What drove the surge of Moroccan migrants to Ceuta?

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Amid widespread reporting of the tens of thousands of Moroccan migrants who swam to the Spanish enclave of Ceuta carrying little more than the clothes they wore, little or no attention was paid to the social conditions that drove them to take such terrible risks. At least 141 people died making the attempt.

Where economic hardship was mentioned, it was usually treated as secondary to the pull of prosperity in Europe. Yet for many who attempted the crossing, the decisive question was not the European “dream”, but the need to escape the increasingly desperate conditions in Morocco—a country marketed to European tourists as an idyllic holiday destination.

Morocco is characterised by mass youth unemployment, rural impoverishment, informal employment, low wages and extreme inequality. Emigration appears to many young people as the only realistic path to a better future.

Official statistics capture only a partial picture of the economically and socially stultifying life of the almost 40 million people ruled by King Mohammed VI and a narrow financial elite.

Unemployment officially stands at around 13 percent, with two-thirds of the unemployed out of work for more than a year. Among young people the situation is far worse. Youth unemployment has reached almost 40 percent, while around one-quarter of Moroccans under the age of 30—approximately 2.9 million people—are neither in education, employment nor training (NEET).

Those fortunate enough to obtain work often receive wages that barely cover basic living costs. The statutory monthly minimum wage outside agriculture is about €320, while the agricultural minimum wage amounts to roughly €9 per day. Newly qualified graduates, including entry-level public-school teachers, typically earn little more than the minimum wage, around €300–350 per month.

Nominal wages have changed little over the past decade. But following the sharp rise in global food and energy prices in 2022, the real purchasing power of low-paid workers has fallen significantly as rents, food, transport and household necessities have become increasingly expensive.

Although around 40 percent of Moroccans still live in rural areas, agriculture now contributes only about 10 percent of GDP. Around one in five rural households is either poor or vulnerable to poverty.

Employment in agriculture is overwhelmingly informal. More than 90 percent of agricultural workers have no written contract, no social security coverage and few legal protections. Work is seasonal, centred on olive harvesting, citrus production, vegetables and livestock. Climate change has intensified these pressures. More frequent droughts and heatwaves, combined with inadequate irrigation infrastructure, have led to crop failures, livestock losses and declining rural incomes.

Living conditions in many rural communities remain harsh. Villages are frequently isolated by unpaved roads, while housing is poorly constructed, lacking adequate roofing, insulation and sanitation. Many households rely on wells and pit latrines, and some remote settlements remain only partially connected to electricity and other essential infrastructure. Secondary schools are often located far from villages, requiring students to board away from home—an expense beyond the reach of many families.

Rural households depend upon a combination of subsistence farming, informal work, remittances from relatives, seasonal migration to Morocco’s major cities—including Casablanca, Rabat-Salé, Tangier and Agadir—and irregular migration to Spain through Ceuta, Melilla and the Canary Islands.

The decline of agriculture has displaced the rural poor. Workers unable to survive in the countryside move to the cities where employment opportunities are not much better. Conditions offer little security for most rural migrants. Around one-third of non-agricultural employment is informal, contributing to an estimated nationwide rate of about 50 percent. Much of this work consists of street vending, unregistered workshops, informal transport services and casual construction labour, characterised by low incomes and little employment protection.

Urban poverty is highly visible. Begging for food is widespread. According to UN-Habitat more than one in ten urban residents live in dense informal settlements, bidonvilles or shanty towns located on the outskirts of Morocco's expanding cities in full view of coastal bullet trains and modern tram systems.

The movement of people from the countryside has expanded both the informal economy and the urban slums, leading to ever increasing competition for insecure jobs and exerting further downward pressure on wages while generating substantial profits for a narrow economic elite. Income inequality, measured by the Gini coefficient, stands at around 0.40, while wealth inequality—although not officially measured—is widely believed to be considerably higher.

The economy is dominated by the king, one of Africa's richest men, who through his ownership of Al Mada, the country's largest conglomerate, controls and influences a substantial, but unknown, part of the economy largely beyond the purview of parliament and the population. Al Mada's holdings include Morocco's largest bank, Attijariwafa Bank, the mining company Managem, retail chains Marjane and Acima, and major interests in agribusiness, cement, real estate and construction materials. These highly capital-intensive sectors generate considerable wealth but comparatively few jobs.

Desperate social conditions have led to numerous strikes, protests and demonstrations, most notably the nationwide Gen Z youth protests last autumn. Cost?of?living protests triggered by inflation, rising food prices, and stagnant wages have erupted in Casablanca, Rabat, Tangier, Fez and Agadir, demanding price controls, wage increases and jobs.

Teachers, one of the most militant groups in Morocco, have repeatedly gone on strike against their abysmally low wages, contracts, pensions and working conditions. In the impoverished Rif province in the northeast of the country, there have been protests over water shortages, agricultural collapse, the neglect of public and social infrastructure and unemployment.

According to the UN World Population Prospects (2024/2026), Morocco experiences net emigration of around 61,000 people each year—equivalent to approximately 1.6 migrants per 1,000 population. Since 1950, cumulative net migration has reduced Morocco's population by around 4.1 million people, placing it among the world's leading countries of emigration. Its diaspora, estimated at between five and six million people, is one of the largest in Africa and among the largest globally relative to national population.

The 72,000 migrants who attempted to reach Ceuta were the latest expression of a long-term structural process. The overwhelming majority were young men from northern Morocco, particularly the surrounding countryside and nearby towns such as Tetouan, Fnideq, Martil, M'diq, Belyounech and Tangier. Facing high youth unemployment, widening disparities between educational attainment and job opportunities, declining rural livelihoods and persistently low household incomes, many concluded that the dangers of a 3 mile, 2-4 hour ocean swim were a risk worth taking.

The Moroccan state has used its role as one of Europe's gatekeepers to its own political and economic advantage. Once viewed simply as a transit route for West Africans, Morocco is now at the core of Europe's external border strategy, with a raft of agreements tying Rabat to the European Union's (EU) migration policy that yield significant financial gains for the country. These include the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF), which in 2023 allocated €152 million ($160 million USD) specifically to reinforce Morocco's border management systems.

Rabat has pushed Spain and France to support its autonomy plan for the disputed Western Sahara and override regional EU court rulings limiting trade in the territory. It is positioning itself as both a stabilizing force and an interlocutor between Africa and Europe.

Migration is a source of geopolitical leverage for Rabat. By demonstrating its ability to regulate—or relax—migration flows towards Europe, the government has strengthened its bargaining position with Brussels and key European governments over financial assistance, trade and diplomatic support.

The working class in Europe and worldwide must defend refugees and migrants. Any division along national and ethnic lines weakens the working class. It can effectively defend its democratic rights, social standards and freedoms only if it is united and fights for global equality, i.e., for an international socialist alternative to exploitation and oppression.