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► **To cite this version:**

Céline Bergeon, Naïk Miret. Using the biographical matrix to interrelate pathways and reconfigurations of migratory space. 2022. halshs-03819665

HAL Id: halshs-03819665

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03819665>

Preprint submitted on 18 Oct 2022

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Using the biographical matrix to interrelate pathways and reconfigurations of migratory space¹

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We present here an analysis of some of the data collected during an exploratory survey conducted as part of the CIMORE international research programme “*Circulations Mobilités espace relationnel des migrants*” (Circulations, Mobility and Migrants’ Relational Space).² The aim of this programme was to understand the spatial dynamics brought about by the reconfiguration of migratory mobility and circulation in the Mediterranean following the political and economic crises of recent years. We draw on a set of interviews conducted in 2014 in three exploratory research fields. We evaluate the potential of the methodological framework we tested to transcribe the various factors that influence migration pathways. Four specific pathways are analysed in terms of migratory routes and social trajectories, taking into account the effects of local contexts (economic, political and legal).

First, we present the objectives of the CIMORE programme before describing the main stages of the four life paths selected. Finally, we attempt to identify their unique contributions in order to answer two questions: how are migration temporalities interrelated within the migratory space; and how is it influenced by relationship circles. In conclusion, we will open up a discussion on this methodological framework and its usefulness for a more systematic understanding of the times and spaces of migration.

1. The CIMORE programme: diversified methodologies

The CIMORE programme was designed to explore the links between different fields of research on migratory circulations in the Mediterranean space and their spatial effects. In this programme, understanding the reconfiguration of places on different spatial scales, a main focus from a geographical perspective, involves asking two questions: how do migrants give meaning to and use places in their journeys and conversely, how are places transformed by the presence of migrants?³

In this respect, it extends other work carried out as part of Migrinter programmes, such as ANR-MEREV and ANR-METAL, which also strongly inspired it in terms of methodology.⁴ The first area concerns the organisation of migratory space, using the concepts of channels, migratory networks, circulatory territories and flow dynamics.⁵ The second focuses on forms of co-presence on a local scale, particularly in urban areas (Schmoll, 2003; Miranda, 2015;

¹ Authors’ version, chapter published in *Penser les migrations: pour repenser la société* (Considering migration: to reconsider society). Coll. Migrations. Tours: Presses universitaires François-Rabelais, 2020. Translated by Katie Booth and Alexandra Poméon O’Neill.

² The CIMORE programme was funded by Socmed/CNRS/IRD in 2013 and by an incentive grant from the University of Poitiers in 2014. Members of Migrinter, URMISS and international partners participated in the programme: ESOMI, University of La Coruña, Spain; CEMAM, Saint Joseph University, Lebanon; University of Agadir, Morocco; University of Sousse, Tunisia (<http://CIMORE2013.sciencesconf.org/>).

³ The second aspect, relating to the transformations of the places of investigation where we captured the trajectories, will not be dealt with in this article. It relates to the component of this programme presented by the authors of chapter 14 of *Penser les migrations: pour repenser la société*” (Torres Perez, Dureau, Miret).

⁴ The literature summarising the findings of these programmes extensively discussed the benefits of methodological frameworks specifically designed to collect systematic information in the two fields of research that deal with the experiences of circulation on the one hand and the practices of the places travelled on the other; see respectively Imbert, Dubucs, Dureau and Giroud (2014) and Dureau, Contreras, Lull and Souchaud (2014).

Torres, 2015). We have sought to revive the long-standing approach based on relational space, which we believe links these two fields. As defined by Roger Béteille (1981) and Gildas Simon (1981, 2006), this concept brings together the various places in the living space of a group of migrants: dispersed places of residence, places of temporary or permanent employment, places of family memory, including places of origin, etc. The relational space designates a geography shared by collective imaginations. It is animated by social networks organised around a migratory story of varying duration. To supplement this notion, we have used that of relationship circles, which includes the members of the successive households to which the individual has belonged, as well as the relatives and key people s/he identifies (Bonvalet and Lelièvre, 2012). At the intersection of these two fields, we draw on the field of migratory experience, made up of the transmission of knowledge and know-how (Hily and Doraï, 2005) and built up over the long term of migration. Finally, this experience brings into play different geographical scales of analysis: the macro scale, that of the Mediterranean sub-regions in view of the economic or geopolitical events and situations that characterise them; the micro scale, that of places (of origin, transit and settlement) and their meaning in multi-localised life systems.

This programme is thus positioned at the centre of questions about the meaning of places in a globalised space. The analysis of this corpus led us to question the categories of places and their functions within multi-localised life experiences: that of anchoring, examined in the field of residential mobility studies in particular, which refers to forms of emotional attachment, social capital and memory in places;⁶ but also that of “relay place”, which can be a stage in an individual journey, with no anchoring value, of varying duration; and finally that of settlement. These functions are dependent on the context effects at the national level (political crises, localised conflicts, economic shortages or opportunities) and the local level (reception facilities, presence of family members, work opportunities, community networks, etc.), which are explanatory factors in mobility practices.

Our methodological framework includes field observations, a questionnaire survey and the collection of graphical representations of itineraries. It is aimed at gathering and cross-referencing information that is usually dissociated, in order to observe the rationales of circulation or the stages of migration on the one hand, and individual or collective practices in the places on the other.

The exploratory fieldwork that was the main objective of the CIMORE programme took place in the region of Valencia in Spain, in Tunisia’s capital and a border town, and in the region of Beirut in Lebanon. It was conducted by international and multidisciplinary teams of researchers. These places of investigation are considered “intense” spaces of circulation and settlement at the crossroads of regional or national internal mobility and international flows:

- Since the first impacts of the 2008 crisis, Spain has been a particularly interesting place to observe the resumption of migration channels, re-emigration or connections between migrants who have been there longer and new arrivals;
- Lebanon, like other Middle Eastern spaces, is at the crossroads of movements of Asian workers and flows of refugees from the vicinity: all are mixed together there and potentially occupy the same relational space;

5 See the work of Alain Tarrius, Kamel Doraï, Marie-Antoinette Hily, Emmanuel Ma Mung cited in Gildas Simon’s overview on the spatialisation of approaches (Simon, 2006).

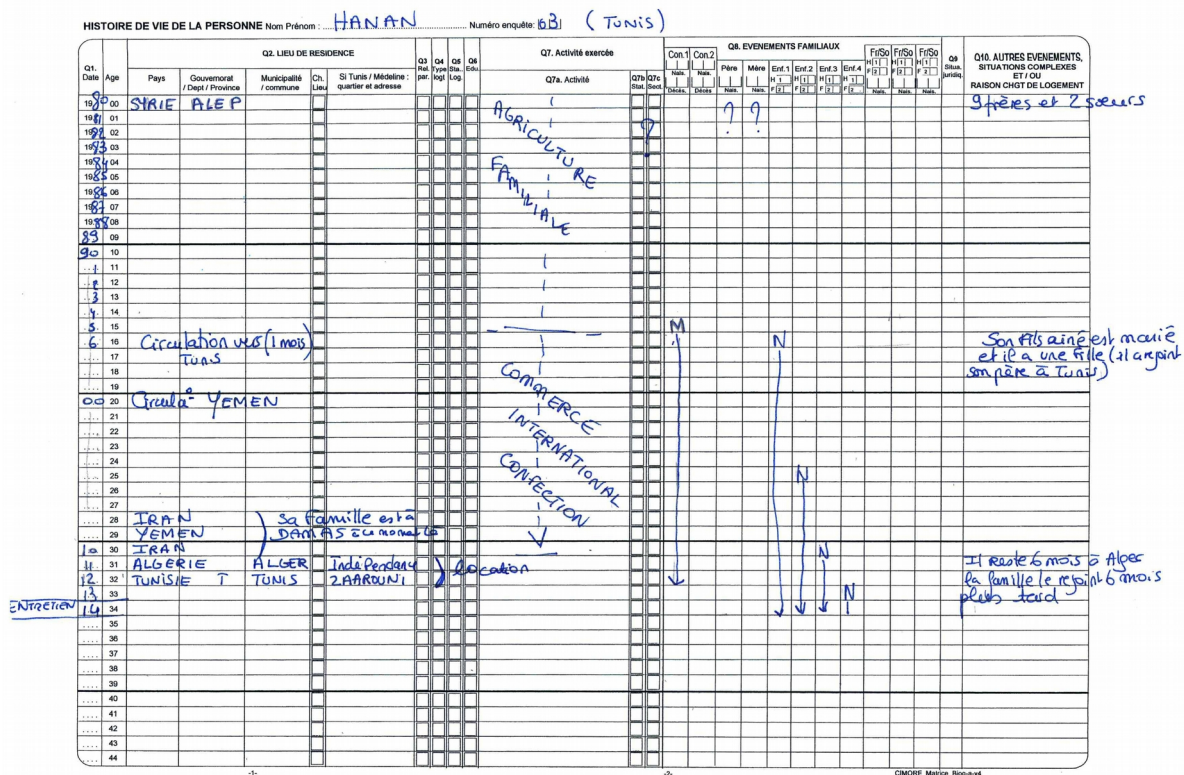
6 See the work of the geographer Cécile Vignal on local anchoring as a resource that can be mobilised by the working classes.

- Finally, Tunisia, historically a land of emigration, is also a land of commercial circulation and, more recently, of transit or more lasting migration.

These three areas have all been affected by the consequences of the recent economic and political crises, leading to displacement for a variety of reasons (family, political, professional, social, etc.), and to itineraries of varying complexity.

The purpose of this paper is to present the results of one of the components of this programme, involving the collection of data on life and migration pathways. Thirty-eight biographical interviews designed around the same framework were conducted in these three locations with populations that were selected⁷ on the basis of their value in understanding Mediterranean circulations. These interviews, which lasted approximately one hour, were conducted with people met through formal channels (NGOs, associations) and were based on a graphic biographical matrix model (Fig. 1). The use of this tool was chosen because of its relevance in the collection of complex trajectories. Previous studies have shown its heuristic value in capturing the intersections of family, professional and residential dimensions of the life pathway.⁸

Figure 1: Biographical matrix



Source: CIMORE programme, field workshop, Tunis, 2014.

The characteristics of the trajectories presented are conditioned by the choice of survey locations, which correspond to detention centres (Laksetha in Beirut) or reception centres for individuals whose asylum applications have been rejected (Medenine), NGOs providing

⁷ These populations were chosen according to the skills and networks of the CIMORE team members.

⁸ See its use in the above-mentioned ANR METAL programme.

assistance to migrants or squats in the case of Valencia.⁹ In this respect, they reflect emergency situations that direct our analysis. Only one of them, that of Hanan, shows previous circulation, while the other three transcribe complex migratory pathways, such as the one depicted in Figure 2.

2. Collecting and transcribing pathways

The analysis of individual pathways¹⁰ enabled us to question the interplay between mobility practices and the places that make up the pathways, and to highlight the need to observe this interplay, which is sometimes shifting, on the scale of a lifetime and especially from an inter-generational perspective. We draw on four significant life pathways to assess the role of individual and family motivations and constraints in the trajectories, but also that of context effects.

The story of Jean, a Congolese refugee, shows how a local refugee crisis in 2008, when he hurriedly fled to Chad, turned into never-ending wandering, which brought him to the borders of Europe in 2014, due to the local transit contexts he went through. After a five-month journey with a young child, he learned of the death of his wife in Congo and lost contact with his nine other children. Thus, his story evolved, from Chad where he remained in a highly precarious social situation for two years, into a desire to move forward by migrating to Libya. His stay in Libya was marked by exploitation by an employer for almost two years, and then by the civil war that broke out during his stay. That stage therefore concluded with a dead end, from which the only escape could be the sea, and Europe. His pathway is thus made up of a series of unplanned “migratory rebounds”, as illustrated by the following extract.

“On 1 February 2009 [after six months of travelling from Congo], I went to the UNHCR in N’Djamena, you apply for status; you do an interview. But life there is no joke, life there is very hard. [...] [I]t was around June that I met the man, before that I was... every month I was a day labourer for 1,000 CFA francs. To survive, we were in a building called Guantanamo,¹¹ on the sixth floor. Life was terrible. And the soldiers were threatening us, so we said, we’re going to leave but we have no money to rent the house...” (Jean, Congolese, Medenine, Red Crescent reception centre, June 2014).

The person he met hired him for six months to renovate a house, which allowed him to save some money, with which, in December 2009, he paid smugglers. He was held prisoner by a Libyan trafficking network for a year and a half. Only in June 2011, he managed to escape and reach Benghazi. He stayed there for five months and then left for Tripoli. In the meantime, he found out that he was ill. He left his daughter in Tripoli and attempted to cross the Mediterranean.¹²

“[...] [O]therwise I will die here ...” (Jean, Congolese, Medenine, Red Crescent reception centre, June 2014).

It is clearly the contexts of the places through which this person has travelled, with increasingly difficult living conditions, that shaped the migratory project to cross the sea to

9 It should be noted that as part of the CIMORE programme we have also carried out surveys in other places, unrelated to situations of precariousness.

10 We would like to thank Marie Antoinette Hily and Liliane Kfoury, members of the CIMORE programme, who transcribed part of these collective interviews.

11 It is interesting to note that the name “Guantanamo squat”, occupied in particular by migrants, is found in other locations, in Barcelona, Clermont-Ferrand and Saint-Denis. Perhaps this represents a circulation of representations of places of migration, another effect of migratory circulation?

12 We interviewed Jean in the Red Crescent centre in Medenine, Tunisia, where he was awaiting protection status after being rescued at sea.

Europe of this farmer, a political exile in 2008. Today, whether he managed to reach Europe or is still waiting in the Maghreb, he is considered an economic migrant, whereas another exile situation, closer to his country of origin, could have resulted in his return there. Who will now, six years later, recognise his journey into exile by granting him refugee status, which the three countries have only temporarily recognised without the UNHCR officially confirming it?

In the case of Romulus, his pathway, as shown in Figure 2, is marked by different stages between Romania, France, Switzerland and Spain. The complexity of this pathway is explained by the fact that Romulus considers his place of origin, Constanta, as a “relay place”, where the resources are to be found to pick up information and economic opportunities which, as we shall see later, pass through his extended family and his relational space spread over several European countries.

Figure 2: Romulus’ migratory pathway



Romulus’ four journeys since he left for Paris in 2003 are all economically motivated: a scarcity of work in Constanta, a Parisian contact who needed a cook for his restaurant, and the employer’s refusal to keep him on illegally. In an unauthorised camp in Seine-Saint-Denis, he met three compatriots from Constanta who told him about job opportunities in Zurich. They left together for the Swiss city but were arrested by the police and detained. Three weeks went by before Romulus obtained permission to return to Romania to join his family. After a few months, again thanks to his information networks, he left for Valencia to work in the orange harvest. Several months after his arrival, he brought his family there. His journey unfolded on the northern shore of the Mediterranean until 2015, depending on encounters and opportunities (Figure 2). The Parisian camp and the people he met there thus appear to be a relay place and resource persons who helped him to redraw his migratory trajectory.

Lucie’s journey also illustrates the significant role of these relay places. She left Congo to go directly to Lebanon in 2004 on the advice of a friend, because her mother had died when she was very young and her father could no longer support all his children. After four years as a domestic worker, conditions did not improve and she still had not been able to save any money. She ran away and met her Ghanaian husband with whom she had two daughters. But

when the second child was born, her husband became seriously ill and, as he could no longer work, he left with the eldest girl for Ghana. She began to take steps to join her husband and was confronted with the particularly restrictive and vulnerability-provoking legal context concerning the rights of women domestic workers under the Kafala regime in Lebanon. Her application was not accepted by the Ghanaian consulate because her passport had expired, and as there was no longer a Congolese consulate in Beirut, she could not complete her documents. Only her daughter was authorised to leave for Ghana, but Lucie refused to let her go alone with a woman from the consulate. During an interview with IOM, she realised that it would be impossible to return to either of these two countries and was offered - she says - the choice of another destination, Canada or the United States. Her family members are settled in other countries: her brother works in South Africa, her sisters in Burundi and Tanzania.

“I don’t want to stay in Lebanon anymore, the children don’t have documents... now I’m with IOM and they’re going to tell me where I can go in Canada or America and we’re waiting for the visa. I’ll be able to leave with the children. I’ve been in Lebanon for ten years and I haven’t earned anything.” (Lucie, Congolese, Beirut, November 2014).

In Lucie’s case too, the passage through Lebanon played a part in redefining her migration project, which was initially temporary and focused on Africa. The particularly complex legal context in Lebanon and the actions of international organisations determine her trajectory: this is another form of “relay place”.

Hanan’s pathway also follows this rationale: as a Syrian refugee, he fled the hostilities in Aleppo with his family. He first spent six months in Algiers, where he joined other Syrians involved in the textile trade.¹³ His siblings also left Syria and were scattered: a sister and four brothers in Algeria with their mother, another sister in Jordan, a brother in Egypt and another one in Libya. In Tunis he worked as a driver. Health issues forced him to stop working and now his eldest son provides the family’s income by working in farming. The children face difficulties accessing school, and he and his wife have health problems for which they do not receive adequate care. Despite obtaining a “humanitarian refugee” permit, which must be renewed every three months, the situation is very difficult. They help each other but had to sell his wife and daughter-in-law’s wedding jewellery in order to survive. They are waiting for a potential return to Syria, as soon as the war is over, knowing that their home has been demolished and looted and that part of the family died in the fighting. At first Hanan came alone before bringing his family. He only had one stopover in Algeria, while his family members travelled through Turkey and Lebanon before meeting in Algeria.

He lives in Tunis because he had been there in the past for business. We even learnt after an hour’s interview that one of his Syrian friends married a Tunisian woman eight years previously and became a citizen of Tunisia. The links with Tunis are in fact much stronger than he suggested at the beginning of the interview. Since the 2000s, he also travelled to Algeria, Yemen and Iran for business, staying for about a month each time. We learnt, by going back over the various stages of his life which raised issues, in order to adjust the chronological framework of the matrix that accompanied the interview, that earlier he had in fact migrated to work in Tunis.

¹³ We learnt during the interview that this is a long-standing business between Syria and Algeria and that his compatriots have been living in this city for a long time. In addition, many Syrians have to go there regularly for their documents because there is no longer a Syrian embassy in Tunisia.

These four pathways are clearly determined by context effects that a reading of these individual spatial trajectories captures well. New sociabilities are created as a result of co-presence in these various places and reshape a relationship circle that is continually redefined by mobility.

3. Local contexts, temporalities and relationship circles

Within the scope of the CIMORE programme, the issue of temporalities arises at three levels: that of migration and economic and political reconfigurations over the long-term; that of the “biographical timeframe”, examining the role of a person’s past circulation in current mobility; and that of the “present”, the time spent by the migrant in the different places along his or her journey, experiences that contribute to reinforcing poles in the relational space or to their redefinition. We discuss the first temporal dimension here, to show the influence of local and international contexts on a pathway. The use of biographical matrices was also intended to enable us to capture mobility practices over several generations in order to examine the extent to which current pathways rely on long-standing links with the spaces and places traversed. The underlying hypothesis is that the migrant has received know-how combining knowledge of the places and the opportunities they present from those within his or her relationship circle who have already been there.

This data gathering exercise proved complicated, on the one hand because of the difficulties that interviewees, who do not always have information to hand, experienced in recalling events; on the other hand, due to reasons related to the survey conditions in the three locations, over short periods of time, which did not allow us to apply the framework to individuals with the appropriate profile. For example, it had been intended to survey Tunisians whose families were scattered across Europe, in order to analyse circulation practices known to the research team. This was impossible in the locations covered by the CIMORE programme due to time constraints (see Part 1). Only a few intergenerational trajectories were captured and none in the case of the four trajectories selected.

However, in relation to the second temporal level, analysis of one of the biographies shows the role of earlier circulation experiences. The case of Hanan, who told us quite late in the interview that he had long-standing business and family ties of various kinds with the city of Tunis, which he already knew well because he had travelled there for trade on several occasions, is significant in this respect.

We mainly collected elements to analyse the organisation of the relational space over a short period of time, according to the experiences of members of the relationship circle.¹⁴ These exploratory surveys conducted on individuals with very different pathways proved interesting in this regard. To understand these complex migratory patterns, it is necessary to study the conditions under which mobility is implemented, and in particular the transmission of experiences through social networks. As demonstrated many times, the circulations studied draw on family or friendship networks rooted in space and time and in the “practice of migration” (Cortes and Faret, 2009). Most of the interviewees were part of collective experiences of mobility: either a collective decision on migration was made within the family, or their migration was inspired, particularly in relation to destinations, by those close to them. The analysis of these four pathways shows us the extent to which individual and collective scales of mobility are intertwined.

¹⁴ This reflects findings on migrant groups that have shown the powerful role of networks in shaping migration channels.

The notion of relationship circle should be considered more broadly to include new sociabilities that are formed during the journey. For example, Romulus, who has a Roma cultural background, had been relying on part of his network since 2003 (when he first left Romania) to find work and to embark on migration.

“I left by coach. I went through Germany and Austria. I travelled with a lot of people on the bus, people I didn’t know at first and whom I got to know. Someone had called me to work in Paris, and I worked for a fortnight, but I couldn’t continue because I didn’t have documents. I lived with several people in an abandoned house, people I had met when I was travelling and then in a slum area in Paris in Seine-Saint-Denis. That was the first place I stayed and then I went to a friend’s flat, it was nice. In the slum area, yes, I knew people, and it was with them that I left for Switzerland.” (Romulus, Romanian, January 2014, Valencia)

In the case of Romulus, on each occasion it was an acquaintance, either in his place of origin or met through community networks on the journey, who told him about a job opportunity in Paris, then in Switzerland and finally in Spain. It was the same thing for Jean who, at the age of forty, after twenty years of stability on a family farm in the south of Congo, lost his entire family; it was also residential relationship circles that structured his pathway, providing him with opportunities or, on the contrary, pushing him to flee even further. Thus, he told us as an aside during the biographical interview that his departure for Tripoli was linked to information about the existence of a group of Congolese people living there.

In these ‘relay places’- place of origin, informal camps, detention centre - information is disseminated, and migratory know-how gradually builds up (Doraï and Hily, 2005), around a relational capital that is labile and constantly redefined (Bergeon, 2015).

Conclusion: possibilities of a systematised survey framework

In conclusion, it is important to recall the conditions under which these four pathways were collected. The survey settings are short interviews which, for reasons related to the conduct of an international exploratory programme, were not subject to careful selection or sampling. The biographical tool proved to be very useful for systematising short, objectifiable life stories, but presents a form of constraint and disruption in the interviewee’s discourse compared to ethnographic data collection. While the framework needs to be improved to adequately address the diversity of the objectives set out in part one, it nevertheless confirms, through several findings, the value of rethinking approaches in terms of pathways and the role of transit places and the relationship circle in defining the projects.

The interviews analysed showed that migration was a continuous process of arbitration between opportunities and constraints, and that despite the strength of some of the obstacles, choice played an important role in starting and/or continuing the migratory journey. These opportunities are of an economic, family and social nature (strength of the network in terms of dispersion but also in terms of knowledge of local contexts). They take shape with the “migratory know-how” acquired by the relationship circle during earlier migratory experiences. In addition to this, political events and contexts, such as the war in Libya in the case of Jean, make itineraries and settlement more complex. It is therefore through the strength of social networks that different levels of the relationship circle are mobilised and that the relational space is structured. This space maintains its dynamics thanks to relationships between places (circulation of information, circulation of people, etc.). This web of family relations, but also institutional and community relations is redrawn as and when “migratory events” occur. It can be very dynamic at some points, “become dormant” and then

be remobilised. Ultimately, the strength of the network lies not so much in its “capacity” to support migrants as in its ability to adapt and reshape itself in the face of migratory events and contexts (Hily, 2004).

The case of Jean, whose flight from Congo spanned six years, putting him in a precarious transit situation, also reveals the role of the duration of transit stages in the redefinition of the life project. Social situations experienced in places along the pathway clearly play a role in the continuity (or absence of continuity) of circulation and mobility. These places, whatever their nature, are resources during the migration process, even if conditions of settlement are precarious at the time. Anchoring can then be defined in several ways and according to different temporalities: first, ‘anchoring in the present’, which makes the place meaningful for the migrant who is undertaking migration, and secondly, anchoring over a longer period of time, which reveals the place as the fruit of a collective experience (family, community, etc.) over the long term.¹⁵ The places of this “anchoring in the present” also condition these pathways: this is why we call them “relay places”, where the experience of migration is fleshed out. This links to discussions on the notion of transit in migration, the wealth of work on which we have not yet fully exploited.¹⁶ These places can either hinder migrants (e.g. detention) or give them a new impetus (e.g. meeting with associations or other migrants) to continue their migratory path.

Thus, the relational space defined by migratory mobility and circulations in the Mediterranean over the long term appears to be a dynamic system, which contributes to migratory reconfigurations, but which is also at the centre of Mediterranean geographical reconfigurations, and particularly of the role of sub-regions and certain places in globalisation. It is through an understanding of the inter-relations of the geographical functions of places, which involves a discussion of the notions of anchoring, “relay places” and “settlement”, that these reconfigurations can be clarified. Other areas of opportunity emerged during analysis of the interviews, such as, in the case of Lucie, the role of NGOs and care structures in the migration pathway. These opportunities are often then “impacted” by a series of constraints, particularly of a legal nature; multidisciplinary approaches to migration pathways are required to assess the issues at stake.

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15 On the notion of anchoring, see Christophe Imbert's thesis (2005), which describes, in its second chapter, the underpinnings of anchoring in its various temporalities.

16 See for example the work of Lucie Bacon, Hassan Boubakri, Hein De Haas, or Mahamet Timera.

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