



Infrastructures of Transit Migration

Understanding El Hierro as a Key Transit Space within
Broader European Migration Systems

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Abstract

This master's thesis investigates how transit migration infrastructures shape migrants' mobility in transit spaces. Looking at the case of El Hierro, it explores how the island became a key transit space within broader European migration regimes. Building on field research conducted on El Hierro in March 2025, the study proposes a new conceptualization of "migration infrastructure" (Xiang & Lindquist, 2010), expanding the notion to better capture the specific conditions and complexities of transit migration. The modified approach, termed "transit migration infrastructure", analyzes the interplay of regulatory, humanitarian, social, and commercial dimensions across multiple scales (local, regional, national, and supranational). The findings suggest that the multi-scalar interdependencies and overlapping responsibilities among actors operating within these dimensions define El Hierro's dual role, functioning simultaneously as a humanitarian arrival space and as part of the externalized EU border regime. El Hierro's residents carry the immediate humanitarian responsibilities yet are excluded from direct decision-making processes, leading to a sense of both obligation and political marginalization. The analysis shows how migration policies affect people's lives far beyond physical borders and highlights how the local community, despite frustration and constraint, continues to meet arriving migrants with dignity and solidarity. By mapping the intersections between regulations, institutions, and civil society, this master's thesis aims to contribute to the ongoing debate and offers a conceptual contribution toward a more nuanced understanding of transit spaces as dynamic and infrastructurally generated sites of migration.

Keywords: Transit Studies; Migration Infrastructure; El Hierro; The Canary Islands; Northwest African Route; Transit Migration Infrastructure

Table of Content

1. Introduction.....	2
1.1. Thesis Structure	3
1.2. Term Definition.....	3
2. Literature Review	4
2.1. Migration to the Canary Islands from the Northwest African Coast.....	4
2.2. Transit Migration	6
3. Methodology	7
3.1. Research Design	7
3.2. Data Collection	8
3.2.1. <i>The Field Research</i>	9
3.2.2. <i>The Interviews</i>	11
3.2.3. <i>Observations</i>	13
3.3. Methods for Data Analysis	14
3.4. Limitations and Ethical Considerations	14
4. Theoretical Framework.....	16
4.1. The analytical Space: El Hierro as a Transit Zone	16
4.2. Understanding Temporality: Local Rhythms and Migration Processes	17
4.3. Theorizing Transit Migration Infrastructure	18
4.3.1. <i>The Regulatory Dimension</i>	20
4.3.2. <i>The Humanitarian Dimension</i>	20
4.3.3. <i>The Social Dimension</i>	21
4.3.4. <i>The Economic Dimension</i>	22
5. Data Presentation and Analysis	24
5.1. Sites of Transit Migration.....	24
6.1.2. <i>The Temporary Attention Centre for Foreigners (CATE) in San Andrés</i>	28
6.1.3 <i>Center for Unaccompanied Minors in Valverde</i>	31
5.2. Intertwined Infrastructure.....	32
5.2.1. <i>Fragmented Coordination and Blurred Responsibilities</i>	32
5.2.3. <i>Migration as an Economy</i>	35
5.3. Island Life: Migration Memory, Solidarity, and Future	39
5.3.1. <i>Conflicting Sites</i>	39
5.3.2. <i>Perception of the Future and Ideas for Improvement</i>	40
5.3.3. <i>Summarizing the Empirical Findings</i>	42
6. Conclusion.....	43
7. Bibliography	45

1. Introduction

Situated at the intersection of Europe and Africa, the Canary Islands have become a critical yet understudied gateway in the shifting geography of migration toward the European Union. In 2024 alone, almost 47,000 people arrived on the archipelago after crossing from the Northwest African coast, representing an 18% increase from 2023 and a record number taking the Northwest African Atlantic route (Gandolfi, 2025; Röhn et al., 2025; Liesenfeld, 2025). One of the main reasons for this shift is the intensified surveillance and control along the traditional Mediterranean routes, which have pushed growing numbers of migrants toward the Northwest African coast (Mauritania, Senegal, etc.) in order to attempt the perilous Atlantic crossing (De Haas, 2008). As authorities in Morocco, Mauritania, and Senegal increasingly patrol coastal waters, migration routes have shifted, with vessels sailing farther out from the African coast before heading north (Kellner, 2025). These journeys are much longer and riskier as the new routes can take up to ten days (UNODC, 2021). Migrant vessels also frequently face navigation problems, fuel shortages, or engine failures, leaving them to drift at sea. Those who do arrive often suffer severe physical distress, including dehydration and hypothermia (Gandolfi, 2025).

With the routes shifting, the small island of El Hierro has become the primary point of arrival, emerging as a hotspot in Europe's so-called "migration crisis" (Röhn et al., 2025). In 2024 alone, 24,000 migrants arrived on the island; while an estimated 10,000 people died during the crossing, not including unrecorded fatalities (Kellner, 2025; Ca-minando Fronteras, 2024). El Hierro, the smallest and westernmost of the Canary Islands, has only 11,000 inhabitants, yet it now receives disproportionate numbers of arrivals. While most adult migrants are transferred to Tenerife within a few days after arrival, unaccompanied minors who come to El Hierro remain on the island, as the Spanish constitution assigns responsibility for their care to each regional community. As a result, the Canary Islands are currently hosting 5,812 unaccompanied minors (Genovese, 2025). From Tenerife, most migrants attempt to move onward to other European countries, as economic opportunities within the archipelago remain limited (UNODC, 2021).

Thus, El Hierro occupies a paradoxical position; it functions simultaneously as a humanitarian space of arrival and an externalized border zone, revealing the tensions between European migration regulation and local reception dynamics. The strain on the island's limited resources and local infrastructure poses major logistical and humanitarian challenges. This is partly also because decisions and regulations are often made by institutions operating at different levels of government (local, regional, national), making it difficult to determine where the responsibility lies. At the same time, El Hierro's population is widely regarded for its welcoming attitude towards the newcomers,

a characteristic shaped by the island's deep-rooted personal connections with migration (Hadden, 2024; Liesenfeld, 2025).

Engaging with the phenomenon of transit geographies, this master's thesis investigates the complexity of transit migration within European borders, focusing on how infrastructures shape migrants' mobility in transit spaces. Using El Hierro as a case study, I examine how localities like El Hierro become key nodes in wider migration journeys. To do so, I propose a new conceptualization of "migration infrastructure" (Xiang & Lindquist, 2010), namely "transit migration infrastructure", an approach that analyzes the interplay of regulatory, humanitarian, social, and commercial dimensions across multiple scales. By mapping the intersections between regulations, institutions, and civil society, this thesis aims to contribute to the ongoing debate and to a more nuanced understanding of transit spaces as dynamic and infrastructurally generated sites of migration. Hence, this research sets out to answer the following question: How does transit migration infrastructure on El Hierro shape migration processes across intertwined dimensions and multiple scales, making it a key transit space within European migration systems?

1.1. Thesis Structure

This master's thesis begins by reviewing the existing empirical literature on migration to the Canary Islands and engaging with the academic debate on transit spaces to position the thesis's theoretical approach. The following chapter outlines the research design, emphasizing the abductive nature of the study, going back and forth between data collection and theory development. The methodology section details the use of qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews and observations conducted during a field trip to El Hierro. Building on this, the theoretical framework operationalizes Xiang and Lindquist's (2010) concept of migration infrastructure and proposes a revised conceptualization tailored to the specific dynamics of transit migration on El Hierro. In the empirical analysis, this framework is applied to examine how different actors engage in the 'transit migration infrastructure' on El Hierro, shaping migration flows on the island. The thesis concludes by summarizing the key findings and discussing their broader contributions, situating them within debates on Europe's broader migration regimes.

1.2. Term Definition

In this master's thesis, the term "migrant" refers to individuals who arrived on the Canary Islands via the Atlantic route from Northwest Africa. While the Canary Islands, and especially El Hierro, also receive significant regular migration by air, mainly from Latin American countries, migration via the Atlantic route is considered irregular migration. As underlined by Godenau (2014), irregular

migration emerges from the selective channeling role of borders, which distinguishes between regular (authorized) and irregular (unauthorized) entry into sovereign states (Godenau, 2014). Individuals arriving irregularly to the archipelago include both refugees under the Geneva Convention on Refugees (UNHCR, 2025) and individuals leaving their countries due to economic, social, and political factors. Most migrants reaching the archipelago are from Senegal, Morocco, and Mali, where individuals flee due to the socio-political situations. Other countries of origin are Gambia and Mauritania, and, to a lesser extent, countries in Southeast Asia such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, and Yemen (Macias, 2025; CEAR, 2025). In 2024, the vast majority of migrants arriving were men between 18 and 40 years old, while the proportion of women dropped from 15% following the pandemic to 7% in 2024 (CEAR, 2025). Throughout this master's thesis, the term "migrant" thus denotes those arriving via the Atlantic route, acknowledging the diverse and complex motivations underlying their reasons to leave their countries and journeys.

2. Literature Review

The following literature review positions the research within the existing academic field by first outlining empirical studies on migration from Northwest Africa to the Canary Islands, along with scholarship on the archipelago's responses to increasing migration flows. This highlights the importance of studying the islands, particularly El Hierro, which has received little academic attention. While specific research on El Hierro is scarce, a substantial body of literature examines transit spaces more broadly. The second part of the literature review, therefore, engages with this scholarship, situating the thesis's theoretical approach to transit spaces within wider academic debates on transit studies. Taken together, this dual focus demonstrates the empirical relevance of El Hierro and provides the conceptual lens necessary to address the research question.

2.1. Migration to the Canary Islands from the Northwest African Coast

Scholarly interest in the Canary Islands as a site of migration increased in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when the migration route from the Northwest African coast to the archipelago gained significance (De Haas, 2008). Although migration to and through the Canary Islands has received growing attention, academic research on the islands as a dynamic transit space remains relatively scarce, particularly when compared to the Mediterranean route (Andersson, 2014). Much of the early attention regarding irregular migration to the Canary Islands came from European media and human rights organizations rather than academia (Carling, 2007; Domínguez-Mujica et al., 2014).

To establish a conceptual framework and situate this master's thesis empirically, I will review existing research on migration to and through the Canary Islands. Parent et al. (2023), in a compara-

tive scoping review, identified the archipelago as a transit space and examined how shifting migration policies shape its role. Moreover, the authors show how strategies of the Global North reinforce confinement in these spaces (Parent et al., 2023, p. 291). Much of the reviewed literature highlights the increasing importance of the Atlantic route and the Canary Islands' emerging role as an external European Union (EU) border (Carling, 2007; Domínguez-Mujica et al., 2014). Accordingly, a substantial body of research has explored intensified border-control measures and migration policies implemented in response to shifting migration routes. This body of literature can be divided into different perspectives: (1) regulations implemented on the macro-scale by the EU such as the 2005 Global Approach to Migration and the establishment of Frontex's operations; (2) policies introduced by Mainland Spain; and (3) measures specific to the Canary Islands, including cooperation with Northwest African countries to stop unwanted sea migration entering Europe (Düvell, 2012; Vives, 2016; Godenau, 2014). Interest in these measures especially emerged after the so-called "cayuco crisis" of 2005-2006, when irregular maritime arrivals to the Canaries in wooden fishing boats from West Africa reached a peak. These studies demonstrate how spaces of transit are transformed into areas of tension between legal protection and exclusion, and how islands function as geographies of confinement (Andersson, 2014; Parent et al., 2023). Notably, a group of researchers from the University of La Laguna in Tenerife has made significant contributions to the literature on migration to the Canary Islands (Godenau, 2014; Godenau & Zapata Hernández, 2008; Buraschi et al., 2025).

More recent research has shifted attention to the role of the local population on the Canary Islands in relation to increasing irregular migration (Giliberti & Fravega, 2024; Fradejas-García & Loftsdóttir, 2024). Giliberti and Fravega (2024), for instance, argue that the inadequate reception systems have prompted segments of Canarian society to respond with solidarity, which the authors describe as solidarity in response to borderland racialization. "The experiences of solidarity emerging from a part of the local Canarian society generate encounters in which some people on the move find themselves as protagonists and part of the general response from below of civil society to the European migratory necro politics" (Giliberti & Fravega, 2024, p.315).

As outlined, research on migration to the Canary Islands remains limited. Most of the existing published academic literature focuses on the new migration route across the Atlantic Ocean and the corresponding changes in migration policy, while research on civil society responses has only recently begun to emerge. Moreover, the literature has primarily focused on the larger islands of Gran Canaria and Tenerife (Godenau & Zapata Hernández, 2008; Buraschi et al., 2025; Godenau, 2012), while El Hierro has received little to no academic attention apart from research done on lifestyle migrants who settle as tourism entrepreneurs on El Hierro (Mendoza et al., 2025;

Domínguez-Mujica, 2024). This research, therefore, contributes to the existing field by examining El Hierro as a distinctive space of transit migration. Since the theoretical approach of this research conceptualizes El Hierro as a site of transit migration, the following section outlines the relevant literature on the concept.

2.2. Transit Migration

While most research on international migration and displacement has traditionally focused on the impact of migration on countries of “destination” and “origin” (Testa et al., 2023), there has been a growing scholarly shift toward examining the migrant journey itself. This shift emphasizes the need to broaden the scope of migration studies, since it is in the so-called “transit geographies” that the overlap and tensions between local dynamics and broader geopolitical frictions become most visible (Parent et al., 2023). The term “transit migration” first emerged in the 1990s and has since been widely employed in migration and border control debates, academic literature and policy documents (Chemlali, 2025; Düvell, 2012; Collyer et al., 2010). However, the concept has faced considerable criticism. Scholars have highlighted its complexity and argued that it is vague, Euro-centric, politicized, and lacks a clear definition (Testa et al., 2023; Düvell, 2012; Papadopoulou-Kourkoula, 2008). As a result, multiple interpretations of what constitutes transit migration have developed.

The European Commission (2025) defines transit migration as the passage through a country of transit by a third-country national traveling from their country of origin to an EU Member State. This often involves a temporary stay in a place that is not considered the migrant’s final destination. According to Collyer et al. (2010), this categorization has become central to understanding the growing diversity and complex realities of migration in Europe. Yet, the authors underline that the notion of “transit migration” is highly politicized, shaped largely by governmental and institutional preoccupations with irregular migration. Countries situated on the “periphery” of Europe through which migrants travel on their way to their intended destinations have come under considerable political pressure to contain so-called “unwanted” migration to Europe (Collyer et al., 2010). This has contributed to transit regions being transformed into areas of containment (Düvell, 2012; Papadopoulou-Kourkoula, 2008). Collyer et al. (2010) also criticize the use of the term “transit migration” for being used to describe a type of migration, certain migrants, and the localities themselves. In this way, it groups together a heterogeneous array of processes such as migrant trajectories, potential migrants, and countries around vaguely defined commonalities, including lack of control, illegality, trafficking, and above all, an assumed desire to reach the European Union (Collyer et al., 2010).

Godenau (2012) further underlines that the perception of islands as spaces of transit can be misleading, as such places may also represent intended destinations. Moreover, Düvell (2012) notes that EU countries such as Poland, Italy, or France have rarely been described as “transit countries”, despite the significant migration flows passing through them. More recent scholarship by Chemlali (2025) has challenged existing debates in transit studies by introducing both a gendered perspective and the analytical concept of “field-externalization”. This work underscores how gendered experiences shape the transit process, while also demonstrating how EU border-control policies actively produce instability in transit areas.

Engaging with the phenomenon of transit geographies, this thesis investigates the complexity of transit migration within European borders, focusing specifically on how infrastructures shape, enable, and constrain migration flows in transit spaces. Using El Hierro as a case study, I will expand on the notion of migration infrastructure and contribute to the critical scholarship on transit migration studies. Further, I develop a new conceptualization that seeks to advance a more nuanced understanding of transit spaces as dynamic, infrastructurally generated, and embedded within ongoing migration journeys.

3. Methodology

The following chapter outlines the methodological approach used to research the transit migration infrastructure on El Hierro. It begins by presenting the research design and methodological orientation, before describing the field research in detail, including the methods of data collection, the types of data gathered, and the analytical strategies employed to interpret the data. The chapter then addresses ethical considerations and the limitations of my research. Overall, the following chapter demonstrates how the chosen methods and theoretical orientation are interlinked and tailored to capture the intertwined infrastructure shaping transit migration processes on El Hierro.

3.1. Research Design

For the purpose of this master’s thesis, I apply a case study methodology. This approach is well suited to examining complex social phenomena and to understanding a phenomenon within its real-life context (Yin, 2014). Given the research question of this thesis is qualitative, the case study approach is particularly suited, as it enables the exploration of contemporary events as they unfold (Yin, 2014). According to Yin (2014), the unique strength of case studies lies in their ability to incorporate a wide variety of evidence, which allows the use of multiple sources of data such as interviews, observations, and documents (pp. 9-12). Complementing this perspective, Stake (1995) emphasizes the interpretive nature of case studies, highlighting their value in capturing the richness of lived experience and in understanding the meanings that participants assign to social phenomena. In addition, Flyvbjerg (2006) argues that case studies do not suffer from inherent problems of

generalization; instead, they provide concrete, context-dependent knowledge that can be just as valuable as the search for universal rules. Therefore, this approach provides not only a nuanced perspective on the local experience of transit migration on El Hierro, but also broader insights into migration processes in the Canary Islands within the wider European migration context.

To explore and understand the real-life context and the lived experiences on El Hierro, I adopt a social constructivist approach. While this perspective is well-suited for case study methodology, it seeks to understand the everyday realities, or “lifeworlds”, of residents and the social and cultural context in which their knowledge is produced (Stake, 1995; Beyer, 2022). It assumes that reality is not inherently objective but constructed through collective actions, interpretations, and interactions among individuals within a society (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). The concept of “lifeworld”, as defined by philosopher Edmund Husserl, refers to one’s “belief” or the “socially, culturally or evolutionarily established sense or meaning”. It denotes the way the members of one or more social groups use to structure the world into objects, establishing a background of shared meanings (Beyer, 2022). I draw on Husserl’s understanding of “lifeworlds” as the foundation from which meaning emerges, while also engaging with Berger and Luckmann’s (1967) social constructivist perspective, which emphasizes that knowledge is generated through the interplay between personal experiences and socially shared meanings.

The research idea for this master’s thesis began inductively, as I developed an early interest in El Hierro as a transit node. From this initial idea I collaborated with the Research Project CORRIDORS from Aalborg University who funded my field trip to El Hierro where I collected data in March 2025. As the project evolved, I engaged in an abductive process of moving between data and theory (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). Informed by the data, I identified the theoretical perspective best suited to analyzing and situating the data in its real-life context. From this point, my analysis became more deductive, though I continued to move back and forth between the collected data, observations, and the theory. This process expanded my understanding of the material and enabled the development of a new conceptualization of the theory in use (Dubois & Gadde, 2002).

3.2. Data Collection

For this master’s thesis, I conducted field research on the island of El Hierro over a period of eight days. While I recognize that fieldwork should be conducted over a longer duration to allow for deeper immersion, this short-term research nonetheless provided valuable insights and shaped my understanding of the island as a transit space involving various actors and dynamics. As interviews are the primary source of data in qualitative research and case studies (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015;

Yin, 2014), the fieldwork included eight semi-structured interviews and one group interview, carried out at different locations on the island with representatives from municipalities, the insular and regional government, as well as volunteers and residents. Three of the interviews were conducted in the presence of a PhD, Mashudu Salifu from Aalborg University, who is also part of the CORRIDORS Research Project. Additionally, did data collection employ other qualitative methods, including direct observation and informal conversations conducted at key sites such as the port of La Restinga, where most migrant vessels arrive, the Temporary Attention Centre for Foreigners (CATE) in San Andrés, and the capital city, Villa de Valverde (see Figure 1) (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The methods for data collection will be elaborated further in the following sections.

By spending time in these spaces and documenting the environment through photographs, I was able to gain first-hand insights into the dynamics at play. This approach enabled a deeper understanding of how various actors interact, engage, and experience transit migration on El Hierro (Lareau, 2021; Flick, 2022). While I rely on primary data gathered through the qualitative methods, I validated this material using secondary data sources. The secondary data examined during the background research also informed the design of the interview guides and provided an initial overview of the circumstances on the ground. This triangulation, together with field observations, helped me contextualize the interview material as well as it reduced the risk of bias providing a better understanding of the embodied dimensions of transit migration (Flick, 2022; Yin, 2014).

3.2.1. The Field Research

In order to understand the field, I draw on the concept of the “extended field-site” (Andersson, 2014) to trace the multi-scalar and infrastructural dimensions of mobility, both within the Canary Islands and beyond. Rather than treating El Hierro as an isolated or fixed field, this approach allows for the mapping of the infrastructure, networks, and institutional interactions that span across geographical and constructed spaces, allowing the study of a field that is embedded within a broader, ongoing migration journey (Andersson, 2014).

El Hierro, the smallest of the Canary Islands with an area of 269 km², is divided into three municipalities. The municipality of Valverde, located in the north of the island, includes the capital city Villa de Valverde; La Frontera lies on the western side of the island; and El Pinar is situated in the south (see Figure 1). During my stay, I visited all three municipalities, each of which plays a distinct role in organizing migration processes on the island. The port of La Restinga, where most boats taking the Atlantic migration route arrive, is located in the municipality of El Pinar. This site was of particular importance for my observation, as it offered direct insights into migrant arrivals and the coordination of first responses, such as medical assistance. La Frontera is the municipality

where women and families are accommodated, while unaccompanied minors are hosted in Villa de Valverde.



Figure 1: Map of El Hierro, showing municipalities and key locations.

During my field trip, I stayed in Taibique (El Pinar) and in Isora (Valverde). I relied on local buses and walked a lot, which facilitated engagement with the field environment and contact with the local population. However, it also restricted my mobility as the buses did not run as frequently. I chose to conduct unstructured observation, which allowed me to enter the field without predetermined assumptions about behaviors to be observed (Mulhall, 2003). While I began with some ideas about the situation and relevant dynamics, I remained open to letting these change as I gathered data and my understanding and experience of the space developed (Mulhall, 2003). I took field notes and photographs primarily to analyze specific events or to understand structural and organizational features and interactions between people (Lareau, 2021).

Access to research sites was generally straightforward, as residents were very welcoming and open, which enabled me to integrate quickly and establish contact. Due to the island's small size, I was soon recognized by many locals. This recognition had dual effects: on the one hand, it may have led some individuals to alter their behavior in response to being observed; on the other hand, it fostered trust, allowing for more open conversations and access to information and various locations (Lareau, 2021). However, access to certain sites was understandably restricted, such as the

migrant reception centers (CATE) in San Andrés and the center for minors in Valverde. The reception and medical care sites in La Restinga were also restricted, although they could be observed from the opposite dock in the harbor.

3.2.2. The Interviews

Some of the interviews were arranged before the field trip to El Hierro, while most interviewees were contacted on site. When choosing the respondents for the semi-structured interviews, I sought to include a range of actors involved in the organization, support, and management of transit migration processes on the island. This diversity of perspectives helped me to understand local dynamics, the distribution of responsibilities, and how various actors are interlinked, how they communicate and collaborate (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). To conduct the semi-structured interviews and to ensure that all relevant topics were covered, I prepared an interview guide in advance. The guide served primarily as a framework, as I remained open to following up on the interviewees' responses, adopting a more conversational interview style (Lareau, 2021). In practice, this meant listening closely in order to identify points requiring clarification or further exploration, while also noting statements for later elaboration and reflection (Galletta & Cross, 2013, p.77). Applying these strategies of semi-structured interviews not only supported the depth of the interview but also helped participants feel more at ease and reduced the sense of being formally investigated.

Moreover, most interviews were conducted in Spanish, the local language, to avoid placing interviewees outside of their comfort zone and to allow them to express themselves as precisely as possible. I requested permission to record each interview for transcription purposes and also took notes to ensure data security (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Consent to record interviews was obtained in all cases; one interviewee requested anonymity, which was fully respected (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

Throughout the fieldwork, I strived to live up to the highest ethical standards. Before beginning each interview, I introduced myself as a master's student from Aalborg University, Denmark, and explained the aims of the research. I ensured that the participants clearly understood the purpose of the study, the nature of their involvement, and any potential exposure associated with participation (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). The audio recordings of the interviews are not included in the appendix, as participants did not provide consent for the sharing of the audio files. The interview transcripts are also not attached in the appendix due to their length; however, they can be made available upon request via email.

Interviews with Municipal and Government Representatives

The first interview took the form of a group session with officials from both the insular and municipal levels of government, held in the city hall of Villa de Valverde, the island's capital. Participants were Mr. Fernández Alarcón, representing the local insular government "El Cabildo"; and, from the Municipality of Valverde, the mayor Mr. Brito, the councilor Mrs. Brosed Padrón, and the secretary Mrs. José. Lasting approximately two hours, this discussion provided substantial insights into the division of responsibilities among the three different municipalities and the ways in which they collaborate with each other. The aim of the group interview is not to reach consensus about the issue discussed but rather to bring forth different opinions and viewpoints on the issue (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Conducted early in my field trip, the interview was structured around broad, open-ended questions, allowing participants to explain the migration process in detail and to articulate their specific roles within it. Next, I conducted an interview with the mayor of the municipality of El Pinar, Mr. Padrón Brito, where the PhD Mr. Salifu participated, as well as the municipality's secretary, Carla, to help with translations. El Pinar is as a municipality more affected by the transit migration as the main arrival port La Restinga, is located in this area. Hence, the interview with Padrón Brito gave me important knowledge about how migrant arrivals are organized and how the municipalities work with the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and local communities.

Another interview with the councilor for the municipality La Frontera, Mrs. Morales, was conducted toward the end of my stay. In this case, while I posed some questions used in earlier sessions to gain comparative perspectives, I was also able to introduce follow-up and more technical questions (Galletta & Cross, 2013). This interview, which lasted about an hour, deepened my understanding of the challenges the island faces and revealed how representatives conceptualize and frame the migration situation. Aside from interviewing the municipality and insular government representatives, I had the opportunity to conduct an interview with Mr. Acosta Armas, Member of the Parliament of the Canary Islands for the Agrupación Herreña Independiente (AHI). During this interview, PhD Mr. Salifu also participated, along with the municipal's (El Pinar) secretary Carla, who had facilitated the contact.

Interviews with Locals and Volunteers

In addition to institutional perspectives, I sought to understand how transit migration is experienced by residents. While I engaged in several informal conversations during my stay, I conducted only one recorded interview with a resident of La Restinga. The interview with Mr. Lopez (pseudonym), a retired fisherman, offered valuable insights into how the community has perceived and

responded to the arrival of migrants over time. Additionally, Lopez also shared reflections on policies and management practices regarding transit migration on the island, providing a local perspective that complemented the views of institutional actors. Lastly, I conducted an interview with the founder of Corazon Naranja, volunteer Mr. Mendoza. I met Mendoza on my last day in front of the CATE, where I conducted a semi-structured interview of about an hour.

Table 1: Interviews

Name	Position	Type	Interview
Mendoza	Volunteer Worker	Humanitarian	Independent
Fernández Alarcón	Director at the Department for Social Rights, Social Welfare and Personal Dignity at the “Cabildo El Hierro”	Local Government	Group
Brosed Padrón	Second Deputy Mayor - Councilor for Education, Social Services, Municipal Nursery School and the Elderly in Valverde	Municipality, Valverde	Group
Brito	Mayor of Valverde	Municipality, Valverde	Group
Morales	Councilor for Youth, Equality, Social Services and the Environment in La Frontera	Municipality, La Frontera	Independent
Padrón Brito	Mayor of El Pinar	Municipality, El Pinar	Group
Carla	Secretary at the Municipality El Pinar	Municipality, El Pinar	Group
Acosta Armas	Member of the Parliament of the Canary Islands for the Agrupación Herreña Independiente (AHI)	Regional Government	Group
Lopez	Fisher in pension	Local	Independent

3.2.3. Observations

During my visits to key sites in the three different municipalities, I collected data through fieldwork observations to gather additional insights into the phenomenon under study. As my research concerns a contemporary and ongoing process, it was possible to observe direct evidence on the ground (Yin, 2014). I adopted an unstructured observational approach, meaning I did not follow a predetermined list of expected observations. Instead, I used the opportunity to document the en-

vironment and social setting in which my research is situated (Mulhall, 2003). This approach provided valuable insight into, for instance, the ways transit migration was structured and organized, how it appeared across the different municipalities, and the broader dynamics shaping the local context.

3.3. Methods for Data Analysis

After conducting and transcribing the interviews, I carried out a thematic analysis of the data obtained through the interviews guided by my theoretical orientation (Yin, 2024). I identified recurring themes across the interviews, which I organized into a thematic table. Simultaneously, I cross-checked whether information provided by one interviewee was confirmed or contradicted by others when asked a similar question (Yin, 2014). As Galletta and Cross (2013) underline, semi-structured interviews often allow researchers to gain a strong understanding of the thematic categories that emerge from the data. This process enables me to gain an overview of the most important themes relevant to my research questions. From this, I deductively selected the most important themes in alignment with my theoretical framework.

After coding the transcribed data, I continued the analysis using thematic analysis, which allowed for the interpretation of data within the broader context of the specific social setting (Gupta et al., 2018). In addition, I employed data triangulation, drawing on multiple data sources related to the same topic. This enhanced the validity and credibility of my findings by enabling cross-verification during the analytical process (Flick, 2022; Yin, 2014). By comparing and contrasting data from the various data sources, I was able to identify both consistent patterns and discrepancies, resulting in a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the research subject. As Yin (2014) notes, case study findings are more robust when based on multiple sources of evidence (p.120).

3.4. Limitations and Ethical Considerations

In the process of conducting research and gathering data, it is crucial to acknowledge and critically reflect upon potential limitations. I am aware that the collected data is created and processed as the given context and way in which I conducted the interviews has an impact on the data collected. Hence, my positionality, presence, and the questions I choose to ask have an impact on the interviewees and the analytical process (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). An important limitation to reflect on in this study was that the interviews were conducted in Spanish. While using the Spanish language made the conversation more fluent and comfortable for the interviewee, some words may have been lost in translation, as I am not a native Spanish speaker (Van Nes et al., 2010). Additionally, I had to translate three of the interviews simultaneously into English, as the PhD student who

conducted these interviews with me does not speak Spanish. This sometimes disrupted the flow of the conversation and made it more difficult for me to fully reflect on the interviewees' responses.

Moreover, I am aware of the power relations and social norms that might have influenced the distinct actors and their responses. An example of that was the occasional lack of privacy during the interviews, which may have led respondents to feel obliged to answer in a certain way (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). The insular nature of the island, where most people know each other, may have contributed to a sense of social pressure, making participants more likely to say what they felt was expected, increasing the potential for bias. Although I offered all interviewees the option to remain anonymous, all but one consented to the use of their real names. Therefore, I have chosen to include their names in this thesis, while acknowledging ethical guidelines. The individuals who did not request anonymity are already publicly associated with their professional positions through newspapers, social media, and official websites. Moreover, anonymizing would have been largely ineffective in this context, as the small population of the island made it difficult to fully conceal participants' identities. Throughout the research process, I remained mindful of the existing power dynamic between myself and the interviewees, ensuring that participation was always voluntary and that participants never felt coerced or pressured to take part.

In terms of limitations, it is also important to acknowledge the contextual boundaries of this thesis. My research focuses specifically on El Hierro, and therefore, the findings may not be representative of other transit locations, either in broader international contexts or within the Canary Islands. Moreover, I acknowledge that most interviewees were working for the government or municipality, increasing the potential for bias, which I however, sought to mitigate as I also conducted interviews with volunteers and locals who could provide a different view on the situation. However, access to humanitarian perspectives was limited, as most volunteers and NGO workers were not authorized to discuss their roles. As a result, I was only able to interview one volunteer, which constrained the depth of insight into the humanitarian dimension. Most of my insights on this aspect therefore, come from interviews with residents and government representatives. This gap highlights the need for further research involving more humanitarian actors to fully capture the humanitarian dimension.

4. Theoretical Framework

The next chapter presents the theoretical framework for examining how transit migration infrastructure unfolds on El Hierro. It begins with specifying the analytical space by situating the island as a transit node within the broader European borderland, thereby capturing the multi-scalar dynamics of transit migration. Next, the chapters explore how temporality is defined and experienced in this context, which is crucial for understanding how local rhythms and transit migration processes are interlinked. Finally, it operationalizes Xiang and Lindquist's (2010) concept of migration infrastructure and proposes a revised conceptualization tailored to better capture the specific conditions and complexities of transit migration. These steps provide a framework suited to analyze the specific dynamics of transit migration on El Hierro and directly address the research question.

4.1. The analytical Space: El Hierro as a Transit Zone

To understand how mobility is shaped and governed in this thesis, it is crucial to conceptualize El Hierro not merely as a fixed geographic location but as an analytical transit zone where mobility is actively produced, negotiated, and controlled. Building on the work of Papadopoulou-Kourkoula (2008), within this master's thesis, transit spaces are more than stopovers: they are socially and politically constructed sites of spatial friction, where mobility and containment intersect. Hence, although geographically defined by its insular character, El Hierro evolves through a dynamic constellation of interconnected sites, shaped by its embeddedness within European migration regimes, policy frameworks, and residents' lived experiences (Andersson, 2014). Historically, El Hierro, like the broader Canary Islands, has been shaped by both emigration and immigration flows, ranging from the outmigration of islanders during the 20th century to Latin America, especially Cuba and Venezuela, to more recent arrivals of migrants from West Africa and beyond (Mendoza et al., 2025). Many locals have a migrant past deeply rooted in their own family histories, which makes them more empathetic to the realities faced by other migrants. It is within this complex transit space that residents' knowledge and understanding are actively constructed and influenced by the cultural and historical identity of El Hierro.

Walters (2010) coined the concept of "humanitarian border", examining the border as a space where the actual borders of states and gateways to the territory become zones of humanitarian government (pp. 138-139). Hence, humanitarianism becomes a technique of governance, legitimizing and expanding the reach of border control. Walters's conceptualization of humanitarian borders shows the paradox of border spaces where movement and containment, care and control, operate simultaneously—not outside of state power, but entangled with it (Walters, 2010). El Hierro

exemplifies such paradoxes, functioning both as a humanitarian reception site and as an externalized frontier of the European Union's migration regime (Andersson, 2014; Casas-Cortes et al., 2015). Here, border work is performed not by a singular authority but through a dense network of actors, the sea rescue service Salvamento Marítimo, the Guardia Civil, Red Cross emergency teams, journalists, and local volunteers. Due to the island's small scale and proximity of operations, these actors often collaborate closely, with responsibilities overlapping (Testa et al., 2023). Andersson (2014) describes this as a form of "symbiosis", a blurring of institutional boundaries and professional identities (p. 11). The author recounts how, for instance, a Red Cross volunteer may later join the Guardia Civil, or how members of the Salvamento crew have past experience in humanitarian work. These circulating roles and know-how are locally embedded routines and well-coordinated response networks (Andersson, 2014). The well-coordinated rescue, reception, and onward transfer is not simply about humanitarian response; it is important to recognize that it remains entangled with broader systems of migration control where migrants are moved efficiently and discretely to minimize disruption and sustain an image of order. In this sense, the island becomes a node within the European Union's externalized border regime. Hence, it is not isolated, but infrastructurally connected to broader territorial governance strategies (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015).

4.2. Understanding Temporality: Local Rhythms and Migration Processes

Alongside space, it is essential to conceptualize temporality for understanding the dynamics of transit migration. Temporality here refers not only to the pace and fluidity of migration flows but also to the waiting, delays, and uncertainty that migrants endure (Hage, 2009). Moreover, the temporality of a transit space like El Hierro also includes the cyclical nature of migration arrivals and the rhythms of island life, where moments of urgency and fast-paced arrivals may be met with slower institutional responses (Mountz, 2011; Andersson, 2014). Unlike the prevailing image of transit sites as spaces of migrant "stuckness" (Andersson, 2014), El Hierro presents an accelerated rhythm and smooth transfer. This rapid circulation challenges the assumption that transit always implies immobilization. Instead, El Hierro reveals a regulated acceleration where people are transferred at a high pace and very smoothly. However, migrants are not moving at this pace themselves; they are being moved through highly coordinated networks and infrastructures (Xiang & Lindquist, 2010).

Sharma (2014) critiques the binaries often existing in migration studies of "waiting" versus "movement" or "smoothness" versus "stuckness". In contrast, the author argues that time is not neutral: it is experienced unevenly and deployed unevenly (p.7). Building on Massey's (1993) conception of power geometry, which points out that experiences of space were bound up with social differences

like class, gender, race, and sexuality, Sharma (2014) shows how time itself is also socially and politically constructed, experienced unequally across different groups of people. Building on Sharma's (2014) perspective, the "efficiency" observed on El Hierro must be understood in relation to the temporal regimes and geopolitical strategies imposed by the national and supranational migration policies, including rapid identification and transfer, rather than as a neutral condition. Hence, for the purpose of this thesis El Hierro's temporality cannot be understood outside of the larger European migration regime; it is actively produced within it.

In this study, El Hierro is therefore approached as an evolving analytical space, shaped by both geographical isolation, historical embeddedness, and political bordering. This framing moves beyond static interpretations, allowing for an analysis of the infrastructure within a wider migration context (Andersson, 2014). As such, it sets the stage for the analytical understanding of how migration is managed through localized routines that are nevertheless embedded within, and reflective of, broader migration regimes.

4.3. Theorizing Transit Migration Infrastructure

For this master's thesis, I will build on the notion of migration infrastructure by Xiang and Lindquist (2010). The authors argue that it is only possible to understand how migrants move by examining how they are moved by others within a multifaceted space of mediation. The authors have developed a framework that explores the internal dynamics of migration infrastructure and the practices of multiple actors in the actual process of migration (Xiang & Lindquist, 2010, p. 126). Providing a framework to understand how mobility practices that move migrants are shaped and constituted by a bundle of technologies, institutions, and actors that facilitate and channel mobility.

There exists a large amount of literature related to the idea of migration infrastructure, including arrival infrastructure (Meeus et al., 2018), infrastructure of surveillance (Andersson, 2014), and infrastructure of illegality (Lindberg & Khosravi, 2021; Walters, 2018). This scholarly work often critiques the linear portrayal of migratory pathways, which ignores the complex, fragmented, and multi-sited nature of migration journeys (Schapendonk, 2017; Colleyer et al., 2012; Chemlali, 2025). Migration journeys in a transit space such as El Hierro are similarly non-linear, multi-sited, and shaped by an improvised local infrastructure. Xiang and Lindquist's (2010) framework offers a more holistic integration, bridging states, markets, and humans across different dimensions within a single conceptual network. Their approach to migration infrastructure is particularly well-suited for the purpose of this research, as it provides valuable insight into the internal dynamics of migration infrastructure and into how migration movements are shaped, enabled, and constrained by multiple actors throughout the migration process. Xiang & Lindquist's (2010) model outlines five

dimensions (commercial, regulatory, technological, humanitarian, and social) that mediate and shape the mobility of labor migrants. These five dimensions, either individually or in combination, mediate the migration process. Yet, their framework is rooted in the context of labor migration and brokerage systems, and as such, it fails to address the infrastructural dynamics of transit migration, which are essential to examine the infrastructure that enables the migration movement on El Hierro.

To account for that, I will apply and expand relevant dimensions of Xiang & Lindquist's (2010) framework of migration infrastructure, as I will operationalize the concept of migration infrastructure to better suit the specific conditions and complexities of transit migration. My approach does not apply the five dimensions in a uniform or static way. Instead, I reduce and adapt the model expanding the dimensions that are most relevant to the empirical reality of El Hierro as a dynamic transit space: 1) The regulatory dimension, encompassing migration policies and regulations operating at multiple scales (local, regional, national, and European); 2) The humanitarian dimension, which includes NGOs, and volunteer groups that respond to humanitarian needs and manage migration flows, while also interacting with regulatory frameworks; 3) The social dimension, which in contrast to the original model, emphasizes the role of civil society actors and how they are shaped by transit experiences; 4) The commercial dimension, which, unlike the original model, includes all economic factors associated with migration flows on the island, hence for the purpose of this thesis it will be referred to as the economic dimension. It is important to emphasize that these dimensions are not isolated but deeply interconnected and intertwined (Xiang & Lindquist, 2010). By focusing on the dynamic interplay between dimensions and their shifting relevance in different contexts, this framework allows a more nuanced and in-depth understanding of how mobility is governed and experienced in the local community in transit spaces. Additionally, a key element of conceptualizing migration infrastructure in all dimensions is its multiscale nature. Therefore, each dimension, not only the regulatory dimension, operates across local, regional, national, and supranational levels.

Through this theorization, I develop a new conceptualization of transit migration infrastructure to analyze how different dimensions shape irregular mobility within transit spaces like the Canary Islands. By situating infrastructure within the space, temporality, and spatial frictions of transit, this research contributes to a conceptual toolkit to better understand the complexity of migration at Europe's margins. In the following, I will operationalize four dimensions of Xiang & Lindquist's (2010) framework while tailoring them to the specific context of El Hierro.

4.3.1. The Regulatory Dimension

In the case of El Hierro, the regulatory dimension operates at multiple scales, including the Spanish state, the autonomous government of the Canary Islands, and the local authorities, including the local government and municipalities. The report published by KNOMAD (2023) highlights that there often is a significant disconnect between the national and local authorities regarding the migration response, as well as a lack of local authority involvement in migration policymaking at the national level (Testa et al., 2023, p. 7). This disconnect is partly due to the division of responsibilities and competencies related to migration-specific responses between national, regional, and local government authorities in Spain, creating a dynamic of multilevel relations on these issues (Pinyol-Jiménez, 2018). Policies related to border control, entry, nationality, asylum, and the general framework for immigration affairs fall under the exclusive competence of the national government. These policies are carried out on-site by the Guardia Civil and the National Police (Europol, 2023). In contrast, areas such as social services, education, healthcare, and housing are within the jurisdiction of Spain's autonomous communities. Additionally, the responsibility for immigrant integration is shared by regional authorities in collaboration with local city governments (such as the government of El Hierro), which manage competencies related to social action and urban planning (Pinyol-Jiménez, 2018). Testa et al. (2023) emphasize that the organization of transit migration in most transit localities is largely delegated to civil society organizations and NGOs, reinforcing the previously mentioned blurred line between government and humanitarian actors. In Spain, NGOs frequently collaborate closely with government authorities at various levels (Pinyol-Jiménez, 2018). Hence, showing how the humanitarian and regulatory dimensions are strongly entangled.

4.3.2. The Humanitarian Dimension

The different humanitarian actors and institutions have a crucial role in shaping migration processes on the island, managing migration flows, while also interacting with regulatory frameworks. The two most important NGOs are the Red Cross and Social Quorum 77; they respond to humanitarian needs and manage migration flows while also interacting with regulatory frameworks. Quorum Social 77 is an NGO working in “collaboration with the Autonomous Community of the Canary Islands and the Cabildo of Gran Canaria with a team of professionals specialized in childhood, adolescence, and family” (Quorum Social 77). The NGO has special care programs for children and adolescents and runs 26 emergency facilities throughout the Canary Islands, where it cares for around 2000 minors who have migrated to the archipelago (Cruz, 2025). Additionally, the Quorum Social 77 also works with foster families. “Our objective is focused on contributing so

that migrant children and adolescents who arrive at our accommodation have a real integration in all spheres of their lives,” (Quorum Social 77).

The other major NGO shaping the humanitarian dimension, the Red Cross, is responsible for the humanitarian reception and the transport of migrants on the island, as well as their transfer to other islands. As mentioned earlier, there is a strong collaboration between the state actors and NGOs. Here, it is interesting to notice that the Canary Islands have one of the highest spreads of volunteers and NGOs per capita in Spain (European Commission, n.d.). This firmly established infrastructure not only encourages locals to participate in humanitarian aid efforts but also anchors this commitment in the socio-economic landscape of the island. On El Hierro, many residents work for NGOs, showing how the need for humanitarian work contributes to the commercial dimension of transit infrastructure, a dimension that will be further elaborated later (De Cobos, 2023). However, the local involvement of residents in managing migration contrasts with the broader governance framework, while local actors facilitate and maintain the day-to-day management of migration, policy-making remains concentrated at the national level. This division highlights a structural imbalance in which communities like El Hierro shoulder the practical weight of humanitarian management but remain excluded from shaping the strategic and political decisions that govern it (Testa et al., 2023, p. 7).

Lastly, there is one organization run entirely by volunteers, Corazón Naranja. This NGO was awarded the “Gold Medal” of the archipelago for its work during the increase in migrant arrivals, mainly for the management of the Temporary Care Center for Foreigners (CATE) in San Andrés. Unlike larger organizations, Corazón Naranja receives its funding through support from other residents rather than formal funding channels. Their reliance on community support not only distinguishes it from institutional humanitarianism but also reflects more grassroots and solidaristic forms of care. This entanglement, as well as the influences the regulations and politics have on the humanitarian actors, will be outlined further in the analysis. It is important to note that while there has been an interview conducted with a volunteer from Corazón Naranja, there have not been any interviews with representatives from the Red Cross or Quorum Social 77; instead, the research relies on secondary interviews and perceptions of government officials and locals about the NGO’s work.

4.3.3. The Social Dimension

In this thesis, the social dimension of “migration infrastructure” (Xiang & Lindquist, 2010) will diverge from the original model to include local civil society actors and the social intimacy of small island life in shaping how transit migration is experienced on El Hierro. This expanded view

acknowledges the specific dynamics of small-island communities, where social proximity and history shape not only the provision of aid, but also the limits of public discourse and the performance of solidarity that form part of the infrastructure that governs and enables mobility. Hence, the social dimension builds on the social networks of the local civil society on El Hierro.

El Hierro presents itself, and is often portrayed, as a solidary space rooted in a welcoming culture of hospitality (Liesenfeld, 2025; Hadden, 2024). However, this solidarity is not without tension. In small-scale settings like El Hierro, social proximity, where “everyone knows everyone”, can produce fears of social exposure. Hence, creating an ambiguous public space where social roles blur and open dissent or critique becomes socially risky. Locals might, in this atmosphere, have a feeling of what Stoler (2016) refers to as “spliced self,” which explores how individuals navigate conflicting social roles and moral expectations. Thus, how they hold contradictory positions simultaneously such as solidarity, conflict, or compassion and self-protection (p. 12). It is interesting to examine the cultivated narratives of local solidarity and humanitarianism, which become central to the identity of the host community, shaping the social dimension. The different actors and internal dynamics forming the social dimension are a crucial, though often overlooked, component of the migration process, as they contribute to the broader legitimacy and functionality of the migration infrastructure on El Hierro. Understanding these social dynamics and the discourse about transit migration on the island is key to grasping how transit spaces are negotiated on the ground.

4.3.4. The Economic Dimension

The economic dimension of migration infrastructure, as adapted for this master’s thesis, refers to the economic flows, interests, and transactions that underlie and sustain migration governance on El Hierro, encompassing economic influences on the local community directly but also effects shaped by state institutions and international dimensions such as EU-level policies and interventions.

According to Xiang and Lindquist (2010), migration processes are conditioned by the transfer of documents, data and money between actors (p. 131). Here, it is important to notice that the economic dimension is strongly intertwined with all the other dimensions (social, humanitarian, and regulatory) at multiple scales (local, regional, national, and supranational). At the supranational level, in March and September 2024, the European Union committed 20 million euros each in two funding rounds to support the Canary Islands in hosting migrants. The money was part of the joint operation in the region with Europe’s border agency Frontex (Wallis, 2024). The Spanish state is also granting money to the Canary Islands, for instance, 100 million euros allocated to the support of unaccompanied minors arriving on the island (Wallis, 2024). Additionally, does the Spanish state

support the Red Cross, allocating 6.9 million euros to the International Committee of the Red Cross in April 2025 (Spanish Foreign Ministry, 2025). These investments form the basis for contracts with operating NGOs and play a major role in the financing of transit migration infrastructure on El Hierro. As of October 2024, Quorum Social 77 was the association that received the most public money from the Canary Islands Government, exceeding 25 million euros (Cano, 2024). Today, most of Quorum Social 77’s staff are residents of El Hierro, as there has been a high demand for employment. As a result, the commercial dimension is closely intertwined with the social and humanitarian dimensions. Additionally, there are cases where migrants who have arrived on the island eventually become part of the local economy, finding jobs in NGOs, local restaurants, on banana plantations, or in other sectors. In this way, the economic dimension functions across scales as it mobilizes international funding, contracts national and regional actors, and distributes economic impact locally. This influence on the local economy and employment rate will be further elaborated in the analysis.

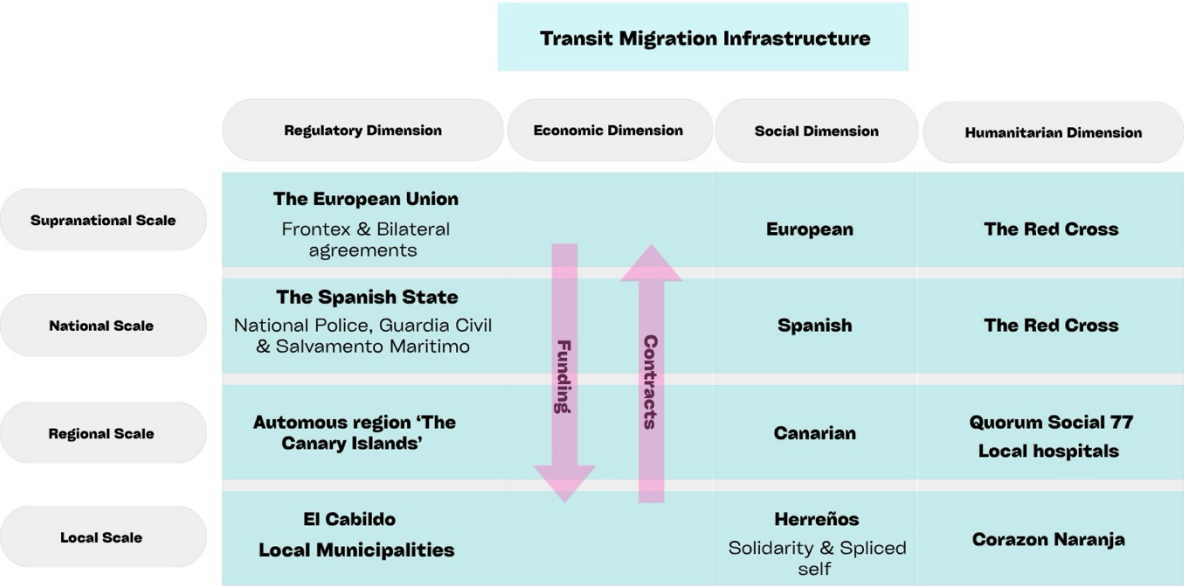


Figure 2: Illustration of the theoretical approach “Transit Migration Infrastructure”

5. Data Presentation and Analysis

The following analytical chapters examine how transit migration infrastructure unfolds on El Hierro, building a narrative that departs from a strictly systematic application of the theoretical framework. The first section outlines how transit migration infrastructure is rooted in three key spaces on the island and introduces the actors operating within them, highlighting how these sites shape the paradoxical dynamic of control and care. The second section analyzes how migration governance is co-produced through the regulatory, humanitarian, social, and commercial dimension, showing how blurred responsibility and lack of transparency shape transit migration infrastructure. The final section explores how transit migration is experienced and imagined at the local level, focusing on the social dimension of migration infrastructure and revealing an atmosphere of emotional ambivalence, shaped by conflicting emotions of both frustration and solidarity.

5.1. Sites of Transit Migration

The first section outlines how the infrastructure of transit migration and the actors operating within it move migrants on El Hierro through a series of steps rooted in key locations such as the arrival port of La Restinga, the Temporary Attention Centre for Foreigners (CATE), and the Center for Unaccompanied Minors in Valverde. Each of these three sites is analyzed in thematic subsections to better capture how migration processes in these locations are organized, experienced, and governed, shaping the island's paradoxical dynamic of both control and care.

5.1.1. The Arrival Site of La Restinga

March 2025, the mayor of El Pinar, Padrón Brito (2025), takes out his phone in his office in Taibique in the municipality of El Pinar and explains:

Today, to me, at 7:19 AM, the 112, Secopin [emergency call], reported the arrival of two cayucos at the port of La Restinga this morning. The first boat carried 61 people, of whom 48 were men and 13 were women. A total of 44 people arrived on the second vessel, of whom 40 were men and 4 were women.

Padrón Brito is the mayor of the municipality of El Pinar, where the small fishing town of La Restinga is located. La Restinga has become the main entry port for migrants taking the Atlantic route to the Canary Islands.

Logistics of the Arrival

Once a Cayuco or Patera, a type of fishing boat mainly constructed in Gambia, Senegal, or Mauritania, is detected at sea, the Spanish maritime rescue service, Salvamento Marítimo, intervenes by heading out to assist and escort the vessel safely into port (see Picture 1). Since immigration is under the sole jurisdiction of the Spanish national government, it is the state that officially receives migrants in La Restinga. Therefore, police forces such as the Guardia Civil and National Police are

on the island specifically for these tasks, as there is no permanent national police station on the island (UNODC, 2022; Fernández Alarcón, 2025).



Picture 1: The Salvamento Marítimo helps a migrant vessel into the port, photo by Esther Kruse, 2025

Upon arrival, national authorities begin investigative procedures to determine points of departure, potential smuggling networks, and boat ownership, using data such as food traces, fuel type, and interviews with survivors (UNODC, 2022). According to an investigation by POLITICO, violence on migrant vessels is a common problem due to the extreme conditions on the journey, where panic spreads quickly. The Spanish law, however, only permits prosecution in cases that have a direct link to Spain. Hence, it applies specifically when the suspect is identified as the boat's leader, captain, or enforcer (Röhn et al., 2025). A report by PICUM (2025), on the other hand, stresses that migrants on the Canary Islands often face unfair trials, receiving harsh sentences and having limited access to legal assistants. Those who testify against the person driving the boat may, in exchange, become protected witnesses and be offered residence and work permits. In many cases, such testimonies constitute the only evidence against the accused (PICUM, 2025, p. 16).

The humanitarian aspect of reception is handled by the Spanish Red Cross, which is contracted by the central government.



Picture 2: Humanitarian reception site, photo by Esther Kruse, 2025

The mayor, Padrón Brito (2025) emphasizes:

As soon as they [the migrants] arrive at the port, they are provided with a shower, and health care by the Red Cross, everything is perfect, we have a center there to take care of them immediately, one of the best in Spain...We had absolutely nothing [in the beginning]. Now I repeat that this reception, which is now with the Red Cross, what the central government has done there, is one of the best receiving spaces for migrants.

The mayor highlights the effectiveness of the reception site in La Restinga, portraying it as a state-driven and very well-managed part of migration infrastructure. This reflects how the port functions as a space where regulatory and humanitarian dimensions are intertwined, operating simultaneously as a site of regulation and humanitarian care, where border

control and humanitarianism are deeply entangled. In this way, La Restinga embodies the island's embeddedness within broader European migration regimes (Andersson, 2014; Papadopoulos-Kourkoulou, 2008).

After being helped off the boats and receiving medical assistance, the migrants are temporarily held in containers at the dock, a procedure the mayor, Padrón Brito, refers to as “localized”. After some hours the migrants are transferred by bus to the reception center, the CATE (Centro de Atención Temporal a Extranjeros) in San Andrés (Padrón Brito, 2025). This spatial practice serves to constrain visibility, protecting the town's touristic atmosphere and limiting contact between locals and new arrivals. As elaborated in the Theoretical Framework, Andersson (2014) argues, such infrastructures are designed not only to manage movement but to manage appearances, shielding European publics from the human realities of migration. Additionally, La Restinga can be understood as what Walters (2010) classifies as a “humanitarian border”, where humanitarianism becomes a technique of governance legitimizing and expanding the reach of border control, where the paradox between movement and containment, care and control, operates simultaneously (pp. 138-140).

Spatial Friction in La Restinga

Fernández Alarcón, Director at the Department for Social Rights, Social Welfare and Personal Dignity at the Cabildo in El Hierro explains that apart from the Red Cross, the Spanish state also contracts companies who are in charge of other tasks related to the organization of migration on the island such as, the national public company TRAGSA that is hired by the Spanish government to manage tasks like: removing and destroying the boats after arrival (Fernández Alarcón, 2025).



Picture 3: Migrant vessel after crossing, photo by Esther Kruse, 2025

This part is of great importance as the physicality of arrival in La Restinga creates friction. Residents have expressed discomfort with the visible side effects of the arrival process, particularly the destruction of migrant boats as the mayor of the municipality, Padrón Brito (2025), explains:

There is a problem with the smashing or breaking of the boats there [La Restinga] because they produce noise to the population and everything that comes in the cayucos, the clothes etc., so it produces some discomfort in the small population.

Plans to install permanent modules at the dock were met with resistance from residents, who feared this would compromise the town's image and economic activity. La Restinga is a port that is used for fishing and underwater tourism such as diving. Fernández

Alarcón stresses “that the locals in la Restinga complain that the migrant reception activities sometimes interfere with both fishing and underwater tourism” (2025). Hence, the proximity of the arrival space and local tourism causes tension in the small arrival port.

Governance and Politics of Reception

The reception of migrants in La Restinga thus operates at the intersection of regulatory, humanitarian, and commercial dimensions. The Red Cross, though nominally humanitarian, acts in the name of the Spanish state. TRAGSA and other subcontracted companies support logistical tasks, showing how commercial actors are woven into border governance. Locals, meanwhile, find themselves either as observers of the process or as temporary workers in a system they do not control or profit from, revealing an unbalanced power relation between state actors and island communities.

Mayor Padrón Brito underlines that the reception center in La Restinga is one of the best reception centers for migrants, but its smooth operation also serves to reassert state sovereignty over migration flows while minimizing disruption to everyday life and tourism. As outlined in the theoretical framework, this smoothness and efficiency must be understood within a wider migration landscape (Andersson, 2014). La Restinga exemplifies the paradoxical space of care and control, where sovereignty is no longer only at the territorial edge, but embedded within spaces of reception, logistics, and visibility management.

This dilemma, between appearing welcoming and managing discomfort, opens onto deeper contradictions that will be explored in the next section on the CATE (Temporary Attention Centre for Foreigners).

6.1.2. The Temporary Attention Centre for Foreigners (CATE) in San Andrés

A Node of Transit and Containment

The CATE is located in the village of San Andrés, in the municipality of Valverde. The climate in



this area is harsh due to the location's altitude. The CATE consists of 66 tents and some containers with showers and toilets for a maximum of 860 migrants. The construction of the center cost almost 6 million euros, financed by the Spanish state and the EU (Kellner, 2025).

Picture 4: Entrance of the CATE, photo by Esther Kruse, 2025

Fernández Alarcón from the Cabildo of El Hierro explains how the transit process is organized and explains:

They [the migrants] can stay in the CATE center for up to 40 days. During those 40 days, they must decide whether they can be sent back to their countries of origin or whether they will apply for political asylum. If they apply for asylum, they stay in the country [in Spain] while the application is being processed. What happens in El Hierro is that the CATE has limited capacity and is configured for a specific number of people. So, what do they usually do? When that number increases, they transfer the people

to Tenerife by boat. And from Tenerife, they're often transferred again to Gran Canaria, because they have more resources and capacity (Fernández Alarcón, 2025).

In fact, as the number of arriving migrants is constantly high, most adult migrants already leave the island directly 24-72 hours after they arrive. During this period, the Spanish National Police conducts interviews to identify cases of smuggling, issue provisional ID documents, and assess whether individuals are eligible for asylum or deportation (Fernández Alarcón, 2025).

According to UNODC (2022), men or boys who are suspected of smuggling migrants and related criminal offences are kept in isolation for a maximum of 72 hours for adults and 24 hours for children, until the judge confirms their arrest. Women and girls are generally not regarded as potential suspects in cases of migrant smuggling and related offenses by Spanish authorities (UNODC, 2022). Rather the few women who get on a migration vessel are in very vulnerable situations, where power imbalance makes abuses almost inevitable (Röhn et al., 2025). The earlier mentioned investigation by POLITICO revealed different cases of horrific crimes that happened during the journey. However, the author stresses that it is important not to stigmatize migrants as violence does not happen on every boat (Röhn et al., 2025).

Brito (2025), the major in Valverde, underlines that:

...at the CATE...they try to speed up the documentation process with legal aid lawyers who come from outside, along with the National Police, so that people can leave and space is made for those who are just arriving.

The rapid turnover illustrates how the CATE functions as a logistical node of transit, aimed at classification and movement rather than long-term hosting. Legal aid lawyers, who are brought in from outside the island, help expedite documentation so that space can be made for new arrivals.

Allocation and Spatial Isolation

The Spanish National Police drives the CATE, carrying out the judicial process and providing all migrants with a provisional passport. The rest is managed by the independent volunteer group Corazon Naranja that operates at the reception center. The coordinator of the volunteer group, Mendoza (2025), explains:

Yes, as soon as they arrive at the CATE, we take care of them and help the doctors. If someone needs a shower, we go and shower them. We listen to them a lot when they talk, and we are at the meals, and during their day-to-day life, while they are here in San Andrés.

After being interviewed, migrants are dispersed based on age, gender, and family status: all minors are taken by the NGO, Quorum Social 77, to a reception center for unaccompanied foreign minors (MENAs) in Valverde. Families both with and without children, as well as women, are taken to an old monastery in the municipality of Frontera, where they stay up to three weeks. The men, however, are sleeping in the sports center in San Andrés after they have been interviewed and have received their ID, and are leaving the island shortly afterwards (Mendoza, 2025).

These spatial arrangements are not only logistical; they are deeply gendered and reflect stereotypical views, such as the explanation that women are placed in the monastery “because they are the weaker sex” (Mendoza, 2025). Hence, reinforcing paternalistic humanitarianism and the uneven vulnerability of migrant’s categorization within the infrastructure.

Morales, councilor for youth, equality, social services, and the environment in La Frontera, underlines that although thousands of migrants pass through El Hierro, the way transit migration is organized on the island gives little room for direct contact between residents and migrants.

We do not see it because it is not usual that I go to the CATE in San Andrés. The neighbors in San Andrés pass by the CATE, as well as any person who goes from La Frontera over the mountains, passes by San Andrés, but nobody interacts with the people who are in the CATE and in the convent [monastery] the same thing happens. It is a secluded area in the bush where they live. So, if they don't go out, which is normal, you don't live with them (Morales, 2025).

Just like La Restinga, the CATE is a symbol of how the Spanish Government manages immigration on the island. Additionally, as Morales stresses, the camp is a site where migrants, on one hand, are protected and helped; however, on the other hand it functions as a holding zone, a space of containment. Migrants arrive, are “processed”, and are moved on often without ever entering meaningful social relations with the local population. As such, the CATE exemplifies how transit infrastructure may efficiently manage people without allowing encounters with the social environment. This shows how the island functions as both a corridor for transit and a frontier of the European migration regime (Andersson, 2014; Papadopoulou-Kourkoulou, 2008). Xiang & Lindquist (2010) underline that migrants are not moving at a high pace themselves; they are being moved through highly coordinated networks and infrastructures (p. 131). The CATE, as well as the reception site in La Restinga, illustrate how migration infrastructure produces mobility, not just by enabling movement, but by regulating who moves, when, and how often—far from public view.

6.1.3 Center for Unaccompanied Minors in Valverde



Picture 5: Center for unaccompanied minors, photo by Esther Kruse, 2025

The center for unaccompanied minors (MENAs) in Valverde is run by the NGO, Quorum Social 77, which is contracted by the government of the Canary Islands. In contrast to adult migrants, whose reception and processing is the responsibility of the Spanish, unaccompanied minors fall under the jurisdiction of the autonomous regions, so it is the region of the Canary Islands that has to take guardianship of them.

The politician Acosta Armas, representing El Hierro in the Canary Islands Parliament located on Tenerife, underlines:

The constitutional legislator, when he made this distribution of competences between the state

and the autonomous community, was not thinking of the 5,000 children that the Canary Islands have at present. The migration is a competency of the state, and the minors are a competency of the autonomous region (Acosta Armas, 2025).

This misalignment in competencies produces structural tensions. The center in Valverde has a maximum capacity of three hundred minors, housed in a former student residence, and a smaller center located in a former kindergarten for 12 minors in the municipality of La Frontera. Once the center reaches its full capacity, the minors are transferred to another island in the archipelago.

Despite the resource constraints, the island has established different integration programs to help the minors. The volunteer group In Corpore Sano facilitates sports activities and Spanish lessons, with the goal of preparing minors for enrollment in local schools (Fernández Alarcón, 2025). Brito (2025), the mayor of Valverde, underlines that:

We try to ensure these are inclusive sports activities so that, during their misfortune or fortune, they can try to become part of El Hierro's society, experience local traditional sports of the island, and feel integrated.

These efforts reflect a commitment to meet the minors' needs and help them integrate. However, they also reflect how the broader infrastructure limits long-term belonging. The status of "minor" is not only a biological or social categorization but also a bureaucratic and juristic one. When the

state determines that a child has reached 18, or when a bone test concludes they are in fact adults, they need to leave the island and are transferred off the island. Some exceptions exist: a handful of unaccompanied minors are fostered by local families, and in rare cases, locals take 18-year-olds into their homes and register them officially in their households (Fernández Alarcón, 2025). However, this is only the case for a few migrants, and Fernández Alarcón points to the problem that:

The ‘better life’ is short-lived. When they are minors, they receive education, food, and an effort is made to integrate them into Spanish culture. But once they turn 18, they’re abruptly left on their own. They must find work—often in the informal labor market and live in unsatisfactory conditions (2025).

Hence, the transition from minor to adult presents a legal break that interrupts the very process of integration it once promised. Moreover, the age limit and its biological testing turn age into a determining factor, either enabling or denying access to care. The infrastructure for minors thus embodies both protection and uncertainty. This tension between care and control, logistics and invisibility, will be further explored in the next sections, especially in relation to minors, NGOs, and local economies.

5.2. Intertwined Infrastructure

This section analyzes how governance and organization of transit infrastructure on El Hierro are co-produced through regulatory, humanitarian, and social dimensions. It highlights how these processes are shaped by fragmentation, blurred responsibilities, and multiscale tensions between local, regional, national, and European levels. In addition, the section considers the role of the economic dimension in shaping the migration process on El Hierro, focusing on uneven benefits, resource shortage, and the distribution of EU migration funds.

5.2.1. Fragmented Coordination and Blurred Responsibilities

“Migration is a state and European issue, not just a Canary Islands issue, and certainly not just an El Hierro or municipal issue,” (Brito, 2025).

Throughout the data collection and analysis, one key theme emerged repeatedly: who holds the competencies for what within the migration infrastructure, and how does the communication between the different areas of competencies function in practice? On El Hierro, migration infrastructure is not governed by a clear logic or well-defined areas of responsibility. Rather, they emerge through overlapping jurisdiction, blurred responsibilities, and fragmented competences of local, regional, and national actors. As Xiang and Lindquist (2010) argue, in migration infrastructure: “each dimension, the leading actors, the driving forces, the central strategies and rationalities, and the defining modus operandi differ” (p. 124). In the case of El Hierro, these differences are not

just parallel; they are entangled, making it unclear which is the leading actor for which dimension of the transit infrastructure.

Missing Communication

Although many responsibilities fall under the respective competences of the Spanish national government, the autonomous communities, and the local administrations, the population of El Hierro is deeply involved in carrying out logistical, humanitarian, and administrative tasks. This happens often without adequate resources or information. Thus, the locals on El Hierro often have to work within a field of operational disconnect where they are left unknown about procedures and organization, as information is communicated at a higher level or goes uncommunicated. One clear example is the management of the unaccompanied minors. Although the NGO Quorum Social 77 is contracted by the autonomous region of the Canary Islands to run the reception center in Valverde, Quorum employees are often unaware of how things are organized on the island. This non-transparent organization adds an additional burden on the local population on El Hierro.

No, the town council is not aware, nor the school, nor the high school. If they were in school and then they [migrant minors] leave, nobody knows about it until that day when they don't show up anymore and we don't really understand why it is done that way because in the end it involves so many people to make them feel comfortable and then suddenly, they leave and we don't know why, so we don't understand that part (Morales, 2025).

Morales explains that unaccompanied minors who are accommodated in the center in Valverde are sometimes transferred to Tenerife. However, according to her, who has some friends working in Quorum Social 77, the teachers and mentors of the children do not know when, why, and which child would be taken when. Morales repeats what her friend told her, "I'm saying goodbye to the children every week, you know?" Morales says that this is because they themselves don't know how the accommodation and care of the minors is organized.

This illustrates not only the lack of transparency but also how the work of care is devalued both in a logistical and emotional way, through top-down decision-making structures.

The Blame Game

Moreover, Fernández Alarcón, director at the cabildo, explains that the division of competences in some cases makes it difficult to know how responsibility is passed from one level to another. This leads to conflict and confusion between the different scales (local, regional, national, and European decision-making levels) and has the consequence that responsibility is passed on over and over again:

They understand, yes. But the problem in Spain is due to the division of competencies. Usually, what they do is say: “No, that’s the responsibility of the Canary Islands Government. You fix it.” So, the Canary Islands Government then tells the state: “Give me more money, because I didn’t foresee this level of assistance.” And the state says, “Okay, okay, I’ll send it.” But the money doesn’t arrive, so the blame game starts: “It’s your responsibility, no, it’s yours,” etc.

Then the state says, “You’re in charge of healthcare, don’t tell me to handle it. You’re the one with the competence.” So that’s the core problem (Fernández Alarcón, 2025).

Fernández Alarcón underlines the multiscalar tension and passing of responsibility without corresponding support constraints for both the regional government and the local administration on El Hierro. Hence, local and regional actors are excluded from national-level planning and underfunded in implementation. Nonetheless, they are acting in the interest of the government handling the migrant arrivals in the name of the Spanish state. The KNOMAD (2023) report confirms this structural disconnection, highlighting that local authorities are often left out of national-level decision-making processes, despite being responsible for implementation on the ground (Testa et al., 2023).

State Control and Legal Disjunctions

In this fragmented landscape of transit migration infrastructure on El Hierro, the Red Cross and Quorum Social 77 have de facto become instruments of the state and the regional government. This strong reliance on NGOs is further blurring the institutional competencies, where NGOs manage reception, care, and integration of migrants. The NGOs are embedded in governance structures and operate in coordination with the Guardia Civil, Salvamento Marítimo, and the local police. This illustrates the co-produced nature of migration infrastructure, where the regulatory and humanitarian dimensions are deeply intertwined, not just in function but in personnel and everyday routines. Yet, as the Quorum Social 77 case shows, NGOs often lack access to the strategic decisions that structure their work.

Another area that is affected by the division of competences and the differing practices is the integration of migrants. Hence, even where integration programs exist, legal barriers undermine them. Fernandez Alarcón (2025) explains:

In Spain, we run employment programs to help people join the workforce, and municipalities receive funds to implement these programs. These programs allow someone to work for a year, gain experience, and earn an income. But we can’t hire migrants because they don’t have legal papers.

Hence, it seems that migrants are expected to integrate but are denied the legal conditions necessary to do so. Without work permits or documentation, adult migrants often end up in precarious situations and informal labor markets, a situation that which the local administration on El Hierro can't help them with:

The issue is that Spanish immigration law is not properly applied, nor are there sufficient resources to apply it correctly. So many of these people end up staying here [in Spain], some even undocumented. But the Spanish state does not implement policies to provide them with papers or facilitate their return to their country of origin (Fernandez Alarcón, 2025).

In fact, there are only a few adult migrants that stay on the island. The mayor of El Pinar says that, in fact, only four migrants stayed on the island.

5.2.3. Migration as an Economy

While migration presents the island with financial and resource-related challenges, the transit migration infrastructure on El Hierro also constitutes an economic structure that impacts the island and the local livelihoods. This economic dimension is not defined by profit in the traditional sense, but by flows of labor, contracts, and resources that directly and indirectly sustain livelihoods for the local people on the island. Drawing on Xiang and Lindquist's (2010) framework of the commercial dimension of migrant infrastructure, which highlights how migration brokerage is driven by profit-seeking actors who commodify mobility and offer services such as job placement, documentation, and training (pp. 131-132), this thesis reinterprets the concept to include direct and indirect economic entanglements. Hence, looking at how migration flows become an economic driver, a new form of island economy.

Uneven Benefit: From Volunteerism to Formal Employment

Initially, migrant arrivals were managed largely by locals and particularly by the volunteers from the Civil Protection. Morales explains, "I imagine that because they were volunteers and so on, it is now the Red Cross that plays this role" (2025). Responsibility for reception shifted to the Red Cross, contracted by the Spanish state, yet many of its local hires came from former volunteers from El Hierro. Morales (2025) underlines:

There are also many people who are not only volunteers in the organizations but also work in the Red Cross and in Quorum Social 77. Quorum has been an important response for young people who were unemployed, and the truth is that, yes, it has given a good response in this sector.

Moreover, the director of the reception center told Canary Radio in an interview that "when we arrived on El Hierro in June [2023], we had to bring people from other islands [Tenerife] to get things started, today, except for me, the rest of the staff are all from El Hierro or residents of El Hierro. There has been a lot of demand for employment, and we have tried to attend to it as best

we can. Because since El Hierro has welcomed us, we also want to return the good feeling they have had with us” (De Cobos, 2023). However, there also exists criticism stressing that the NGO has a monopoly as the association has become the one that has received the most public money from the government of the Canary Islands. Additionally, the leader of Social Quorum 77 was an elected member of the PSOE, joining the party that already governed Spain with Pedro Sánchez (Cano, 2024). In line with this, the newspaper El Diario wrote, “Save the Children calls for strengthening the child-centered approach in the reception of minors and taking decision-making out of the political fray” (Vargas et al. 2024).

In this way, migration has created an employment and income niche, even as it remains framed by the state as a security or humanitarian issue. This shift also provoked tension as not all residents view this economic shift positively. Lopez, a former fisherman living in La Restinga, describes how locals initially helped migrants in a spirit of solidarity and are now displaced by professionalized NGO structures. He criticizes that:

In the beginning, it was done in a different way; you went, you collaborated, but now you see that it cannot be, because now it is a business, now there are people who are getting rich at the expense of others, so you work, and others take the money; this is not possible. Here in La Restinga, this cannot go on like this (Lopez, 2025).

Lopez points towards a growing resentment between those locals who volunteered early on without compensation and those now employed in the migration sector. Clearly revealing the dilemma between those who used to help but now feel left unseen, facing obstacles due to a lack of resources on the island, such as a shortage in the hospital, and those who are part of the transit migration infrastructure contracted by the government to organize the transit migration. Hence, leading to a split between those who are in a way benefiting from the situation and those who used to help and never received recognition for it.

A Crisis Economy: Gains, Gaps, and Burdens

Many sectors on the island are benefiting economically from the transit migration, yet there are also many sectors that lack resources and remain underfunded. Especially those under the regional and island competencies, such as healthcare, housing, and burial service. The mayor of Valverde, Brito (2025), points out:

We help as good as we can with the resources we have. But we can't do everything. Still, we've welcomed migrants well. Many are arriving, not just by boat, but that's the most visible. Our resources are very limited. Despite that, we've tried to help and show solidarity 100%.

This lack of resources is especially noticeable in the health sector, which falls under the regional governments' competencies. Various government representatives on El Hierro underline that the hospitals and health centers are overwhelmed.

In some municipalities, if they're large or far from others, like La Restinga, there's also a health center. In that health center, there's only one doctor attending to patients, since it's a basic service. If a patera arrives with sick or seriously ill people, that doctor has to leave the health center to attend to them. What happens then? The local population, who had scheduled appointments or have emergencies, no longer has a doctor available. So, one of the things the mayor [Padrón Brito] is proposing is either to bring in more doctors to the island or for the state to send a specific team of doctors to handle these situations. Especially when a patera or cayuco arrives (Fernandez Alarcón, 2025).

The island's residents, especially those in public service, often feel caught between solidarity and scarcity. They try to respond to growing demands, not just from African migrants arriving by boat, but also from less visible groups like Venezuelans and Cubans arriving by plane.

You're limited by what you can do, you can't act entirely freely, either, because the state has a role. Other regions with more infrastructure and staff aren't as supportive as we Herreños are. Also, migration from Africa stands out because it's more visible, but here in Valverde, there are about 700 people from other nationalities. Venezuela stands out, with 252 people. Many are returning from Venezuela due to a humanitarian crisis. But nobody talks about that migration—because they come by plane, not by boat. But they also need food and housing. And a lot of our social aid goes to those people too (Brito, 2025).

This broader migration presence adds further strain on local budgets and social infrastructure, with limited external support. One particular example is the difficulty the island faces in covering the costs of burying migrants who died during the crossing or in the island's hospital after arrival. Morales (2025) explains that the island estimated that “in one year there may be 19 or 20 deaths in the municipality, and the budget is designed for that, and suddenly in a matter of one or two months there is a shipwreck and suddenly they have five or six deaths at once”. All representatives from the three municipalities underline that they see the burial as a very important duty, and they try to trace the name and religion of the deceased so that they can bury them appropriately. This, however, also presents challenges for the municipalities.



Picture 6: Center for unaccompanied minors, photo by Esther Kruse, 2025

I have committed myself to burying every migrant that comes to the island dead, to bury him anywhere in El Pinar. If they give me money to enlarge the cemetery and build niches, I am committed to it. But of course, I must have money to expand, because the budget of this town hall is 6,610,000 euros (Padrón Brito, 2025).

This example illustrates the human and financial burdens of serving as a border for the European Union while receiving insufficient support in return. It exemplifies how the commercial dimension shapes and constrains the humanitarian dimension while also influencing the social dimension, as locals feel a moral obligation to grant migrants who died during the crossing or after a final dignity.

Frictions over EU Funds and National Gatekeeping

Another economic frustration emerges in relation to the distribution of European Union (EU) migration funds. The politician Acosta Armas (2025), who grew up on El Hierro and is now representing the island in the Parliament on Tenerife, points to the disagreements between the national and regional scales:

On other points, such as European Community Aid and the implementation of Frontex, there have been many disagreements between the government of Spain and the government of the Canary Islands. For example, any relation of the Canary Islands with Europe has to be through the [EU] Member State. The Canary Islands cannot go directly to Europe. It has to be the [EU] Member State that requests certain issues. There are many European funds for the treatment of migration or refugees, which are billions, of which Spain has only asked for, I think it is about 500, and of which I think only 50 or 60 have been transferred to the Canary Islands. So, there have been many frictions because the particularities and needs of the Canary Islands are not being attended to by Spain and neither by Europe. But from Europe, not so much because they do not want to, but because Spain often does not ask for it.

The point made by Acosta Armas highlights how the economic dimension of migration infrastructure becomes visible here as well, not only through EU funding but through unequal access to

resources at the most local levels of governance. Padrón Brito (2025) goes on to stress that the Spanish state is failing to meet its responsibilities to address what is ultimately a national issue. He says that:

...if there's a problem, it has to be solved, and the state has to solve it. But they can't just look the other way and ignore the migration issue. The migration issue in Spain is El Hierro, it's La Restinga, and the three municipalities... There's total neglect on the part of the government. Look at the Palmeros [residents of La Palma], they're still living in temporary barracks two years after the volcanic eruption. In Valencia, with the floods, it's the same. We need a solution.

As highlighted by Padrón Brito, this crisis economy offers a short-term fix but no long-term sustainability, especially in the light of structural neglect by national and EU authorities.

5.3. Island Life: Migration Memory, Solidarity, and Future

This final section examines how transit migration is experienced and imagined on El Hierro at the local level. Focusing on the social dimension of migration infrastructure, it explores how everyday practices, histories of solidarity, and the visibility of migration contribute to a complex and at times ambivalent public atmosphere. Additionally, this section will explore local perspectives on the island's future. The chapter concludes by summarizing the main empirical findings of the three analysis sections.

5.3.1. Conflicting Sites

Different government representatives highlighted the strong tradition of solidarity among El Hierro's residents in response to arriving migrants. As Fernandez Alarcón from the insular government noted, "Other regions with more infrastructure and staff aren't as supportive as we Herreños are" (2025). This self-image of hospitality and solidarity is not only embedded in public discourse but also reinforced through recognition, such as awards given to local volunteers (e.g., Corazón Naranja) (Magdaleno, 2024). Moreover, El Hierro's reputation for support extends beyond the island itself and is recognized both across the Canary Islands and also to some degree internationally (Borrazas & Sempere, 2024; Hadden, 2024). The solidarity narrative is deeply rooted in the island's migration history as El Hierro has long been a place of departure as well as arrival, with many families maintaining strong connections to Venezuela and Cuba from past emigration. Carla (2025), a young employee from the town hall in El Pinar, explains that:

...here it is very typical for people to volunteer. My mother is a Red Cross volunteer, and it's very normal... we all support everybody, and we have a very open mind here, and I think it's a culture here... I think it's because our families, for example, my family emigrated to Venezuela, and it's typical for us because I think in our whole life, we just change the place, and for a better life, it's very normal.

This comment illustrates how histories of migration, both inward and outward, are woven into the island's collective memory and daily practice. On a small island where social proximity is high and "everyone knows everyone," acts of solidarity are experienced as both a personal obligation and communal expectation. Hence, this island's dynamics can also create a climate of social surveillance, making it difficult for people to voice concerns, limiting an open debate. Lopez (2025) a resident of La Restinga, says that:

...it's uncomfortable to speak... because if you speak well, they still talk, and if you speak badly, they criticize you anyway, so it's better to stay quiet. Yes, because that happens—then people gossip, they say, "Hey, he was speaking badly about him," and then they say to me, "No, you're racist," when you've been the one who's worked the most and helped the most. You understand? So, what are we supposed to do?

Hence, despite the prevailing narrative of support and generosity, some residents, particularly in La Restinga, the island's main arrival port, voiced growing concerns about the management of migration and the limited resources on the island. These include hospital capacity, the perception that migrants receive preferential access to benefits, and fears about the impact on tourism. However, these complaints were often framed to avoid targeting migrants themselves, placing responsibility instead on the system and actors managing migration. Lopez (2025) underlines:

It's not their fault. The blame lies with those who are making a business out of them. That's what makes people angry. Everyone knows—damn, look, those people [migrants], yes, but then there are others who are taking advantage. And making a lot of money—making a lot of money off this. And it shouldn't be like that. That money could be invested there [in the countries of origin] and give them work so they can work there [country of origin].

This shows that locals find themselves in an atmosphere of emotional ambivalence, navigating conflicting emotions: a mixture of compassion, fatigue, and frustration. Hence, they are in the state of what was introduced in the theoretical framework, a "spliced self" navigating conflicting moral expectations and social norms (Stoler, 2016, p. 12). This tension was captured by the Frankfurter Rundschau interview with a Salvamento Marítimo captain recalling a tragic shipwreck in May 2025 in which 150 migrants capsized just five meters from the dock in La Restinga. "People are tired. And yet they still went out to help. When something happens, everyone helps; we are human beings," (Liesenfeld, 2025).

5.3.2. Perception of the Future and Ideas for Improvement

In recent months, the arrival port of La Restinga has attracted growing attention from both Spanish and international media (Liesenfeld, 2025; Gandolfi, 2025; Röhn et al., 2025). This visibility has also increased political awareness on the island, with local authorities promising improvements not

only for the migration process but also in the practical organization of arrivals, such as the removal of abandoned boats from the arrival port (Liesenfeld, 2025). Despite this increase in coverage, most of the international community, including the European Union (EU), remains largely unaware of the realities faced by the inhabitants of El Hierro. The record-high use of the Atlantic Route in 2024, when more than 10,000 people attempted the dangerous crossing to La Restinga, underscores the scale of the issue. Hence, Morales (2025) from the town hall underlines that the locals on El Hierro only deal with a small fraction of a much larger crisis:

It is a little bit of an escape route, something like that, that is what we are trying to do, we know that it is a crisis, a migratory crisis that I don't think it is in our hands to be able to solve it, that it is something that involves a lot of people much more at the government level, at the European Union level and so on, but at least, since we are the people responding to it we should have the resources to be able to attend to them [the migrants] well and at least for the population living on the island to have access to those resources as they normally had access to before.

For many Herreños, resolving the migration crisis is the responsibility of the EU. The island can do little beyond responding to the immediate situation, offering assistance in a temporary and limited capacity, yet without any decision-making power. Acosta Armas, representing El Hierro in the Parliament of the Canary Islands, calls for a broader, long-term approach that addresses demographic and economic changes both in Europe and in Africa. He argues that:

...the first thing is to listen to Africa, what it wants...It is important that Europe has a real involvement in the development of Africa. What is happening is that it is developing and we are not allowing it, even though selfishly it would be in our interest.... Selfishly, we need these people, but we are not making the necessary migratory flows for these people to come. There is a diplomatic problem at the European and Spanish level of not allowing visas. Those people [from Africa] could take a plane if they had a visa, it would cost 800 euros, and they end up spending 3,000 euros in a boat risking their lives. That is neither coherent nor logical (Acosta Armas, 2025).

Acosta Armas points to the Tierra Firme pilot program in Senegal, initiated by the Government of the Canary Islands, as an example of a constructive approach. The program trains individuals in sectors where there is demand in the Canary Islands, facilitating legal migration and smoother integration. The first cohort of 500 trainees has reportedly been successfully integrated, arriving with relevant skills and prior preparation. The politician Acosta Armas (2025) gives an example:

... a Senegalese boy who came in the 2006 wave of the cayucos, then trained in nursing, is now a nurse in a hospital here in the Canary Islands and he has a program with his country where, thanks to the contributions he makes, he feeds 100 boys and girls young people in his village. If only one person is helping 100 people, imagine the multiplier effect it has; that many people can come and then cooperate or collaborate with their families or with their communities of origin.

Nonetheless, most Spanish and EU interventions currently focus on combating human trafficking from West Africa. According to a report by the German broadcaster Deutschlandfunk, arrivals of cayucos declined following visits to Mauritania and Senegal by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, alongside new anti-trafficking measures. Yet local humanitarian actors remain cautious. As Mendoza (2025) from Corazón Naranja told Deutschlandfunk:

If they could stem the influx, that would be great news, but as long as conditions in the countries of origin don't change, we've just put a new cork in the bottle, which means that at some point the cork will no longer hold or another route will be found.

Mendoza's statement emphasizes the urgent need for approaches that go beyond containment. While short-term measures may decrease arrivals, long-term and sustainable solutions, such as the initiative Tierra Firme, might better address the root causes of migration and create outcomes that are beneficial for both migrants and receiving communities.

5.3.3. Summarizing the Empirical Findings

The analysis of El Hierro as a paradoxical, socially and politically constructed site of transit migration demonstrates the value of adapting Xiang & Lindquist's (2010) framework of migration infrastructure to account for the specific complexities of transit spaces. By reducing and expanding the original dimensions, the framework was operationalized in a way that reveals how migration governance, humanitarian practices, economic factors, and social dynamics intersect and co-produce the lived reality of transit migration on the island.

In the first part, the regulatory and humanitarian dimensions emerged as deeply entangled, demonstrating how El Hierro functions simultaneously as a humanitarian border and an external frontier of the European Union's migration regime (Andersson, 2014). The empirical examples show how humanitarian practices become integrated into migration management strategies. This reflects the paradoxical logic of "care and control", in which humanitarianism legitimizes containment while still addressing urgent needs.

Second, the analysis of intertwined infrastructure highlighted how migration governance on El Hierro is driven not by a single actor, but through multi-scalar interdependencies between EU, national, regional, and local authorities, humanitarian organizations, and civil society actors. This blurred and sometimes fragmented coordination reveals the infrastructural obstacles of miscommunication, contradictory regulations, unclear responsibilities, and lack of transparency. Here, the adapted economic dimension proved crucial for revealing how migration processes shape local

financial dynamics, ranging from allocation failures to the stimulation of the local economy and the emergence of migration-related employment niches.

Lastly, by shifting the focus toward the social dimension, the analysis underlines how the transit migration infrastructure is not only shaped from above by regulations and institutions but also grounded in local histories, norms, and everyday practices. On El Hierro, traditions of solidarity coexist with surveillance and proximity in small-island life, shaping how migration is experienced and discussed at the community level.

In sum, the adapted framework shows that migration infrastructure in transit spaces such as El Hierro is multi-scalar, co-constructed, and embedded within broader geopolitical dimensions through tensions between regulation and humanitarianism, blurred responsibilities, gaps of governance, economic entanglements of migration flows, and the social dynamics of island life. By operationalizing migration infrastructure in this way, the analysis moves beyond static and linear models and helps to capture the paradoxes and complexities of transit migration.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this master's thesis has been to explore how transit migration infrastructure shapes migration processes on El Hierro. It does so by focusing on how actors across intertwined dimensions (regulatory, humanitarian, commercial, and social) operating at different scales (local, regional, national, and supranational) shape migrants' mobility. As the findings suggest, the multi-scalar interdependencies between these dimensions and the overlapping responsibilities define El Hierro's dual role operating simultaneously as a humanitarian arrival space and as a part of the externalized EU border regime.

On the one hand, the interplay of local actors, NGOs, and state institutions enables relatively direct communication and coordination in responding to arrivals, illustrating a well-managed and effective reception and transit of migrants. On the other hand, overlapping responsibilities and fragmented coordination lead to miscommunication, blurred accountability, and a sense of neglect. The analysis shows that these conditions leave many residents feeling unheard, under-resourced, and frustrated with the structural constraints of migration management. While El Hierro's residents carry the immediate humanitarian responsibility, decisions about migration flows, legal pathways, and development cooperation are made at the national and European levels. This tension between frontline responsibility and exclusion from direct decision-making produces a sense of both obligation and political marginalization.

Within the island context, these dynamics become especially visible. The high social proximity and strong collective identity intensify the ambivalence of wanting to help while feeling frustrated about how the migration process is managed. Hence, locals find themselves in a state of “spliced self” (Stoler, 2016, p. 12), where public discourse is shaped by overlapping moral logics; where solidarity is expected, however, critique of the ongoing situation is also on the rise.

By applying a new conceptualization of “transit migration infrastructure” to El Hierro and engaging with knowledge produced in the local context, this thesis has provided a small-scale perspective on migration governance, humanitarianism, and public discourse in a transit space at Europe’s external border. While the findings are specific to El Hierro, they show how European and Spanish border externalization regulations affect people’s lives beyond physical borders and offer knowledge on how migration is lived in everyday contexts, showing how a small island community with already scarce resources copes with increasing migrants’ arrivals. Thereby giving critical insights into the consequences of migration regulation and border externalization. The case of El Hierro shows how the local community, despite frustration and constraint, continues to meet arriving migrants with dignity and solidarity, as they understand the struggles of the young men and women who undertake the very perilous journey in search of a better life. Hence, adopting the notion of “migration infrastructure” helped not only to shed light on the theoretical understanding of transit spaces but has also provided initial empirical insights into realities on the ground (Xiang & Lindquist, 2010). By centering the lived experiences of residents, as well as municipal and government officials on El Hierro, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of circumstances on the ground, offers reflections on evolving dynamics within broader migration regimes, and situates critiques of conventional notions of transit within concrete empirical contexts.

Finally, this master’s thesis concludes that to understand El Hierro’s role, we must situate it within the broader European migration picture. As elaborated in the analysis, the case of El Hierro shows that there is an urgent need in European migration policy to move beyond short-term containment measures that strain and endanger the lives of both residents and migrants in transit spaces. The demand for stronger border control in Europe obscures the fact that a complete closure is ultimately illusory, as increased enforcement does not halt migration but displaces it, as seen in the southward shift of departure points along the Northwest Atlantic Route and the rising numbers of arrivals on El Hierro. As mentioned by Mendoza, founder of Corazón Naranja, increased control and refolement may temporarily “cork the bottle”, but without addressing root causes, new routes will inevitably emerge. The case of El Hierro offers hope, as it shows how local residents keep acting in solidarity despite difficulties, lack in resources, disempowerment in decision making, and political marginalization. However, Europe needs to acknowledge what is happening on El Hierro

to find sustainable and fair long-term solutions for all parties involved. Hence, there is an urgent need to critically rethink and challenge dominant discourses and existing migration regimes to envision more humane and just approaches to migration.

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