



BORDER OBSERVATORY 2024

Exporting Migrant Suffering:

The U.S. and Spain Border Externalization
Strategies in Perspective

HOPE



UNIVERSITY OF
SAN FRANCISCO

Master in
Migration Studies

The Hope Border Institute (HOPE) brings the perspective of Catholic social teaching to bear on the realities unique to our US-Mexico border region. Through a robust program of research and policy work, leadership development and action, we work to build justice and deepen solidarity across the borderlands.

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Design

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I. Introduction

In September 2023, US and Mexican officials, joined by business leaders from the Mexican train company Ferromex, met in Ciudad Juárez to agree on new measures to curtail irregular migration. “We are continuing to work closely with our partners in Mexico to increase security and address irregular migration along our shared border,” said Troy A. Miller, a top U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) official.¹ Considering still increasing encounters at the U.S.-Mexico border, the U.S. redoubled its pressure on Mexico to deter asylum seekers. In turn, Mexico

implemented more aggressive enforcement measures against people seeking safety, work and family reunification. In a call to Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador in February 2024, President Biden “expressed his appreciation for Mexico’s operational support and for taking concrete steps to deter irregular migration while expanding lawful pathways.”² In the same vein, CBP touted a decrease in encounters at the U.S.-Mexico border in early 2024 as a success.³

1 U.S. Customs and Border Protection, *Readout: U.S.-Mexico meeting on joint actions to further enhance border security* (September 24, 2023). <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/national-media-release/readout-us-mexico-meeting-joint-actions-further-enhance-border>

2 White House, *Readout of President Joe Biden’s Call with President Andrés Manuel López Obrador of Mexico* (February 3, 2024). <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/02/03/readout-of-president-joe-bidens-call-with-president-andres-manuel-lopez-obrador-of-mexico-3/>

3 U.S. Customs and Border Protection, *CBP Releases January 2024 Monthly Update* (February 13, 2024). <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/national-media-release/cbp-releases-january-2024-monthly-update#:~:text=In%20January%202024%2C%20the%20U.S.,of%2042%25%20from%20December%202023.>

Too often, the U.S. and other high-income countries measure migration policy success according to the number of migrants arriving at their borders, including asylum seekers. Fewer encounters at borders are often equated to policy success, while increasing encounters prompt narratives of “crisis.” However, this reasoning masquerades the conditions leading people to migrate in the first place, migrants’ experiences during transit, and, most importantly, the influence that the U.S. immigration policies exert over those who haven’t crossed its borders yet.

One of the most significant policies impacting people on the move is border externalization: the expansion of one country’s migration policy preferences to other third states through a multi-layered web of public and private actors and agreements to prevent migrants and asylum seekers from arriving and staying in its territory. From agreements with Mexico to host asylum seekers (Migrant Protection Protocols, MPP) to policies that forcibly return or expel nationals to countries others than theirs (Title 42, Safe Third Country Agreements) or force countries to deter asylum seekers, the externalization of borders is becoming the option by default when it comes to migration governance.

Border Externalization

“The expansion of one country’s migration policy preferences to other third states through a multi-layered web of public and private actors and agreements to prevent migrants and asylum seekers from arriving and staying in its territory.”

This report problematizes the U.S. externalization of its border toward Northern Central America and Mexico (Mesoamerica from now on) from a global critical perspective, highlighting patterns of policy diffusion and grassroots resistance. For that purpose, it conducts a comparative case study with Spain. The U.S. and Spain have been paradigmatic cases of cross-country comparison to find similarities and differences between a long-term net-receiving country and a “latecomer” to net-receiving migration.⁴ It would be expected that these two countries, with significant differences in their migration histories, would have developed diverse strategies to manage migration. Based on 21 in-depth semi-structured interviews with practitioners accompanying people on the move in Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Morocco, Senegal, and Mauritania,^{5 6} this report will

4 James F., Hollifield, Philip L. Martin, Pia M. Orrenius & François Héran, *The dilemmas of immigration control in liberal democracies* (2022). In *Controlling immigration: A comparative perspective* (pp. 3-51). Stanford University Press.

5 Practitioners had to be adults and work or have worked accompanying migrants on their journeys to the U.S. or Spain or in routes affected by these countries’ policies in non-profits, faith-based organizations, migrant advocacy organizations, legal or healthcare aid groups, and other community-based organizations. In seeking to explore the perspectives of those accompanying migrants and not directly enforcing the law, interviews explicitly omitted government-related migration practitioners. In addition, due to the online nature of the study, unavoidable risks of consent violation, and power imbalances, the study also excluded migrants from its scope. As those primarily impacted by these policies, future studies should consider migrants’ voices if these ethical issues can be solved. By no means does this study claim to speak in the name of migrants, and by no means do practitioners’ voices need to correspond with migrants’ voices, as the literature has explored before (see, for instance, Martha Montero-Sieburth, *Who gives “Voice” or “Empowers Migrants” in Participatory Action Research? Challenges and Solutions* (2020), in *Migration Letters* 17(2), 211-218) and practitioners highlighted themselves during interviews.

6 Selected participants were recruited through snowball sampling. Interviews were conducted online between June 2022 and March 2023 in Spanish, English, and French and lasted approximately one hour and a half. Interviews were fully transcribed and analyzed following axial coding analysis and triangulation techniques to find themes and draw conclusions. For data protection purposes, practitioners were identified with their country of work and a number. See *Annex 1* for further information about participants demographics.

show that both countries have developed similar border externalization strategies with similar impacts on people on the move. The reasons lay in similar securitized and racist perspectives of migration and asylum based on sanitized and reified conceptions of who belongs to the “nation.”

Ultimately, this report shows that the U.S. border externalization practices cannot and mustn't be understood in isolation but rather as pertaining to a larger web of global practices that respond to similar policy goals and narratives. Therefore, actions to challenge these policies from below demand transnational solidarity and coordination.

The subsequent sections are structured as follows. The first section reviews the dynamics and functioning of the U.S. and Spain's externalization policies in Mesoamerica and Northern Western Africa through the lived experience of practitioners. The second section explores the impacts of such dynamics on local populations and people on the move in these countries. The final section offers advocacy and policy alternatives based on practitioners' perspectives. Conclusions are finally drawn.



II. Dynamics:

The Exporting of Migrant Suffering Through Mandating (Im)Mobility

The U.S. and Spain, Exporters of Suffering

A precondition often neglected is to what extent border externalization policies are known by and relevant to people in countries of transit. When asked about which were the most important issues affecting migrants and their work, 12 out of the 21 practitioners interviewed immediately reported the impact of the U.S. and Spain policies (often under the European Union coordination) on their contexts, with practitioners from Morocco and Mexico almost unanimously arguing so. Immediately after, practitioners underscored the need to address the root causes of forced migration and the lack of assistance to migrants as the two other most relevant topics for them, independently of their geographical location.

Similarly, when questioned about which actors were most responsible for the situations that migrants experienced in their journeys, most practitioners

resorted to the U.S., Spain and the European Union, with some even mentioning specific actors like the U.S. Customs and Border Protection agency (Mexico 4). Yet, many also pointed to other actors, such as:

1. their own national governments and their national police and military apparatuses for repressing and not protecting migrants,
2. extractivist industries for displacing people at home,
3. smugglers,
4. non-profits and churches for their assistance to this collective (not without criticism), and
5. international organizations like the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) for facilitating deportations or returns to origin countries.

Interestingly, only two practitioners (Honduras 2 and Morocco 7) mentioned migrants as the most important actors in their own migration journeys.

All except one interviewee went deeper into why they thought that the U.S., Spain and the European Union had an impact on their contexts. First, some pointed to their lived experiences. For example, some practitioners referred to the Spanish *Guardia Civil*'s⁷ joint actions with Moroccan border guards to deter migrants from crossing their shared border, as well as the *Guardia Civil*'s presence in Mauritania's waters to intercept boards. Mexican and Central American practitioners referred to their daily encounters with people deported from the U.S. to their countries, even if these were not their countries of origin.

"[I see the U.S. influence] when they apply Title 42, because they send them all back, so we receive everyone from everywhere..." (Guatemala 3, 2023)

Others in Morocco, Mexico and Honduras concluded that the the provision of material and economic resources from the U.S. and Spain had changed their countries' migration policies:

"The interference of the United States [in Central America] is just because of the possibilities of giving money, of offering military assistance, of providing money for patrols, of offering money for drones, that is to say, of buying our countries' will with a lot of money" (Honduras 2, 2023)

In this line, practitioners argued that some migration measures wouldn't make sense if it wasn't for the U.S. and Spanish involvement:

"I can't imagine why Morocco would do that [displacing people on the move to its interior cities], because it costs a lot of money and a lot of resources, and they're still in Morocco (...)
What advantage would Morocco have to displace people systematically like this just to keep them in Morocco? It's not a logical idea" (Morocco 1, 2022).

Few migration workers referred to knowing specific agreements signed between countries to externalize borders but, those who did, they showed a high level of criticism against them:

"It is very clear that the U.S. is using the Declaration [2022 L.A. Declaration on Migration and Protection]⁸ (...) to have more interference in the migratory issue and to be able to continue externalizing the borders not only to Mexico or Central America but also get more information on the situation of the Venezuelan population in Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, even Chile" (Mexico 2, 2022)

"Today, the European border is not Spain, it is not Morocco. Currently, the European border is in Niger, in Libya" (Morocco 4/Senegal 1)

Despite not mentioning the specific letter of the agreements, declarations and memoranda of understanding (MOUs) that facilitate the externalization of the U.S. and Spain's borders, most interviewees referred to their knowledge of foreign policy to explain why they believed these countries were partly responsible for on the situation of migrants on the move. For instance, Mexico and Central America participants connected the U.S. border externalization policies to a saga of U.S. foreign policy actions to

7 The *Guardia Civil* (or Civil Guard) is the Spanish agency in charge of border enforcement, among other functions.

8 White House, *Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection* (June 10, 2022), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/06/10/los-angeles-declaration-on-migration-and-protection/>.

preserve and expand “its empire” (Mexico 5, 2023). Honduras 1 (2023) lamented that “we [Honduras] are a country that unfortunately has been taught that we are on our knees before the empire [the U.S.]”

In addition, respondents on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean linked countries’ acceptance of the U.S. and Spain’s demands to the diplomatic and economic pressure of the latter. For example, Mexico 5 referred to President Donald Trump’s threats against Mexico if the country didn’t accept deterring migrants.⁹ Meanwhile, Morocco 4/Senegal 1 spoke about how the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation introduced paragraphs related to migration control in its agreements with countries like Senegal, thus conditioning aid to migration control.¹⁰

In sum, some concluded that they had no migration policy but the European and U.S. one: “We have to say that we do not have a migration policy. Our countries are aligned behind the migration policy of the European Union, which consists of closing the borders” (Mauritania 1, 2023); to which Mexico 4 (2023) added that “Mexico’s public immigration policy is outlined by the U.S. State Department.” Other practitioners, especially Guatemala’s interviewees, understood that the U.S. couldn’t host everyone arriving at its borders and thus had to find ways to alleviate the migratory pressure.

Mandating Forced (Im)Mobility: Policies to Determine Migration Flows Direction

The migration agreements reached between the U.S., Spain and other third countries pursue three goals:

1. Dissuade people from migrating, 2. Deter people

if they had migrated, and 3. Take people as far away as possible from their borders if they are close to them or have already arrived at them. Externalization agreements seek to build an entire system that mandates people to remain where they are or move in directions they don’t want to. In short, they impose a mandate of forced immobility and mobility.

On the one hand, forced immobility policies and tools hold, retain and detain people to prevent their movement closer to the U.S. and Spain’s borders. On the other hand, forced mobility mechanisms push migrants as far away as possible from these countries’ physical borders and territories. As scholars of mobility have explored, these two mechanisms constitute a continuum, as forced immobility often has the purpose of resulting in forced mobility (for instance, detaining migrants -immobility- to later deporting them -mobility-), and forced mobility often has the goal of creating forced immobility (for instance, deportation of asylum seekers -mobility- to third countries so they remain in places further away from one’s border -immobility-).

To enforce this mandate, the U.S. and Spain have increased their pressure on and assistance to origin, transit and destination countries so they build new physical and administrative systems of deterrence. Such barriers comprise at least the following:

- 1. Administrative barriers.** They seek to complicate the legal migration process of persons from certain nationalities to avoid their arrival at the U.S. and Spain borders. For instance, under U.S. pressure, Mexico imposed a visa requirement

⁹ Quinn Owen & John Parkinson, *Trump threatens to completely close southern border as early as next week if Mexico doesn’t stop ‘illegal immigration’* (March 30, 2019). ABC News. <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/trump-threatens-completely-close-southern-border-early-week/story?id=62040724>.

¹⁰ See, for example, Spanish Cooperation, Spain-Senegal Country Partnership Framework 2019-2023 (2019), *Strategic Objective 3: Economic governance, public finance management and fight against corruption; migration management; democratic governance and security*. https://www.aecid-senegal.sn/?wpfb_dl=550.

on Venezuelan nationals to prevent them from boarding direct flights to the country,¹¹ while the country also implemented a restrictive ID-check policy to prevent migrants from boarding buses up North (Mexico 2, Mexico 5).¹² As Morocco 5 (2023) highlighted, “This is an invisible and administrative [border], of a bureaucratic nature, that closes administrative doors in the respective consulates.”

2. Militarized blockades. Whether through the deployment of the military for migration control or the militarization of police bodies with migration functions, interviewees reported an increasing militarization of migration controls with US and European support. In Mexico, the signing of the 2019 U.S.-Mexico Joint Declaration¹³ led to the deployment of almost 30,000 National Guard members across the Mexican territory to intercept and detain families seeking safety. Similarly, the Safe Third Country agreement between the U.S. and Guatemala led to the deployment of the police to suppress migrant caravans, as well as the army in the north of Guatemala to surveil new migration routes (Guatemala 3).

Meanwhile, the E.U. and Spain deployed their forces (Spanish *Guardia Civil* and the European Union borders and coast guard agency, Frontex) in Senegal and Mauritania to deter migrants and enhance border patrolling capacities in these countries. Similarly, Spanish and European funding and resource transfer to Morocco for stricter border and interior migration controls

have skyrocketed in the past years.¹⁴ Morocco 5 summarized it:

“They [police / armed forces] have *greater mobility* because they have more resources, more troops, so they can afford more incursions and put more people in. If they have more money, then obviously they [police / armed forces] increase their internal and external displacements; there is a border of the police security forces that has multiplied in the last years” [emphasis added] (Morocco 5, 2023).

3. Technological borders. Particularly in the case of the U.S., practitioners described the use of technology, with mobile applications like CBP One, to filter and reduce the number of people crossing the U.S. border, which Mexico 4 (2023) described as “an everyday technological border.” Developed by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, CBP One aims to make asylum seekers reserve a time slot to present themselves at U.S. ports of entry and make their asylum claims. Despite this being an app developed by the U.S., Mexico felt the most pressure as asylum seekers remained stranded in Mexico trying to obtain an appointment. Among the challenges asylum seekers must face to get an appointment are the lack of access to Wi-Fi or Internet connection, language barriers, the lack of access to the proper technology, and racial bias in the app’s facial recognition.

11 Human Rights Watch, Mexico/Central America: New Visa Restrictions Harm Venezuelans (July 5, 2022). <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/07/05/mexico/central-america-new-visa-restrictions-harm-venezuelans>.

12 A Mexican court declared the policy mandating ID and migration status checks to buy bus tickets illegal on October 2023. However, people on the move in Mexico still report frequent documentation checks to board buses and buy bus tickets.

13 Dave Graham, *México despliega 15,000 efectivos en norte del país, mientras busca frenar migración a EEUU* (June 24, 2019). Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/article/inmigracion-mexico-seguridad-idLTAKCN1TQ06M>.

14 José Bautista, Alberto Alonso, Rocío Márquez, Emma Esser & Fernando Anido, *Fronteras SA: la industria del control migratorio* (July 15, 2022), https://www.elconfidencial.com/espana/2022-07-15/fronteras-industria-control-migratorio_3460287/.

4. Offshored asylum regimes. The U.S. and Spain have increasingly transferred their responsibility with asylum seekers and refugees to countries of transit. In this case, the U.S. has significantly innovated in its policy toward Mexico and Central American countries, formalizing systems for these countries to accept expelled migrants and host potential asylum seekers arriving in its territory. Over the years, Mexico has been instrumental in accepting returned asylum seekers waiting for an asylum hearing in the U.S. during the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), expelled asylum seekers from Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Venezuela (among others) under the health authority of Title 42 in the U.S., and then expelled asylum seekers from Venezuela, Cuba, Nicaragua and Haiti after President Biden's Circumvention of Legal Pathways rule. Similarly, the Trump administration formalized the return of potential asylum seekers to Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador so they could seek asylum in these countries instead of in the U.S. – agreements that the Biden administration later suspended in 2021. As Honduras 2 (2023) argued, "This [safe third country agreements] followed the logic of externalizing the borders further and further south, to the south of the United States."

In the case of Spain, Northwestern African practitioners reported a *de facto* offshoring of the Spanish asylum system. Morocco 5 underscored how Spain conducted expedited expulsions of potential asylum seekers to Morocco as soon as they crossed its border without letting them claim asylum. These practices, popularly called "hot returns" or *devoluciones en caliente*, have been frequently reported as unlawful by civil

society organizations and Spanish institutions such as the Spanish Ombudsman.¹⁵ Furthermore, Mauritania 1 reported how Spain was also deporting so-called economic migrants to third countries other than the ones of their nationalities without evaluating whether they could be asylum seekers. According to Mauritania 1's account of some migrants' testimonies, people from Guinea had been deported from the Spanish city of Las Palmas to Senegal. This practitioner argued that the Spanish police could do so because many of these migrants and asylum seekers didn't have passports.

5. Offshored deportation regimes. Once expelled or returned, the U.S. and Spain request transit countries to take these persons as far away as possible from their shared borders to avoid repeated crossings, resulting in a sophisticated mechanism of domestic and international displacement. Migrants in the Spain-Morocco and U.S.-Mexico borderlands – whether returned or not – are subject to increasing surveillance, detention and transportation by bus into the interior of Mexico and Morocco.

"Police take people off the street and off the borders from border cities and bring them to migrate them *against their will* to central areas in the country that are further away from the border" (Morocco 1, 2022, emphasis added). Similarly, Mexico detains persons in its northern border and forcibly buses them to its capital, and from there to its southern border. From there, practitioners from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador reported receiving buses from Mexico with persons who had been returned by the U.S. or

15 María Martín, *El Defensor del Pueblo concluye que las devoluciones en caliente durante la tragedia de Melilla fueron ilegales* (March 13, 2023). El País. <https://elpais.com/espana/2023-03-13/el-defensor-del-pueblo-concluye-que-las-devoluciones-en-caliente-durante-la-tragedia-de-melilla-fueron-ilegales.html#>.

apprehended close to the U.S. border. Guatemala 3 complained that these buses were arriving in more remote areas of Guatemala where there was little to no services available to migrants, whereas Honduras 2 (2023) described this system as “a third line of express deportations without any [legal] guarantee.” According to Honduras 2, buses are the preferred transportation method for these deportations because they are harder to track. Nonetheless, deportations on flights are still relevant. A relevant example is the collaboration of Mexico in the deportation of Venezuelans that the U.S. couldn’t return due to diplomatic tensions.

The logic of deterrence and deportation under which border externalization practices operate is a logic of giving and taking away life for “los atravesados,” those seen as unworthy, ungrateful, and dangerous.¹⁶ By only focusing on detaining and pushing migrants and asylum seekers further away, countries neglect people’s protection needs and vulnerabilities, further endangering their lives.

16 Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands - La Frontera: The new mestiza* (1987). Aunt Lute Books.

Timeline

Major Developments of the U.S. and Spain Border Externalization Strategies



1981

U.S. Agreement with Haiti for high-sea interdictions

U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Services conduct credible fear interviews (CFIs) on high seas and U.S. Coast Guard pushes boats back, mainly impacting Haitian nationals. Later processing in Guantanamo.



1989

Beginning of U.S.-Mexico official cooperation on migration deterrence

Introduction of checkpoints along transit corridors in Mexico and deportation of intercepted Central Americans



1992

Spain-Morocco Readmission of Third-Country Nationals Agreement

It officially entered into force in 2012 and has been enforced intermittently.



1993-1994

Operations Hold the Line and Gatekeeper in the U.S.

Paradigm of prevention through deterrence. Mexico continues to increase immigration controls within the country.



2002-2009

Beginning of repatriation, readmission, and migration cooperation agreements between Spain and Western Africa and Sahel countries

Deployment of the Spanish Civil Guard in Mauritania and Senegal



2002

U.S.-Mexico Border Partnership Action Plan

Securitization of migration in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks



2006

Spain-Frontex's first joint aero-maritime patrolling operation, Hera



2008

U.S. Merida Initiative

US funding for Mexican border patrolling and routes surveillance, followed by the 2014 Mexican *Plan Frontera Sur*



2011-2016

Spanish Technical Assistance and Deployment of Forces for Migration Control Sahel

Spanish-led European Union technical assistance for migration control through European Union projects.

2019

U.S.-Mexico Joint Declaration & Safe Third Safe Country Agreements with El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala (later suspended)

Return of asylum seekers to Mexico under the Migrant Protection Protocols, deployment of 30,000 National Guard members in Mexico for migration control

2020-2023

U.S. Title 42 expulsions to Mexico

Mexico accepts the return of thousands of asylum seekers without reception or protection protocols

2021-2024

Renewed Spain's Migration Memoranda of Understanding in Western Africa and the Sahel

Joint Declarations with Senegal (2021) and Gambia (2024) for migration control.

Reinforcement of already established patrols in Mauritania and increasing migration control funding for countries like Morocco

2023-2024

U.S. Circumvention of Lawful Pathways Rule and U.S. Securing the Border Interim Final Rule

The U.S. continues to return Venezuelan, Haitian, Cuban and Nicaraguan nationals to Mexico. It makes the CBP One mobile app the only way for asylum seekers to present at ports of entry and claim asylum. Mexico significantly increases migration controls and imposes visa restrictions on South American nationals

2024

U.S.-Panama Agreement for Removal Flight Program

Start of Panama-operated, US-funded removal flights to "reduce irregular migration through the Darien"

Source: Cristina Fuentes-Lara and Gonzalo Fanjul. Externalización: Caos, corrupción y control migratorio bajo apariencia de cooperación europea (2024). Fundación Por Causa. https://porcausa.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/InformeExternaliz_COMPLETO_04_25.pdf



III. Impacts: Irreparable Harm to Migrants and Countries

To seek safety, to move, or to simply live in one of the countries toward which borders are externalized represents a danger. As this section explores, border externalization policies result in direct physical and psychological violence against people on the move and an exponential increase in the risks these people face. The outcome: severe injuries, deep-wounded trauma and systemic confusion, disappearances, and deaths.

Extreme Physical and Psychological Violence

Border externalization practices directly increase the physical and psychological violence that people on the move endure. Whether at borders, in internal checkpoints, in raids, in detention, during forced internal movements, or during deportation, border externalization policies attack migrants' rights, dignity and lives.

On the one hand, the expansion and militarization of migration controls and raids multiplies the abuses against people seeking safety, particularly women, children and LGBTQI+ people. According to testimonies, public officials' verbal abuse has grown in detention and during deportations. Similarly, there is a concerning escalation of unrestrained state violence against people on the move with severe consequences, including serious bone fractures and illnesses (Morocco 4/Senegal 1), extrajudicial killings, like the assassination of 30+ Sudanese asylum seekers at the Spain-Morocco border in June 2022 (Morocco 5),¹⁷ and widespread sexual abuses. Indeed, sexual abuse has often become the only bribe police and army members accept in contexts of transit. The preceding has a devastating impact on the physical and mental health of targeted women, children and LGBTQI+ people. "I think it is this mistreatment by the authorities that hurts the most,"

17 MENA Rights Group, *Sudanese national victim of police violence at the border between Morocco and the Spanish enclave of Melilla on June 24, 2022* (July 06, 2022), <https://menarights.org/en/case/ao>

said Mexico 2 (2022), who recalled women describing the transit through Mexico as more dangerous than the route through the Darien Gap.

Furthermore, Mexico's, Morocco's, or Guatemala's continuous busing and forced relocation of migrant populations inflict severe psychological harm on them:

"I met some cases of Salvadorans and Nicaraguans who also arrived at the [Honduras] border and, of course, this [Honduras] was not their country and region, nor did they know where they were. There was so much disorder and so much violation of people's rights that they [Mexico's immigration authorities] did not even respect the nationality or the country [referring to chain removals from the U.S. through Mexico]" (Honduras 2, 2023).

This process contributes to deepening the trauma deportation imposes on affected people and their families, who often don't know how to accompany them in their return process to their communities of origin (Honduras 1).

On the other hand, the more stringent migration enforcement at the US and Spanish requests, combined with narrow legal migration pathways, force people to look for less surveilled but more treacherous routes where abuses continue (Honduras 2). There, members of organized crime, smugglers, bus drivers, and other individuals often prey on migrants' situations of vulnerability (Morocco 7 & Mexico 1). Smuggling actors and criminal networks provide confusing or false information, request more money to facilitate the migration journey, and expose migrants to greater danger as they seek more dangerous routes to take them to their destinations. Moreover, sexual abuse is

widespread. For instance, migrant women crossing Mauritania and other countries frequently narrated episodes of sexual abuse at the hands of bus drivers, people facilitating their movement, and sometimes other peers (Mauritania 1, Morocco 6, and Morocco 7). Furthermore, unscrupulous actors frequently strip migrants of all their belongings.

Yet, navigating these more dangerous routes has become the only option for most to access protection. Albeit a business, smuggling becomes the only option available to access some forms of protection, thus creating complex relationships of unequal power and care between migrants and smugglers (Morocco 7).¹⁸

Lack of Care and Privation of Care

Border externalization policies exert violence over migrants by neglecting care of their rights and needs and preventing their access to care.

Whether at forced relocations or in immigration detention, police and militarized forces deprive migrants of all their belongings, including their documents, money, and, at times, their clothes (Morocco 2 & Guatemala 4). In addition, many do not receive proper medical attention if they are injured or in distress (Guatemala 3, Guatemala 4, Morocco 1, Mauritania 1). Eventually, forces with migration control function "dump" (Honduras 2) migrants in cities without previous notice, where they cannot access services. For instance, Mexico 2 reported that cities like Acapulco, Morelia and Aguascalientes were receiving internal relocation buses without any support to expand their public and social protection networks. As a consequence, many humanitarian actors in countries of transit have to provide emergency care for asylum seekers severely injured by police and other actors

18 See also Gabriella Sanchez, *Critical perspectives on clandestine migration facilitation: An overview of migrant smuggling research* (2017). *Journal on Migration and Human Security*, 5(1), 9-27, John Doering-White, *Evidencing violence and care along the Central American migrant trail through Mexico* (2018). *Social Service Review*, 92(3), 432-469. doi:10.1086/699196

(Morocco 1 & Guatemala 4) and help these people find shelter in arduous circumstances (Guatemala 4).

States are, thus, victimaries and accomplices. For instance, El Salvador 2 stated that migrants usually fall into trafficking networks with purposes of sexual exploitation, labor exploitation, organ trafficking, and drug trafficking without Central American states and Mexico doing enough to protect them. Not only that, the Mexican National Guard and the Army knew about massacres against migrants and didn't do anything. Even worse, Mexican army forces participated in some of these massacres.¹⁹

Mexico 2's (2022) account may summarize well the increasing risks and violence that migrants face as a result of border externalization policies:

"The Venezuelan population could come to Mexico and arrive by plane. People we interviewed said, "If it weren't for the visa, we would have arrived by plane, as we used to do before." And it is impossible to obtain a visa. (...) So think, think about all these women and children who are walking through seven countries (...) and then having to go through Mexico in the worst way: Paying extortion, with this mistreatment, with always the fear that someone is going to do something to you, some kind of physical abuse. And then the whole issue of care, families that used to be able to come and now they are in this situation of not being able to move."

Increased Separation of Families, Disappearances & Deaths

The focus on deterrence over protection ultimately leads to a humanitarian catastrophe where families

19 Alicia Moncada, Eduardo Rojas & Ana Lorena Delgadillo, *Bajo la bota: militarización de la política migratoria en México* (2022). Fundación para la Justicia y el Estado Democrático de Derecho (FJEDD), Sin Fronteras IAP, Derechos Humanos Integrales en Acción (DHIA), Derechoscopio, Uno de Siete Migrando e Instituto para las Mujeres en la Migración (IMUMI). https://sinfronteras.org.mx/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Informe-Bajo-la-Bota_240522.pdf



are separated, migrant disappearances and deaths skyrocket, and rescue and identification efforts languish.

Morocco 1 and Morocco 2 explained how more frequent raids have resulted in the separation of tens of families. They recalled the case of a migrant mom who was caught by the police in northern Morocco, where she had her three-month-old baby at home, and was bused to the south of the country. “She found herself hundreds of kilometers away from her baby because she happened to be caught by the police” (Morocco 1, 2022). The same phenomenon happens in Mexico, where dozens of family separations were reported just during the first months of 2024.²⁰

In the same vein, externalization-fueled violence is leading to soaring numbers of reported migrant disappearances and deaths (Morocco 4/Senegal 1, El Salvador 2 and Guatemala 2). According to the IOM-sponsored Missing Migrant Project,²¹ thousands of people have perished in their quest for safety, family reunification, work, and more. In one of the most recent and cruelest examples, 40 men were left to burn on a fire sparked in an Instituto Nacional de Migración detention facility in Ciudad Juárez (Mexico). Most of the people killed during the fire were Brown

and Indigenous men from Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Colombia and Ecuador.²² Victims were particularly vulnerable people who couldn't have paid a \$200 bribe to immigration agents.²³ Those who survived, including women detained nearby, still suffer from disabling injuries and long-lasting trauma. The families of all of them, mostly from Indigenous communities, were left alone in agony as they processed the killing of and harm to their relatives, neighbors, and friends (Guatemala 2 and Guatemala 3).

But far from over, violence against migrants prolongs after disappearing or dying – new forms of violence emerge: the lack of due diligence of transit countries to investigate massacres against migrants and prosecute armed forces and other actors involved, as well as the persecution of relatives demanding accountability (El Salvador 2). In addition, in an effort to eliminate any evidence of violence, countries like Morocco often deny the right to bury migrants close to the Spain-Morocco borderlands. Thus, it is common that countries designate out-of-reach places to bury dead migrants in rushed procedures, often without due proper investigations nor civil society oversight.²⁴

Erosion of Democracy

Didier Fassin argued that Global North states use

20 Jesus de la Torre, Blanca Navarrete & Diana Solís, *Pain as Strategy: The Violence of U.S.-Mexico Immigration Enforcement and Texas' Operation Lone Star against People on the Move in El Paso-Ciudad, Juárez* (July 10, 2024), Hope Border Institute and Derechos Humanos Integrales en Acción. https://www.hopeborder.org/_files/ugd/e07ba9_1ef77e8068b24ab7bf55ff6236c1850d.pdf

21 Missing Migrants Project, *Deaths during migration recorded since 2014, by region of incident* (2023). <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/data>

22 Lighthouse Reports, *La Verdad de Ciudad Juárez, El Paso Matters, Smoke and Lies* (March 19, 2024). <https://www.lighthousereports.com/investigation/smoke-and-lies/>

23 Luis Chaparro, *Migrants died in detention fire because they couldn't pay \$200 bribe to be released* (2023). Vice. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/v7bmk4/ciudad-juarez-jail-fire-migrants-died-failed-to-pay-bribe-for-release>

24 Vicki Squire, *Governing migration through death in Europe and the US: Identification, burial and the crisis of modern humanism* (2017). *European Journal of International Relations* 23(3), 513-532, El País, *Marruecos se apresura a enterrar a los migrantes que intentaron entrar en Melilla entre críticas por la falta de investigaciones* (June 26, 2022). <https://elpais.com/espana/2022-06-26/marruecos-se-apresura-a-enterrar-a-los-migrantes-del-asalto-a-la-valla-entre-criticas-por-la-posible-ocultacion-de-las-causas-de-la-muerte.html>

border externalization to overcome the paradox of the liberal democratic state, by which democracies want to repress migrants but they cannot do it unrestrictedly.²⁵ These findings show that the solution high-income countries have found to “save democracy” is to erode democracy somewhere else. In turn, the precedent reinforces the narrative scheme of a violent “them” and a respectful “us,” by which high-income countries relinquish any responsibility over what happens to migrants and asylum seekers in countries of transit.²⁶

Concrete examples of this reasoning in practice comprise the use of the National Guard, armed forces, and reinforced police forces to repress migrants in countries like Mexico or Morocco. “There is more tolerance to human rights violation under the guise that governments are protecting us,” El Salvador 2 (2023) lamented, noting that these practices are effectively undermining democratic advances in countries of transit migration. In addition, practitioners from Morocco, Mauritania, and Mexico pointed to their governments’ evasion of any contact with civil society organizations that hold them accountable. Indeed, some interviewed practitioners reported being detained and persecuted for demanding accountability from their states.

These narratives and policies ultimately create a vicious cycle that keeps reinforcing the vulnerability of people on the move. Because migrants identify the governments as only pursuing their deportation, they avoid recurring to state actors in cases of need or abuse. Mexico 4 underscored how migrants barely denounce the abuses they suffer from state or non-statal groups before the police because they fear being deported. Similarly, Guatemala 4 argued that migrants

seek the Church and other social institutions for help and not the state for the same reasons. Consequently, the precedent pushes people on the move to the margins, making them more likely to be abused by unscrupulous actors.

25 Didier Fassin, *Policing borders, producing boundaries: The governmentality of immigration in dark times* (2011). *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 40, 213-226.

26 Thomas Gammeltoft-Hansen & Nick Tan, *Extraterritorial migration control and deterrence* (2021). In C. Costello, M. Foster, & J. McAdam (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of International Refugee Law* (pp. 502-516). Oxford University Press.

Practitioners' **Voices on Border Externalization** across Northern Central America, Mexico, Morocco, Senegal and Mauritania

“This [safe third country agreements] followed the logic of externalizing the borders further and further south, to the south of the United States”

(Honduras 2, 2023)

“We have to say that we do not have a migration policy. Our countries are aligned behind the migration policy of the European Union, which consists of closing the borders”

(Mauritania 1, 2023)

“There is more tolerance to human rights violations [against migrants] under the guise that governments are protecting us”

(El Salvador 2, 2023).

“What do they [Spanish Guardia Civil] do besides that [“rescuing at the sea”]? (...) We have to give them food. There are injured people here. We have to take care”

(Mauritania 1, 2023).

“I think it is this mistreatment by the authorities that hurts the most”

(Mexico 2, 2022)

“[I see the U.S. influence] when they apply Title 42, because they send them all back, so we receive everyone from everywhere...”

(Guatemala 3, 2023)

“Mexico’s public immigration policy is outlined by the U.S. State Department”

(Mexico 4, 2023)

“Today, the European border is not Spain; it is not Morocco. Currently, the European border is in Niger, in Libya”

(Morocco 4/Senegal 1)

“Police take people off the street and off the borders from border cities and bring them to migrate them against their will to central areas in the country that are further away from the border”

(Morocco 1, 2022)



IV. Resistance

Migrants and their companions retain agency despite the pain inflicted upon them. Even in contexts of extreme physical, psychological and symbolic violence, migrants make decisions to resist and thrive.

First and foremost, the decision to migrate to the U.S. and Spain or elsewhere is the first and often the ultimate act of resistance.²⁷ When border externalization policies demand people not to move or move as far away as possible from the U.S. and Europe, then moving toward them is an act of defiance. This is particularly true for people who had been previously deported and decided to restart their journeys.

Second, migrants and practitioners renegotiate border externalization policies in creative ways. Organizations in Mexico are challenging US policies like MPP and Title 42 in Mexican courts to stop similar policies from being implemented. Practitioners in Central America, Mexico

and Morocco are informing migrants about their rights in the U.S. and Spain should they be detained so they can advocate for themselves. Furthermore, practitioners are creating transnational networks to search and rescue missing migrants and exchange information that can provide relief to their families (Guatemala 4).

Therefore, solidarity, resistance, and boundless imagination span across borders, challenging the same notions of physical and social borders and the policies that reify them.

27 Maribel Casas-Cortes, Sebastian Cobarrubias & John Pickles, *Riding routes and itinerant borders: Autonomy of migration and border externalization* (2015). *Antipode*, 47(4), 894- 914.

V. Recommendations

Based on participants' responses, this report offers recommendations for advocacy and policy at the international, national and local levels.

Recommendations for Advocacy

- 1. Transnational organizing.** Civil society and grassroots movements should explore transnational forms of organizing and resistance against global border externalization practices. Transnational networks should pursue three goals at least: 1. Monitor and share information about the implementation and impacts of border externalization policies, 2. Plan advocacy actions to raise awareness about these policies' impacts, thus increasing pressure on decision-makers; and 3. Strategize to challenge border externalization policies in courts in countries of transit.

As Honduras 2 (2023) expressed, "Those of us who work with the accompaniment of migrants also have the challenge of seeing how migration is being managed in other countries, perhaps in Europe, and Spain in particular."

Recommendations for Policy

- 1. Meaningfully address the root causes of migration.** The U.S., Spain and the European Union should enact strategies to ensure people have the right to thrive in their places of origin and migrate when wanted or needed. These strategies should focus on four areas: fair jobs, quality education, better security that respects human

rights, and better international development policies that center local communities' needs and voices.

These strategies must overcome the current US and EU projects to address the underlying reasons that lead to migrate. These projects have remained short due to an exclusive focus on preventing migration and misconceptions about the relationship between development and migration.²⁸ To do so, countries must overcome top-down models and, instead, support grassroots-to-grassroots alliances across countries. In addition, they must reconsider their role in situations of economic exploitation and subjugation at the international level.

- 2. Significantly expand safe migration pathways and protect access to asylum.** The U.S. and the European Union should enact new legislation to create circular migration pathways. These should allow potential migrants to work, study, and reunite with their families in the U.S. and Europe while permitting them to go back and forth to their origin countries. These pathways should be available to so-called "low-skilled" migrants, who may apply to these pathways based on community sponsorship broadly understood. They should also consider the acknowledgment of certification and re-training opportunities for those with tertiary education. The U.S. and the E.U. must also work on providing better and more reliable information about the legal pathways available to potential migrants. At the same time, for those unable to wait for a

28 Ariel G. Ruiz & Camille Le Coz, *Reshaping the root cause approach: Disentangling official development assistance and migration management* (2022), Mixed Migration Review 2022, pp. 234-239. <https://mixedmigration.org/resource/mixed-migration-review-2022/>

visa in their origin countries due to individual persecution or general unrest, countries must guarantee access to asylum and protection at their borders in a fair and humane manner. Both safe migration pathways and asylum are essential ways to prevent people from undertaking dangerous journeys and falling prey to bad-intended actors, including some state enforcement forces.

3. Enhance protection measures for migrants, including asylum seekers, in transit. Irrespective of migrants' legal status, countries must respect and protect their rights and ensure their safety during their journeys. That means:

- a. Ending the detention by-default in dangerous immigration stations in Mexico, where migrants are usually subject to abuse and even death (Mexico 4);
- b. stopping busing migrants within Mexico, Morocco, Guatemala, and beyond, which often results in physical violence and the separation of families (Morocco 1);
- c. demilitarizing migration controls and increasing accountability mechanisms to report public officials abusing migrants (Guatemala 3 & Mauritania 1);
- d. issuing humanitarian permits in countries of transit that can provide recognition and protection for people on the move;
- e. including migrants in the design of protection strategies (Morocco 6) and supporting them with vocational and language training (Morocco 3); and
- f. enhancing the resources -financial and human- available to the asylum systems in Mexico, Morocco, and other countries of passage for those who would like to claim asylum there or establish permanent residence.

4. Create especial mechanisms for prosecution and remedy for crimes against migrants.

Mexico, Morocco and other countries of transit and destination should create special reporting, prosecution and remedy mechanisms for crimes committed against migrants (Mexico 4). These mechanisms must be independent, count on enough resources and include the participation of civil society and faith-based grassroots organizations.

In addition, the U.S. and Mesoamerican states and the E.U. and North African states should create transnational search and rescue and identification mechanisms for disappeared migrants (El Salvador 2). These mechanisms must connect the institutions that find persons who have disappeared in each country, enhance information flows, and facilitate cross-country DNA identification. Such mechanisms can rely on international humanitarian organizations like the Red Cross-Red Crescent.

5. Rescind migration agreements that externalize borders and divest funds allocated to these agreements to support asylum and welcoming systems. Ultimately, the U.S., Spain and the European Union must renounce a governance of migration that represses people, suppresses their rights, and forces people to wait in or return to danger. That means that the U.S., Spain and the European Union must:

- a. Fully comply with their international commitments to migrants and asylum seekers, crystalized but not restricted to, in the international Human Rights and Refugee Law treaties, pacts and protocols, many of which are incorporated into national legislation.
- b. "Take responsibility for their own borders"

(Morocco 1, 2022). The U.S. and Spain should adequately fund their border processing infrastructures to ensure a smooth, fair and humane processing of border crossers, including people aiming at requesting asylum. Borders must become places of “integral assistance and encounter and not deadly deterrence” (Mexico 2, 2022).

- c. Escalate up efforts to rebuild their asylum systems by providing substantial resources to asylum processing, ensuring access to legal representation, abolishing immigration detention or invasive alternative-to-detention programs as the default option, and providing fair, non-adversarial processes where asylum seekers can demonstrate their fear claims after recovering from likely-traumatic experience.²⁹
- d. Divest the resources spent on border militarization, detention, and technical cooperation for border externalization into supporting asylum and welcoming systems abroad and at home.

6. Increase transparency regarding border externalization agreements and funding.

The increasing reliance on non-public MOUs for “national security reasons” and the secrecy surrounding aid delivered for “migration cooperation” to third countries is unacceptable according to the expected standards of transparency and accountability in democracy.

The U.S., Spain and the European Union must drastically increase their transparency regarding migration agreements signed with their countries. To that aim, the U.S. and Spanish Congresses must demand the corresponding departments and ministries to publish regular updates on any technical, logistical and financial cooperation with third countries in the “migration cooperation” realm.

²⁹ Bill Ong Hing, *Humanizing immigration: How to transform our racist and unjust system* (2023). Penguin Random House.



VI. Conclusion

The U.S.-Mexico and the Spain-Morocco topographical borders no longer limit the reach of the US and Spanish migration policies. Through a complex web of agreements, actors, and tactics, the U.S., Spain and other high-income countries extend their migration preferences toward middle- and low-income countries, perpetuating relations of exploitation, dispossession and colonialism. Ultimately, border externalization policies thrive on a matrix of dehumanization that has devastating consequences for people on the move.

As this report described, border externalization policies inflict physical and psychological harm to migrants, increase their vulnerability before bad-intentioned actors, separate families, and ultimately result in increasing disappearances and deaths. “Migrants are *not animals* to be treated like that at the border,” said Honduras 1 (2022) [emphasis added]. However, people on the move and practitioners enact creative forms of resistance and continue to pursue dreams, aspirations and safety. “They [migrants] need to be respected; they need to be respected because they are *human beings*,” argued Morocco 6 (2023) [emphasis added].

This report offered recommendations for advocacy and policy that center the dignity of people on the move. On the one hand, civil society movements should organize transnationally to resist and advance alternative narratives and realities. On the other hand, governments must meaningfully advance toward a form of governance of migration that helps people thrive wherever they call home and safely migrate when needed or wanted. To that aim, the U.S., Spain and the European Union must center migrants’ voices in their policy-design process, recalibrate their foreign assistance policies, significantly widen safe migration pathways, safeguard and adequately fund asylum and welcoming systems at home, and assume their responsibility to migrants and asylum seekers.

In sum, as Morocco 5 (2023) put it, we must “realize that the other, in essence, is me, and their rights are my rights and that, therefore, to take care of their life is to take care of my own life.”

Annex 1. Research Participants per Location and Functions

Practitioner	Location	Functions (self-described)
El Salvador 1	Northwest El Salvador	Assistance to deported migrants
El Salvador 2	El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala and Mexico	Migrant transnational justice
Guatemala 1	South-Central Guatemala	Migrant shelter coordinator
Guatemala 2	Northern Guatemala	Youth community organizing
Guatemala 3	Northern Guatemala (Guatemala-Mexico borderlands)	Legal aid and first aid
Guatemala 4	Northwest Guatemala (Guatemala-Mexico borderlands)	Migrant shelter coordinator
Honduras 1	Northwest Honduras	Research and migrant advocacy
Honduras 2	Northwest Honduras	Research, popular communication, and migrant advocacy
Mexico 1	Northwest Mexico (U.S.-Mexico borderlands)	Humanitarian assistance
Mexico 2	Central Mexico	Migrant women psychosocial accompaniment and legal aid
Mexico 3	Central Mexico	Migrant women psychosocial accompaniment and legal aid
Mexico 4	Northwest Mexico (U.S.-Mexico borderlands)	Education and migrant advocacy
Mexico 5	Northwest Mexico (U.S.-Mexico borderlands)	Training to social workers, crisis response, and community reconciliation
Morocco 1	Morocco (whole country)	Pastoral and material support to migrants
Morocco 2	Morocco (whole country)	Pastoral and material support to migrants
Morocco 3	Northeast Morocco (Spain-Morocco borderlands)	Social work

Morocco 4/ Senegal 1	Northeast Morocco (Spain-Morocco borderlands)	Psychosocial assistance
Morocco 5	Northeast Morocco (Spain-Morocco borderlands)	Migrant services coordinator
Morocco 6	Northwest Morocco	Humanitarian assistance
Morocco 7	Northwest Morocco	Migrant women shelter coordinator
Mauritania 1	West Mauritania (Mauritania-Western Sahara borderlands)	Migrant services coordinator

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