



## FIELDWORK BRIEF

# MIGRATION AND CIVIL SOCIETY LEADERS IN MOROCCO

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the context of the MIGRADEMO project, this report presents selected descriptive findings from our research on the extent to and ways in which the role of returnee leaders of associations link their international migration experience to their entry into and engagement with civil society. A core component of this research is 12 semi-structured interviews with returnees working with civil society organisations in Morocco. Our preliminary analysis suggests that these civil society leaders do perceive their migration experience as influential for their perceptions, knowledge, skills, and transnational network upon their return to Morocco. Although some of them can implement what they learned and observed abroad, interviewees also reflect on the obstacles they face in doing so.

## INTRODUCTION

Both international migration and democratic development are important contemporary academic and policy concerns. Recent studies of transnational migrant practices have uncovered how migrants influence democratic participation in their homelands through the remittance of both money and newfound ideas about democracy from afar or through return. The MIGRADEMO project seeks to unpack these processes at the level of the political elite, civil society, and among households in regions of high outmigration. This brief deals with the level of **civil society in Morocco**. Our research focuses on how the migration experience of heads of civil society associations influences their entry to and engagement with civil society.

Our research team conducted a total of **12 semi-structured interviews** with civil society representatives, including 5 women and 7 men. These representatives were from different national associations working on various issues such as human rights, gender, education, environmental issues, democracy, and migration. The fieldwork took place during the months of **January and March 2023** and involved multiple trips to different areas, including large cities like **Fes and Rabat**.

Most interviewees were contacted through networking via email, phone calls, and personal contacts. Interviews with the participants were conducted individually, both in person and online.



12 INTERVIEWEES  
(5 WOMEN, 7 MEN)

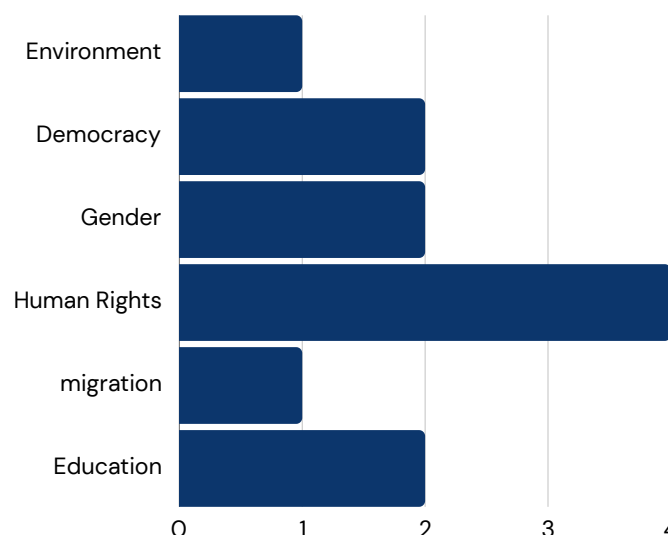


Fig. 1. Themes of civil society associations

## CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MIGRATION EXPERIENCE

Most of the interviewees moved abroad to pursue **higher education**. Some of the representatives lived abroad for several years and pursued some form of professional work once their education was finalised. However, most of them **returned** to Morocco right after completing their degrees, as this was largely their intention before migrating.

The interviewees explained their return with reference to their **commitment to civic causes** and their desire to share their newly acquired skills and knowledge and contribute to civil society in Morocco. Moreover, France stood out as the most common **destination** for civil society leaders, probably due to the linguistic and historical links with this country.

## (RE)SOCIALISATION ABROAD

The leaders of the associations interviewed linked their experience abroad to acquiring new perspectives and skill sets. This can be attributed to several mechanisms, especially related to their **studies** and their participation in **political and civic events**. In terms of studying, being university students led to involvement in student-led organisations and university marches. Interviewees also reported volunteering for non-governmental and diaspora organisations abroad, which provided them with an opportunity to learn about how civil society operates in these contexts.

For example, one of the representatives was involved in two associations while studying abroad: a European youth engagement association and another one focused on democracy. Through this experience, he learned about how associations collaborate with politically engaged individuals from different political parties and backgrounds, as well as various mechanisms of engagement.

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## ENTRY INTO CIVIL SOCIETY

Several participants agreed that their migration experience had a positive impact on their decision to **join or initiate a civil society organisation** in Morocco upon their return. For instance, one interviewee described how volunteering for domestic violence programmes abroad helped him learn how to conduct advocacy campaigns when he started to manage his association back in Morocco. Another interviewee linked his migration experience to founding an agro-ecological association focusing on the environment, food security, and human rights.

Another participant expressed a change in perception after volunteering for cultural and sports associations abroad, influencing his perspective on organisational and work culture in civil society and how to value the different perspectives. Other interviewees, for instance, emphasised that their engagement in issues such as human rights was already formed before migration.

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*“Having an experience abroad might indeed influence the perspective and developmental outlook of a civil society leader, because when traveling especially to North America or Europe, one will quickly notice that things are very well-organised, highly structured, people and authorities are meticulous, they place a lot of importance on details, and they value the human experience.”*

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Interview with a returned leader of an association

However, other interviewees also stated that their decision to engage in civil society associations in Morocco was not linked to their time living abroad but rather to either **pre- or post-migration experiences**.

## MIGRATION EXPERIENCE AND WORK WITH CIVIL SOCIETY

Our research suggests that leaders of civil society associations draw on their **international experience** in their work.

Some participants expressed their interest in working in national civil society based on their experiences living abroad. However, most interviewees reported facing challenges when it comes to planning and implementing activities within their associations. These challenges include a **lack of support from local and national authorities**. Another participant acknowledges the difficulties faced by women in a predominantly male-dominated civil society environment and recognises their own privileged position within this context. Several participants also identified **funding** as a major obstacle to their work. For instance, one participant high-

lights the difficulties faced by new associations in securing funding opportunities. This challenge arises from the struggle to find funding opportunities from the funding bodies. For instance, a participant shares that when he established a service centre for female survivors of domestic violence, there was little to no funding coming from state partners or public stakeholders.



## TRANSNATIONAL LINKS

One important dimension for civil society organisation leaders relate to their migration experience is **transnational links**.

While all participants state that their current network of **personal and professional connections** is primarily based in Morocco, most of them also acknowledge the way in which their migration experience helped them gain transnational networks. These transnational partnerships are crucial for securing funding, accessing specific spaces and opportunities, exchanging skills and knowledge, and establishing strong connections with individuals

and associations abroad. For example, one leader mentioned that obtaining a foreign degree opened many doors and helped him establish a robust academic and professional network in Morocco.

Likewise, another participant emphasised the importance of international links in establishing her environmental association. In contrast, a second participant explained how her transnational network serving as a support mechanism to provide judicial help for Moroccan migrants abroad.



MIGRADEMO is a European Research Council (ERC) funded project which examines the impact of migration on democratic participation and processes in countries of origin. It is hosted by the Department of Political Science at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona.

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