

IOM **DJIBOUTI**

**MIGRATING ALONG THE EASTERN ROUTE**  
TRENDS AND NEEDS WITHIN THE MIGRATION CONTEXT IN SOUTHERN DJIBOUTI  
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## OBJECTIVE

The objective of this report is to consolidate and present the information collected by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) during focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informants interviews (KIIs) in Ali Sabieh and Dikhil in order to inform programmatic interventions to assist vulnerable migrants, especially women and children, in the southern regions of Djibouti. This report brings to light new migration dynamics and needs, while highlighting the obstacles for migrants to access basic services in the targeted areas.

## HIGHLIGHTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Prepare for changes in the migration dynamics:** the impact of drought and conflict in Ethiopia on families' unity has changed migratory dynamics in unexpected ways. Elderly women who had never migrated, large families and unaccompanied children who followed their peers in their migration journeys, have now become migrants. For many of them, Djibouti is not a transit country but their final destination. To ensure that policies and interventions cater for different types of needs, a migrant presence exercise to quantify and qualify migration is critical.
- **Shrinking space for self-reliance and coping mechanisms is heightening humanitarian needs:** migrants in the south of Djibouti have unique stories. While the local communities provide the assistance they can to migrants, the drought and worsening economic conditions have reduced the amount of support available, while the number of migrants in need of health care, shelter, water and sanitation, non-food items (NFIs), food protection, and information and referral services is growing.
- **Offer information and services for migrants through outreach and mobile approaches:** many of the migrants interviewed were unaware of their rights, services available and access modalities. They relied on other migrants for information or did not ask for information at any time. Even when needing medical attention, most migrants interviewed assumed they would not qualify for free care and expressed apprehension and confusion about who to reach out to for assistance. Many migrants did not have access to key information that can ensure their safety and dignity during their migratory journey, and facilitate informed decision-making, such as the definition of refugee status and how to apply for it. The lack of awareness and information appeared to contribute significantly to a sense of hopelessness.
- **Promote localization of responses:** the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) for the referral of migrants in need in Djibouti was drafted and validated by partners in November 2021. Local civil society organizations (CSOs) should be reinforced in their capacity to respond to the specific needs of vulnerable migrant populations, including a refresher training on the NRM.
- **Continue improving assessment capacity, both quantitative and qualitative:** an improved assessment capacity will strengthen the ability to inform the response in a complex and dynamic migratory scenario, to ensure relevance of interventions and to conduct forward looking analysis.

## INTRODUCTION

The socioeconomic situation in countries along the Eastern Route has been negatively affected by a number of factors, including the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the conflict in Ethiopia and the drought in the Horn of Africa region. Moreover, the security situation and access to services and livelihoods in Yemen has continued to deteriorate, while access to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has become nearly impossible. These factors have significantly hindered migrants' capacity to generate an income along the journey to support themselves.

IOM, through its Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) flow monitoring component, works in collaboration with the Government of Djibouti to better understand the migratory dynamics in Djibouti and the profile of migrants passing through the country. In 2022, around 223,000 migratory movements were observed by DTM at 10 key transit points in Djibouti. Of these, most were transit (83%) and incoming (16%) movements of migrants heading to Yemen (44%) and Saudi Arabia (31%).

Most migrants entering Djibouti from Ethiopia in 2022 were Ethiopians from the Oromia, Amhara and Tigray regions, and were looking for better economic opportunities (79%). However, forced movements associated with drought and conflict increased significantly between 2021 and 2022. According to the IOM rapid assessment of the drought impact in Djibouti published in September 2022,<sup>1</sup> just over 1,500 migrants were affected by drought (24% identified in Ali Sabieh and 21% in Dikhil). Moreover, IOM observed the emergence of new migratory dynamics in the south of Djibouti: migrants spending longer time in urban centres with no means to support themselves, an increase in the presence of women and girls, and more localized migration movements that include returns to the nearby Ethiopian border. The decision to conduct the FGDs stemmed from the need to better understand the nuances behind these different migration dynamics against the worsening drought and limited access to services.

## MIGRATORY DYNAMICS IN THE SOUTH OF DJIBOUTI

Ali Sabieh is a hilly, mountainous town located in a valley and surrounded by mountains about 98 km southwest of the capital and 10 km north of the border with the Somali region of Ethiopia. The nearest Ethiopian town is Dewele. Ali Sabieh has a population of 28,026 inhabitants with various ethnic groups represented, but a predominance of Somali Issa, which explains why the main spoken language is Somali.<sup>2</sup> Dikhil is also a hilly, mountainous town situated about 122 km southwest of Djibouti City and 12 km north of the border with Ethiopia. The town has a population of 43,398 inhabitants.<sup>3</sup> The inhabitants of the city belong to various ethnic groups, but Afar and Somali Issa are predominant, which also explains why the main language spoken is Somali. Dikhil is one of Djibouti's main agricultural areas, with the local economy largely centred around farming.

According to IOM DTM flow monitoring data, around 21,300 migrants were observed in Ali Sabieh in 2022 (78% men, 18% women, 1% boys and 3% girls). Almost all migrants came from Ethiopia, mainly from the Oromia (58%), Amhara (26%) and Tigray (14%) regions, and were headed to Yemen (70%), Saudi Arabia (29%) and Djibouti (2%). Most migrants reported moving for economic reasons (86%) or due to conflict, violence and persecution (13%). Similarly, around 34,000 migrants were observed in Dikhil in 2022 (59% men, 8% women, 22% boys and 11% girls) and most of them came from Ethiopia (94%), more specifically from the Oromia (85%), Tigray (5%) and Amhara (3%) regions. Most migrants were also going to Yemen (64%), Saudi Arabia (33%) and Ethiopia (3%), and reported moving for economic reasons (95%) or due to conflict (4%).

In 2022, the presence of migrants for prolonged periods of time was observed in these locations, with a growing number of women and children requesting assistance, sleeping outside, and being exposed to protection risks and temperatures that can drop to 15°C during winter nights (between November and March).

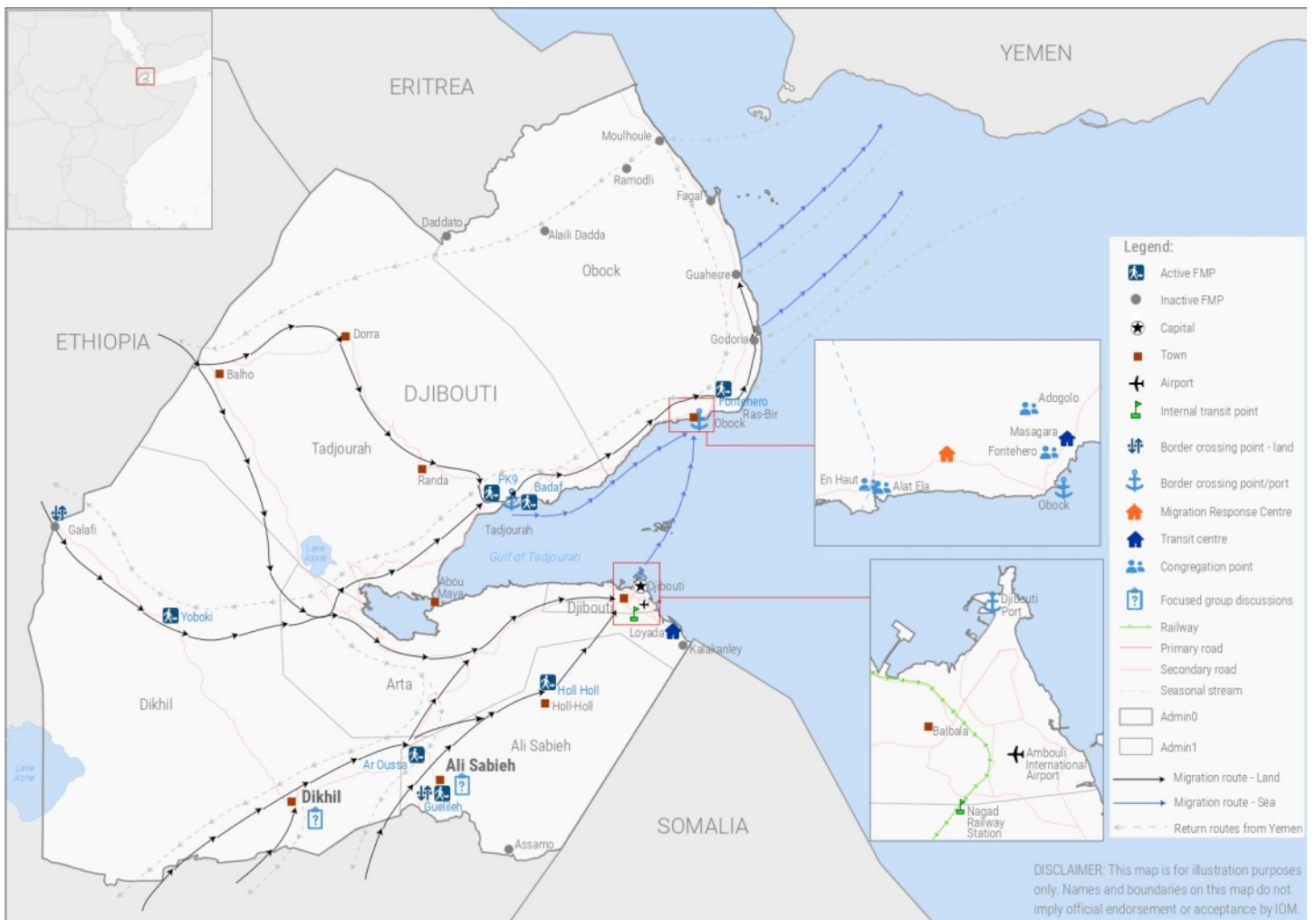


A YOUNG MIGRANT WALING ON THE RAILS IN ALI SABIEH, DJIBOUTI © IOM 2022/DANIEL IBAÑEZ CAMPOS

<sup>1</sup> IOM (2022). [Rapid assessment of the impact of drought in the 5 regions of Djibouti](#).

<sup>2</sup> INSTAD (2023).

<sup>3</sup> INSTAD (2023).



MIGRATORY ROUTES PASSING THROUGH DJIBOUTI

## FINDINGS FROM ALI SABIEH

### Local context

In the region of Ali Sabieh, the government is represented by the prefecture. Other institutional entities present in the town of Ali Sabieh include the police, gendarmerie, the information and meeting centre (CIR, *Centre d'information et de réunion*), coordinated by the National Commission for Human Rights (CNDH, *Commission Nationale des Droits de l'Homme*), and the regional hospital, which is the main health care referral point for the entire southern region, including Dikhil.

During KIIs, the following points were raised:

- The authorities are concerned about the increasing numbers of migrants in the town and their living conditions, especially the women and girls sleeping outside;
- Migrants who have settled in the town for some time are not considered a concern to the authorities, regardless of their immigration status, as they have integrated into the local community;
- Health services are in principle available to migrants, including non-settled migrants, but the resources are insufficient to meet the demand. Migrants who access the hospital most commonly suffer from diarrhoea, dehydration, small fractures and diabetes, and are

referred by the local population. The hospital also conducts mobile patrols that provide COVID-19 vaccination as well as food and water to migrants. Basic drugs may be provided when available.

- A representative of the CNDH in Ali Sabieh stated that the local and migrant populations can refer cases of violence to the CIR.
- A local CSO, Gar Gar, with whom IOM collaborates for food and NFI distribution, assists the most vulnerable migrants through these distributions as well as by offering service referral and orientation in the city. Gar Gar also conducts awareness-raising campaigns among the local community to foster migrant integration.
- The Catholic School welcomes both local and migrant children. At the time of the interview, 10 Ethiopian unaccompanied children were present in the school. These children were hosted by local families who also paid their education fees.
- In general, CSOs highlighted that access to health care is very complicated for migrants and that they need to be accompanied by a member of the local community in order for them to access any service.



MIGRANTS AT THE ABANDONED TRAIN STATION IN ALI SABIEH, DJIBOUTI © IOM 2022/DANIEL IBAÑEZ CAMPOS

### *Migrants' experiences*

The migrants who participated in the FGDs in Ali Sabieh were Oromo and Somali coming from drought-affected areas of Ethiopia, mainly from northeast Oromia (Kersa, Gara Muleta, Awaday in East Hararghe), northern Somali (Jigjiga) and Dire Dawa regions. Perceptions and needs of migrants from the Amhara (Dessie) and Tigray (Alla Mata, Mehoni) regions were captured through the FGDs and semi-structured interviews that took place at an informal congregation point in Grand Bara, located 20 km away from Ali Sabieh.

Among the migrants who considered Djibouti as their destination were different groups with specific needs. IOM interviewed elderly ethnic Somali and Oromo Ethiopian women (some of whom in their eighties) who were forced to migrate for the first time due to the combined effect of drought and conflict; the Oromo men were drawn into conflict and could no longer work the land. They travelled on foot, some accompanied by family members with small children, with the intention of staying in Djibouti to live off charity and daily work until the rains fall in Ethiopia. Due to their advanced age, their employability was very limited. Thanks to a shared language and culture, some of the older Somali women received support from the local population in the form of mats and access to covered porches for sleeping, but they struggled with the cold weather as well as access to food and water.

Some young women who travelled with their young children, and in some cases with their spouses, were particularly concerned about the lack of access to medical facilities for their children, some of whom looked visibly sick during the FGDs. One young woman who reported being assaulted and had a cut over her eye explained that she did not seek medical treatment for lack of financial means.

Most working-age adults who intended to stay in Djibouti wanted to earn money to send to their families in Ethiopia or to pay for the travel expenses of other relatives. A few of them wished to seek asylum in the refugee camp of Ali Addeh, not far from the city. They did not show a full understanding of the criteria for asylum or the implications of refugee status.

Children, both boys and girls, explained how they mostly came from broken families in which one or both parents had died or

gone to war and never returned. The surviving parent or caretaker did not have the financial means to care for them or was abusive, pushing the children to leave (the majority left without informing their family). Most children followed friends or in some cases older siblings and mostly relied on peers in Djibouti, with few adults being mentioned. Girls expressed concern over finding shelter at night as well as finding job opportunities. Boys were more difficult to engage with and reluctantly shared that many of them got beaten up and had very little opportunity to find work, especially the Oromo boys who lived under wagons in the abandoned train station in Ali Sabieh.

The few migrant men from Tigray reported having been deported from Saudi Arabia between March and September 2022 after having left Tigray in 2019, before the conflict broke out. They stayed in Addis Ababa, but with no opportunity to return home, lack of access to water and a general sense of hostility towards them, which made them decide to attempt the migration journey again. However, they were divided over their intentions as two of them wanted to try to reach Saudi Arabia and another one did not wish to cross Yemen again and therefore would try to find employment in Djibouti. A woman from Tigray interviewed separately reported to have experienced rape multiple times back in Ethiopia, and while she had found stability in Djibouti working for a man with a commercial activity, she reported a sense of deep isolation and obsessive thoughts when alone.

Other migrants explained that their intention was to reach the Gulf countries. Among them, many were stranded in Ali Sabieh,<sup>4</sup> trying to collect money to continue their journey. Another group had already migrated before, either arriving to Obock in the north of Djibouti, to Yemen or to Saudi Arabia. These migrants were then either deported to Ethiopia or returned voluntarily but came back to Djibouti because of the difficult situations they found back home. Among the migrants interviewed the most reported reasons for migrating were the search for better economic opportunities, the impact of the drought, the impact of ongoing conflict, or difficult family dynamics, such as mandatory conscription for males in origin communities, death of a parent, abuse in the family, lack of means that push migrants, especially children, towards other youth members in the community.

<sup>4</sup> There were 672 migrants stranded in Djibouti as of December 2022. IOM (2022). [Djibouti Migration Trends Dashboard \(December 2022\)](#).

## Observations

- Ali Sabieh is clearly **no longer a sole transit stop for migrants wanting to reach the Gulf countries**. The locality has also become a destination that is perceived to provide short- and long-term stability and opportunity in the face of shocks in the migrants' places of origin.
- While each migration experience is unique, migrants who sleep outside and by the old train station are predominantly from the Oromia region. Migrants who share rented houses or sleep under a Djiboutian family's porch in the Feera-ad neighbourhood are generally from the Somali region. For those living under abandoned wagons in the train station, the **lack of shelter and warm clothes was the main concern reported** considering the low temperatures at night and the heightened vulnerability to violence that such precarious living conditions entail, especially for unaccompanied children. The local community tends to be less understanding towards migrant boys as they experience physical violence when they ask for work or beg for food and water.
- A clear distinction between Oromo and Somali migrants was perceived, with the latter being slightly better off than the former. Ethnic Somali migrants are generally more accepted by the host community as they speak the same language and share the same religion, thereby easing to some extent the channels to receive support from locals, including accommodation or work. Furthermore, they can rely on the already established networks of Ethiopian Somali migrants that have integrated into the community. **The role of the host community is once again key in shaping migration dynamics.**<sup>5</sup> This difference was also reflected on migrants' willingness to engage in FGDs; Oromo migrants found it more difficult to open up and many seemed traumatized by their journey and their current living conditions.
- The reported daily pay for migrants was between 50 and 1,000 Djiboutian francs (0.3 and 5.6 United States dollars). **Migrants lived on a day-to-day basis and were able to secure employment once or twice weekly.** These conditions affected their capacity to access health services as they were not able to pay the 500 Djiboutian francs (2.8 United States dollars) needed to access primary care at the local hospital.
- **Access to information about assistance or services available for migrants seemed very limited.** Some migrants who wished to apply for asylum lacked information about application procedures, with other migrants reporting experiences of failed attempts to access asylum request services. Most importantly, most migrants did not show an understanding of what refugee status entails and what the criteria for claiming asylum are. Some seemed to equate seeking asylum with obtaining papers that allow them to stay legally in Djibouti and travel freely back home.



IOM CONDUCTS A FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION WITH ETHIOPIAN WOMEN IN ALI SABIEH, DJIBOUTI © IOM 2022/DANIEL IBAÑEZ CAMPOS

<sup>5</sup> Mixed Migration Centre & IOM (2022). [Relationships in Transit: Local communities' interactions with transiting migrants along the Eastern Route in Djibouti and the Somaliland region](#).

# FINDINGS FROM DIKHIL

## Local context

In the region of Dikhil, the government is represented by the prefecture. Other institutional entities present in the town include the police, gendarmerie and the local hospital.

During KIIs, the following points were raised:

- The police reported that migrants, mainly from Oromia and Tigray, passed through Dikhil almost every night. The Oromo groups were larger and less organized than the Tigrayan ones. The two groups were often separated by smugglers to avoid inter-ethnic conflict;
- The police also said that migrants were more afraid of the smugglers than of the officials, and often came to the police station to ask for help;
- Staff at the local hospital reported that migrants rarely came to them for treatment.
- Some of the CSOs interviewed in Dikhil were the local cultural organization for artisanal goods and local development (ACADD, *Association Culturelle Artisanat et du Développement de Dikhil*), the Okarois youth organization for development (AJOD, *Association des Jeunes Okarois pour le Développement*) and the KARMA organization.
- All these actors provide direct assistance to vulnerable populations, including migrants, and conduct awareness-raising campaigns among the local community to foster migrants' integration and ensure their safety during their stay in Dikhil.
- These actors used to conduct food and NFI distributions but the resources were not enough to respond to all the needs.
- Apart from AJOD staff, who have been trained by the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ) on assistance to vulnerable migrants, the other organizations do not have capacity to provide psychosocial support when needed and to respond to protection needs.
- The representative from ACADD raised concern over the lack of trust that migrants have towards CSOs and local institutions, due to the fact that many have had traumatic and violent experiences with smugglers.



ETHIOPIAN MIGRANTS MAKING THEIR WAY TO THEIR SHELTER AFTER TAKING PART IN A FGD IN DIKHIL, DJIBOUTI © IOM 2022/DANIEL IBAÑEZ CAMPOS

## Migrants' experience

The ability to carry out FGD activities in Dikhil was significantly impacted by the return to the Ethiopian border of 527 migrants carried out by the authorities just a few days before the deployment of IOM for this activity. This event hindered the ability of IOM to identify migrants in the city and decreased migrants' trust and willingness to take part in the FGDs.

The migrants who participated in the FGDs in Dikhil were Oromo and Somali migrants coming from drought-affected areas of Ethiopia, namely northeast and southwest Oromia (Gara Muleta and Awaday in East Hararghe, Jimma, Arsi).

Unlike in Ali Sabieh, the FGDs in Dikhil allowed to clearly identify a common migration dynamic. All the migrants interviewed in

Dikhil wanted to continue their journey to Saudi Arabia and had no intention of staying in Djibouti or returning to Ethiopia. The only reason for their presence in Dikhil was to wait for their families to send money to the smugglers so they could continue their journey.

None of the migrants mentioned conflict as a reason for migrating. Most migrants were seeking better economic opportunities to support their families back home. Although some migrants came from very vulnerable backgrounds, most of them said they did not encounter any difficulties at home and confirmed that their socioeconomic situation was not unfavourable. Their decision to migrate was based on the hope of significantly improving their economic situation and that of their families.

## Observations

- Dikhil is a **dynamic transit location where smugglers shape the migration movements** and the migration journey is temporarily halted until money is transferred from families in Ethiopia to finance onward movements. Migrants' stays seemed more organized and their presence was mostly concentrated in the T.P. neighbourhood on the hills, sometimes sleeping in shared houses.
- The migrants interviewed were on their first migration experience and showed little or no knowledge of the ongoing conflict in Yemen. Even when informed of the difficulties they might encounter, they did not seem discouraged and reiterated their intention to continue their journey to Saudi Arabia. Such determination was supported by the very positive feedback they had received from family and community members who had successfully migrated to Saudi Arabia and were able to earn a lot of money, as well as by the fact that they **preferred to face unknown risks rather than return to a reality that they knew had nothing to offer them.**
- All migrants identified the **difficulty in walking long distances on a challenging terrain and the lack of food and water as the biggest challenges.**



IOM CONDUCTS A FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION WITH ETHIOPIAN MEN IN DIKHIL, DJIBOUTI © IOM 2022/DANIEL IBAÑEZ CAMPOS

## CONCLUSION

The Eastern Route continues to be the busiest and most relevant migration corridor in the East and Horn of Africa region. In Djibouti, migration dynamics are gradually changing, as demonstrated by the example of Ali Sabieh, which is no longer a sole transit stop but also a destination for migrants experiencing shocks in areas of origin. Studying the flows and volumes of the movements is key to understanding changing migration patterns as well as dynamics of regional and intraregional development and of social and economic nature. Collecting qualitative information is critical to understand the multi-causality and complexity of migrants' journeys and needs. The impact of the conflict in Ethiopia and the drought in the region have put a strain on both migrants and the host communities along the way, making an already difficult journey even more challenging. The role of the host community and the smuggling networks are central in shaping migration patterns. Protection measures and safe, humane and orderly migration policies and measures must take a comprehensive whole-of-route approach, considering all the actors involved in the migration journey.



## METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study aimed to capture the experiences and perceptions of different migrant groups at different stages of their migration journey. The intention was to engage with three different Ethiopian ethnic groups (Oromo, Amhara and Tigrayans) with a focus on women and children, to better understand protection gaps and needs as well as migrants' experience in accessing local services. A total of **11 FGDs** were organized by IOM in Ali Sabieh (7), Dikhil (3) and at an informal congregation point along the route connecting the two cities between 27 and 30 November 2022. **The FGDs involved a total of 52 people** (25 women, 13 girls and 14 boys), as follows:

LOCATION	WOMEN	GIRLS	BOYS
Ali Sabieh	15 Oromo	5 Oromo	4 Oromo
	5 Somali		5 Somali
Informal congregation point	5 Amhara		
Dikhil		8 Oromo	5 Oromo

The FGDs were facilitated using a semi-structured interview protocol and were conducted by DTM and Protection staff from IOM Djibouti, and staff from the IOM Regional Data Hub based in Kenya, with the support of interpreters. The interview protocols initially focused on the participants' migration decision-making, experiences, difficulties, needs and migration intentions. However, as the stories that emerged during the FGDs were very unique, the interview protocol had to be adjusted each time to fully capture the different migration experiences.

In addition to the FGDs, IOM conducted **four semi-structured interviews with nine migrants** from the other sex and/or ethnicities that were not largely represented during the FGDs (8 men and 1 woman), as follows:

LOCATION	WOMEN	MEN
Ali Sabieh		2 Oromo
Informal congregation point		3 Tigrayans
Dikhil	1 Tigrayan	3 Tigrayans

The third and last method of data collection was KIIs with actors providing basic services in the targeted areas, to better understand service availability and accessibility to migrants. **IOM conducted 12 KIIs with different actors from the local civil society and institutions** such as the police, gendarmerie and health structures.

### Limitations

This report aims to provide a qualitative assessment of protection gaps and needs of migrants in the southern regions of Djibouti. While reflective of a wide variety of individual migration experiences, the information collected during FGDs is not an exhaustive compilation of all gaps in meeting the needs of migrants, but rather an analysis of the most commonly reported and observed challenges to inform programming. Furthermore, a few external factors need to be kept in mind while reading the report. At the time of the FGDs in Ali Sabieh, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was running a verification exercise in the refugee camp of Ali Addeh during which asylum requests could not be accepted by the organization. This specific circumstance might have influenced the perception of certain migrants on the difficulties to submit asylum requests. Additionally, a few days before the FGDs, local authorities in Dikhil returned several migrants to the border with Ethiopia, which affected migrants' presence in the town as well as their intentions and willingness to exchange with IOM. Finally, no FGDs with migrants from the Tigray region took place as IOM did not find ethnic Tigrayans in Ali Sabieh or a group of Tigrayans large enough to organize an FGD in Dikhil. Instead, their experiences were captured through semi-structured interviews in Dikhil.

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