

EVALUATING MOROCCAN INTEGRATION POLICIES FOR UNACCOMPANIED SUB-SAHARAN MIGRANT MINORS: A CASE STUDY FROM OUJDA THROUGH AN INTERCULTURAL LENS

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Abstract: Morocco has prioritized its African foreign policy since gaining independence. The 2011 constitutional reform led to the 2013 creation of the National Immigration and Asylum Policy (PNIA), allowing immigrants the same rights as Moroccans under Moroccan law. However, one of the major concerns of these foreign policies is embodied in the illegal migrant minors, mainly those coming from sub-Saharan African countries to Morocco as a country of transit or destination, especially to Oujda, an eastern Moroccan border town. This paper seeks to answer the following research question: How effective are Moroccan migration policies and the role of social organizations in integrating sub-Saharan migrant minors in Oujda? To address this, it uses a qualitative research design, utilizing thematic analysis of interviews with such stakeholders as policymakers, social workers, and migrants to identify policy gaps and opportunities for improvement. The findings reveal that the integration of these children has reached an adequate level, but further work is required.

Keywords: Border town, country of transit, Moroccan policies, integration, social organizations, sub-Saharan migrant minors.

INTRODUCTION:

Morocco has experienced various types of migration flows, including internal, cross-border, and cross-regional, making it a country of destination, transit, and departure. As a result, Morocco has been involved at international and national levels to manage properly these migration flows through governance frameworks and mechanisms, including "the National Strategy for Moroccans Living Abroad and the Moroccan Development Model" and "the National Strategy for Immigration and Asylum (SNIA)," and "the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration" (International Organization for Migration, "the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development" as reported by IOM website).

According to the 2019 report "Migration, Displacement, and Education: Building Bridges, Not Walls," published by Global Education Monitoring, the change in law to accommodate immigrant children by lowering the documentation standards required resulted in thousands gaining access to education (UNESCO, 2019). However, the issue of integrating migrant minors, mainly from Sub-Saharan Africa, into Moroccan society remains a critical challenge, particularly in border regions like Oujda, which has been called "one of the main migratory crossroads in North Africa" by the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network (2013). It is distinguished by connections that are highly well-liked by immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, including those who have just arrived (Essayagh, F., Essayagh, T., Essayagh, M., Khouchoua, M., Lemriss, H., Rattal, M., ... and Essayagh, S., 2023).

Irregular migrants from sub-Saharan Africa face many challenges while trying to reach their intended destination, Europe, such as death from hunger, injuries, thirst, or loss in the vast expanse, along with violence and other violations of their dignity because they traverse thousands of kilometers across the Sahara Desert (Dalouh, 2024). Those who succeed in reaching Morocco, swinging between staying or continuing their journey, also encounter numerous integration barriers, specifically for children, including legal uncertainties, limited access to education, healthcare, and social protection, as well as exclusion from formal support structures.

Morocco has implemented numerous integration policies for irregular migrants, particularly Sub-Saharan Africans, as part of the National Strategy for Immigration and Asylum (SNIA) that was released in 2013. Alongside the efforts of various international and local organizations, Morocco is making strides in addressing the integration of Sub-Saharan migrant minors into its society. However, this remains a considerable challenge that requires continued focus and action. As a result, this study aims to explore, scrutinize, and evaluate the impact of existing policies and institutional roles (governmental strategies and social organizations) on the integration process of sub-Saharan migrant minors in Oujda and to identify the structural challenges and weaknesses that hinder effective integration, mainly those related to intercultural communication. This inquiry seeks to answer the following key questions:

1. What current policies address the integration of migrant minors in Morocco, and how are they implemented in Oujda?
2. How do social organizations and institutions collaborate in supporting migrant minors, and what role do they play in the integration process?
3. What are the opportunities and constraints within the current integration framework, and how can they be improved?
4. How do institutions and organizations engage in intercultural communication, and what challenges do they face in integrating unaccompanied migrant minors?

By critically addressing these questions, the study aims to make a theoretical contribution (in-depth examination within the Moroccan context, with the Chabiba association serving as the only social organization shelter in Oujda) and a practical contribution (identification of gaps in integration policy) to migration policy, human rights, and social integration frameworks.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Unaccompanied migrant minors may be viewed as a transient global phenomenon, but they are now permanent migrants from southern to northern nations (Migliorini, L., Rania, N., Varani, N., & Ferrari, J. R., 2022). According to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 2005, para. 61), an unaccompanied minor is A child or teenager under the age of eighteen who is not receiving care from any other adult who is legally or customarily responsible for providing care and who is separated from both parents and other family members. Due to the particularity of this phenomenon, numerous researchers from various disciplines have studied unaccompanied migrant minors in different contexts around the world. Many of these minors face various difficulties (maltreatment and violence) in their home countries, as well as during their migration journey (Migliorini et al., 2022). Isolation from a protective family unit increases the prevalence of disease and trauma, which are exacerbated by the delicate physical, mental, and psychological developmental stages of childhood and adolescence.

Although international legal instruments outline a wide range of states' obligations and advocate for current recommendations regarding unaccompanied minors, the lack of services to support these individuals results in more complicated child health risks (Maioli, S. C., Bhabha, J., Wickramage, K., Wood, L. C., Erragne, L., García, O. O., ... and Devakumar, D., 2021). The International Organization for Migration (IOM, n.d) states that migrants will likely face numerous challenges when attempting to access healthcare and education, as adjusting to a new environment is a complex and multifaceted process. In addition, undocumented immigrants are less likely to report discrimination and are more likely to be subjected to various forms of exploitation. An estimated 152 million children work as children worldwide, with a sizable portion of them being trafficked (International Labour Organization 2021a, 2021b). A significant percentage of victims of child trafficking are girls, who are disproportionately affected by child trafficking for sexual exploitation (UNICEF, 2020). Southeast Asia and parts of Africa report exceptionally high rates of child trafficking, which vary by region due to factors like poverty, educational gaps, and political instability (UNODC 2021). Unaccompanied minor migrants are diverse in religion, culture, and ethnicity. According to Bhabha (2014), these young people also differ in their current situation, the reasons they are migrating (such as family, exploitation, survival, or independence), and how they are getting around (either traveling alone or with an adult who left them shortly after they arrived or traveling with an adult who is unable or unfit to care for the child). Furthermore, Migliorini et al. (2022) claim that there are multiple factors that had affected the emotional health of sub-Saharan migrants, including the decision to leave their country of origin, the long and perilous journey they must undertake alone, and being separated from their parents and other family members. The additional cultural and contextual changes make these separate elements more complex, which significantly endangers children.

In the Moroccan context, integrating migrants, mainly from sub-Saharan Africa, is a significant priority as Morocco increases its influence on the African continent (El Ghazouani, 2019). According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM, n.d), Morocco is one of the leading countries in implementing the 23 objectives of the Global Compact, notably in promoting and sharing best practices in the framework of South-South cooperation, promoting regular migration channels, and strengthening international cooperation and global partnerships for safe, orderly, and regular migration. In other words, Morocco has implemented the National Strategy for Immigration and Asylum (SNIA) to ensure that migration contributes to development efforts. The strategy includes 11 sectoral and cross-cutting action programs covering education, health, shelter, social protection, employment, human trafficking, international cooperation, and governance (International Organization for Migration [IOM]).

Since the publication of the National Immigration and Asylum Strategy (SNIA) in 2013, Moroccan public schools have offered free education and a safe, friendly learning environment to students from sub-Saharan Africa (Ismaili, 2023). Many have succeeded in learning Moroccan Darija (Moroccan Arabic) and developing a sense of belonging (El Ghazouani, 2019). In addition, considerable efforts have been made to ensure better access for sub-Saharan migrants to primary healthcare facilities, emergency services, and support for pregnant women (Koubri et al., 2021). However, these policies remain insufficient in integrating these migrants into Moroccan daily life (El Ghazouani, 2019; Bitari, 2020; Koubri, H., Hami, H., Coulibaly, S. K.,

Soulaymani, A., El Kouartey, N., and Essolbi, A., 2021; Ismaili, 2023). In the case of Oujda, as a border, transit, and hub city for migrants from sub-Saharan Africa, sub-Saharan migrants lack resources in four areas: housing, language classes, medical and psychological care, and employment and income (Bitari, 2020). Consequently, Koubri et al. (2021) reported that Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and thematic associations have stepped in to support and complement international bodies and public authorities, whose limitations in handling increasing migratory flows became evident, especially during the global economic crisis. These organizations have gained prominence in the international migration landscape due to their strategic role in addressing the humanitarian crisis and aiding its victims. At the national level, Morocco allocates substantial resources to sub-Saharan migrants and acknowledges the crucial role associations and non-governmental organizations play in addressing the needs of migrants, as evidenced by the convergence of its public policies on migration in general and migrants' health in particular. At the local level, the integration process for sub-Saharan migrants received from organizations in Oujda, such as MS2 and Wafae associations, is still under debate in several areas (Bitari, 2020).

Furthermore, several studies have scrutinized the impact of communication practices in shaping migrant integration efforts. According to Braga (2023), European policies have been unable to manage migration effectively, which leads to numerous human rights violations, such as xenophobic political parties gaining power due to their anti-migration rhetoric and actions, which occasionally violated the Refugee Convention and other human rights provisions. Migliorini et al. (2022) state that to improve aid and to develop new methods that consider the particularities of unaccompanied migrant children (minors), challenges must be addressed concerning the host context and service in order. Koubri et al. (2021) argue that enhancing coordination between public authorities and associations/NGOs will undoubtedly facilitate the implementation of effective health interventions that address the actual needs of migrants in Morocco.

Research on unaccompanied minor migrants in North America and Europe is impressive, but studies that specifically address Morocco's policies regarding migrant minors are scarce. Studies on migration in Morocco tend to focus on border control measures, humanitarian initiatives, and the integration of adult migrants; however, few explicitly address the legal, social, and educational frameworks for unaccompanied minor migrants through the lens of intercultural communication competence (ICC).

Due to the complex nature of the term Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), a wide range of definitions, models, and assessment tools have been developed. In this respect, Fantini (2007) has listed several related terms employed in the literature to describe ICC. These encompass intercultural communicative competence, intercultural sensitivity, cross-cultural awareness, ethno-relativity, and global competencies, which all imply the same ability allowing an individual to go beyond his/her own culture and to deal with people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Fantini, 2007).

Sercu (2006) defines ICC as the ability of foreign language learners to deal with intercultural experiences. Byram (1997) emphasizes that ICC entails understanding and relating to people from other countries, believing that successful communication is achieved when interlocutors "establish and maintain relationships" (p. 3). Advocating an ethnorelative perspective, Bennet (1993) developed his Intercultural Sensitivity (IS) to describe learners' ability to respond to cultural differences and complexities effectively. However, Deardorff (2011) sheds light on the dynamic and ongoing development of ICC, making it impossible for learners to become fully competent due to instruction. This entails providing students with continuous feedback on their understanding and application of intercultural communication.

Byram's model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) (1997) offers a comprehensive and multidimensional framework, particularly suited for assessing in depth the quality of integration policies targeting migrant minors. Unlike more general or unidimensional models of cultural adaptation, Byram's model of ICC highlights the qualities of a competent intercultural speaker. In general terms, these qualities include a set of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. The first element in Byram's model, *savoir*, refers to the intercultural speaker's knowledge of the social products and practices of his/her own and other cultures, including the underlying patterns of societal and individual interaction. Byram (1997) includes as the second component of his model the *savoir être*, which denotes the attitudes of intercultural speakers towards the beliefs of their own culture and those of others. This means "relativizing self" and "valuing other" (Hoff, 2020).

The third quality of competent intercultural speakers entails mastering the skills of interpreting documents/events from different cultures and relating them to one's own (*savoir comprendre*). *Savoir apprendre/faire* is the fourth element in Byram's model, which involves discovering and/or interacting. Put simply, this implies intercultural speakers' ability to engage in real-time communication relying on the aforementioned knowledge, attitudes, and skills. The last ability, *savoir s'engager*, comprises the critical evaluation of one's beliefs, practices, and products of one's own and other cultures.

In a nutshell, integration policies can be evaluated through the lens of Byram's model of ICC to determine the engagement of institutions and organizations in intercultural communication and the challenges they face in integrating unaccompanied migrant minors. Byram's model uniquely aligns with the holistic nature of integration policies' examination, which bridges the gap between policy intent and lived experience.

METHODOLOGY

This study aimed to understand and evaluate Moroccan integration policies and institutional roles in inter-cultural communication for unaccompanied minor migrants from sub-Saharan Africa and to explore this phenomenon within a specific context, namely Oujda City. It adopted a qualitative exploratory research design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The participants in this inquiry included the various parties involved in the integration process: the Chabiba association, an example of a social shelter organization working with unaccompanied minor migrants from sub-Saharan Africa; policymakers and institutional representatives, primarily in education, healthcare, and legislative matters, as well as migrant minors. The gathered data was achieved by conducting semi-structured interviews, making observations, and analyzing different policy documents. Furthermore, we prioritized several ethical considerations, including obtaining informed consent from participants and ensuring their anonymity to safeguard vulnerable populations. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which helped identify patterns and insights regarding the integration of unaccompanied migrant minors in Morocco.

FINDINGS

The complexity of this social phenomenon, the integration of unaccompanied migrant minors in Morocco, the gathered qualitative data, and the thematic analysis approach applied resulted in the development of specific codes, including policy gaps, institutional barriers, organizational intervention, resource constraints, discrimination and social exclusion, resilience and adaptation, protection and rights along with ethical consideration. The following table (table 1) provides a summary of the systematic organization of this study's findings, organized according to the adopted coding framework.

Table 1 Main Study's Findings

Main Theme	Code	Description	Example Quote / Observation
Policies And Institutions	Policy Gaps	Lack of clear integration plans for migrant minors	There is no structured government plan to accommodate these children.
	Institutions	Challenges	The procedures to accept the undocumented minors from sub-Saharan Africa might take time to integrate them into the educational system.
		Services	Ministry of justice, Ministry of interior, Ministry of national education, preschool and sports, National mutual aid, Ministry of youth, culture, and communication, Ministry of health and social protection, and other ministries provide multiple services such as protection, nursing, shelter, health care, education, rehabilitation, integration, and so on in alignment with the international laws regarding minors including sub-Saharan migrants.
Role of NGOs & Social Organizations; Chabiba Association	NGO Interventions:	Support provided by NGOs in education, healthcare, and legal assistance	"Our organization provides settlement, psychological support, medical check-ups, legal aid (help to get a "formal" identity paper), and educational integration (they have Massar codes; specific codes from the education ministry)."
	Resource Constraints	Funding and logistical challenges faced by NGOs	Not enough resources to meet the demand, and the places are limited (60 beds).
Experiences of Migrant Minors	Discrimination and Social Exclusion	Racism, marginalization, and social rejection	Names like African would be considered as an insult for these minors, social integration would take more time than institutional integration.
	Resilience	Coping strategies of	"I feel grateful to have joined this

	and Adapta- tion	migrant minors	community center; we learn lan- guages like Arabic and French, along with pursuing a formal apprentice- ship to get jobs such as cook and bar- bershop."
ICC Com- ponents	Attitudes (curiosity, openness, re- spect)	respect for the minors' resilience and limited openness	Chabiba association staff: "They've been through a lot, and we have been tried to listen and understand." Social protection director: "They don't behave like us." "They have their own traditions."
	Knowledge (of other cul- tures, institu- tions, val- ues)	understanding, gaps, and stereotypes	Association director: "We respect their religious practices." "We actually know what they have gone through to come here." "We know a lot about their families and their customs."
	Skills of in- terpreting and relating	Integration facilitators	Social workers facilitate the integra- tion of the unaccompanied minors; they try to explain the cultural norms, expectations, and misunderstandings based on their experience, but there is a lack of formal mechanisms and trainings
	Skills of dis- covery and interaction	Limited Meaningful engagement with Mo- roccan peers and staff	The limited opportunities to have meaningful engagement with the Mo- roccan society have restricted the de- velopment of the discovery and inter- action skills for the sub-Saharan un- accompanied minors.
	Critical cul- tural aware- ness	western centric cultural assumption	Policies are made if all children think the same way, have the same feel- ings, go through the same path, speak the same language, have the same re- ligion, background, culture, etc.
Legal and Ethical Considera- tions	Protection and Rights	Compliance with inter- national child protec- tion laws	Moroccan law does not have a spe- cific recognition of unaccompanied minors' rights from sub-Saharan Af- rica
	Ethical Safe- guards	Anonymity, informed consent, and research ethics	Consent before interviews was en- sured

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This inquiry seeks to answer the following key questions:

1. What current policies address the integration of migrant minors in Morocco, and how are they implemented in Oujda?

In Oujda, there are many representatives from various Moroccan ministries who take care of mi-nors in general and sub-Saharan minors specifically. One of these ministries is the Ministry of Youth, Cul-ture, and Communication, which has a center for childhood protection that provides housing, nutrition, clothing, med-ical care, and educational activities for sub-Saharan minors (according to their declarations) who are in con-flict with Moroccan law (entering Moroccan territory without any official paper) and sent by public prose-cution. Most of these migrants are males who encountered physical and psychological abuse during their journey to Morocco, which affected their attitudes. Not to forget that most of the time, they refuse to stay in the center because they have their own plans and destinations, according to the cen-ter's director.

National Mutual Aid is another institution that offers, through numerous centers of qualifying training, mul-tiple programs in professional crafts (sewing, cooking, hairdressing...). In addition to the ac-companiment centers of childhood protection, which ensures different aids such as listening, orientation, psychological support, and accompaniment. Moreover, this establishment organizes humanitarian cam-paigns for deliver-ing hygiene kits, food pantries, and blankets...Sub-Sahan minors in Morocco can pursue their studies via informal educational programs. To facilitate their access to these programs, the Ministry of Education, pre-school, and Sports grants Massar Codes to these migrant minors (fig. 1). Additionally, they benefit from all Moroccan healthcare services, like other Moroccan children.



Figure 1 A temporary identity document made by Chabiba Association in coordination with the support unit for women and children who are victims of violence in Oujda.

One of the most positive outcomes that foster, enhance, and promote the integration of sub-Saharan minors is an identity certificate provided by a local cell to combat violence against women and children created by the court of first instance. This certificate enables these children to move within the city of Oujda (fig. 1). Minor migrants from sub-Saharan Africa in Morocco gain significantly from these Moroccan institutions, enabling them to integrate successfully into Moroccan society. However, there is an absence of coordination between these institutions, which essentially stems from a lack of a clear governmental plan regarding this category of children.

2. How do social organizations and institutions collaborate in supporting migrant minors, and what role do they play in the integration process?

Generally, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play a crucial role in society's development. In Oujda, many social associations support sub-Saharan migrants and minors. However, there is only one organization that works with unaccompanied minors in terms of housing, and that is the Chabiba Association. This association provides housing, nutrition, clothing, medical care (including physical and psychological treatments), and educational activities and training (such as languages, sewing, cooking, hairdressing, etc). Additionally, it reestablishes contact between these minors and their families in their countries of origin. It also promotes an atmosphere where these sub-Saharan migrant minors integrate into Moroccan society; for example, they study and train with locals in respecting their own cultures.

Furthermore, the director of the Chabiba Association stated that integrating these children can be easy when they speak Arabic or French, but it turns more challenging when they speak English. However, once they learn Arabic or Moroccan Darija, the task becomes easier. She asserted that the association's successful work is not effortless; collaborating with different establishments strengthens and fosters our job. Each institution has a focal point that facilitates the coordination and communication between the different intervening parts. This mediation encourages and enhances the integration of the sub-Saharan migrant minors into Moroccan society.

Although the association is funded directly by UNICEF, it still faces numerous challenges related to funding and logistics. UNICEF supports the association financially within the framework of a convention between the association and UNICEF. With these funds, the association can provide its services to sub-Saharan migrant minors. However, these services are limited, with only 60 beds allocated, which is considered an obstacle to serving more beneficiaries. Chabiba Association presents, in collaboration with Moroccan institutions and UNICEF, a fantastic contribution to the field of sub-Saharan migrant minors in Morocco, especially in Oujda, as the director stated.

3. What are the opportunities and constraints within the current integration framework, and how can they be improved?

To address this research question, it was necessary to give a chance to the sub-Saharan migrant minors' experiences to be voiced. Two fundamental themes were detected: 1) Discrimination and Social Exclusion, and 2) Resilience and Adaptation. It was observed that some specific words are considered as discrimination by sub-Saharan migrant minors, like "African." They do not accept it from locals, who think it is an ordinary word used to differentiate between them, those from sub-Saharan Africa, and others from other countries

like Syria. During the interviews, none of the interviewers mentioned being confounded by any marginalization or discrimination from anyone in the association or the city. One of them stated that they received help once they entered Moroccan territory. He continues that he met locals who gave them money to pay for a taxi that would drive them to the association. All of them claimed that they had heard about the association and Mama Haja (the director of the association) before coming to Morocco. These positive statements may be questionable due to their temporary nature (they are currently beneficiaries of this organization and Morocco).

CONCLUSION

In a nutshell, this study aimed to evaluate Moroccan institutional and organizational policies regarding the integration of unaccompanied sub-Saharan minors into Moroccan society through the intercultural communication lens. The findings revealed that this integration generally faces various barriers, including language, intercultural communication, and funding. Even though Moroccan institutions provide multiple services to these children, such as social protection, nursing, shelter, health care, education, and rehabilitation, there is still a lack of structured policies that address this category of minors. The NGOs, like the Chabiba association, play a significant role in integrating these children, regardless of the limited funds. The unaccompanied sub-Saharan migrant minors have benefited from different Moroccan facilities to integrate into the Moroccan community, but still need to work on their future. The institutional intercultural communication is grounded on social workers' lived experiences, not based on formal training and support. By conducting qualitative research on a new academic area, "child migration" in a transit country like Morocco, which has borders with Europe, this enquiry highlights the importance of institutional intercultural communication in integrating the unaccompanied sub-Saharan minors into the Moroccan nation. It is recommended that there should be a clear governmental policy regarding this category (sub-Saharan migrant minors). This integration policy should address multiple issues, such as developing learning programs for teaching Moroccan Darija and Moroccan culture to these children, integrating institutional intercultural communication policies, in addition to funding and improving the NGO's contributions (e.g., the existing establishment of the social protection EPS should accept these sub-Saharan minors). Ultimately, this research emphasizes the significant role of intercultural communication competence (ICC) in the social integration of the unaccompanied sub-Saharan migrant minors and appeals to the rethinking of institutional migration policies.

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