

Irregular maritime migration and managing arrivals in the Canary Islands

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The Canary Islands are witnessing a new cycle of intense migratory influx by sea, coinciding in time with the progression of the current coronavirus pandemic. Irregular arrivals have increased, and, after a decade of low arrivals through this *Atlantic route*, the archipelago's reception system was initially insufficient and highly debilitated. This system now takes on renewed prominence as the always perilous crossings bring with them a more diverse range of vulnerable migrants. The institutional response has had to deal with greater complexity, conditioning the constant urgency to adopt incomplete and inappropriate solutions in certain cases, according to many of the evaluations carried out. The migratory process continues its course and more and more voices are demanding that a suitable reception strategy be defined, one based on a model that also integrates the principles of interculturality and is built with input from all the stakeholders involved.

1. Introduction

The Canary Islands have been a waypoint in international migrations for decades, turning this mobility and its effects into a structural fact of their daily reality: 20.2% of its population was born in another country according to census data from 1 January 2021 (ISTAC, provisional data). This is 438,230 people (51.6% are women), a figure that almost triples that registered twenty years ago, during which time the contribution of foreign origin accounts for three-quarters of the region's demographic growth: a continuous and diversified flow of people who choose to settle on the islands for a wide range of reasons, but primarily economic and residential ones. This question is always present on the archipelago's social and political agenda, which also arouses interest in the media, especially when it relates to some of the main problems on the islands. It is the predominant migratory current, although the most visible one features a significant transit component and is expressed through the arrival of vessels that seek to cross the stretch of sea that separates these islands from the African coasts.

We are referring to irregular maritime migration, documented in the archipelago since 1994, when the first people who arrived in a *small boat* on the island of Fuerteventura were reported. Since then, and through 29 August 2021, there have been 135,474 arrivals or interceptions on the high seas or near the coast involving different types of vessels, according to data from the Ministry of the Interior, with a stage of heavy and prolonged intensity during the first decade of this century, and a culminating episode, centred around 2006, which has been etched into the collective memory as the *cayuco crisis*. This so-called Atlantic or Canary Islands or West African route is among those that connect the African continent with the closest European territories, either continental or insular, as in the case of the Canary Islands or other Mediterranean islands and archipelagos (Godenau and Buraschi, 2018).

This migration is increasingly familiar, having been studied and covered by the media, widely described by its protagonists, whose expression involves a large number of stakeholders of different natures (people, organisations, institutions, etc.), both in the areas of origin and in the points of transit and destination. Hence its complexity, and that of managing everything from isolated events or experiences, to broader and longer migratory processes, both due to their own configuration and to the context in which they take place at any given time. A good example of this is the progressive activation of the *Canary Islands route* since 2018, and its culminating episode in terms of intensification in 2020, in the midst of the spread of the pandemic due to the SARS-CoV-2 virus. This episode is still underway, since the figures that are being reported do not yet indicate any decline in the most recent flows¹.

As mentioned earlier, this specific international migration route has been extensively analysed, and is the permanent focus of the Tenerife Immigration Observatory (OBITen) in some of its publications, which gather the results of research on irregular immigration (Godenau and Zapata, 2005 and 2007), the South-South border nexus (Godenau and León, 2012), and mobility within the framework of the Outermost Regions of the European Union (Asín and Godenau, 2014). The last stage has also received full analytical attention through two short monographic studies that have tried to contextualise the *Canary*

¹ At the time of completion of this text, in September of 2021, the arrival figures for the current year more than doubled those of the previous year at 9,255 compared to 3,925, 136% higher - between the months of January and August. (243 versus 131 vessels), according to information from the Ministry of the Interior of the Government of Spain. There was also a significant number of shipwrecks and deaths at different locations along the route.

Islands route in a much broader and more complex network of itineraries (Godenau and Buraschi, 2018), and delved into the keys to understanding the most recent process of migratory intensification in its initial phase (Godenau, Buraschi and Zapata, 2020).

Most of these studies deal with the general interpretation of the migratory process, with no thorough analysis of what happens when its protagonists complete the initial phases, or the period of time during which they are received and documented. The reception itself, that is, the period after arrival, especially the one that implies a period of transit that later usually concludes with the departure from the islands, has been less studied. As a result, some of its essential characteristics remain little known. This stage has also incorporated new features in this latest intensification sequence, particularly since the final months of 2020. This has also reactivated the interest in the conditions involving irregular migrants during their stay in the Canary Islands.

This document delves into this stage through the experience that is taking place after the most recent increase in arrivals by sea, which, together with its determinants, will be presented in the first part of the analysis. We will then focus on the institutional response that has played out in reaction to the new situation, and also consider the framework created by the evolving COVID-19 situation. Later on, we outline the various reactions that have resulted from the response offered and its more immediate consequences, concluding with a set of key outcomes that allow us to overcome the less favourable elements of a process that has had its pros and cons, in the opinion of the many people who have analysed it from different perspectives. Now, with this enhanced perspective, seems a good moment to lay out what happened and review it critically.

2. Reactivation of the *Atlantic route* in a context of global complexity

Already in 2019, verified publications looked at 2018 as a year of the “incipient rebound” of the *Atlantic route* (Godenau, 2019: 161), and underscored the goal of combining the proper reception of migrants and applicants for international protection, with that of “preventing, controlling and sorting out irregular migratory flows at the borders” (Zapata, 2019: 238). Even earlier, the focus was on the enormous challenge posed by the reception process, when “arrivals have a volatile evolution over time and there are no fixed infrastructures for such tasks” (Godenau and Buraschi, 2018: 2). This demanded more attention be paid to managing migratory flows and their implications, particularly in insular and border territories in the contact area between the European Union and the African continent. It is further understood that the accumulated migratory experience and the coverage of certain exceptional episodes should be the source of inspiration to come up with responses that are tailored to these demanding, and also often changing, circumstances.

One change has been the incidence of the different migratory routes that *facilitate* access to the European Union from its closest neighbours in recent years. FRONTEX has identified seven main routes² that have seen almost half a million detections or interceptions between January 2018 and June 2021, with the Mediterranean basin being the geographical framework with the highest numbers as a whole, especially at its

² FRONTEX publication based on the data reported monthly by the European Union Member States and the Schengen area, aggregated by route, on “the detection of people at illegal border crossings” (BCPs). Database accessed on 15 August 2021. <https://migration-demography-tools.jrc.ec.europa.eu/catalogue/dataset/ds00032>

eastern (Cyprus, the maritime and land borders of Greece, together with Bulgaria and its connections with Turkey) and western (Spanish maritime and land borders, excluding the Canary Islands) ends. During the period in question, the focus has shifted from those mentioned above, to the itineraries involving the maritime borders of Italy and Malta, plus the territories of interaction in the Balkan region, which include Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary and Croatia.

The *Canary Islands* or *West African route* gained prominence mainly between September 2020 and January 2021, becoming during the months of October and November the preferred route for accessing the European Union³. From being an almost marginal or irrelevant *entry point* for almost a decade, after the events of 2006, in a short time it has taken on renewed significance, accounting for 7.1% of the total detections in the period analysed (11.7% if the interval is reduced from August 2019), as shown in table 1 and graph 1. "A complex web of factors", in the words of Godenau (2019: 158), usually explains this change in prominence, drawn out over time, between the impulse resulting from structural and situational circumstances in the areas of origin, and the relative impermeability of the set of itineraries, as well as the role that "intermediaries", among others, may play.

Table 1
Detections at illegal border crossing points in the European Union by route between 2018 and 2021.

Ruta	2018	2019	2020	2021	TOTAL	%
Western Balkans	5,844	15,127	26,918	18,910	66,799	13,9
Eastern Mediterranean	56,560	83,333	20,280	7,932	168,105	35,0
Central Mediterranean	23,485	14,003	35,673	23,099	96,260	20,0
Western Mediterranean	56,245	23,969	17,228	6,139	103,581	21,6
Western Africa	1,323	2,718	23,029	6,953	34,023	7,1
Circular from Albania to	4,550	1,944	1,365	595	8,454	1,8
Eastern Borders	1,029	642	615	971	3,257	0,7
Black Sea	0	2	0	0	0	0,0
Other	0	3	2	0	5	0,0
Total	149,036		125,110	64,599	480,486	100,0

Note
The data for 2021 are through June.

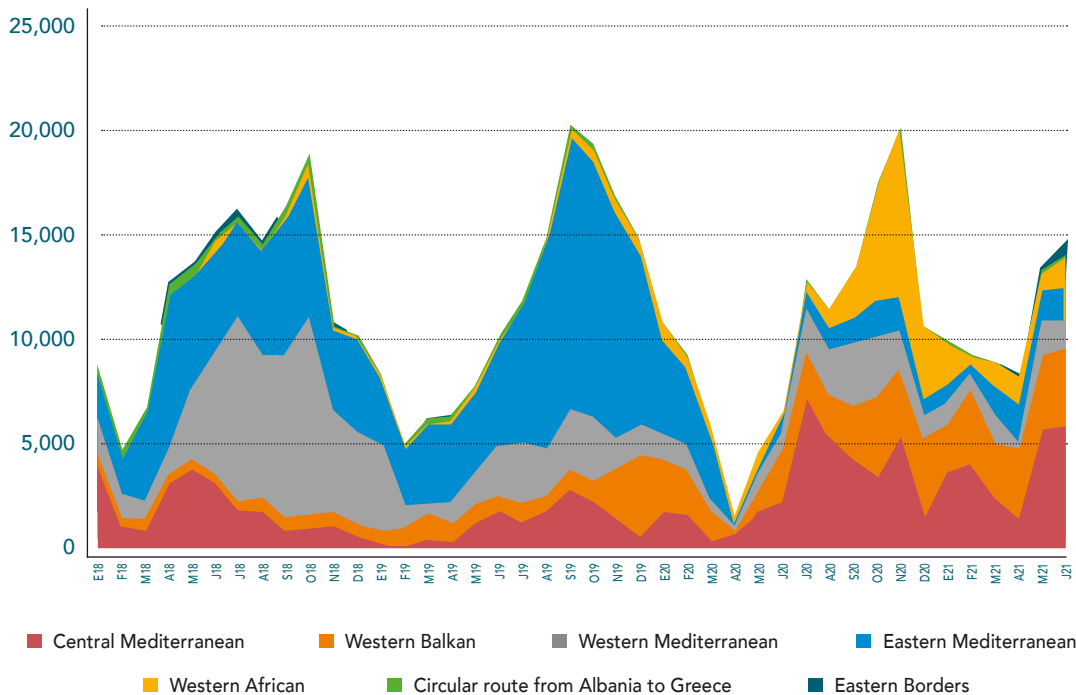
Source
Monthly detections at border crossings, FRONTEX. Compiled by authors.

The fact is that, in this last stage, access to the European Union through mainland and insular Spain has evened out greatly, in the latter case using primarily the connection through the Canary Islands. This circumstance is essential to estimating the services and resources allocated to managing this influx, with the added complexity posed by monitoring human mobility in an area as vast and difficult to control as the coastal-maritime strip that extends through West Africa, from southern Morocco to as far south, on occasion, as the coast of Guinea, almost 2,500 kilometres from the archipelago (IOM, 2021).

Already in 2020, arrivals to the Canary Islands exceeded those on the Spanish peninsula, including the Balearic Islands (23,023 versus 16,610), and in 2021 they are level (9,255

³ Information of interest on the *Atlantic route* from West Africa to the Canary Islands may be found in the work of Rojo Esteban (2008), particularly from the perspective of border control and the actions of State law enforcement agencies.

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Graph 1
Monthly detections at illegal border crossing points in the European Union by route between January 2018 and June 2021.

Source
Monthly detections at border crossings, FRONTEX. Compiled by authors.

and 9,075 through 29 August). In the case of the Atlantic islands, the crossings are more crowded (fewer boats) and the distances considerably longer when the boats depart from Mauritania, Senegal, Gambia, Guinea Bissau or Guinea. In fact, the average number of people per boat has risen in the Canary archipelago from 19 in 2018 to 38 in 2021 (it is 30 in the entire period in question, compared to the average of 20 in the rest of the country, that is, the mainland, Balearic Islands, Ceuta and Melilla). In all, Moroccan nationals accounted for 52.1% of arrivals in 2020, well ahead of Senegalese (19.7%) and Malians (17.9%), according to figures published by the Ombudsman (2021: 25) with data from the Ministry of the Interior. The same source notes the higher concentration of this influx in the province of Las Palmas (82.3%), through direct access or through the transfer by rescue devices after intercepting vessels on the high seas.

However, in the last three and a half years, most of these migrants have been of sub-Saharan origin (54.3%), versus those from Maghreb, although, with the available data published by FRONTEX, the Canary Islands receive a third of all the Moroccan nationals who travel along the routes listed above. These percentages have been much higher since late 2020; for example, in November of that year, more than five thousand of these migrants accounted for 89.3% of all registered Moroccan detections. The influx from sub-Saharan regions is more diverse and difficult to assign, because the statistics do not offer detailed information, although the various sources always point to citizens of Senegal, Mali, Ivory Coast, Guinea Conakry, Gambia and Guinea as the main protagonists in this mobility, as verified by organisations such as IOM (2021), and reaffirming the data already presented.

When assigning intensities, it is important to pay specific attention to what happened in November 2020, since it is one of the seven monthly episodes with the greatest impact in terms of the number of people travelling along the different migratory routes mentioned above since January 2018, also accounting for two-fifths of the total detections in that month. In that short period of time, over five thousand Moroccan migrants (89.3% of the North Africans received in that month in the EU through these routes), and almost three thousand sub-Saharan Africans, had to be processed. This extensive migration was

carried out using 230 boats, on board of which arrived 8,157 people (almost the same figures that have been recorded in 2021 through August).

This was the most intense monthly episode in the Canary Islands since documents on irregular maritime migration have been kept, with everything that entailed in terms of the operation that had to be set up to deal with this exceptional situation, and with the previous month's precedent, with over five thousand arrivals. In all, between September 2020 and January 2021, five months, 21,167 people arrived in the archipelago, an average of 140 people a day. Representative of this crisis was Arguineguín, a small dock in the Gran Canaria municipality of Mogán where, in the absence of a sufficient and well-structured system for handling this type of contingency, many of these people were provisionally sheltered. Only the month of October 2018 saw a higher influx in the mainland and Balearic areas.

The above figures refer to the people intercepted on the high seas or near the coast and taken to port, those who managed to reach a safe point on the islands. Even more departed from different locations on the African coast, since an unknowable fraction of the expeditions have problems of various kinds and end in tragedy (*invisible shipwrecks*) (Black, 2021). Hypothermia, dehydration, drowning, respiratory failure, and other causes take the lives of many people on one of the routes that is regarded as the most dangerous. Through its *Missing Migrants* project, IOM estimates that between 2018 and August 2021, 1,567 people - half of those reported on the African continent in that period of time - lost their lives in what it calls the North Africa sector, in the vicinity of the Canary Islands⁴. This is a minimum estimate based on information provided by national authorities and reported by the media. By the end of 2021, this figure will be close to or exceed that registered during the previous four-year period (2014 to 2017, 1,836 people).

Caminando Fronteras, a group that defends the rights of migrant people and communities, gives much higher figures. For 2020 alone, it indicates 1,851 migrants who died in 45 shipwrecks on the *Canary Islands route*, according to its *2020 Monitoreo Derecho a la Vida 2020 Report* (this number is double that of 2019, 893 deaths)⁵. Its sources are diverse, such as the hotline it has set up so that interested persons can report on the expeditions, stories from survivors or from the families in search of missing persons. According to this organisation, most of the victims were lost at sea, since, for example, 33 boats have disappeared without a trace. UNHCR lists the number of people killed in this way in 2020 as 480 (Ombudsman, 2021).

This second period of notable activation of migratory influx by sea offers some relevant contextual elements that have a decisive impact on how it is managed, and incorporates original aspects with respect to previous stages. The pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus is the first and perhaps most significant, since, both directly and indirectly, this factor is an additional driver behind this mobility (Black, 2021; CEAR, 2021; Doctors of the World, 2021). It has also largely conditioned the logistics of the reception processes, at least until adequate formulas and facilities are found to organise those who arrive, whether healthy or infected. It has also influenced the perceptions of the resident population, in terms of the effect that these arrivals can have on health perceptions, and this on top of the current of thought that associates them with competition for healthcare resources or

⁴ *Missing Migrants. Tracking death along migratory routes*. Accessed 19 August 2021. <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/>

⁵ The aforementioned Report was checked on the same date as the story in *El País* on 29 December 2020 on the public presentation of said report.

job opportunities. COVID-19 has ended up multiplying the difficulties already present in the different reception phases, even beyond the Canaries. As Pinyol-Jiménez (2021: 43) stated, it has provided an excuse for some countries to “make it harder to access their territory”.

As already noted, the upward trend in the number of arrivals started becoming apparent in 2018, but it was in the second half of 2019, since August of that year, that this upward tenor took hold, coinciding with the autumn and winter months, which are more favourable for sailing (Godenau, Buraschi and Zapata, 2020). This progression was interrupted in February, as the coronavirus began to expand worldwide, and even decreased in March, coinciding with the first wave of more rigorous restrictions. Such was the case in Spain, and also Morocco, as well as in many other countries that decided to close their borders and implement lockdowns. Many non-essential economic activities also came to a halt, which compromised the outlook for countless people, families and even entire communities. The spring was still uncertain, although many measures were eased towards the beginning of summer, with an enormous range of situations by country, and even region. August in the Canary Islands saw the resumption of the sequence that was *postponed* in January, as the *new normal* brought with it a period of maximum migratory pressure.

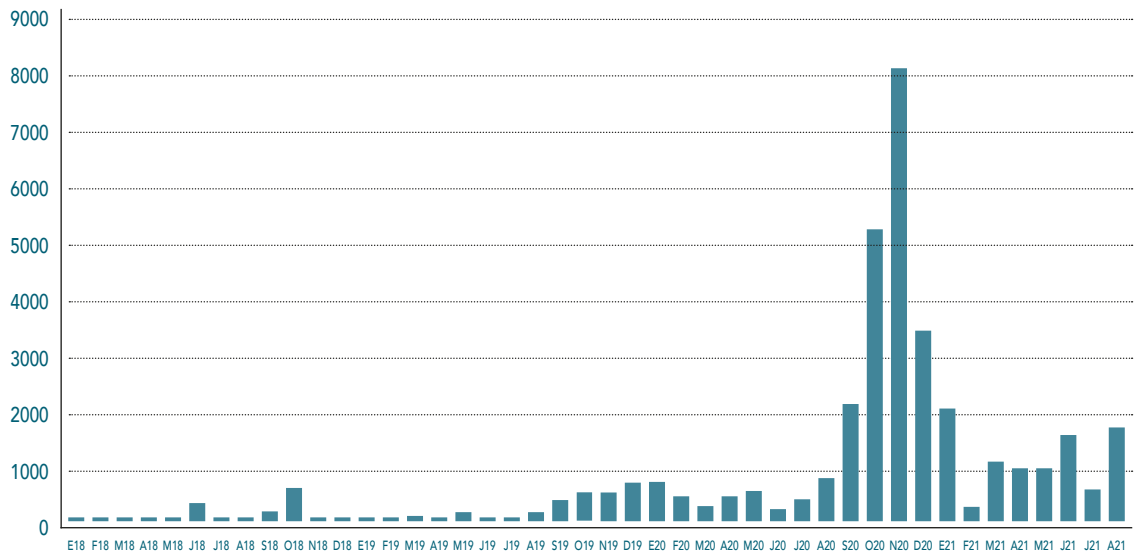
As a result, the pandemic would significantly condition the processing of irregular arrivals by sea, both in relation to the reception process in the Canary Islands, as well as the potential steps to return said arrivals to their territories of origin or transit, or routing to other facilities located in different parts of Spain. The common strategies for dealing with this mobility, especially when required by the volume, are now interrupted, either by the decisions of third countries in the first case, or by the decision of the Government of Spain in the second. It also poses an added difficulty regarding the availability of appropriate spaces to accommodate the people received, where, first, expeditions can be separated from one another, and second, and when appropriate, people infected by the coronavirus can be segregated. All of this has been reflected in the way the reception process has been approached, highlighting the weakness of the existing ability to respond in light of the complexity of the situation.

Another element of considerable importance that is worth noting is the legal framework that accompanied the most recent reception process, since it incorporates significant changes that also affect its configuration. Thus, for example, as has already been explained in detail in previous work, the option of filing an application for international protection on reasonable grounds before a judge nullifies the possibility of internment and conditions the prompt return of migrants. This means, in most cases, “that they must be assigned a place in humanitarian first reception centres in open detention” (Godenau, Buraschi and Zapata, 2020: 13). This implies accommodating them and providing for their basic needs, with full freedom of movement. This is done by way of a programme that is applied to each person for a maximum of nine months, extendable for a further six.

Also of significance is the almost permanent *give and take* between the national government, the courts, institutions such as the national or regional Ombudsman’s office, as well as various individuals, groups or organisations that aid migrants, in relation to the exercise of their rights of free mobility within the Spanish State, especially when they are in open detention and remain on the islands in a documented way through their passport, which has been considered one of the main aspects of the violation of their human rights. Specifically, in the first half of 2021, this prevented the individual transfer to the mainland of many people who were housed in the archipelago, except in specific

Graph 2
 Monthly number of irregular arrivals to the Canary Islands through the Atlantic route from January 2018 to August 2021.

Source
 Biweekly reports on irregular immigration from the Ministry of the Interior. Compiled by the authors.



cases or in expeditions authorised by the Ministry of the Interior and organised by the Inclusion, Social Security and Migrations Ministry through specialised entities contracted by it. Police checks in airports have been ongoing during the period mentioned, increasing the number of complaints due to racial profiling.

Global and local complexities have thus marked the new stage of migratory intensification, which has brought 36,283 people to the archipelago on 1,190 vessels from January 2018 to the end of August 2021, based on data from the Ministry of the Interior and shown in graph 2. This number is exactly one-fourth of those received in the country as a whole, in a sequence that has been bringing the *Atlantic route* level with the *Western Mediterranean route*, at least in terms of the figures. This intensity in arrivals to the islands “has collapsed the reception capacity and made it necessary to set up various temporary services on the fly to deal with this situation” (Ombudsman, 2021: 7). It is in this context that the institutional response takes place, as we will analyse in the next section of this document, which focuses on the specifics that the migratory reception process has experienced in the Canary Islands.

3. Institutional response to the multiple reception challenges

When irregular maritime migration is characterised only through general figures, we lose sight of the wide internal diversity of the people involved in this mobility in relation to the Canary Islands, in terms of their background and origin prior to departure, and of their personal characteristics involving their sex and age, customs, culture and possible religious affiliation; the degree of knowledge and understanding of the keys to cope with the new socio-territorial contexts of their permanent or temporary place of residence; their family circumstances, previous migratory experience, the expectations that they have formed throughout the process, etc. The existing reception systems, often set up in response to the emergency and sometimes with improvised elements, do not always address the full needs of the people they have to receive. However, different sets of resources have been developed that work simultaneously to attend to different migrant profiles.

New reception resources - in addition to those already in place, and which were scarce before the new intensification process in the Canary Islands - have had to be set up in a very short time, leading to the proliferation of emergency solutions on a temporary basis, but that, on certain occasions, remain in place longer than desired⁶. The Ombudsman (2021: 36) summarises the image of the existing structure in the archipelago: 2019, 3 reception centres with 78 places; 2020, 11 comprehensive reception centres with 388 places. To this must be added the emergency resources that are enabled both for people in an irregular situation and for asylum seekers, temporary solutions that involve the rental of hotels or the spaces assigned by the regional government and local entities. This response is clearly insufficient to manage the constant arrivals to different islands, led by people with various characteristics and needs, as already noted.

August 2020 triggered the first major warning, after seeing the highest number of arrivals in many years: 797 people on 31 vessels. This would be a prelude to the more than two thousand arrivals in September, over five thousand in October and over eight thousand in November. The existing facilities are not sufficient to deal with these numbers, not when we consider also the reception, health care, identification and parentage processes that have to be followed, as well as the transfer to the relevant facility in each case, whether in the archipelago or in the mainland, if applicable, since returns have been minimal⁷ during this stage due to the closure of international borders and the pushback that the Spanish State has been encountering from those countries with which it has lodged its demands (Godenau, Buraschi and Zapata, 2020).

The greatest pressure, and even collapse in some cases, has been registered in the docks that have been used as reception areas. The events of Arguineguín, in the south of Gran Canaria, were paradigmatic, with up to 2,700 migrants staying in a small jetty all at once "in precarious and overcrowded conditions" (Ombudsman, 2021: 29), plus all the personnel and provisional facilities that are part of the necessary logistics (security, sanitation, cleaning, transfers, etc.), which led various organisations to cry out against the enormous degradation in the reception and detention conditions⁸. On a different level, improvised Temporary Immigrant Assistance Centres (CATE) were set up in various port complexes in the Canaries, where even vacant storage warehouses were set up to alleviate the situation of migrants out in the open, and in order to manage the added complexity resulting from the pandemic, since positive cases had to be isolated and the various expeditions kept separate. Arguineguín was not cleared out for good until the last days of November 2019, with its former occupants being moved to Barranco Seco in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria.

⁶ The institutional response has been broader than that limited strictly to the reception capacity in terms of the accommodations and basic needs of migrants. This text focuses mainly on that aspect, but recognises different efforts made by various agencies to activate other resources and generate solutions for the multiple open fronts. One of them has been training local and regional police, who have had to work to ensure public safety in the neighbourhoods of the centres in use.

⁷ The number of returns or repatriations in recent months has been minimal, and only possible with a few countries, such as Morocco and Mauritania, with little information available in this regard. CEAR (2021) reports 163 to Mauritania in 2020, as well as Spain's agreement with Morocco to make 80 weekly returns through Air Maroc in the initial months of 2021. According to *Europa Press* (25/04/21), Spain repatriated 153 people from the Canary Islands to their countries of origin in the first two months of 2021. According to the *Efe Agency* (08/05/21), 509 people were transferred in 2020, based on a response from the Interior Ministry to representatives from the Popular Party.

⁸ CEAR (2021: 14-16) identified up to four important irregularities in Arguineguín: lack of legal assistance on arrival; no identification and protection of specially vulnerable people; illegal detentions for more than 72 hours; inhumane and unsanitary conditions on the pier.

During that time, hotels were used as Temporary Migrant Residences (CETI), taking advantage of the fact that tourist activity was stopped for many months due to COVID-19. Facilities were opened as per arrangements made with the hotel owners in areas such as the south of Gran Canaria, and Puerto de la Cruz and Santa Cruz de Tenerife on the island of Tenerife. The Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security and Migration made available 5,500 operational places in hotel and non-hotel complexes in the region. In parallel, other emergency services were also set up to receive minors, who were integrated into the custody and guardianship process of the regional government. In certain cases, this power was delegated to the island councils. Many of these services are managed by various private organisations, especially on the islands of Gran Canaria, Tenerife and Fuerteventura.

On 20 November 2020, the architecture of the *Plan Canarias* was presented. This was the national formula to have emergency places and stable solutions to manage the migratory reception process in the archipelago (table 2). Its structure relies primarily on providing six publicly-owned facilities of the Ministries of Inclusion, Social Security and Migration, Interior and Defence of the Government of Spain, as well as the temporary transfer, by Bankia, of a ship in the port complex of La Luz in Gran Canaria. These initially offered a joint capacity of 5,900 places as an emergency resource, to which must be added 1,100 additional places made available by the Ministry of Inclusion in different islands, and which were in use at that time. A subsequent review, presented to the Canary Islands Immigration Forum, set this capacity at 6,301 places. In February 2021, the system as designed was deemed to be operational, with the facilities managed by the Spanish Catholic Association of Immigrants (ACCEM), the Spanish Red Cross, the White Cross Foundation and the International Organization for Migration (IOM)⁹.

These facilities are provided as a result of an emergency solution, as noted, the idea being to later transform many of them into stable facilities so as to have 5,350 structural places, concentrated in three municipalities on the islands of Tenerife (San Cristóbal de La Laguna, 2,600 places, 48.6%), Gran Canaria (Las Palmas, 2,050 places, 38.3%) and Fuerteventura (Puerto del Rosario, 700 places, 13.1%). These are old military barracks and powder magazines, a disused public school and a warehouse in a port industrial park, which offer different locations both inside consolidated urban spaces and in their periphery. These locations were selected without a preliminary public information and consultation process; in fact, the State's decision was greatly contested by the towns where the different centres are located, or rather, the *camps*, as they are colloquially called by the residents and in the media. Their operation has been the subject of a huge controversy, both inside and outside the archipelago¹⁰, and resulted in multiple complaints for human rights violations from organisations such as CEAR, Doctors of the World, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

⁹ The official press release of the Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security and Migrations is available at the following link: <https://prensa.inclusion.gob.es/WebPrensaInclusion/noticias/inmigracionemigracion/detalle/3998>

¹⁰ There were multiple pronouncements, statements, press releases and communiqués between 2020 and 2021, issued by organisations such as the Centre for African Studies and the Department of Geography and History of the University of La Laguna, Cáritas Diocesana de Canarias, Refugees Welcome, Coordinator of NGO for Development, Tenerife Migrants Support Assembly, Plataforma Tercer Sector Canarias and Red de Migrantes con Derechos de Canarias. Nationwide, entities as diverse as Red Acoge, Spanish Episcopal Conference and the Unified Association of Civil Guards.

Table 2: Main characteristics of the locations in the *Plan Canarias*

Name	Municipality	Town	Owner	Type	Emergency facilities (places)	Revision (places on 26 Feb 2021)	Stable resource (places)
Colegio León	Las Palmas de Gran Canaria	El Lasso (district 1)	Ministry of Inclusion	Old public school	300	630	400
Canarias 50	Las Palmas de Gran Canaria	La Isleta (district 3)	Ministry of Inclusion	Old barracks	650	1,190	1,150
Nave El Sebadal	Las Palmas de Gran Canaria	El Sebadal (district 3)	Bankia (on temporary)	Warehouse in industrial park in	500	500	500
Barranco Seco	Las Palmas de Gran Canaria	Barranco Seco (district)	Ministry of the Interior	Old military munitions dump	500		
Las Canteras	San Cristóbal de La Laguna	Las Canteras (district 6)	Ministry of Inclusion	Old barracks	1,800	1,642	2,000
Las Raíces	San Cristóbal de La Laguna	Rodeo Alto (district 4)	Ministry of Defence	Old barracks	1,450	1,200 (up to 2,200)	600
El Matorral	Puerto del Rosario	El Matorral	Ministry of the Interior	Former barracks used as a CIE	700	648	700

Note: Emergency facilities (places on 11 Nov 2020) announced by the Minister of Inclusion, Social Security and Migration during its public presentation at the office of the national government in the Canary Islands. Revision (places on 26 Feb 2021) coinciding with the opening of all the centres. Stable resource (estimate of places), once the emergency humanitarian situation is over.

Source: Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security and Migration. Public presentations of the *Plan Canarias* (office of the national government in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria and Canary Islands Immigration Forum). Compiled by the authors.

As they were being set up, even on a somewhat temporary basis at the beginning, given the pressing need, the various facilities progressively received the people temporarily housed in the hotel and non-hotel facilities on the islands, and almost in parallel, the new arrivals as well. Their planned capacities were almost always reached, and even exceeded at certain times, especially due to the reduced numbers of returns made and to the obstruction of individual transfers to the mainland during the first months of 2021, on the grounds of the effects resulting from the pandemic, despite repeated demands to allow this mobility, as there were no legal reasons preventing it. There have been organised group transfers during all this time, however, as evidenced by the activity witnessed at the main airports in the Canaries¹¹. In fact, it is these transfers that explain the gradual reduction in the volume of people taken in, which, according to different sources, has ranged from the initial high figures of almost 4,000 in April, coinciding with an inspection visit by the Ombudsman, to less than a thousand in the summer of 2021.

¹¹ The Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security and Migration, through the Secretary of State for Migration, acknowledged the transfer from the Canary Islands to the mainland for humanitarian reasons of 6,508 migrants between the months of June 2020 and April 2021, according to various articles in *El País*. February saw the most transfers, in excess of two thousand people.

Image 1
CATE of Las Raíces, near
the Los Rodeos Airport
in Tenerife, while in use.

Source
Vicente Zapata.



The problems with returning migrants received by sea in recent months to their countries of origin, together with the limitations imposed by the pandemic in terms of the use of internment spaces and COVID-19 outbreaks, have resulted in the underutilisation of the two CIEs that are currently in use in the Canary Islands (Barranco Seco and Hoya Fría), and the transformation of the old CIE of El Matorral into a CATE as part of the *Plan Canarias*. This is not the case with other facilities that have been set up to receive and temporarily care for new arrivals on the various islands, such as port complexes, bus stations, shelters and camps, old convents, etc. The quarantines have also required setting up separate accommodations, ranging from vacant tourist lodgings (medicalised hotels) to storage warehouses, school residence halls, and more. CEAR first reception and temporary reception resources have also remained active for people seeking international protection, as have those providing comprehensive humanitarian care, both in Gran Canaria and Tenerife, with a combined 418 places. There are also specialised resources, such as the CAI for vulnerable groups in Santa Cruz de Tenerife, among others.

Another unique characteristic of this new stage of migratory intensification has been the increased number of minors in the expeditions: boys, girls and adolescents, travelling alone or accompanied, comprise one-fifth of the migrants, according to the Ombudsman (2021). This resulted in a jump from the 421 minors listed in the Registry of Unaccompanied Foreign Minors (UFM) of Spain in December 2019, 3.4% of the national total (State Attorney General's Office, 2020), to the 2,570 that the Government of the Canary Islands publicly reported in June 2021. 79.5% were placed in about thirty emergency centres set up by the competent Ministry and run by various organisations, and the rest, in facilities managed by the island councils. With data from the month of April of 2021, the Ombudsman stated before Parliament that the number of UFM rose to 2,776, most of them still awaiting age determination tests. This same institution compared the current circumstances to those experienced in the first decade of this century, although over a

longer period, since, between 2006 and 2009, 2,727 minors were received in emergency facilities located on different islands in the archipelago (Ombudsman, 2021: 43-44).

The effort made to welcome these people has been and continues to be significant, since, on this occasion, a veritable *constellation* of residences has been made available on all the islands of the archipelago. The Government of the Canary Islands itself notes the existence of 30 emergency centres to care for UFM in June 2021 (ECUFM: 19 in Gran Canaria, 9 in Tenerife and 2 in Fuerteventura), most of them open between September and December 2020. This number can exceed forty if we add the ones set up through the efforts of the island councils. There are a further hundred general centres operating in the region for housing minors that can also receive newly-arriving UFM. This means that almost half of all municipalities in the Canaries (40 out of 88, 45.5%) are hosting or have had some experience hosting UFM. These data are fluid because the reality is changing in terms of both the number of individuals entering and leaving the system, either due to transfers to the mainland or as the UFM turn 18. Of note also in the latter case is the existence on several islands of homes for ex-wards (18 to 25) run by the regional government.

A study carried out by UNHCR for the Government of the Canary Islands with information from before March 2021 makes it possible to better characterise this group of people, particularly those who are directly overseen by the regional institution through emergency facilities run by various specialised organisations. Here live 82.1% of the total, 2,108 people on the aforementioned date, mostly male (99.6%) ages 12 to 17 (99.0%) from Morocco (52.9%), Mali, Senegal and Gambia. They are housed in 27 centres, mostly located on the aforementioned islands, and within them, in municipalities such as San Bartolomé de Tirajana, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Mogán, La Aldea de San Nicolás and Telde in Gran Canaria, which contain 70.4% of the total, and San Cristóbal de La Laguna, Santa Cruz de Tenerife and El Rosario, in Tenerife, or Puerto del Rosario, all of which have two or more centres. The number of children and adolescents per centre varies, and ranges from almost two hundred to just 7 individuals, with an average overcrowding of 15%. One issue of concern is the length of time needed to determine their age by way of the corresponding tests, a circumstance that has led to cases being reported of minors living with people who are no longer minors.

The Government of the Canary Islands is also resorting to the families that are registered in the foster care programme, who, in addition to the aforementioned centres, are housing the minors, especially the youngest, who are being cared for by families from all over the archipelago. All of this has implications for other public systems, such as education, with specific responses to the need for schooling for a significant part of these individuals at any given time during the academic year, as a result of which certain structures have been permanently converted. Therefore, old and new programmes are combined to offer different solutions to needs as they arise. These include the Caritas Mobile Street Service Unit (UMAC) initiative, which tends to many migrants who are homeless or who are no longer housed in reception centres. Even general municipal facilities, such as the Municipal Shelter of Santa Cruz de Tenerife or those in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, have had to redouble their efforts recently, as former residents of reception centres have either left or been thrown out of the facilities of the *Plan Canarias*¹².

12 Doctors of the World (2021) estimates that some 1,000 migrants in Gran Canaria and around 300 in Tenerife were *homeless* between late February and early March 2021. Most of them had come from the facilities of the *Plan Canarias*, and found themselves in highly vulnerable circumstances and living in hiding near the sea, in small caves or shelters, at the bottom of ravines, etc., resorting to begging and/or general-purpose relief agencies.

The situation has become even more complex during this phase as members of the public, either as private citizens or as part of collective responses and platforms, offer their own resources in response to the growing migrant flows and the lack of institutional solutions, whether on an episodic basis or more permanently. This is especially visible in the vicinity of some of the newly opened facilities, such as Las Raíces, Canarias 50, and others. NGOs and companies have also channelled resources, as have institutions such as the island councils. Town halls have also gotten involved, such as those of San Cristóbal de La Laguna and Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, through various areas of activity promoted by several of their departments¹³. A Single Permanent Committee ended up being created in the municipality of La Laguna to deal with processing migrants. This committee features the various stakeholders who are involved in this process (institutions at different levels, neighbourhoods and associative networks, organisations that run the facilities, police forces, OBITen, etc.¹⁴). In the capital of Gran Canaria, different meetings have been held at the headquarters of the office of the national government.

With regard to the more direct participation of citizens, mentioned earlier, of note is the breadth and importance of the social mobilisation during this stage, to include the convening of various assemblies, platforms and support networks that have taken action on different islands: Asamblea de Apoyo a Personas Migrantes and Red Migrante, in Tenerife, Somos Red and Red Canaria de Apoyo a Personas Migrantes, in Gran Canaria, and Red de Apoyo a Migrantes in Fuerteventura are just some examples. On occasion, the residents in the area of the centres have also been involved in the reception process. A considerable number of non-residents have also taken part in the process, either informally or through representative organisations. Examples include the Foro por la Isleta in Gran Canaria and the residents of the Rodeo Alto and Las Canteras neighbourhoods in Tenerife. Of note are the connections between some of the initiatives, which at different times have shared experiences and promoted joint actions: “It all happened suddenly, but it is bringing out the best in us”¹⁵.

It is clear that this latest process of migratory intensification has created a broad and diverse response in the Canary Islands. This response has not always been on equal footing, particularly at the institutional and social level, and is more intense where the reception process is underscored by the presence of reception facilities, as they are gradually set

13 Some answers are given by way of example. The town hall of San Cristóbal de La Laguna has promoted different initiatives of its own and in collaboration with the University of La Laguna, the most important of which are the signing of two agreements to coordinate the actions undertaken by the municipality in relation to the migratory reception process, as well as to develop a strategy whose purpose is to counter the spread of hate speech and the proliferation of xenophobic and racist attitudes. The City Council of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria has promoted the development of an online forum to analyse and collect proposals made by social entities and government agencies on how to improve the rights of migrants who are in the municipality. It has also temporarily provided several spaces to help with the reception process and has enhanced its social services system. In fact, after the old León School in the El Lasso neighbourhood was remodelled, it was added to the *Plan Canarias*.

14 The Municipal Corporation of San Cristóbal de La Laguna has reached a consensus on different agreements (November 2020 and February 2021) to draw attention to the future of the migratory reception process that takes place in the municipality, and to demand that the competent authorities carry it out in the most appropriate way possible, within the framework established by human rights, both in relation to migrants and to the residents of La Laguna, rejecting the use of high-capacity facilities and emphasising the need to more equitably distribute migrants, including their transfer. In May 2021, it unanimously approved a motion to join the Spanish Network of Municipalities to Receive Refugees and to create a Committee to Receive Migrants and Refugees, “to engage in stable and permanent efforts that implement different measures to improve the services and support given to this population”.

15 Statement from the online meeting held on 31 March 2021 between the residents of La Isleta, in Gran Canaria, and Rodeo Alto, in Tenerife, to meet and exchange experiences involving the migratory reception process.

up. Several systems and programmes are at work simultaneously, some of which have been providing their services over time. Others emerged recently, including community volunteering and activist initiatives that have managed to organise meaningful responses, even if their sustainability is uncertain. Migrants sometimes move from one to another, and the elements of coordination, and even coherence, needed to have a complete and effective model that is consistent with human rights and manages to adequately integrate all the efforts made are still lacking.

4. By way of conclusion and proposal

As discussed, the progression of the most recent migratory reception process has focused the attention of many people, organisations and institutions at different levels. This process is also part of the debate on the European Union's new Pact on Migration and Asylum¹⁶, which has been a source of intense controversy among its member States. Receiving and distributing people in a way that shares responsibilities, or, on the contrary, allocating resources to border territories to limit access and stop mobility there, while also advocating for returns (Pinyol, 2020), seem quite distant positions that also determine different reception models. In some cases, these models are far removed from the approach of the 2030 Agenda and goal 10.7, which advocates "facilitating orderly, safe, and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies".

There is also broad consensus about maintaining the importance of the *Atlantic route* in the complex map of African mobility towards Europe, as the mobility waxes and wanes over time: "it is a fact that the Canary archipelago will continue to endure ongoing migratory pressure" (Ombudsman, 2021: 71). Previous *crises*, plus the events of recent months, prolonged over the course of 2021, including the greater repercussions of the tragic death toll that is being reported, demands that we devise a general strategy that goes beyond addressing emergency or exceptional situations. And although the islands are seemingly being called upon specifically to improve migratory flows, aware of the permanence of these flows for as long as their underlying causes remain unsolved, the reception process remains an outstanding issue that will not be resolved solely by making more places available, as essential as that is.

That is the conclusion drawn by multiple organisations, which are demanding "to resize the humanitarian reception program by making its structure more stable and flexible while developing comprehensive and inclusive care mechanisms that can be adapted to the different flows of arrivals" (CEAR, 2021: 29)¹⁷. On the same page are professional structures, such as the Foro Canario de la Inmigración (2021: 4), which advocates for "defining a preventive reception and processing plan based on medium- and long-term scenarios and outlooks that involves institutions, various organisations and regional

¹⁶ The new European Pact on Migration and Asylum, presented in 2020 by the European Commission, emphasises controlling the European Union's external borders as a mechanism for limiting access by people who move irregularly and relying on their return, ignoring "the construction of a common and comprehensive European asylum system, as well as the search for proposals for regular access to the EU", while also reinforcing the narrative "of immigration as a threat" (Pinyol-Jiménez, 2021: 45).

¹⁷ CEAR also sent twelve proposals to the Senate in the study paper to comprehensively address the migratory phenomenon, including one to "seek a stable structure for a dignified humanitarian reception system that, in addition to ensuring that basic needs are met, develops comprehensive and inclusive care mechanisms" (February 2021). (<https://www.cear.es/doce-propuestas-migracion-canarias>)

society, and that optimises the potentially available resources at any given time". And, in any case, that "guarantees that all temporary reception facilities comply with international human rights standards" (Red Acoge and other organisations, 2021: 2), an aspect that is reinforced in the latest Ombudsman report (2021: 72), which proposes "a set of permanent facilities to avoid having to improvise them on the fly", and that bring together the essential elements of habitability in order to "shelter people with the dignity they deserve and provide the appropriate support personnel".

Image 2
Demonstration by migrants housed at the CATE of Las Raices, together with support and citizen groups in San Cristóbal de La Laguna in March 2021.

Source
Vicente Zapata.



In all, it seems clear that the existing migratory reception system in the archipelago has been *trailing the events*, despite the considerable effort that has no doubt been made. It has been particularly overwhelmed by the significant rise in the number of arrivals in the final stretch of 2020, a dynamic that has spilled over into 2021 with even higher figures. The *Plan Canarias* has sought to provide an immediate response and provide humanitarian reception, but its resources are not the only ones, since, over time, other facilities have also been set up to handle flows that exhibit a growing diversity of profiles, such as the large number of centres that house minors, vulnerable families, asylum seekers, etc. From the Las Canteras *camp*, with its almost two thousand places at maximum capacity, to a family from the foster care programme for minors, the scenarios vary enormously and involve multiple stakeholders. And there is no evidence of the existence of a general strategy, much less of a specific model, that is tailored to the particularities of the archipelago, which have been determined using a process that encourages the confluence and participation of these stakeholders.

That seems to be the fundamental challenge, to discuss the best model of migratory reception for the Canary Islands, one that gives rise to the shared definition of a global strategy that can redirect the current situation and enhance the preferential function of migratory transit of the archipelago, since, given its characteristics and limitations, it seems that there is no other possibility and responsibility. This work can be carried out with every guarantee, while also providing the starting point for the unavoidable task

of engaging with European border regions in order to spearhead the socio-economic revitalisation programmes of the areas that are driving this mobility. The focus of all this should be on community interculturality (Zapata, 2021a, 2021b), “incorporating all relevant stakeholders” (Doctors of the World, 2021: 40) and ensuring the confluence of institutions and society as a whole, including the people who are the protagonists in the mobility, both in the reception proper, and in the challenge of influencing the factors that drive migration, in cooperation with the States. The model, strategy and action plans should allow us to look beyond the ocean towards the communities of origin.

And although this specificity must arise from the aforementioned process of dialogue, we have already revealed some keys that should be taken into account when committing to “the conception of a flexible, multipurpose reception system in the designated spaces, suitably distributed throughout the archipelago. In this system, each protagonist should play the most appropriate role with a sense of the co-responsibility needed to manage this type of stay, which, ideally, should be temporary; or definitive for those people whom we can receive and incorporate with every guarantee, which will always be much fewer than those who, with luck, manage to arrive, and who, for the most part, wish to continue on their unfinished migratory journey” (Zapata, 2021b: 2). The goal then is to involve every municipality in the Canaries by setting up a large network of facilities of variable but reduced capacity, adapted to the various existing possibilities at the local scale, connected to their socio-territorial and even business environment, keeping some of the current facilities ready to deal with potential emergency situations. All the islands must have their corresponding temporary migrant residences (CETI), so as to avoid keeping these individuals exposed on the ports of the Canaries for an extended time.

The existing power structure suggests that all the stakeholders can contribute, in one way or another, to the operation of a stable system designed to ensure the well-being of both migrants and host communities. This means creating a permanent space for meeting, dialogue and coordination, plus a specialised management structure that can combine the actions of all the necessary resources and mechanisms. From the highest responsibilities of control, planning and organisation to be carried out by the State in collaboration with the Autonomous Community¹⁸, to the most routine task that can be agreed with local entities, which are much more connected with the reality of each location, the Island Councils already have extensive experience welcoming minors, and some of them, and the municipalities, in promoting coexistence initiatives. On top of this are the different organisations that take on the task of managing various facilities and projects. There is thus ample room for improvement, starting with an evident premise of concerted action and joint responsibility.

This must include an intercultural approach that emphasises the positive interaction between people, respect for diversity and equality, as proposed by Giménez (2013). It must also feature equality in its broadest conception, so as to advance towards more complete models of reception and social inclusion - regardless of how long each migrant is housed - that are based on and prioritise human rights above all else. There must also be understanding and respect for diversity, understanding that each person who arrives is unique and thus deserves to receive care that addresses their specific needs and takes into account their aspirations and life project. A positive interaction through

¹⁸ Article 144.3 of the Statute of Autonomy of the Canary Islands (Organic Law 1/2018 of 5 November) makes it possible for the Autonomous Community to take part in State decisions on immigration that are of special concern to the region, and strengthens its powers in aspects related to social and health care, integration policies in social and economic spheres, the establishment of a frame of reference for reception, etc.

engagement and relationship that favours participation and allows setting up spaces for collaboration and collective construction, as already mentioned, both between people and between the organisations and institutions involved, which is essential for defining the best responses and determining measures that ensure the common good.

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El Observatorio de la Inmigración de Tenerife es una iniciativa conjunta del Cabildo de Tenerife y la Universidad de La Laguna que surge con vocación de estructura permanente y dinámica para avanzar en el conocimiento científico de los movimientos migratorios. OBITen desarrolla su actividad a modo de centro de recopilación, producción y difusión de información que facilita la opinión cualificada y favorece la toma de decisiones que redunden en una mejor gestión del fenómeno inmigratorio y sus implicaciones.

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