastoralists. However, despite all these challenges, we are convinced that by innovating on the basis of knowledge and strengthening existing demographic policies, these trends can be managed and integrated for the benefit of the economy, society and culture".

To the extent that African societies invest in improving education levels, the continent can develop an unprecedented talent pool. Better quality education for millions of Africans can lead to significant progress for society as a whole.

Looking at the experience of East Asia as an illustration, the data suggest that near-universal secondary school enrolment and good quality education provision were key elements in these countries' success. Taking the case of South Korea, studies highlight the close link between investment in education and socio-economic development. The results show that if educational attainment had not improved during this country's remarkable growth period, GDP per capita would be only 30% of its current value. More generally, the effects of demographic change and education on growth are crucially intertwined: favourable demographics, in the

form of a larger proportion of the working-age population, tend to increase growth, but the magnitude of this benefit depends above all on the level of education (International Monetary Fund, 2024).

However, education statistics still place the continent below the figures obtained in other developing regions. In sub-Saharan Africa, nearly three in ten school-age children do not attend school. The primary school completion rate is around 65%, compared to a global average of 87%. And the literacy rate for 15- to 24-year-olds is only 75%, below the rate of nearly 90% in other developing economies. One reason for these shortfalls is that public spending on education in many sub-Saharan African countries is below the desirable average. The average education budget in the region was approximately 3.5% of GDP in 2020, below the international recommendation of at least 4% (Fornino, 2024).

Africa can improve the productivity and quality of its economic growth by investing in a virtuous circle of better skills for better jobs. Labour markets must rapidly increase the supply and demand for skilled workers. On the supply side, while educational levels have progressed, the quality of education must be brought up to the level of other developing regions. On the demand side, labour markets must create quality jobs for skilled workers. More than 80% of educated young Africans aspire to work in highly skilled occupations, but only 8% find such jobs. Demand for skilled workers remains low because employment growth has been limited to low-productivity sectors such as agriculture, retail and services (OECD, 2024). However, the last decade has seen exponential growth in the number of African start-ups, which is proving to be an opportunity to attract investment and business (Chinye, 2022).

Spending on education provides clear long-term economic benefits that more than justify its cost. Increased public spending on education offers economic benefits such as increased productivity and foreign direct investment. It will also ensure the supply of a productive workforce, which a rapidly ageing world will need with increasing urgency.

One obstacle to progress in terms of welfare is that 85.8% of the working population in sub-Saharan Africa is employed in the informal sector, meaning that they perform work that is neither registered nor identified and therefore does not contribute to

social security; people do not pay taxes on their income, which means that countries have less scope to invest in social welfare. Furthermore, informal production accounts for 62% of the continent's official GDP on average (International Organisation for Migration, 2024a). Addressing the issue of labour and economic informality is necessary for the desired demographic dividend to materialise.

A key opportunity for socio-economic development will be linked to the smooth functioning and utilisation of the recently established African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), the world's largest free trade agreement in terms of number of members (54 countries have signed up), territory and population (a market of almost 1.3 billion people). The aim is to boost economic growth, intra-African trade and investment across the continent. Although it was established in February 2020, implementation of the agreement is slow. Thus, according to the Economic Commission for Africa, African countries continue to trade more with the rest of the world than with each other. The reasons often cited are inadequate infrastructure, lack of financing and poor governance (Lewis, 2024).

Statistics show that Africa exports more to the rest of the world than to other African countries. The share of Africa's exports to the rest of the world ranged from 80% to 90% between 2000 and 2020, mainly primary products and minerals. Intra-African trade accounted for only 15.2% of Africa's total trade volume during the period 2015-2020, well below desirable figures. The AfCFTA is expected to change these figures (International Organisation for Migration, 2024a).

5 Industrialisation and energy transition: an opportunity for development

One of the main challenges facing African economies is industrial development. To give an example, two out of every three cocoa beans in the world originate in Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire, but their growers receive only 5% of the profits from the chocolate industry due to a lack of industrial development. Cocoa leaves Ghana or Côte d'Ivoire at a very low price, and if they want to buy it processed, they end up purchasing it on the foreign market at a higher price, paying a lot of money for a product that is originally theirs. Something similar occurs on a large scale with oil, which is exported crude and imported refined (Soler, 2022).

The global drive to mitigate climate change is generating significant demand for critical minerals, which are vital for transforming the energy system and developing low-emission technologies. An integral part of this transition are electric vehicles and renewable energy generation, which require more minerals than traditional fossil fuel technologies. For example, the production of batteries for electric vehicles is heavily dependent on minerals such as lithium, nickel, manganese and cobalt. Renewable technologies, such as solar panels and wind turbines, require minerals such as bauxite, copper, silicon and platinum group metals, among others. As things stand, demand for these critical minerals, which has already increased in recent years, is expected to skyrocket in the coming decades.

Sub-Saharan Africa, which is estimated to hold nearly 30% of the world's proven reserves of critical minerals, is crucial to global supply. The region already contributes significantly to the production of minerals such as cobalt, graphite, manganese, platinum group metals and chromium. The Democratic Republic of Congo dominates the cobalt market, with over 70% of global production and approximately 50% of the world's proven reserves. Major manganese producers include South Africa, Gabon and Ghana, which account for over 60% of global production. Other countries such as Guinea (bauxite), Mozambique (graphite), Mali (lithium), Zambia (copper) and Zimbabwe (nickel, platinum, lithium) are poised to benefit from this boom induced by the transition to clean energy (International Monetary Fund, 2024b).

However, most sub-Saharan African countries export critical minerals, mainly in raw form, which tend to have lower added value than processing activities. Although countries in the region have deepened their participation in the mineral trade and are working to become more integrated into global value chains, they continue to focus primarily on basic extraction.

The Democratic Republic of Congo, which accounts for 74% of global cobalt mining, sends 97% of its cobalt exports, mostly unprocessed, to China. Similarly, large quantities of low-grade lithium in rock form are estimated to leave Zimbabwe's mines, also bound for China, rather than undergoing local processing (International Monetary Fund, 2024b).

By limiting themselves to the lower value-added stages of extraction, countries risk losing significant profits. The development of local processing industries could significantly increase profits,

boost tax revenues and create more skilled jobs. Sub-Saharan Africa's wealth of critical minerals offers an opportunity to move from exporting raw materials to developing processing industries to obtain more value-added profits.

6 African demographics and migration: a continent on the move

The contribution of international migration to demographic change varies across countries and international regions. In most countries where the average fertility rate is relatively high, migration is likely to have a limited impact on population growth. Conversely, for many countries with relatively low fertility rates, migration is expected to be the main driver of future population growth (United Nations, 2024).

In sub-Saharan Africa, mobility takes many forms. Herders cross the continent every day in search of pasture for their livestock and commercial opportunities; dynamic trade routes have survived centuries of change and continue to thrive; people move in search of education and work or to escape conflict or the adverse effects of climate change. It is estimated that in 2020 there were 25.1 million international migrants in Africa, meaning that 1.9% of the African population lived outside the country where they were born, below the global average of 3.6%. This figure represented 9% of the 281 million international migrants in the world in 2020 (International Organisation for Migration, 2024a).

One of the main characteristics of African migration is that more than half of African international migrants move mainly within the continent. More specifically, the number of intra-African international migrants—those whose countries of origin and destination were in Africa—was 20.8 million in 2020, slightly higher than the number of African migrants leaving for non-African countries, which was 19.7 million. In relative terms, intra-African migration accounted for 51% of total African migration. This pattern is common in all regions except North Africa, where migration to European countries (e.g. Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia) or the Middle East (e.g. Egypt) significantly outnumbers intra-African migration (International Organisation for Migration, 2024a). For example, Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia account for five of the 11 million African migrants estimated to be living in Europe (Fundación Alternativas, 2024).

The largest intra-African migration flows are predominantly between countries that share a land border, highlighting how migration on the continent is characterised by short-distance mobility and is therefore more local than global. Furthermore, the bidirectionality of several intra-African corridors reflects the high prevalence of temporary or circular labour migration, such as between Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire, and refugee movements, such as between South Sudan and Sudan. These data also support the hypothesis that return migration is an important dimension of mobility in Africa (International Organisation for Migration, 2024a).

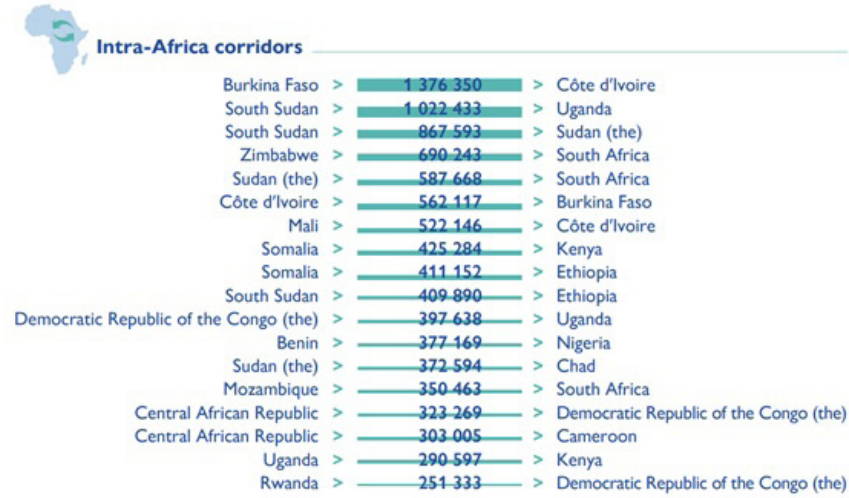

Figure 4. Main intra-African migration corridors. *Source:* Africa Migration Report (Second edition 2024). IOM, UN Migration

Refugees and asylum seekers account for a high proportion of all international migrants in Africa, 21% in 2020. In Africa, as in the rest of the world, most refugees remain close to their countries of origin (International Organisation for Migration, 2024a). Of the total number of refugees under UNHCR's mandate at the end of 2022, more than 87% came from ten countries: Syria, Ukraine, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Myanmar, Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, Somalia, Central African Republic and Eritrea. Six African countries are included in this classification (International Organisation for Migration, 2024b).

In recent years, the term "climate refugees" has been coined. The number of people forced to leave their homes due to natural dis-

asters, droughts and other calamities has grown. Although the figures are difficult to calculate because this category of migration is still being defined by governments and international legislation, the World Bank estimates that climate refugees in sub-Saharan Africa could exceed 85 million by 2050. For example, Lake Chad, which supports nearly 25 million people in four different countries, has shrunk dramatically over the past sixty years, increasingly displacing many of the people who depend on its waters (Esiri, 2022).

However, the available data suggest that climate change cannot be considered the main driver of migration and food security, but rather one factor among others, such as the consequences of the fragile governance of many African states, global food production structures and other social factors (International Organisation for Migration, 2024b).

Regular and irregular labour migration flows are fundamental to mobility on the African continent. In 2020, there were more than 14.5 million migrant workers in sub-Saharan Africa, residing mainly in South Africa (19%), Côte d'Ivoire (12%), Uganda (7%) and Ethiopia (5%) (International Organisation for Migration, 2024a).

All these data clash with representations of African migration, which are mistakenly considered to be higher than ever and directed primarily towards rich European countries. European concern and alarm about African migration also contrasts with the prediction that the European Union and Great Britain will be short of some 44 million workers by 2050, even with normal migration flows (*The Economist,* 2023b).

According to Hein de Haas, Professor of Sociology at the University of Amsterdam and founder and co-director of the International Migration Institute at the University of Oxford, it is not true that migration is higher today than ever before. Haas believes that "the figures have little to do with a massive invasion of illegal immigrants, but rather with the growing movement of immigrant workers attracted by the increasing labour shortage in the rich and ageing societies of the West". Haas also argues that it is a mistake to overestimate the scale of illegal migration:

> "[...] my estimates suggest that nine out of ten Africans who move to Europe do so legally, with a passport and visa in hand. But because political rhetoric and media images focus on illegal migration, we tend to exaggerate the numerical importance of this type of migration. The vast majority of immigrants, including those bound for Spain, cross borders

> legally. What is happening at the Spanish border is a real humanitarian crisis that must be addressed, but we must be careful and, based on the data, not accept the idea that the borders are completely out of control. It is important to continue to see things in perspective. In other words: there is cause for concern, but not for panic" (Haas, 2024).

In any case, irregular migration is not only a humanitarian challenge, but also a governance challenge for European countries. In 2022, there were more than 189,000 irregular arrivals in Europe by land and sea, the highest number since 2016. The largest number of irregular migrants in 2022 came from Egypt (21,800), Syria (more than 18,000), Tunisia (around 18,000) and Afghanistan (more than 18,000) (International Organisation for Migration, 2024b).

Looking at the ranking of the top twenty countries of origin of international migrants, none from sub-Saharan Africa appear on the list. However, one country from the north of the continent does appear in twentieth place: Egypt.

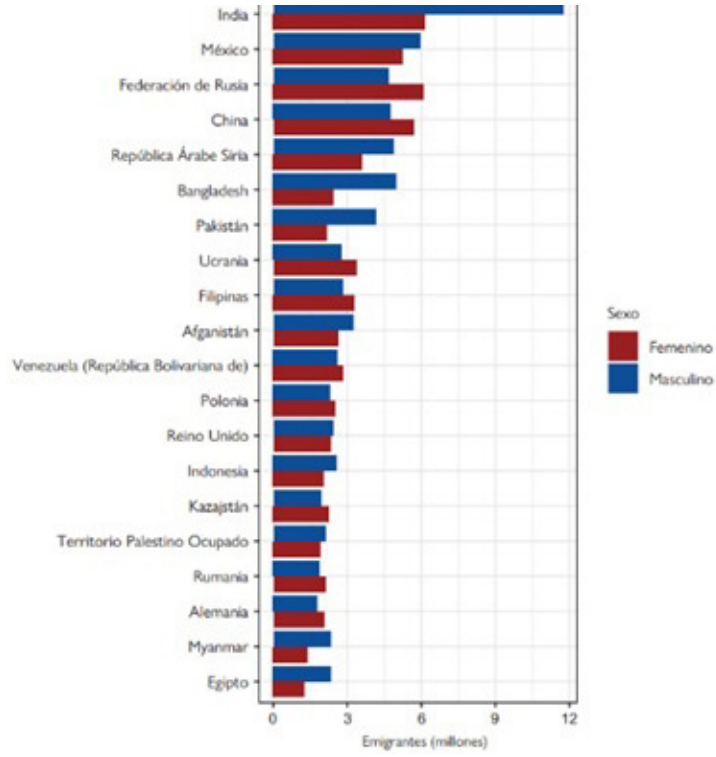

Figure 5. Top twenty countries of origin of international migrants.
Source: **World Migration Report 2024. IOM, UN Migration, 2024**

According to Eurostat data, the population of European Union countries will decline by 6% between now and 2100. The European population is expected to peak in 2026, with a total of 453 million people, but from then on the figure will decline to the 420 million forecast for the turn of the century. The European Commission estimates that while 70% of the population is currently of working age, by 2070 that figure will fall to 54%, which will necessarily transform the social welfare and pension systems of European countries (Zornoza, 2025).

And although it is not significant from a demographic point of view, in France there has been talk of a silent exodus, a phenomenon that refers to the growing number of French people of African origin who are leaving the European country because of racism and discrimination and migrating to African countries (Abida *et al*., 2024).

Migration plays a key role in the development of countries of origin. This is because migrants continue to maintain close ties with their families and communities and contribute significantly to their development. The main contribution of migrants comes in the form of remittances, but also through the exchange of knowledge and ideas between host and home countries.

The easiest benefits to measure are the remittances that migrants send home. Nigeria, for example, received USD 24.3 billion in 2018 from its citizens working abroad, about eight times more than it receives in development aid. It is also more than ten times what Nigeria received in foreign investment that same year. Senegalese working outside their borders send back up to half of their income, with remittances accounting for around 9% of the country's national income. Not only are these flows much larger than foreign aid, but they are often better invested, as most of the money sent by migrants has a direct impact on increasing the social welfare of the recipient family (*The Economist,* 2020c).

As an anecdote, it is worth noting that in the 2022 World Cup and the 2024 European Championship, many African players or players descended from families mainly from West Africa were decisive for the European national teams they played for. This highlighted some of the benefits of migration to audiences in the Old Continent. European national teams are made up of many players of African origin. The teams from Wales, Croatia and Portugal are particularly noteworthy in this regard. The World

Cup in Qatar had the highest proportion of foreign-born players in the history of the tournament, with 137 of the 830 players (16.5%) representing a country other than the one in which they were born (Osserman and Zhou, 2022).

Finally, it should be noted that as its population grows, Africa is also becoming more urbanised. In 1950, the urban proportion of the population was estimated at 11%, in 2020 at 41% and, according to United Nations projections, it is expected to reach 58% in 2050. Urbanisation occurs through two channels: migration from the countryside to the city and natural growth within urban centres. In Asia and Latin America, the majority of the population is already urban, and all future population growth will occur in these areas. However, sub-Saharan Africa remains approximately 59% rural. As in the rest of the world, the high demand for employment in Africa occurs in urban areas. But unlike the rest of the world, the African continent still has a large and growing rural population that must continue to be taken into account (Lam *et al.*, 2019).

Figure 6. ***Source:*** **IMF/Esther Ruth Mbabazi**

Rural-urban migration on the continent has brought some economic prosperity to many Africans who leave agriculture to seek formal, more stable and better-paid jobs in cities. However, not all those seeking such jobs have found them, and many African cities are saturated, and the cost of living has increased (Esiri, 2022).

7 Demographics and climate change

Climate change is perhaps one of the most important problems facing the population explosion on the African continent. The most vulnerable societies are more exposed to the socio-economic consequences of natural disasters such as floods, displacement and environmental degradation. Climate change thus becomes a major threat to a population with high levels of poverty and constant demographic growth (Chinye, 2022).

Although global warming is a problem that affects everyone on the planet, there is a contradiction in that the continent that produces the least greenhouse gas emissions may be one of the most affected.

One of the most pressing considerations for African countries is how to minimise future environmental impacts while meeting the needs of their growing populations. Some of the environmental damage is often the result of economic development processes that lead to higher living standards. In addition, population growth amplifies these environmental pressures by increasing total economic demand. Many of the countries with rapidly growing populations are currently considered low-income. These countries, which until now have been responsible for only a small share of global material resource consumption and greenhouse gas emissions, are expected to increase their energy consumption in their economic development processes (United Nations, 2024).

There is also the paradox that, just at the moment of consensus on implementing measures to curb global warming, new oil and gas deposits have been discovered over the last decade in various parts of Africa, such as Côte d'Ivoire, Namibia, Mozambique, Senegal and Ethiopia. Given this new advantageous situation, it seems logical that African governments and peoples should refuse to give up the exploitation of these new resources in order to prevent global warming. Africa is only responsible for 4% of

global carbon emissions, despite being home to around 20% of the world's population. To put this dilemma into context, it is also worth noting that Nigeria, for example, the main oil exporter on the African continent, has not managed to transform its oil revenues into economic and social prosperity for all Nigerians. Among the countries of sub-Saharan Africa, only Gabon has managed to translate oil profits into social prosperity, joining the group of upper-middle-income countries (French, 2024).

The scale of the problem of global warming for the African continent is also evident when analysing the issue of food security, which is intrinsically linked to global warming. Africa is an agricultural continent, where around two-thirds of jobs are related to agriculture.

Conclusions

Population growth in sub-Saharan Africa will become increasingly important in the coming decades and will have consequences for both the continent and the rest of the world. Regardless of whether the final magnitude of the population increase matches the highest or most moderate forecasts, it will have an impact, first and foremost, on the lives of Africans themselves. This impact can be beneficial if states implement the appropriate reforms to enable the demographic dividend to materialise.

To amplify and prolong this opportunity, sound economic and social policies are needed. In countries with young populations, substantial investments in education, health and infrastructure are necessary, while reforms are needed to support the creation of employment opportunities and more transparent and efficient government institutions.

Sub-Saharan Africa's wealth of critical minerals offers an opportunity to move from simply exporting raw materials to developing processing industries to obtain more value-added benefits. Industrial development may be the main lever that triggers the virtuous circle that generates the demographic dividend.

A regional policy approach in this area that takes advantage of mineral diversity, pools resources and promotes economies of scale can address the challenge of industrialisation more effectively than isolated state efforts. Furthermore, and no less importantly, the aforementioned regional approach can promote the recovery of not only economic but also political sovereignty,

which has been taken away by the old and new interests of the major powers in the natural resources of the African continent.

Population growth will also have an impact on other regions, mainly neighbouring Europe and the Middle East, due to possible migratory pressures. The repercussions will not necessarily be negative, given the lack of human resources in the labour market, which will mainly affect European countries stuck in a demographic winter. For centuries, migration has benefited millions of people around the world, providing opportunities and enriching the lives of both sending and receiving societies.

Finally, it is important to highlight the challenge that global warming poses for the continent, mainly in the area of food security. African societies will have to strike an optimal balance between necessary industrial development and socio-economic growth on the one hand and mitigating the harmful effects of climate change on the other.

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Chapter Three

Demographics and migration governance in the 21st century in the European Union: a challenge for democracy?

Gemma Pinyol-Jiménez
Andreu Domingo

Abstract

The European Union faces a key structural challenge: managing profound demographic change in a context of growing political polarisation around migration. The combination of an ageing population, low fertility and regional differences in development has made migration central to the sustainability of economic and welfare systems. However, migration management presents significant challenges, from the lack of consensus on the Common European Asylum System to the externalisation of migration control to third countries. At the same time, the debate on migration and demography has become politicised, with discourses ranging from the narrative use of the role of immigration in repopulation and economic development to its instrumentalisation as a threat to identity and security. The growing influence of populist and Eurosceptic parties has reinforced polarisation, making it difficult to implement inclusive and sustainable policies.

This chapter analyses the current demographic dynamics of the EU, the impact of migration and the challenges of its governance, as well as the role of politicisation in the formulation of migration policies today. The ultimate goal is to consider the extent to

which these issues represent a challenge to the quality and stability of democracy in the European Union.

Keywords

Demography, Migration, Migration governance, Discourses, Spain.

1 Demography and migration in the European Union: a strategic view from Spain

Migration policy, in two of its main aspects—the management of flows and border control, which covers both mobility within the European Union and migratory flows between the EU and non-EU countries, on the one hand, and integration policies, which define the rights and duties of immigrants, on the other—, has been a central element in the construction of the European project itself.

This strategic area has required a complex multi-level governance framework, characteristic of the European Union. In terms of migration control, national governments, and in particular interior ministries, have taken on a predominant role. In contrast, integration policies have been marked by the action of a variety of local administrations, from municipalities to regional governments, which have played a key role in their implementation.

In the 21st century, two crucial factors coincide that must be taken into account in the design and strategic vision of European migration policy. On the one hand, economic globalisation and the acceleration, growth and diversification of migratory movements, in a context of rapid population ageing due to the confluence of declining fertility and increased longevity. On the other hand, the construction of the Union with the progressive accession of new partners with very different political and socio-demographic characteristics. However, it is not only the demographic reality of the countries of the European Union that has changed, with migration increasingly playing a key role in the population growth of most of them, but also the assessment of the demographic situation and the challenges that migration posed to the governance of the Union.

In order to understand the strategic crossroads at which we find ourselves, this text aims to offer a perspective that includes data and political actions. First, we must look at the demographic evolution of the different countries of the European Union, with a special emphasis on the conceptual framework provided by to explain the evolution of fertility, on the one hand, and the contribution of migration to population growth and its heterogeneity in the different EU countries, on the other. Secondly, it is worth analysing the construction of both migration policies and the politicisation of demography when discussing migration, which requires an analysis to accompany the data in the

first section. Thirdly, it is worth rethinking the future challenges of migration policies in light of demographic trends, but also in relation to the tension introduced by conflicting narratives on the subject within the Union. We conclude with some final reflections on demography and democracy from a strategic perspective.

2 From the second demographic transition to complex systems of demographic reproduction

2.1 Fertility and the second demographic transition

In the mid-1980s, the rapid and continuous decline in fertility that followed the baby boom—which had occurred in northern and central European countries after the Second World War—led to the formulation of a theory about a "second demographic transition" (Kaa, 1987; Lesthaeghe, 1991), which attempted to explain the reason for these changes and predict their future evolution, following in the footsteps of the theory of demographic transition (Notestein, 1945). If that theory had explained the transition from an old demographic regime—characterised by high fertility and mortality—to a modern regime characterised, on the contrary, by low fertility and mortality, with significant savings in biological energy (Livi-Bacci, 2002), the second demographic transition, through empirical observation of demographic trends in northern European countries after the baby boom, sought to anticipate the progression of all post-transitional countries.

The observation of the evolution of children per woman born in the different countries of the European Union from 1960 to 2022, expressed by the Total Fertility Rate (TFR), represented in Figure 1, allows us to see the different stages, as well as the regional differences in this evolution marked by convergence in the decline. Before analysing the data, we would like to point out that the geographical grouping adopted by the European Statistical Institute, which seems to be the most neutral and functional for the latest data, masks the great divide between the countries that belonged to the communist bloc—colloquially known as the "Eastern countries"—and the rest, with the former now spread across both the East and the North (the Baltic countries) and the South (the countries of the former

Yugoslavia). In the foreground, we have highlighted the evolution of the EU (current) and Spanish averages compared to the rest of the Union countries as a whole. Thus, while the EU average peaked in the mid-1960s with the baby boom, at 2.6 children per woman, by 2022, which is the last year for which we have data for all EU countries, it stands at 1.45, which means a return to early 21st century levels, after a slight recovery that peaked in 2009 at 1.59, coinciding with the start of the Great Recession.

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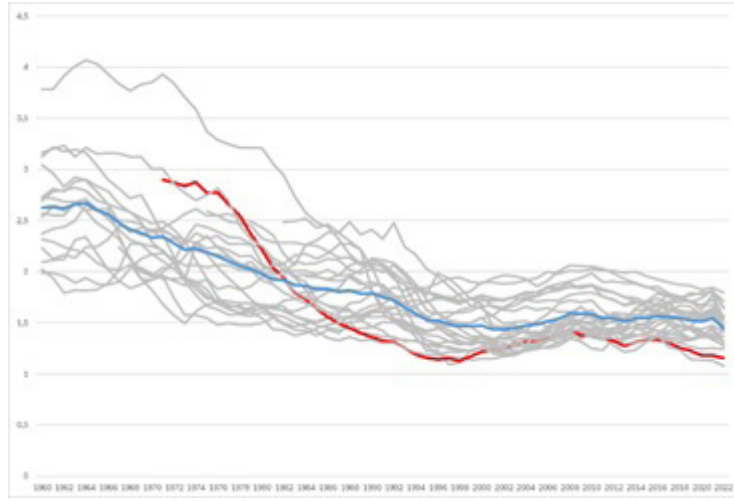

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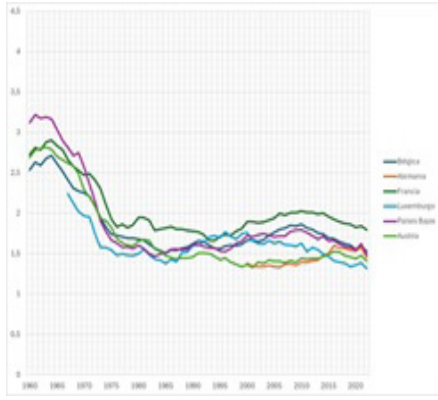

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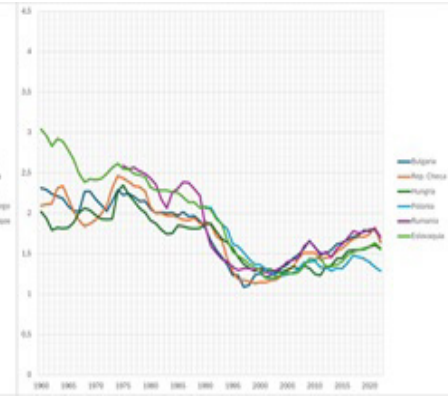


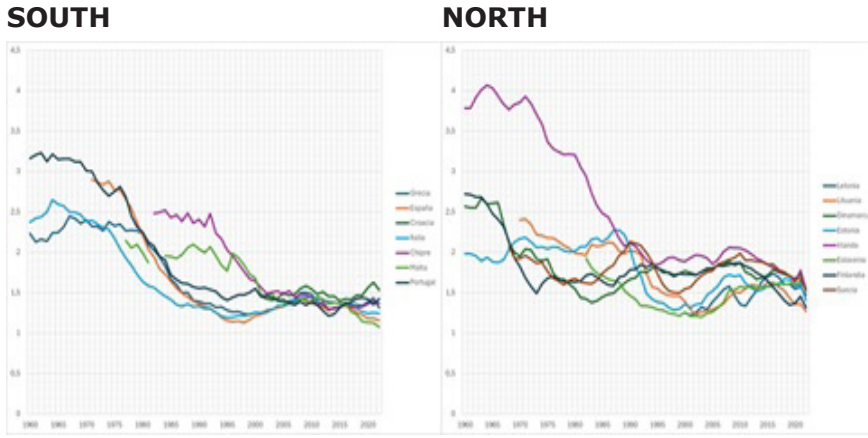


Figure 1. Evolution of the total fertility rate for EU countries, total and major regions, 1960-2022. *Source:* CED, Fertility rates by age [demo_frate__ custom_14895684]. [Accessed: 3 September 2024]. Eurostat

Spain's evolution stands out for having gone from occupying the top spots in high fertility during the baby boom in the 1970s, with a rate of 2.9 in 1971, which is the first year for which records are kept in the Eurostat series, to plummeting to the bottom of the rankings with a minimum of 1.13 in 1998, only ahead of Bulgaria with 1.1. As we have seen for the EU as a whole, these minimum values improved during the first decade of the new millennium with the economic expansion cycle—partly thanks to the arrival of migrants, partly due to the age structure of Spanish women—reaching a maximum of 1.45 in 2008, before falling again to 1.16 in 2022, surpassing only Malta, which had a rate of 1.08, with values just below Italy's 1.24, in contrast to those achieved by France and Romania, which have the highest fertility rates in the EU, at 1.79 and 1.71, respectively.

In any case, if we compare the evolution of different geographical areas, what stands out first are the peaks in all European countries during the baby boom, exceeding three children per woman in all geographical areas for countries with data, for example, the Netherlands with 3.12 children per woman among Western countries, with Ireland taking the lead with 3.78 among Northern countries, which even reached four children per woman in the mid-1960s, followed closely by Denmark with 2.57, Portugal with 3.16 among Southern countries, and Slovakia with 3.4 among Eastern countries. The second characteristic feature of this evolution is the different chronology of the decline in fertility at the

end of the baby boom, earlier for those countries in Northern and Central Europe, where the baby boom had already begun at the end of the Second World War, and later for countries in Southern Europe, such as Spain, with declines that also stand out for their different intensity. Thus, Denmark and the Netherlands were already at 1.9 in 1973, while Ireland—exceptional in its geographical area—did not reach this level until 1992, even behind Spain and Portugal, whose TFR did not fall below 2.1 until 1982 and 1983, respectively. Among the Eastern European countries, Hungary appears to be a pioneer, falling to 1.9 in 1980, followed by the Czech Republic in 1983 and Bulgaria in 1987. This decline generally accelerated with the collapse of communism in the early 1990s. As we have already pointed out for the EU countries, during the first decade of the 21st century, there was a general recovery, but always with minimum values for most EU countries, only to fall again with the Great Recession, without fertility rates accompanying the emergence from the economic crisis. A comparison of countries for the last year confirms a convergence in the narrow range between the French maximum of 1.79 and the Maltese minimum of 1.08 mentioned above. Thus, we find countries from all geographical areas in the different fertility ranges. Among those above 1.5, we find countries in the west such as France, in the east such as Romania with 1.71, and in the north such as Denmark with 1.55 and Ireland with 1.54. The same is true of the intermediate range, which is around the European average of between 1.3 and 1.49, such as the Netherlands or Germany with 1.46, representing the West with 1.49, Latvia or Estonia in the North, with 1.47 and 1.41, respectively, or the South, such as Greece with 1.32. Finally, along with Spain in the last band, we find other southern countries, such as Italy with 1.24, but also eastern countries such as Poland with 1.29 and northern countries such as Lithuania with 1.27.

In an attempt to explain the changes in fertility and, in general, in the formation of couples—the emergence of cohabitation, the increase in divorce, and the decline in marriage, among the main ones—which would precipitate the decline in fertility—together with the delay in the age of motherhood and the reduction in family size—various reasons were soon put forward , forming more of a heterogeneous repertoire of possible causes than a theory *per se*. Among the primary causes, the change in values that would explain the progressive deinstitutionalisation of the family was highlighted. This view, in which the generational imprint would be decisive, drawing on Ronald

Inglehart's (1977) theory of the "Silent Revolution" and the transition from materialistic to post-materialistic generations to explain social change, echoing the utopian projects of May 1968 and the feminist movement—which would also count the massive entry of women into the labour market as an essential factor in the decline in fertility. At the same time, neoliberal theories applied to the family, on rational choice and the cost of child-rearing, represented by Gary Becker (1981), were evoked, which had already been identified as a cause of the decline in fertility by Ron Lesthaeghe, before the formal enunciation of the theory of the second transition (Lesthaeghe and Meekers, 1986). Competition between productive and reproductive work would also explain, from this perspective, the general decline in fertility.

The differences between northern and southern Europe (remember that we are talking about the European Economic Community with twelve members, among which Spain and Portugal had just joined in January 1986) would be sought in the delay in the process of secularisation in the southern countries, ultimately dating back to the division between Catholics and Protestants, following Weber's thesis on the origin of capitalism. Very soon, however, differences in the welfare state were also associated with this, especially to explain the pioneering role of the Scandinavian countries in the second demographic transition, both in terms of the increase in cohabitation—and the consequent decline in marriage— as well as in single-parent families, specifically contrasted with the "backwardness" of the models in Mediterranean countries, characterised by placing families (and heads of households) at the centre of their policies rather than individuals (Esping-Andersen, 1993). This association continued to favour the interpretative approach of "values" over structural economic factors, overlooking the brutal effect that the economic crisis of had in the late 1970s and early 1980s in these southern countries and the erosion of the welfare state, already weak in these countries, which began with the triumph of the neoliberal creed—which in Spain coincided with the democratic transition.

This initial interpretation based on values continued to be applied to explain the decline in fertility in Eastern European countries following the collapse of the Communist bloc, attributing the fall in the number of children per woman to the adoption of Western values and individualism (Lesthaeghe, 1991)

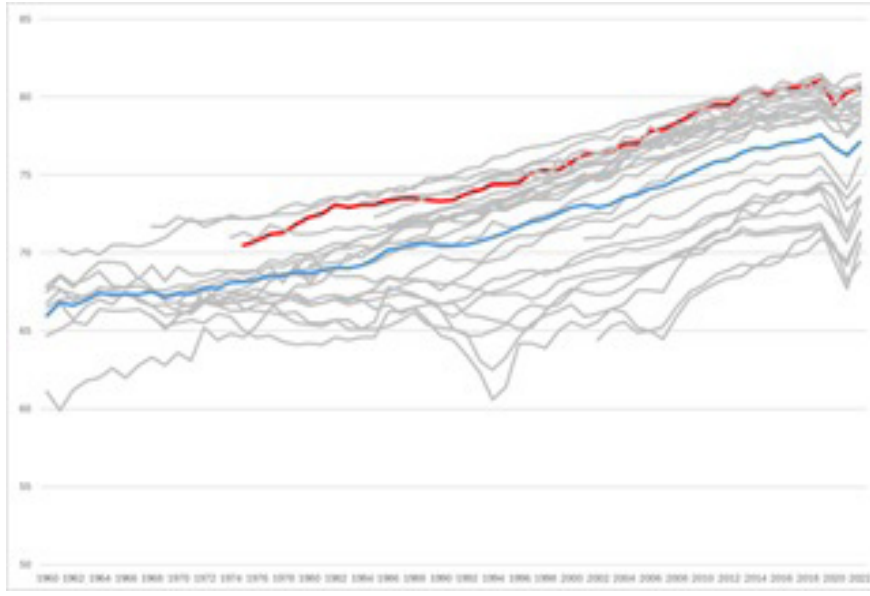
and thus ignoring the devastating effect of the dismantling of social housing policies and policies for young couples, in the context of the economic and social crisis caused by the structural adjustment to which these countries were subjected. Thus, at the very beginning of the attempt to interpret the decline in fertility in European Union countries, it is possible to identify one of the misunderstandings that has been dragging on, which may explain the difficulty in understanding demographic change: we refer to the neglect of structural economic factors, which act as the primary constraint on Europeans' reproductive projects. Thus, in the aforementioned theory of the second demographic transition, key factors are conspicuous by their absence, such as the systematic disinvestment in reproductive work hand in hand with the progressive dismantling of the welfare state, together with the precariousness of working conditions for both men and women, and the colonisation of time to the point of making it a scarce commodity, which will particularly affect women in terms of reconciling productive and reproductive work for the formation of a family, with the added difficulty of reconciling the biographies and professional projects of the members of the couple.

Already in the early 1990s, in an attempt to explain the failure of very low fertility rates to recover in southern European countries—joined by some of the more developed Asian countries such as Japan and South Korea—the hypothesis was put forward that this failure to recover from very low levels, lower than those in Scandinavia, the pioneers of demographic transition, should be understood as the delay in the emancipation of women, or the maintenance of cultural and political contexts where the burdens on women continued to subject them to levels where they were inhibited from reproduction, which demographer Anna Cabré, thinking of Spain and Italy, called the "family transition" (Cabré, 1995). Subsequently, this has remained one of the hypotheses for the maintenance of this very low fertility (Esping-Andersen and Billari, 2015), so that, contrary to some of the initial interpretations that opposed women's emancipation and fertility, they argued that greater gender equality could guarantee higher levels of children per woman in developed countries than those being recorded in the southern European Union. This thesis is contrary to the narratives of the far right, which calls for a "return to traditional values" as a way of encouraging fertility.

2.2 The evolution of life expectancy

Taking a historical perspective from the 1960s onwards, it is in the field of mortality trends that we find the second demographic phenomenon that will ultimately shape both natural population growth and the sex and age structure of the different countries of the EU, and particularly its impact on longevity. To this end, the evolution of life expectancy at birth by sex, which we represent in Figures 2 and 3, will serve to mark both the different stages and the comparison of different countries by geographical area, in the same way as has been done with fertility. Thus, the European Union average for life expectancy shows a positive trend from 66 years of life expectancy at birth for men and 71 for women in 1960 to 16 points above that for men in 2022, reaching 77 years, while women reach 83, an improvement of 12 years. The difference between men and women has remained average. However, this average masks much more disparate patterns than those seen in fertility, with the exceptional improvement in some southern countries, including Spain, on the one hand, and the uneven evolution of the former communist bloc countries on the other.

TOTAL UE



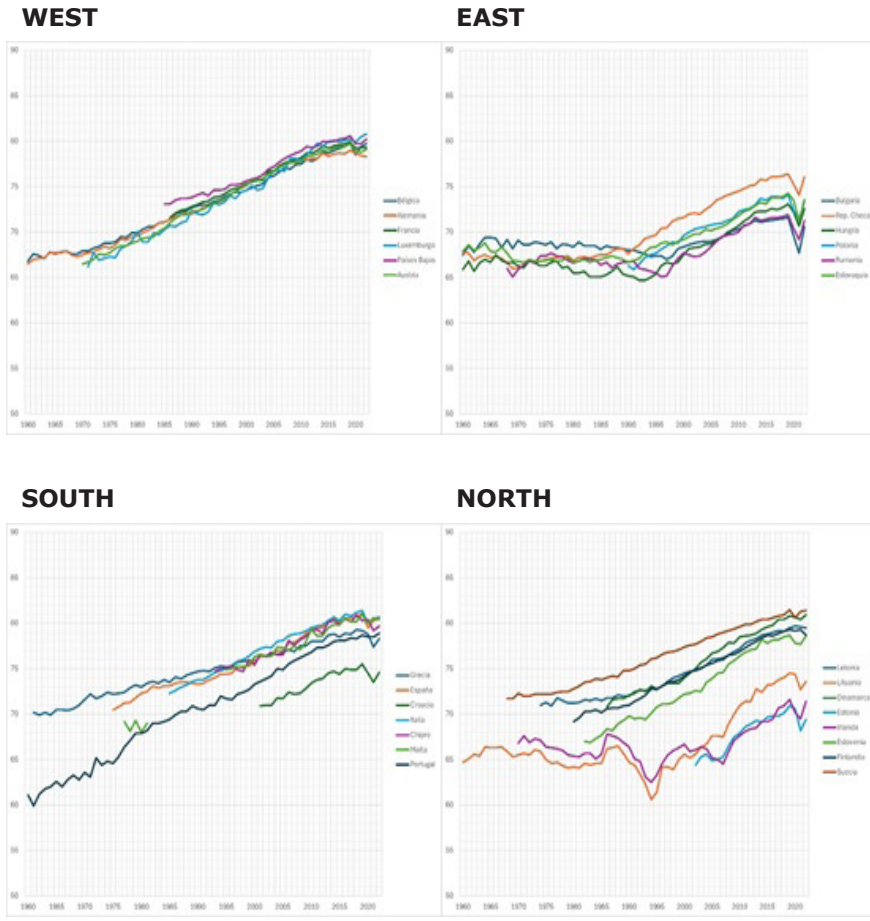
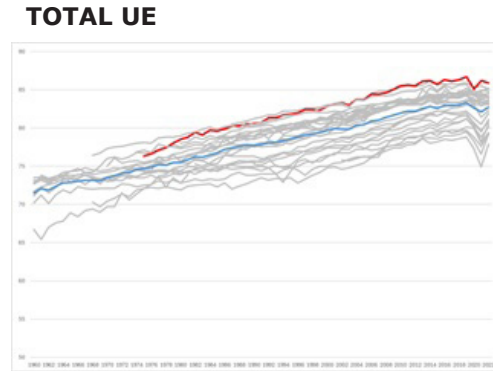


Figure 2. Evolution of life expectancy for men in European Union countries, Total and major regions, 1960-2022. *Source*: CED compilation, Life expectancy by age and sex [demo_mlexpec__custom_14911357]. [Accessed: 4 December 2024]. Eurostat



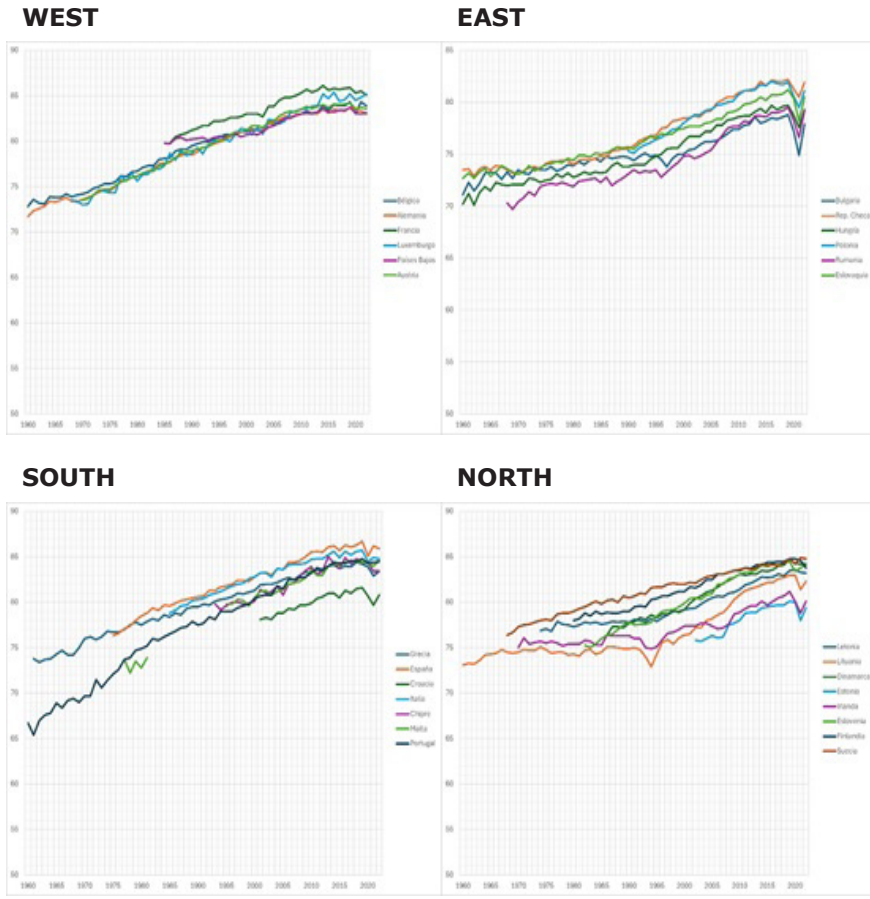


Figure 3. Evolution of life expectancy for women in European Union countries, Total and major regions, 1960-2022. *Source*: CED compilation, Life expectancy by age and sex [demo_mlexpec__custom_14911357]. [Accessed: 4 December 2024]. Eurostat

Overall, Spain stands out for its privileged position, boasting the best results in the last year for both sexes, with 80.5 y s for men and 85.9 years for women, which is 3.4 years above the EU average in the last year for men and 3.19 years for women. This means that both men and women have gained more than twenty years of life since the 1960s. This takes into account the temporary decline and its consequences in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic on life expectancy, which, although it did not reach one year for the average of the countries in the Union, in the case of Spain meant a decline of 1.6 years, reaching the lowest level in the EU.

As we have anticipated, what is most striking about the evolution of mortality is the different chronology of the countries of the former communist bloc, noticeable due to the shock represented by the collapse of the socialist regimes, which for some countries still mark a disadvantaged position in terms of life expectancy today. Thus, while the data recorded in 1960 for some countries were comparable to the best among the capitalist bloc countries, with 67.9 years for Slovak men and 72.2 years for Slovak women, while Belgians stood at 66.8 and 72.8 respectively, well above the levels of southern countries such as Portugal, with 61.1 for men and 66.7 years for women. However, this initial advantage is lost because improvements are much slower than in other European countries, or are even marked by setbacks, as in the case of Lithuania, which will go from 66.5 years for women in 1988 to a minimum of 63.9 in 1998, widening the gap between them and placing them at the bottom of the ranking for both men and women in 2022, always below the European average, which in the case of Estonia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria does not exceed 80 years for women, while men are below 73.

2.3 The components of population growth: natural increase and migration

The first thing to bear in mind when referring to the population of the European Union is that the main factor in its growth between 1986, coinciding with the entry of Spain and Portugal, when the Union had 322.8 million inhabitants, and 2024, when it had 449 million, was not demographic change but the accession of new members. There were clear jumps in growth in 1991 with German reunification, in 1996 with the accession of Austria, Finland and Sweden, in 2005 with the integration of most of the Eastern European countries — the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, as well as Cyprus — in 2007 with the incorporation of Romania and Bulgaria, to a lesser extent in 2014 with the accession of Croatia, but also the loss of 67 million with the effective departure of Great Britain on 31 December 2020.

To represent the evolution of natural growth —that is, the difference between births and deaths— and migratory growth —the difference between immigration and emigration— in total popu-

lation growth, which appears in Figure 5 for natural growth and in Figure 6 for migratory growth, we have decided first to focus only on the evolution of the 21st century, and secondly, to divide this evolution into three periods corresponding to the economic cycle: from 2000 to 2007, with the first migratory boom in southern countries such as Spain; from 2008 to 2013, coinciding with the negative cycle of the Great Recession; and, finally, from 2014 to the present, including the hiatus caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The first thing that stands out is that in the last period from 2014 to 2024, 17 of the 28 countries in the European Union will have negative natural growth, including Spain, dragging down the European average. This negative natural growth is due both to the reduction in births as a result of very low fertility and to the increase in deaths due to the growing proportion of elderly people, which is a result of population ageing. On the other hand, Ireland, France, Cyprus , and Luxembourg are at the forefront of natural growth in all three periods thanks to their birth rates. Meanwhile, the countries of Eastern and Southern Europe, with higher levels of ageing and low birth rates, are the ones with the worst trends, especially in the last period.

If we look at the net migration balance during the same three periods, Spain stands out during the initial period of economic growth, followed by Ireland and Italy (countries with a long tradition of emigration). In the case of Spain, there was a decline in the second period of economic crisis and subsequent recovery, but already below other countries with more significant percentage balances, such as Ireland, Austria and Sweden, if we exclude the microstates of Malta and Luxembourg.

We find losses in the countries of the former communist bloc, together with Greece, in almost all the periods observed. Thus, Croatia, Bulgaria, Poland, Latvia, and Romania continued to receive fewer people than they expelled. Meanwhile, the growth in the balance has always been below the European average in other countries in the same bloc, such as Hungary and Lithuania, but also France and Italy in the last period.

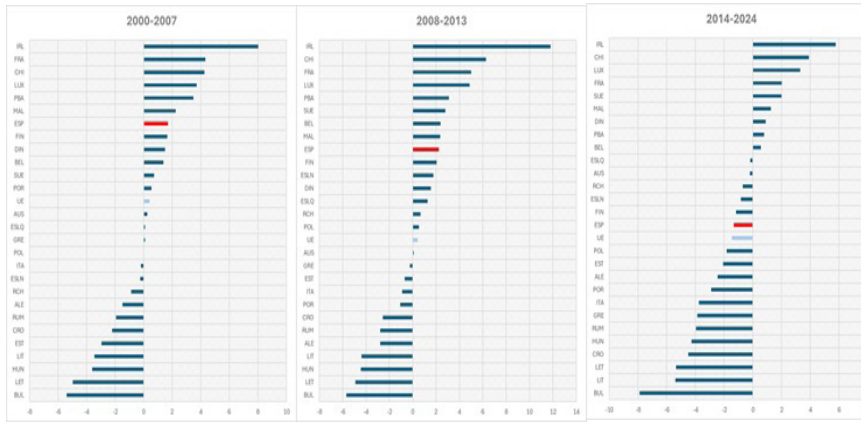


Figure 4: Evolution of natural growth for European Union countries and the total, by periods 2000-2007, 2008-2013 and 2014-24. *Source:* CED compilation, Population change - Demographic balance and crude rates at national level [demo_gind__custom_14911273]; [Accessed: 8 November 2024], EUROSTAT.

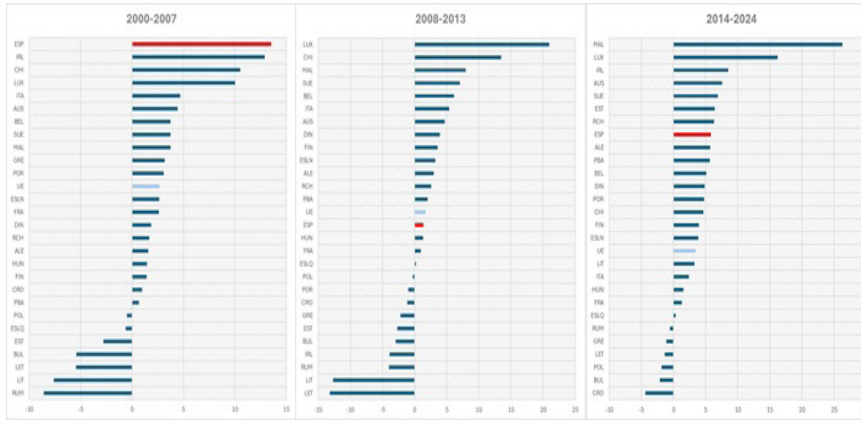
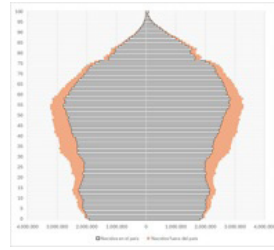


Figure 5: Evolution of migration growth for European Union countries and the total, by periods 2000-2007, 2008-2013 and 2014-24. *Source*: CED, Population change - Demographic balance and crude rates at national level [demo_gind__custom_14911273]; [Accessed: 8 November 2024, EUROSTAT.

2.4 The structure of the population of EU countries by sex and age and the contribution of migrants

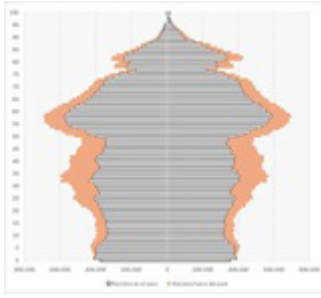
Before going into detail about the heterogeneity of the international migrant populations established in the different countries of the European Union, it is worth taking a look at a comparative view of their population pyramids, taking into account their place of birth (within or outside each of the countries considered) for the last year of 2024 (Figure 6).

Total European Union

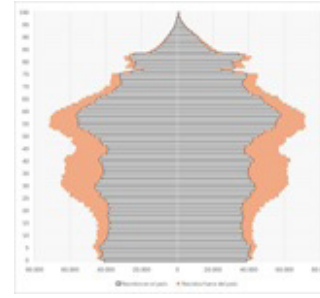


Western Europe

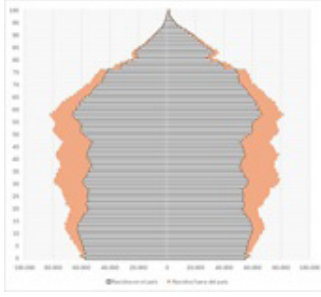
Germany



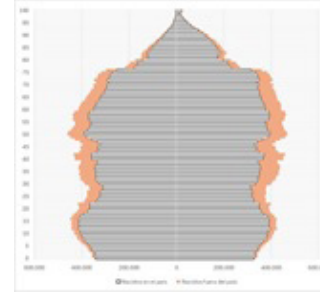
Austria



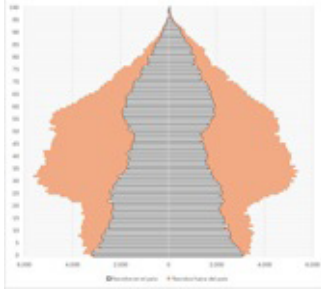
Belgium



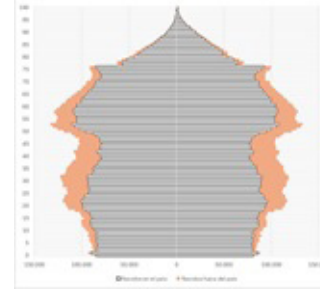
France



Luxembourg

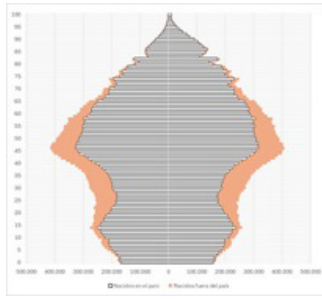


Netherlands

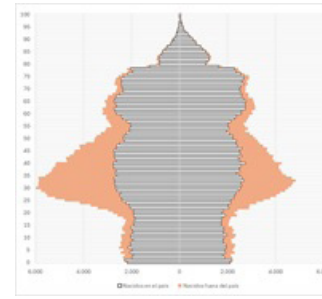


Southern Europe

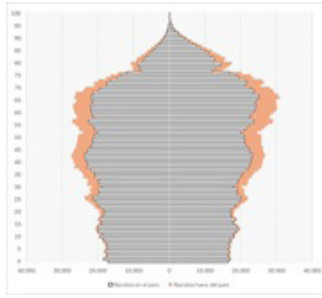
Spain



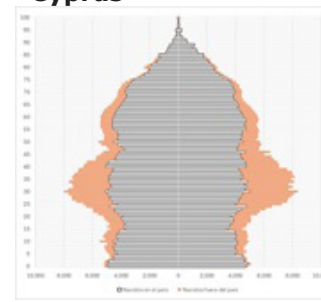
Malta



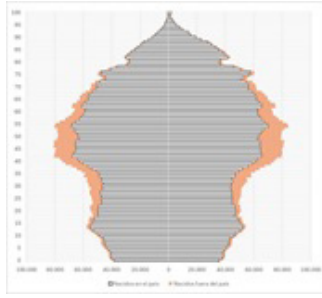
Croatia



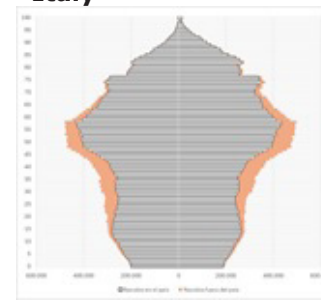
Cyprus



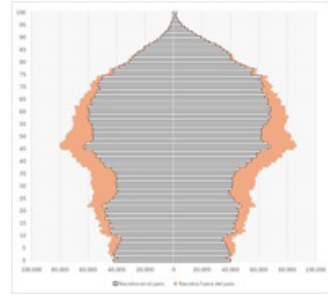
Greece



Italy

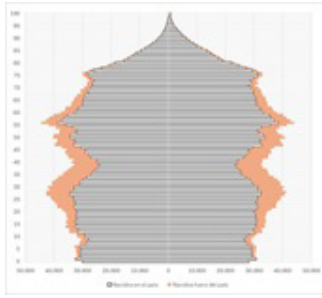


Portugal

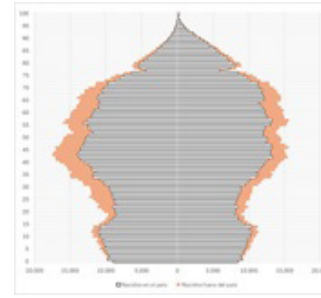


Northern Europe

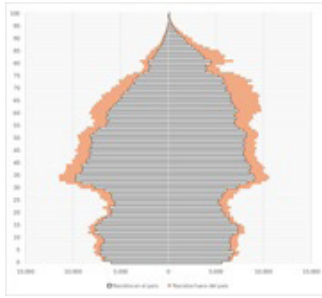
Denmark



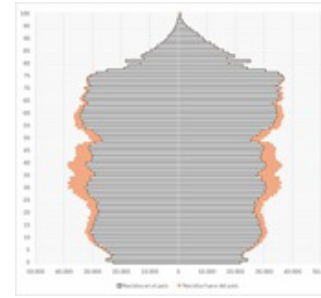
Slovenia



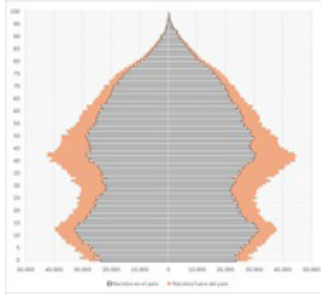
Estonia



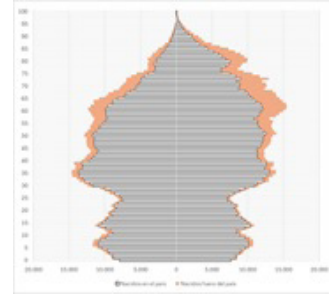
Finland



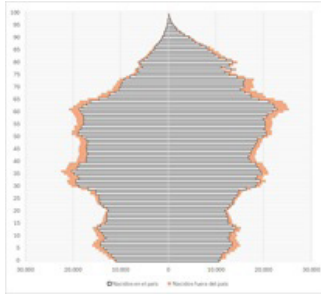
Ireland



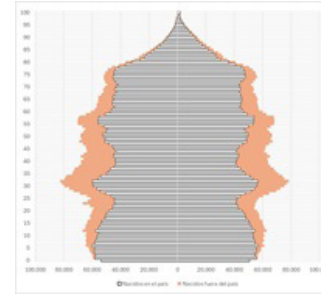
Latvia



Lithuania

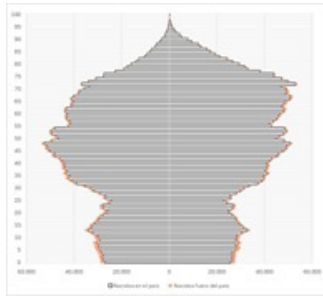


Sweden

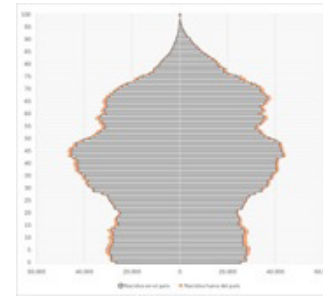


Eastern European Countries

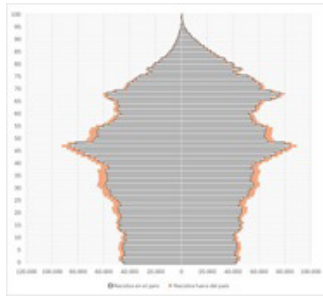
Bulgaria



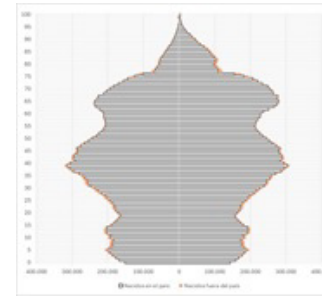
Slovakia



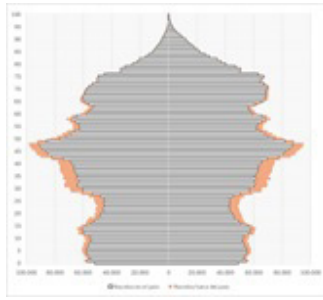
Hungary



Poland



Czech Republic



Romania

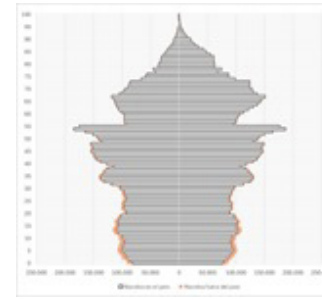


Figure 6: Population pyramids by origin (born in the country and abroad) sorted by large geographical areas, Total European Union and countries, 2022.
Source: **CED elaboration, Eurostat population data, 2022**

In terms of age structure itself, all the pyramids share an ageing profile, with no major asymmetries between men and women, beyond the differential mortality for older ages, with the exception of the Baltic republics and other Eastern European countries, where this is much more pronounced. The percentages of people over 64 are therefore high, ranging from 14.88% in Luxembourg to 24% in Italy (Figure 7). While the EU average was 21.32%, Spain was below this, at 20.16%. Spain's intermediate position is due to migration, as with 17.1% of the population born abroad, despite not yet being in the high range of immigrant percentages, it is also above the European average of 13.3% (Figure 7).

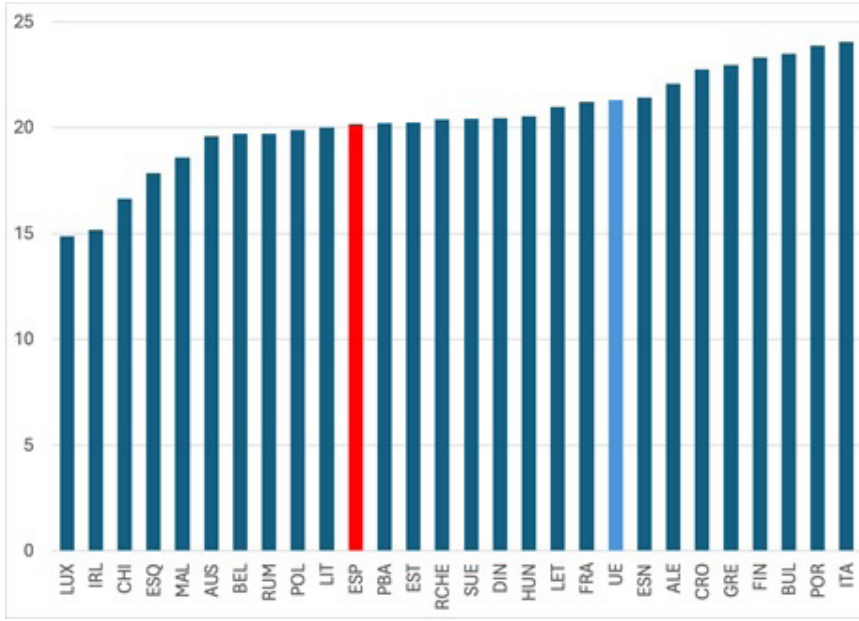


Figure 7: Percentage of people over 64 years of age for European Union countries, 2023. *Source:* CED, Eurostat

Each population pyramid summarises the demographic history of each country. We will not dwell on them, but it is worth mentioning, by way of example, the curious shape of the pyramid for Romania, which shows the generational effect of the ban on abortion and contraceptive methods, or the aforementioned Baltic countries and others in the east with a deficit of men at the top due to mortality caused by the Second World War and emigration. However, rather than the weight of immigrants in each of the pyramids, which we will analyse in the next section,

what interests us here is to examine their distribution by age (or by generation). There are four reasons for this: the first is to observe how the full generations corresponding to the baby boomers differ from country to country; the second is to note how the size of the generation is not directly related to any pull factor for migrants, especially in the case of Spain, where its late baby boom coincided with the first great wave of international migration, thus refuting the demographic determinism of the "replacement migration" theory, which assumes that the arrival of migrants is due to a shortage of young people entering the labour market, caused by low fertility; Thirdly, despite the above, the coincidence of migration with empty generations means that the relative weight of migrants is very significant. Finally, fourthly, among immigrants to some countries there are clear gender biases, for example in favour of men in the case of Malta.

2.5 Growth and heterogeneity of migration flows and immigrant populations in the EU

In the statement of the theory of the second demographic transition, migration itself was almost ignored—as had already been the case with the theory of demographic transition—and limited to pointing out how improvements and reductions in the cost of transport favoured the growth of migratory movements (Kaa, 1994). This is understandable, given that the acceleration of migratory flows occurred in the late 1990s, becoming apparent in the first decades of the 21st century until the Great Recession of 2008, with Spain also playing a notable role in this revival of migratory flows.

With economic globalisation, there are three main factors that explain the migration boom of the new millennium: the first is labour market demand—a progressively segmented market, where migrants were added to the secondary segment comprising the most precarious sectors, with lower skill levels, as already observed by economist Michel Piore (1979); secondly, the specific demand for reproductive work—once outsourced from European families, particularly acute in countries such as Spain with a low level of welfare and a rapidly ageing population—which would give rise to what has been called "global care chains" (Hochschild, 2001); and, thirdly, the increase in cycles of expulsion in the countries of the world system, leading to forced

emigration and an increase in the number of people seeking refuge (Sassen, 2015).

Since the 1990s, migration flows to the European Union have almost quadrupled, rising from 1.75 million in 1990 to 6.9 million in 2022. Apart from the accession of new members, which could turn former international migrations into internal (inter-community) migrations, the evolution of these flows is a barometer of global conflict. It is for this reason that we have included asylum applications in Figure 8. The peak in 1991 reflects the convergence of the Balkan crisis and, in 2001, refugees from Iraq and Afghanistan, until reaching the crisis of 2015 led by Syrian refugees, or the rise in 2018 where Venezuelans stand out, or the latest in 2022 with the invasion of Ukraine, partly responsible for the jump recorded in the last year, together with the rebound effect of COVID-19.

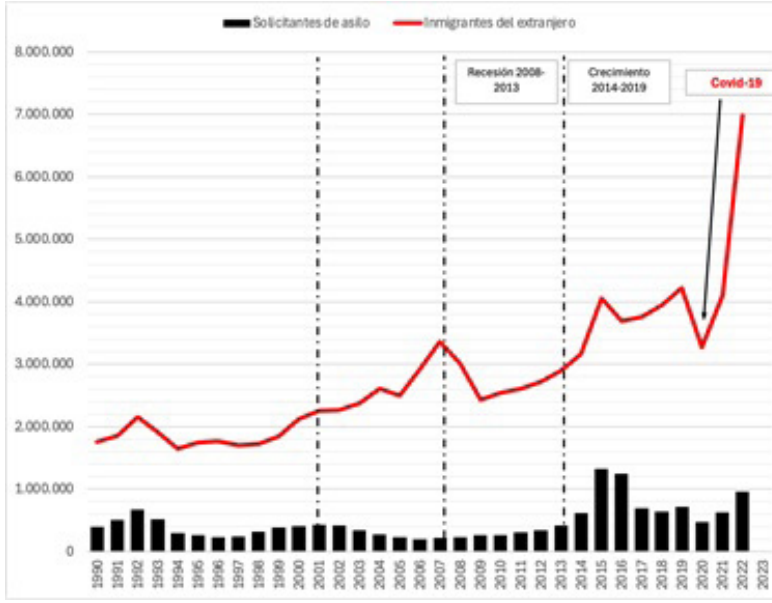


Figure 8: International migration flows to the European Union and asylum applications 1990-2022. *Source:* CED, based on Eurostat data

It is important to note that not only are the levels of immigration and, consequently, the immigrant population residing in each of the European countries very different, but so are the socio-demographic characteristics, origins and motivations of these migrations, together with their legal status and integration into

the receiving society. This can be seen in Figure 10, which shows the percentage of the population born abroad and the foreign population for each of the countries in the Union. Unsurprisingly, Luxembourg, given its status as a microstate and its strategic location within the EU, is the country with the highest percentage of both foreign-born persons, with just over half of immigrant residents (50.4%), and foreigners (47.4%), followed by Malta and Cyprus. The first thing that may catch the eye is how the countries of the former Soviet sphere, which today defend more anti-immigration positions, are precisely those with the lowest percentages—remember that some of them also have negative values for migratory growth—Poland has a mere 2.5% of immigrants and 1.2% of foreigners, Hungary only 6.7% of people born outside the country and 2.4% of foreigners, far removed from countries such as Austria with 21.6% of immigrants and 19% of foreigners. It is also worth noting the difference that sometimes exists between the status of immigrant and that of foreigner in some countries, for example, in the cases of Croatia and Sweden. The former has 12.7% immigrants and 1.8% foreigners, while the latter has 20.4% immigrants and only 8% foreigners. More than the time of arrival, which also has an influence, it is worth considering the importance of asylum in some countries, such as Sweden.

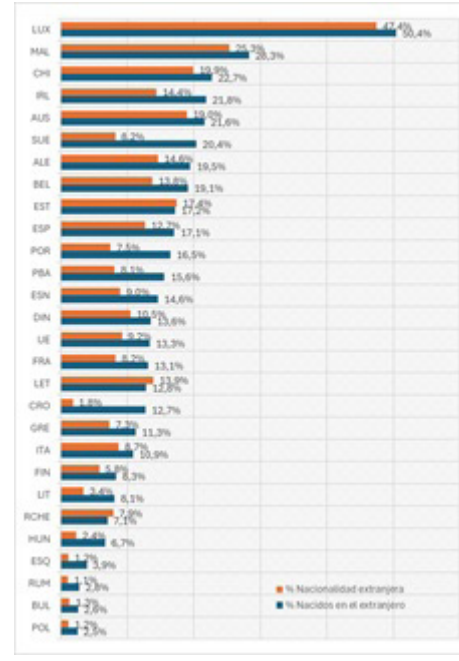


Figure 9: Percentage of foreign-born population and foreign population in European Union countries, 2023. ***Source: CED, EUROSTAT.***

These differences can be intuited from the varied composition of migrants by origin, which is another of the major disparities between European Union countries (Figure 11). Thus, despite the lack of information for Greece and Ireland, it is significant that, for the EU as a whole, one third of the immigrant population in the European Union corresponds to intra-Community movements, with

33.1% originating from one EU country and living in another, and 37.7% born in another European country, while those born in Asia represent 13%, in Africa 9.65%, and in America 6.37%. Although in most countries Europeans (both EU and non-EU) continue to occupy first or second place, in northern and central European countries the reception of refugees has been a historical constant, challenged by the 2015 refugee crisis, with a significant proportion of Asians. In new immigration countries such as those in southern Europe, we find flows of migrants, mainly workers, who in the case of Spain and Portugal have had a very significant presence from the former colonies, Brazil and Africa in the case of Portugal, and Latin America in the case of Spain. Italy has selected its migration by prioritising countries that were formerly recipients of Italian migration, together with new Moroccan, Albanian and Indian migration. Finally, in Eastern European countries, migration from the rest of Europe predominates.

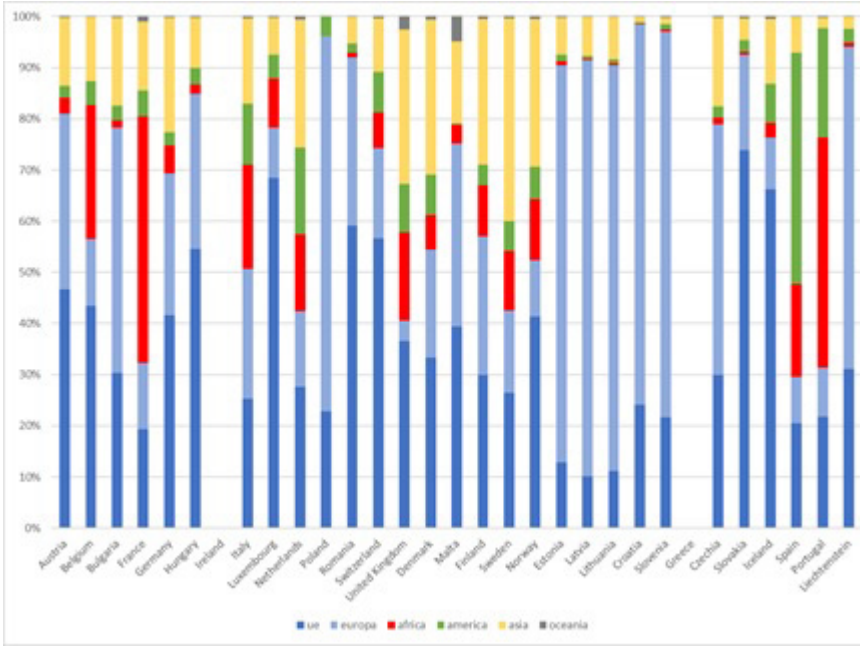


Figure 10: Percentage distribution of the origin of international migrants by major continental groups in European Union countries, 2023.
Source: CED, Eurostat

3 The process of developing European immigration and asylum policy and the predominance of member states

The different migration histories of the countries of the European Union explain the difficulties in advancing the development of a European immigration and asylum policy. In addition to formal issues—the defence of state powers—and political issues—partisan constructions of otherness—the impact of the timing and intensity of demographic transformation processes must also be taken into account in order to better understand the predominance of member states' voices in half a century of European migration and asylum policy.

In 1999, the Treaty of Amsterdam nominally established the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice (AFSJ) in the European Union, covering areas such as judicial cooperation in civil and criminal matters, police cooperation, and border control, asylum and immigration policies. The AFSJ was further strengthened with the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009, and its development in the area of immigration and asylum is closely linked to the Schengen Agreement, through which the signatory states abolished controls at their internal borders. This created an immediate need to apply common rules for the management and control of external borders, including visa regulations. Thus, immigration and asylum policies have acquired strategic relevance and become a politically sensitive area (Mitsilegas *et al.*, 2003), where member states have shown a high degree of political contestation (Trauner and Ripoll, 2016).

3.1 The process of building European immigration and asylum policy

The Tampere European Council (1999) established four key pillars for immigration and asylum policy: cooperation with countries of origin, a common asylum system, fair treatment of third-country nationals through integration policies, and the management of migration flows, addressing both legal entry routes and the fight against irregular immigration. However, the process faced obstacles, such as member states' resistance to cede competenti, the fragmentation of migration policy, the institutional particularities of the EU (where Denmark, Ireland and the United Kingdom had specific clauses limiting their participation in migration cooperation in the first case, and in Schengen in the other two) and

the impact of the 9/11 attacks, which refocused European priorities on security (Carrera and Geyer, 2007). In this context of new political and institutional challenges, two new work agendas were defined to strengthen the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice: the Hague Programme (2005-2009) and the Stockholm Programme (2010-2014). Both marked the evolution of European migration policy, consolidating progress and, at the same time, reflecting the tensions between the supranational approach and intergovernmental dynamics.

The Hague Programme (2005-2009) consolidated the ELSJ with a more structured proposal than Tampere. It focused on managing migration from a comprehensive perspective, covering the causes of migration flows, admission and return, and integration instruments. Its priorities included the creation of a common asylum area, balanced migration management, the integration of third-country nationals and the development of a common border policy. Within this framework, financial instruments such as the External Borders Fund, the Return Fund and the Integration Fund were established. The role of FRONTEX in coordinating the management of the EU's external borders was also consolidated (Leonard, 2009), and the external dimension of migration policy was emphasised, promoting cooperation with countries of origin and transit.

For its part, the Stockholm Programme (2010-2014) was adopted in a context of economic crisis and with even greater resistance from member states to cede sovereignty in migration and border management. The programme emphasised the economic dimension of migration, addressing the demographic needs of the EU and promoting the attraction of talent. However, tensions between supranational and intergovernmental logic limited its impact on the development of a more ambitious common policy (Goig, 2017; Pinyol-Jiménez, 2018). In this regard, while The Hague sought to consolidate the common immigration and asylum policy with a comprehensive approach, Stockholm reflected a retreat towards more controlled and restrictive approaches, in a context of crisis and growing political pressure in member states. The Stockholm Programme coincided with the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon, which marked a new turning point in the European Union's immigration and asylum policy. This treaty redefined the institutional framework, giving greater decision-making power to the European Parliament and establishing migration management as a shared competence between the EU

and member states. However, it was the emergence of external events that transformed the European migration agenda. The Arab Spring of 2011 caused significant population movements, especially towards the Italian coast, leading the EU to rethink its migration strategy. In this context, the external dimension of immigration and asylum policy was strengthened with the development of the Global Approach to Migration and Mobility (GAMM), which consolidated cooperation with Mediterranean countries through mobility and border control agreements (Pinyol-Jiménez, 2012; Emiliani, 2016).

Despite these efforts, the EU failed to establish an effective mechanism for managing large-scale migration crises. This fragility was evident in the 2015 asylum crisis, when the significant arrival of refugees, mainly from Syria, highlighted the limitations of the intergovernmental cooperation approach (Geddes and Hadj-Abdou, 2018). These factors—the new institutional framework of the Treaty of Lisbon, the external dimension of the policy, and the migration crises of 2011 and 2015—explain the shift in EU strategy and the adoption of a new working agenda focused on crisis management and with a short-term view, prioritising border control, the externalisation of migration management and the containment of flows in third countries.

The European Agenda on Migration (EAM), presented in 2015, emerged in this context of humanitarian, institutional and political crisis in the EU, marked by the war in Syria, instability in Libya and growing migratory pressure in the Mediterranean, motivated more by political than demographic causes. With the EMN, the European Commission presented emergency measures such as the strengthening of maritime rescue operations, the fight against human trafficking networks and the creation of relocation mechanisms to share the burden among member states. In addition, hotspots were established as centres for registering and screening migrants in countries of first entry, reinforcing a logic of containment rather than protection (Léonard and Kaunert, 2020). At the structural level, the EMN took up elements of Tampere, highlighting the need to implement the European Asylum System, reform the Blue Card and strengthen cooperation with countries of origin and transit. However, its approach prioritised border control and the externalisation of migration management over the creation of regular channels and integration policies. The implementation of the relocation mechanism failed due to the refusal of several member states

to participate, highlighting the lack of solidarity and coordination within the EU (Gortázar and Santos, 2020).

Ultimately, the EMAP proved to be a reactive and minimalist instrument. Its restrictive approach consolidated the securitisation of migration and the fragmentation of European policies, weakening the principles of solidarity and shared responsibility. This failure paved the way for the European Pact on Migration and Asylum (EPMA).

Presented in September 2020, the MAP attempted to correct the shortcomings of the EMN but failed to resolve the political tensions and lack of solidarity among member states that had marked EU migration policy (Bruycker, 2019). Structured around three pillars (external dimension, reinforced border control and restructuring of internal solidarity rules), the MAP maintains the EU's restrictive approach, with measures such as the pre-entry assessment system, a solidarity mechanism for returns and migration conditionality in relations with third countries (Wessels, 2021). The AMP generated tensions among member states: on the one hand, border countries pointed to the lack of balance in the distribution of responsibilities (Carrera, 2020), while on the other, Hungary and Poland opposed moving forward with common rules. In fact, the AMAP was not approved until 2024, when the European Parliament and the Council gave the green light to the five main regulations that comprise it. Approval in the Council was not unanimous, as the Visegrad Group countries opposed (or abstained from) the agreement, with very harsh rhetoric against immigration that is not present in their territories (see Figure 5). This lack of consensus reflects the persistence of deep divisions among member states over immigration management and solidarity within the bloc, confirming that migration policy remains one of the most fragmented areas of European governance.

3.2 Some challenges for the European Union's immigration and asylum policy

Since the Tampere European Council in 1999, the European Union has been working to build a European immigration and asylum policy. However, the development of this policy has been marked by the persistence of the intergovernmental principle, which has limited the transfer of powers by member states and hampered joint decision-making (Geddes, 2008; Trauner and Ripoll, 2016). Furthermore, the separation between the management of legal

immigration and the fight against irregular immigration has led to fragmented and uneven regulatory development, with more restrictive and slow-to-implement rules on legal immigration (Goig, 2017).

The lack of solidarity among member states, particularly evident after the 2015 crisis, has been and continues to be another challenge for this common migration policy. The gap between the northern and southern countries of the EU, traditionally differentiated by their exposure to migration flows, has been accompanied by an east-west divide, with the Visegrad Group countries opposing the fair sharing of responsibilities in the area of asylum (Lehne, 2019). This lack of cooperation has hampered the implementation of mechanisms for distributing asylum seekers and has led the European Commission to highlight the urgent need to rebuild trust between member states (European Commission, 2015). Similarly, the external dimension of migration policy has focused on outsourcing border control and making development cooperation conditional on migration collaboration.

Finally, the securitisation of immigration has shaped the European agenda, with a focus on policing and border management rather than on integration and respect for human rights (Lavenex and Kunz, 2008). This approach has reinforced the security perspective in migration decision-making (minimising the role of social and economic actors) and the development of strategies such as the strengthening of FRONTEX and readmission agreements with third countries. Furthermore, this focus on control and security does not provide legal channels of access and affects the protection of the rights of migrants and refugees, issues that impact the objectives and democratic quality of immigration and asylum policies.

4 The politicisation of the demographic debate and the securitisation of migration governance

The politicisation of a phenomenon such as demography or immigration involves its transformation into a central topic of public debate and a focus of political confrontation (Hampshire, 2013). This process occurs when different actors, from political parties to the media and civil society organisations, articulate discourses that present immigration not only as a social or economic phenomenon, but as a problem or an opportunity that requires specific responses (Scholten, 2011; de Wilde, 2019). Politicisation

also involves a reconfiguration of social perceptions of the politicised issue, leaving aside explanatory structural factors to focus on those that support the narrative of politicisation.

In recent decades, the politicisation of demography has transformed the debate on population dynamics into a field of ideological dispute, where demographic data and trends are no longer interpreted exclusively from a technical perspective but have become tools for political legitimisation. In this process, certain elements, such as population ageing, migration, and fertility, are reconfigured within discourses that reinforce narratives of crisis, threat, or national identity. As a result, the structural factors that explain demographic changes may be relegated in favour of interpretations that respond to political- objectives (Bourbeau, 2011; Geddes and Scholten, 2016), generating normative responses based on perceptions rather than rigorous empirical analysis.

The politicisation of immigration is not a neutral process, as it involves the selection of certain interpretative frameworks that can generate support or rejection of migrants and the policies that affect them (Boswell, 2003; Lahav and Messina, 2005). In some cases, immigration is presented as an opportunity that can strengthen economic development, contribute to the sustainability of welfare systems, or enrich cultural diversity (Ruhs and Martin, 2008). In others, it is used as a factor of social division, linking it to problems such as insecurity, competition for public resources or the loss of national identity (Mudde, 2007; Brubaker, 2017). These narratives can have direct consequences on public policy, influencing the direction of immigration reforms, access to rights, and social perceptions of human mobility (Triandafyllidou, 2018).

The level of politicisation of immigration varies according to the context and circumstances of each society. In times of economic crisis or social transformation, immigration tends to become more prominent on the political agenda, becoming a central issue in election campaigns and the subject of polarised discourse (Hutter and Kriesi, 2019). Furthermore, the role of the media is key in this process, as it amplifies certain discourses and contributes to the construction of images of migrants (Eberl *et al.*, 2018).

In the European context, the politicisation of immigration has been driven mainly by nationalist, Eurosceptic and nativist parties, which have used migration as a scapegoat to channel social

discontent and justify restrictive measures. Through alarmist discourse, they have managed to frame immigration as a permanent crisis, even at times when the figures do not support the alleged emergency. This has had two key aspects: on the one hand, the politicisation of demography and, on the other, the securitisation of immigration.

4.1 Politicised demographics as part of the European debate

Since the establishment of the European common market, the free movement of people, along with that of capital and goods, has been contingent upon the creation of an ideal labour market for the Union as a whole, in constant tension with the actual flows that would occur, and the changes experienced by the member countries. Take Spain, for example, along with the rest of the southern European countries, which, as they became integrated, were transformed into immigrant countries, breaking with their centuries-old tradition of emigration (Izquierdo and Muñoz, 1989). The same could be said of the Eastern European countries, with regard to the effects of German reunification in 1989 and the enlargement of the EU with the gradual integration of the countries of the former Communist bloc. At the beginning of the new millennium, the attacks of 2001 caused the balance of migration control policy to shift towards an approach that prioritised security, sacrificing a more inclusive vision from a human rights perspective (Lucas, 2009; and 2012). This was without prejudice to the discussion that had already begun at the United Nations (2001) on the subsidiary role of migration in counteracting population ageing and ensuring the sustainability of the pension system. The Great Recession of 2008, which precipitated the death knell for multiculturalist policies in 2011 (Chin, 2017), and the refugee crisis of 2015, would once again raise the need for a more inclusive common policy, defined as "safe and orderly" in line with the United Nations (2018), but which at the same time would better define the position of migrants in European societies. Following the United Kingdom's departure from the Union in 2019 —with migration from the EU playing a very important role in the arguments in favour of Brexit— the growing political polarisation within the European Union, marked by the rise of far-right and nationalist populist parties that are openly anti-immigration, has also placed migration policy at the centre of the political debate on the European Union and its very viability.

The politicisation of immigration has been closely linked to demographic debates in Europe. With an ageing population, a decrease in the birth rate and the impact on welfare systems and the labour market, migration has become a central issue in the political strategies of different actors. While some defend immigration as a key tool for filling labour shortages and ensuring the sustainability of pensions, others present it as a factor putting pressure on public resources and access to essential services, generating debates around redistribution and social balance. However, beyond the empirical data showing the contribution of migrants to economic growth and the labour market (OECD, 2019; Milanovic, 2018), immigration has been used as a framework for ideological confrontation. While some political parties argue that Europe's future depends on more open and planned management of migration flows, others insist on models of closure and autarky, without offering viable alternatives to the demographic challenges facing the continent. The lack of a solid consensus has led to fragmented policies and contradictory responses, with immigration being presented both as a structural necessity and a threat to social cohesion, depending on the political approach adopted.

The first fracture in this regard seemed to divide the countries of Eastern Europe from the rest, fearful of the ethnic replacement of their populations (Krastev, 2023) and that both their traditions and democracy would be threatened by the change in the composition of the electorate due to migration, with an irreversible marginalisation of the native population due to its demographic decline. This phantasmal perception was exacerbated by the identification of migrants with the non-democratic countries or anti-Western or anti-liberal values from which they came. It is in this context that we can explain, for example, the creation in 2019 of the European vice-presidency for "Democracy and Demography", with the implicit aim of counteracting the use that regressive discourses were making of a pseudo-demographic narrative, in which declining fertility was interpreted as "demographic suicide", ageing and population decline were interpreted as political decline, in the popular metaphor of the "demographic winter", and migration as the "great replacement" (Domingo, 2023). To these topics could be added the impact of rural depopulation on social cohesion and territorial balance, referring to a "demographic desert", although these have been resolved by appealing to "demographic suicide". What until 2020 seemed an eccentricity of Eastern European countries—characterised precisely by their low proportion of immigrants—and of

some small groups on the far right and supporters of conspiracy theories, has skyrocketed since 2022, contaminating most of the countries of the Union and threatening the adoption of increasingly restrictive policies on migration, with obvious repercussions on the democratic quality of the different countries of the European Union.

4.2 The process of securitisation of immigration

With regard to the *securitisation* of immigration and asylum, it should be understood that this does not happen automatically but requires a prior process of politicisation. In terms of securitisation theory (Buzan *et al.*, 1998), for a social phenomenon to be considered a threat to security, it must first be constructed in the discursive sphere as a high-priority political problem. In the case of immigration, this process has manifested itself in public debates, institutional discourses and the formulation of migration policies that have emphasised the need for control and surveillance at borders. The politicisation of immigration has led to the consolidation of the security discourse, which, in many cases, has reduced the scope for alternative approaches based on integration or regulated mobility, reinforcing a view of immigration as a challenge to the stability and internal order of the EU (Léonard, 2010). A clear example of this phenomenon is the contradiction highlighted by the EU Commissioner for Home Affairs when presenting the New Pact on Migration and Asylum in 2020: although she criticised the media for focusing on the 142,000 attempts at irregular entry in 2019 rather than on the three million initial permits granted, the document she presented reinforced the narrative of border control and the fight against irregular immigration, relegating legal channels of entry to the background. This shows how the political and media framework is dominated by a security-focused view, where immigration is seen as a threat that must be contained, rather than a phenomenon to be managed in a comprehensive manner (Pinyol-Jiménez, 2018).

Even more interesting is the fact that the countries that have most strongly expressed their opposition to migration and to the development of a common European immigration and asylum policy are the countries of Eastern Europe. As confirmed by the figures presented (see section 2.3 of this chapter), the countries with the smallest non-EU foreign populations are countries such as Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, which have been very aggres-

sive in their anti-immigration rhetoric, always pointing to the risk of immigration as a threat to cultural identity.

The securitisation process is complete when exceptional measures are adopted that would not be tolerated in other circumstances. Over the last decade, this exceptionality has become the norm in migration matters. For example, since 2015, internal border controls have been temporarily reintroduced in several European countries. In 2017, a Council decision pointed to the need to continue these temporary controls "to address the serious threat to public order and internal security facing these States [Austria, Germany, Denmark, Sweden and Norway] due to deficiencies in external border control in Greece"1. The normalisation of the dismantling (albeit temporary) of Schengen is accompanied by indifference towards refugee detention centres in the European Union. Far from the concern that existed in 2015, today the hotspot model no longer deserves media attention, and there is no mention of the failure of the attempt to relocate, among the different member states, some 160,000 people stranded in these camps. Finally, and more recently, it is worth noting the proposal presented by the European Commission in March 2025 relating to returns2. In addition to proposing various actions to improve the return of people in an irregular situation in the European Union, the Commission also proposes to enable the creation of return centres, allowing the return of people to third countries under bilateral or EU agreements. This initiative, which follows the model proposed by Italian Prime Minister Meloni, leader of a far-right government (Mudde, 2019), confirms the normalisation of the nativist and anti-immigration option in European institutions as well.

This process, as noted in Chapter 3, is not new. The debate on immigration as a risk to European security has been on the table for some time. On the one hand, migration is considered to be a consequence, among other factors, of the lack of security in the countries of origin. But it is migrants, not geopolitical insecurity,

[1] See: Council Implementing Decision (EU) 2017/818 of 11 May 2017 establishing a recommendation to extend the temporary controls at internal borders in exceptional circumstances threatening the overall functioning of the Schengen area.

[2] See: *Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a common system for the return of third-country nationals staying illegally in the Union, and repealing Directive 2008/115/EC of the European Parliament and the Council, Council Directive 2001/40/EC and Council Decision 2004/191/EC.* COM/2025/101 final.

who become a risk when they move. On the other hand, (irregular) immigration is presented as a risk to European security, as it is equated with organised crime, human trafficking and drug trafficking. This perception of immigration as a risk justifies the adoption of extraordinary measures that would be unacceptable in another context, reinforcing the logic of securitisation. Thus, the circle of securitisation is closed: the discourse constructed around immigration as a threat has legitimised the adoption of extraordinary measures.

Finally, securitisation not only affects European security, but also the very idea of European identity, as reinforced by discourses originating, although not exclusively, from Eastern European countries. This phenomenon shows how the securitisation of migration policy can lead to the construction of the figure of the "suspicious other", that is, anyone who does not fit into the "constructed" dominant European identity (Sassen, 2015).

5 The challenges of a future that is already here and the need to reframe the debates

In recent decades, instead of analysing the real challenges facing these political and economic systems, the dominant discourses have diverted attention towards immigration as the cause of social discontent, the precariousness of the welfare state and the erosion of social cohesion. However, this approach is not only fallacious but also prevents the underlying problems from being addressed: the crisis of the capitalist production model and its consequences in terms of inequality, the inability of democracies to manage diversity, and the political disaffection that fuels the rise of anti-liberal movements. Reformulating the terms of the debate means shifting the focus away from immigration as a problem and instead asking about the reasons for social unrest and growing distrust of institutions.

5.1 Realities that are already here

Liberal democracies have faced difficulties in managing the growing diversity that characterises their societies. Although the principles of equality and non-discrimination are enshrined in their regulatory frameworks, the implementation of policies that guarantee social cohesion without eroding the rights of minorities remains a challenge. All too often, diversity has been exploited

in the political arena. On the one hand, it has been used to legitimise neoliberal principles of competitiveness, promoting identity politics, blurring inequality and social class, and erecting this diversity as an ethical principle (Vertovec, 2012). On the other hand, it has been presented as a threat to national identity rather than recognised as a social and economic asset (Joppke, 2017). Debates on multiculturalism, assimilationism and integration have oscillated between restrictive approaches and more inclusive proposals, without achieving a clear consensus on how to articulate models of coexistence that avoid both segregation and cultural imposition. In this context, the inability of liberal democracies to address the management of diversity has generated tensions that have been exploited by populist and nativist movements, which present immigration and cultural pluralism as factors of social fragmentation (Mudde, 2019).

The challenge of diversity is not only a cultural issue, but also a political and institutional one. The lack of representation of minorities in positions of power, structural discrimination and the persistence of inequalities based on ethnic origin or religion undermine the credibility of liberal democracies in their commitment to equality. Instead of taking on this challenge as an opportunity to strengthen democracy and its principles, many policies have oscillated between making differences invisible and imposing models of integration that sometimes reinforce social exclusion (Kymlicka, 2015).

On the other hand, it is also clear that the welfare state, which in the 20th century was the cornerstone of the social contract in liberal democracies, is undergoing a structural crisis that has been intensified by globalisation, population ageing and changes in labour markets. Neoliberal reforms have transformed social protection systems, prioritising the containment of public spending and the promotion of individual responsibility to the detriment of collective solidarity (Streeck, 2014). This process has led to a progressive weakening of redistribution mechanisms, increasing the perception of economic insecurity and precariousness, especially among the middle and working classes.

Against this backdrop, immigration has been presented as a factor putting pressure on public services, when in reality the dismantling of the welfare state is a response to political and economic decisions that predate current migration flows (Pierson, 1996). The narrative of the "migration burden" has been used to justify cuts in health, education and social benefits, diverting

attention from the real causes of the crisis in the welfare model. This is particularly paradoxical when public systems in countries with high immigration have remained sustainable thanks to the labour and tax contributions of the migrant population (Schierup *et al.,* 2006). However, the association between the welfare crisis and immigration continues to be exploited by political forces seeking to mobilise social unrest through exclusionary rhetoric.

Finally, it should be noted that this deterioration of the welfare state coincides with a deepening of inequalities both globally and within states themselves. The financialisation of the economy, digitalisation and globalisation have generated economic growth concentrated in highly specialised sectors, while large sections of the population have seen their working conditions and purchasing power deteriorate (Piketty, 2014). The gap between capital and labour income has widened significantly, fuelling social discontent and eroding trust in democratic institutions (Streeck, 2014).

One of the most visible effects of this transformation has been the polarisation of the labour market. While the technology and financial sectors have experienced a boom, jobs in manufacturing, agriculture and traditional services have been displaced by automation and offshoring (Rodrik, 2011). This reality has accentuated territorial inequalities, leaving behind regions that depended on traditional industries and now experience high levels of structural unemployment. The inability of governments to redistribute the benefits of economic growth and mitigate losses in these sectors has been key to the expansion of anti-globalisation and protectionist discourses, often linked to anti-immigration positions. Meanwhile, as has happened in Spain, low value-added, labour-intensive sectors have grown, often precarious, where the immigrant population is concentrated, such as tourism, construction and intensive agriculture. Precariousness, with the proliferation of informal employment, reduced labour protections and weakened trade unions, has eroded workers' ability to negotiate fair conditions. While the mobility of capital is unlimited, the mobility of workers remains highly restricted, creating asymmetries in access to economic opportunities (Milanovic, 2016).

5.2 Refocusing the debates: paradoxes and contradictions of the system

The limit to the EU's growth due to the incorporation of new members and the growing centrifugal danger of Eurosceptic

secessionism highlights the need for immigration both for demographic reproduction and for social reproduction in each of the countries of the European Union and as a whole. The apparent paradoxes facing the European Union in demographic terms, and its difficulty in defusing the exploitation of demographics by far-right movements, can, in our view, be found in the contradictions inherent in the economic system itself in terms of population.

We will briefly mention three paradoxes intrinsic to the contradictions of the capitalist order that condition the migration debate: 1) the contradiction between the need for sustained economic and demographic growth and the environment, 2) the contradiction between productive and reproductive work, which, as we have said, is also at the root of the causes of migration, and 3) the contradiction between economic growth and the creation of redundancy, both in demographic terms, i.e. population, and in spatial terms, i.e. territories.

In this sense, one of the key factors behind social unrest is not immigration, but territorial inequality and the decline of certain regions, known as geographies of discontent (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). Globalisation has created enormous economic disparities between dynamic urban regions and rural or industrial areas in decline. The difficulties of the territories most affected by deindustrialisation and automation have been ignored, leading to a sense of abandonment that translates into a protest vote against the political establishment (Colantone and Stanig, 2018).

This territorial unrest has been exploited by far-right and populist parties, which offer simplistic explanations for the economic crisis, pointing to immigration as responsible for job losses, in nsafety and pressure on public services (McCann, 2020). In reality, regional inequalities have much deeper roots in the transformation of the productive model, the dismantling of the welfare state and the lack of investment in territorial development. However, anti-immigration rhetoric has been useful in diverting attention from political responsibilities in managing these crises.

Beyond economic inequalities, liberal democracies face a crisis of legitimacy and effectiveness. The liberal paradox describes how democratic mechanisms themselves have been used to restrict rights, particularly in relation to immigration and security (Hollifield, 1992; Joppke, 2017). Fear and insecurity have served as justification for the erosion of fundamental freedoms, allowing the rise of authoritarian policies within formal democratic systems

(Boswell, 2020). This is a clear blow to the survival of the liberal democracy model. In this regard, it is worth recalling Rodrik's trilemma (2011), which argues that globalisation, national sovereignty and democracy cannot coexist fully and simultaneously. This is reflected in the growing influence of supranational institutions and the reduction of citizens' decision-making power over key aspects of their economic and political lives (Streeck, 2014). In other words, it seems that many democracies have chosen to preserve globalisation and sovereignty at the expense of democratic quality. The perceived lack of control over these processes has fuelled mistrust in institutions and facilitated the rise of leaders with anti-liberal rhetoric.

The instrumentalisation of immigration as a problem has diverted attention from the real challenge facing liberal democracies: the rise of political forces that seek to undermine their very principles. Populist and far-right movements have exploited social discontent and the sense of crisis to propose authoritarian and nationalist models of governance, delegitimising democratic values and promoting policies of exclusion (Mudde, 2019).

While immigration has been used as a central element in their discourse, the real problem is the erosion of trust in democracy and the lack of structural responses to economic and territorial inequalities. Reformulating the debate means moving away from discussing immigration in terms of threat and starting to address the structural problems that are undermining the stability of liberal democracies.

Conclusions: demography and democracy, strategic elements under debate

Migration policies are the touchstone of Western democracies and, in particular, of European Union countries. In the case of migration, this process of politicisation has been exploited not only by far-right parties, but also by conservative and even social democratic parties which, rather than challenging this narrative, have chosen to adapt to it in order to avoid losing electoral support (Hinnfors *et al.,* 2012; Nedergaard, 2017). In this context, the moral panic described by Zygmunt Bauman (2015) has become a political tool to justify restrictive measures and erode the principles of solidarity, equality and human rights on which the European project was built.

From a strategic point of view, the closure of the European Union's enlargement processes, which we have seen to be the main factor in the growth of the EU's population, leaves migration as the only factor that is not only capable of slowing down the rate of ageing, but also of preventing decline, when population size has also become crucial in the geostrategic sphere with regard to Russian and American expansionist ambitions (in clear reference to claims on Canada or Greenland). From this perspective, immigration and population growth in Africa over the coming decades should be seen as an opportunity rather than a threat. If the European Union is unable to make this strategic shift in migration policy, migration will become a tool used by its enemies.

To address these challenges, it is necessary to shift the focus of public and academic debate. Instead of discussing immigration as a problem, it is essential to analyse how democracies can regain their ability to manage diversity, reduce inequalities and strengthen political representation. This means questioning simplistic narratives that attribute social discontent to migration and, instead, examining the structural transformations that have weakened the social contract in many Western democracies.

The real challenge is not immigration, but the ability of liberal democracies to respond to economic, territorial and political crises without sacrificing their own principles. As long as immigration continues to be used as an excuse to avoid addressing these problems, anti-liberal forces will continue to gain ground, progressively eroding democratic values in Europe and around the world.

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Chapter Four

Latin America and the Caribbean on the demographic chessboard: ageing, migration and regional power

Rocío de los Reyes Ramirez

Abstract

This chapter examines the processes of demographic and migratory transformation in Latin America and the Caribbean during the 21st century, within a context of transition characterised by population ageing, declining fertility rates and the emergence of new socio-economic tensions. It analyses the impact of migratory flows on regional reconfiguration, both from large, forced movements—such as the Venezuelan exodus—and from internal and external migratory dynamics that alter the population structure. It also studies the expansion of megacities and their impact on new urban and social configurations. Finally, the phenomena of expulsion, return and self-deportation are addressed, as well as their impact on the restructuring of regional demographic balances, in a scenario conditioned by restrictive migration policies and systemic crises.

Keywords

Demography, Migration, Latin America, Caribbean, Strategy, Displacement, Crisis.

"When we had all the answers, they changed the questions."

Mario Benedetti

Introduction

Throughout history, population movements have shaped societies, reconfigured territories and defined the course of political and economic events. However, at no other time than in the 21st century have demographic patterns taken on such a strategic dimension for the development and stability of countries.

In the vast and diverse territory of Latin America and the Caribbean, where ancient rural rhythms coexist with the frenzy of megacities, demographic transformations are advancing with an intensity that challenges old paradigms. The passage of time is no longer measured solely in decades of growth or development, but in the silent changes in the population structure: who is born, who migrates, who ages...; and how these increasingly interdependent flows are reshaping the region.

Today, more than ever, demographic issues are ceasing to be mere statistical indicators and becoming key elements of the political, economic and social agenda. Understanding the evolution of the population—its size, distribution, age composition and mobility—is essential for projecting the future of work, designing public policies, relations between states and even new forms of power in the international system.

Far from being a uniform process, the region is undergoing a demographic transition marked by the coexistence of different stages. While some nations have reached advanced levels of ageing, others maintain young and dynamic population structures. According to the ECLAC Demographic Observatory (2024), birth and death rates have declined more rapidly than projected at the beginning of the century, except during the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused a temporary increase in mortality (ECLAC, 2022). These changes have altered population growth projections and given rise to new and complex scenarios. Notably, net migration has also been more negative than expected, revealing the growing weight of migration in regional population dynamics.

This change is profound: in 2023, 13.8 %of the Latin American population was aged 60 or over, and it is estimated that by 2030 this percentage will rise to 16.5%(ECLAC, 2023). Population ageing is no longer a distant prospect and is beginning to be felt in health, pension and care agendas, all in a context of high inequality, informal employment and institutional weakness. In

many ways, it is a challenge that has been anticipated but not yet resolved.

At the same time, a demographic dividend persists in various parts of the continent, a window of opportunity where the majority of the population is of working age. But this potential does not activate itself: it requires robust education policies, investment in youth, formal employment and social cohesion strategies. Without these conditions, the dividend can become a trigger for frustration and conflict, rather than a lever for development.

Migration, both internal and cross-border, is part of this whole process. Latin America has gone from being a predominantly sending region to also becoming a transit area and, in certain cases, a destination, especially in recent years. Humanitarian and political crises in countries such as Venezuela, Haiti and Nicaragua have generated increasingly complex and numerous intraregional migration flows, while migratory pressure towards the United States, Mexico and some European countries remains structural. These migrations are driven by economic and security factors and, in many cases, demographic factors, as they are mainly undertaken by young people and adults of working age who are seeking opportunities in the face of a lack of prospects in their countries of origin.

In this context, the new migration policies promoted by Donald Trump since his return to power in 2025—more restrictive, securitised and with a renewed emphasis on deterrence—are beginning to redefine both migration flows and narratives in the Western Hemisphere. These actions have drawn strong criticism from human rights organisations and reflect a geopolitical shift in migration management from Washington. It is important to note that the political response to migration in the global north has a direct impact on the population structure and mobility of the south, and that these decisions are not only administrative, but also deeply strategic and geopolitical.

Population dynamics not only affect internal governance, but also have an impact on countries' international integration, economic flows, security and inter-state relations. The population thus becomes a structural variable of contemporary power: a source of opportunity or vulnerability, depending on how it is managed.

We are obliged to open our eyes to a phenomenon that goes beyond statistics to lie at the very heart of the tensions and possibilities of 21st century Latin America, because talking about

demography today also means talking about the future, strategy and power.

1 Demography and strategy: The population reconfiguration of Latin America in the 21st century

At the beginning of the 21st century, Latin America and the Caribbean ceased to be a region defined by rapid population growth and high birth rates. In just a few decades, the demographic face of the continent has changed rapidly. This shift has transformed the region into a mosaic of multiple, overlapping and often contradictory demographic transitions. What in the past was interpreted as a natural evolution of the population must now be analysed as a significant factor in the definition of national power, sustainable development and political stability.

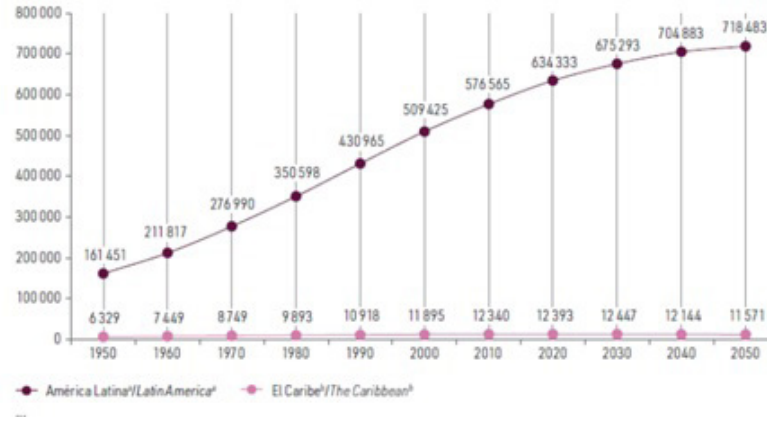

Figure 1: Latin America and the Caribbean: estimates and projections of total population, by decade, 1950-2050 (In thousands of people, at mid-year). *Source:* ECLAC, Population Database. 2024 Revision, and UNPD, World Population Prospects. 2024 Revision [online] https://population.un.org/wpp/

The region reached 663 million inhabitants in 2024, representing 8.1% of the world's population. However, this figure is 3.8% lower than the initial projection made in 2000, which estimated 689 million for the same period.

The total fertility rate has fallen dramatically, from 5.9 children per woman in 1950 to 1.85 in 2023, below the replacement level in most Latin American countries, although there is heterogeneity

within the region, with Argentina and Chile experiencing significantly low fertility rates (1.5 children per woman), while Bolivia still has figures above the replacement level (2.5 children per woman). These differences reflect inequalities in access to health services, education and employment opportunities (ECLAC, 2024).

This decline is accompanied by an increase in life expectancy—which already exceeds 75 years on average in the region—and a slowdown in population growth. According to the United Nations World Population Prospects 2022, Latin America will experience its turning point towards negative growth before 2070, although some countries such as Cuba and Uruguay could reach that threshold much earlier (UN DESA, 2022).

According to estimates by the United Nations Population Division (2022), Cuba has already had fertility rates below the replacement level for more than two decades, combined with high life expectancy and persistent emigration, which has led to accelerated ageing and a gradual contraction of its total population.

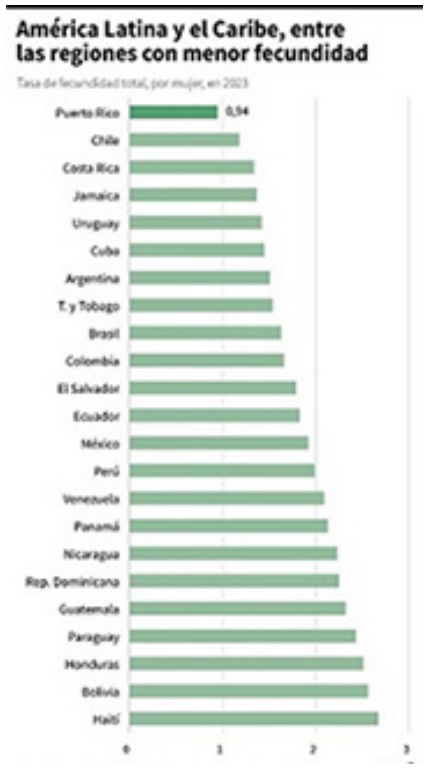

Figure 2: *Source:* World population estimates and projections (2024 revision) United Nations Population Fund/AFP

The Cuban case represents the most extreme example of a widespread trend in Latin America. In 2020, the population of the largest island in the Antilles was around 11 million. Today, following a mass exodus that has drained the country of part of its workforce, there are barely nine million people left, of whom nearly a third are over the age of sixty. This population includes around one million political leaders, civil servants and military personnel, and approximately 1.5 million children under the age of fifteen. As a result, Cuba's economically active population does not exceed three million people.

Uruguay, for its part, reflects demographic patterns similar to those of European countries in terms of fertility and age structure, also projecting a population decline in the short and medium term (ECLAC, 2023). Furthermore, the relative loss of population weight of these countries within Latin America could reduce their regional influence, while forcing them to redefine their international integration strategies in the face of an increasingly demographically disparate region (Rosero-Bixby, 2021; López and Lustig, 2020).

These transformations cannot be analysed in isolation from the global context. Population ageing and declining natural growth have direct effects on the labour force. Fiscal sustainability and consumption patterns. Beyond statistics, these are processes that impact the projection of state power. As Emmanuel Todd (2011) suggests, population structure is a key indicator for understanding both the evolution of social mentalities and emerging geopolitical tensions. In regions where the demographic dividend has been exhausted without translating into substantive improvements in productivity or equity, as is the case in several Latin American countries, fertile ground is being prepared for social unrest and institutional weakening.

From a strategic perspective, Latin America runs the risk of entering what some analysts call the "premature ageing trap": a phase in which the population structure begins to age before economies have consolidated robust social protection systems or adequate levels of formal employment (OECD, 2019; World Bank, 2020). The region is ageing faster than Europe did at the time, but without having resolved the major gaps in labour informality, inequality in access to pensions and universal health coverage. More than 55% of workers are still employed in the informal sector (ILO, 2023), which seriously compromises the future income of the pension system and the fiscal sustainability of states.

On the other hand, the demographic dividend, understood as the window of opportunity derived from a higher proportion of the population of working age, is still present in some countries, such as Bolivia, Guatemala, and Honduras. However, taking advantage of it requires massive investments in education, employment, and health, without which young people become a factor of migratory pressure or a potential source of instability. At this point, the connection between demography and migration is inescapable: the lack of prospects for young people in their countries of origin explains much of the migratory movements towards the United

States and other receiving areas. Migration flows, both within the region and abroad, have begun to have a direct impact on the age composition, population redistribution and urban dynamics of the region, an issue that we will address later.

In addition, population ageing and the transformation of family structures are reshaping social demands. By 2050, more than 25% of the population in countries such as Chile and Costa Rica is expected to be over 60 years of age, implying a growing need for care systems, city adaptation and new intergenerational policies (HelpAge International, 2023).

The reduction in average household size, the increase in older people living alone and the feminisation of ageing—that is, the longer life expectancy of women—are generating new forms of vulnerability that require specific policies for care, inclusion and social protection (Aranco *et al.*, 2020). In Chile, for example, the proportion of single-person households has grown significantly in the last decade, while in Costa Rica there has been a sustained expansion of health coverage for older adults, but with marked territorial and socioeconomic differences (OECD, 2021).

In addition, the transformation of the role of families as the primary care network is placing increasing pressure on the state and the labour market. As the working population shrinks proportionally, the so-called "dependency burden" increases, forcing a rethink of models of productivity, employment and social cohesion in increasingly ageing environments.

This situation is not politically neutral: the electoral weight of older adults is increasing and beginning to alter party priorities, budgets and public policies.

In Chile, where votes were held for the Constitutional Convention and the 2023 plebiscite, the vote of older adults was decisive in rejecting proposals perceived as too disruptive or uncertain. Various analyses indicated that older voters showed a preference for options that offered institutional stability and sustainability of pension systems, as opposed to younger sectors, which called for more daring structural reforms (Barozet and Espinoza, 2023). This generational divide highlights the growing political weight of older people in electoral processes.

In Argentina, which held presidential elections in 2023, the older electorate was a strategic focus for all candidates. Javier Milei, despite representing a break with the traditional economic order,

moderated his discourse on pensions during the second round, aware of the impact that any adjustment would have on an ageing electorate that is very sensitive to cuts in social security (Clarín, 2023). In fact, during the electoral debate, proposals on pension mobility, free medicines and the sustainability of the social security system took centre stage.

In Costa Rica, in the 2022 elections, ageing has also impacted the political debate. President Rodrigo Chaves focused part of his campaign on reforming social security management, particularly the Costa Rican Social Security Fund, in a context where ageing is putting pressure on the system's resources and increasing the demand for specialised services. The National Council for Older Persons (CONAPAM) itself warned of the need to prioritise public policies in response to the growth of this age group (CONAPAM, 2023).

In Uruguay, where general elections were held in 2024, population ageing was one of the central issues in the electoral debate. With more than 20% of its population over the age of 60, the country had approved a reform of the pension system in 2023, which generated intense discussions both in Parliament and among the public. During the campaign, several candidates were forced to take a clear stance on the sustainability of the pension system, the rights of retirees, and the expansion of services for older people. The election results reflected, in part, the electorate's sensitivity to these issues, with a marked mobilisation of older voters, who historically have high turnout rates (SER, 2023).

This new demographic profile also has an impact on the international projection of countries, beginning to act as a strategic variable for the integration of states. Latin America and the Caribbean, with their contrasts between countries that are still young and others that are ageing, are an illustrative case of how population structure directly affects a nation's economic, diplomatic and geopolitical positioning.

Countries with young populations tend to have a renewed capacity for economic integration through an abundant labour force, productive migration and dynamic domestic markets, as is the case in Guatemala, Bolivia and Honduras, which still have a high proportion of the population under the age of 30, provided that there are adequate policies in place to channel this demographic dividend towards productive development and social cohesion. In the case of Guatemala, for example, 33% of the population

is under the age of 15, and almost 60% is under the age of 30 (UNFPA, 2023).

Countries with ageing populations, such as Uruguay, Cuba and Chile, on the other hand, require policies for innovation, attracting human capital and structural reforms to main ity. Chile, for example, has begun to explore policies to attract foreign talent and technological innovation as part of its strategy to maintain regional competitiveness (OECD, 2023). The country has signed agreements with innovation centres in Asia and Europe to promote technology transfer, understanding that human capital can be replaced—at least in part—by adaptive innovation mechanisms.

Therefore, the decisions taken today on demographic issues will influence the region's position vis-à-vis emerging powers such as India and Nigeria, which are capitalising on their population dynamism to project global influence. "Young India" has integrated its population into global diplomatic and economic discourse: the country promotes itself as the "workshop of the world" in contrast to an ageing China, and has increased its investments in Africa, Central Asia and Latin America precisely with this demographic narrative (Goldstone *et al.,* 2022). Nigeria, for its part, presents itself as the most populous country in Africa with sustained growth, which gives it a growing voice in international forums such as the African Union and the WTO (United Nations, 2023).

Latin America, therefore, faces a strategic dilemma. Although it does not have the demographic weight of those countries, it can make decisions that enhance its relative advantages: countries with abundant youth can bet on productive regional integration with a value chain logic, while ageing countries must strengthen their links with technological powers and invest in job retraining, artificial intelligence and skilled migration.

The region's future international positioning, its influence in trade negotiations and its ability to attract foreign direct investment will depend, to a large extent, on how the regional demographic map is interpreted today.

Similarly, in terms of soft power, demographic dynamics can serve as levers of cultural, scientific and technological influence. Urban youth, digitally connected and with transnational aspirations, represent an asset that can be channelled through training, entrepreneurship and international cooperation policies. However, if these young people become trapped in cycles of exclusion, unemployment or violence, they can become a factor of internal

destabilisation and forced migration. The strategic potential of the population structure is therefore directly linked to the public policies that accompany these transformations.

In this context, several Latin American governments have begun to recognise the strategic dimension of demographic planning. Investment in young human capital is becoming a central focus of public policies that seek to integrate economic growth, social cohesion and global competitiveness.

Mexico, for example, has included in its 2019-2024 National Development Plan a series of objectives focused on strengthening education, reducing inequality and promoting the inclusion of young people in the labour market and public life. One of the most notable programmes is Jóvenes Construyendo el Futuro (Youth Building the Future), which seeks to train young people who are neither studying nor working (known as *ninis*) through internships in companies, social organisations and government entities. By 2023, more than 2.5 million young people had participated in the programme, with mixed results in terms of employability, but with a clear impact on reducing youth unemployment (Secretariat of Labour and Social Welfare, 2023). This approach has been interpreted as an attempt to reduce social vulnerability and also as a preventive measure against the recruitment of young people by organised crime (Bargent, 2021).

In Uruguay, Plan Ceibal has been a continental benchmark in the use of educational technology since its implementation in 2007. Originally conceived as a digital inclusion policy through the provision of laptops to students and teachers, the plan has evolved into a comprehensive strategy linking technology, pedagogy and social innovation. Today, Ceibal includes adaptive learning platforms, programming from an early age, artificial intelligence tools and continuous teacher training. Its success has led to Uruguay being repeatedly invited to national and international forums on digital education and has reinforced its image as an innovativ n in the region (Cobo, 2021; Unesco, 2022).

Colombia, for its part, launched the National Youth Strategy in 2022 as part of an effort to coordinate inter-institutional policies aimed at the population between the ages of 14 and 28. This strategy seeks to integrate educational, employment, mental health, political participation and cultural dimensions, and places young people as key actors in development. In addition, Colombia has strengthened its National Innovation System through partner-

ships with universities, research centres and the private sector, with programmes such as Colciencias Young Researchers, which promote scientific and technological leadership among young people. According to a World Bank report (2023), Colombia has made notable improvements in retaining young talent in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) fields, which has a positive impact on its international integration.

However, new demographic realities also open up opportunities. The decline in the number of pupils in schools will make it possible to improve the teacher-student ratio, extend teaching hours and strengthen teacher training, rather than allocating the education budget to the construction of new schools. In Costa Rica, for example, where education spending accounts for 6% of GDP, it is estimated that by 2075 there will be only 320,000 students in primary and secondary education, compared to 1 million in 2002 (Política Exterior, 2025).

These initiatives, although diverse in scale and ambition, share a common strategic horizon: to prepare new generations for a globalised and competitive environment, where knowledge, innovation and adaptability will be decisive. In this context, young people are not only seen as a vulnerable age group, but as a strategic national resource, whose potential can make a difference in terms of sustainable development, democratic stability and geopolitical positioning.

In turn, the growing interest of foreign powers such as China and the United States in Latin America's labour markets and human resources shows that the region is not only a space of flows, but also a terrain for geostrategic competition linked to population (ECLAC, 2023; Brookings Institution, 2022).

In short, what in past decades was understood as a natural evolution of demographic dynamics is now a central component of strategic analysis in Latin America and the Caribbean. The transformation of its population structure is reshaping the political, economic and geopolitical landscape of the continent and needs to be addressed with a multidimensional approach that transcends a purely statistical or welfare-based approach.

From a strategic perspective, what we are seeing in Latin America and the Caribbean is not simply a natural evolution of the population structure, but a process that raises growing tensions between potential and vulnerability. The coexistence of countries with accelerated ageing and others still marked by large youth pop-

ulations reveals not only regional heterogeneity, but also a lack of coordination of common policies. In many cases, states have failed to transform their demographic advantages into effective capacities to project themselves internationally, or to anticipate the challenges of social sustainability posed by ageing. This dissonance between demographic and political rhythms conditions the region's strategic room for manoeuvre, particularly in a global scenario where power balances are also being reconfigured in terms of population.

2 Transformative displacements: the other side of regional change

Migration in Latin America and the Caribbean is currently one of the most complex and decisive phenomena in the regional landscape. Far from representing a peripheral or marginal movement, human displacement has taken on a central role in the transformation of the continent's countries, not only in response to local or regional crises, but also as part of a broader process of reorganising territories, economies and societies. Human mobility has come to occupy a strategic place on the public agenda, challenging both states and regional and international organisations.

In a global context marked by uncertainty, conflict, inequality and climate change, the region has become the point of origin, transit, destination and return for multiple migratory flows that no longer follow exclusively linear patterns (UNHCR and R4V, 2024). Migration trajectories are increasingly complex, multi-causal and prolonged over time, with a growing feminisation and diversification of socio-demographic profiles (IOM, 2022; UN Women, 2021). This new reality poses unprecedented challenges in terms of governance, integration and even international cooperation, which has been recognised in initiatives such as the 2022 Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection[1], promoted by multiple governments in the hemisphere.

Mobility is intertwined with other ongoing structural processes, such as the exhaustion of certain development models, the erosion of social cohesion and the transformation of employment, as

[1] Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection, signed in June 2022 during the IX Summit of the Americas. Available at: https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/06/10/declaration-of-los-angeles-on-migration-and-protection/

warned by ECLAC in its analysis of post-pandemic trends (ECLAC, 2023). In many countries, internal migration from rural areas to medium-sized cities or national capitals is changing land use patterns, accelerating urbanisation and putting pressure on already saturated infrastructure (UN-Habitat, 2022). At the same time, cross-border flows, whether voluntary or forced, challenge institutional capacities and force a rethinking of public policies from a regional and intersectoral perspective.

This is not just a matter of flows across borders, but a phenomenon that redefines belonging, reactivates old historical links between countries and communities, and raises new ways of understanding citizenship, rights and identity in the 21st century (Castles, Haas and Miller, 2020). Migration has gone from being a social variable to becoming a geostrategic factor that impacts political stability, labour markets, and continental integration and cooperation processes (Goldstone *et al.,* 2022; IDB, 2023).

Understanding migration as a structural component rather than simply a reactive one allows it to be placed at the centre of the discussion on the region's future. Beyond its immediate effects, human displacement is having a decisive impact on population configurations, the relationship between the state and society, and the way Latin America positions itself on the international stage. We aim to address this transformative dimension from a demographic and strategic perspective, with the goal of better understanding how population movements are shaping—and will continue to shape—the region in the coming decades.

Today, Latin America is experiencing an unprecedented wave of migration that transcends the classic narrative of economic migrants to the United States and forms a much more complex and regionalised network. The case of the Venezuelan exodus remains paradigmatic: with more than 7.7 million people displaced by 2024 according to the R4V Platform, it is the largest forced movement in the region's recent history. Nearly 80% remain in Latin America, with Colombia, Peru and Ecuador as the main receiving countries (R4V, 2024). This phenomenon has had a profound impact on the demographic profiles of the receiving cities, modifying the population pyramid, increasing the proportion of young people in ageing contexts and forcing a reorganisation of social services.

Colombia, with nearly 2.9 million Venezuelans, is the main receiving country. According to data from Migración Colombia,

the Venezuelan migrant population in the country is mainly composed of people of working age, with 51% women and 49% men. This group contributes positively to the demographic dividend, as most are between 18 and 39 years old (IOM, 2024).

Economically, in 2022, Venezuelans generated USD 529 million in taxes, contributing significantly to public finances. Most are employed in sectors such as food, commerce and construction, offsetting the labour deficit in operational and seasonal jobs (Vanegas, 2024).

A similar situation occurs in Peru, with approximately 1.5 million Venezuelans, and in Ecuador, with more than half a million. Most migrants are young people of working age, which has led to a rejuvenation of the workforce in these countries. However, it has also created challenges in terms of integration, access to services and social cohesion.

Despite the demographic and economic benefits, Venezuelan migrants face significant challenges. According to the Refugee and Migrant Needs Analysis (RMNA) 2024, many migrants and refugees in an irregular situation, whether newly arrived or in transit, are unable to access the basic rights and services necessary to lead a dignified life. This underscores the need for coordinated and comprehensive support to ensure their safety, well-being and opportunities for a stable future.

In parallel with the Venezuelan exodus, migration originating in the so-called Northern Triangle of Central America—Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador—continues to shape one of the most complex cross-border dynamics on the continent. This phenomenon, fuelled by structural factors such as criminal violence, persistent poverty, the effects of climate change and institutional fragility, constitutes a sustained pattern of displacement that has had profound demographic implications in both the countries of origin and those of destination.

Added to this is a growing diversification in the migratory profiles crossing the Central American isthmus. Cubans, Haitians, Ecuadorians, Venezuelans and a growing number of people from Africa and Asia travel the most dangerous routes on the continent—including the perilous Darien jungle, the natural border between Colombia and Panama—on their way to North America. This crossover of flows not only strains the state capacities of transit and destination countries, but also redefines local demo-

graphic patterns, creating new challenges in terms of planning and institutional response.

During 2023, the figures reached record levels: on the southwestern border of the United States alone, the Border Patrol reported more than 562,000 arrests and of migrants from the Northern Triangle, of which more than 250,000 were from Honduras and Guatemala (*The Washington Post*, 2024).

In Mexico, meanwhile, more than 224,000 Central Americans were apprehended while travelling north, reflecting the magnitude of migratory pressure on both receiving countries (Mera, 2023).

This migration corridor has become a key geopolitical space, where humanitarian, security and foreign policy interests intersect.

However, the most recent data show a significant change: in 2024, total apprehensions of migrants from the Northern Triangle fell by 38% compared to the previous year, with a total of 486,343 registrations between the United States and Mexico. Arrests at the US border fell to 288,337 (a decrease of 48.7%), while in Mexico the reduction was more modest, with 198,006 apprehensions (11.78% less than the previous year) (Infobae, 2025). Despite this decline, deportations of citizens from these countries increased, exceeding 102,000 in 2024, with El Salvador leading the increase (35.8%), followed by Guatemala (12.8%), while Honduras experienced a 13.2% drop (Infobae. 2025b).

From a demographic point of view, this flow is characterised by a markedly youthful profile. The majority of migrants are between 15 and 35 years old (ICCA, 2021), making this group a strategic component of the labour force, especially in economies with increasing ageing rates. The increase in unaccompanied children, adolescents and minors—more than 13,000 deported in 2024 (Sagastume, 2025)—poses specific challenges in terms of protection and institutional capacity in the receiving countries.

Overall, this youth migration from the Northern Triangle not only implies a loss of human capital for the countries of origin—many of which already face demographic stagnation or declining birth rates—but also alters the population balance in medium-sized cities and border areas of Mexico and the United States, where these communities tend to settle. Their integration, therefore, becomes a critical variable in the continental demographic landscape.

Demographically, the effect of these movements is not uniform. In the Dominican Republic, the sustained increase in the Haitian population—which represents about 5% of the national total—has had a dual effect: on the one hand, it has contributed to the rejuvenation of key labour sectors such as construction, agriculture and domestic work; on the other, it has generated accumulated tensions in basic social services such as health, education and housing, especially in border provinces such as Dajabón and Elías Piña (El País, 2024c). Structural discrimination, restrictions on access to fundamental rights and difficulties in registering children born in Dominican territory amplify these tensions, with long-term implications for social cohesion and population structure. UNICEF (2022) has also warned of the growing presence of Haitian children and adolescents in vulnerable situations, many of them in irregular circumstances or without schooling.

In the case of Chile, the transformation has been remarkable. The arrival of more than one million migrants in less than a decade has not only altered the proportion of foreigners in the total population but has also had an impact on the age and sex composition in specific regions.

Between 2017 and 2020, the country experienced an explosive increase in its migrant population, especially from Haiti and Venezuela. This influx raised the percentage of foreigners from 2.7% in 2014 to nearly 10% in 2023, with more than 1.9 million people officially registered (National Institute of Statistics of Chile, 2024). The geographical concentration in urban communes with low natural growth—such as Santiago Centro, Estación Central, and Antofagasta—has changed the local demographic composition, introducing new linguistic, cultural, and age dynamics. In areas with high ageing rates, migrants—mostly young people—fill labour shortages in sectors such as construction, informal trade and care services, but they also face institutional barriers to integration: the validation of qualifications, healthcare and access to secure rentals. These challenges, if not addressed with robust public policies, could crystallise into ethno-demographic social segmentations.

Both cases show how recent migration flows are reshaping the population structure of receiving states, not as a threat, but as a strategic variable that requires updated regulatory frameworks and agile institutional responses. Instead of viewing migration as a one-off demographic shock, a long-term vision is needed that integrates it as a structural factor in regional development.

Furthermore, internal migration in Latin America—often overshadowed by large international movements—represents a significant demographic dynamic. In Andean countries such as Peru and Bolivia, movements from rural areas in the highlands to the inter-Andean valleys and departmental capitals have become structural in nature. This phenomenon is not only a response to the search for employment or access to services, but also to the deterioration of climatic and agricultural conditions in high-altitude regions, where climate variability has severely affected subsistence crops.

DIMENSIÓN	TENDENCIAS OBSERVADAS	IMPACTOS EN LA REGION
Origen de los migrante	• Crisis humanitaria – Venezuela, Haiti • Violencia y pobreza (Centroamérica)	• Éxodo masivo • Presión sobre paises receptores
Destino de los migrantes	• Politica del Cono Sur (Argentina, Chilé, Brasil) • EE. UU., México, Canadá	• Nuevos patrones migratorios intra-regionales • Reconfiguración del paisaje demografico
Migración Sur-Sur	• Predominancia de flujos dentro la región • Redes familiares y comunitarias	• Oportunidad de para redefinir odos de desarrollo regional • Necesidad de cooperación sostenida
Respuestas insticuionales	• Politicas de coordinación regional • Falta de coordinación eficaz • Rápel crecimiento de cooperacion	• Oportunidad para redefinir modelos de desarróllo regional • Necesidad de cooperación sostenida
Implicaciones		• Desafios para la integración y estabilidad regional

Figure 3: Displacement in Latin America and the Caribbean. Own elaboration

From a demographic point of view, the impact of this migration is twofold. On the one hand, it leads to a progressive exodus of young people from rural areas, with direct consequences for the

population pyramid in these territories. In several provinces of the Bolivian highlands, such as Potosí and Oruro, more than 40% of the rural population is now over 40 years old, and fertility has declined significantly in the last two decades (INE Bolivia, 2023). This dynamic accelerates ageing and reduces the active base that sustains the local economy, jeopardising the sustainability of educational and health services that still remain in these areas.

On the other hand, destination centres are receiving an influx of young people that is changing their internal structure. Although this age renewal may represent an advantage in terms of economic dynamism, it also introduces regional tensions: recent censuses show growing inequality in the distribution of the young population between rural and urban departments, which deepens regional gaps in access to opportunities, services and political representation (INEI, 2024). In regions such as the Peruvian Central Highlands, departments such as Huancavelica and Apurímac have lost between 10% and 15% of their young population in the last decade, while Lima now accounts for more than 35% of the country's young people (INEI, 2022).

Thus, far from being mere territorial adjustments, these internal displacements are silently reshaping the demographic profile of the Andean world. Public planning continues to lag behind this reality, and few territorial strategies address in a coordinated manner the ageing of the areas of expulsion and the pressure on social systems in the receiving areas.

We must not fail to mention the case of Mexico, as it constitutes a demographic hub in the regional migration system, playing a simultaneous role as a country of origin, transit, destination and return. This condition makes it a true "complete migration system", with multiple and complex demographic implications.

From the point of view of international emigration, the demographic profile most affected continues to be that of young adults, mainly between the ages of 20 and 39, with medium and high levels of education. According to the National Survey of Demographic Dynamics (ENADID), between 2018 and 2023, nearly 1.2 million people emigrated, 87.9% to the United States and 6% to Canada (Paz, 2024). This loss of working-age population particularly affects regions that have traditionally been sources of emigration, such as Guerrero, Oaxaca, Zacatecas and Michoacán, where the generational gap exacerbates rural ageing processes and reduces local economic dynamism.

Internally, Mexico is experiencing sustained interregional migration, with movements from states with high fertility and low labour supply (Chiapas, Veracruz, Hidalgo) to more industrialised areas such as Nuevo León, Querétaro and Mexico City. This process produces a partial rebalancing of the population pyramid in receiving areas, rejuvenating their age base, while leaving the states of origin with a growing proportion of elderly and dependent people. In the medium term, this demographic redistribution may put pressure on health and pension systems in rural regions that are losing their young and active workforce.

On the other hand, transit migration to the United States has also had unexpected effects. During 2023, more than 782,000 incidents involving people in an irregular migratory situation were recorded in Mexico (IOM, 2024). Although many seek to continue northward, a growing number of them have become stranded or have chosen to settle in the country, especially in southern and northern border cities. This migrant population—mostly young people from Central America, the Caribbean, South America, and even Africa—is significantly altering the age and cultural composition of cities such as Tapachula, Ciudad Juárez, Tijuana, and Monterrey.

In addition, return processes—and especially deportations from the United States—also have a notable demographic effect. In 2023 alone, the Mexican government recorded more than 190,000 returnees, many of them unaccompanied minors (Government of Mexico, 2024). The reintegration of these returnees represents a challenge in terms of schooling, labour market integration and access to services, especially in poor municipalities that already face institutional overload.

Mexico, therefore, illustrates how migratory flows not only affect human mobility, but also profoundly transform regional and national demographic balances: from age structure to the spatial distribution of the population. Managing this process requires intersectoral public policies that recognise the weight of the demographic dimension in strategic decision-making.

A complementary dimension to be taken into account is climate migration, which is already emerging as a growing reality, beginning to alter population patterns in vulnerable areas of the Caribbean, the Americas, Central America, and southern Mexico. ECLAC and the IOM have warned that phenomena such as sea level rise, droughts and hurricanes could generate millions of new

displaced persons in the coming decades (IOM, 2023; ECLAC, 2024). Anticipating these dynamics is crucial for planning public adaptation policies that not only address displacement but also integrate it into demographic and territorial strategies.

Finally, it is worth briefly mentioning the sustained increase in migration to non-traditional destinations such as Southern Europe (Spain, Italy, Portugal) and certain emerging Asian economies, such as Japan and South Korea. Unlike the forced or precarious movements that characterise much of regional migration, these flows are largely composed of skilled professionals, young people with higher education, digital skills, and language proficiency, which gives them a specific demographic profile: highly skilled, between 25 and 45 years of age, and with a low propensity to return.

According to recent data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the number of Latin Americans with university degrees residing in Europe has grown by more than 30% since 2015, with a particular increase in the health, technology, and educational services sectors (OECD, 2023). In countries such as Spain, Venezuelans, Colombians, and Argentinians have entered the skilled labour market en masse, reshaping the balance in certain professional sectors and demographically revitalising urban areas in population decline, especially in regions with low birth rates and rapid ageing (El País, 2024a).

The Asian case presents a more incipient but significant dynamic. Japan, for example, has facilitated the entry of Latin American workers of *Nikkei* descent[2] (especially Peruvians and Brazilians) since 2019, which has helped to alleviate its demographic deficit, but has also posed challenges for cultural and social integration, given the different migratory experience of this new generation (Nippon.com, 2024).

For the countries of origin, however, this phenomenon also entails significant demographic costs: the "brain drain" affects strategic sectors such as public health, education and technological innovation, where domestic demand far exceeds supply. Although remittances represent a key source of income—in 2023 alone, Latin American countries received more than USD 150 billion in remittances, led by Mexico, Guatemala and the Dominican

[2] People who are of Japanese descent but were born or raised outside Japan.

Republic (*BBC,* 2024)—they do not always offset the long-term impact of the loss of skilled human capital.

Demographically, this trend expands the Latin American migration map, revealing a structural divide between those who can move for resources and skills, and those who do so out of necessity or desperation. Thus, the demographic landscape of Latin America is being redefined not only from within, but also through its diasporas, scattered across increasingly diverse and competitive circuits.

Current migratory flows should therefore be understood not only as social phenomena, but also as drivers of demographic change that affect the reconfiguration of the labour force, the age structure of the population and the balance between sending and receiving regions. In a scenario of progressive ageing, these migrations can represent—if managed properly—an opportunity to boost economies, diversify demographic profiles, and rethink the strategic positioning of Latin America and the Caribbean in the global context.

3 The urban face of demographic change: megacities and new social frontiers

The demographic dynamics of Latin America and the Caribbean cannot be understood without observing their growing urbanisation. While the previous sections have shown how population ageing, migration and internal displacement are reconfiguring demographic balances, it is in cities—and particularly in megacities—where these processes take visible form and have tangible consequences. The concentration of population in urban environments not only responds to the search for economic opportunities or services, but also reflects historical patterns of inequality, rural abandonment and structural changes in social composition. This new urban face poses unprecedented challenges for social cohesion, public policy design and territorial sustainability, making megacities true laboratories of regional demographic change.

The 21st century has consolidated Latin America and the Caribbean as one of the most urbanised regions in the world. More than 80% of its population now lives in cities, and a growing number do so in large urban agglomerations with more than five million inhabitants. These megacities—such as Mexico City, São Paulo, Buenos Aires, Lima and Bogotá—are not only economic and political cen-

tres; they have become privileged settings where the main vectors of demographic change converge: ageing, migration, uneven growth and internal mobility (UN-Habitat, 2022).

The expansion of these cities has not been uniform or free of tensions. In many of them, population growth has been driven both by internal migration—particularly from declining rural regions—and by the arrival of foreign populations, particularly young people of working age from countries such as Venezuela, Haiti, and the Northern Triangle of Central America (CELADE, 2023). This influx has significantly altered the age structure of the receiving cities, rejuvenating urban areas marked by low birth rates or the progressive ageing of the local population. Thus, Latin American megacities are becoming not only centres of attraction, but also areas of rapid demographic transformation.

However, this population concentration also poses structural challenges. The pressure on urban infrastructure, health and education systems, housing and transport has tested the capacity of local governments. In addition, the growth of peripheral belts and informal settlements, often linked to the arrival of migrants or internally displaced persons, has given rise to new social frontiers where urban inequality is acutely expressed. The demographic distribution within cities themselves reflects territorial disparities: while some areas show indicators similar to those of ageing countries, others remain markedly young and dynamic (Rodríguez, 2021).

These transformations affect not only urban planning, but also the projection of power and representation within states. In political systems that still suffer from deficits in decentralisation and territorial equity, megacities concentrate not only population, but also political and economic influence. This reality forces us to rethink the link between territory, citizenship and the state from a demographic and strategic perspective (Bello, 2022).

Lima, for example, has established itself as one of the largest metropolises in South America, with more than 11 million inhabitants and growth marked by migration from the Andean highlands and, more recently, by the massive arrival of Venezuelan population. By 2024, it is estimated that more than one million people of this nationality will be residing in the Peruvian capital (*El Comercio,* 2024). This influx has rejuvenated the demographic composition of peripheral districts, where young people of working age predominate, while intensifying pressure on pub-

lic services and accentuating the informal expansion of urban space. According to recent studies, more than 60% of Lima's urban growth has occurred outside formal planning schemes (Revilla and Ramírez, 2021), creating a city that is fragmented both physically and socially.

A similar dynamic can be observed in Bogotá, which has undergone a significant demographic transformation since 2017 with the arrival of more than 500,000 Venezuelan migrants, many of them under the age of 30 (Migración Colombia, 2024). This influx has reshaped certain areas of the city, especially in the south and south-west, where demand for housing, education and informal employment has skyrocketed. At the same time, deep territorial inequalities persist: according to DANE (2023), gaps in indicators such as life expectancy, access to health care and educational level between the north and south of the city have widened, generating a demographic polarisation that reinforces historical patterns of urban segregation.

Santiago de Chile, for its part, presents a particular case of simultaneous urbanisation and ageing. While traditional communes such as Providencia and Ñuñoa show advanced signs of population ageing, others such as Quilicura, Independencia and Estación Central have experienced a notable increase in the young foreign population. Between 2016 and 2020, immigration from Haiti and Venezuela transformed the age structure of these areas, accounting for up to 25% of the local population (La Tercera, 2024). This demographic redistribution has posed significant challenges in terms of access to services, transport and housing, while also changing the socio-cultural profile of neighbourhoods. Although the Catholic University's City Observatory has documented progress in institutional integration (UC City Observatory, 2023), the gap between wealthy and vulnerable communities remains one of the most pronounced in the region.

In the case of São Paulo, the most populous city in the southern hemisphere, recent demographic dynamics are explained not so much by the arrival of international migrants as by a complex web of internal flows, natural growth and regional mobility. Unlike other Latin American capitals, where international migrants have profoundly altered the population pyramid, in São Paulo the dominant phenomenon continues to be the uninterrupted urbanisation of populations from the interior of Brazil, especially from the Northeast, who for decades have been feeding the urban periphery in search of better opportunities. However, in recent

years, there has been a growing number of Haitian, Bolivian, Venezuelan and Senegalese migrants, many of whom are entering precarious labour markets—such as textile manufacturing, delivery or domestic work—which accentuate the socio-spatial fragmentation of the city (Folha de S. Paulo, 2024). This heterogeneity has created a demographic landscape where areas of progressive ageing coexist with markedly young and multicultural districts, such as Brás or Pari, posing an additional challenge in terms of urban planning, differentiated public policies and equitable access to rights.

Mexico City, for its part, continues to function as a demographic magnet on a national and regional scale. Although it has seen a slight slowdown in its growth over the last decade, the migratory dynamism of the centre of the country, combined with the economic and administrative weight of the capital, maintains it as a strategic node in the Latin American urban system. Unlike receiving cities such as Bogotá or Santiago, where recent migration inflows have had a proportionally higher impact, Mexico City has a pattern of historical population concentration that reflects both long-term internal migration processes and sustained settlements of foreign communities—mainly Central American, South American and, to a lesser extent, Asian—integrated into complex urban structures (El País, 2024b).

Beyond their local specificities, the large metropolises of Latin America and the Caribbean share a series of structural features that link them as demographic protagonists of the 21st century. Firstly, most of these megacities exhibit marked territorial polarisation: the peripheries—younger, more vulnerable and rapidly growing—contrast with the consolidated urban centres, where an older population with better living conditions and access to services is concentrated. This internal segmentation reproduces and amplifies inequalities that are not only economic, but also generational and territorial (Cano, 2022).

Secondly, constant pressure on health, education, housing and transport systems represents one of the main challenges for urban governance. The ability of these systems to adapt to a changing population—in terms of age, geographical origin, migration status, or family structure—is key to avoiding major social fractures. The growing presence of international migrants, internally displaced persons, or returnees only further complicates this scenario, requiring coordinated responses across levels of government, planning, and public policy.

Finally, these megacities are not just large concentrations of people: they are increasingly becoming hubs of regional power. They concentrate population, production, knowledge and decision-making capacity, becoming arenas where development models, sustainability strategies and narratives about the continent's demographic future are debated. What happens in São Paulo, Bogotá or Mexico City will have repercussions that transcend national borders and will condition the life opportunities of millions of people in the coming decades (UNDP, 2023).

4 Back to the beginning: expulsions, returns and new population balances

Although this chapter has focused on the internal and regional processes that shape the Latin American demographic landscape, it is impossible to conclude the analysis without addressing a dynamic whose magnitude and urgency have intensified since the beginning of 2025: that of forced returns and mass deportations. Although not new, this phenomenon has taken on a new dimension under the presidency of Donald Trump, who has returned to power with an even more aggressive immigration agenda than in his first term.

Since returning to the presidency in January 2025, Trump has reinstated a markedly restrictive immigration agenda, strengthening border control and accelerating the deportation of tens of thousands of people, many of them young, employed and with established family ties in the United States.

Measures marking this new phase include the suspension of refugee and asylum admission programmes, the expansion of the power of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to carry out mass raids and deportations (*The New York Times*, 2024), and a drastic cut in legal avenues for seeking asylum. Added to this were openly xenophobic speeches from the presidency, which fostered a climate of hostility towards migrants, especially Latin Americans.

Measures such as the reactivation of the "Remain in Mexico" programme[3] and the tightening of asylum procedures have led

[3] This protocol came into force in January 2019, during Trump's first term (2017-2021). It requires migrants and asylum seekers to wait in Mexico until their right is authorised, in order to curb illegal immigration.

to a significant increase in forced returns, especially to Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean.

Among the most controversial measures is the use of the Alien Enemies Act of 1798 to justify the deportation of migrants accused of having links to gangs, without the need for conclusive judicial evidence. These individuals are being transferred to detention centres in their countries of origin, such as the Terrorism Confinement Centre (CECOT) in El Salvador, the mega-prison promoted by President Nayib Bukele as a symbol of his hard-line policy (Villafranca, 2024). Although presented as a security strategy, this practice has been harshly criticised by human rights organisations, which consider that it encourages arbitrary detentions and can profoundly alter the social fabric of the receiving communities (HRW, 2024).

At the same time, deportation flights to Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean have increased, operating from Texas, Arizona and Florida on an almost daily basis. According to figures from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), more than 120,000 people were deported to the region in the first quarter of 2025 alone (DHS, 2025). This figure includes both adults and unaccompanied minors and reflects a systematic policy of emptying migrant populations considered "undesirable".

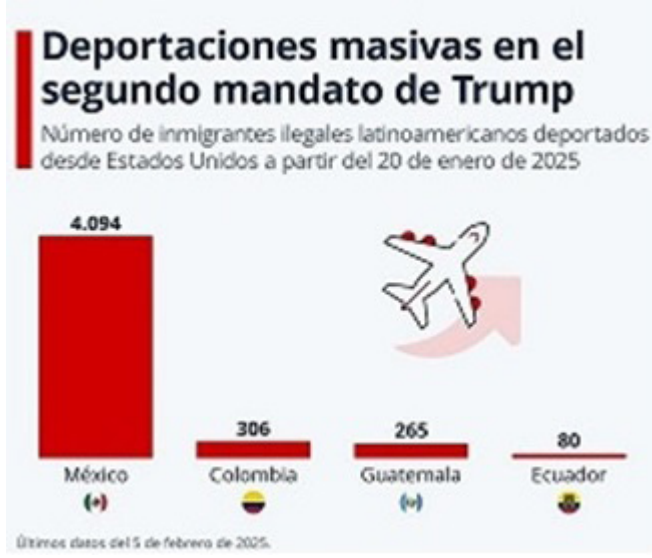

Figure 4. ***Source:*** **United States Department of Homeland Security/Migración Colombia/Statista**

In this context, the phenomenon of self-deportation has also become visible—and is now actively promoted—a term that refers to the voluntary departure of migrants pressured by the institutional environment, threats of imprisonment, or the impossibility of renewing permits. Under the new administration, this practice has ceased to be a marginal phenomenon and has become an official strategy. The Donald Trump administration has begun to offer financial incentives, forgiveness of immigration sanctions, and preferential access to certain assisted repatriation programmes for migrants who agree to leave the country voluntarily.

Through the "Safe Departure" programme, launched in March 2025, the Department of Homeland Security offers undocumented migrants the possibility of leaving the country without being detained, provided they cooperate with the departure process and waive future applications for residency. According to preliminary figures, more than 30,000 people took advantage of the programme during its first two months of operation (U.S. CIS, 2025). This mechanism, although apparently voluntary, has been harshly criticised by human rights organisations, which consider it a form of structural coercion, in which the threat of punishment drives decisions that are not technically free (AIC, 2025).

Although these are not deportations in the legal sense, these departures have the same impact on the population structure of the sending countries. Those who self-deport are usually young adults of working age with work experience in sectors such as construction, agriculture or domestic services. Their forced return, although voluntary in legal terms, represents a personal, economic and community rupture. Furthermore, as they are not recognised as expelled by the legal system, they fall outside the traditional frameworks of assistance and reintegration offered by some countries of origin.

It should also be noted that these initiatives have encountered legal limits. In April 2025, the United States Supreme Court temporarily suspended the implementation of certain measures of the mass deportation programme, considering that they violated procedural guarantees and fundamental rights. This decision, although provisional, opens up a new legal scenario that could slow down—or at least qualify—the impact of the new government's more aggressive policies (*The New York Times,* 2025).

In this context, since October 2024, under the presidency of Luis Abinader, the Dominican Republic has intensified the deporta-

tion of Haitian migrants in an irregular situation, reaching rates of up to 10,000 expulsions per week. According to official figures, more than 276,000 foreigners, mostly Haitian citizens, were deported in 2024, and in January 2025 alone, more than 31,200 deportations were recorded (Hasbun, 2025). This policy has raised concerns among human rights organisations and international agencies due to the lack of procedural safeguards and the humanitarian impact on vulnerable groups such as pregnant women and minors.

Beyond the political or humanitarian arena, these displacements have lasting implications for the regional demographic map. By altering patterns of residence, labour cycles and age distribution, they are influencing the very future of sending countries: from their labour market and education system to their fiscal capacities and international representation. What is ultimately at stake is the construction of new forms of citizenship, rootedness and belonging in a region marked by mobility, inequality and unwanted return.

Conclusion

Thinking about demography in Latin America and the Caribbean can no longer be limited to counting inhabitants or observing birth or ageing curves. The population transformation that the region is undergoing challenges power structures, development models and social pacts that were believed to be stable. What is at stake is not only a quantitative transition, but a profound reordering of the relationships between generations, territories and states. The figures alone do not explain the social fracture that opens up when a country ages befor r becomes rich, when a city grows without integration, or when millions of people are expelled or returned to contexts they no longer recognise as their own.

One of the great paradoxes that this chapter has attempted to highlight is that, in the midst of an era of mobility, Latin America faces multiple forms of immobility. The immobility of the state in designing long-term demographic policies. The immobility of social sectors trapped between informality and exclusion. The immobility of returnees who arrive in countries without real mechanisms for reintegration. This tension between constant displacement and immobile structures is one of the main sources of imbalance on the continent.

Migration—which should be seen as an opportunity rather than a threat—continues to be managed, to a large extent, from a security perspective imposed by powers such as the United States. Migration policy has become an instrument of geopolitical pressure, where border control is negotiated as a bargaining chip and migrants become tools in electoral disputes. The case of mass deportations under Donald Trump's new mandate not only illustrates this logic, but also starkly reveals how the decisions of one power can abruptly change the demographic dynamics of its neighbours.

Another fundamental lesson from this journey is that demographic processes are not neutral. They do not affect men and women, young and old, rich and poor equally. Social gaps tend to crystallise at the margins: in urban peripheries where births are concentrated, in rural communities that are losing their working population, in neighbourhoods that receive flows of migrants without resources. Where public policy does not reach or arrives late, demography becomes destiny, and the territory becomes a trap.

But the future is not written in stone. Latin America and the Caribbean still have a demographic window of opportunity—albeit a narrow one—to transform their present. It is not just a question of managing ageing or containing migration, but of building a new territorial and generational pact that articulates the rights of those who stay, the dreams of those who leave and the dignity of those who return. This requires a change of approach: to stop treating demography as data and start understanding it as a tool for democratising development, redistributing power and projecting a strategic vision for the region.

Ultimately, the challenge is not only to adapt to demographic trends, but to challenge their meaning. Do we want cities that concentrate opportunities or reproduce inequalities? Do we want migration policies that expel or integrate? Do we want reactive states or states capable of anticipating change? The answers to these questions do not depend on demography, but on politics. And this is precisely where Latin America and the Caribbean face their most complex test: that of building a strategic vision that is not limited to crisis management, but dares to think long term, anticipating scenarios, articulating coherent public policies and understanding that every decision—in health, housing, mobility or education—has profound demographic effects.

The region does not lack resources or talent, but it does lack sustained political will and a common project. Committing to demographically conscious development means rethinking the role of states, but also strengthening local capacities, recognising the centrality of cities, integrating diasporas as agents of change, and turning data into decision-making compasses. Only in this way can a region marked by inequality and displacement be transformed into a region capable of offering a future, because demography does not determine the destiny of peoples, but it does define the terrain on which that destiny is played out.

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Chapter Five

Who works in Spanish agriculture? Fragmentation, partiality, opacity and lack of reliable data on migrant workers in a key sector for the State and the EU

Yoan Molinero Gerbeau

Abstract

This article analyses the current state of the statistical sources available for studying the interrelationship between migration and agricultural work in Spain. Through an exhaustive inventory and evaluation of the main databases—Labour Force Survey (INE), SEPE contract records, GECCO (OPI) authorisations, and Eurostat statistics—it identifies what information these sources provide, what sociodemographic dimensions they allow to be explored, and what limitations they present in terms of disaggregation, accessibility, and comparability. The study shows that, although relevant data exist in the various public bodies, their analytical usefulness is limited by four major structural flaws: institutional fragmentation, partiality of the variables offered, opacity in access to microdata, and absence of key information, especially on workers in an irregular situation. These deficiencies make it difficult to construct complete and up-to-date sociodemographic profiles of the group of migrant workers in the agricultural sector. Despite these limitations, the analysis identifies some general patterns—such as the predominance of male workers from Morocco, Romania, and sub-Saharan Africa—which, by combining the available records, provide an insight into the profiles of those

working in Spanish agriculture. The article highlights the urgent need to establish an integrated and transparent data collection system as an essential condition for designing effective, empirically based public policies in the field of migration and agriculture.

Keywords

Migration and agriculture, Public statistics, Agricultural work, Agribusiness, GECCO.

Introduction

More than three decades ago, Spanish agriculture underwent a series of structural changes that profoundly transformed the sector, leading it to become the leading producer of fresh fruit and vegetables in the entire EU (Molinero-Gerbeau, 2020a). The creation of the common market, the financing of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and the impetus provided by both the state and the business community led to the emergence of a series of global agricultural enclaves throughout the country which, through the application of the Californian model of industrial agriculture, turned the Spanish countryside into a veritable global food factory (Moraes *et al.,* 2012).

In addition to transforming the territories where the sector developed, creating massive spaces such as the "sea of plastic" in Almeria (Ferrez, 2024), the new industrial agriculture brought about significant socio-demographic changes. In moving from a peasant or family model to a factory model, the primary sector required large numbers of wage workers to function, which, at a time when the already ongoing rural exodus was intensifying, created significant difficulties in finding local labour (Reigada, 2017). This production problem was solved, as in most countries in the global centre, by employing immigrant workers who, due to the strong growth of the Spanish economy, began to arrive in the country in unprecedented numbers (Arango, 2000).

Today, migration and agricultural work go hand in hand to such an extent that the contingent of foreign workers has become a structural part of the primary sector's production scheme. Without their willingness to do work that is arduous, poorly paid and carries little social recognition (López-Sala, 2016), Spanish agriculture would not only have failed to achieve its current dynamism but would have barely been able to sustain itself.

Despite the essential nature of this work, a fact that was even legally recognised, as was done by the EU and many other neighbouring states, by decree during the pandemic (Sajir *et al.*, 2022), there is no clear and coherent national policy on how to enable predictable migration channels that guarantee both the availability of these workers and respect for their most basic rights. The effects of this absence lead to problems ranging from widespread labour exploitation of the group (Fernández *et al.,* 2023) to unpredictable production, which weighs heavily on the sector.

One of the elements that undoubtedly hinders the articulation of a national plan on the issue is the current fragmentation, partiality, opacity and, in some dimensions, absence of both sociodemographic data and data indicative of the migration channels that bring foreign workers to the Spanish countryside.

This article will review the available statistical sources, indicating what data exists and what socio-demographic profiles it reveals. The aim of the article is twofold: on the one hand, it will seek to provide tools to those researching the issue to facilitate their access to existing information and, on the other, it will seek to highlight gaps in the data with the aim of stimulating debate on the need to promote systematic data collection and subsequent transparent access as strategic drivers for improving Spanish migration governance.

The article will be structured as follows. After this introduction, we will take a historical look at how agriculture and migration have developed a structural link in Spain. Subsequently, a meta-analysis will be carried out on what and how research has been conducted in this area with the aim of understanding what evidence has been found, but also what its limitations have been. The next section will review the available statistical sources, indicating what data they provide and what gaps they present in understanding the main sociodemographic characteristics of the contingent of foreign agricultural workers. Finally, there will be a discussion section, followed by a series of conclusions that will bring this article to a close.

1 Agriculture and migration in Spain: a historical overview of a structural link

As mentioned above, migrant workers became part of the agricultural industry in the early 1990s, when it began to expand its production scheme significantly (Moraes *et al.*, 2012). In the early days, in the absence of a well-defined state migration policy, due to the country's history of negative net migration, the majority of those who began working in the sector did so informally (Gualda, 2012). Most of them were men from the Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa who found in agriculture a first way to stabilise their situation, begin to earn an income and plan their regularisation. Unfortunately, their working conditions were characterised by being very poor, with precarious labour relations and severe exploitation predominating (Calavita, 2005).

The various mass regularisations implemented by the national government, together with the implementation of the *arraigo* mechanism, which since 2005 has defined a permanent route to administrative regularisation (Aguilera, 2006), led part of this workforce to leave the sector in search of better opportunities. Nevertheless, Spain's booming economy continued to attract migrants to the country, even placing Spain's net immigration rate among the highest in the OECD, surpassed only by the United States during the first decade of the 21st century (Arango, 2013). This meant that part of the sector continued to be fuelled by migrant workers, both in an irregular and regular situation.

The national origins of these contingents were varied, with Morocco and sub-Saharan Africa remaining among the main nationalities over time, but workers from Latin America and Eastern Europe also joining them. New migrations, such as those from Romania, will be key to understanding how the agro-industrial sector remained afloat, despite the challenge of securing the necessary labour in such a changing context (Molinero-Gerbeau, 2021).

At the same time, with the aim of providing a mechanism that, like countries such as Canada and France, would allow for a greater degree of production forecasting and guarantee a stable workforce for the sector, the Spanish government developed a temporary migration programme in 1999. Known as GECCO (initials that refer to Collective Management of Recruitment at Source, its official name), this seasonal work programme will allow employers to recruit large numbers of workers in their countries of origin and bring them to the UK for a maximum of nine months per year. Although GECCO was originally designed for any sector, it ultimately proved to be useful for agriculture, particularly for seasonal crops. Given that GECCO allows participants to repeat campaigns, it establishes a circular migration mechanism that, over time, has ended up being applied almost exclusively in the province of Huelva, as it has a campaign (for red fruits) that fits perfectly with the profile of seasonal workers (Molinero-Gerbeau, 2020b).

It should be noted that, although GECCO is very attractive, it is a micro-programme that currently transports less than 20,000 workers per year, which constitutes approximately only one-fifth of the labour required in Huelva.

Finally, to understand how the sector has been fuelled by foreign labour, it is worth highlighting three geopolitical factors that have had a decisive influence on its development.

The first of these has been the eastward expansion of the EU, although the 2004 and 2007 expansions did so for different reasons. The 2004 enlargement led to a dramatic decline in the workforce, particularly Polish workers, as Poland ceased to be a third country and was therefore no longer able to participate in the GECCO. Furthermore, as Polish citizens now had European nationality, they opted for other destinations (such as the United Kingdom) and other sectors of employment that were better paid than Spanish agriculture (Gualda, 2012). In fact, this loss of labour is at the origin of the impetus for the programme with Morocco, which currently provides more than 90% of the contracts in the country of origin.

The second enlargement, concerning the inclusion of Romania and Bulgaria, will paradoxically have the opposite effect. Although both states will also lose their third-country status, which will mean their removal from the GECCO programme, for more than a decade they will become the main suppliers of labour to the sector, especially Romania (Molinero-Gerbeau, 2021). However, this result, which is the opposite of what happened in the Polish case, can only be understood in the context of the second major geopolitical event: the economic and financial crisis of 2007-2008.

2007 will be the year with the highest number of hires in the history of GECCO, nearly 40,000, but the following campaign will see this figure fall to around 14,000, dropping in subsequent years to a low of 2,000 in 2013 (Macías *et al.*, 2016). This decline will be linked to a decision by the central government, which, in the face of rampant unemployment, will choose to freeze GECCO in order to promote the employment of people already residing in the territory. However, this will not happen, so employers will choose to take advantage of the fact that Romanians will no longer need a visa, as they are European citizens, and will organise their own recruitment processes in that country, thus bringing in the labour they need without the bureaucratic restrictions of the GECCO (Molinero Gerbeau, 2018). In this way, unlike with Poland, entry into the EU will serve to bring more people from Romania, and not only to the provinces where seasonal production predominates.

The third geopolitical factor that will cause major disruption in the sector will be the COVID-19 pandemic declared in 2020. At a time when GECCO was recovering from the 2008 crisis and the sector had managed to balance the supply of workers between those arriving from the East, those hired in their country of origin (almost all of whom are women) and the employment of residents (whether they are in a regular or irregular situation), the slowdown in mobility caused by the pandemic will pose a major challenge. Although agricultural work was considered "essential" in Spain and "critical" by the EU's European Commission—thus allowing mobility and on-site work for those who carried it out without the need for lockdown—the closure of borders in countries of origin such as Morocco, coupled with a certain amount of European competition to secure these workers, meant that the sector faced difficulties (Sajir *et al.,* 2022). In this context, many people from Romania chose to go to work in Germany, as it was not only closer, but also offered better wages, which made this route more complicated for employers (Șerban and Croitoru, 2022).

We are currently in a period of transition. GECCO numbers remain low, as we will see later (less than 20,000 hired per campaign), but the government has not only launched pilot projects with new countries such as Ecuador, Honduras and Senegal, but has also expressed its intention to promote circular migration as an alternative to irregularity. It is therefore possible that this mechanism will expand its quota in the coming years.

On the other hand, the progressive decline in the number of people from Eastern Europe could be offset by an increase in the hiring of people in an irregular situation, but we do not have data to confirm this, which will be discussed later. However, before addressing the existing statistical data, the next section will conduct a meta-analysis of what and how research has been carried out in this area, with the aim of understanding what evidence has been found, but also what limitations it has had in understanding the socio-demographic dynamics of the migrant worker community in Spanish agriculture.

2 Three decades of research in this field: forms and scope of accumulated knowledge

The study of the conditions of migrants working in Spanish agriculture is as long-standing as the phenomenon itself, with

research on these issues already available in the late 1980s (Berlan and Nevado, 1987). However, the evolution of this field of analysis will run parallel to the intensification of the process of integration of migrant workers into Spanish agriculture, coinciding with its progressive industrialisation. Thus, in the 1990s, certain authors began to talk about the formation of enclaves (Giménez, 1992) and the social dynamics involved in this reality (Checa, 1995), and little by little, their study began to take shape as a specific subfield within migration studies (Pedreño, 1999).

Events such as the racist riots in El Ejido (Almería) in 2000 (Martínez, 2001) or the aforementioned implementation of recruitment at source (Gualda and Ruiz, 2004) broadened the foundations of a field of research which, however, will not see a proliferation of research on the subject until practically the second decade of the 21st century.

The launch of the GECCO programme with Morocco will undoubtedly be a significant factor in attracting a growing research community (Moreno, 2009), which will be reflected in the emergence of research projects that will significantly expand knowledge on the subject. In this regard, noteworthy projects from the second decade of the 21st century include CIRCULAR (Towards new formulas for migration management in the Spanish case? Recruitment at source, mobility partnerships and migratory circularity CSO2011- 27115) led by Ana López Sala (CSIC) in 2011, and the ENCLAVES project (Social Sustainability of New Agricultural Production Enclaves: Spain and Mexico (Enclaves) CSO2011-28511) led by Andrés Pedreño Cánovas (University of Murcia) in the same year. In addition to these, other international projects, such as TEMPER (Temporary vs. Permanent Migration — Grant Agreement 613468) funded by the European Commission, will also study this reality in Spain.

Undoubtedly, the doctoral theses that will emerge from these projects, together with those directed by researchers specialising in this field of study, will generate a multiplier effect that will increase the number of people dedicated to studying migration in Spanish agriculture. At present, although it remains a minority field within migration studies, it is quite dynamic, as can be seen, for example, in the number of national and international publications that have addressed the Spanish case in the last five years (Ruiz *et al.,* 2024).

This non-systematic meta-history of the subfield of research on agricultural work and migration in Spain allows us to understand its dynamism and the temporal dimension of the knowledge accumulated in the field. However, despite its prolific nature and the extensive knowledge it has generated, it has been afflicted by certain biases. The main one is the research approach, which has predominantly used qualitative methodologies and case studies, resulting in certain shortcomings in terms of its scope and territorial dimension. Thus, enclaves such as Murcia, Huelva and Lleida have been extensively studied, while, on the contrary, important centres of agricultural production such as Jaén, Aragón and Albacete have hardly been researched. In terms of scope, it has been common to find structural policy analyses (see, for example, Molinero-Gerbeau, 2020b), in-depth research on working conditions (see, for example, Ramírez, 2020), gender dynamics (see, for example, Reigada, 2022), legal conditions (López-Sala, 2016) and other related topics such as housing, racism and many others (for a complete overview of the most recent research, see Ruiz Ramírez *et al.,* 2024).

Whether due to the difficulty of researching a group characterised by its spatial segregation, precariousness or the existence of language barriers (Avallone, 2014), there have been few quantitative studies, let alone demographic studies, on this group.

The survey carried out in Lleida by the project "Observatori permanent de la immigració de les comarques de Ponent: Els temporers a les comarques de la Plana" (Permanent Observatory on Immigration in the Western Counties: Seasonal Workers in the Plana Counties), funded by the Lleida Provincial Council in 2015 (Ref. 201500223, 2015-2016) is one of the few that has attempted to develop a sociodemographic profile of migrant agricultural workers in Spain (some of its results can be consulted, for example, at González *et al.,* 2021). More recently, some projects focused on the field of health have also proposed quantitative methodologies, although most of them are still in the initial phase. Although descriptive, the study of data with an international perspective carried out by Molinero-Gerbeau (2020a) can also be added to this list of efforts to understand some sociodemographic dimensions of the group of migrant agricultural workers in Spain.

In short, the use of numerical data has been very limited in this area of research, undoubtedly influenced by the partiality and inaccessibility of the available data. In the next section, we will discuss

which records and databases contain sociodemographic information on this group, indicating where and how to access them, analysing them and pointing out their advantages and shortcomings.

3 How can we measure the scale of the phenomenon? Available statistical data sources and analysis thereof

Firstly, it is important to note that, as there is no standard protocol for data search, the records presented below are the result of more than a decade of research by the author on the subject, although they have not been systematically identified. This means that it cannot be ruled out that there may be other data that have not been identified during this period and that could supplement what is presented here. For example, it is possible that some regional statistical institutes have their own data that has not been detected by the author.

The order in which the data is presented below follows a deductive reasoning, or the logic of presenting the most general data first and then the more specific data. Graphs or tables will be provided depending on what is considered most useful or visual for the objective set, and the sociodemographic profile corresponding to the most recent period of the data will be provided.

3.1 Labour Force Survey (EPA) — National Institute of Statistics

The Labour Force Survey (EPA) is an ongoing statistical survey carried out by the National Institute of Statistics (INE), whose main objective is to provide detailed and systematic information on the employment situation of the population residing in Spain. The EPA makes it possible to estimate the size and evolution of the active, employed, unemployed and inactive population, as well as to study its characteristics according to variables such as gender, age, educational level, nationality and economic activity. The survey is conducted through personal and telephone interviews with a representative sample of around 65,000 households each quarter, representing around 180,000 people. The sample design is rotational, allowing for the observation of temporal and comparative dynamics. The EPA has been collecting information since the first quarter of 1964, although its current methodology was consolidated in 2005 to adapt to European and international standards. The data are published quarterly, usually a few days after the end of each quarter, and are available both in reports

and in microdata accessible for research purposes. The survey follows the methodological criteria set by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and Eurostat, ensuring comparability with labour statistics from other countries. Due to its breadth, continuity and reliability, the EPA is one of the main statistical sources for analysing the labour market in Spain, being used both in the design of public policies and in academic and economic studies.

With regard to agricultural work carried out by migrants in Spain, its long history is particularly useful, allowing us to see the evolution of this contingent since it began to enter the sector. Specifically, two EPA databases provide relevant information in this regard: those that collect information on active workers[1] and employed workers[2].

Of course, certain precautions must also be taken, not only because it is a survey and not registered data, but also because, as it is quarterly, the annual data presented here is calculated by taking an average of the four quarters, showing figures that, for example, obscure factors such as seasonality.

The EPA variables provided by the databases of active and employed workers are as follows: gender, economic sector, nationality and period. The first allows us to differentiate between data for men and women, while the second allows us to select the agricultural sector. The latter has the limitation of not being able to disaggregate by subsectors or tasks, so that all workers in the sector are included in the data, ranging from agricultural engineers to agricultural labourers.

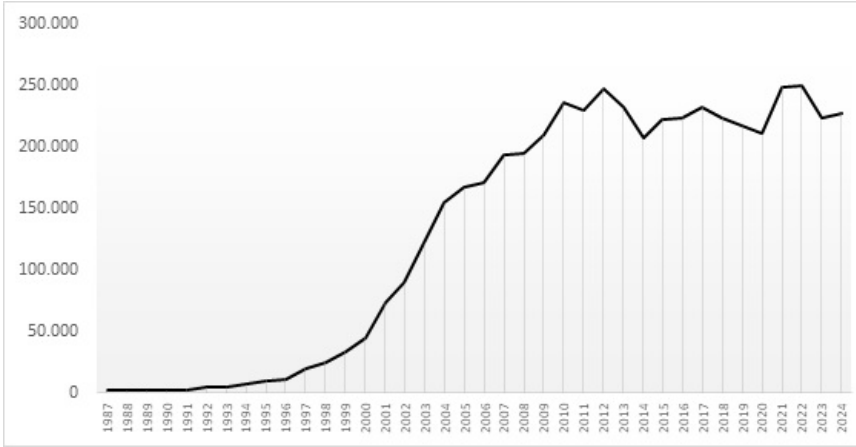
The nationality data is the least useful, as not only is it not disaggregated by country, but the available regions are only European Union, rest of Europe, Latin America, rest of the world and stateless. The period data corresponds to each quarter of the year.

The lack of variables such as age, province of work and nationality by country detracts from the strength of this database, so its greatest usefulness is to show, on the one hand, the national magnitude of the phenomenon and, on the other, its historical trajectory.

[1] This database can be consulted at the following link (for the period from 2008 to the present): https://www.ine.es/jaxiT3/Tabla.htm?t=65102&L=0 [Accessed: 28 March 2025]

[2] This database can be consulted at the following link (for the period from 2008 to the present): https://www.ine.es/jaxiT3/Tabla.htm?t=65127&L=0 [Accessed: 28 March 2025]

Figure 1 shows both dimensions for the period 1987-2024, in the case of active workers.



Graph 1. Active workers of foreign nationality in the Spanish agricultural sector during the period 1987-2024 (annual average). *Source:* Labour Force Survey

As can be seen, the increase in the number of workers in Spanish agriculture has been spectacular, beginning to take off in the 1990s, multiplying exponentially in the first decade of the 21st century and, despite certain fluctuations, remaining relatively stable from 2010 to 2024, with an average of 229,000 foreign workers active in agriculture throughout the country.

In terms of the demographic characteristics of the group, it should be noted that, in 2024, the foreign workforce in Spanish agriculture was highly masculinised, accounting for almost 75% of all foreign workers in the sector (171,200) compared to 25% women (55,600).

Unfortunately, with regard to the national origin of workers, the lack of disaggregated data makes it impossible to obtain useful information, as can be seen in Table 1.

	Dual nationality	European Union	Rest of Europe	Latin America	Rest of the world and stateless persons
No. of workers	29,100	56,200	8,000	35,400	127,300
% of total	11.4	22.0	3.1	13.8	49.7

Table 1 Active foreigners by nationality in the Spanish agricultural sector in 2024 (annual average). *Source:* Labour Force Survey

The table shows that almost half of foreign agricultural workers in Spain come from the "rest of the world", while the second most common origin is the European Union. In any case, the aggregate form of the data makes it uninformative.

In short, according to the EPA, the majority sociodemographic profile of foreign agricultural workers in Spain would be male and from a region other than Europe or Latin America. As we will see in the next section, data from the State Public Employment Service (SEPE) will allow for a greater level of detail.

3.2 Registered contracts — SEPE

The State Public Employment Service (SEPE) is an autonomous body attached to the Ministry of Labour and Social Economy, whose main function is to manage and coordinate employment policies at the state level, as well as to contribute to the monitoring and analysis of the labour market.

Among its many responsibilities, the SEPE maintains a database of registered contracts, an administrative statistical source that collects detailed information on employment contracts formalised in Spain. This database provides information on variables such as the volume and type of contracts signed, differentiated by contract type, duration, working hours, economic sector, geographical area, age, sex and nationality of the worker, among other criteria. As this data is not from a survey but from a register, it is more reliable than the EPA and provides a more accurate picture of the figures collected, as the data is generated from the mandatory records that companies submit to the SEPE.

Unfortunately, the format in which the data for the field of study that interests us in this article is published is not functional, as contracts for foreigners in agriculture are published monthly without being broken down by nationality or gender[3]. To obtain this information, it is necessarry to the Transparency Portal of the General State Administration[4] and submit a request. The request must specify the type of data required, the time period covered and the variables of interest. Fortunately, the SEPE usually responds by providing this data in well-organised files. However,

[3] See, for example, the section on "Contracts with foreigners" in the single volume for January 2024, which is available at this link: https://www.sepe.es/HomeSepe/que-es-el-sepe/estadisticas/contratos/estadisticas-nuevas/2024/enero.html [Accessed: 4 April 2025]

[4] See: https://transparencia.gob.es/ [Accessed: 1 April 2025]

those making this request should allow at least fifteen days to receive the data[5]. It is a cumbersome procedure and it is not clear why this data is not available for download in CSV format like the EPA data, but at least the delay is not very long, and it has a much higher level of disaggregation than the EPA data.

Thus, in the most recent request made by the author, data on registered contracts in agriculture were obtained, disaggregated by province, nationality, sex and age. It should be noted, however, that the data refer precisely to registered contracts and not to individuals, so they do not provide a fixed number of workers, as the same person may have had several contracts during the period analysed. However, since the implementation of Royal Decree-Law 32/2021 of 28 December, popularly known as the "labour reform", the temporary nature of contracts has been drastically reduced, so that from 2022 onwards, the figures may come quite close to the number of workers.

Given that presenting data for the whole country is a titanic task, we will now proceed to draw up a socio-demographic profile of migrant agricultural workers in the five provinces with the highest volume of contracts in 2024. Excluding workers of Spanish nationality, these are, as shown in Table 2, Murcia, Huelva, Jaén, Almería and Seville.

Province	No. of contracts to foreigners
Murcia	166,920
Huelva	95,404
Jaén	56,244
Almería	54,523
Seville	35,992

Table 2. Top five Spanish provinces by volume of contracts registered for foreign workers in the agricultural sector. *Source:* SEPE Registered Contracts

As can be seen, the province with the most contracts registered in the whole country is Murcia, almost five times more than the fifth province in the ranking, which in this case is Seville. In any case, the first four on the list stand out for exceeding fifty thousand contracts, as the difference between Almería (or Jaén, which is

[5] The various requests made by the author took between fifteen days and a month to be resolved. On one occasion, SEPE even contacted him by telephone to send the data file in the format requested by the author.

not far behind) and Seville is almost twenty thousand contracts, indicating a clear hierarchy of these territories over the rest.

Each of these provinces has its own specific characteristics in terms of production. For example, Murcia, known as the "Orchard of Europe" (Pedreño, 1999), offers a varied range of produce that provides work all year round, meaning that its productive fabric is capable of keeping the workers on whom it depends in the region. Huelva, on the other hand, is almost a monoculture, producing red fruits (particularly strawberries), which are seasonal and therefore require mobile contingents to work in the province for only a few months a year, which is why GECCO has worked very well in the enclave (Molinero-Gerbeau, 2020b). In Jaén, the situation is similar to that in Huelva, with olive trees predominating (in fact, a significant part of the workforce displaced by the Huelva campaign comes from working in Jaén). The case of Almería is similar to that of Murcia, and Seville combines both, producing mainly seasonal products such as citrus fruits (especially oranges and mandarins) and olives, although it is a region where a significant volume of tomatoes is produced. As tomatoes are a non-seasonal crop, they can be produced all year round[6].

These differences undoubtedly imply varied profiles that deserve to be analysed individually.

3.2.1 Murcia

In Murcia, the vast majority of agricultural contracts are awarded to foreign men, who account for 80% of the total, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Distribution by sex of contracts signed with foreign workers in the agricultural sector in Murcia in 2024. *Source:* SEPE Registered Contracts

[6] These data can be consulted on the Statistical Portal of the Provincial Council of Seville, in the report *Avance de producciones y superficies agrícolas. November 2024* [Accessed: 1 April 2025]. Available at: https://portalestadistico.dipusevilla.es/es/deinteres/noticias/Avance-de-producciones-y-superficies -agricolas.-Noviembre-2024-00001

As for the age of those hired, as shown in Figure 3, the majority of men are between 25 and 54 years old, with significantly fewer below or above that age range. Women, as shown in Figure 4, show a similar distribution, although those between 35 and 44 years old stand out in terms of volume.

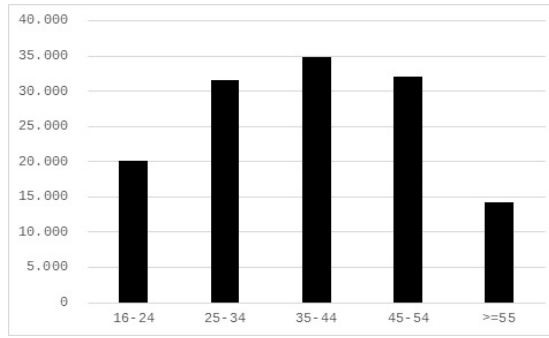


Figure 3. Age distribution of contracts signed with male foreign workers in the agricultural sector in Murcia in 2024. *Source:* SEPE Registered Contracts

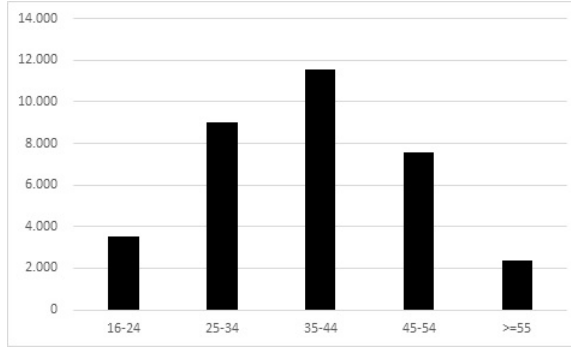


Figure 4. Age distribution of contracts signed with female foreign workers in the agricultural sector in Murcia in 2024. *Source:* SEPE Registered Contracts

The top five nationalities of migrant workers in Murcia's agricultural sector are, in descending order, as shown in Table 3, Morocco, Senegal, Ecuador, Mali and Algeria.

Nationality	No. of contracts
Morocco	95,347
Senegal	11,378
Ecuador	9,062
Mali	7,523
Algeria	4,641

Table 3. Top five foreign nationalities by volume of contracts registered in the province of Murcia in 2024. *Source:* SEPE Registered Contracts

The absolute predominance of Morocco is striking, with almost 60% of the total number of contracts for the migrant contingent, eight times greater than the next nationality present in the sector, Senegal, which barely reaches 7% of the total.

Therefore, by cross-referencing the data presented here, we can say that the majority sociodemographic profile of migrant agricultural workers in Murcia, based on registered contracts, is male, Moroccan, and between 35 and 54 years of age.

3.2.2 Huelva

As in Murcia, in Huelva the vast majority of contracts in agriculture in the province are signed by migrants (75%), although the Huelva contingent differs significantly from that of Murcia in terms of its composition.

Contrary to the general impression that may exist, given the high visibility of the GECCO programme, where practically 100% of the contingent is made up of women, the distribution by sex of contracts signed by foreigners working in agriculture in Huelva shows more men than women, although it is true that the difference is smaller (58% of contracts to men and 42% of contracts to women) than in other enclaves, as shown in Figure 5.

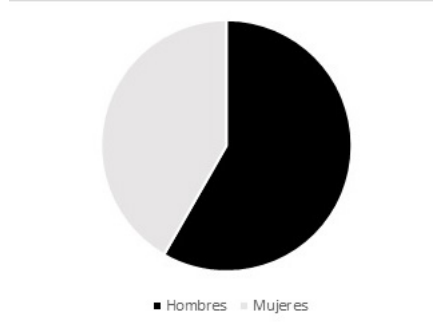
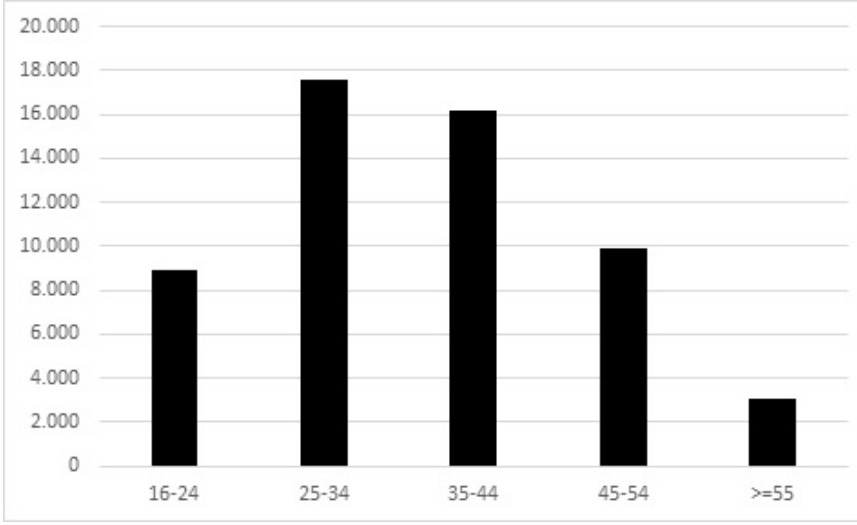


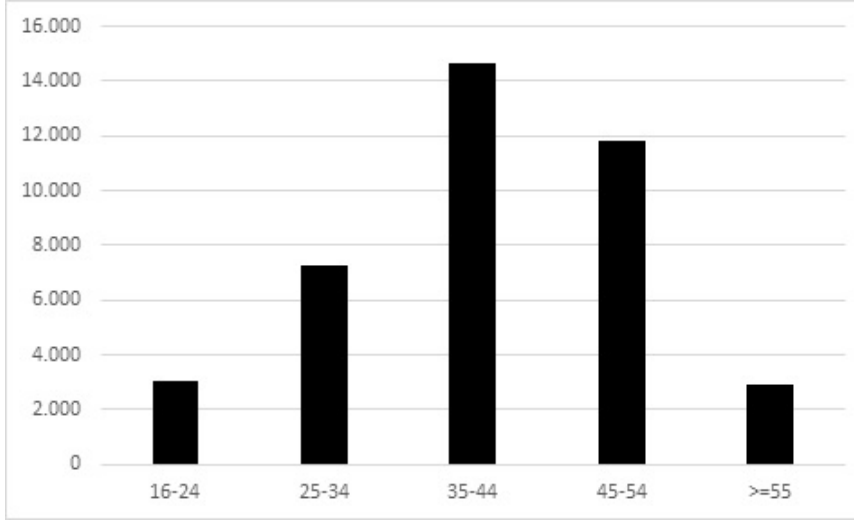
Figure 5. Distribution by gender of contracts signed with foreign workers in the Huelva agricultural sector in 2024. *Source:* SEPE Registered Contracts

With regard to the age of these workers, as shown in Figures 6 and 7, there is an interesting gender disparity, with a significant proportion of male workers aged between 16 and 24, while

women in this age group represent a very small proportion of the total. The largest age group among men is between 25 and 34, while among women it is between 35 and 44 (twice as many as those in the previous age group). In both cases, the proportion of people over 55 is small.



Graph 6. Age distribution of contracts signed with male foreign workers in the agricultural sector in Huelva in 2024. *Source:* SEPE Registered Contracts



Graph 7. Age distribution of contracts signed with female foreign workers in the Huelva agricultural sector in 2024. *Source:* SEPE Registered Contracts

The top five nationalities of the migrant worker contingent in Huelva's agriculture sector are, in descending order, as shown in Table 4, Morocco, Romania, Senegal, Mali and Bulgaria.

Nationality	No. of contracts
Morocco	48,103
Romania	16,047
Senegal	7,930
Mali	7,637
Bulgaria	4,779

Table 4. Top five foreign nationalities by volume of contracts registered in the province of Huelva in 2024. *Source:* SEPE Registered Contracts

As in Murcia, Huelva shows a clear predominance of workers of Moroccan origin, who account for half of all contracts for migrant workers, three times more than the next nationality, Romanian, which in turn doubles the third and fourth: Senegalese and Malian. In last place is the contingent of Bulgarian workers, although they represent only 5% of the total number of contracts signed with foreigners in the province's agricultural sector.

Based on these data, in the case of Huelva, the majority sociodemographic profile of the migrant agricultural worker would be, as in Murcia, that of a Moroccan man, but here he would be between 25 and 34 years old. However, given not only the practical balance between the sexes, but also the fact that the group of Moroccan workers is made up of a majority of women (53%), it should be noted that there is also another predominant profile with a similar presence in the province: that of a Moroccan woman between the ages of 35 and 44.

3.2.3 Jaén

The productive enclave of Jaén presents notable differences with respect to the other two analysed. Firstly, despite being the third province in terms of total numbers of contracts signed by migrant workers in agriculture, these only represent 28% of the total, with Spanish workers making up the vast majority.

Secondly, the proportion of contracts signed by men compared to women is significantly higher than in Huelva and Murcia, with 95% of contracts signed by men, as shown in Figure 8.

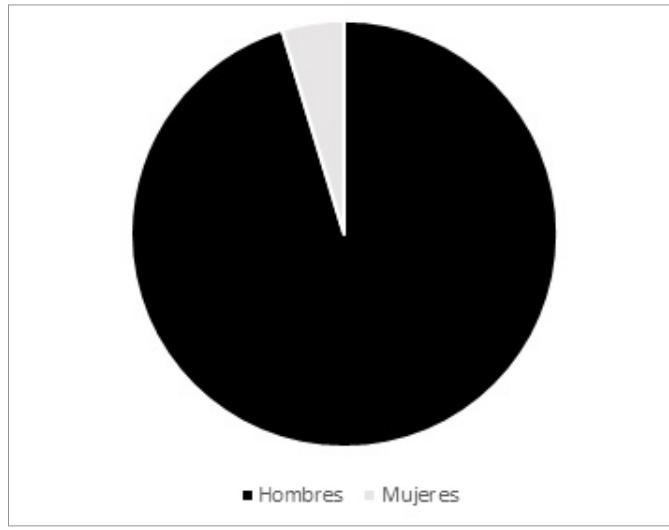


Figure 8. Distribution by sex of contracts signed with foreign workers in the agricultural sector in Jaén in 2024. *Source:* SEPE Registered Contracts

Most of these workers, as shown in Figure 9, are between 25 and 54 years old, as is the case with foreign men working in Murcia, and, as there, there are significantly fewer younger and older workers. Women, as shown in Figure 10, have a similar age distribution, although the number of workers between the ages of 35 and 44 stands out slightly from the rest.

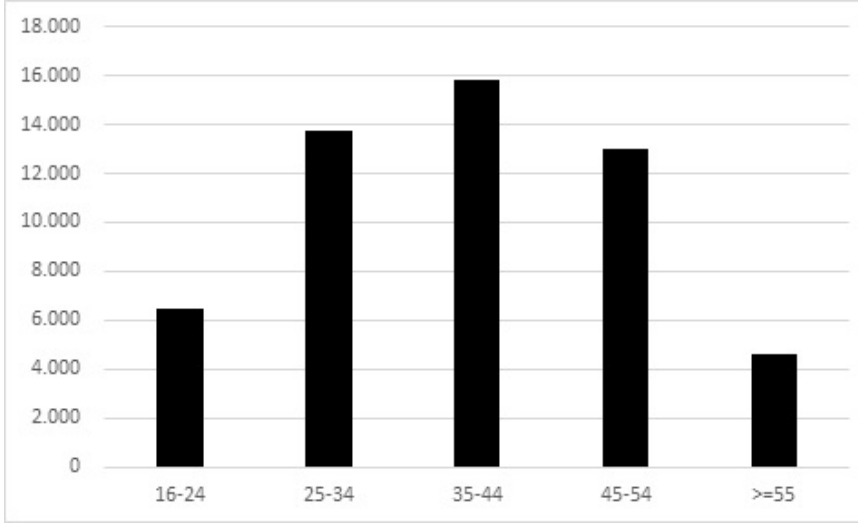


Figure 9. Age distribution of contracts signed with male foreign workers in the agricultural sector in Jaén in 2024. *Source:* SEPE Registered Contracts

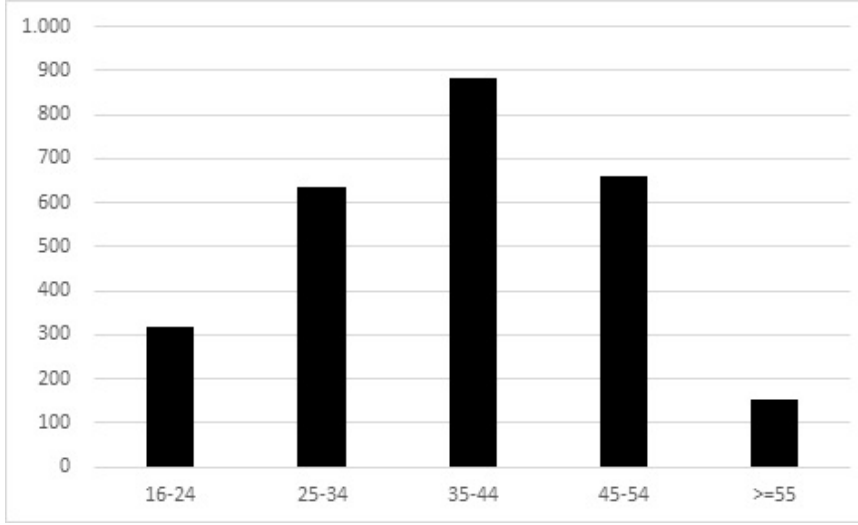


Figure 10. Age distribution of contracts signed with female foreign workers in the agricultural sector in Jaén in 2024. *Source:* SEPE Registered Contracts

The top five nationalities of migrant workers in Jaén's agricultural sector are, in descending order, as shown in Table 5, Morocco, Senegal, Mali, Algeria and Romania, already showing a certain pattern of repetition of nationalities among agricultural enclaves at the national level.

Nationality	No. of contracts
Morocco	16,036
Senegal	14,436
Mali	10,563
Algeria	4,162
Romania	3,179

Table 5. Top five foreign nationalities by volume of contracts registered in the province of Jaén in 2024. *Source:* **SEPE Registered Contracts**

In the case of Jaén, although most of the contracts signed by foreign workers correspond to people from Morocco (28% of the total), in percentage terms this figure is very similar to that of contracts signed by Senegalese workers (25%), reflecting an almost equal balance between the two nationalities.

Once again, the majority socio-demographic profile in this province would be that of a male Moroccan worker between the ages of 35 and 54, followed by a male Senegalese worker, but in this case between the ages of 25 and 54.

3.2.4 Almería

Known for its sea of plastic (referring to the concentration of greenhouses that can even be seen from space), Almería is the fourth province in Spain in terms of the volume of contracts for foreign workers in the agricultural sector. There, 77% of all contracts are made with migrants.

Without reaching the level of Jaén, and closer to the situation in Murcia, there is again a predominance of contracts signed with men over women, with a difference of around 82% compared to the remaining 18%. Figure 11 shows this distribution.

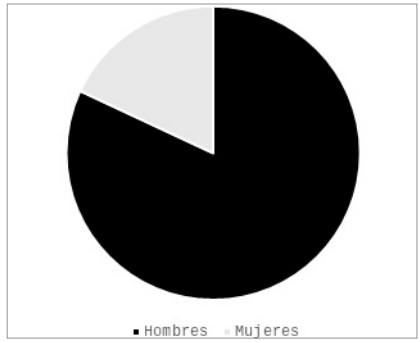


Figure 11. Distribution by sex of contracts signed with foreign workers in the agricultural sector in Almería in 2024. *Source:* SEPE Registered Contracts

Most of these workers are between 25 and 44 years old, with a significantly lower proportion in the other age groups. Women, on the other hand, are more concentrated in the 35-44 age group, although a significant proportion are between 25 and 34 or between 45 and 54, as shown in Figure 13.

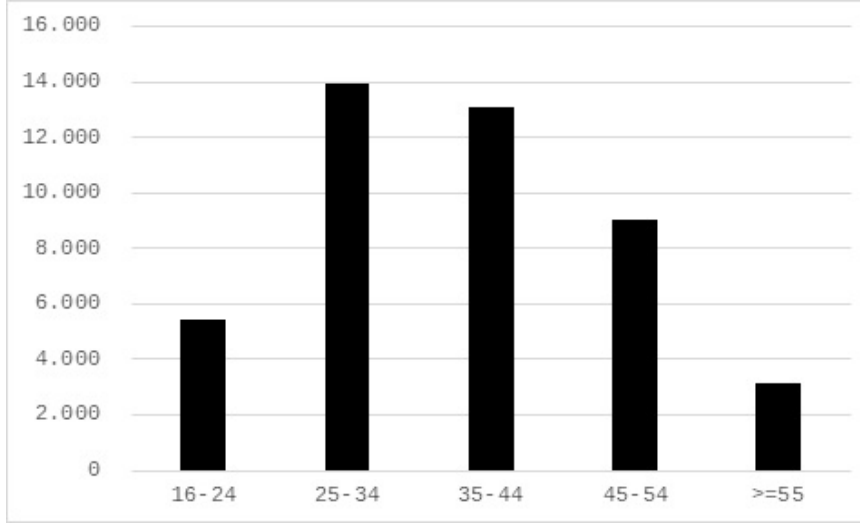


Figure 12. Age distribution of contracts signed with male foreign workers in the agricultural sector in Almeria in 2024. *Source:* SEPE Registered Contracts

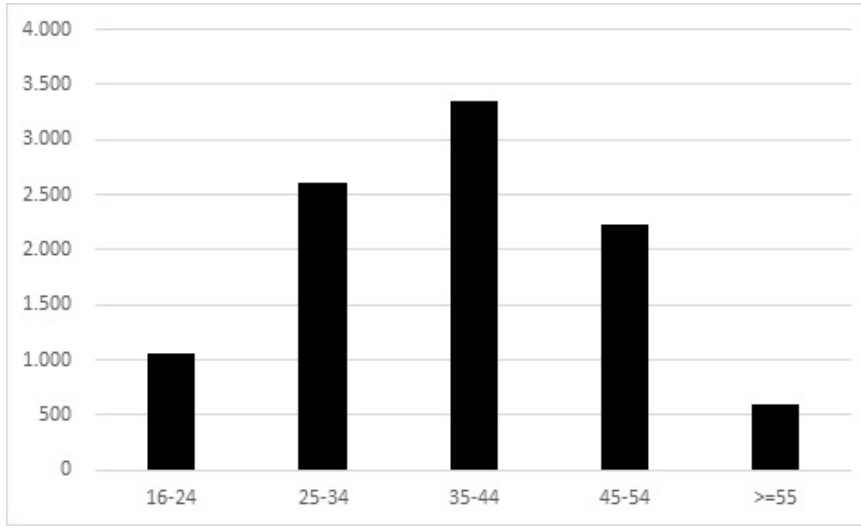


Figure 13. Age distribution of contracts signed with female foreign workers in the agricultural sector in Almeria in 2024. *Source:* SEPE Registered Contracts

The top five nationalities of migrant workers in Almeria's agricultural sector are, in descending order, as shown in Table 6, Morocco, Senegal, Mali, Romania and Gambia, the latter being the only new addition to the pattern observed in previous cases and representing, in any case, only 3% of the total number of contracts signed with foreigners in the province's agricultural sector.

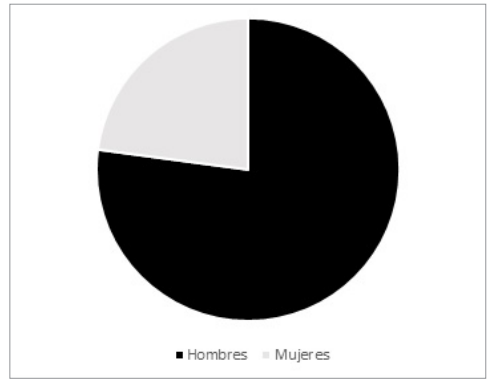
Nationality	No. of contracts
Morocco	28,217
Senegal	6,591
Mali	5,231
Romania	2,567
Gambia	1,591

Table 6. Top five foreign nationalities by volume of contracts registered in the province of Almería in 2024. *Source:* SEPE Registered Contracts

Contracts awarded to Moroccans account for 51% of the total, showing an absolute predominance of this nationality over the rest, as the next most common nationality, Senegalese, accounts for only 7%. This notable difference allows for a clearer sociodemographic profile to be drawn up, corresponding in Almería to that of a male worker from Morocco aged between 25 and 54.

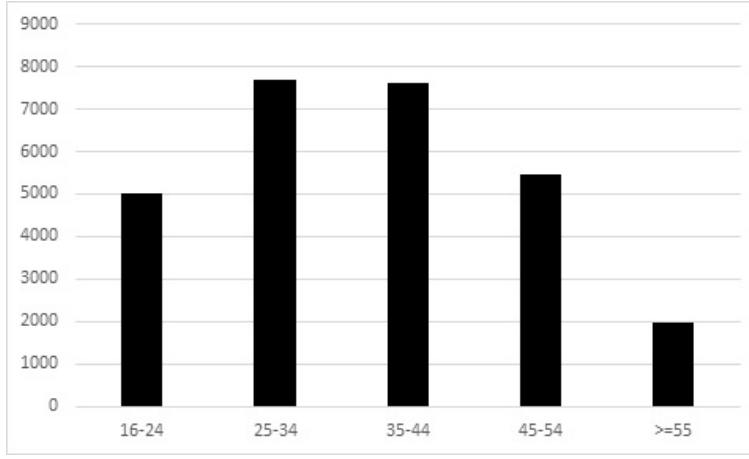
3.2.5 Seville

The case of Seville shows, in general terms, some parallels with that of Jaén because, despite being the fifth province in the country in terms of the number of contracts signed with migrants in agriculture (35,992), these only represent 24% of the provincial total. Of these, the majority are also signed by men, accounting for 77% of the total, as shown in Figure 14.



Graph 14. Distribution by gender of contracts signed with foreign workers in the agricultural sector in Seville in 2024. *Source:* SEPE Registered Contracts

As in Almería, Figure 15 shows that most of these workers are between 25 and 44 years old, with a considerable proportion in the 16-24 and 45-54 age groups, but only a minority over 55. Despite slight variations, women also show a similar distribution, as reflected in Figure 16.



Graph 15. Age distribution of contracts signed with male foreign workers in the agricultural sector in Seville in 2024. *Source:* SEPE Registered Contracts

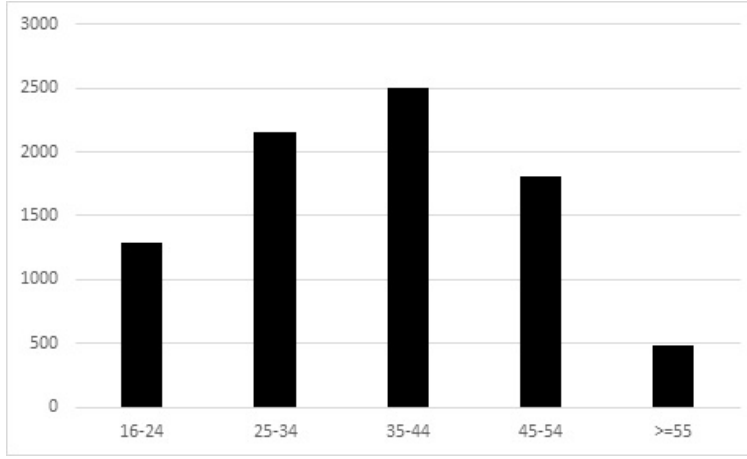


Figure 16. Age distribution of contracts signed with female foreign workers in the Seville agricultural sector in 2024. *Source:* SEPE Registered Contracts

As for the five nationalities with the highest presence in agricultural contracts in the province, we find, in descending order, as shown in Table 7, the usual nationalities of other agricultural enclaves, although with differences in order and magnitude, with Seville being the only province where contracts with Romanians predominate over those with Moroccans. The order is as follows: Romania, Morocco, Senegal, Bulgaria and Mali. As can be seen, almost half of the contingent (42%) is made up of workers of Romanian origin, while contracts with Moroccans account for 20% of the total. The rest of the nationalities have a lower incidence on the total, with none of them reaching 10%.

Nationality	No. of contracts
Romania	15,260
Morocco	7,463
Senegal	2,953
Bulgaria	1,633
Mali	1433

Table 7. Top five foreign nationalities by volume of contracts registered in the province of Seville in 2024. *Source:* SEPE Registered Contracts

Based on this data, the majority sociodemographic profile of foreign agricultural workers in Seville would be male, Romanian, aged between 25 and 44.

3.3 Collective Management of Recruitment at Source — GECCO

The data corresponding to the GECCO temporary migration programme, which we mentioned earlier, already appear in the two previous databases because, despite being a very specific political mechanism, those who come through it are still registered both as part of the active population (INE) and in terms of contracts (SEPE). However, given the specificities of a migration channel that operates through bilateral agreements and generates strictly temporary, albeit circular, migration, it is important to be able to access its own data in order to have tools that allow it to be understood and evaluated.

The main problem in this regard is that GECCO data is only partially public and, moreover, difficult to locate, so it is very likely to be largely unknown.

To find the available data, you must go to the Permanent Immigration Observatory (OPI) belonging to the Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security and Migration. With a format very similar to that of the INE, the OPI has a database called OPIbase, which contains a dataset entitled "Persons with residence permits by province according to sex, age group, type of permit and reason for granting"[7]. If you look closely at this, you will see that, among the "reasons for granting permits", there is one named "Collective Management of Recruitment at Source and other fixed-term contracts". The title itself already indicates one of its first weaknesses, which is that it includes both GECCO permits and other unspecified permits, so it is not really possible to know what it includes and to what extent. On the positive side, it should be noted that these data are from the register and can also be disaggregated by gender, type of authorisation, age and province. Furthermore, they are collected every quarter, which allows their historical evolution to be monitored.

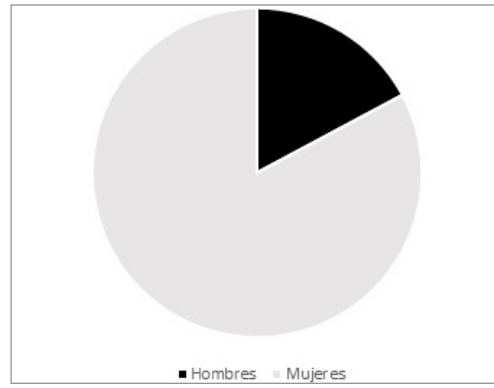
However, in addition to the limitation already mentioned, the major obstacle to our analysis is that it does not allow us to select the agricultural sector, so it includes all economic sectors. Nor does it allow disaggregation by nationality, so we only have totals that prevent us from knowing, for example, how many hires each GECCO participating country contributes.

[7] See: https://expinterweb.inclusion.gob.es/jaxiPx/Tabla.htm?path=/Stock/l0/&file=AT_PV_SX_GE_TIP_MOT.px [Accessed: 3 April 2025]

To find out these details, as with the SEPE database, you have to go to the transparency portal and request them. The author's experience is that the response time in this case is much longer (often exceeding 90 days), but the data provided so far by the Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security and Migration has provided a useful level of disaggregation for analysis by showing the nationalities of the participants and the labour sector in which they have worked.

Unfortunately, the most recent data available to the author only goes up to 2022, as the request made through the transparency portal to obtain data for 2024 has not yet been answered. Therefore, we will show the data for 2024 below, calculating an annual average for the quarters listed in OPIbase, and we will address the other dimensions using the data for 2022.

In 2024, a maximum number of 20,054 GECCO authorisations was reached in the second quarter of the year, with an annual average of 17,848. The latter shows an absolute predominance of women over men, with women accounting for 83% of the total number of people hired through GECCO, as shown in Figure 17.



Graph 17. Persons with GECCO residence permits by sex in 2024. Annual national average. *Source:* OPIbase

Given that the age ranges provided by OPIbase are excessively broad, the data is not relevant to our analysis, as there are obviously no participants in the first age range, which includes people between 0 and 15 years of age, with the vast majority falling into the second range, which covers those between 16 and 64 years of age and therefore includes practically everyone of working age.

The data by province is relevant because it shows, as indicated in Table 8, that 77% of people who resided in Spain with a GECCO or other fixed-term authorisation did so in the province of Huelva. The second province with the most people with this type of permit is Lleida, which accounts for just 6% of the total, followed by the Balearic Islands, Huesca and Segovia, each with just 3%.

Province	Annual average number of people with GECCO or fixed-term permits	% of total
Huelva	13,830	77
Lleida	996	6
Balearic Islands	546	3
Huesca	492	3
Segovia	485	3

Table 8. Top five Spanish provinces by number of residents with GECCO or fixed-term authorisation in 2024. *Source:* OPIbase

This data coincide with one of the main sociodemographic profiles we developed for the province of Huelva using SEPE data, as, according to OPIbase data, the majority of people with GECCO authorisation would be women residing in Huelva and of working age.

Looking at the data obtained through the transparency portal, several interesting cross-references can be made. For example, with data on the sectors in which these foreign nationals work, it can be seen that since 2013 (although it has always been the case), 100% of people hired through the GECCO procedure work in agriculture. Therefore, unless there have been significant changes in 2023 and 2024, which has not been reported in any publication, it can be confirmed that the OPIbase data refer overwhelmingly to the agricultural sector, with the exception of fixed-term permits, which may correspond to other sectors. Table 9 shows the distribution of GECCO authorisations by employment sector for the period 2010-2022.

SECTOR	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Agriculture	11,517	14,285	6,464	2,963	2,834	2,767	5,562	17,543	17,303	18,987	15,037	14,365	18,565
Hospitality	3	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Industry	12	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Services	458	333	191	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Table 9. Authorisations granted under the GECCO 2010-2022 programmes by sector. *Source:* Subdirectorate-General for Migration Flow Management and Coordination

Given that the OPIbase data are already disaggregated by province, it is not particularly useful to replicate those provided by the Sub-Directorate General for the Management and Coordination of Migration Flows. It should only be noted that these data also reflect the absolute predominance of the province of Huelva in receiving these workers, always exceeding the 70% threshold (except in 2012) and, in the case of the period between 2016 and 2022, exceeding the 90% threshold of the total.

As for the nationalities of GECCO participants in the same period (2016-2022), it should be noted that Moroccans accounted for more than 90% of the total. Table 10 shows the only five nationalities of GECCO workers present in 2022, which, in any case, were the only five present in the period 2016-2022.

Nationality	Number of persons	% of total
Morocco	16,786	90
Colombia	862	5
Honduras	633	3
Ecuador	143	1
Senegal	141	1

Table 10. Authorisations granted under the GECCO 2016-2022 programmes by nationality. *Source:* Subdirectorate General for Migration Flow Management and Coordination

Based on the data obtained from this source, it is possible to expand the majority sociodemographic profile previously developed with OPIbase data, incorporating the predominant nationality: Moroccan.

3.4 Eurostat

Eurostat is the statistical office of the European Union, responsible for collecting, processing and disseminating comparable statistical data among member states. Among its many areas of work, statistics on migration stand out, which aim to provide detailed and harmonised information on migration flows, foreign populations and the movements of citizens within and outside the EU. These statistics enable the analysis of aspects such as the number and characteristics of immigrants and emigrants, the acquisition of nationality, asylum applications and mobility within

the Schengen area, etc. The geographical coverage includes all EU countries, as well as other associated countries such as Norway, Switzerland and Iceland. Eurostat publishes these data annually, based on information provided by national statistical institutes, and following a common methodology defined in coordination with member states to ensure international comparability. Due to their harmonised nature, accessibility and broad scope, Eurostat's migration statistics are a key tool for the design of European policies on migration and integration, and are widely used in academic research, institutional reports and comparative demographic analyses.

Unfortunately, in the field of migration and agricultural work, despite being one of the most dynamic and sustained movements of intra-Community workers over time, the availability of data is not only extremely limited, but also ceased to be collected in 2020. Eurostat explained this by stating that it only had data for 2017 and 2018, and that this data was not available for all EU countries, which made it difficult to compare and ensure the completeness of the information. Furthermore, it seems no coincidence that this interruption occurred in the year of the COVID-19 pandemic, as this significantly affected data collection and the mobility of seasonal workers, which may have contributed to the interruption in the collection of this data (European Commission, 2020).

In any case, this database, entitled *First permits issued for remunerated activities by reason, length of validity and citizenship* (migr_resocc)[8], is supposedly fed by data from the OPI[9] , so in principle it only replicates the same data, which should therefore match, and its only added value would be to enable comparisons between European countries. However, as it is only macro-level aggregate data on the first permits issued under the category of "seasonal work"—a label that can cover multiple professions and sectors—its analytical value is very limited.

The only disaggregated variable it offers is temporal, allowing us to see how many permits have been issued for a duration of between three and five months, between six and eleven months, or more than twelve months. In any case, once again, given that it does not allow for any other type of disaggregation by sector,

[8] See: https://doi.org/10.2908/MIGR_RESOCC [Accessed: 3 April 2025]

[9] See https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/cache/metadata/EN/migr_resval_sims_es.htm [Accessed: 3 April 2025]

nationality, etc., it is an irrelevant database for analysing this social reality.

3.5 Irregularity

Some of the migrant workers employed in the Spanish agricultural sector are in an irregular administrative situation. Although this phenomenon was particularly significant in past decades, when control and regularisation mechanisms were more limited (Molinero-Gerbeau, 2020b), it is currently estimated to represent a small but not negligible percentage of the total (Márquez and Gordo, 2014). Given their legal status, this group is affected by statistical invisibility, a fact that contrasts with the fundamental role they play in agricultural campaigns, contributing decisively to the functioning of the sector (López-Sala, 2022).

Unfortunately, there are very few estimates of how many workers are in this situation, with the one carried out by Fanjul and Gálvez-Iniesta (2020) for the Porcausa Foundation probably being the only one in recent times. In it, the authors estimated, using data from the EPA and the Continuous Sample of Working Lives, that the rate of irregularity in Spanish agriculture was around 8.9%. This does not seem unreasonable, but as it is a speculative exercise, it could be higher or lower, with a different impact in different areas. Due to these limitations, it is currently impossible to draw up a sociodemographic profile of irregular migrant agricultural workers in Spain.

4 Data limitations and implications for national policy

The data we have provided here show a number of significant limitations to a better understanding of the phenomenon of migration and its interrelation with agricultural work in Spain.

Four major shortcomings can be identified, which correspond to those mentioned in the title of this article: fragmentation, partiality, opacity and lack of reliable data.

Firstly, the fact that so many different sources have to be consulted in order to piece together the socio-demographic puzzle of the agricultural migrant contingent poses a considerable difficulty for anyone wishing to examine this reality, which reduces the possibility of working with this data to a handful of experts. Not only does it make no sense to have to turn to the INE, the SEPE

and the OPI to find some of this data, but in many cases it is not even easy to find on their own websites. In this regard, it would be desirable to have a single access point, as New Zealand has done, for example, with its Stats NZ portal[10], where it has set up an Integrated Data Infrastructure, which is not perfect but does reduce the obstacle of fragmentation to some extent.

The second major problem detected in accessing this data is its partiality. All the records and surveys analysed offer a partial view of reality, but do not represent it in its entirety. Whether it is because the EPA does not have data on active workers in agriculture by province, or the OPI does not have data on the nationalities of those participating in the GECCO, in the end, some fundamental dimension is always omitted for carrying out research with analytical value. On other occasions, the level of disaggregation is non-existent or incomplete. A clear example of this is, once again, the EPA data, which aggregates the number of migrant agricultural workers for the whole country but also provides information on their nationality by region rather than by country of origin. The former prevents an understanding of the complexity of the social reality analysed, and the latter directly provides data that is of no use whatsoever.

The third problem concerns the opacity surrounding certain data. It is difficult to understand why certain state bodies such as the SEPE or the Subdirectorate General for the Management and Coordination of Migratory Flows have extremely useful and widely disaggregated data, but do not make it available to the public through open access. Although the creation of the transparency portal has significantly improved this situation, facilitating access to data and legally obliging those who have it to respond to requests received, the fact that users do not know the level of detail available to those who produce and record the data limits their access. Given that the bodies receiving requests are reactive and there is no public information on the level of detail they have, it is possible that, due to the applicant's lack of knowledge, dimensions that could be useful for analysis are lost.

In other cases, it is possible to submit a request to access microdata from certain databases, such as the EPA itself, but the INE charges for this, which reduces universal access, restricting it to those who have the funds to do so. It is very likely that both problems, i.e. the unavailability of existing data to the public and

[10] See: www.stats.govt.nz [Accessed: 3 April 2025]

the need to pay for access to microdata from certain sources, are related to the underfunding of the services that should provide them. It is therefore essential that the State invest resources in facilitating transparent and democratic access to data for citizens.

The fourth and final flaw has to do with the absence of data. Agriculture is a key sector, both for the EU[11] and for the State[12], and its interrelation with migration, another essential policy area for the Government (Molinero Gerbeau, 2023), makes it urgent not only to publicise the available data, but also to produce new data on aspects such as working conditions, health problems, etc., which will enable the design of effective public policies. Only in this way will it be possible, on the one hand, to work to guarantee the stability of a sector that is a pillar of the economy and, on the other, to ensure that its operation respects human rights since, as countless studies point out, it is currently characterised by being a huge source of exploitation (Ruiz *et al.,* 2024).

Conclusions

This analysis has shown that drawing up a socio-demographic profile of migrants working in Spanish agriculture is a complex task. This difficulty is not only due to the heterogeneity of the sector, in which each territorial enclave has specialised in a type of production that requires a different labour profile, making it impossible to identify a homogeneous pattern at the national level. The main limitation lies, above all, in the limited availability of data to adequately understand the phenomenon.

Of the five data sources mentioned here, only those with a very limited level of disaggregation, such as the EPA, OPIBase or the SEPE, are readily available through the public portals of the organisations that produce them. Some data sets, such as the found in the latter two databases, are particularly difficult to locate on their websites. Eurostat is also accessible, but its cessation of data collection from 2020 onwards, coupled with the fact that the data it provided was excessively aggregated, means that it is not a useful source for obtaining data on this subject.

[11] See, for example, the European Commission's recently launched Strategic Dialogue on the Future of EU Agriculture https://commission.europa.eu/topics/agriculture-and-rural-development/strategic-dialogue-future-eu-agriculture_es [Accessed: 4 April 2025]

[12] See, for example, the CAP Strategic Plan in Spain https://www.mapa.gob.es/es/pac/pac-2023-2027/plan-estrategico-pac.aspx [Accessed: 4 April 2025]

In order to at least understand the basic socio-demographic aspects of the migrant community working in Spanish agriculture, it is necessary to submit requests through the transparency portal, with the uncertainty that this entails regarding the time it will take to respond to the request, whether the body receiving it will respond positively and what variables it will include in the data provided. This complex and inaccessible process means that the information is available to very few people, which limits the debate on public policies with potential applicability to the context to those who have access to this data. As a result, it hinders the participation of a large part of society, including employers and trade unions.

For the sector, one of the results of this fragmentation, partiality, opacity and lack of data is a chronic problem of forecasting. For workers, this leads to invisibility, which in turn leads to severe exploitation.

Without accessible and reliable data, dichotomies arise, such as the fact that, on the one hand, GECCO is internationally recognised as a programme associated with good practices (López-Sala, 2016) and, in fact, the government has recently committed to expanding[13], and, on the other hand, the vast majority of studies that have examined it point to it as a mechanism that encourages severe labour exploitation (Ruiz *et al.*, 2024). Employers themselves have also complained about the limited number of authorisations granted annually, as well as other aspects, such as the excessive bureaucracy of the programme[14], which explains why, in the end, it has been applied almost exclusively in the province of Huelva, as we have seen in the analysis of the data.

The state must invest in making its data records public, in disaggregating those it already offers publicly with more variables, and, above all, it must propose a data collection strategy that allows for a better understanding of this social reality.

[13] See, for example, this news item: Government signs agreements with Mauritania, Gambia and Senegal to strengthen safe and regular migration routes and protect workers' rights [online]. [Accessed 4 April 2025]. Available at https://www.inclusion.gob.es/w/el-gobierno-firma-acuerdos-con-mauritania-gambia-y-senegal-para-reforzar-vias-seguras-y-regulares-de-migracion-y-proteger-los-derechos-de-los-trabajadores

[14] See, for example, this news item from the Union of Small Farmers and Ranchers (UPA): Labour shortages and the lack of viable alternatives for soil disinfection jeopardise the upcoming berry season [online]. [Accessed 4 April 2025]. Available at: https://upahuelva.es/gecco2022/

Despite these problems, however, the exercise carried out here has made it possible to identify some socio-demographic patterns regarding foreign labour in Spanish agriculture. It has been found that the most common nationalities are Moroccan, Romanian, Senegalese and Malian, with a relatively high presence in some enclaves of nationals from other countries such as Bulgaria and Ecuador. It has been determined that the vast majority of migrant labourers are men, with the exception of Huelva, where almost half of the workers are women. And although there is some disparity in the predominant age ranges, it can be said that the majority of those who do this work are between 25 and 34 years old. Finally, it is important to note that everything points to a low presence of irregular workers in the sector. However, once again, more rigorous data collection could provide greater clarity in this regard.

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Chapter Six

Migration and religion: interactions and their influence on integration

Juan Alberto Mora Tebas

Abstract

Religion is present, in one way or another, throughout the entire migration process: from decision-making to departure, including the journey itself. This religious dimension of migration once again takes centre stage in the discourse on the integration of immigrants into host societies. However, this integration does not always unfold in the same way, depending on both the religion of the migrant and that of the host country.

This chapter will address the interactions between religion and migration in two almost antagonistic scenarios:

- E-1) Migrants of Christian tradition/religion living in countries of Muslim tradition/religion: Sub-Saharan Africa → Maghreb
- E-2) Migrants of Muslim tradition/religion living in countries of Judeo-Christian tradition/religion: Maghreb → European Union (EU).

To conclude, we will address the role of religions in the integration of immigrants.

Keywords

Religion, Migration, Integration, European Union, Maghreb.

> "Religion permeates the entire migration experience, from decision-making to departure, through the journey from their communities of origin to the host country."
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Introduction

The religious dimension in the study of migration, after having been relegated to oblivion, is once again taking centre stage in the discourse on the integration of immigrants into host societies. This chapter will emphasise the interactions between migration and religion[1], analysing them in two contrasting scenarios:

- E-1) Migrants of Christian tradition/religion living in countries of Muslim tradition/religion: Sub-Saharan Africa → Maghreb
- E-2) Migrants of Muslim tradition/religion living in countries of Judeo-Christian tradition/religion: Maghreb → European Union (EU).

The chapter is divided into four sections. After a brief description of the religious composition of migrants, the first scenario is addressed: "Christian migrants (*Sub-Saharan Africa)* in Muslim host countries (North Africa: Maghreb)", in which the conditions of Christian religiosity among sub-Saharan migrants in Muslim countries in North Africa (cases of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia) are discussed.

The third section, entitled "Muslim migrants in the European Union," discusses the conditions of migrants of Muslim tradition/religion in European Union (EU) countries with Christian tradition/religion (cases of Denmark and Italy).

Finally, a fourth section, entitled "Influence of Religion on the Acceptance and Integration of Migrants", focuses on observing whether religion acts or can act as a catalyst in the process of migrant integration, noting the relevance of the relationships developed in religious spaces to the integration of migrants and,

[1] NB: For this study, a broad approach has been taken when assigning religiosity to migrants. In fact, they have been considered *cultural Muslims* or *cultural Christians,* based on the traditions and majority culture of their country of origin.

therefore, to social peace in host countries, an issue that is among the main concerns of European citizens[2].

1 The religious composition of migrants worldwide

Migration has grown steadily in recent decades. Today, more than 280 million people, or 3.6% of the world's population, are international migrants living outside their country of origin (International Organisation for Migration, 2024).

In 2020 (the last year for which global figures are available) and according to an analysis by the Pew Research Centre (2024), it was estimated that Christians, who make up 30% of the world's population, represent 47% of all international migrants, the largest migrant group. They are followed by Muslims with 29%, then Hindus (5%), Buddhists (4%) and Jews (1%). Interestingly, this religious composition of international migrants has remained relatively stable since 1990 (Kramer and Tong, 2024).

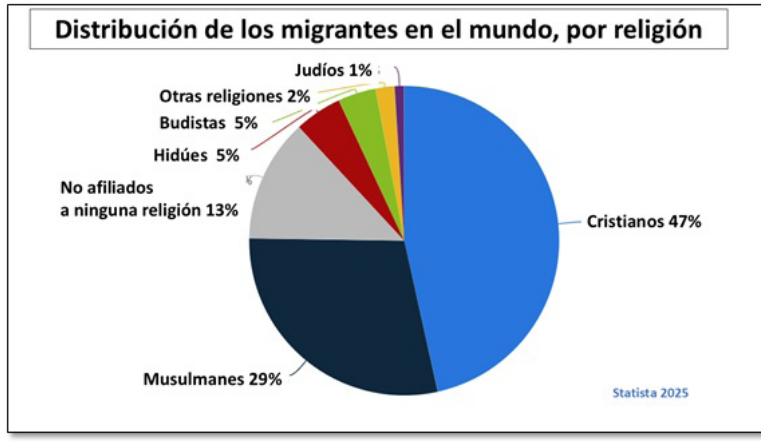


Figure 1. Distribution of migrants worldwide, by religion.
***Source:* Statista. Own elaboration**

Currently, the "transnational character" of the Catholic Church and the Evangelical and Pentecostal Churches helps immigrants

[2] According to Eurobarometer (autumn 2024), immigration is a concern for 28% of Europeans. The figure for Spain (34%) is higher than the European average and represents an increase of thirteen points compared to the previous Eurobarometer (June 2024). [Accessed: 2025]. Available at: https://efe.com/espana/2024-12-11/eurobarometro-preocupaciones-espanoles-vivienda-inmigracion/

find continuity between different territories, reconnecting them in their new host society (Capone, 2010). Today, we find migratory flows that provide "ethnic" religions with identity resources beyond the borders of the original group, influencing and even modifying (sometimes profoundly) the religious landscapes of host countries.

It is in Anglo-Saxon literature that we find a qualitative leap, moving from the analysis of migratory phenomena in terms of assimilation to an analysis that emphasises the links between here and there, which occurs in a surprising way by staging a "circulatory territory", to use the term immortalised by Alain Tarrius (Tarrius, 2000: 124), in which migrants develop a sense of belonging to two worlds at the same time, both their homeland and their host country (Capone, 2010). In general terms, migrants tend to move to regions where their religion is common among the native population. This may be due to religious similarities within regions (many migrants move to nearby countries), as well as the appeal of moving to a religiously familiar community.

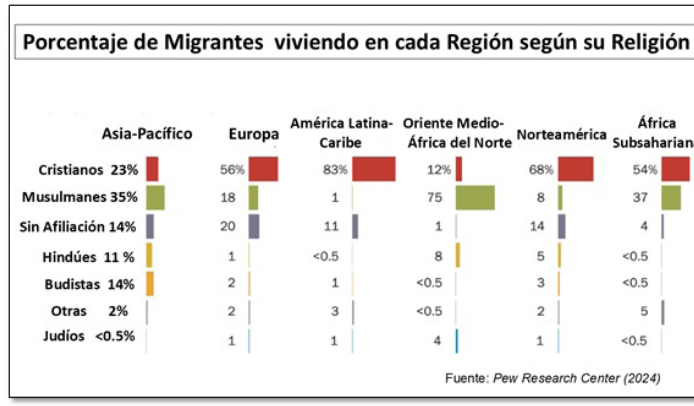


Figure 2. Percentage of Migrants Living in Each Region by Religion. *Source:* Pew Research Centre (2024), Own elaboration

For example, Christians constitute the majority of immigrants living in Latin America and the Caribbean, North America, Europe, and sub-Saharan Africa, all of which are regions with large Christian populations. Muslims are by far the largest group of migrants in the Middle East and North Africa region (Kramer and Tong, 2024).

1.1 Christian migration

Christian migration covers a more diverse geography than that of other religions. North America is the largest recipient of Christian migration, mainly from Latin America. The second largest recipient of Christian migration is Europe, mainly from Latin America, Asia-Pacific and sub-Saharan Africa.

Despite high migration figures, Christian migration is not expected to change regional religious affiliation percentages between 2020 and 2050, given the balance between immigration and emigration (The Lausanne Movement, 2024).

1.2 Muslim migration

- Its main characteristics are:
- It mainly takes place between the predominantly Islamic regions of the Middle East and North Africa, which account for 75%, and the Asia-Pacific region (35%).
- They travel shorter distances (on average) than migrants from other major religious groups, remaining closer to their countries of origin. For example, a large number of Muslims from Syria have sought refuge in neighbouring countries (Turkey and Lebanon).
- As for the other regions[3]:
    - 18% of Muslim immigrants live in Europe
    - 37% in sub-Saharan Africa.
    - Only 8% of all Muslim migrants now reside in North America, and an even smaller percentage live in Latin America and the Caribbean (Kramer and Tong, 2024).

Europe is a notable exception, as it receives large numbers of Muslim migrants (The Lausanne Movement, 2024).

2 Scenario 1: Christian migrants (Sub-Saharan Africa) in a Muslim host country (North Africa: Maghreb).

"The Qur'an establishes an alliance between hospitable Muslims and prohibits such an alliance with infidel countries.

[3] NB: Despite the existence of 57 Muslim-majority nations, 22 of which are Arab, many Islamic immigrants have chosen to settle in Western countries rather than those that reflect their customs and beliefs.

> It also states that the Muslim community has an obligation to help those who seek help outside of it."
>
> (verse 8:72)

Over the last few decades, migration in Africa has experienced an unprecedented increase on a continental scale, with an ever-growing number of international migrants moving both within and outside the region, heralding a new phase in the history of the African diaspora (Adogame, 2013).

In 2020, IOM figures indicated that approximately 21 million Africans were living in another African country, a significant increase from 2015, when an estimated 18 million Africans were living outside their country of origin but within the region. The number of Africans living in different regions also grew during the same period, from around 17 million in 2015 to more than 19.5 million in 2020 (IOM, 2024).

Almost 90% of international migrants in sub-Saharan Africa came from another country in the same region where they resided (UNDESA, 2019: § 6). These internal movements in Africa are one of the most notable characteristics of migration in the region. IOM data show that they are particularly pronounced in sub-Saharan Africa (IOM, 2024).

This complex phenomenon is the result of a multitude of socio-economic, political and environmental factors, often caused by armed conflict, and has led many Africans who undergo complicated immigration processes to take their religious and cultural identity traits with them. In fact, their stay in new *geocultural* contexts has encouraged them to identify, organise and rebuild their religion both for themselves and for their host societies. The last three decades have seen a rapid proliferation of African Christian communities (Adogame, 2013).

2.1 Algeria

The authorities have not amended Law 08-11 of 25 June 2008[4], which explicitly prohibits collective expulsions, nor have they adopted new legislation to implement the Geneva Convention

[4] *Law 08-11 of 25 June 2008 on the conditions of entry, stay and movement of foreigners in Algeria.* [Accessed: 2025]. Available at: https://www.interieur.gov.dz/index.php/fr/le-ministere/le-minist%C3%A8re/textes-legislatifs-et-reglementaires/59-les-etrangers-et-les-conventions-consulaires/500-loi-08-11-du-25-juin-2008-relative-

on Refugees (UNHCR, 1967) and its Optional Protocol (UNHCR, 1951). Instead, they have continued with mass expulsions of immigrants[5].

With regard to religion, *Ordonnance* No. 06-03 of 28 February 2006[6] continues to be applied, restricting religions other than Sunni Islam. On the basis of this regulation, at least two churches have been closed in 2023, bringing the total number of churches closed since 2018 to 31 (Amnesty International, 2024).

The Algerian Constitution declares Islam to be the state religion and prohibits state institutions from behaving in a manner that infringes on Islamic morality. The law grants all persons the right to practise their religion if they respect public order and the rules. "Offending or insulting" any religion is a criminal offence, and blasphemy is punishable, but apostasy is not. In fact, religious conversion is not prohibited, even from Islam, although proselytising among Muslims by non-Muslims is a criminal offence. The law provides for a maximum penalty of one million dinars (about seven thousand euros) and five years' imprisonment for anyone who "incites, restricts or uses means of seduction with the intention of converting a Muslim to another religion"; or through educational establishments. The printing, storage or distribution of physical documents or audiovisual materials with the intention of "shaking the faith" of a Muslim is also illegal and subject to the same penalties. The law specifies the manner and conditions in which religious services, Islamic or otherwise, must be conducted. The law states that religious gatherings, for worship or other purposes, are subject to regulation, and the government may shut down any religious service (except for daily prayers) that takes place in private homes or outdoor settings without official approval.

Non-Muslims face social pressure, including threats and intolerance, for practising a different faith. Some local media outlets occasionally criticised *Ahmadi* Islam and *Shia* Islam as "sects" or

aux-conditions-d%E2%80%99entr%C3%A9e,-de-s%C3%A9jour-et-de-circulation-des-%C3%A9trangers-en-alg%C3%A9rie.html

[5] Algeria summarily expelled at least 18,302 migrants, mostly from West Africa, according to Amnesty International's "Report 2023/24". [Accessed: 2025]. Available at: https://www.amnesty.org/es/location/middle-east-and-north-africa/north-africa/algeria/report-algeria/

[6] *Ordinance No. 06-03 of 28 February 2006 establishing the conditions and rules for the practice of religions other than Islam.* [Accessed: 2025]. Available at: https://www.joradp.dz/ftp/jo-francais/2006/f2006012.pdf

"deviations" from Islam or as "foreigners" and demonstrated bias against those groups (U.S. Department of State, 2024).

Christian groups include Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Seventh-day Adventists, Methodists, members of the Église Protestante d'Algérie (EPA), Lutherans, members of the Reformed Church, Anglicans, and approximately 1,000 Egyptian Coptic Christians. Unofficial estimates by religious leaders of the number of Christians range from 20,000 to 200,000. According to government officials and religious leaders, foreign residents make up the majority of the Christian population. The Christian population includes students and immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa. Christian leaders say that citizens who are Christians belong predominantly to Protestant groups. Christians reside mainly in Algiers and in the northern provinces (Bejaia, Tizi Ouzou, Annaba, Ouargla, and Oran).

Non-Islamic religious services must take place only in buildings registered by the state for the exclusive purpose of religious practice and be administered by a registered religious association, open to the public, and marked as such on the outside. Requests for permission to hold special non-Islamic religious events must be submitted to *the wali* (governor) at least five days before the event, and the event must take place in buildings accessible to the public. Applications must include information on the three main organisers of the event, its purpose, and the expected number of attendees (U.S. Department of State, 2024).

The Algerian state maintains a more radical alignment with Sunni Islam and an intolerance towards other religions, particularly Protestantism and Judaism, to the extent that Algeria has not reopened synagogues; it also prohibits the *Baha'i* faith ([7]).

2.2 Morocco

Morocco, at the crossroads between Africa and Europe, is at the centre of global migration flows. Its strategic geographical location makes it a country of emigration, transit and immigration. In 2020, Morocco ranked 18th among the world's 20 largest migrant-sending countries, with an official total of 3.25 mil-

[7] A monotheistic Abrahamic religion whose followers follow the teachings of the Persian religious leader Bahá'u'lláh. Bahá'ís come from more than 2,100 ethnic, racial and tribal groups and, in 2020, numbered more than eight million worldwide, with the majority in India.

lion emigrants. This represented 8.1% of its total population (International Organisation for Migration-IOM, 2024).

According to a report by the Ministry of the Interior, Morocco prevented 78,685 irregular immigrants from entering European Union countries in 2024, an increase of 4.6% compared to the previous year. It is specified that 58% of migrants come from West Africa, 12% from North Africa and 9% from East and Central Africa (Khettou, 2025).

Over the last decade, Morocco has gone from being a transit point to becoming an immigration destination where, as elsewhere, migration is reviving and reshaping the religious offerings of large cities, whether they are places of passage or settlement, giving rise to new religious dynamics and reactivating old ones. The explanation may lie in the fact that when it is not religious institutions or religious NGOs that welcome newcomers, it is the newcomers themselves who create their own spaces for prayer, relying on existing transnational religious networks or building their own places of worship.

It should be remembered that the issue of freedom of worship is recognised in the Moroccan Constitution but is strictly regulated in practice. Morocco officially recognises the Muslim and Jewish religions and tolerates the r practice of Christianity by foreigners, although it remains vigilant against any form of proselytism or unregulated religious activity. King Mohammed VI, as Commander of the Faithful, has repeatedly stated this, including in his message on the occasion of Pope Francis' visit to Rabat in 2019.

2.2.1 Rise of Christianity: "informal churches"

Since the late 1990s, the increase in the number of immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa, particularly from the Christian regions of Central Africa, linked to the strengthening of European migration policies in the post-Schengen period, has revitalised the official Protestant and Catholic churches, which have filled up again, while other Protestants (Evangelicals, Pentecostals and Charismatics) developed parallel places of worship on the outskirts, better known as "informal churches", "immigrant churches" or even "transit churches".

In addition to the official churches, there are about thirty "house churches" in Rabat, not counting those in Casablanca, which are even more numerous. Fragile charismatic churches are born or

disappear, while others become transnational with the departure of their pastors to Europe. The number of their followers decreases periodically, especially in spring and summer, when migrants attempt the adventure to Europe. These informal churches, however, provide the spiritual and material support necessary in a daily life where waiting, without work or money, is the main activity. There, it is possible to pray, find work, comfort or training, and rebuild a social life that, without papers, is often lacking (Bava, 2021).

Whether they have resident status or are simply in transit, they often gather in house churches that also function as support networks, as these communities are concerned with everything from schooling for their children.

In the Moroccan context—which is not secular—the intersection between religion and migration is relevant because the debate on religious freedom and cultural diversity shapes the public space. Migration could reinforce this issue by calling into question the political and religious foundations on which the Moroccan state is based. Rachid Benlabbah (Institut des Etudes Africaines - Université Mohammed V- Rabat) argues that migration, religion, religious freedom and individual rights are intertwined and correlated (Benlabbah, 2023).

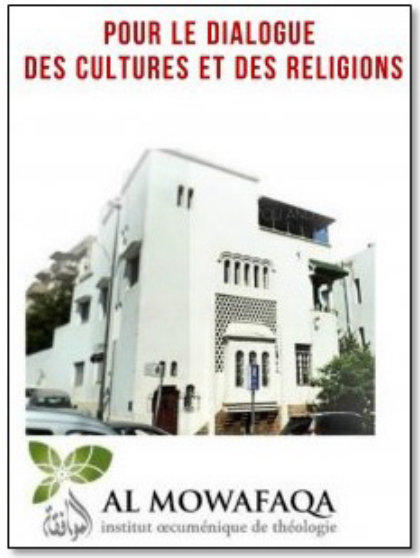
As a result of the increasingly permanent settlement of men and women from sub-Saharan Africa in the 1990s, the Christian religious landscape in Morocco has changed. Migration has built this new latent Christianity since independence, which is diversifying and enriching itself with Christianity arriving from the south, through minorities. This Christianity is more diverse and geographically dispersed in the outlying districts, in contrast to the "historic churches" (found in city centres), and favours the religious openness of Moroccan society (Bava, 2019).

In Morocco, this situation has given rise to a completely unique Christian religious landscape, closely linked to the realities of migration, both in the organisation of worship and in the theological journey of religious leaders and the faithful. The faithful are now younger (80% are under 30), multicultural, multi-ethnic and multi-denominational. These forms of Christianity imported by migrants were perceived by the leaders of the historic Christian churches both as a "blessing", because they re-established Christianity in Morocco, and as a "risk" because, if they were too proselytising or charismatic, they could destabilise the Christian

environment, already weakened after the expulsion of missionaries in 2010 (Benlabbah, 2023).

2.2.2 Ecumenism

For Protestants grouped together in the Evangelical Church of Morocco (EEAM), which has existed for over a century, African migration is seen as the beginning of a new history, giving new meaning to the very existence of the Church in Morocco. Driven by this stimulating situation, in an environment where many Protestant denominations compete, they have had to deepen their theological reflection in order to offer a more contextualised theology, adapted to the situations encountered by the faithful, sometimes giving rise to a "theology of migration" that draws on both the journeys of exile of biblical figures and migration policies and the stories of migrants. The new religious project of this Church consists of re-establishing Christianity in Morocco, also with the support of Catholics, in a vision of a decidedly more African Christianity.



To achieve this, it was necessary to train religious leaders within a new Ecumenical Institute created by the Protestant and Catholic Churches in 2012, the Al Mowafaqa Ecumenical Institute of Theology[8], which since 2016 has been providing training for leaders of domestic churches (Bava, 2021).

2.2.3 "Informal churches": Social debate

This influx of Christians into a Muslim country raises the question of the political management of multi-faithism, as well as its

[8] See: https://www.almowafaqa.com/. [Accessed: 2025].

inevitable counterpart, religious freedom and proselytism. These questions arise periodically in social debates, as has recently been the case in Morocco, where the political management of multi-faithism has begun to be seriously considered.

Indeed, the Islamist parliamentary group of the Justice and Development Party (PJD) submitted (6 April 2025) written questions to the Moroccan ministers of the Interior and Islamic Affairs on what it calls the "proliferation of informal churches" in Casablanca, expressing concern about the increase in the number of unregistered Christian places of worship, particularly in working-class neighbourhoods. According to them, several underground spaces and other discreet premises are currently being used to accommodate Christian communities outside the legal framework. They speak of a growing phenomenon which, according to them, is worrying to some members of the public because it "deprives citizens of a sense of spiritual security". They also call for concrete measures by the state to "curb this phenomenon", which they consider worrying for national religious cohesion (Balkis, 2025).

2.3 Tunisia

Until the 2000s, in both Tunisia and Morocco, Christianity, whether Catholic or Protestant, was the result of a territorial network developed during the protectorate. Since independence, the number of faithful has been declining and places of worship have gradually emptied.

It was in the 1990s, with the increase in the number of students and migrants from sub-Saharan Africa, that the churches began to fill up again. On the one hand, the "historic" churches—Catholic and Protestant—present in urban centres (i.e., established since the 19th century) increased their number of followers and religious services. On the other hand, Pentecostal and charismatic churches, known as "informal" churches, appeared and developed in the outlying districts.

Tunisia, even more so than Morocco, continues to be considered a country of emigration rather than immigration. According to Tunisia's *Institut National de la Statistique* (INS), the number of foreigners from African countries (excluding those from the Maghreb) increased significantly from 7,200 in 2014 to 21,466 in 2021 (INS, 2022).

Unlike in Morocco, the presence of sub-Saharan Africans is not seen as an opportunity to strengthen political ties with Africa. The Tunisian state's concern is rather focused on securing its borders (with Libya to the south and Algeria to the west), which it considers to be transit points that could jeopardise internal security, threatened either by jihadist fighters or by migrants in search of a Maghreb or European *El Dorado*.

In Tunisia, African migration consists mainly of students, mostly men, with very different administrative statuses and financial situations. Those who remain after completing their studies may find themselves in situations of profound precariousness. In addition to the two main categories of students and former students, there are illegal immigrants and sub-Saharan workers from Libya who sought refuge in neighbouring countries after the fall of Colonel Gaddafi in 2011.

At the other end of the social scale are sub-Saharan expatriates, embodied by the figure of the international civil servant working at the African Development Bank (ADB), whose headquarters were located in Tunis between 2003 and 2014, following the civil war in Côte d'Ivoire. Most of them are Christians, originally from Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Nigeria and Cameroon. Many of these privileged immigrants were committed to weekly religious practice, and adjustments were quickly made in urban churches to accommodate the new faithful.

In a very informative article on sub-Saharan immigrants in Tunisia, Mustapha Nasraoui highlights an unfavourable regime for the employment of foreigners, who are often undocumented, and difficult working conditions. And while he mentions the psychological difficulties linked to the lack of family and community support, the author does not address the use of religion as a counterbalance to a difficult daily life (Nasraoui, 2017). Nevertheless, churches are filled every week with people seeking support and comfort.

Unlike Morocco, where profound institutional changes have taken place, mainly through the creation of a Theological Institute for Christian ecumenical training, as seen above, in Tunisia the provisions remain more prosaic. This was done to compensate for imbalances in attendance and a lack of religious personnel. As early as 2004, priests and pastors asked their hierarchies to send additional personnel.

This increase in the number of worshippers and clergy led to a greater supply of religious services, which soon ran up against a lack of space. For historical reasons, places dedicated to Catholic worship are more numerous and more spacious than Protestant buildings. Furthermore, given that the Protestant community is larger today, some churches offer several services on the same day, at different times, rent function rooms or even move their services to Catholic buildings made available for the occasion. But the problem of numbers was quickly compounded by that of liturgical style, because some Catholics and Protestants no longer felt at home in the Masses and services as they were now celebrated.

Unlike what we see in Morocco, Protestant pastors in Tunisia did not attempt to unite the discourses of the historic churches and the house churches. Within house churches, a form of Protestantism close to evangelical Pentecostalism is developing, whose religious discourse focuses in part on waiting, patience, and the strength of the weak, but also on the vigorous spread of the word of God and the fight against depravity and false religions. The values defended there are those of an expanding religion, destined to spread, whose cornerstones are proselytism and the dissemination of the good news. In this context, the faithful, who often define themselves as "soldiers of Jesus", must spread the good word and encourage conversion, even though they find themselves, let us remember, in a country (as in Algeria and Morocco, but to a lesser extent) where proselytism is prohibited and punished. These Pentecostal churches are attended exclusively by sub-Saharan faithful, with the exception of a few Tunisian converts. In contrast to these discourses, African immigrants who decide to gather for Sunday worship in the church in central Tunis (in the Reformed Church or the Church of Saint-Georges) or in one of the historic churches in the northern suburbs of the city do so in a context of relative social and national diversity, as a quarter of the faithful are European or American.

In Tunisia, Pentecostal house churches are so few in number that traditional Protestant pastors (whether European or sub-Saharan) are trying to distance themselves from them. The aim is to keep them physically and symbolically at a distance, pointing more or less directly to them as responsible for the conversions of several hundred Tunisian Muslims. Thus, by labelling these churches "charismatic" and criticising them for not having incorporated the ban on proselytism (common in Algeria, Morocco and

Tunisia), the historic Protestant Church distances itself from a theology that, according to it, is too far removed from its own.

In fact, if there were accusations of proselytism, they would no longer be directed against the Protestant Church as a whole, but against specific migrant churches, from which the historical Church wishes to distance itself. Beyond the style of worship, it is therefore the relationship with proselytism that constitutes the insurmountable difference.

3 Scenario 2: Muslim migrants (North Africa: Maghreb) in a Christian host country (European Union)

In 2023, there were approximately 385,000 irregular migrants in the European Union, while more than 3.7 million people used legal migration channels (European Parliament, 2025).

As of 1 January 2024, 44.7 million people born outside the European Union (EU) were residing in one of the EU countries, representing almost 10% of the EU population. This is an increase of 2.3 million compared to the previous year. Turkish and Moroccan citizens constitute the largest groups of third-country nationals living in the EU (Eurostat, 2025).

Figure 3. Non-EU citizens: Main nationalities.
Source: **Eurostat (2024). Own elaboration**

The religious involvement of immigrants and their descendants has the potential to reshape the religious landscape of Europe. Migrants arrive with religious affiliations that often differ from those historically dominant in their destination countries.

Furthermore, people of migrant origin may also display greater religiosity in their particular religion, not only in the first but potentially also in the second generation. They may therefore contribute to slowing down the overall processes of secularisation of religious expression (Guveli and Platt, 2003).

3.1 European initiatives on migration

In the European Parliament survey (Eurobarometer July 2024)[9] on the challenges and priorities of the EU, 33% of respondents considered irregular migration to be the most urgent problem that the EU should address. Forty-one per cent considered it to be the second biggest challenge for the EU, behind the war in Ukraine and ahead of terrorism and security.

Aware of the significance of migration, various European supranational organisations have launched initiatives to try to better understand this demographic phenomenon. Some of these are outlined below.

- Eurostat: The EU Statistical Office has launched the interactive publication "Migration and asylum in Europe-2023", which places EU-wide statistics in the context of issues such as population diversity, protection and asylum, irregular migration and return, and migrant skills. It allows users to compare data on non-EU citizens, citizens of other EU countries and nationals of the reporting country, and to explore statistics at EU level. The data covers all main areas and topics of integration[10].
- European Website on Integration (EWSI): The European Website on Integration is an initiative of the European Commission and is under the responsibility of the Directorate-General for Home Affairs and Migration. This website is the only source at EU level that provides up-to-date information and good practices on the integration of migrants to policy makers and practitioners[11].
- EURISLAM: is a European comparative research project that analyses how the incorporation of Islam in European member states is influenced by national traditions of identity,

[9] See: https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3232. [Accessed: 2025].
[10] See: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/interactive-publications/migration-2023
[11] See: https://migrant-integration.ec.europa.eu/index.php/home_en

citizenship and Church-State relations. EURISLAM studies how these traditions have affected interactions between Muslim immigrants, their descendants and the host society. Fieldwork is currently being carried out in Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland and the United Kingdom[12].

With the aim of improving social relations, EURISLAM has drawn up a series of policy recommendations to promote integration:

- Greater support from states.
- The importance of civil, professional and other organisations in facilitating integration.
- A change in the way the media deals with the issue, moving away from the tendency to focus exclusively on negative events.

The recommendations also seek to promote the development of policies that foster the socio-cultural integration of European Muslims, with an emphasis on aspects such as education, the situation of immigrants in the labour market and a better distribution of social capital.

– IMISCOE (International Migration Research Network): is the largest interdisciplinary network of academics in the field of migration. Currently, the research network is composed of 68 research institutes from different countries[13] and disciplines, such as sociology, political science, anthropology, economics, law, demography, public administration, geography and history[14].

3.2 Denmark

Until 2015, the number of immigrants increased steadily, declining thereafter until 2020, when the trend reversed, increasing to a record high of 121,000 people in 2022, after which the decline began.

[12] See: https://arquivo.pt/wayback/20160314101022/http://www.eurislam.eu/page=site.home

[13] In Spain: University of Deusto, University of La Coruña, Pompeu Fabra University, Pontifical University of Comillas, University of Gerona. See: https://www.imiscoe.org/about-imiscoe/members [Accessed: 2025]

[14] See: https://www.imiscoe.org/about-imiscoe/mission [Accessed: 2025]

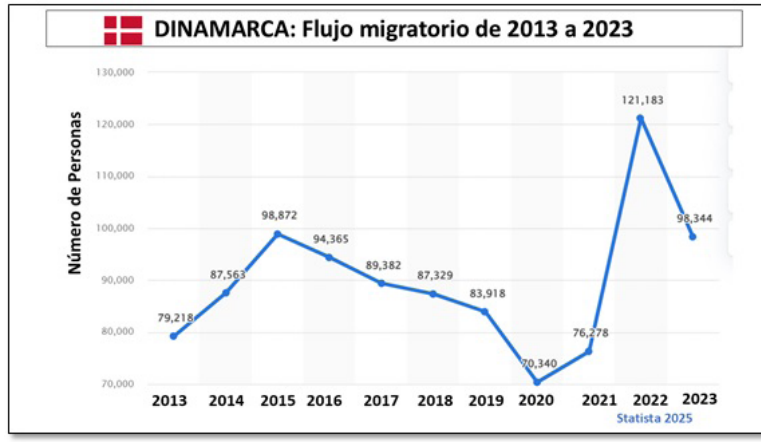


Figure 4. Denmark: Migration flow from 2013 to 2013.
Source: **Statista (2025). Own elaboration**

This decline in immigration figures in the period 2015-2020 is partly explained by the tightening of immigration policies. One example of this is that immigrants must work 37 hours per week in order to access certain social benefits, and the law (L226, passed on 3 June 2021) that allows asylum seekers to be sent to countries outside the EU while their applications are being processed.

Despite this trend, forecasts predict that the number of immigrants will increase and reach 725,000 by 2029. This is because a large number of immigrants come from other EU countries, such as Poland and Germany. In 2024, nearly 50,000 Danish residents were of Polish origin, followed by nearly 32,000 Ukrainian refugees (STATISTA, 2025).

3.2.1 Religion

The Danish Muslim population was estimated at 256,000 in 2020. Both Shia and Sunni Islam are represented in the approximately 170 mosques that exist in Denmark. In addition, there are national differences, as there are Arab, Pakistani, Turkish, Somali and European (Bosnian and Albanian) congregations.

Since the 1970s, several Muslim religious communities have been established in Denmark. They were established by immigrant labourers from Morocco, Pakistan and Turkey. Their meeting

rooms were in private homes or dilapidated factory buildings, but these communities received support from their countries of origin through their embassies, and more formal buildings emerged, such as the Islamic Cultural Centre in Copenhagen, founded in 1976.

Since 2015, the Mariam Mosque in Copenhagen has been specifically aimed at women, with the intention of amplifying the voices of female imams in Scandinavian communities and beyond.

- Its mission is based on creating spaces for women in religious leadership roles, a commitment that goes beyond mere symbolism. Here, women not only lead Islamic ceremonies, but also guide souls towards spiritual enlightenment.
- It includes an Islamic Academy, where the principles of the Quran are taught and interpreted in light of their original and inclusive sources. Friday prayers are exclusively for women. However, after Friday prayers, its doors remain open to all, regardless of faith.

The Mariam Mosque is more than just a place of worship: it is a pioneering institution striving to integrate the essence of equality into the structure of religious leadership.

More information is available at: https://www.mariammoskeen.com/. [Accessed: 2025]

The Qur'an has been translated into Danish, and Danish is also the language of worship in many mosques, based on the ideal

that the mosque should welcome all those who do not necessarily speak or understand Arabic. There has been a desire to make Islam a more natural part of everyday Danish life and the religious landscape. For political reasons, attempts have been made in recent years to impose Danish as the language of worship in Muslim congregations, and it is not permitted to call to prayer from minarets (LEX Danmarks Nationalleksikon, 2025).

These Muslim communities have made demands on the welfare state in order to receive adequate, reasonable and legal care. For example, Muslim patients in hospitals have the right to speak to an imam as part of the hospital chaplaincy scheme, as they do in prisons. They have also established a large number of free religious schools in all major cities. In large cities, Muslim celebrations are held with strong institutional support in public spaces. Shiite Muslims organise the *Ashura* parade in Nørrebro (a neighbourhood in Copenhagen), but the *Eid* festival *(*end of Ramadan*),* which was previously celebrated together with the Islamic Faith Community, now takes place in a more decentralised manner in cities. This has sparked a debate in Danish society about whether schools should be allowed to take time off or simply lighten the workload for students around this holiday (LEX Danmarks Nationalleksikon, 2025).

3.3 Italy

With its central position in the Mediterranean, Italy receives the largest number of immigrants arriving in Europe from North Africa by sea.

Between 2014 and 2024, the number of migrants entering the country peaked in 2016 with 181,000 people, while in 2019 only 11,400 people were rescued from the sea. In fact, between 2018 and 2019, stricter migration policies were enacted by the right-wing, populist government (Statista, 2025).

After the peak recorded in 2016, the number of migrants arriving by sea gradually decreased each year. In 2024, around 66,000 immigrants arrived in the country, 60% fewer than in 2023. Among the most frequently declared countries of origin for arrivals in 2024, Bangladesh (13,800) and Syria (12,500) ranked highest (Statista, 2025).

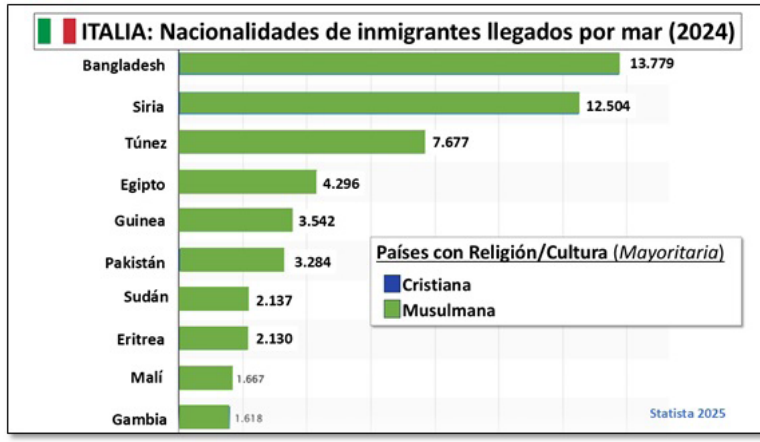


Figure 5. Italy: Nationalities *of immigrants arriving by sea (2024).*
***Source:* Statista (2025). Own elaboration**

The government has recently adopted new policies, collaborating with North African countries to reduce departures and with Albania to process asylum applications externally.

Over the years, the number of applications for international protection in Italy has increased, and more people have been granted refugee status in the country (11,315 asylum applications accepted in 2023, mostly Afghans, Nigerians and Pakistanis). In addition, the proportion of residence permits issued on humanitarian grounds reached 32% in 2023, compared to only 16% in 2019.

3.3.1 Religion

Islam is the most common religion among foreigners throughout the country. In 2023, around 1.52 million Muslims (mostly Sunnis) lived in Italy (417,000 Moroccans). The second most widespread religion among immigrants living in Italy is Orthodox Christianity, due to the large Romanian community residing in the country. (STATISTA, 2025).

The Constitution states that all citizens are equal before the law, regardless of their religion, and are free to profess their beliefs in any form, individually or with others, and to promote and celebrate rites in public or in private, provided they are not offensive to public morality. According to the Constitution, each religious community has the right to establish its own institutions in accordance with its own statutes, provided these do not conflict with the law.

The Constitution states that all religious groups are equally free. Relations between the State and the Catholic Church are governed by a concordat between the government and the Holy See, while relations between the State and non-Catholic groups, with regard to state support, must first submit their application to the Prime Minister's Office. The government and representatives of the group then negotiate a draft agreement, which must be approved by the Council of Ministers. The Prime Minister then signs and submits the agreement to Parliament for final approval. The law grants religious groups tax-exempt status and the right to recognition as legal persons once they have completed the registration process with the Ministry of the Interior. The agreement also allows a religious group to receive funds collected by the state through a voluntary 0.8% personal income tax set aside in taxpayers' returns. Taxpayers can specify which eligible religious group they would like to direct these funds to (U.S. Department of State, 2024).

The groups that currently have an agreement are:

- Confederation of Methodist and Waldensian Churches
- Seventh-day Adventists
- Assemblies of God
- Jews
- Baptists
- Lutherans
- Church of Jesus Christ
- Orthodox Church of the Patriarchate of Constantinople
- Italian Apostolic Church
- Buddhist Union
- Soka Gakkai Buddhists
- Hindus
- Anglican Church

National legislation does not restrict the use of external religious symbols, but some local authorities impose restrictions. Regional laws in Liguria, Veneto, and Lombardy prohibit the use of burqas and niqabs in public buildings and institutions, including hospitals (U.S. Department of State, 2024).

Regional governments and Muslim religious authorities recognised eight mosques, respectively, in Colle Val d'Elsa, Albenga, Milan, Rome, Ravenna, Forli, Palermo and Catania. In addition, local governments continued to recognise many other premises as Islamic places of worship, although some of these are not considered by Muslim authorities to be full mosques because they lack key architectural features such as minarets or domes.

It is estimated that in 2019 there were between 800 and 1,200 unofficial and informal places of worship for Muslims (the most recent figure). According to press reports, the authorities allowed most of them to operate but did not officially recognise them as places of worship (U.S. Department of State, 2024).

4 Influence of religion on the integration of immigrants

4.1 Concepts

At its meeting on 5 November 2004, the European Council adopted the following definition of integration: "A continuous, two-way process involving both legally resident third-country nationals and the host society"15.

However, participants at the conference "Migration and Religion in a Globalised World" (Rabat, 5 and 6 December 2005) organised by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) declined to define the concept of "successful integration", although they confirmed that "well-integrated" migrants were often found among those who participated not only in religious organisations but also in community activities. As a result of the growing cultural and religious diversity of countries, this necessarily implies the existence of a climate of cultural and religious tolerance that is fundamental to social cohesion (IOM, 2006).

Integration: IOM definition

> "A two-way process of mutual accommodation between migrants and the societies in which they live, whereby migrants become incorporated into the social, economic, cultural and political life of the receiving community. This entails a series of joint responsibilities for migrants and communities and encompasses other related notions such as inclusion and social cohesion".

15 See: https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-14292-2004-INIT/es/pdf. [Accessed: 2025].

Note: Integration does not necessarily imply permanent residence. However, it does involve consideration of the rights and obligations of migrants and societies in transit and destination countries; access to different types of services and the labour market; and recognition and respect for the essential set of values that strengthen the ties between migrants and host communities in pursuit of a common purpose.

International Organisation for Migration (IOM). Glossary of Terms. (2019).

Integration: Definition by the European Commission

> "Integration is a social process in which responsibility lies not with one particular group but with many: migrants, host communities, public authorities and institutions, social and economic partners, civil society organisations, churches, religious communities and other philosophical communities, and the private sector. Empowering both migrants and host communities to actively participate in the integration process is essential to achieving sustainable and successful integration".

EU Commission (2020). Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021–2027.

The World Bank, in its report *Inclusion Matters: The Foundation for Shared Prosperity* (The World Bank, 2013), proposes two definitions of social inclusion:

- The process of improving conditions for individuals and groups to participate in society.
- The process of improving the capacity, opportunities and dignity of people disadvantaged by their identity to participate in society.

The European Commission, in its Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027, broadens the concept and states that "*it also consists of combating unconscious bias and changing mindsets and the way each person perceives others and approaches the unknown*".

Religious beliefs and practices can be an important resource in the integration process of migrants. However, the form and direction in which these resources are used can vary significantly, even among groups of immigrants from the same country of origin, settled in the same region, and professing the same religion at the start of their migration (Odgers, 2013).

Charles Hirschman (2004), in his analysis of the role of religion in the incorporation of immigrants, brings together historical and contemporary evidence from three areas of immigrant adaptation in which religion has a greater influence. He identifies these areas as the three Rs of immigrant religion: refuge, respect and resources.

Figure 6. Areas of adaptation with the greatest influence of religion. *Source:* Charles Hirschman (2004) "The Role of Religion in the Origins and Adaptation of Immigrant Groups in the United States" Statista (2025). Own elaboration

On the other hand, the predominant religion of the majority groups can have both a positive and negative effect on tolerance and acceptance of immigrants, depending on the extent of religiosity and whether or not immigrants share the same religious affiliation.

The religion of immigrants can also have a positive and negative effect on their integration, providing a social network and a reference system, but it can also facilitate extremism, depending on conflicts of values with the majority group and acceptance by the majority group (Vishkin, A and Ben-Nun. P., 2022).

4.2 Identity function

When people migrate to a new environment, they bring with them their national, ethnic and religious identities. Research on immigrants in Western contexts has shown that, among these identities, religious identity takes precedence due to its more universal nature and its ability to be transplanted into different contexts. Furthermore, immigrants from minority religions may become more religious over time, especially when their primary social contacts are with members of their family (Vishkin, A. and Ben-Nun, P., 2022).

Practising migrants are aware that they will meet other people who are often in the same situation as them and speak the same language or dialect. In these cases, religion fulfils an identity function that is often the gateway to socialisation, a sense of belonging and interaction with others.

Religious social behaviour, such as regular participation in community prayer, has been shown to be a source of intolerance towards external groups, such as the prediction of support for suicide attacks targeting external religious groups (Vishkin and Ben-nun, 2022).

4.2.1 Religiosity varies according to origin and religion

Religion takes on a cultural and social function in immigrant communities that has been partially lost in the majority population. However, religiosity varies in intensity according to origin and is strongest among Muslims and Jews: approximately 75% of these groups say that religion plays an important role in their lives.

The children of immigrant parents, especially Muslims, show stronger religiosity and markedly lower rates of religious disaffiliation than the majority population, particularly if they are Catholic, but also the children of "mixed" couples. In fact, religious mixing in couples (one religious parent and one atheist parent, for example, or parents of two different religions) leads to a decline in religious transmission (Simón and Tiber, 2013).

Conclusions

Researching and studying the interactions between migration and religion could help to better understand the migration situation

and elucidate the ways in which migrants adapt to different socio-ocultural environments.

– Europe, the exception.

  Both Christian (the majority, at 47%) and Muslim (29%) migration follow the general trend of moving to countries with the same religion/culture/tradition, except in the case of Muslim migration to Europe. The EU receives a large number of Muslim migrants, and the Muslim population is expected to grow by approximately 63% between 2020 and 2050. Compared to the expected 6% decline in the European population, the impact of Islamic migration in Europe will be significant in the short/medium term.

– Parallel but different scenarios: an increase in Christian worshippers and places of worship in North African countries and in Muslim worshippers in European countries.

  The first decades of this century are witnessing a rapid proliferation of African Christian communities in Muslim countries in the Maghreb, and of Muslims in the European Union, the social and political consequences of which are difficult to predict as we are still in the early stages.

  As we have seen, Muslims in the EU have more rights and support than Christians in North African countries. Here it would seem necessary to apply the "diplomatic principle of reciprocity".

– The reality of migration has prompted certain developments and changes in the majority religions, such as:

    - The Al Mowafaqa Ecumenical Institute of Theology, created by the Protestant and Catholic Churches in 2012 in Rabat (Morocco).
    - The Mariam Mosque, a mosque for women only in Copenhagen (Denmark).

– Political management of multi-faith communities.

  The massive migratory flows of believers of religions/cultures different from those of the host country clearly raise the question of the political management of multi-faithism, as well as its inevitable trade-offs (religious freedom, proselytism, change in social norms/behaviours, etc.).

  It is only now that the relevance of the religious factor in the identity construction of immigrant groups has been observed

that this issue has been incorporated into political agendas, especially at the local level. Both European societies and, more recently, societies in the Maghreb countries have begun to seriously consider the political management of multi-faithism.

In order to carry out this management correctly, detailed studies with a large component of fieldwork are necessary, on which to base satisfactory but proportionate and legally viable responses to their demands (places of worship, cemeteries, religious assistance in hospitals, prisons, armed forces, etc.).

Finally, it should be noted that the challenge lies in identifying policies and legal principles that can adequately respond to the religious diversity generated by immigration without necessarily relying exclusively on the secular roots (Christian or otherwise) of the host societies' systems.

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Chapter Seven

Access to reproductive rights in India: a socio-legal analysis of the challenges faced by migrant populations[1]

Adam Dubin

Shreya Srivastava

Abstract

This chapter explores the significant barriers faced by migrant women in India in accessing abortion, placing the issue at the intersection of gender, migration, and reproductive rights. While India's legal framework for abortion, particularly under the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, has evolved in a fairly progressive manner, systemic disparities persist, especially for internal migrants, refugees, and undocumented women. Drawing on international human rights law, domestic jurisprudence, and empirical research, the chapter demonstrates how legal rights are undermined by practical obstacles such as poverty, lack of documentation, language barriers, stigma, and fragmentation of the healthcare system. Immigrant women are disproportionately affected by unsafe abortion practices due to limited access to formal healthcare and the widespread use of informal methods. The chapter argues that immigrant women's access to abortion is not simply a matter of healthcare, but a broader issue of social justice

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and human rights. It calls for a reproductive health approach that takes migration and gender into account, upholds the universality of human rights, and ensures meaningful access to abortion for all women, regardless of their status or origin.

Keywords

India, Migrant women, Access to abortion, Reproductive justice.

Introduction

> "Migrants can be defined by their legal status or ethnic origin, or migration can be categorised using parameters of duration, motivation and distance. The most important categories of migrants are labour migration, refugee migration, resettlement migration, internal migration and daily commuting" (UNAIDS, 2001).

In 1999, the International Labour Organisation determined that more than 90 million people were living legally or illegally in a country other than their own (ILO, 1999). Furthermore, despite the perception that a typical migrant is a man, approximately half of the migrant population worldwide are women (ILO, 1999). Internationally, these migrant workers not only accompany their family members, but also constitute an increasing proportion of the migrant workforce. Their vulnerability lies in the fact that not only are they outside the legal protection of their country of origin, but even in the host country they may be in workplaces that are not strictly within the scope of the law, such as domestic work, manual labour, hostesses or entertainers in nightclubs, etc. Immigrant women often have less bargaining power than the local population in a given area.

India accounts for approximately 40% of the total number of internal migrants. These have been defined as those who live in their own country but outside the region in which they were born (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2013). According to the 2011 Indian population census, the number of internal migrants has increased to 453.7 million (Chandrasekhar and Sharma, 2022). The pattern of migration is dominated by movement from rural to urban areas. Fifty-eight per cent of the migrant population has moved from rural to urban areas (Singh, 2024). Other migration patterns include movement from one rural area to another and movement from one urban area to another.

India is also home to a vast immigrant population and one of the major destinations for migrant populations, with the twelfth largest migrant population in the world. Since 1990, when the United Nations began tracking migratory movements, India has welcomed some 5.2 million immigrants (Connor, 2017). Most immigrants in India come from neighbouring countries such as Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka. India is the

destination of choice for these immigrants due to its geographical proximity and the extensive economic and interpersonal ties that existed before partition. The forces driving international migration are also the same as those driving internal migration.

It is significant to note that more than half of migrants living in rural areas move to get married. The majority of this group consists of women (Chandrasekhar and Sharma, 2022). This can be attributed to patrilocal kinship structures and marriage patterns in India. Some of these women also participate in the labour force. The percentage of migrant women who are part of the labour force is approximately 34% (Chandrasekhar and Sharma, 2022). However, in both rural and urban areas, the majority of migrant women are engaged in domestic work. In India, there has been an increase in the percentage of women who are self-employed, in unpaid work and in salaried jobs (Chandrasekhar and Sharma, 2022).

The migration of men is mainly attributed to the need for work. This may mean searching for a first job, losing an existing job, or a lack of job opportunities. For example, due to rural poverty, in India there are short-term migrations from rural to urban areas. These migrations are temporary, and the nature of the work they do is not based on qualifications. Migration from rural to urban areas also involves the redistribution of work, for example, from casual labour to salaried employment. Thus, in the context of migration in India, the classic push and pull factors come into play. Unemployment, underdevelopment, scarcity of natural resources and arable land, and natural calamities push people to leave their birthplace. Employment, higher wages, and better working conditions are the pull factors that draw migrants to their destination. Approximately 10.8% of all migrants have migrated for employment-related reasons (Ministry of Labour and Employment, 2023).

Although policies exist for external migration, internal migration does not feature prominently in India's poverty reduction and development strategy frameworks (Sethi and Kundu, 2020). Any form of migration has an impact on multiple sectors, but India's migration policy is not comprehensive and does not guarantee protection against vulnerabilities and exploitation, such as wage exploitation, health and safety violations, and poor living conditions. Migrant women, in particular, are highly vulnerable and face double discrimination as victims of gender-based violence,

physical and psychological abuse, exploitation, and trafficking (Sethi and Kundu, 2020).

Although the vulnerabilities of migrant women in India in terms of labour exploitation, poor living conditions and gender-based violence have been recognised, much less attention has been paid to their limited access to reproductive healthcare, particularly abortion. This omission is surprising, given the scale of female internal migration and the important role these women play in both the formal and informal economies. The combination of precarious working conditions, lack of social safety nets, and limited autonomy over their own bodies severely restricts migrant women's ability to make reproductive choices. These limitations are exacerbated by India's deeply stratified healthcare system, in which the poor—especially those without documentation, stable housing, or community networks—are often excluded from timely and safe medical services.

India's Medical Termination of Pregnancy (MTPA) Act, first passed in 1971 and most recently amended in 2021, provides a relatively progressive legal framework for access to abortion. It allows abortion up to 24 weeks under specific conditions and recognises risks to physical and mental health as legitimate grounds. However, the benefits of the law remain largely inaccessible to many migrant women due to systemic barriers. These include lack of knowledge of legal rights, linguistic and cultural alienation in urban settings, lack of health insurance portability, and outright discrimination by healthcare providers. Even when services are available in urban centres, poor migrant women often encounter bureaucratic obstacles or are deterred by the stigma surrounding abortion, especially if they are unmarried or belong to marginalised castes or religious groups.

Furthermore, the fragmentation of India's public healthcare system—divided between states and varying greatly in quality—exacerbates the inaccessibility of reproductive services for mobile populations. Public hospitals are often overburdened, under-resourced, and unable or unwilling to accommodate non-local patients. For migrant women, whose movements are often dictated by precarious work contracts or family obligations, navigating this system can be nearly impossible. They may be forced to seek abortions from informal providers, where safety is not guaranteed and where the risk of complications, coercion, or criminalisation is higher.

This chapter explores the legal, structural, and sociocultural factors that limit migrant women's access to abortion in India. Drawing on legal analysis, reports, and case studies, it argues that reproductive rights cannot be meaningfully exercised without addressing the broader framework of exclusion in which migrant women live and work. It thus advocates for an approach to reproductive healthcare that takes migration into account, i.e., one that considers the realities of internal displacement, informal work, and systemic neglect within the rapidly urbanising landscape of India.

1 Migrants' access to human rights in developing countries: barriers to the fulfilment of socio-economic rights, with a focus on India

Migrants in developing countries face systemic barriers to the realisation of their human rights, particularly socio-economic rights such as healthcare, housing and labour protection. Although international human rights law guarantees the protection of the rights of all persons regardless of their citizenship or migration status, the reality is that migrants—especially undocumented migrants and those in precarious employment—suffer exclusion from basic services, limited legal protection, and discrimination. These challenges are particularly visible in developing countries such as India, where internal migrants play a vital role in the economy but remain socially, economically and legally marginalised. This section describes the broader challenges migrants face in accessing their rights under international law and highlights the specific vulnerabilities of migrant women seeking reproductive healthcare, including abortion services.

The international human rights framework, including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), guarantees the rights to health, education, housing and decent work for all persons, regardless of their migration status (CESCR, General Comment No. 14, 2000). However, in practice, many developing countries condition access to socio-economic rights on formal citizenship, residency or documentation status (Khan and Arokkiaraj, 2021).

In India, internal migrants—particularly those moving from rural to urban areas—often face exclusion from state social welfare programmes, including food subsidies, health care assistance, and housing schemes. India's social welfare system often links

benefits to place-based entitlements, meaning that migrants lose access to services when they move from one state to another (Deshingkar and Akter, 2009). This exclusion disproportionately affects marginalised caste groups, indigenous populations and women, who already face systemic barriers to accessing rights in their places of origin.

Even when internal migrants move within state borders, they often lose access to benefits and services due to the patchwork of laws, welfare regimes, and regulations across countries. For internal migrants, movements within state borders are more common than cross-border movements: 87% of migrants move within the same state (Singh, 2024). Lack of awareness of differences in local healthcare systems results in these migrants losing access to resources. Migration also involves the loss of support systems, such as family and community, who know how and where to access services.

Migrant women are in a much more vulnerable position than men due to the reasons for migration. Women have a much higher migration rate (47.7%) than men (11.4%), mainly due to marriage, and only a very small proportion of women (1%) migrated for employment opportunities. This means that migrant women are often left without financial and family support when they leave their places of origin. The main reason for migration was marriage, cited in 87.5% of cases (Singh, 2024). Internal migration patterns, especially for women in India, tend to be regional.

For international migrants in developing regions, including South-East Asia, the situation is even more precarious. In India, undocumented migrants from Bangladesh, Rohingya refugees and other regional migrants often face exclusion from formal rights protection (Samaddar, 2020). Lacking legal recognition, they are excluded from public health services, formal employment and social protection programmes, making them vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

In developing countries, the informal sector employs a large proportion of internal and cross-border migrants. In India, it is estimated that over 90% of the workforce is employed in the informal sector, with migrants disproportionately represented in low-paid, insecure and hazardous jobs (NCEUS, 2007). These immigrants, who lack employment contracts and legal protection, face serious obstacles to realising their right to decent work, as guaranteed by Article 7 of the ICESCR.

The absence of labour protection exacerbates vulnerability in the workplace, particularly for migrant women, who are overrepresented in sectors such as domestic work, construction and garment manufacturing (Srivastava and Sasikumar, 2003). Migrant women often work without access to maternity leave, healthcare or mechanisms to report harassment or exploitation. This lack of workplace protection directly affects their ability to access reproductive healthcare and safe abortion services, particularly when seeking such care may require taking time off work.

These socioeconomic vulnerabilities are amplified during crises, as seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, which disproportionately affected migrant workers in India. When lockdowns were imposed, millions of migrant workers were left without income, food or shelter, and many were forced to walk back to their home states, highlighting the fragility of their socioeconomic rights (Kesar *et al.,* 2021).

Migrants' access to healthcare in developing countries is often fragmented and exclusionary. In India, for example, health services are primarily state based, meaning that migrants lose access to subsidised care when they move from one state to another (Borhade, 2011). Many public health programmes, including maternal and child health programmes, are linked to domicile status, effectively excluding mobile populations from essential services.

For migrant women, access to reproductive healthcare—including contraceptives, prenatal care, and abortion services—is difficult. Many migrant women lack information about their reproductive rights and are unable to navigate unfamiliar health systems in their destination areas. Language barriers, discrimination by health professionals, and the cost of services further deter migrant women from seeking healthcare.

Migrant women in developing countries often face interrelated vulnerabilities that exacerbate their exclusion from the protection of their rights. Migrant women experience higher rates of gender-based violence, including sexual exploitation by employers, landlords and state officials, particularly when their migration status is irregular (Samaddar, 2020). These abuses occur with near total impunity, as migrant women fear detention, deportation or further victimisation if they report violence.

The lack of gender-sensitive services exacerbates these vulnerabilities. In many developing countries, such as India, public

health services are not equipped to address the specific needs of migrant women, particularly those who experience intimate partner violence, sexual violence or unsafe working conditions (Borhade, 2011). Without access to trauma-informed care and reproductive health counselling, migrant women are forced to navigate pregnancy, contraception and abortion without support.

These challenges represent a form of reproductive injustice, in which economic marginalisation, social exclusion and legal disenfranchisement converge to deprive migrant women of control over their reproductive lives (Ross and Solinger, 2017). The result is a double burden: not only are migrant women excluded from socioeconomic rights, but they are also denied control over their own reproductive choices, further intensifying cycles of poverty and exclusion.

In developing countries, migrants' access to justice is limited by multiple factors, such as language barriers, lack of knowledge of their rights, and fear of state authorities. Migrants who experience discrimination, violence, or violations of their labour rights rarely seek justice due to the prohibitive cost of legal representation, corruption in judicial systems, and fear of reprisals. For undocumented migrants, these barriers are even more pronounced, as they risk detention and deportation if they meet with state institutions.

This lack of access to justice extends to violations of reproductive rights, where migrant women face significant obstacles to challenging forced sterilisation, denial of care, or forced abortions (Ghosh, 2011). Without access to legal assistance, migrant women's reproductive autonomy is routinely violated, with limited avenues for redress.

Migrant women, even when aware of local reproductive care systems, may choose to avoid contact for fear of reprisals. Women in low-income slums with high migrant populations cited lack of confidentiality and pressure to undergo sterilisation as reasons for not accessing formal care (Behera *et al.* 2015). Migrant women lack direct means to address this issue and fear state intervention, perpetuating a cycle of vulnerability in migrant communities.

Characteristics that define immigrant worker groups most vulnerable to denial of socioeconomic rights and impediments to their status include age and educational level. Younger women have difficulty accessing healthcare, including reproductive services.

This may be related to a lack of economic stability and knowledge of available services. Migrant women are forced to resort to more unsafe abortions.

Young migrant women find themselves at a critical crossroads of vulnerability that significantly increases their likelihood of undergoing unsafe abortions. Among them, migrant adolescents aged 15 to 19 are at particular risk. Recent studies reveal that the likelihood of undergoing unsafe abortions is nearly three times higher in rural areas and five times higher in urban areas for women aged 15 to 19, compared to those aged 40 and above (Rahaman *et al.*, 2022). This marked disparity reflects the level of disadvantage faced by poor migrant adolescents in urban centres, where they often lack stable income, family support or knowledge of reproductive rights. Rather than improving access to healthcare, urban migration often intensifies risk, particularly for migrants who are unfamiliar with the system or lack social support. These patterns highlight the deep interrelationship between poverty and youth that drives unsafe abortion practices among migrant women.

2 Abortion as a human right, regardless of immigration status

The human right to abortion is not a singular right, but rather a composite of several internationally recognised rights that have evolved over time to support and affirm women's ability to terminate a pregnancy. This right applies universally, regardless of immigration status or documentation. The universality of human rights underpins the principle that all women—including immigrants, asylum seekers, refugees, and undocumented women—are entitled to the same reproductive health protections as citizens. When migrant women, especially those without legal status, face barriers to accessing abortion, these restrictions often violate the fundamental principles of non-discrimination and equal access to healthcare. Although human rights are understood to apply from birth to death, outside of religious or moral frameworks they do not extend to the legal recognition of foetal rights.

Historically, the right to abortion was first framed in relation to population control, particularly in the context of development policies in the so-called global south. Over time, however, the international community has come to recognise that access to abortion is essential to women's bodily autonomy and decision-making. These rights are now embedded in the fundamental

principles of international law. It is important to note that states retain a degree of discretion to regulate abortion beyond the minimum grounds established—such as rape, incest, or threats to the life of a pregnant person—as long as such regulation does not result in violations of other protected rights, including the right to life, health, or bodily integrity. These obligations apply equally to all women within a state's jurisdiction, including undocumented migrants and refugees. Migrant women often face heightened barriers—linguistic, economic, cultural, and legal—that make them more vulnerable to rights violations. According to the Committee on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (General Comment No. 2, 2013), denying essential reproductive health services on the basis of immigration status contravenes international guarantees of non-discrimination.

Although abortion is not recognised as an absolute right in international law, access to abortion—particularly in life-threatening circumstances—is guaranteed under certain conditions. The right to abortion is protected through a multi-level framework that includes international, regional and national legal instruments. In particular, the three regional human rights systems affirm that abortion should be accessible under certain conditions. The African regional system is particularly progressive in this regard: the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol) is the only binding human rights treaty that codifies abortion as a right.

The development of abortion rights in the UN system has been gradual. CEDAW laid the initial groundwork in 1979, specifically through Article 12, which obliges states to ensure access to health services, including those related to family planning. Over the decades, this foundation has been reinforced by interpretations and recommendations from various treaty bodies. Restrictions on abortion are increasingly seen as violations of other fundamental rights, such as privacy, health, liberty, and the prohibition of torture. It is crucial that CEDAW protections are applied universally, meaning that migrant and undocumented women must have equal access to reproductive healthcare without fear of deportation or legal reprisals. A State's commitment to international human rights conventions requires ensuring that these protections extend to all women under its jurisdiction.

The political sensitivity of abortion has determined how it has been addressed in international instruments. The Convention

on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women does not explicitly mention abortion, a deliberate decision that was partly influenced by pressure from the Clinton administration in favour of 'abortion-neutral' language to facilitate wider ratification (Venter, 2012: 455). This compromise sought to maintain political consensus by avoiding overt references to abortion, particularly at a time when it was not yet firmly established in the international framework of women's rights. However, the omission has created vulnerabilities for migrant women, who may lack access to abortion services without explicit legal protection.

The drafting process of CEDAW reflected an important shift in emphasis. A 1974 draft of the convention included language that only guaranteed "information on family planning". Later, the final Article 12 was expanded to include access to family planning services, thus recognising women's right not only to knowledge but also to care. This change strengthened women's autonomy in reproductive decision-making and imposed a clear obligation on States to provide services, not just information. General Recommendation No. 26 on migrant women workers (CEDAW, 2008: 18) recognises the reproductive rights challenges faced by migrant women, noting and calling on States to enact policies and laws to protect equal access:

> "[...] coercive abortion or lack of access to safe reproductive health and abortion services when the mother's health is at risk, or even after sexual assault; the absence or inadequacy of maternity leave and benefits, and the lack of affordable obstetric care, which result in serious health risks."

Lack of documentation or other obstacles should not be used as a justification for denying care. Equal access to reproductive services is an essential component of states' obligations under international human rights law and a fundamental element of non-discrimination in healthcare.

The recognition of women's bodily autonomy was further advanced in the 1994 Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD). This landmark document identified unsafe abortion as a global health priority and shifted the focus from state-directed population goals to individuals' rights in reproductive decision-making (Erdman, 2023: 1119; Pillai, 2024). The ICPD recognised that migrant women, particularly undocumented women, face a higher risk of violation

of their reproductive rights and called on states to ensure equitable access to healthcare for all women within their territory.

Despite this growing international consensus, political resistance to the recognition of the right to abortion persisted. During negotiations for the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the US government attempted to introduce a reservation clarifying that the document did not create new human rights, including abortion (Pietilä, 2007: 101). However, the final declaration explicitly condemned unsafe abortion and reaffirmed women's right to make autonomous decisions about their reproductive health. It did not impose gestational limits and recognised the significant contribution of restrictive abortion laws to maternal mortality. The Beijing Platform also recognised that migrant women face different barriers to accessing reproductive health care and should receive the same level of care as other women (paragraphs 94, 97 and 106).

Following Beijing, CEDAW issued General Recommendation No. 24 (1999), which urged States to reconsider laws that criminalise abortion (paragraph 31c). The recommendation emphasised that states should pay "special attention [...] to the health needs and rights of women belonging to vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, such as migrant, refugee and internally displaced women [...]". This guidance marked a turning point in the international recognition of abortion not only as a health issue, but also as a matter of universal human rights and gender equality, and an implicit extension of this right to migrant women.

The evolution of jurisprudence in support of abortion rights has seen significant advances in the 21st century. The United Nations, particularly through the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), has consistently affirmed that abortion rights are a fundamental component of reproductive autonomy, without distinction between migrants and non-migrants. In fact, international law, as discussed below, has methodically recognised the reproductive health rights of vulnerable groups such as migrants. International law has anchored the right to abortion in a broader framework of internationally recognised protections, ensuring that these are universally applied, regardless of migration status or other personal characteristics.

Recent decisions reaffirm that all women, including immigrants and undocumented women, have the right to abortion care. The principle of universality of human rights guarantees the

same protection to all persons under the jurisdiction of a State. Although States retain the authority to regulate elective abortion, the UN has emphasised that such regulation must respect basic human rights standards, particularly in the context of maternal health. Although case law that has expressly addressed the right to abortion for migrants is limited, human rights decisions issued by courts and committees are, in theory, equally applicable to migrants, regardless of their immigration status.

A landmark legal development occurred in 2005, when the rights to privacy and protection from torture were formally linked to access to abortion. In K. L. v. Peru (2003), the UN Human Rights Committee ruled in favour of a 17-year-old girl who had been denied an abortion even though her foetus had been diagnosed with fatal abnormalities. The committee determined that this denial constituted a violation of her right to privacy under Article 17 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and amounted to cruel and inhuman treatment under Article 7. By applying these fundamental rights to access to abortion, the committee expanded the international legal framework, affirming that protections against torture and invasion of privacy apply universally.

This momentum continued in 2015, when CEDAW responded to a communication filed by three NGOs against the Philippines, which had promoted natural family planning to the exclusion of other reproductive options. The Committee urged the Philippine government to legalise abortion in specific circumstances, eliminate unsafe abortion practices, and ensure access to post-abortion care. It emphasised that denying access to abortion undermines women's 's ability to make intimate and personal decisions about their bodies and lives. As the Philippines is a party to CEDAW, its blanket criminalisation of abortion was in direct conflict with its obligations under the treaty. The Committee's recommendation reinforced that bodily autonomy, including access to abortion, is a human right, and in no way limits this right solely to those who are documented.

Other landmark rulings in 2016 and 2017 further consolidated this legal trend. In Mellet v. Ireland (2016), the Human Rights Committee concluded that forcing women to carry non-viable pregnancies to term and forcing them to travel abroad for abortion services constituted cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment. The Committee reaffirmed that such laws violate the right to privacy and the principle of non-discrimination. In particular,

it stated that Article 7 of the ICCPR prohibits any justification for treatment amounting to torture. These findings are significant for migrant women, who often face additional financial and logistical barriers when seeking abortion care abroad.

There have been a small number of cases involving immigrant women's access to abortion that further reinforce the universal nature of access to abortion rights. In the United States, the case of Garza v. Hargan, later appealed as Azar v. Garza, concerned a 17-year-old undocumented immigrant in federal custody who was initially prevented from having an abortion by Trump administration officials despite meeting the requirements for a Texas judicial referral. The District of Columbia Circuit ruled in favour of the minor, affirming the constitutional right to abortion access for unaccompanied minors in immigration detention (874 F.3d 735, D.C. Cir. 2017). Although the US Supreme Court later overturned the decision on procedural grounds, because she had already undergone an abortion, the case remains a touchstone in debates about the reproductive rights of migrant minors. And in Ireland, the 2014 case of Ms. Y v. Ireland, involving an asylum seeker in Ireland who was denied an abortion despite being suicidal and pregnant as a result of rape, highlighted the disproportionate impact of restrictive abortion laws on migrant women. Forced to undergo a caesarean section at twenty-five weeks of gestation, her experience prompted calls for reform (O'Carroll, 2014).

Since 2016, a series of general observations and recommendations have further entrenched abortion as a human right in international law. The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), in its General Observation No. 22, obliged States to provide access to legal and safe abortion and to protect that access from ideological interference. It affirmed that women and girls must be able to make autonomous decisions regarding their reproductive health and that health systems must be equipped to provide abortion and post-abortion care services, particularly to women who are disproportionately affected by intersectional discrimination, such as migrants and refugees.

CEDAW has continued to strengthen this legal foundation. General Recommendation No. 35 recognised that denying or delaying abortion can constitute a form of torture. Similarly, General Comment No. 36 (2018) of the Human Rights Committee emphasised that States parties must ensure safe, legal and effec-

tive access to abortion, especially when pregnancy endangers a woman's life or causes her severe suffering. These comments explicitly recognised the vulnerable position of migrant women and highlighted the importance of removing structural barriers to their reproductive rights.

Despite these important advances, challenges remain. International law continues to grapple with reconciling women's reproductive rights with state sovereignty over abortion regulation. Although international standards require access to abortion in cases of rape, incest, life-threatening conditions, or severe suffering, states retain discretion to establish broader legal frameworks. This continued deference to national autonomy—combined with the absence of a fully harmonised global standard—continues to result in the exclusion of migrants from essential reproductive healthcare.

Nevertheless, the fundamental principle of human rights is their universality. Abortion is increasingly recognised as an essential component of bodily autonomy and gender equality. All women—including immigrants, asylum seekers, and undocumented women—deserve equal access to abortion services. International law must continue to evolve to ensure the protection of these rights without exception or discrimination.

3 Abortion rights in India: legal progress and practical challenges

Access to abortion in India has evolved through a complex legal and socio-cultural landscape, shaped by changing legislation and judicial interpretation. Historically, the MTPA, enacted in 1971, regulated access to abortion by allowing terminations up to twenty weeks of gestation with the approval of a registered medical practitioner. This framework subjected women's reproductive choices to the discretion of medical professionals, often influenced by prevailing cultural and social norms. Although the Indian Constitution does not explicitly guarantee the right to abortion, the courts have played a key role in recognising reproductive rights as an integral part of broader constitutional protections under Article 21, which guarantees the right to life and personal liberty.

The constitutional basis for the right to abortion in India has been gradually built up through key court decisions. In Suchita

Srivastava v. Chandigarh Administration (2009), the Supreme Court affirmed that reproductive choices are central to a woman's personal liberty, and that the right to terminate a pregnancy is protected by the rights to privacy, dignity, and bodily integrity. The Court emphasised the need for informed consent and stressed that these protections apply equally to women with disabilities. By rooting reproductive autonomy in constitutionally guaranteed, the ruling greatly strengthened the legal legitimacy of abortion rights in India.

Further strengthening this framework, the landmark ruling in K.S. Puttaswamy v. Union of India (2017) declared privacy a fundamental right, explicitly stating that this includes the freedom to make reproductive decisions. Although it does not directly address abortion, the decision broadened the scope of constitutional protections underpinning reproductive autonomy.

In 2021, the Indian Parliament passed the MTPA (Amendment) Act, extending the upper gestational limit for abortion to twenty-four weeks in certain cases. Although this amendment represented a progressive expansion of abortion rights, its implementation has revealed inconsistencies. Judicial interpretations of the law have varied significantly, with some courts granting access to abortion while others have denied it, creating legal uncertainty and unequal access.

4 Practical access to abortion in India: A difficult right to achieve

Despite a relatively progressive legal framework and Supreme Court jurisprudence that has reaffirmed and expanded the right, access to safe and legal abortion in India remains elusive for many. Between 2015 and 2019, an estimated 48.5 million pregnancies were recorded, of which about 16 million ended in abortion (Guttmacher Institute). A 2015 study published in The Lancet reported an abortion rate of 47 per 1,000 women aged 15 to 49. However, only 22% of abortions were performed in regulated medical facilities, while 73% were medical abortions outside the formal health system. An additional 5% were performed using non-medical methods, many of which were outside the legal limits. As a result, the study estimated that nearly one million abortions in 2015 were unsafe (Singh *et al.,* 2018).

Unsafe abortion remains one of the leading contributors to maternal mortality in India, accounting for approximately 10% of maternal deaths (Chandra *et al.*, 2021). These statistics reflect deep systemic barriers despite the existence of a legal right to abortion. In its 2014 Concluding Observations, the CEDAW committee expressed concern about the limited availability of safe abortion and post-abortion care in India. Based on evidence provided by civil society organisations, the committee called on the government to ensure that all women have access to high-quality abortion services, including adequate care for complications arising from unsafe procedures (CEDAW, 2014: 31b).

However, numerous structural and social barriers prevent access to abortion. Stigma, patriarchal norms, economic insecurity, and bureaucratic hurdles continue to limit women's autonomy, particularly in rural regions where public health infrastructure is poor. Cultural opposition to abortion—reflected in the personal beliefs of healthcare professionals—can further restrict access, especially for low-income women who rely on public hospitals and clinics. Migrant women, particularly those without legal status, face additional challenges: fear of legal repercussions, language barriers, unfamiliarity with the healthcare system, and lack of awareness of their reproductive rights contribute to delays or denial of care.

These barriers are compounded for women from marginalised castes, particularly Dalit women, many of whom migrate for work and face discrimination in healthcare institutions. These intersecting forms of disadvantage place migrant and undocumented women in precarious circumstances, increasing their reliance on clandestine and often dangerous methods of abortion.

Although India's legal framework has expanded to recognise abortion as a component of reproductive rights—supported by international law, constitutional interpretation, and legislative reform—significant disparities in access and outcomes persist. Legal rights alone have not translated into equitable or universal access, especially for poor women, those belonging to marginalised castes, those living in remote areas, or those without secure immigration status. For these populations, safe and legal abortion often remains out of reach. The persistence of unsafe abortion among India's most vulnerable groups highlights the urgent need for systemic reforms that bridge the gap between legal rights and lived realities.

5 Challenges to abortion access for immigrants in India

The United Nations recognises that one aspect of immigrants' health rights that is often overlooked is their reproductive rights. The ability to address reproductive health rights is a matter of human rights and social justice. Globally, nearly 15% of the burden of disease is associated with unmet reproductive health needs (UNAIDS, 2001), which disproportionately affect women.

Globally, displaced women and girls have been found to face increased risks of sexual and gender-based violence; increased risks of sexually transmitted infections (STIs); increased risks of unwanted pregnancies; and increased risks of unsafe abortions, with their associated complications (Refugee Women's Commission, 2019). In India, the government's approach to migrant women workers focuses on their protection and safety. However, there is an urgent need for a gender-sensitive migration policy that considers gender-specific concerns and risks. This policy should focus on both the protection and empowerment of women.

Refugee women have therefore been identified as a priority in UNHCR policy since the early 1990s. However, a global assessment of sexual and reproductive health services in humanitarian contexts in 2012 showed that the provision of abortion and contraceptive services lagged other services in this category (Refugee Women's Commission, 2019).

India has previously been perceived as a refugee-receiving nation. In January 2022, 46% of refugees and asylum seekers registered with UNHCR India were women and girls (UNHCR, India). Refugees and asylum seekers registered in India come from Tibet, Myanmar, and Afghanistan. In addition, historically, India has also hosted refugees from Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

Sexual and gender-based violence is a reality of international migration. A significant challenge that exists in the case of refugees is transactional sex. Refugees and asylum seekers have few options for earning a living. As the Refugee Women's Commission has found, refugees from all backgrounds and demographic groups engage in sex work. This may be done on a regular basis, as the sole source of income or to supplement income from another source, or it may be a one-off transaction involving monetary or non-monetary items (Refugee Women's Commission, 2016). It was noted that refugees who engage in sex work lack access

to specific health services focused on reproductive and sexual health.

According to the United Nations glossary on sexual exploitation and abuse, transactional sex refers to "the exchange of money, employment, goods or services for sex, including sexual favours, other forms of humiliating, degrading or exploitative behaviour" (United Nations, 2017). In a conflict situation, established sources of income may be destabilised; economic trends change; the imprisonment of male members and male mortality rates increase. All of this has profound consequences for women's livelihoods (Hutchinson *et al.,* 2016). Relocation to a refugee camp in this context can lead to an increase in the incidence of transactional sex, not only in the camp, but also on the journey there. People displaced in situations of armed conflict and transported illegally to another country are completely at the mercy of the trafficker.

Although a refugee camp may initially be safe, it comes with its own challenges. Living conditions in these camps are often dehumanising and deplorable. For example, in India's largest detention centre, the Matia transit camp, the Supreme Court noted the appalling state of affairs, including the lack of adequate water supply, poor sanitation and insufficient toilets in the camp. It therefore instructed the Assam State Legal Services Authority to conduct a surprise inspection of the camp to assess hygiene conditions, food availability and overall living conditions (Rajubala Das v. Union of India, 2024).

These harsh and unfamiliar conditions have an impact on the health of refugees. However, as financial resources are limited, refugee families do not prioritise the health of female refugees. Access to healthcare is also limited and restricted to public hospitals. Hospital visits are often supervised by the police (Sullivan, Sur and Dan, 2024). Private healthcare providers are often beyond the reach of refugees. Unfortunately, refugees are also excluded from most health and nutrition programmes available to citizens (Malik, 2024).

Due to the general deterioration in the health of refugees in detention camps, it can be argued that if these women take abortion pills, the complications could be serious. All health parameters must be adequate for a woman to take an abortion pill. However, some women may ignore their other health conditions and take the pill, which can be dangerous. According to

the United Nations Population Fund, it is estimated that between 25% and 50% of maternal deaths in refugee settings are due to complications from unsafe abortions (Ohren and Lewinger, 2020). In comparison, only about 13% of deaths worldwide are due to such practices (Centre for Reproductive Rights, 2001). Abortion affects not only the pregnant woman's body, but also her mental and emotional well-being. However, in refugee centres, physical health is prioritised over mental health. Displaced women are "twice as likely to experience symptoms of PTSD and more than four times as likely to experience depression, compared to their male counterparts." It has been reported that "the use of mental health services is lower among refugees than among the local population and among women than among men" (Malik, 2024).

Although the law in India does not prevent refugee or asylum-seeking women from accessing abortion rights, some cases can nevertheless be complicated. For example, a Rohingya woman became pregnant as a result of rape by the man who helped her escape from prison, where she had been incarcerated for three months on charges of illegally entering India. She was an asylum seeker with the UNHCR in India, and her refugee status was being considered. However, she was unable to terminate her pregnancy in India. The delay was due to the lack of clarity about her status and the ongoing criminal case she had filed against the accused (Paliath, 2024). She was only able to terminate the pregnancy after Indian officials pushed her back to Bangladesh, and there too in a private clinic.

It is also pertinent to note that she was awaiting a court order in Tripura for approval to terminate her pregnancy. Indian law, however, does not require court intervention until twenty weeks in the case of all women and until twenty-four weeks in the case of vulnerable women identified by the 2021 amendment. Police personnel advised her to wait for the court order. This particular case, therefore, highlights the lack of clarity regarding the procedure for medical termination of pregnancy. Although the preservation of the foetus is essential in the case of termination of a pregnancy caused by rape, as it is considered evidence (Nabal Thakur v. State, 2023), the jurisdiction of a court of law only arises once the deadline has passed.

It has also been found that migrant women use abortion pills without consulting doctors. These pills are available over the counter. According to a migrant worker, they are sometimes

also sold illegally outside shops. When pills are sold in this way, the price is also greatly increased for profit (John, 2024). Self-administration of pills has been observed among migrant women. Furthermore, the pills cannot be taken in the case of certain conditions or illnesses. However, these factors are not taken into account in self-administration. Immigrant women are often not very healthy. Many suffer from hypertension, moderate anaemia, and even psychological disorders (Saraswati, Sharma and Sarna, 2015). The incorrect administration of pills often causes damage to the woman's body as well as the foetus and does not lead to a complete abortion. As a result, many women experience unbearable pain and immense bleeding. This also affects their ability to work and earn a living, which is often low wage in the unorganised sector (Saraswati, Sharma and Sarna, 2015).

One factor leading to the increase in unsupervised use of pills is women's limited social access to abortion-related services. Providers in formal, certified centres do not provide services to women if they come alone or if their spouse or family member does not give consent (Duggal and Ramachandran, 2004). It is important to note that the law does not require such consent and that the right to terminate a pregnancy belongs exclusively to the pregnant woman. This is a failure to properly enforce the law, which is observed at various levels (Akhter, 2022).

Another factor that may lead women to terminate their pregnancies is the cause of migration. The gender dynamics of internal migration show that most women migrate to get married. Due to the challenges posed by migration, it is possible that a high proportion of migrant women do not want to have more children than they already have. This was recorded in a study of a thousand internal migrant women conducted in Delhi and Mumbai (Saraswati, Sharma and Sarna, 2015).

There are also language barriers to accessing medical care, as many migrant workers come from states such as Jharkhand, West Bengal and Odisha and work in linguistically different areas of India, such as Kerala and Kashmir. Doctors and migrants therefore speak different regional languages and may not be fluent in the languages most widely spoken in the country. Added to this is the lack of inclusion of migrant women in rights-based information on reproductive health and safe abortion services. As a result, women rely on non-medical guidance from female family members or friends.

In a study on patterns of seeking abortion services, preferences and their determinants among Indian women, it was found that 54% of women sought medical termination of pregnancy in private clinics, compared to 19% who went to public health service providers (Malik *et al*., 2023). These data are from the National Family Health Survey-5, collected by the Indian Government's Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. In 2019, there were a total of 7,092 public centres with trained providers across the country to provide comprehensive abortion services (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2019). In India, the vast majority of long-term migrants are women, constituting nearly 68% of this population (Roshania, 2024). Therefore, investment in public infrastructure for the availability of comprehensive abortion care must increase to accommodate the number of migrant women who may need access to public healthcare.

Economic factors also influence women's choices when accessing abortion care. Although the cost of terminating a pregnancy in a private clinic can be high, especially when considered in the context of migrant women, public hospitals or government-affiliated hospitals may offer comprehensive abortion services free of charge or at low cost. However, several studies have found that women are discouraged from attending public facilities due to repeated visits and longer waiting times (Malik *et al.,* 2023). For migrant women, this could have a direct impact on their livelihoods. Poverty and fear of losing their jobs may prevent them from accessing formal, subsidised or free healthcare. Urban health centres, which provide primary healthcare, are often inaccessible to migrants due to their opening hours. Furthermore, places offering safe services are not adequately advertised (MHFW, 2023). In states such as Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Goa and Maharashtra, a significant proportion of women had abortions in private centres (Malik *et al.,* 2023).

The right to abortion is not only the right to access a safe abortion but also includes post-abortion follow-up and care. In the aforementioned environment of a refugee camp and the migrant population, it is difficult to imagine that women have an unlimited right to abortion, as health is not a priority. According to the World Health Organisation, health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. The challenges of migration and displacement compromise their health.

The general right to health is also an integral component of the right to abortion. India lacks a reliable database with information on the number of inter-state migrants, which has a negative impact on relief and rehabilitation measures. For example, the timely distribution of food to beneficiaries, especially migrant workers, is less than the allocation made. As a result, migrant women do not have adequate and nutritious food, which can lead to miscarriages. In addition, migrant workers also face serious occupational and health and safety risks, such as accidents and respiratory disorders. This can even endanger pregnant women and their foetuses. Due to the high percentage of their wages that migrants spend on food, living conditions, such as adequate housing and water and sanitation, are compromised. The burden of inadequate water, sanitation and hygiene falls on women and girls and is directly related to sexual and reproductive health rights. In addition, many migrant communities are also unable to benefit from visits by health workers because they only visit recognised slums, thus excluding migrant workers living in open settlements or within workplaces. Slums present difficult living conditions, such as lack of basic services, overcrowding and congestion, and lack of basic sanitation.

6 Recommendations

The previous sections of this chapter have outlined the systemic barriers faced by migrants and refugees in accessing socio-economic and sexual and reproductive health rights. The intersectionality of gender and migration exacerbates migrant women's access to reproductive and sexual health rights. However, these rights should be universally accessible. This will also uphold the constitutional principles of justice and equality.

In India, working women receive maternity benefits under the Maternity Benefits Act 1961 if they work in mines, factories, shops, establishments or plantations. Under this Act, women have the advantage of receiving maternity benefits if they have suffered a miscarriage. Maternity benefit in this case refers to the right to receive an average daily wage for at least the period of actual absence. To improve access for migrant women employed in the unorganised sector, particularly in construction, it is important to extend the application of the Maternity Benefit Act, 1961 to this sector as well. In 2024, the Indian Ministry of Labour issued

a directive to all companies in the infrastructure sector to grant six weeks of paid leave to women who have an abortion. This will also include migrant women (Madhukalya, 2024). Together with the provision to transfer their wages directly to their bank accounts, this can address migrant women's fear of losing their wages or jobs due to their reproductive work.

Awareness campaigns in immigrant communities and refugee camps are essential to bridge the knowledge gap that immigrant women have about their rights. As recognised in a study conducted in the state of Kerala, where many migrants come to work on farms and construction sites, it was found that women believed that laws related to abortion only apply to minors or survivors of sexual violence. In other cases, it is illegal (Anil, 2024). It is imperative to dispel these myths. These awareness campaigns will also enable immigrant women and their families to learn about healthcare professionals and abortion techniques that are less invasive and painful. It has also been observed in some health centres that the provision of abortions is conditional on undergoing sterilisation if the woman already has two or more children (Deosthali and Rege, 2019). Migrant women are more vulnerable to this due to their lack of knowledge and language barriers in some cases.

Access to healthcare in slums, as well as in open settlements and workplaces, also requires immediate attention from the authorities. India's urban healthcare infrastructure is not adequate to provide comprehensive support to slum dwellers. Studies also indicate that in urban areas, private doctors are more accessible than public health centres (Banerjee *et al.,* 2012). As discussed in the previous section of this paper, migrant women cannot access abortion services in private health centres. This represents a significant drain on the already low incomes of migrant families. As a result, women and their families compromise on access to abortion services and self-administer drugs or physical procedures to induce abortion.

It is therefore essential that public health centres reach out to slums, workplaces and open settlements. Investment can be made in mobile health vans and telehealth services, which improve access to healthcare. The penetration of these services in urban areas can meet the needs of the dominant migrant group, i.e. from rural to urban areas. These services can help ensure patient confidentiality and enable patients to receive sexual and reproductive health counselling. Some platforms in

India already provide information on the legality of abortions, access to services, and online referrals (Chandrasekharan *et al.*, 2022).

Countries such as England, France, New Zealand, Pakistan, and Scotland already offer abortion services through telehealth (Chandrasekharan *et al.,* 2022). If it is also determined that abortion services can be provided in a similar manner in India, an amendment or broader interpretation of the MTPA Act of 1971 will be necessary, as it currently only allows termination in a public hospital or a government-approved facility (Jain *et al.*, 2022). At the same time, it will also be essential to ensure that local clinics do not sell abortion pills without a prescription. This is necessary to prevent self-induced abortions.

It has also been observed that practitioners insist on obtaining additional documentation to provide pregnancy termination services (Chandra *et al.*, 2021). A photo ID, an Aadhar card (similar to a social security card), and marriage certificates are some of the common forms of proof required by many service providers. While women may have an identity card or Aadhar card, not everyone in India has a marriage certificate. Although marriage registration is a legal requirement in India, as marriages are solemnised and become valid according to the religious laws applicable to the parties, registration does not always take place. This requires immediate reconsideration so that access and care are non-discriminatory. In this way, abortion services will also fall within the rights-based framework.

Ultimately, measures must also be taken to improve the overall right to health for all people, particularly women and girls. Indian government schemes such as Poshan Abhiyaan (National Nutrition Mission) must be strengthened. One of the beneficiaries of this scheme is pregnant women. Its aim is to provide sustainable health and fill nutritional gaps. India has also taken notable steps to improve its commitments to water, sanitation and hygiene. Improving sanitation practices has not only safeguarded people's health but also reduced gender vulnerabilities associated with poor WASH practices.

Conclusion

The right to abortion in India is recognised in law and constitutionally grounded, but it remains inaccessible to many

of the country's most vulnerable populations. For migrant women—whether internally displaced, undocumented, or refugees—this gap between the law and lived experience is acute. Their marginalisation in the healthcare system is not the result of a legal prohibition, but rather exclusion caused by poverty, social discrimination, lack of documentation, and a fragmented healthcare infrastructure. Although the MTP Act and Indian constitutional jurisprudence provide the legal framework for abortion rights, these protections remain aspirational for migrant women unless they are supported by specific reforms that dismantle the social and administrative barriers they face.

As this chapter has shown, the structural vulnerabilities faced by migrant women—including language barriers, poor working conditions, exploitative labour practices, and limited access to public healthcare—create a context in which reproductive autonomy is severely limited. Reliance on informal abortion methods, inability to access post-abortion care, and conditionality imposed by healthcare providers contribute to a pattern of reproductive injustice. These patterns are troubling when compounded by caste, social class, religion, and immigrant status, which intersect to further entrench exclusion and stigma.

Recognising abortion as a human right under international law reinforces the state's duty to ensure equitable and non-discriminatory access to reproductive healthcare for all women, regardless of their immigration status. However, fulfilling this obligation requires more than legal recognition; it demands a comprehensive and intersectional approach that includes investment in public health infrastructure, mobile and community-based services, awareness-raising campaigns, legal, and robust oversight of medical practice. It also requires the decriminalisation of self-managed abortion and a shift towards affirming women's autonomy through accessible, confidential and culturally sensitive care.

The reproductive health needs of migrant women should not be considered peripheral, but central to any rights-based healthcare framework in India. Addressing these needs is not only a matter of service delivery, but of justice, equality and human dignity. To this end, the state must go beyond formal commitments and take concrete and sustained measures to ensure that no woman, regardless of where she is born or where she travels, is denied the right to make decisions about her own body.

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Conclusions

The future ahead

Cecilia Estrada Villaseñor

Introduction

We come to the end of this collective journey through the demographic and migratory dynamics of the 21st century with the certainty that the world we inhabit is undergoing a transformation of society. This book has brought together diverse voices, perspectives and approaches with the aim of understanding a complex, multi-scale and multifaceted phenomenon: how populations are changing and how people are moving on an unequal, urbanised, ageing and tense planet.

The starting point for this work was clear, and we established it as such in various group meetings: it is impossible to understand the major contemporary debates without incorporating demographic factors and human mobility as central elements of the analysis. Without data, it is impossible to describe reality. Therefore, in each chapter we have addressed aspects that, although they may seem fragmented at first glance—demographic transition, agricultural work, forced displacement, reception policies, religion, the right to healthcare, ageing, political polarisation—together form a coherent map of the present and an uncomfortable mirror of the challenges we face.

In this context, migration is neither an exception nor an anomaly, but rather a structural part of how the world works today. Nor is demography a neutral or purely technical science; it is a field from which narratives are constructed, policies are designed, and societies are projected in the context of the future. For this reason, our analysis has sought to avoid both alarmism and triumphalism, focusing instead on the complexity of the data and the human lives behind each number.

This section of conclusions is not intended merely to summarise what has already been said. Its purpose is to open up a broader conversation about what we have learned, what we do not yet fully understand, and what we must begin to imagine. The intersection between demographic dynamics and migration requires cross-cutting approaches that integrate human rights, political economy, cultural sensitivity, and environmental responsibility. Above all, it demands an ethical commitment to the real people who inhabit and transform our territories.

From here, we will review the main ideas developed in the previous chapters in a structured manner, highlighting not only the shared findings and diagnoses, but also the critical issues, open tensions and questions that remain unanswered. The aim is to offer an interpretative roadmap to help guide public debate, political action and academic research on a phenomenon as vital as population and human mobility.

When we talk about global governance and democratic agreements, as we saw in the corresponding chapter, it is necessary to raise our gaze from particular cases to a systemic reflection on human mobility in the 21st century. This approach is based on a disturbing observation: current migration governance frameworks are overwhelmed by the realities they seek to contain.

We must understand that human displacement—whether forced, voluntary, circular, or structural—is not an epiphenomenon of globalisation, but one of its persistent expressions. In a world characterised by inequality, climate change, protracted conflicts and political polarisation, migration is not going to decrease but rather intensify. Therefore, the challenge is not to contain it, but to govern it with justice, efficiency and a long-term vision (Czaika and Haas, 2017).

Mobility must be understood as a right, not as a tolerated exception. This statement resonates with the principles enshrined in the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration

(United Nations, 2018), but also with the legacy of the struggles for freedom of movement, quality before the law and universal dignity. The interpretation is therefore political and ethical: either we recognise mobility as an integral part of global citizenship, or we continue to build legal, administrative and symbolic walls that exacerbate exclusion.

A multi-level governance in which state, local, regional, community and international actors share responsibilities and coordinate policies. In particular, we must highlight the role of cities as spaces of welcome and democratic innovation, where many of the decisions that states formulate but do not implement are put into practice. In this regard, recent approaches that advocate urban diplomacy and decentralised cooperation as keys to a new architecture of rights (Barber, 2013).

1 What happens when we talk about politicised demography?

Joaquín Leguina's chapter offered us a detailed and stark analysis of the ageing population process in Spain, framed within a broader trend affecting the whole of Europe. With persistently low fertility (1.29 children per woman in 2024), an inverted demographic pyramid and a growing dependence on foreign employment, Spain faces what some authors describe as a "demographic time bomb" (Kohler *et al.,* 2002; Esping-Andersen, 2019).

There is a contradiction between the structural need for migration to sustain the economic and welfare model and the growing politicisation of the migration discourse. Far from being managed as a tool for demographic sustainability, immigration has become an ideological battleground, especially since the rise of populist parties such as Vox (Casals, 2018).

One of the most relevant contributions of the chapter is the denunciation of the lack of a comprehensive state strategy for migration governance. Despite the fact that more than 20% of jobs are held by people born outside the country, public policies tend to react in an improvised manner or based on electoral. Throughout this chapter, the author emphasises that without planning, reform of reception systems, or strengthening of the social protection system, integration becomes increasingly difficult and social rejection grows.

In line with recent studies (Cebolla-Boado and González-Ferrer, 2021), Leguina warns that the real challenge lies not in the arrival

of migrants, but in the institutional and political capacity to articulate an inclusive and sustainable model of coexistence. This chapter therefore reminds us that Europe's demographic future cannot be separated from a fair, effective migration policy based on data, not on emotions or unfounded fears.

2 Refugee and displaced populations as a structural challenge of the 21st century

We have already discussed how structures must adapt to real needs and challenges. Nuria Ferré's chapter therefore marks an important shift in the contemporary demographic narrative by placing forcibly displaced persons—more than 120 million in 2024, according to UNHCR—at the centre of the discussion, whose presence is often ignored in official statistics, censuses and population projections (UNHCR, 2024). Ferré denounces this invisibility as a form of political and technical exclusion that prevents both their protection and their effective integration.

One of his main contributions is to dismantle the idea that forced displacement is an anomaly or a temporary crisis. On the contrary, he argues that it has become a structural reality of the 21st century, with lasting impacts on communities of origin, transit and destination. His regional perspective allows us to see how the phenomenon manifests itself differently in Africa, Asia-Pacific, Europe, Latin America and the Middle East, going beyond the traditional frameworks of humanitarian action.

In this type of dynamic, there is a slowness and insufficiency of so-called "durable solutions" (local integration, voluntary return, resettlement), as well as a need to create legal and safe pathways that recognise the dignity and rights of these populations. His analysis coincides with authors such as Betts and Collier (2017), who have proposed rethinking the governance of refugees from a logic of mobility and opportunity, rather than emergency and containment.

Like other chapters in this book—such as Garrido's on Africa or Domingo and Pinyol's on Europe—Ferré calls for a political reading of demography, in which displacement is not understood as a "failure of the system" but as an expression of its limits and contradictions. He therefore calls for a fundamental transformation of the ethical, legal and social frameworks with which we address forced mobility in a world in tension.

3 Sub-Saharan Africa: the demographic centre of the future and its tensions

Óscar Garrido's chapter confronts us with one of the greatest transformations of the 21st century: the rapid and sustained population growth in Sub-Saharan Africa. While much of the global north faces demographic decline, the African continent is projected to be the main driver of population growth, with forecasts pointing to a population of up to 4 billion people by the end of the century (United Nations, 2022).

Far from a catastrophic interpretation, Garrido argues that this growth represents a historic opportunity, provided it is managed properly. The so-called "demographic dividend"—the possibility that a large proportion of young people of working age will drive economic development—is still open. However, turning this potential into progress requires bold policies in education, health, formal employment and industrialisation (Bloom *et al.*, 2003).

He argues that one of the central themes of the chapter is the need to promote productive value chains on the continent, especially around critical mineral resources that are currently exported unprocessed. Garrido proposes a post-extractivist view that connects the global energy transition with the strengthening of African economic sovereignty, in line with the proposals of authors such as Mbembe (2016) and the agenda of the African Union.

The chapter also offers a nuanced reading of African migration: far from the alarmist image that prevails in Europe, most movements are internal to the continent, circular and labour related. Garrido highlights the role of remittances, which exceed official development aid, and the importance of strengthening regulated mobility mechanisms within frameworks such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).

The growing impact of climate change on food security and forced mobility is emphasised. Although Africa contributes only 4% of global emissions, it will suffer some of the worst consequences, particularly in the Sahel and coastal regions (IPCC, 2023).

Garrido's text forces us to rethink traditional hierarchies of demographic power and to recognise Africa as the emerging centre of global geo-demographics. His approach avoids both fatalism and

paternalism, opting instead for a strategic, collaborative reading anchored in the transformative potential of African youth.

We have seen how the chapter by Andreu Domingo and Gemma Pinyol-Jiménez provides a critical reading of the demographic and migratory situation in the European Union, in a context of accelerated ageing, structural need for migration and growing political disaffection. Their approach transcends the technical level of migratory flows to focus on the narratives, institutional frameworks and ideological disputes that define migration governance in Europe.

One of the main findings of the chapter is the gap between the technical consensus on the need for migration to sustain the European welfare system and the political difficulty of translating this diagnosis into stable and sustained public policies. This paradox, fuelled by pressure from populist and Eurosceptic forces, blocks structural progress and deepens institutional fragmentation (Geddes and Scholten, 2016).

Both researchers point out how immigration has been turned into a symbol of identity conflict, and how this polarisation translates into increasingly punitive rhetoric, focused on security and control, to the detriment of human rights. This drift jeopardises the European democratic model itself by eroding public confidence in institutional management and legitimising discourses of exclusion (Triandafyllidou, 2018).

Another relevant contribution of the chapter is its analysis of multilevel governance; because, while migration policies are designed at the state or supranational level, it is cities and regions that implement—and often repair—their effects. This disconnect between levels of government fuels tensions and exposes the limitations of the EU's current migration architecture.

The text proposes rebalancing the migration debate by explicitly incorporating democratic principles, intergenerational justice and territorial cohesion. In light of structural ageing, population decline in large rural areas and the need for young talent, the authors advocate for a migration policy that combines effectiveness, rights and democratic legitimacy.

Europe not only needs more immigration, but also better ways of integrating it politically. Its social cohesion and the sustainability of its political model will depend largely on its ability to build inclusive governance.

4 Latin America and the Caribbean, between unequal ageing and structural migration

Rocío de los Reyes' chapter invites us to look at the Latin American demographic landscape not only from the perspective of figures, but also from that of power tensions, structural imbalances and still latent opportunities. Unlike sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) are already in an advanced stage of demographic transition, with a sharp decline in fertility (from 5.9 children per woman in 1950 to less than 1.9 in 2023) and a progressive trend towards ageing (CELADE, 2022).

However, this transition has not been accompanied by equivalent economic and social development. As the author rightly points out, ageing in Latin America occurs "before becoming rich", that is, without consolidated social protection systems, with high levels of informal employment (more than 55% on average) and with significant territorial and gender inequalities (ECLAC, 2020).

One of the main contributions of the chapter is to show how Latin American youth, far from being a passive capital, constitute a strategic asset that can still drive regional development. This requires sustained investment in education, decent employment and health, as well as productive integration policies that prevent brain drain and channel skilled migration in a constructive manner (Gasparini *et al*., 2015).

De los Reyes also astutely describes the structural nature of migration in LAC: the Venezuelan exodus, the routes from Central America, the deportation processes from the US, and forced displacement in Colombia are not isolated phenomena, but expressions of intertwined crises (violence, inequality, climate change, extractivism). This interpretation connects with recent approaches to migration as "adaptive responses" to systemic exclusion **(**Sassen, 2014).

The chapter also highlights the role of megacities as critical settings for demographic transformation. Migration, ageing, and inequality converge in these cities, creating new challenges for urban planning, infrastructure, and social inclusion. The author argues that these cities not only concentrate problems but can also be laboratories for social innovation if they are provided with the necessary tools and resources.

In addition to articulating a geostrategic reading of Latin American demographics that challenges both the collapseist vision and

naive optimism, she finds Latin America to be an open demographic window, but its exploitation depends on a sustained and regionally coordinated political commitment, with a focus on equity and integration.

5 Agricultural work, migration and statistical opacity: an anatomy of the Spanish production model

Yoan Molinero's chapter is one of the most revealing contributions to this volume, not only because of its empirical thoroughness, but also because of the way it articulates migration, economic structure and knowledge governance. His analysis of who works in Spanish agriculture is, in essence, an X-ray of the type of society we are building: one that is structurally dependent on migrant labour, but which systematically renders it invisible.

Molinero starts from a compelling observation: the Spanish countryside cannot be understood without migration. In the provinces with the greatest weight in the agri-food sector—Huelva, Almería, Jaén, Murcia—foreign labour represents a majority proportion, especially in temporary and harvesting work. This migrant presence is neither temporary nor marginal; it is the pillar on which an intensive model of agricultural production integrated into global food distribution chains is based (Caro *et al.*, 2022).

The problem, the author points out, is that this reality is deliberately opaque. Although there are multiple statistical sources (EPA, SEPE, OPIBase, Eurostat), their fragmentation, lack of coordination and poor accessibility prevent a clear and accurate picture of the situation from being obtained. The difficulty in knowing precisely how many foreign workers there are in the countryside, what conditions they work in and what their socio-demographic profile is is not just a technical shortcoming: it is a symptom of a strategy of structural neglect, which allows precarious labour practices to be sustained without clear institutional responsibility (Martínez-Buján and Mira, 2020).

The chapter also focuses on the GECCO (Collective Management of Recruitment at Source) programme, particularly in the case of Moroccan women workers in Huelva. Despite its virtues in terms of legal circular migration, Molinero demonstrates how these mechanisms can also become devices for control, segregation and violation of rights if they are not accompanied by effective guarantees. Her analysis dialogues here with critical studies on

the feminisation of labour migration and the intersection between gender, class and racialisation in European agricultural sectors (Anderson, 2010).

But beyond denunciation, the text invites us to think about what kind of agriculture we want to sustain in the 21st century. Is it possible to have agri-food production that is ecologically sustainable, socially just and demographically viable without rethinking the working conditions of those who make it possible? What does it say about a society that renders invisible those who harvest its food, while proclaiming the centrality of the "green transition"?

In this sense, Molinero's chapter is not just a report on the present. It is a wake-up call about the future. If we are unable to guarantee labour rights, recognition and visibility for migrant farm workers, any attempt at sustainability will be caught in a moral paradox. Food sovereignty, the author reminds us, cannot be built on structural precariousness or on the deliberate ignorance of those who sustain our daily food supply.

6 What happens if people on the move do not have access to health and hygiene?

Before reaching their destination, many people pass through a series of countries, known as transit countries. This is explained by Shreya Srivastava and Adam Dubin in their study of migration through different countries. If populations on the move, such as migrants and refugees, do not have adequate access to health and hygiene services, they face serious consequences that affect both their individual well-being and public health.

Firstly, lack of access to preventive health services and medical care increases vulnerability to infectious and chronic diseases. Migrants are often exposed to poor living and working conditions, which increases the risk of contracting communicable diseases (such as respiratory, gastrointestinal and skin infections), as well as complications from pre-exist e conditions. Difficulties in accessing health services, medicines and prenatal care can result in higher rates of maternal and infant mortality, especially among pregnant women and young children.

In addition, the lack of basic sanitation, safe drinking water and adequate hygiene conditions during transit or in temporary settlements encourages outbreaks of water- and food-borne diseases, such as diarrhoea and other infections, which are one of

the leading causes of death among children under five in migration contexts.

Poor hygiene also increases the incidence of skin lesions, infections and mental health problems, exacerbated by the stress, violence and exploitation to which these populations are often exposed.

Furthermore, legal, cultural, linguistic and administrative barriers make access to healthcare even more difficult, creating avoidable inequalities and situations of social exclusion. This translates into poorer health outcomes for migrants compared to the local population in transit and destination countries.

7 How does institutional discrimination affect the health of migrants?

If people cannot access medical care due to an administrative error, this negatively affects the health of migrants by limiting their effective access to health services, social protection and basic rights. When migration and integration policies are marked by exclusion, restrictive bureaucracy or a lack of recognition of rights, migrants face legal, administrative and cultural barriers that hinder timely and quality medical care. This can result in lower vaccination rates, difficulties in accessing primary care, maternal health or mental health services, and an increased risk of preventable diseases and untreated complications.

In addition, institutional discrimination can foster social stigmatisation and legal uncertainty, leading many migrants to avoid seeking medical care for fear of deportation, discrimination or rejection. In contexts where migration is politicised and perceived as a threat, restrictive policies and lack of coordination between levels of government exacerbate exclusion and perpetuate health inequalities.

8 Humanitarian crises as agents of transformation and change

Humanitarian crises play a fundamental role in global migration dynamics and have a direct impact on the demographic balance of affected and receiving regions. These crises, caused by armed conflict, political collapse, natural disasters, food insecurity or severe economic crises, generate large population movements both internally and internationally.

In the case of Latin America and the Caribbean, recent migration flows have been marked by humanitarian and political crises in countries such as Venezuela, Haiti and Nicaragua. These situations have led to large-scale migration, especially of young people and adults of working age, who are seeking better opportunities and living conditions in the face of a lack of prospects in their countries of origin.

This phenomenon directly affects the demographic composition of the sending countries, accelerating population ageing processes and reducing the proportion of the working-age population, while in the receiving countries it can modify the age structure, boost the labour market and pose new challenges in terms of social integration and the provision of public services.

9 Humanitarian crises also alter population growth projections

Mass migration can contribute to negative net migration in sending countries, as seen in Venezuela and Cuba, where persistent emigration is compounded by low fertility rates and high life expectancy, accelerating population decline and ageing.

At the same time, receiving countries may experience faster population growth or a relative rejuvenation of their demographic structure, although this depends on the magnitude and characteristics of migration flows.

Globally, these humanitarian crises have made migration a strategic and geopolitical variable, influencing the internal governance of states, regional stability and international relations. Political responses and new migration regulations, especially in the global north, have direct effects on mobility and demographic balance in the south, conditioning the international integration and sustainable development of the countries affected.

Although humanitarian crises can be seen as key drivers of contemporary migration, it is also important to consider the way in which they reconfigure demographic balances by modifying the size, distribution and age composition of populations in both countries of origin and destination, with profound social, economic and political implications at the regional and global levels.

10 Main contributions of the monograph

– We are experiencing an accelerated and heterogeneous demographic transition; especially in Latin America and the

Caribbean, which have gone from high population growth to a rapid demographic transition, characterised by a drastic decline in fertility (from 5.9 children per woman in 1950 to 1.85 in 2023) and a sustained increase in life expectancy, with projections of negative growth in countries such as Cuba and Uruguay before 2007.

- Population ageing as a structural challenge, given that it is no longer a distant prospect but an immediate challenge for health, pension and care systems. In 2023, 13.8% of the Latin American population was aged 60 or over, and it is estimated that by 2030 this percentage will rise to 16.5%.
- The persistence of structural inequalities, given that ageing countries (Chile, Uruguay, Cuba) coexist with other countries that are still young (Guatemala, Bolivia), evidencing an uneven demographic transition and the presence of significant gaps in access to services, employment and social protection.
- High levels of informal employment, especially in some Latin American countries, and institutional weakness, where more than 55% of the workforce is informal, weaken the sustainability of social security systems and limit the capacity to respond to ageing and the demand for care.
- Migration, seen as a strategic and complex variable in each region, is no longer just a source of migration but has become a space of origin, transit and destination. Humanitarian and political crises have generated complex and numerous intra-regional flows. And the responses have not been studied sufficiently by the neighbouring countries of the unstable areas.
- Changes in global migration policies and their regional impact, as well as more restrictive and securitised migration policies in the United States since 2025, have redefined migration flows and narratives, directly impacting mobility and population structure in countries in Latin America, Africa, Asia and Europe.
- The demographic dividend as an opportunity and a risk: in several countries, there is still a window of opportunity due to most of the population being of working age, but taking advantage of this depends on investment in education, formal employment and social cohesion. Without these, the dividend can become a trigger for frustration and conflict.

- Reconfiguration of social and political demands, because ageing and the transformation of family structures generate new demands for care, urban adaptation and intergenerational policies, as well as the growing electoral weight of older adults in political and electoral processes.
- Youth migration and "brain drain" from Latin America and Africa in a growing migration of skilled young people to Europe and Asia, contributing to the "brain drain" and posing additional challenges for regional development and competitiveness.
- Demographics as a variable of power and international strategy, with population structure directly affecting the projection of power by states, their international integration and political and economic stability, making demographics a key part of the strategic agenda for the 21st century.

It is precisely the demographic and migratory transformations of the 21st century that not only pose urgent public policy challenges, but also open questions that require a solid, critical and multidisciplinary research agenda. It is necessary to continue exploring how demographic factors interact with climate change, production models, gender inequalities, multilevel governance and social discourses on mobility. Likewise, there is an urgent need to develop methodologies that make the experiences of migrants visible and comparative approaches that allow us to understand common and divergent patterns between regions. The lines outlined below seek to contribute to this collective effort to expand knowledge and refine the analytical tools that allow us to understand, with greater accuracy, the world we are inhabiting and building.

- Explore the role of migration as a counterbalance to ageing and low fertility, especially in regions where natural growth is negative. The aim is to analyse how migration flows can contribute to the sustainability of welfare and pension systems.
- Investigate differences in demographic transition and migrant integration between countries and regions, considering structural factors such as labour informality, unequal access to services and fragil social protection systems.
- Analyse how political discourse and the securitisation of migration affect migration governance, public perception and migrants' rights, as well as the impact of polarisation on the formulation of inclusive and sustainable policies.

- Study the effects of migration on social cohesion, intergenerational coexistence and cultural integration, identifying good practices and success factors in the inclusion of migrants in ageing or polarised societies.
- Investigate the long-term impact of humanitarian crises and forced displacement on demographic structure, mobility and the resilience of social and economic systems.

In light of these considerations, it is essential to move towards a renewed public policy framework that is commensurate with the demographic and migratory transformations of the 21st century. Far from fragmented or reactive responses, comprehensive approaches are required, based on evidence, respect for human rights and shared responsibility between levels of government. The proposals presented below arise from the dialogue between the different chapters of the book and seek to guide institutional action towards more inclusive, sustainable and fair models of population and migration management, both in local and international contexts.

- Promote coordination between different levels of government and between countries to manage migration flows, share responsibilities and ensure the protection of migrants' human rights.
- Design policies that respond to both labour market needs and demographic challenges, facilitating regular migration and the integration of migrants into the social and economic fabric.
- Strengthen health, pension and social services systems to respond to population ageing and diversity, ensuring universal access and reducing institutional discrimination.
- Implement measures to prevent institutional and social discrimination, guarantee equal access to services and encourage the participation of migrants in community and political life.
- Support the production of data and studies that enable the monitoring of demographic and migratory dynamics, facilitating informed decision-making and policy evaluation.

In the face of simplistic discourse and short-term political responses, we need to construct interpretative frameworks that recognise the complexity of migratory and demographic processes, as well as their centrality to the great dilemmas of our time. What is at stake is not only the management of populations or the design of policies, but the possibility of forging more just, resilient and democratic societies.

Looking at migration from a demographic perspective allows us to understand it not only as a social or economic phenomenon, but as a structural variable that reconfigures societies and their future prospects. Demographic analysis has revealed how population movements affect age composition, the labour force, the sustainability of health and pension systems, and even the international positioning of countries.

In this way, demography ceases to be a simple statistical record and becomes a key tool for interpreting the tensions and possibilities of the 21st century, placing migration at the centre of debates on development, equity and regional power.

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