Mixed Migration Centre

"If I had known it would be this hard, I wouldn't have taken the risk"

Examining onward and mixed movements along the Western Indian Ocean Route

Evidence to Action Brief

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Mixed Migration Centre

DRC DANISH REFUGEE COUNCIL

UNHCR The UN Refugee Agency

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Acronyms

DR Congo	Democratic Republic of the Congo
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
MMC	Mixed Migration Centre
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Front cover photo credit:
Photo credit: © William Daniels / Panos Pictures (2020)
Dozens of 'kwassa kwassa' or small boats are stored in Petite Terre, Mayotte.

Summary and key findings

The Western Indian Ocean Route runs from mainland Africa to islands in the Indian Ocean region, including Mayotte as being the intended destination for many on onward movement along this route.[1] Journeys are often long and perilous, involving extended sea crossings with limited food and water, insecure boats, and a heavy reliance on smugglers. Compared to other routes on the African continent, the Western Indian Ocean Route remains understudied. This report examines the drivers of onward and mixed movement for refugees and migrants, routes and intentions, smuggling dynamics, and key risks along the Western Indian Ocean Route. It is based on 54 interviews and five focus group discussions with refugees and migrants along the route and in Mayotte and 25 key informant interviews with mixed movement stakeholders. This report aims to fill a critical evidence gap and inform onward and mixed movement policies and programming along this route. The key findings include:

- **Congolese, Burundians, and Somalis identified conflict, violence, persecution, and terrorism as shaping their movements, and limiting decision-making and preparation for their journey**. At the same time, some also reported economic drivers, noting the insecure environment had negatively affected their livelihoods. **Comorians and Malagasy expressed moving mainly for economic reasons and access to better education and health services, as well as socio-cultural ties**.

- **The Western Indian Ocean Route is comprised of several routes or branches, some of which involve long, complex, and unsafe journeys over land and at sea**. For people from the Great Lakes, key countries of transit include Tanzania and Comoros, while another segment of the route involves transit through Madagascar. Somali respondents engaged in the longest sea journeys, with some journeying at sea for over a month and one reporting a brief stop at the Kenyan coast.

- **Smuggling networks between Tanzania and Comoros appear well established, primarily targeting people from the Great Lakes**. Contrary to other African mixed movement routes where smugglers play a limited role in influencing movement, Congolese and Burundians reported being influenced to move onward along the Western Indian Ocean Route by smugglers in Tanzania, in Kigoma and Dar es Salaam (in particular Kariakoo market), which appear as smuggling hubs.

- **Arrest and detention in Tanzania were cited as key risks while transiting the country**. Moreover, a majority of interviewed Congolese and Burundians believed they could not access asylum in Tanzania, based on information received from co-nationals and Tanzanians with links to smuggling networks, which spurred them into engaging in onward movements.

- **Perilous sea journeys pose great risks to the lives of refugees and migrants**, and respondent testimonies included the witnessing of the death(s) of fellow passengers. **Some respondents noted additional dangers linked to abuse and robbery at the hands of smugglers**.

- **Refugees and migrants reported facing considerable constraints in Mayotte with regards to access to livelihoods and housing, and to the risk of xenophobic violence**. A number of respondents noted direct experiences of xenophobia in school, at work, and in other public spaces.

1 This brief does not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of MMC and UNHCR concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city, or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

1. Introduction

The Western Indian Ocean Route runs from mainland Africa – primarily East Africa and the Great Lakes – to islands in the Indian Ocean region including Mayotte, which is the intended destination for many on onward movement along this route. Journeys are often long and perilous, involving extended sea crossings with limited food and water, insecure boats, and a heavy reliance on smugglers. Over the past years, there are indications the route has become more important for primarily those departing from the Great Lakes region. Yet, compared to other routes on the African continent, the Western Indian Ocean Route remains largely understudied and underreported by news media. The lack of attention likely stems from the relatively low volume of movements along this route, which number in the thousands each year, as compared to the tens of thousands observed along the Mediterranean Routes to Europe, or over a hundred thousand along the Eastern Route from the Horn of Africa towards the Arabian Peninsula.

This evidence to action brief aims to provide policymakers and protection actors with greater insight into the onward and mixed movement dynamics along the Western Indian Ocean Route, with the study serving as a first step towards generating a largescale evidence base on this route. In particular, it sought to learn:

1. What factors drive movements along the Western Indian Ocean Route?
2. What specific trajectories do refugees and migrants follow and how do they arrange their journeys?
3. How do people on the move enter countries along the route, and what is their access to asylum in these countries?
4. What do smuggling dynamics look like along this route?
5. What are the dangers that refugees and migrants get exposed to and what are their needs?

Photo credit:
© Sandy Ravaloniaina / Unsplash.
Nosy Be, Madagascar.

2. Methodology

The study adopted a multi-sited, qualitative research design to examine onward and mixed movements along the Western Indian Ocean Route, with data collection taking place in several locations including the islands of Grande Comore, Anjouan, and Mayotte as destination, as well as in Tanzania and Madagascar. The qualitative approach served as a first step towards filling a considerable information gap, aiming to map key features and dynamics of the route. It also aimed to identify local stakeholders and to scope data collection locations for future, largescale quantitative data collection.

Sample overview

Table 1. Gender of interview respondents and FGD participants

Women		Men		
Interviews	FGDs	Interviews	FGDs	Total
19	17	35	18	89

Table 2. Countries of origin of interview respondents and FGDs participants

Country of nationality	Interviewees / FGD participants
DR Congo	35
Somalia	26
Burundi	16
Sudan	5
Yemen	3
Comoros	1
Madagascar	1
Rwanda	1
Cameroon	1
Total	**89**

Interviews were also conducted with key informants (local civil society, authorities, and assistance providers) in locations along the route, where it proved challenging to access refugees and migrants, owing to their highly transitory and more hidden movements. A total of 25 key informant interviews were conducted in Tanzania, Comoros, and Madagascar.

Limitations

Owing to the limited sample size and largely hidden nature of movements along the Western Indian Ocean Route, the data in this report does not represent the profiles and the experiences of all individuals moving along this route. Instead, it aims to provide rich information on dynamics along this route.

While the research design sought to conduct an equal number of interviews across all locations, this proved challenging to achieve over the project's time period, owing to the periodic nature of boat arrivals and highly transitory nature of movements. Future research would benefit from a longer timeframe to extend presence in locations of transit and not be dependent upon boat arrivals. Moreover, considering the complexities of travelling to the different islands of Comoros, which lack frequent air travel, multiple data collection teams operating simultaneously would be needed for full coverage of this archipelago.

In addition, obtaining research authorisation to conduct data collection with intercepted groups of people on the move posed a challenge and required more time than the study's three-month inception period allowed. This resulted in fewer respondents being accessed in Grande Comore and Mohéli in Comoros, and in coastal areas of Tanzania and Madagascar. Finally, particularly in Tanzania and Madagascar, which are countries with highly diverse mixed movement landscapes, it was more difficult to identify people on the move with clear intentions to move onward. Future research would benefit from more time in coastal departure points and from largescale data collection from which to identify relevant subsamples.

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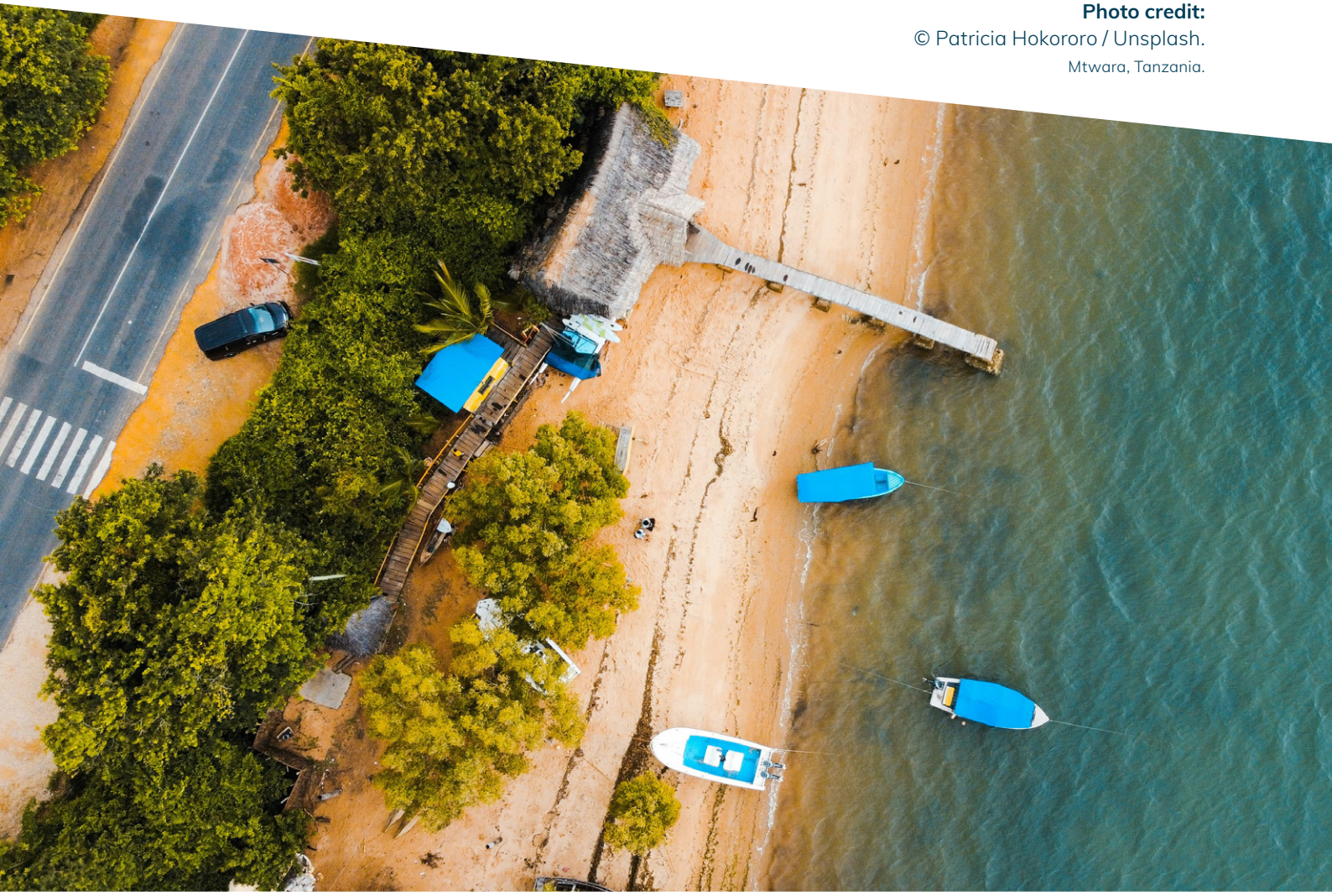
Mtwara, Tanzania.



3. Conclusion and preliminary recommendations

The recent media reporting on shipwrecks off the coast of Madagascar and Comoros in October and November 2024 has exposed a wider audience to discussions of the Western Indian Ocean Route.[2] Yet, the route remains understudied and underreported in comparison with other African mixed movement routes towards Europe and the Arabian Peninsula, and the Southern Route to Southern Africa. To respond to this evidence gap, the conducted study set out to define and provide insight into onward and mixed movement dynamics along the Western Indian Ocean Route, studying movements originating in the Great Lakes region, Somalia, and Madagascar, and transiting through Tanzania and Comoros. It examined key drivers of movement, trajectories and transport modalities, interactions with smugglers to arrange journeys, and exposure to risks and needs along the route to Mayotte. In so doing, this study aimed to help lay the foundation for an evidence base for policy actors and practitioners providing protection to people on the move along this route in Eastern Africa and the Indian Ocean region. Based on the study's key findings, the following is a list of recommendations for local, national and regional authorities, protection actors, and researchers and academic institutions.

For local and national authorities in the Western Indian Ocean

- **Strengthen or adopt asylum systems in countries of transit** to ensure fair access to asylum, and timely and fair processing of refugee claims.
- **Work together with research institutions to increase the evidence base** on refugees and migrants moving along the Western Indian Ocean Route, including granting researchers access to (intercepted) people on the move.
- **Ensure a protection-sensitive rescue-at-sea coordination mechanism, disembarkation process, and referral mechanism** to ensure timely and effective emergency rescue and overall support for vulnerable individuals. Collaborate with local civil society and NGOs to coordinate the provision of protection services to refugees and migrants, starting with mapping available and needed services.
- **Counter misinformation promoted by smuggling networks in Tanzania** seeking to recruit refugees and migrants for irregular onward journeys through awareness-raising initiatives on rights to asylum and access to assistance and services in the country.
- **Support alternatives to detention of intercepted people on the move in Comoros and Madagascar** through collaborating with regional bodies, UN agencies, and NGOs in promoting access to legal aid and humanitarian assistance and seeking Alternatives to (temporary) Detention (ATD).
- **Taking into consideration the local context, develop programmes in Mayotte to facilitate the socioeconomic inclusion of refugees and migrants, or explore alternative options in collaboration with the host community.**
- **Develop community engagement initiatives adapted to the local context in Mayotte to combat xenophobia**, and promote social cohesion in countries along the route.

For regional bodies in the Western Indian Ocean

- **Work towards harmonising asylum and migration policies across SADC and IOC Member States** to ensure consistency and fairness in the treatment of refugees and migrants.
- **Create regional protection mechanisms to safeguard the rights of refugees and migrants**, particularly those transiting through multiple countries.

2 Sheikh Nor, M. (2024, 25 November). Migrant boat sinkings off Madagascar highlight desperation felt by many Somalis. *VOA News*.

- **Establish a regional database to share information on mixed movement patterns and trends**, linking up with the African Union's continental migration and displacement data and research centres and initiatives, improving the ability to respond to emerging challenges.
- **Provide training and capacity-building programs for Member States** through thematic meetings on mixed movement and protection, focusing on the Western Indian Ocean Route.
- **Advocate for the rights of refugees and migrants at regional and international forums**, highlighting the specific challenges faced along the Western Indian Ocean Route.
- **Encourage regional research and analysis on mixed movement trends** to inform policy decisions and improve responses.

For UN agencies and NGOs working in Eastern Africa and the Western Indian Ocean

- **Adopt a route-based and coordinated approach to reach refugees and migrants** in locations of (early) transit, including in Kigoma, Dar es Salaam, Anjouan, and Nosy Be, through mapping available services along the route, setting up information points and services, and providing targeted services to women and children on the move.
- **Promote and advocate for increased visibility and attention for the Western Indian Ocean Route** and the rights of refugees and migrants along the route with donor institutions, governments, international organisations, and communities of origin and transit.
- **Strengthen the capacity of local NGOs and community-based organisations** working with refugees and migrants, providing training and resources, particularly in hard-to-reach locations in Comoros, Madagascar, and Tanzania.
- **Enhance protection for women and children on the move in transit locations** through providing targeted protection services addressing risks such as sexual exploitation and family separation.
- **Expand assistance to refugees and migrants in emergency situations**, including after rescue from shipwrecks and after interceptions, particularly around access to shelter, food, and medical care.
- **Work with local communities along the route and in Mayotte** to support the socioeconomic inclusion of refugees and migrants and promote social cohesion.
- **Based on the local context, implement suitable livelihood programmes** to support the economic self-sufficiency of refugees and migrants, also benefitting the host community.
- **Develop psychosocial programmes** for refugees and migrants in countries along the route, including mental health support and services for survivors of violence and sexual exploitation.

For researchers and academic institutions

- **Increase data collection and research along the Western Indian Ocean Route**, with special attention on locations of transit, where people on the move are more difficult to access.
- **Study the specific needs and vulnerabilities of women and children on the move** along the Western Indian Ocean Route, including risks of sexual exploitation and family separation.
- **Examine interactions with host communities and public perceptions of refugees and migrants** along the route, and the factors influencing these views.
- **Study the skills, education levels, and employment aspirations of refugees and migrants** on the move, to inform livelihoods and economic integration programming in countries along the route and in Mayotte.

MMC is a global network engaged in data collection, research, analysis, and policy and programmatic development on mixed migration, with regional hubs in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Europe and Latin America, and a global team based across Copenhagen, Geneva and Brussels.

MMC is a leading source for independent and high-quality data, research, analysis and expertise. MMC aims to increase understanding of mixed migration, to positively impact global and regional migration policies, to inform evidence-based mixed migration responses for people on the move and to stimulate forward thinking in public and policy debates on mixed migration. MMC's overarching focus is on human rights and protection for all people on the move.

MMC is part of the Danish Refugee Council (DRC).

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