



Working conditions of migrant workers in the fish processing sector in Dakhla

Working Paper WP5 Morocco

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About the DignityFIRM project

The DignityFIRM project is a Horizon Europe research project that is driven by the ambition to deepen the understanding of and to improve the policies related to irregular migrant work (IMW) in Farm to Fork (F2F) sectors. This report is part of WP4, which is aimed at understanding the governance arrangements underpinning the national policies addressing IMW in F2F sectors in five EU Member States (namely Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain and the Netherlands) and two Associated Countries (namely Morocco and Ukraine) in the period 2019-2024.

For more information about the project's research activities and deliverables, see <https://www.dignityfirm.eu>.

Abstract

This paper studies the working conditions of migrant workers in the fish processing sector in Dakhla and examines in particular the recruitment practices and the role of foremen and community mediators for irregular migrant workers, whose livelihoods depend on the availability of fish stocks. Drawing on a literature review, a corpus of interviews with various stakeholders, the study highlights the strategies and mechanisms adopted by each stakeholder, including employers, to maintain productivity and address the sector's challenges, as well as the strategies developed by migrant workers to improve their working conditions. Finally, the paper analyzes the perspectives of state and non-state actors and their interactions, which take the form of collaborative approaches encompassing institutional, social, and citizen-led mediation, all aimed at improving the working conditions of migrants.



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1. Introduction

The maritime fishing sector plays a significant role in the Moroccan economy and is a strategic area of public policy. It is governed by a national policy aimed at organizing the exploitation of marine resources while ensuring their sustainability. Through the Halieutis strategy, the government has sought to modernize the sector, strengthen its contribution to economic development, and promote the sustainable management of fisheries resources. This strategy is based on measures such as regulating catches, respecting closed seasons, and improving production conditions, thus placing maritime fishing at the heart of the country's economic, social, and environmental challenges. Recently, these structuring national and integrated sectoral policies steered significant investments in processing facilities in the city of Dakhla, which made 27% of the regions GDP in 2020¹, and generated a significant number of jobs, amounting to 40000 in 2020. Dakhla has become a magnet for the labour force from across Morocco and elsewhere. The city's location as a frontline zone with the only open land border with Africa, i.e. Guargarate, as well as its proximity to the Canary Islands makes it a corridor of both maritime and land crossings and a destination for sub-Saharan migrants seeking work opportunities.

¹Regional investment centre (2020).



This study seeks to explore the working conditions of migrant workers in the sector of fish processing in the city of Dakhla, the south of Morocco. Drawing on two focus groups and 30 interviews with migrant workers, employers, state and non-state actors, we will explore how the various perspectives and strategies of the actors involved as well as their interactions at the local level shape migrant workers working conditions in this location and sector. The methodology for this paper is based on an approach that draws on documentary and content analysis of papers, 30 in-depth semi-structured interviews with the stakeholders in the fish processing industry in Dakhla. The qualitative interviews were conducted with migrants, employers, and state and non-state actors at the level of Dakhla. The interviews with the local stakeholders (i.e. 5 representatives of employers, 7 local state actors, and 3 civil society actors) were conducted in April, as for the interviews with migrant workers, they were conducted at end of May. The interviews were conducted in good conditions and in full compliance with the ethical rules outlined in the project, i.e. explanation of the project, consent, right to anonymity, prior agreement for recording, etc. All rules of anonymity and confidentiality will be respected. Data analysis focused on primarily on the following variables: gender, migrant status, actors' function and positionality, and how these identity markers and positionality of actors influence each actor's strategies and perspectives, thereby creating precarious working conditions for migrant workers. This paper presents explanations and interpretations of the data collected of each category of interview as well as of the two focus groups discussions with local stakeholders.

The paper is structured as follows. The first section provides a description of characteristics and reasons for the choice of the sector, locality and the methodological choices, considerations and conditions in which the research was conducted. The second section provides an analysis of the major defining factors that affect workers' conditions, namely their legal status, employment mode, income and access to rights and services. The third section analyses strategies and frames used by employers, migrant workers, state and non-state actors. The fourth section deals with the interactions among the various stakeholders involved in the issue of fish processing and how these affect migrant workers labour conditions.

2. Description of the local case

2.1 The region of Dakhla Oued Eddahab

The Dakhla-Oued Eddahab region is located in southern Morocco. It is bordered to the west by the Atlantic Ocean, to the east by the Laâyoune-Sakia El Hamra region, and to the south by the border with Mauritania. The city of Dakhla, situated on the Atlantic coast, is the capital of this region². According to the 2015 territorial division, the Dakhla-Oued Edahab is one of the

² Royaume du Maroc (2022).



twelve regions of Morocco. It comprises two provinces: Oued Eddahab and Aousserd³. The region covers approximately 130,898 km² or 18.4% of the country's total area. It is characterized by low reliefs, mainly sandy basins, and stony accumulation plains.

Analysis of demographic and socioeconomic indicators confirms the attractiveness of Dakhla. The main characteristics of Dakhla are:

(1) A high activity rate: This area has the highest regional activity rate for people aged 15 and over at the national level, at 60.8%, compared to 41.6% for the national average.

(2) The lowest unemployment rate: The Dakhla region has the lowest rate, at 10.6%, compared to 21.3% at the national level⁴.

(3) The highest population growth rate: This can be mainly explained by internal and international migration. The region has experienced a population increase with an annual growth rate of 4.40%, compared to 0.85% at the national level. Since 2018, the region has seen a significant influx of sub-Saharan migrants following the implementation of the regularization of foreigners' status in Morocco. According to the results of the 2024 General Population and Housing Census, 5,846 foreigners were registered in the Dakhla region⁵.

(4) Economic activities: The fish industry sector is experiencing a significant evolution, as evidenced by the increase "in the number of establishments for processing and valorizing fishery products, which amounted to 518 units in 2025, including canning units, semi-preserving units, land-based freezing units, fresh fish packaging units, fish meal and oil production units, as well as other units specialized in the processing of algae and shellfish. The industry processes around 70% of the country's coastal fishing catches. The Dakhla-Oued Eddahab region constitutes a considerable lever in terms of fisheries as it is classified as the second most important fishing hub in the country, with its industry supporting a significant portion of the regions' economy. 29% of fish processing establishments are located in the Southern region, 86% in the coastal cities of the Atlantic coast and 31% in the North Atlantic region⁶. With the job opportunities offered by this region, the major project policies, and the new development model, many Moroccan and foreign investors are establishing their businesses in the region. This transforms the region into a center for immigration. Attracting investment is not new. It results from the government's infrastructure efforts, namely the major project for the new port

³ Ministry of Energy, Mines and environment (2019).

⁴ HCP (2024, December, p. 17).

⁵ HCP (2024).

⁶ Ibid., p. 16.



of Dakhla, the 1,000-hectare industrial and logistics zone, the construction of logistics zones in Bir Gandouz, and the El Guergarat border crossing⁷.

2.2 Justification for the selected case

A number of reasons justify our choice for the fish processing sector in Dakhla:

- (1) The significant number of migrants living in the city: 5,846 foreigners were registered in the Dakhla-Oued Eddahab region in the 2024 General Population and Housing Census.
- (2) The significant number of migrants working in the sector: Based on interviews, we estimate that a significant number of the workforce in the fish industry are sub-Saharan migrants.
- (3) Proximity with the only open land border with sub-Saharan Africa: Dakhla is located in proximity with the only open land border with Africa, i.e. Guargarate. It facilitates the departure and entrance of regular migrants.
- (4) Proximity to the Canary Islands: Dakhla is geographically close to the Canary Islands and serves as a transit point for some migrants attempting to reach Europe by the sea.
- (5) Economic attractiveness of the city: Dakhla has become an attractive destination for internal migrant workers, as well as sub-Saharan regular and irregular workers, due to the economic opportunities it offers.
- (6) An international hub: Dakhla is rapidly transforming into a strategic and international hub for trade, cross-border commerce, and the creation of economic relays to new African markets⁸. According to Ben Attou “Dakhla’s planning is done through a visionary urban planning that is built on the economic productivity of a city anticipated, in the very near future, as a metropolitan and driving force for national and international development”⁹. The construction of the Dakhla Atlantic Port is one of the structuring projects that makes Dakhla an essential axis for the consolidation of south-south cooperation¹⁰.

⁷ Ibid., p. 182.

⁸ Ben Attou (2019, May, p. 81).

⁹ Ben Attou (2024, June, p.7).

¹⁰ Dakhla Invest (n.d.).



3. Working conditions of migrant workers

3.1 Legal status

In accordance with Article 516 of the Moroccan Labour Code, regulating the procedures for hiring foreign workers, any employer wishing to recruit a foreign worker must obtain authorization from the competent government labour authority. As the 2024 General Population and Housing Census (RGPH) reported, Morocco has approximately 148,152 foreigners on its territory, representing approximately 0.4 % of the total population. This figure has increased by more than 71% in 10 years. Compared to the national average, the Dakhla-Oued Edaahab region has a significantly higher proportion of foreigners, averaging 2.66% of its population¹¹; their number is estimated at 5,846¹².

The majority of them are of African origin, particularly West African, with which Morocco maintains close ties, notably through a visa exemption policy aimed at boosting trade, tourism, and strengthening interpersonal links with African countries. Anicet, an Ivorian irregular migrant stated in this respect: “*I arrived in Morocco by plane in 2019, like many others, and at that time, Ivorians did not require a visa. I came with the intention of working here, not going to Europe.*” [Interview_20]. The president of the Ivorian migrant community and former president of the Ivorian community in Dakhla explained that many migrant workers have expired residence permits; others have just arrived and do not have any. They only have their passports. Most do not have residence permits because they need either an employment contract or registration with the trade register as entrepreneurs. [Interview_15]

3.2 Employment status

For formal employment, employers in the fish processing sector in Dakhla often issue calls for tenders via ANAPEC (National Agency for the Promotion of Employment and Skills) to recruit long-term workers, particularly from other cities, i.e. Safi, El Jadida, Casablanca, and sometimes even Essaouira. Workers recruited via ANAPEC are often hired with a permanent contract (CDI) that includes a piece-rate pay clause, which allows employers to lay off or call upon these workers in case of need. “*This contract must always be discussed with the labour inspector to validate it and inform them that the employee is not being laid off but is without work.*” [Interview_14]. 10 out of the 15 interviewed migrants confirmed that they work as task workers and day labourers in the fish processing units and stated that they are often hired to sort fish by kind and size because it comes with fake fishing, sardines, macro fish, with different mussels S, SS, small size.

¹¹ HCP (2024).

¹² Ibid.



Migrants describe how selection and recruitment conditions are often communicated by foremen and community mediators who contact workers via WhatsApp groups. These foremen can be Moroccan or sub-Saharan African. Arthur, head of the Ivorian community in Dakhla underscored the role of sub-Saharan community leaders in recruitment. *“Each unit has its own WhatsApp group, and workers who have performed tasks in several units have access to several WhatsApp groups for job offers. In case of high demand, migrants work for the main unit where they usually work, and can work in other units in case of a fish shortage.”* [Interview_15]. A human resources manager at a fish processing plant in Dakhla confirmed that worker selection is entrusted to line supervisors or community mediators. These line supervisors are generally employed by the company and their salary ranges from 3,000 to 4,000 dirhams. *“They monitor the pace and continuity of work, and ensure that the workers are working. In a typical processing room, the line supervisor oversees 36 people on the line.”* [Interview_14]

3.3 Employment conditions

Migrant employment in the fish processing sector is characterized by its precariousness as it depends on the availability of resources and fish catches. As one employer representative stated: *“The seafood processing industry is fragile due to the unavailability of resources (fish) throughout the year, in addition to periods of biological rest, which lead to temporary shutdowns of operations in factories.”* [Interview_1]. The representative of the National Union of Fish Canning Industries (UNICOP) emphasized that, starting in 2022, *“factories specializing in the production of canned fish are operating at only 50% of their capacity due to the continued decline in fish stocks”* [Interview_4]. This shortage is one of the main challenges facing production units in Dakhla. The fragility of the sector, particularly in the face of raw material shortages, affects the workforce and, consequently, the aspirations and choices of migrants. Another interviewee confirmed this observation: *“Work is not continuous. I manage this precarious situation day by day. Many people have left Dakhla because of the lack of fish, some heading to Agadir or Casablanca, while others have chosen to return to their country through the IOM’s voluntary return program. Others prefer to continue to Europe, despite the risks”* [Interview_22].

The daily minimum wage is 136 DH. But the labour expert stated that in Dakhla, the majority work at 150DH to 170DH per piece. Workers are obliged to search for other small jobs, such as construction, masonries, farm work, or services in hotels and cafés during off-season. Annicet mentioned that *“work isn’t guaranteed every day, and I often have to look elsewhere when there’s no fish”*. [Interview_20]. Working hours and duration are not fixed; they are at the will of the employer. The labour expert explained in this regard that: *“Even the Court of Cassation has gone in the same direction and considered that work in production units related to marine fishing products is seasonal work, linked to biological rest, inclement weather, and the availability of the raw materials, which is fish or sardines.”* [Interview_12].



3.4 Work-related protections

To obtain a residence permit, foreign workers must hold an employment contract issued by the labour authority, not an informal agreement. It is the employer, not the employee, who is responsible for complying with the law as noticed by our interviewee: *“The obligation and full responsibility for non-compliance with the recruitment procedure for a foreign worker rests on the employer. The employee cannot be penalized for work performed irregularly. Therefore, the contract is considered valid and legal for the employee, even if it is not formalized.”* [Interview_12]. This means that in the event of a dispute with a foreign worker, even in the absence of a formal employment contract, all labour laws apply: the employment contract remains legal and confers the rights and obligations of the parties.

Regarding occupational health and safety, migrant workers emphasized that their work at the fish processing plant generally does not expose them to recurring occupational hazards. Physical risks associated with their jobs include slips and falls due to wet and slippery surfaces, exposure to machine noise, cold, repetitive tasks, and the smell of fish or chemicals used in processing. Saida, a divorced Moroccan woman and mother of two who came from Meknes to Dakhla to work, described some of the risks associated with fish processing: *“This job has certain risks. Standing for long periods and cleaning floors with potentially hazardous products is difficult. The cold is also a problem, especially because of the icy water from the frozen fish on the floor.”* [Interview_22].

To cope with these risks, migrants use personal protective equipment provided by their employers, such as gloves, aprons, and boots. They must also dress warmly to protect themselves from the cold at work. Kaoukou, an Ivorian migrant, testifies: “(...) the constant cold and ice are difficult to bear. Some have stopped working because of it. You have to protect yourself by dressing warmly and wearing gloves.” [Interview_22]. Regarding workplace accidents, and according to migrant testimonies, Arono, a Senegalese migrant worker employed by the same company since 2018, states that he was taken care of by his employer after a workplace accident. *“A year ago, (...) I slipped and injured myself. I was then taken to Hassan II Hospital by ambulance. The company took care of me until I returned to work, and I was even paid for the days I was off work.”* [Interview_18]

4. Actors' frames and strategies

4.1 Employers' frames and strategies

Employers within the fish processing sector make use of two perspectives that justify their use of migrant labour. The first is competitiveness and attractiveness, which allow them to overcome the sector's two main problems: the scarcity of natural resources and the high turnover rate or instability of the workforce. Employers adopt a socio-economic framework of



action, aimed at maintaining productivity despite the decline in fishing resources, which directly affects the continuity of production and the stability of the workforce. They also seek to make their companies more attractive than their competitors' by emphasizing social aspects and improving working conditions of all workers. This dynamic aims to build workforce loyalty and strengthen the company's competitiveness. According to a human resources manager at a seafood processing unit: "*The competitiveness and attractiveness of certain units depend on the working conditions it provides. The way employees work, the behavior of the production manager towards them: employees are sensitive to these aspects: their attitude, their authoritarian approach, and adherence to payment deadlines (at the end of the two-week period or after the task is completed)*". [Interview_14].

The lack of resources is due to several factors, including climate change, which disrupts marine balances and makes fish processing sector particularly vulnerable. The availability of fishery resources is one of the factors driving the dynamics of the fishery production system¹³. This observation is confirmed by an industry stakeholder: "*This shortage (in fish resources) is one of the main challenges facing these production units.*" [Interview_4]. The sector is heavily contingent on fishery resources, the scarcity of which, whether seasonal or long-term, encourages companies to diversify their investments, i.e. canned, semi-canned, fishmeal, etc. This strategy is confirmed by a company manager: "*We are therefore looking to invest in alternatives to improve production, maintain balance and make the production chain more flexible, particularly by developing semi-preserved products.*" [Interview_3]. Another practice that characterizes the organization of this sector is cooperation and mutual assistance between employers, particularly during periods of high activity. This solidarity makes it possible to cope with production peaks by pooling labour between units. As one Human Resources manager points out: "*There is also mutual support between our HR departments, in the form of an informal agreement. Employees from one unit may be assigned to work in other units, with the agreement of the HR directors of those units.*" [Interview_14].

In terms of recruitment, employers in the seafood processing sector in Dakhla adopt different strategies, combining the use of public and private intermediary structures. At the institutional level, they rely primarily on public bodies such as ANAPEC or private temporary employment agencies to recruit Moroccan workers from other cities: "*In Dakhla, however, we recruit through the National Agency for the Promotion of Employment and Skills (ANAPEC). (...). This year, we will try again to collaborate with temp agencies. However, their success remains uncertain... These agencies differ from ANAPEC because they handle the registration of workers with the CNSS (National Social Security Fund) as well as their administrative follow-up.*" [Interview_2]. Alongside formal recruitment, informal recruitment relies on close relationships and shared knowledge between company executives and certain key individuals.

¹³ Ibid., p.13.

This method is widely used in the canning industry, as this manager points out: *“To recruit staff, our first instinct is word-of-mouth. It’s the main strategy in all canneries. Word-of-mouth is our primary recruitment channel. We hire about twenty or thirty people who pass the information on to their friends, who then recruit others, and so on.”* [Interview_14]. This recruitment method relies on an internal intermediation system, ensured by the foremen or leaders of migrant communities.

To retain their workforce and prevent its departures, some employers boost their production by investing in new units capable of ensuring continuous production, as this manager points out: *“(...) For our part, we are trying to guarantee continuity of production through new investments, such as the creation of semi-continuous units that do not shut down.”* [Interview_3]. During periods of inactivity due to the depletion of fish stocks, employers try to retain seasonal workers by offering them bonuses. This manager indicates: *“We offer them bonuses in February to encourage them to stay, even though we know that this is still insufficient.”* [Interview_3]. Others try to compensate them with overtime: *“To address the seasonal nature of work in these industrial units (...) the addition of paid overtime for workers (...) aims to ensure the loyalty and stability of the workforce.”* [Interview_4]. Other factories adopt a structural investment approach, integrating social measures for workers. As one manager explains: *“This industrial company has a foundation aimed at strengthening the social aspect for workers, particularly by helping them in the areas of education and schooling for their children, as well as providing them with support during festivals and religious occasions.”* [Interview_1]

Hiring choices are strongly influenced by company size, financial capacity, and resource dependence. Large units employ a large female workforce, perceived as more stable, patient, and productive. This choice is explained by several factors related to women's qualities and skills, as one stakeholder confirms: *“The use of this female workforce is explained by their qualities of patience and dedication to work.”* [Interview_1]. Another actor also specifies: *“The fish canning industry employs a significant proportion of women, who can be described as a soft workforce. This is due to several reasons: women are perceived as being more patient, more dedicated, working carefully and without wasting fish.”* [Interview_4]. Although this workforce is largely female, a gender division of labour persists. Tasks requiring physical strength are primarily assigned to men, as one actor indicates: *“Heavy tasks are assigned to men.”* [Interview_3]; *“Women, on the other hand, are assigned to more detailed tasks, such as sorting and boxing,”* as another actor confirms: *“In canning factories, women always outnumber men. Men are called upon for physical tasks and to supplement the production line when there are no women.”* [Interview_14]



4.2 Migrant workers' frames and strategies

It is difficult to understand the perspectives of migrant workers and how they envision working legally or illegally in the fish processing sector in Dakhla without considering intersectionality—that is, their socioeconomic and legal statuses, which influence their work experience. The sample of migrants interviewed is not a homogeneous group. Originating from various countries (2 Senegalese, 1 Cameroonian, 3 Moroccans, and 7 Ivoirians), migrants possess different legal, administrative and social statuses: only 2 migrants have a residence permit, and 5, including the 3 Moroccans, have a formal employment contract. Their identities and educational levels are varied: 8 are men and 7 are women, 5 have no formal education, 4 hold a high school diploma or university degree, and the others have a primary or secondary education. The responses of migrant workers, including Moroccan migrant workers from other cities in Morocco, regarding their acceptance or challenge of their working conditions in fish processing companies in the city of Dakhla and how they justify their choices, revealed three categories of workers: satisfied workers who do not plan to change jobs; those who have no other choice but to work; and finally those who are dissatisfied with their work.

Some migrants expressed a degree of satisfaction with their work in the fish processing sector in Dakhla. A significant number of migrants listed a combination of factors contributing to their job satisfaction. The primary reason for some workers' job satisfaction lies in the regularization of their status and access to equal working conditions and rights. Zaynabou noticed: "*I have all the necessary Moroccan documents. For work, I have everything I need: a CNSS card, an employment contract, and all social benefits. Even my salary is paid directly into my CIH account. I'm not looking for alternatives. For now, my job suits me. Later, I'll go to Senegal to see my family, then I'll return to Dakhla.*" [Interview_16] Arouno, a Senegalese worker who obtained a proper employment contract, expressed the same satisfaction: "*The work is good, I would say. I'm also comfortable because, frankly, since my arrival, no one has ever harassed me.*" [Interview_18]

Another reason for the job satisfaction of migrant workers lies in the income gap between Morocco and their country of origin. They want to stay in Dakhla because they have found work there and are paid fairly. This allows them to provide for themselves and support their families back home, despite the irregular nature of their income and the scarcity of natural resources in recent years. "*I prefer to stay here in Dakhla rather than in other cities in Morocco because I have found a stable job here. I plan to settle permanently in Morocco.*" [Interview_26]. Compared to other sectors, migrants expressed a preference for employment in fish processing. Dominique, testifies that, from a health perspective, this sector is far better than call centers, which demand constant mental attention and concentration: "*At the call center, I earned 7,000 dirhams a month, plus 1,000 dirhams in bonuses, but the stress level was high. Conversely, at the factory, I earn 4,000 dirhams a month, but I am much more relaxed.*" [Interview_19].



Other migrants think that the fishing industry is more structured than agriculture and cleaning. “In construction, a worker can work five months, sometimes only getting paid for two, and then nothing. In fishing, on the other hand, the money is 100% guaranteed every two weeks.” [Interview_19]. Migrants’ job satisfaction and their desire to continue working at their fish processing also lies in the positive work environment and the good relationships some migrants have with their colleagues and supervisors. Zaynabou explains: *“I have a good relationship with the foreman. I respect the schedule and finish on time. I have no problems at work, nor with the foreman. For the moment, I am not looking to change jobs.”* [Interview_16]. As for Dominique, he explained that his satisfaction stemmed from the feeling that his contribution was appreciated. Attached to the plant that had initially hired him, Dominique refused a more lucrative offer and preferred to stay in a job where he was respected, while accepting a slight salary increase. *“For me, respect and how I am treated are just as important as salary. I prefer a healthy work environment to a higher salary in an atmosphere of contempt.”* [Interview_18]

Our analysis conveyed that the migrant workers with no choice but to adapt to the working conditions in the sector, generally adopt this attitude for a variety of reasons. Some undocumented migrants arrive with high expectations and professional ambitions that they cannot fulfill and end up changing course. For example, Kaokou wanted to become a journalist, but he later ended up accepting the job opportunity he found as fish processor in Dakhla. *“I came to Morocco to earn money and find work. I have my baccalaureate and I dreamed of becoming a journalist and continuing my studies, but it didn’t work out. I didn’t try to resume my studies when I arrived; I immediately looked for a job to support myself. I first cleaned in a pastry shop in Casablanca for a month, but the pay wasn’t enough. Then I came to Dakhla after a colleague told me about factories.”* [Interview_22]

Others, who were forced into exile for economic reasons, are ready to work and overcome any hardship. They have no choice but to accept any job offer. *“I left Ivory Coast after the crisis. We had to leave to look for work. After the crisis, there was nothing left.”* [Interview_17]. Working to survive is not unique to migrant workers. Khadija, a Moroccan worker who supports herself and her two children, said with a latent sense of powerlessness and vulnerability that she appreciates her current financial stability and has no desire to leave her job unless her health fails her. The work of other migrants is motivated by the weight of duty and responsibility towards their families back home. Arouno, for example considers his acceptance of working illegally in the fishing industry as a necessary sacrifice to provide for his family. *“My father is very old, so I studied, but at times he could no longer provide for the household, so I had to stop. I came to make sacrifices and provide for my family, my father and myself.”* [Interview_18]



Based on the interviews conducted, we found that the dissatisfaction of some migrant workers with their jobs and working conditions stems from a number of work-related considerations as well as personal feelings about their status. Tapi highlighted the long and repetitive character of the work which has negative consequences as it is physically and psychologically draining. “*I don't have fixed hours. If there's a staff shortage, we're moved to different positions. We can do three or four jobs in the same day: packing, scraping, or even reweaving. We work like that all day. That's what tires us out.*” [Interview_17]. Regarding daily expenses, struggle to cope with the high cost of living and the precariousness of their employment, which complicates their situation especially in off-work seasons. “*With my salary, it's difficult. Rent in Dakhla is expensive, and so is food. Otherwise, in Morocco, we feel comfortable, especially us Ivorian.*” [Interview_17]

Another irregular migrant worker expressed a deep sense of dissatisfaction, distress, and lack of belonging, due to his irregularity. “*The income isn't enough. We're not registered, we're not taken into account. We're being mocked. Even the person who calls us isn't registered. Some receive a fixed salary, but it's rare. Moroccans sometimes benefit from it, but not sub-Saharan Africans.*” [Interview_27]. An Ivorian worker, who worked as a foreman in a fish processing plant in Dakhla since 2016, expressed his deep concern and anxiety about his financial instability during the fishing season closure. “*I don't have problems at work, it's okay. But yes, I want things to get better. I want to live better. We're exhausted, and money isn't enough.*” [Interview_17]. Another echoed with the same feeling: “*I don't want to continue indefinitely under these conditions. If the situation doesn't improve, particularly with a salary increase to 140 dirhams per day and administrative stability, I will return to Côte d'Ivoire. The lack of a residence permit is a major obstacle to our integration.*” [Interview_20]. According to Sissi, only the granting of a residence and work permit would increase their sense of belonging and job satisfaction.

To improve their working conditions, migrant workers employ a range of strategies that goes from the least to the most pronounced and influential forms of agency. Through their irregular migration experiences, migrant workers acquire psychological resilience and develop coping mechanisms that allow them to acclimate to new situations and conditions and survive precarious employment. This strategy implies that migrants prepare for the experience, adapt to the situation, and intervene minimally to change it, especially at the beginning of their journey. The weight of their family responsibilities compels them to accept precarious working conditions. At the same time, their mobility, motivated by the search for a better life, creates new realities on the ground and contributes to the expansion of integration measures in host countries. To overcome the hardships of her work, Tapi emphasized the central role of adopting an attitude of surrender to divine will. She stated: “*We Black people do the hardest jobs. They themselves acknowledge this. We don't complain, we simply ask God to give us strength.*” [Interview_17].



Migrant workers also underscored the importance of diversifying their sources of income. Even if this has no direct impact on their work conditions, but this strategy helps them be in a better position to search for jobs with better working conditions. *“If I don’t work, I earn nothing. When there is a lack of work, I try to diversify my sources of income by working in different units (farms, construction). These strategies help compensate for periods of inactivity and ensure a minimum of financial security.”* [Interview_20]. During peak-off periods, migrants specifically diversify their income either by working in other factories, the agricultural sector, in small trades. Interviews showed that migrant workers directly address their labour concerns with their supervisors, by negotiating, complaining, and discussing ways to improve their working conditions while maintaining positive relationships with them. *“I’ve never gone on strike because the conditions are good. If God gives you a smiling and approachable boss, you forget he’s the boss... If there’s a problem, you go to the office and talk about it.”* [Interview_18]. However, for others, resignation appears as an alternative tactic when adaptation and negotiation fails to produce positive results. Quitting one’s job becomes a form of protest and assertion of one’s dignity. Interviews revealed that work individual and collective stoppages of work are used as tactics to draw attention to their working conditions. *“I left the first factory because of the hard work. It was too intense; the factory ran non-stop and I couldn’t keep up. In the second factory, there was no continuity: when there was fish, they called me in, otherwise I stayed home.”* [Interview_24]

In Dakhla, the number of workers’ strikes, in general, does not exceed two or three per year, as observed by the labour expert. Even migrant communities began celebrating Labour Day on May 1st, as one migrant worker leader observed, migrant workers feel they cannot unionize or file complaints while in irregular employment and without residency permits. Their only option is to resolve disputes amicably with their employers and superiors. *“It’s difficult to file a complaint without a residency permit. The solution is to seek an amicable agreement.”* [Interview_19]

From an intersectional perspective, workers from some nationalities are better mobilized than others to defend their labour rights. *“I believe that demands carry more weight when they are made collectively. But many fear losing their jobs. Among the migrants, certain profiles stand out: Senegalese are more inclined to assert their rights, as are Cameroonian, although they are a minority. Ivoirians, who constitute the largest demographic group in Dakhla, are also beginning to mobilize.”* [Interview_19]. From a gender equality perspective, although women outnumber men in factories, particularly in fish sorting, they make far fewer collective organizing. In her testimony, Kaoukou spoke of the essential social and emotional role women play in providing for their families. Even with modest wages, they cope better with working conditions.



Aware of their inability to organize and form a union, migrants mentioned employ collective tactics by creating worker communities with leader representatives who are tasked to negotiate and reach consensus with employers through dialogue and compromise. In Dakhla, migrants emphasized the role of migrant communities in helping them overcome challenges in their workplaces. One said, *“I am a community leader for an ethnic group. We meet every Sunday to discuss problems and seek solutions. I facilitate the integration of Ivorians in Dakhla”*. [Interview_27]. Leaders of migrant communities play an important role in resolving labour disputes by acting as intermediaries and advocates for migrant workers facing employment difficulties. *“If a Moroccan or a Black person has made offensive remarks, and the foreman is unhappy, he may sanction you with dismissal. The ethnic community can then intervene, demand an apology, and allow you to return to work”*. [Interview_23]

4.3 State actors' frames and strategies

State actors agree on the need to reform the Labour Code. The Code must establish a general framework for workers' and employers' rights and responsibilities as well as specific labour relations that take into consideration the particularities of each sector and the protections needed for migrant workers. In their governance logic, state actors adopt an interest framework, which weighs the advantages and disadvantages of two options: keeping migrants out of the Labour market or integrating them regardless of their irregularity. According to a CSO report, since September 2013, migration policies have moved towards greater freedom of movement and an easing of restrictions. However, the application of labour law and the protection of migrant workers remain inconsistent in the absence of a regular status.

In the Dakhla region, migration is considered a driver of development. In 2004, the regional office of the High Commission for Planning published a study proposing an approach combining migration and development. The objective of state actors is to maintain the level of development recorded in this city, particularly in terms of employment. “Regarding employment and unemployment rates, Dakhla has some unique characteristics. Indeed, the unemployment rate there is estimated to be half the national rate (13.2%).” [Interview_9]. The integration and economic inclusion of these migrants has become a priority for maintaining the high indicators recorded in the region. The director of the regional office of the High Commission for Planning emphasizes: *“We observe that the presence of migrants has had an impact on several indicators, particularly those related to education, health, and employment. It has also contributed to an increase in the female labour force participation rate.”* [Interview_9]. The integration of migrants and the granting of equal rights to Moroccans can improve the level of development in the Dakhla region, given the significant number of migrants present in the city.

State actors recognize the positive link between migration and development. Their actions are guided by development objectives, which require constant vigilance. The representative of



HCP emphasized the need for this vigilance in order to make migration a tool for development. *“We must be vigilant regarding migration and migrants, as this could affect certain indicators in which Morocco has made significant progress, whether in the fields of education or health.”* [Interview_9]. Migrants also contribute to the development of their countries of origin, as evidenced by remittances that illustrate two realities. The first is the economic integration of migrants in the city of Dakhla, based on their savings capacity. The second is the role their migration plays in the development of their countries of origin. Statements from state actors attest to the importance of these remittances. *“Migrants have the option of sending money via a transfer company. They benefit from this service for two years. At the end of this period, they must renew their account at headquarters. The renewal process takes three months.”* [Interview_11]. The integration of undocumented migrants into Dakhla’s labour market is a reality. The city offers employment opportunities to migrant workers and uses irregular migration as a tool for development. This South-South migration also contributes to microeconomic development. The results of our study support the thesis of the new economics of migration, which considers the role of the family in irregular migration. According to Hein de Haas, “remittances from migrants constitute income insurance for households in their countries of origin”¹⁴.

State actors have a wide range of mechanisms at their disposal to improve the working and living conditions of migrants. First, the immigration and asylum strategy provides a framework for migrant integration. It encourages employers to hire migrants, provided that their employment begins after their status has been regularized. It has also fostered the emergence of a vibrant civil society working for migrants rights. For example, the Southern Observatory for Economic and Social Development helps promote migrants’ right to work as a means of integration, regardless of their legal status. *“It combines business and solidarity, launching community initiatives that promote local development while upholding migrants’ social and economic rights.”* [Interview_7]

Public authorities have several legal means at their disposal to guarantee migrants’ access to rights and services, even if they are undocumented, particularly through partnerships with civil society. Subsidies are granted to associations working in the field of migration. The authorities guarantee migrant workers the right to mobility and movement so that they can access the necessary administrative services at their consulates, as this excerpt highlights: *“Undocumented migrants who wished to travel to Casablanca by plane were unable to do so due to a lack of residency permits. Thanks to our intervention, we found a solution with the local authorities allowing even undocumented migrants to travel by plane, subject to obtaining authorization. This authorization allows them to move freely within Moroccan territory, even without a residency permit.”* [Interview_11]

¹⁴ Haas (2010).

Within the framework of the National Integration Strategy, local state actors, such as the social development agency, are implementing several social development and integration programs targeting disadvantaged groups in certain neighborhoods of Dakhla. *“Currently, as a social development agency, we are working on an urban program in certain neighborhoods of the city of Dakhla, focused on cultural and sporting activities. The targeted neighborhoods will be selected based on an assessment aimed at identifying the people most in need.”* [Interview_8]. It is worth noting that these social development programs are aimed at both Moroccans and sub-Saharan Africans, on an equal footing. Migrant women have a significant role to play in intercultural initiatives, as the following observation demonstrate: *“In 2016, during the first project dedicated to family counseling, training workshops were organized for women in the Al Massira neighborhood (...) to adapt their clothing to local Moroccan cultural norms. Furthermore, the presence of consulates in Dakhla played an important role in the stability of migrants.”* [Interview_8]

Furthermore, the interviews revealed that non-state actors favor other perspectives. First, the effective and humane management of irregular migration involves combating irregular immigration while offering migrants arriving in Morocco access to existing jobs in order to and enable them to meet their needs and ensure their livelihood. This type of management contributes to guiding migration by reducing the dangers to which migrants are exposed on maritime migration routes. Secondly, local public authorities conduct their interventions within a framework of comprehensive economic integration. This integration is essential to the migration and development strategy implemented by public authorities, as it allows state actors to transform the challenges posed by irregular migration into development opportunities, while simultaneously protecting migrants attempting the perilous Atlantic crossing to the Canary Islands. *“To effectively address the issue of migration and migrants, the State must implement a social cohesion strategy aimed at limiting certain behaviors observed upon the arrival of migrants in Morocco, particularly the formation of ‘ghettos’ and the practice of certain economic activities.”* [Interview_8]. These frameworks are omnipresent in the discourse of all state actors; they are also reflected in their initiatives and the documents they produce, demonstrating that these perspectives constitute the preferred framework for intervention.

Regarding their strategies, local state actors adhere to the royal vision about the need for the integration of migration issue in all policies as well as the interrelation between migration and development¹⁵. Actors main strategy is to stick to the Royal vision which is a general strategic policy of the State, not a simple public policy. *“Migration management is part of the vision of King Mohammed VI, may God protect him, which aims for the integration of migrants,*

¹⁵ Regional directorate of the High Commission for Planning (2004).



particularly on the social level.” [Interview_8]. In this respect, local actors stress that the adoption of integrated policies, including the economic, social, cultural and environmental dimensions, requires addressing the migration issue as a cross-cutting issue. The representative of the regional department of fisheries observed: “The Halieutis plan is a comprehensive policy that takes into account several dimensions: resources, productivity, employment, etc. It is an integrated approach to promoting the maritime fishing sector. However, some aspects are not always addressed explicitly. For example, the issue of employment is not addressed directly, but rather indirectly, through the encouragement of productivity, which leads to the creation of job opportunities.” [Interview_5]. In Dakhla, the links between migration and development are evident and serve as a basis for recruiting migrant workers in the region, as well as for understanding why these workers have access to their rights despite their irregular status. This relationship between migration and development offers state actors the opportunity to determine the type of migration governance implemented.

4.4 Non-state actors’ frames and strategies

The city of Dakhla experiences no labour disputes; conflicts, concerning late payments, the calculation of working hours, and overtime pay, are resolved immediately and amicably. Foremen chosen from among the migrant workers take the initiative to resolve them. Non-state actors consider working conditions satisfactory, even acceptable. In fact, although the province offers other employment opportunities to migrant workers, they prefer to work in fish processing units. Unlike other regions of Morocco, working conditions are not contested by migrants, as evidenced by the low number of union strikes. The province records two sit-ins per year, the lowest rate in Morocco. By comparison, the province of Chtouka can experience up to four per week. The strategy of rapid conflict resolution is justified by various actors (trade unions, labours, migrant communities, civil society) because it is in their common interest to resolve conflicts. The perishable nature of seafood and the labour shortage incentivize employers to resolve labour disputes quickly. In addition to providing housing and transportation services to workers, employers hire workers under acceptable conditions.

The three strategies adopted by non-state actors are motivated by the region’s history, culture, and the need for Labour in all sectors. These are openness, inclusiveness, and respect for human rights. Openness is evident in the tasks assigned to migrants, such as those related to private spaces. Civil society actors discuss the role of cultural factors in contributing to this openness. “The region’s culture does not discriminate against migrants. Moroccan families are beginning to trust migrant women as nannies, housekeepers, French language teachers for their children, and domestic workers.” [Interview_8]. Inclusiveness is about integrating all stakeholders, including irregular migrants, in a migrant rights-based logic. This encourages migrants to appeal to non-state actors in general (civil society, trade unions, etc.) and to human rights institutions in particular, as demonstrated by the representative of Dakhla’s



Council for Human Rights. “We base our work and interventions at the CRDH on the same human rights effectiveness indicators, with an inclusive approach for all stakeholders, including irregular migrants and refugees. We are obliged to work with them to identify the factors that have driven these migrants to migrate from their homeland.” [Interview_11]

The actions and initiatives undertaken by non-state actors reveal the three logics that structure their work. The first is communication and social mediation. Whether for sub-Saharan communities or Moroccan associations, communication is prioritized to improve working conditions, particularly for migrants, in the city of Dakhla. The words of a community leader clearly illustrate this: “I spoke with the pasha and the caïd [local authorities] whose industrial zone is located in their territory, and they summoned me two or three times to meetings with factory managers to discuss working conditions with employers. That’s how we proceeded to reduce working hours.” [Interview_7]. Non-state actors adhere to this communication logic. For example, the Observatory for Southern Economic and Social Development (ODES) encourages the participation of migrants in its activities. Its president explains: “We regularly organize meetings with representatives of the African communities established in Dakhla.” [Interview_7]

The second logic is the gender-based approach. Non-state actors pay particular attention to the specific needs of women in terms of health, HIV, and social recognition. This approach is adopted because of the dynamism of women-led associations. The president of a family association objectively states: “Within this association, our goal is to integrate migrants into the city of Dakhla, paying particular attention to migrant women.” [Interview_10]. Activities carried out for the benefit of migrant women demonstrate a gender-based approach to migration that guides civil society initiatives. The following excerpt illustrates these initiatives: “Since 2016, we have carried out several activities in this area, particularly for migrant women. Our first action was to honor migrant women from six different countries, including Senegal and Côte d’Ivoire, as well as other nationalities. During this event, several migrant women were honored.” We also organized a health activity for migrants, focused on HIV/AIDS testing. [Interview_10]

The third approach employed by non-state actors is social intervention when needed. To support migrants in distress, civil society intervenes to meet their needs. The city of Dakhla is facing waves of migration that require emergency measures, support, and assistance. The president of the observatory cites the actions undertaken in this regard: “We visited these people, prepared meals, cut their hair, took care of them, and provided them with clothing.” [Interview_7]



5. The impact of actors' interactions on migrants' working conditions

Our analysis of interviews with employers, state and non-state actors, and migrant workers in the fish processing sector revealed no publicly reported events, demonstrations, or collective protests concerning these workers' conditions. Media coverage of fishing workers in the region is very rare. The representative interviewee of the union emphasized that during a celebratory demonstrations that the union celebrates during the Labour Day on the first of May of each year, workers demand wage increases, protection of their purchasing power, improved working conditions, and strengthened workers' rights¹⁶. The labour expert attested that migrants do not protest their working conditions. Dakhla is a very calm city with only two sit-ins per year, compared to up to four per week in the province of Chtouka.

This section focuses on the general interactions and initiatives implemented to improve the working and living conditions of migrant workers. Close interactions are observed between migrants and key stakeholders, including local authorities, employers, and civil society. These interactions are not conflictual since the economic opportunities available in the city of Dakhla and the growing need for labour force makes employers arrange encouraging working conditions for their workers, respect for the right to work without discrimination, and adopt a soft line approach that frames migration as a tool for development. In addition, interactions between stakeholders are based on collaboration and mediation. In the case of work-related problems, institutional mediation may be undertaken by the local authorities, who intervene in resolving conflicts and disputes at the workplace, involving migrant workers. Social mediation is provided by migrant community leaders or migrant associations which are considered as community relays and buffers which to accompany migrant workers and provide them with the necessary assistance. Last, citizen mediation can be also be carried out by associations aiming to promote the living together with the local population and migrants, by organizing sport and cultural activities. As for the interactions established between employers and various stakeholders, particularly the National Social Security Fund (CNSS), the aim was to find solutions for the employment of migrant workers. As one stakeholder indicates: "It is said that the National Social Security Fund (CNSS) is looking for solutions for registering migrants with social security funds (...). Currently, solutions are being studied, in coordination with the CNSS, which is aware of the situation." [Interview_2]. Other interactions are established with associations and organizations defending the interests of the sector, particularly through membership in these structures. One employer explains: "*We belong to the Association of Canners and the National Federation of Industries for the Processing and Valorization of Fishery Products (FENIP). Within these associations, we address issues related to the maritime fishing sector, particularly those relating to fishery resources and the relationship between our sector and public administrations.*" [Interview_2]

¹⁶ Bouaamoud (2023, May 1).



Finally, the interaction between employers and labour inspectors aims to monitor working conditions and ensure compliance with national standards in force within the professional sector. As one industry professional explains: *“Compliance with standards and working conditions is a legal obligation. The Moroccan labour authority ensures their implementation. If the labour inspectorate observes precarious working conditions during a visit to a company, it immediately files a report. It has the right to access companies without restriction. The inspector conducts an administrative visit before going into the field to monitor working conditions and interview employees about their wages, working conditions, problems, etc.”* [Interview_14].

6. Conclusion

The fishing industry in Dakhla provides a valuable case study for examining migrants' working conditions and the challenges related to the enforcement of their rights. This study reveals that the fish processing sector relies on a mixed workforce, composed of local and international migrant workers from sub-Saharan Africa, especially women. Many migrants, both with and without legal status, work in the fish processing sector, either formally or informally. The complex local context of Dakhla, a crossroads of migration flows for arrival, transit, and departure, in addition to other multiple considerations, including humanitarian, economic, and political ones influence local actors' local governance of migrant work. In this context, and given the humanitarian and human rights-based approach underpinning Morocco's migration strategy, local migration governance is essential. The sector's increasing dependence on national and non-national migrant workers strongly encourages the development of effective policies aimed at protecting migrant workers from exploitative labour while at the same time improving human development indicators at the regional level and strengthening the sector's overall economic efficiency and social sustainability.

In order to integrate into the formal market and contribute more visibly to the economy (by paying taxes, making investments, obtaining formal and stable jobs, etc.) and to social life, migrant workers are aware that their socio-economic integration must begin with the regularization of their situation. At the same time the study reveals the existence of a migration governance model based on the “migration and development” approach. Given the region's economic dynamism and the resulting growing demand for labour, migration is framed positively as a driver of local development. This perspective helps to manage migration and reduce the risks to which migrants are exposed while at the same time promoting migrants' socio-economic integration



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Annex 1 – Interviews conducted

Interviewee code	Participants and attendees
[Interview_1]	Employer: Managing Director of a fish processing Unit in Dakhla
[Interview_2]	Employer: General Director of a fish processing unit in Dakhla
[Interview_3]	Employer: Manager of a fish processing Unit in Dakhla
[Interview_4]	Employer: Representative of a professional Federation for fish packaging units
[Interview_5]	State actor: Representative of the Department of Maritime Fishing in Dakhla
[Interview_6 representative]	State actor: Representative of the Regional Centre of Investment (RCI) in Dakhla
[Interview_7]	Non-state actor: Representative of an NGO
[Interview_8]	State actor: Agency for Social Development (ADS)
[Interview_9]	State actor: Representative of the Regional Department for Planning
[Interview_10]	Non-state actor: Representative of an NGO in Dakhla
[Interview_11]	State actor: Representative of the Regional Human Rights in Dakhla
[Interview_12]	State actor: Labour expert in Dakhla
[Interview_13]	State actor: Occupational Doctor in Dakhla
[Interview_14]	Employer: Director of Human Resources in a fish processing unit in Dakhla
[Interview_15]	Arthur, head of the Ivorian migrant community in Dakhla, 34, man, University level, Ivorian
[Interview_16]	Zaynabou, female, regular Senegalese
[Interview_17]	Tapi, 38, female, Ivorian, 5th grade
[Interview_18]	Arouno, 35, a man, Senegalese, no education, no residence card, has a formal work contract
[Interview_19]	Dominique, 38, man, Cameroonian, University level
[Interview_20]	Anicet, 38, man, Ivorian, Bac



[Interview_21]	Kaoukou, 40, woman, Ivorian, Bac
[Interview_22]	Saida, 30, woman, Moroccan, no education, formal
[Interview_23]	Bomba, 35, Ivorian, primary school
[Interview_24]	Naima, 47, woman, Moroccan, no education
[Interview_25]	Sissi, 46, man, Ivorian, no education
[Interview_26]	Isaac, man, 30, Ivoirian, Bac
[Interview_27]	Balamba, man, 32, Cameroonian
[Interview_28]	Khadija, 55, woman, Moroccan, no education, formal
[Interview_29]	Fatima, 38, man, Ivorian, Primary school
[Interview_30]	Karamoko, man, Ivorian



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Working conditions of migrant workers in the fish processing sector in Dakhla

ABOUT DignityFIRM

Towards becoming sustainable and resilient societies we must address the structural contradictions between our societies' exclusion of migrant workers and their substantive role in producing our food.

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