Migration Decision Making and Heterogeneities, Infrastructures and Trajectories of African Migrations

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This report examines migrant decision-making processes among African populations through a comparative, multi-sited qualitative study conducted in Kenya, Morocco, Nigeria, and diasporas in Italy and the UK. Drawing on 179 semi-structured interviews and 18 longitudinal digital diaries collected between 2023 and 2024, it reveals migration aspirations, planning and trajectories as iterative and contextually contingent, rather than linear or predetermined.

Analysis demonstrates significant heterogeneity in decision-making stages - from non-migration and aspiration to preparation, transit, settlement, and return - with participants frequently oscillating between these positions amid evolving personal circumstances, social networks and structural constraints. Legal statuses varied widely, encompassing internal migrants, regional movers, refugees, long-term European residents, returnees, and users of regular/irregular pathways.

Coding of transcripts employed a collaborative, multi-researcher approach across country teams, yielding node memos that facilitated cross-national thematic synthesis and minimized bias through generous, overlapping application at the paragraph level. Digital diaries captured temporal dynamics over six months, highlighting shifts in strategies influenced by uncertainty, waiting, and real-time information flows via WhatsApp and social media.

Findings disrupt traditional push-pull models by foregrounding non-linear temporalities and the interplay of formal (e.g., NGOs, agencies) and informal infrastructures (e.g., kin, brokers, peers). This underscores the need for migration policies attuned to diverse African-European corridors, emphasizing empirical complexity over simplified dichotomies.

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01 Executive summary

Following the framework of recent theoretical and methodological developments on migration decision making within and beyond Africa in D2.1, focusing on trajectories, temporalities and dynamics, this report presents the results of extensive fieldwork in three African countries (Kenya, Morocco and Nigeria) and in their diasporas in Italy and the United Kingdom which helps to better understand the decision-making process of heterogeneous groups of aspiring migrants at different stages in their potential and actual journeys. Interviews were conducted with 179 respondents, of whom 18 agreed to participate in digital diaries which yielded a longitudinal perspective over 6 months of their decision-making. Unlike many studies, the research encompassed a wide range of migratory statuses, ranging from those who had no intention to migrate, those aspiring both with and without plans, those who had migrated and were in transit or had decided to settle and returnees as well as refugees. For those who had made plans or who had migrated, the results focussed on the how and outcomes of their migration, namely in the ways they were intending to or had navigated their journeys through the use of informal means, such as family, friends and peers and digital sources of information such as social media as well as formal infrastructure, such as recruitment agencies. In addition, NGOs and international organisations, especially for refugees, were turned to for advice and support in terms of their lives in transit or in destination countries, outcomes and trajectories.

02 Introduction: Background and context of migration in Kenya, Morocco and Nigeria

Following D2.1 the Conceptual Framework of recent theoretical and methodological developments on migration decision making within and beyond Africa, this report presents the results of extensive fieldwork in three African countries (Kenya, Morocco and Nigeria) and in their diasporas in Italy and the United Kingdom. Our research with aspiring and those who have migrated, helps us to better understand the decision-making process at different stages in their potential and actual journeys. Unlike many other studies, the research encompassed a wide range of migrant categories to include those who have migrated within Africa, those who are currently in transit or who have decided to settle in an African country, those who have returned as a result of temporary work or who have returned involuntarily, and those who have settled long term in Europe. We also cover those who are contemplating or have undertaken irregular journeys as well as those who have moved through regular routes, whether to the GCC or Europe.

In all, 179 interviews were conducted in the three African countries and the diasporas in Europe (described in Chapter 03). Of the interviewees in the African countries, 18 agreed to participate in digital diary over a period of 6 months, which enabled to see how their thinking evolved during this time. The data contribute to the examination of decision-making about whether to move or not to (Chapter 04), on the navigation of potential and actual journeys through informal means and sources of information (Chapter 05) or formal institutions and infrastructures (Chapter 06), and the phases or trajectories of their migration (Chapter 07). In the conclusion, we

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highlight the ways in which the empirical research generates new insights into the why, the when, the where, and particularly the how, of migration of migrants and refugees with diverse statuses and heterogeneous characteristics. Recognising the complexity of decision-making, the heterogeneity of migrants and the diversity of trajectories calls for a more a policy making more aligned with this reality (see D8.1).

In the rest of this chapter, we firstly set the empirical results within the theoretical context described in D2.1. In the second section the general trends in recent African migration and remittances resulting from migration are outlined before discussing the specific socio-economic, political and migration policy developments in the three countries where the qualitative fieldwork was undertaken - Kenya, Morocco and Nigeria. Each of these countries represents very different contexts and configurations of migrations (regionally within Africa and beyond the continent) as well as developing policies towards emigration, particularly labour migration, and the hosting and settlement of migrants and refugees. The third section presents the structure of the report with chapters based on the themes derived from the fieldwork and current theoretical discussions.

Section 1 Introduction

In the past decade, a lively debate has emerged over how we should analyse decision-making in migration and to what extent the why or the determinants of migrant decision-making should be the central concern of migration studies. On the one hand, authors such as Jorgen Carling (2024; Carling et al. 2023) have argued that asking the why behind migration continues to be valid and can generate a range of interesting and diverse ways of looking at it. These include the categories of entry, such as labour, family, student, refugee, the much contested binary of regular and irregular, and the classification of push and pull factors in places of origin and destination. It can also be viewed in terms of whether individuals have aspirations

and the ability to migrate and are presented with opportunities to do so. The why can in addition be considered in relation to how migration is viewed as intrinsically valued or enabling someone to lead a normal life which they feel cannot be achieved in their country in which they live. Others critique (de Haas 2021) the emphasis on the why which, it is argued, simply generates a list of factors. These authors argue we should instead see migration as the result of broader processes of social transformation covering demographic, political, economic, technological and cultural dimensions (Berriane et al. 2021). However, framing migration in terms of social change doesn't necessarily neglect individual life experiences and therefore decision making over time and space in different contexts (Vezzoli et al. 2024). Rather it may be argued that social change and the individual are combined into a Temporal Multilevel Analysis framework, which considers how migration decisions are constantly calibrated over the life course drawing together the past, the present and the future.

Although the macro and micro dimensions have been brought together, the meso/middle level (Collins 2021) or how migrants plan and undertake their migratory projects, in what we could conceptualise as the facilitation of migration, requires much more attention to gain a better understanding of the modalities of how migration takes place or not. Both formal and informal infrastructures from the family and friends, social media and digital technologies, recruitment agencies, brokers, traffickers and NGOs provide information, advice and assistance in accessing resources without which migration would not take place (Duvell and Preiss 2022). Access to these economic and social resources are addressed in the growing focus on how migration is navigated (Schapndonk 2018; Vigh 2009) by those aspiring and planning to do so and in the trajectories that are followed by those who have migrated. At the same time, there is also growing recognition that the aspirations and abilities to migrate and the resultant trajectories are heterogeneous in terms of

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age, education and gender in particular and that these differences and inequalities are shaped by material resources as well as narratives and norms pertaining to different groups. As Faist (2016: 329) comments, theories of migration combining interactional and institutional patterns do not seek to explain the causes but its dynamics, which nonetheless have implications for the distribution of resources.

As we highlighted in *D2.1 Conceptual framework: Report of synthesis of recent theoretical developments* , the constellation of such connected approaches (journeys and trajectories, narratives and norms, infrastructures and intermediaries) help us to generate a better understanding of processes at all stages of migration (Kofman et al. 2023). Furthermore, social categories, such as gender, age, class, ethnicity, and religion as axes of inequality have shaped the ability to migrate and the experiences of different forms of migration (labour, family, humanitarian, student, lifestyle). They do so not just through access to economic and social resources, infrastructures and information but also in framing the norms, cultural practices and values ascribed to different categories. This may entail different expectations as well as support for migration according to age and gender. In relation to the latter, this may change over time as societal norms evolve, resulting in higher levels of international migration by women.

We also noted in D2.1 the need to take into account all forms of mobility simultaneously instead of only focusing on one type of migration – typically, international out-migration whilst ignoring the continuing significance of internal migration, especially rural-urban. In our research and analysis we have brought together the internal, the regional within Africa, the pan-African, and beyond Africa. Other forms, such as transit and return, are also gaining more attention. Transit can be further differentiated by intentions to remain temporarily, permanently or return whilst return may be desired or imposed. Emigration and return too may be

repeated, either because of temporary migration regulations by states, especially imposed on those providing low skilled labour. In other instances, it may characterise the global mobility of those in niche markets, such as the music industry. Over time, increasing levels of emigration have generated important and large African diasporas of permanent settlement in Europe and North America, facilitating continuing migration, supplying narratives of success and reinforcing transnational linkages.

These evolving trajectories and the heterogeneity of decision-making need to be placed within broader processes of social change (Thomas and Mara 2024). Africa has the most youthful population in the world, with more than 60 % of its population under the age of 25 years (Mpemba and Munyati 2023) and with increasing access to education. However, employment opportunities in countries with high levels of informal employment and unemployment are unable to offer opportunities to a better educated youth, thus generating disillusionment with their society and a desire to leave, even if this cannot be accomplished through regular means. To flee is epitomised in the japa phenomenon in Nigeria (Liu 2024a) but can be seen in other countries such as Senegal and Tunisia. Economic failures are often accompanied by lack of political leadership, corruption and conflicts. On the other hand, both changing gender norms (Olarinde et al. 2023) and employment opportunities, especially in the domestic, care and health sectors in Europe and GCC countries, have opened up international migration for women, though with risks due to poor protective legislation in particular for temporary migration. For those aspiring or planning to leave, there has been a greater access to social media of different kinds which they use to acquire and sift information. Its use in Africa has grown considerably in the past decade to around 570 million internet users in 2022, representing a doubling of the number of internet users compared to 2015. Using social media to navigate migration may be done in conjunction with formal

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infrastructure, including employment agents and NGOs, not only to migrate but also to settle into places of transit and permanent settlement.

Section 2 Key trends in recent African migrations

A combination of structural and governance factors are contributing to the steady increase in African migration to, within and out of the continent (see Graph 1). The largest migration in Africa still takes place within countries—mostly circular in nature from rural-to-urban settings. Rural-to-urban migration can be a first step toward international migration as urban migrants gain more income and information about other employment opportunities. Within ECOWAS, most migrants circulate through Côte d'Ivoire and Nigeria.

Most reported African migration is via regular channels. The 43 million Africans documented as living in other countries have some form of legal status. An unknown number of African migrants have turned to migrating via irregular or clandestine channels, resulting in high numbers passing through Southern routes from Kenya and Tanzania to South Africa, the Eastern route to the GCC and the Mediterranean and Atlantic route towards Europe. The latter routes have captured considerable attention since the sharp increase migration in 2014. The major countries making up more than half of irregular migrants are Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, and Algeria. In addition, a large number of old and new conflicts are generating record numbers of forcibly displaced populations. Climate change has also generated higher numbers of cross-border displacements (Williams 2024) such that it is estimated that it will contribute to an increase of 10 percent cross-border migration and much larger internal and rural-urban migration by the middle of this

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Graph 1. Migration within and from Africa


MIGRATION WITHIN AND FROM AFRICA
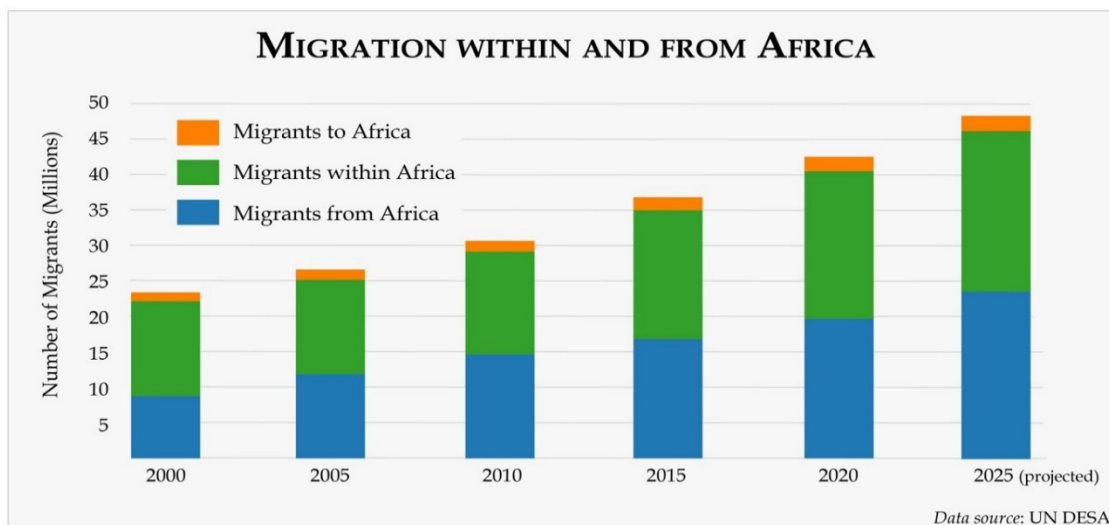
century as a result of a greater incidence of adverse events such as droughts, flooding and storms (du Parc and Naess 2024; The Africa Climate Mobility Project 2022).

The Regional Economic Communities (RECs) have been important means of dismantling barriers to the movement of people regionally. Forty-two countries now extend visa-free entry to citizens from at least five other African countries, and 33 countries offer the same to at least 10 other countries. We discuss the East African Community, the Inter-governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in greater detail in the sections on Kenya and Nigeria, which are key countries in both communities.

Remittances resulting from waves of migration and diasporas in the GCC, Europe and North America are also steadily growing in contrast to foreign direct investment which has sharply fallen since Covid. In 2023, Africa received $100 billion PDF in remittances, the equivalent of almost 6 percent of the continent's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and exceeding Official Development Assistance (ODA) amounting to $42 billion PDF and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) of $48 billion. On the continent,

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Egypt is among the top five remittance recipients globally, and together with Nigeria and Morocco, accounted for 65 percent of the total remittances flowing into Africa in 2022. According to the World Development Report by the World Bank (2023), Sub-Saharan Africa received an estimated US$49 billion in remittances in 2021.Owing to its massive diaspora population, Nigeria regularly receives the greatest remittance inflows (followed by Ghana, Kenya, and Senegal). Adhikari et al. (2021) note that "the remittances from Nigerians abroad increased in 2019 to US$ 25 billion, which is 5 percent of the country's gross domestic product and four times Nigerian foreign direct investment earnings". Remittance is a significant pull factor for most Nigerians—especially the young middle and upper middle class. Morocco, which ranks among the top 20 recipient countries of international remittances globally, is estimated to have received over USD 11 billion in 2022, accounting for 8 per cent of its GDP. Conversely, South Africa is the largest sender of remittances to other African countries.

Graph 2 Resource Flows to Sub-Saharan Africa 2000-2023
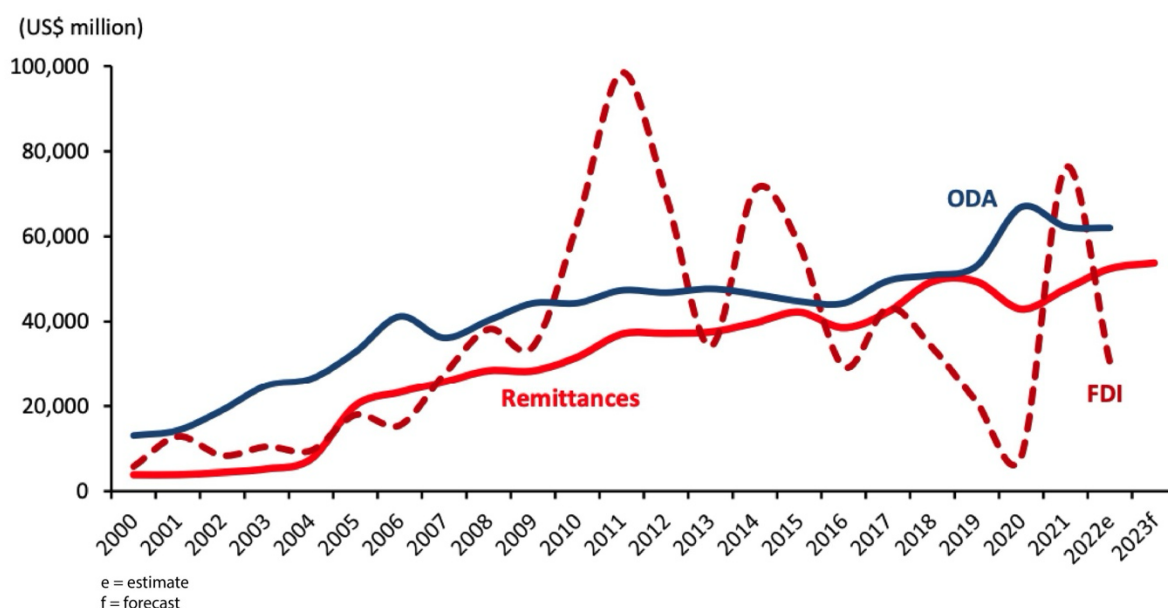
Source: KNOMAD

We now turn to our three selected countries for which we present an outline of the development of internal, regional and international migrations and the development of policies relating to emigration and immigration.

Kenya

Kenya has diverse forms of migration that take place within the country, the region and outside of the continent. As an economic powerhouse and refugee haven of East Africa (Ikanda, 2024), Kenya continues to attract migrants from within the East and Horn of Africa due to the economic and political stability of the country over the years. Internal migration has been the primary form of migration since independence in 1963. Major destination cities continue to be Nairobi, Mombasa and Kisumu. With the devolution of governance in 2013, internal migrants have been attracted to Nakuru and Machakos due to the opportunities emerging (NCPD, 2021:12). Although there is evidence of internal displacement due to political, economic and environmental factors, it has been short lived. The recent Housing and Population Census (KNBS, 2020) reveals that Nairobi, Kiambu and Kajiado Counties attract the largest share of internal migrants where most of them continue to be male.

Most of the displaced populations flowed from Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan and Eritrea due to the economic and political instabilities in the countries. Most of the refugees are hosted in Dadaab Refugee Camp in Garissa County, bordering with Somalia and Kakuma Refugee Camp in Turkana County bordering with South Sudan and Uganda. Nairobi hosts refugees and there are reports that small populations of refugees reside in other counties. Their displacement has been also severely affected by the slow onset of climate change in recent years that has led some to seek asylum in neighbouring countries as a result of it.

Kenya attracts skilled and semi-skilled migrants from the EAC region and beyond due to its economic and political stability. It is estimated that there are over 1.1 million international migrants in Kenya making up 2 percent of the population (IOM 2021b). Most migrants are from East and Horn of Africa region where Uganda, Somalia and Tanzania are the top three immigrants from the region. The majority of the immigrants are male but women are following closely behind in their migration aspirations (see Graph 3).

Graph 3 Immigrant by Sex and Country of Origin, 2019
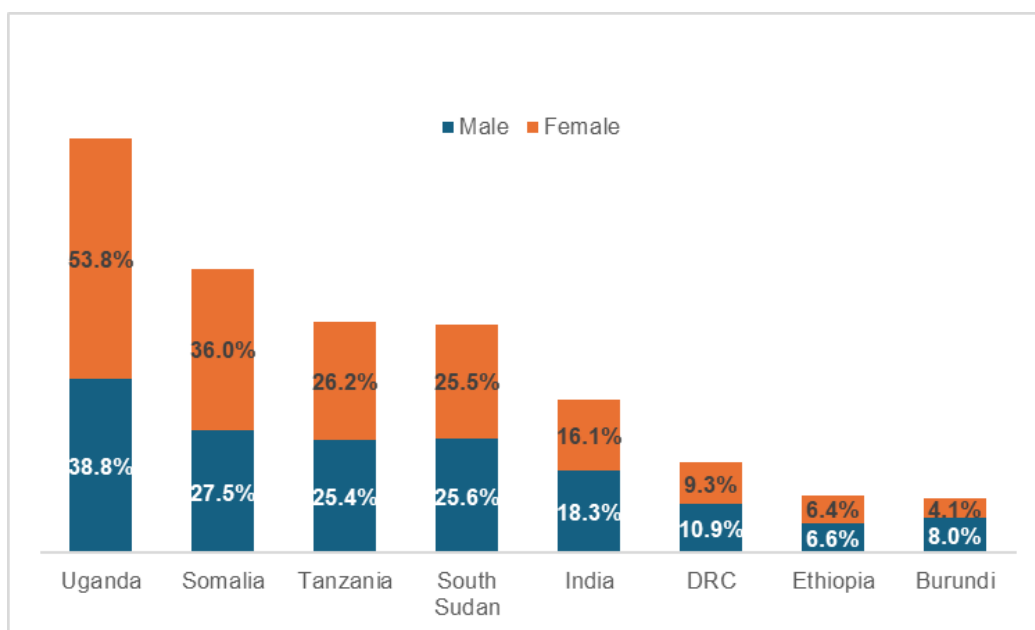
Citizens of the EAC benefit from free movement through the Protocol on the Establishment of the East African Common Market (2010) popularly known as the EAC Common Market Protocol (EAC-CMP) which allows nationals to apply for a work permit at no cost provided they have entered the country legally. There is a significant population that migrate to the country irregularly to access opportunities as they lack awareness of the free movement protocol signed by their country (especially in the EAC). The EAC has expanded recently by including Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the Republic of Somalia as its members in 2022 and

2023 respectively. This, however, does not mean free movement extends to nationals in this country automatically as the respective government needs to put certain measures in place that will allow their nationals to benefit from free movement. Kenya is also a Member States of the IGAD and in June 2024, it signed the newly developed Free Movement Protocol for IGAD (2021) that mirrors the EAC CMP approach to free movement of persons, goods and services for its Member States, mostly in the Horn of Africa. This illustrates the government's commitment to creating an environment where free movement of persons is possible across 11 countries in the East and Horn of Africa.

Kenya has also been source country for labour migrants as migrants explore education and employment pathways in different countries across the globe. The government currently estimates that there are over 4 million Kenyans living outside of the country. Between 2016 and 2020, there were 535,000 Kenyans living outside the country which has been gradually increasing from 250,000 since 1990. Migration over time has been influenced by political and economic conditions in the country. In recent years, there has been economic and political instability that has led nationals to consider migration. As a result, the state has developed bilateral agreements with GCC and some European countries such as Germany and UK, to encourage emigration. There is limited evidence to illustrate that Kenyan nationals migrate through irregular pathways, but for those who do, it is highly likely most of them become undocumented once they reach their desired destination countries.

Kenya is a primary transit country, mostly for Ethiopian and Somali nationals seeking irregular migration pathways to South Africa via the Southern Corridor. Although Ethiopian nationals are visa free to access Kenya, migrants often use porous borders and migrate irregularly through Kenya, Tanzania, Malawi, Zimbabwe and Mozambique and become undocumented in the country of destination (Burnett,

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Nistri and Rodata, 2023). The number of irregular migrants is unknown, but the IOM tries to capture this data using the Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) which mostly captures those displaced across and within a country with some data on those moving irregularly.

Evolution of Migration Policies in Kenya

Kenya's migration policies have evolved since independence and are a result of pan Africanism focused on regional and continental integration as well as economically driven and focused on capitalizing on the economic benefits of migration for national development. During the 'Golden Age of Asylum' in Kenya in the early 1990s the policies in practice for asylum seekers and refugees permitted them more freedom of movement, to work and integrate locally. However, when the number of displaced persons increased, the government introduced an encampment policy that restricted refugees to the camps which were often distant and isolated. The Refugee Policy was first developed in 2006 and was updated in 2021 with the Refugee Bill. The government also developed the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) to align with the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants (UNHCR 2016). More recently, the government has adopted the Shirika Plan (2025) that is a strategic plan that aims to transform refugee camps into integrated settlements and essentially promote social cohesion between host and refugee communities (Ministry of Interior and National Administration, 2025).

Free movement of persons, as mentioned earlier, is facilitated by the EAC-CMP (2010) which has guided Kenya and its Partners States to ease the movement of its East African citizens, including a no-fee work permit approach for its citizens. Recently, the EAC developed the Regional Labour Migration Policy (2024) targeting key labour migration issues such as harmonisation of labour migration policies, mutual recognition of qualification, exchange of young workers and social protection,

among others. The IGAD Free Movement Protocol aims to adopt a similar approach as the EAC Common Market Protocol but has yet to be ratified. IGAD also has in place the Regional Guidelines on Rights Based Bilateral Labour Agreements (2021) to assist its Member States to negotiate BLMAs with the GCC. The harmonization of the regional guiding principles into national policy is a long-term process as countries in the region, including Kenya, are slowly aligning their national instruments to facilitate free movement of persons, goods and services among others as outlined by the EAC Common Market Protocol. In 2020, the EAC and IGAD came together under the Regional Ministerial Forum on Migration (RMFM) supported by the IOM that facilities dialogue and enhances cooperation between Member States of both RECs on migration issues, including safe pathways to migration through Bilateral and Multilateral Labour Migration Arrangements and Skills Mobility Partnerships among others (IOM, 2025).

The Kenya government has taken a keen interest in migration issues since 2009 and in 2015 the first migration profile highlighted the trends, flows, impact and policy gaps in the country (IOM 2015). The government has been working on a National Migration Policy since 2009 when it was initially developed as an immigration policy. Regular consultation with government stakeholders and the AU pushed the government not only to establish a National Coordination Mechanism on Migration (NCMM) to coordinate the development of the National Migration Policy. The NCMM led and has been coordinating the National Implementation Plan for the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration since 2023. The plan focuses on data driven migration policies, addressing drivers of migration, facilitating regular migration and managing irregular migration as well as enhancing positive developmental impacts of human mobility.

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Other key sectoral policies include the Diaspora Policy developed in 2014 and revised in May 2024 (Ministry of Foreign and Diaspora Affairs 2024) to align with the current government's agenda. The revised Diaspora Policy focused on rights and welfare of Kenyan diaspora, diaspora investment, partnership and diaspora engagement as well as international job placement. In 2023, the government led the development of the first National Labour Migration Policy Sessional Paper of 5 (Ministry of Labour and Social Protection 2023) to address weak coordination of labour migration management, ensure there is a policy to guide labour migration activities including negotiation for bilateral labour agreements and regulating the activities of private employment agencies as well as issues faced by labour migrants such as protection in destination countries, trafficking in persons as well as return and reintegration of labour migrants to the country. The policy is complemented by the Labour Migration Management Bill (2023) (Republic of Kenya 2023) that aims to coordinate and regulate the recruitment of labour migrants by private employment agencies operational in Kenya. Both the Diaspora Policy and the National Labour Migration Policy overlap in terms of labour migration facilitation between Kenya and potential destination countries.

Due to the increase in emigration to the GCC since 2010, the government began to negotiate Bilateral Labour Migration Agreements. The agreements were meant to also include labour protection, especially needed in relation to abuse of domestic workers who may lack protection and reintegration upon return to Kenya. In light of the growing protection concerns of labour migrants in selected GCC countries, especially domestic workers, the government has been actively negotiating for BLMAs since 2015 especially with GCC countries such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and Lebanon. Recently BLMAs have also been developed with UK and Germany and there are ongoing discussions with the USA. These BLMAs adopt a whole of government and society approach including

perspectives from key migration stakeholders as well as civil society. However, since the terms of the agreements are never made public this makes it difficult to discern whether key issues such as protection are factored in the agreement. It is also difficult to determine whether the voices and experiences of migrants are factored in the negotiation process. There are ongoing concerns of the government's approach to labour migration, where critics suggest it will increase brain drain by encouraging migration of skilled migrants (medical personnel, teachers) and recent graduates to other countries and create shortages in these sectors. Furthermore, there continue to be growing concerns on the protection of migrant's welfare in destination countries over the keen interest in diaspora remittances. The government has been criticized for focusing more on remittances as opposed to the welfare and protection of migrants working abroad.

Morocco

Morocco has become not just a country of departure with the largest African diaspora in Europe but also of transit and destination for Africans, especially from West Africa with which it has signed bilateral agreements, largely with Francophone countries such as Cote d'Ivoire and Senegal. Pre-colonial and colonial developments during French and Spanish protectorates laid the foundation of the complex mobility system that characterizes Morocco today. The introduction of capitalist modes of production, combined with urbanization and colonial recruitment efforts, shaped both internal and international migration patterns, setting the stage for the socioeconomic role migration would play in Moroccan society during and after independence (Berriane et al. 2021). Following Morocco's independence in 1956, migration patterns evolved significantly, transitioning from the colonial framework to one shaped by economic challenges, international labour demands, and shifting socio-political contexts. It marked Morocco's transition from a country of

immigration to a country of emigration, with Europe becoming the primary destination for Moroccan migrants during a boom period (1963-1972) (Lahlou, 2015) with many migrants opting for permanent settlement aided in addition by family reunification. In recent decades, the lack of socio-economic mobility, the high inequality and the growing mismatch between young Moroccans' rising occupational expectations and local job opportunities have contributed to increasing migration aspirations, particularly for the better-educated.

Graph 4 Net Migration in Morocco
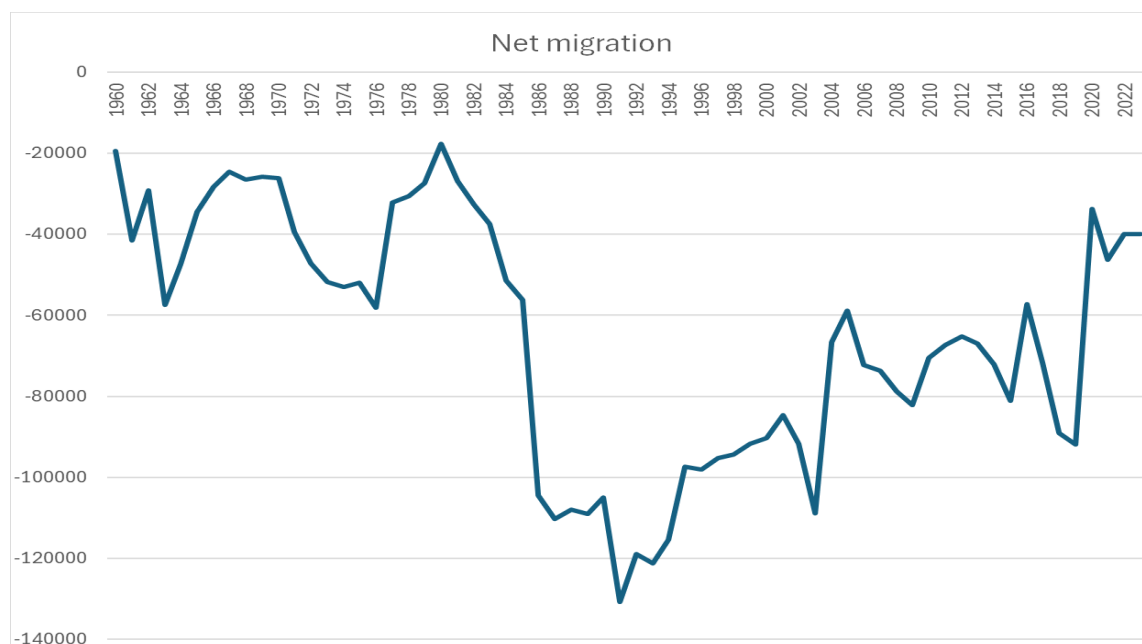
Source: Data from the World Bank

Morocco is among the top 20 countries of origin with the number reaching 3.35 million migrants in 2020 or 8.1% of the total population (IOM 2024). In parallel with international emigration, Morocco experienced unprecedented internal migration, primarily from rural to urban areas. The expansion of urban areas was often financed by remittances from international migrants, with construction activities in migrants' regions of origin playing a significant role in urban development, illustrating the interconnectedness of internal and international migration dynamics (Berriane et

al. 2021). Increasing numbers of people migrating to smaller and medium-sized towns within rural provinces was influenced by decentralization policies and infrastructure improvements, which facilitated migration beyond the largest cities.

Morocco's migration policies and regional engagement have undergone significant transformations following its departure from the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in 1984 and its rejoining of the African Union (AU) in 2017. These milestones reflect Morocco's evolving position within Africa and its complex approach to managing migration. In 1984, Morocco exited the OAU after the organization recognized the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), which Morocco claims as part of its sovereign territory. This decision marked the beginning of a period of diplomatic isolation from the African continent. Morocco shifted its focus toward Europe, prioritizing migration policies aimed at managing its role as a source and transit country for migrants heading north. During this time, Morocco's migration policy primarily addressed the needs of Moroccan emigrants and Europe-bound transit migrants, sidelining its potential as a destination for sub-Saharan African migrants and overlooking broader African migration dynamics.

After 33 years Morocco rejoined the African Union in 2017, signalling a strategic shift in its foreign policy. This decision was driven by a desire to regain influence in Africa, particularly to advocate for its stance on Western Sahara from within the organization. Rejoining the AU allowed Morocco to re-establish its role as a key player in African politics and economics and coincided with a notable transformation in the country's migration policies, reflecting a dual focus on strengthening African partnerships and addressing migration challenges. Since rejoining the AU, Morocco has increasingly become a destination for migrants from sub-Saharan Africa. Its strategic location as a gateway to Europe and its relative economic stability has made it an attractive option for migrants from countries such as Côte d'Ivoire,

Guinea, and Senegal. These migrants often seek better opportunities or flee poverty and instability in their home countries. Today, Morocco serves not only as a country of origin but also as a key transit point for migrants from sub-Saharan Africa seeking to reach Europe. The country's geographical location and proximity to Europe make it an essential part of the Western Mediterranean migration route, particularly the corridor from Tangiers in Morocco to Algeciras in Spain.

Morocco's role as a transit country became more pronounced in the 1990s, as irregular migration flows from sub-Saharan Africa to Europe surged. These flows, however, have fluctuated over time, influenced by various factors. One of the key factors has been the tightening of border controls. Both Morocco and European countries have implemented stricter security measures, which have led to a decrease in irregular migration flows since the mid-2000s. Additionally, external events such as the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011, particularly in Libya, and the Syrian civil war, have triggered surges in migration flows through Morocco as people sought refuge or better opportunities in Europe. In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, Moroccan emigration continued to evolve, with a noticeable diversification in both destinations and migrant profiles. Southern European countries (Spain and Italy), became major destinations, and Moroccan emigration also expanded beyond traditional labour migration, with increasing numbers of students migrating abroad for higher education and highly skilled professionals seeking opportunities in countries like France, North America, and the Gulf countries. Moroccans abroad sent significant remittances, playing a crucial role in supporting families and contributing to the national economy.

Growing economic opportunities in Morocco, compared to some sub-Saharan African countries, have made it an increasingly attractive destination country (IOM 2023; Lahlou, 2015) whilst stricter border controls and immigration policies in

Europe have made it more difficult for migrants to reach European destinations, further incentivizing them to settle in Morocco. Europeans remain the largest migrant population although Morocco's evolving migration policies, including regularization campaigns for irregular migrants, have played a crucial role in facilitating the settlement and integration of other African migrants. These policies, aimed at supporting migrants in vulnerable situations, include initiatives focused on providing access to healthcare, and education, and promoting their overall integration into Moroccan society. Student immigration, which began in the 1970s, has grown substantially since the emergence of private universities in Morocco in the early 2000s. Additionally, conflicts and instability in neighbouring countries, such as Libya and Syria, have led to an influx of refugees seeking safety in Morocco. The increasing presence of immigrants has led to new social and cultural dynamics within Moroccan society, signalling the country's evolving role in global migration patterns. In 2022, Morocco saw a notable rise of those assisted voluntarily to return (2,457) to countries of origin from Morocco in 2022. Despite two regularization campaigns (2014 and 2017), a substantial number remain undocumented and vulnerable to exploitation (Berriane et al. 2021).

Nevertheless, despite Morocco's increasing role as a destination for migrants from sub-Saharan Africa, Europe continues to be a key destination for Moroccan migrants with Moroccans forming the second largest diaspora population (Berriane et al. 2021). There has been a low rate of return of earlier emigrants. Amongst those who have returned, reintegrating into Moroccan society can be challenging, as cultural shifts and changes in social systems create gaps that complicate their reintegration.

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Evolution of Migration Policies in Morocco

Morocco's migration policies have evolved significantly, particularly regarding its commitments to international conventions and the treatment of refugees and migrants. In 1956, Morocco ratified the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol, which expanded the definition of refugees and removed geographical and temporal restrictions from the original convention. In 1993, Morocco ratified the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (1990). Additionally, Morocco's early migration policies were also characterized by Law No. 02-03, enacted in 2003, which established a security-oriented framework that criminalized irregular migration and imposed strict penalties for illegal entry. This law positioned Morocco as a transit country for migrants aiming to reach Europe.

The evolution of these policies has been influenced by Morocco's changing role as a country of emigration, transit, and increasingly, immigration, particularly from sub-Saharan Africa. The Moroccan government has made strides towards a more humanitarian approach to migration, especially following King Mohammed VI's announcement in 2013 to adopt a new immigration policy that emphasizes human rights and integration for migrants. Following this announcement, Morocco developed the National Strategy on Immigration and Asylum (SNIA) in 2014, which aimed to regularize undocumented migrants and improve their integration into Moroccan society.

The strategy included provisions for exceptional regularization of irregular migrants, legal recognition of refugees and asylum seekers, and measures to combat human trafficking while improving migrant rights. The first regularization campaign in 2014 allowed approximately 24,000 migrants to receive residency permits, granting them access to work and social services with the largest numbers from Congo (11%),

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Cote d'Ivoire and Nigeria (both 9%). The Framework Agreement on the Partnership between the Office for Vocational Training and Promotion of Labor (OFPPT) and the Deputy Minister in charge of Moroccans Residing Abroad and Migration Affairs in 2014, aimed at enhancing vocational training opportunities for migrants and facilitating their integration into the labour market. This initiative was part of a broader effort to address the needs of both Moroccan migrants abroad and foreign migrants residing in Morocco.

In 2016, Morocco enacted Law No. 27-14, which marked a significant legislative step in combating human trafficking. The same year, Morocco launched the National Strategic Plan on Health and Immigration (PSNSI) for 2018-2021, which aimed to improve healthcare access for migrants, recognizing their right to health services regardless of their legal status. In 2017, Morocco launched a second campaign for the regularization of irregular immigrants which aimed to address the challenges faced by migrants living in precarious conditions and to promote their integration into Moroccan society. Approximately 28,000 migrants were granted residence permits, contributing to a total of around 50,000 permits issued across both campaigns. The criteria for eligibility were made more flexible compared to the first campaign, allowing women and their children, unaccompanied minors, and individuals with professional activities but without formal employment contracts, to apply. The 2017 campaign was also aligned with Morocco's aspirations to position itself as a leader in regional migration governance and to enhance its geopolitical ties with sub-Saharan Africa.

However, there have been no subsequent campaigns and challenges remain in fully implementing these policies, as many migrants still face discrimination and inadequate living conditions. The Moroccan National Human Rights Council (CNDH) has played a crucial role in advocating for migrant rights and pushing for reforms in

immigration laws to align with international standards. Overall, Morocco's migration policy reflects a complex interplay between historical commitments to international conventions and contemporary socio-political dynamics that continue to shape its approach to migration and asylum.

Nigeria

Nigeria is the most populous African state which took the lead on the creation of ECOWAS. It has had severe economic difficulties and high youth unemployment (many of whom are very well educated) seeking to flee through study, work or a combination of the two, something that has been termed the Japa phenomenon (Liu 2024a, 2024b) (discussed in greater detail in subsequent chapters). There are substantial regional variations in aspirations to migrate with it being most pronounced in the South, especially Lagos (Kirwan and Anderson 2018).

The historical trend for migration shows significant upward fluctuations in the stock of migrants from Nigeria. From 1960 to 1981, Nigeria experienced economic prosperity, supported by the absence of visa requirements for travel to the UK, a major destination. The 1971 oil boom and the years that followed until 1980 saw a sharp rise in migration. The period from 1981 to 1988, known as the 'lost decade of growth,' was marked by economic decline and a fall in migrant stock (Leibfritz and Flaig 2013; Rai 2019). Overall the 1980s was a more liberal decade in terms of destination country policy for regular migrants (de Haas et al., 2019).

Starting in 1981, increases in restrictions in immigration policies in the UK and across some parts of Europe, made it more difficult for Nigerians to migrate for work or settlement. Similar restrictions on migration applied through the 1980 quota reductions applicable to all foreigners going to the United States (DEMIG, 2015).

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Overall, economic shocks and policy change have been predictors of migration trends. At the same time, migrants have shown resilience and adaptation to changing destination country policies, as evidenced by the upward trend in migrant stock from Nigeria since the 1980s.

Irregular migration is inherently difficult to measure due to its clandestine nature, but estimates consistently suggest that irregular migrants from Nigeria constitute less than 10% of total migration flows. Efforts to curb irregular migration to destination countries have resulted in significant numbers of Nigerians being prevented from travelling abroad. In 2017, the Nigeria Immigration Service (NIS) reported that 50,326 individuals were stopped from leaving the country due to suspected intentions of engaging in irregular migration (IOM, 2019). In 2023, the International

Graph 5 International Migrant Stock from Nigeria (1960-2020)
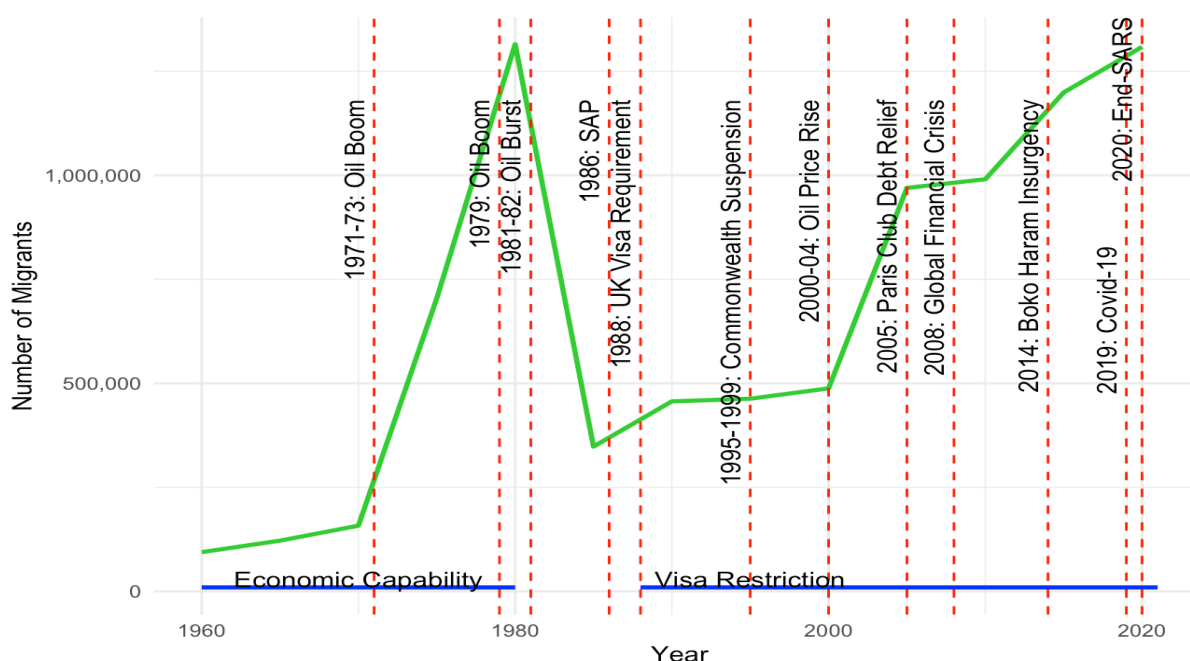
Sources: Estimates of the number of international migrants by country, from the World Development Indicators of the World Bank (2024 revision) for the years 1960 to 1990 and the United Nations Population Division, International Migrant Stock 2020 revision for years after 1990. Computed by Omolola Olarinde.

Organization for Migration (IOM) facilitated 4,700 assisted voluntary returns (AVRs) to Nigeria (GMDAC, 2023).

Until the 1990s, Nigeria's economic growth was closely linked to oil prices, with declines in global oil prices preceding worsening economic conditions (Akinlo & Apanisile, 2015). The Structural Adjustment Programme (1986) also negatively impacted Nigeria's economy by increasing unemployment and lowering per capita income (Isiani et al., 2021). A moderate rise in migration accompanied these periods of economic decline, reflecting source country push effects. Additionally, more restrictive visa requirements and lower quotas for Nigerians as well as the suspension of Nigeria from the Commonwealth, were all accompanied by slight increases in migrant stock, as migrants adjusted to restrictive policies to maintain mobility. Economic and financial capability influenced the surge in migrant stock during the oil price recovery period from 2000 to 2004, and the Paris Club Debt Relief in 2005, particularly since a notable part of Nigeria's migration is for education abroad. Conversely, the 2008 Global Financial Crisis limited migrant stock growth.

Political factors have influenced migration stock in Nigeria, particularly security-related ones since 2014. In 2014, a series of crises, including the Chibok girls' abduction (April 2014) and attacks in Jos (May 2014) and Gwoza (June 2014), heightened migration aspirations due to the Boko Haram insurgency. Notably, the most vulnerable, who were directly affected by the insurgency, lacked the financial means to migrate. In 2001, Nigeria drafted a policy to separate the management of internally displaced persons, which was eventually approved in 2022. The EndSARS social movement (2020), aimed at ending police brutality, also coincided with increased migrant stock, particularly because of the political administration's response of clamping down on protesters rather than addressing grievances.

Nigeria serves as a source, transit, and destination country for migrants. According to the World Bank's Bilateral Migration Database, immigration to Nigeria has grown steadily, except for 1990—a lagged response to the "lost decade of growth"—when the migrant stock experienced a significant decline (World Bank, 2017). The Chinese presence in Nigeria, which dates back to the 1950s, has expanded significantly over the decades, fostering a robust network contributing to a growing influx of Asian migrants seeking and providing work opportunities. In the 1990s, Chinese traders in Nigeria faced tensions and clashes with local traders and the Nigerian manufacturing sector due to competition in trade and business activities (Liu, 2019). However, most migrants in Nigeria originate from neighbouring West African countries (IOM, 2021). As of 2020, Nigeria hosted approximately 1.3 million migrants, representing about 0.63 per cent of its population (IOM, 2021). In mid-year 2020, 45.5 per cent of these or 594,900 were women (IOM, 2021).

Internal migration, particularly rural-urban migration, is a critical aspect of Nigeria's demographic and socio-economic landscape, accounting for an annual urbanisation rate of about 6.5 per cent as of 2021 (NDP, 2021-2025). Urban centres such as Lagos, Abuja, Port Harcourt, and Kano exert a strong centripetal force, attracting rural migrants with the promise of better employment opportunities, education, and healthcare access. Despite agglomeration pressures of overcrowding, inadequate housing, traffic congestion, and strained public services, these centrifugal forces have not yet significantly diminished the attractiveness of these cities, highlighting their enduring economic attraction.

Displacement is also caused by conflict and disasters constitutes a significant proportion of internal migration and require humanitarian interventions. Data provided by multiple agencies are consolidated in reports by Internal Displacement Monitoring (IDMC, 2023), which provide insights into displacement trends,

disaggregated by sex and age, as well as disaster-related displacement. Graph 5 charts these patterns in greater detail. Internal displacement remains a substantial challenge. According to UNHCR (2024), Nigeria is home to 3,558,038 internally displaced persons (IDPs), necessitating sustained humanitarian responses. Additionally, as of 2024, Nigeria hosts 90,852 refugees and 31,458 asylum seekers (UNHCR, 2024) mainly from Cameroon (74,368) and Niger (134,438).

Evolution of Migration Policies in Nigeria

There has been much policy development in recent years. Nigeria launched its Labour Migration Policy in 2014 (revised 2023) and the National Migration Policy in 2015 (revised 2024) to address migratory effects of insecurity and manage migration effectively. In 2024, Nigeria launched the National Policy on Health Workforce Migration to mitigate the loss of skilled workers by retaining local health expertise and improving healthcare outcomes. While its impacts are still to be evaluated, the migration of skilled workers continues amidst more attractive conditions in destination countries.

The National Migration Policy (NMP, 2015) is currently under revision, with plans to adopt a more data-driven and gender-sensitive approach, though the outcomes remain to be seen upon its official launch. Similar to the National Labour Migration Policy (NLMP), the NMP seeks to enhance coordination mechanisms among government agencies and stakeholders. Nneli et al. (2022) provide a systematic analysis of Nigerian migration policies, highlighting several areas for improvement. First, the absence of bilateral agreements continues to constrain structured migration opportunities. Second, migration processes are largely left to individual agents, with limited coordination between government institutions and diaspora networks. Even where government support exists, such as pre-departure orientation, there is a limited adoption of the service by aspiring migrants. Third,

while diaspora policies focus on remittances and return migration, they offer insufficient support for social protection, such as access to benefits or property transfers. Finally, despite increased emphasis on regional and continental integration, protections for migrants—particularly those using land routes—remain inadequate.

Section 3 The Report

In this chapter, we have outlined the general socio-economic and political contexts of the three countries in which we conducted research on migrants aspiring, having made plans, transiting and returning after a period away. In the next Chapter 03 we outline the research methodology consisting of interviews in the three countries and diasporas in Italy and the UK as well as digital diaries following selected migrants from the three countries over a period of time. Our research enabled us to bring together a wide range of migration types (labour, family student, refugee), stages in preparation (aspiring, planning, undertaken) and trajectories (regular, irregular, transit, temporary, permanent residence, return), as well as the heterogeneities of migrants characteristics (age, education, gender). The richness and diversity of our data enable us to go beyond a focus on a single type which typifies many studies, for example, irregular migrations of African youth.

Chapters 04 to 07 present the empirical results from the qualitative research. In particular, Chapters 05−07 are closely connected through discussions of the how, when and phases of migration, that is its navigation (Chapter 05), facilitation through infrastructure and intermediaries (Chapter 06) and resulting trajectories or phases of migration (Chapter 07). These aspects highlight the openness of decision-making and the transition from one phase to another. The results also indicate the significance of age, education and gender in the decision-making, the norms,

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opportunities and outcomes for migration and implications for policy making. The empirical chapters of this reports are as follows:

Chapter 04: To move or not to move: decision-making of heterogeneous populations. The chapter firstly addresses the general motivations to migrate in terms of socio-economic and political drivers before turning to the significance of heterogeneous characteristics, in particular age, education, and gender, and how they contribute to and impact on the aspirations, abilities, perceptions and outcomes of migration.

Chapter 05: Navigating Migration examines how decisions are made within a social environment and how aspiring and actual migrants acquire knowledge and support from those close to them, such as family, friends and peers to make decisions about whether to migrate, by what means (regular/irregular) and to which destinations.

Chapter 06: Migration Infrastructure: formal and informal intermediaries follows on from Navigating Migration, focussing on the formal intermediaries, such as employment agencies, NGOs and international organisations, and informal intermediaries, such as smugglers networks, with which migrants and refugees may be engaged in undertaking migration (regular/ irregular) and resolving issues arising from their migration, either in transit or with a temporary or permanent status.

Chapter 07: Migration Trajectories follows on from the previous two chapters and focuses on the phases of migration, and where relevant, the connections between them, for example different outcomes of being in transit, return both voluntary and involuntary, arising from temporary and long stays.

Chapter 08: Conclusion draws out the key insights of the empirical research and considers how it contributes to a better understanding of the complexities and heterogeneities of contemporary African migrations for theoretical developments and policy making and implementation.

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03 Methodology

The DYNAMIG Project adopted a mixed-methods approach, with Work Package 2.3 employing a qualitative methodology to explore the migration aspirations, plans and trajectories of migrants, as well as their decision-making processes, both within Africa, beyond and in the diaspora. Semi-semi-structured interviews were conducted with respondents in Kenya (N=67), Nigeria (N=43), and Morocco (N=42), as well as with diaspora members from these communities residing in the UK (N=10) and Italy (N=14). Besides the semi-structured interviews, socio-demographic data were gathered from all participants, alongside two key questions relating to their current migration status or plans and their reasons for migrating (N=176). This information forms the basis for understanding the characteristics of the sample, which will be further elaborated below. In addition, digital diary entries were collected from a smaller sub-section of respondents (N=18), followed by online interviews (N=13). This approach enabled a longitudinal analysis of migrant decision-making.

Semi-Structured Interviews

A common interview guide was developed, informed by insights from the Deliverable (D2.1) on the concepts, temporalities, and dynamics of migration (Kofman et al. 2023). Drawing on these insights and a comprehensive literature review, the guide was designed to cover seven key thematic areas. Each section began with a guiding question, followed by several probing questions to ensure both consistency and flexibility across different research sites and during the data collection and analysis. The final block incorporated a visual elicitation technique.

The questionnaire was structured as follows:

Block I – Current Migration Aspirations and Journey

Block II – Migration History

Block III – Livelihood and Security

Block IV – Meso-Level I: Family, Peers, Community, and Norms

Block V – Meso-Level II: Information Flow and Intermediaries

Block VI – Policy and Governance

Block VII – *Blob Bridge*: Tapping into Emotions, Desires, and Identity

In the final section, focused on emotions, desires, and identity, the *Blob Bridge* image was employed as an elicitation tool for retrieving latent memory and stimulating emotions and experiences associated with the respondent's life (Olmo-Extremera et at., 2024). The illustration depicted a bridge populated by various

Graph 6 Blob Bridge
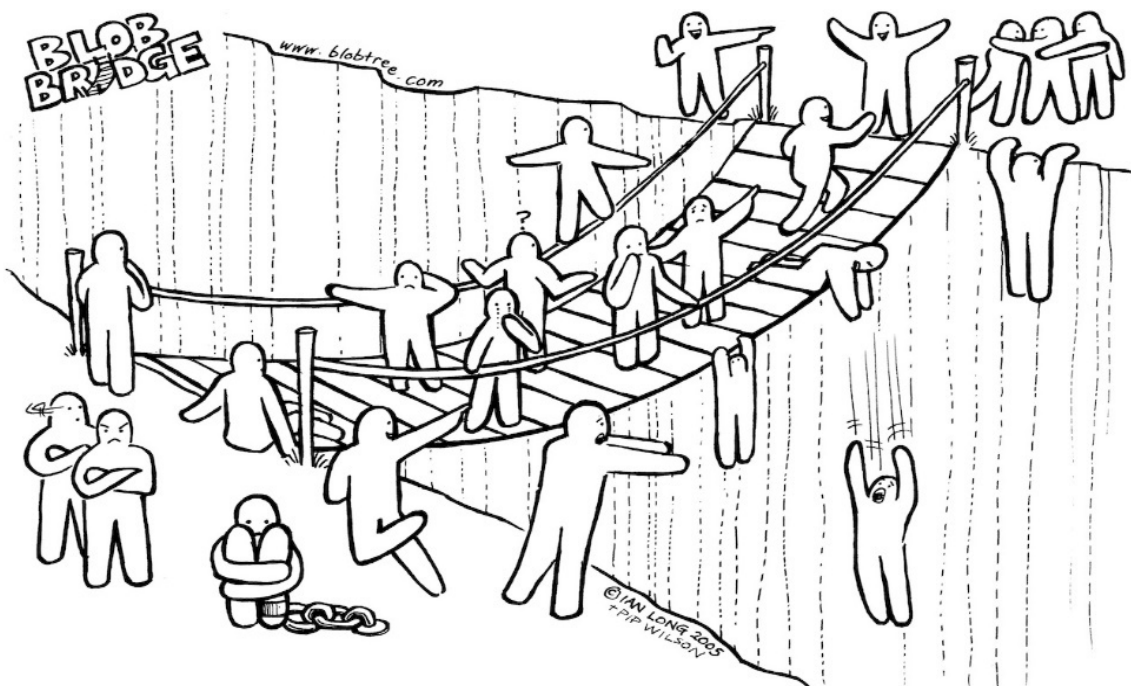
Source: www.blobtree.com. Image subject to copyright

characters—some at the start, some mid-journey, and others at the far end—shown in a range of emotional states, either alone or in groups. This visual aid encouraged respondents to reflect on their own migration histories and aspirations, generating deeper and more nuanced narratives (see Graph 6 above).

Participant Inclusion Criteria

In Kenya, Morocco and Nigeria participants were eligible for inclusion if they were aged 18 years or over and were either nationals of the respective country or residing there (i.e. migrants in transit or as refugees). We aimed to achieve a diverse sample in terms of socio-demographic characteristics, including age, gender, religion, educational background, and employment status as well as respondents who were actively planning to migrate, those contemplating migration, returnees, and those with no intention to migrate. We distinguish in particular between migration aspirations (Carling 2002) and migration intentions (de Haas and Fokkema, 2011) where the former reflect a general desire or preference to migrate, the latter more concrete and deliberate plan to do so. The former is more abstract and reflecting a preference an individual holds, and the latter representing a more concrete decision and plan to migrate, although the two can overlap[1]. Regarding migration types, our objective was to capture a broad spectrum of motivations, such as migration for study, work, or family reunification, or for any other reasons. In the diaspora, we targeted members of the Moroccan, Kenyan, and Nigerian communities living in the UK and Italy, aged 18 years and over. These targets were largely met, though with some limitations, which will be discussed further below.

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[1] We distinguish between migration aspirations which are abstract, subjective and future oriented and reflect what a person would like to do regardless of whether they can realise it or not (Carling 2002). Migration intentions on the other hand represents a concrete plan or decision to migrate. Both concepts however refer to people who wish currently to migrate but they differ in the stage of planning and realisation of it.

Data Collection for the semi-structured interviews

Data collection for the semi-structured interviews took place between October 2023 and March 2024 in the African countries and from January to November 2024 for the diasporic interviews in Italy and the UK. In Kenya, Nigeria, and Morocco, primary data collection was conducted during several short field visits, with small teams of three to six researchers conducting interviews during each trip. In contrast, interviews in Italy and the UK were carried out over a longer period by a single researcher (see Table 1 for an overview of fieldwork and data collection). In total, 179 semi-structured interviews were conducted: 67 in Kenya, 46 in Nigeria, 42 in Morocco, 14 in Italy, and 10 in the UK. On average, interviews lasted 50 minutes, with interviews in the UK averaging 80 minutes—the longest of the project.

Fieldwork Locations and Participant Recruitment

The three countries in Africa, where fieldwork was conducted, have different migration configurations, histories, insertion within regional systems and relationships with Europe. They also differ in types of migrants, including migrants and refugees from neighbouring African countries within their respective regional systems (EAC, ECOWAS), and bilateral agreements (for example, between Morocco and a number of francophone West African countries).

In **Kenya**, Nairobi, Mombasa and Kilifi are major places for aspiring migrants. Nairobi is a major hub where recruitment agencies operate and facilitate labour migration opportunities for Kenyans intending to migrate. At county level, the National Employment Authority (NEA) has representatives that support migrants to seek legal migration pathways to destination countries. These areas attract high levels of internal migration, largely due to opportunities in employment, education, and affordable housing, as well as populations of refugees and African migrants in transit. In Nairobi, fieldwork was conducted in the neighbourhoods of Kasarani,

Kayole, Kawangware, and Rongai, which are popular among rural-urban migrants. These areas offer low-cost living and are in proximity to employment and education opportunities, while the central business district functions as a commuter and financial hub. In Mombasa and Kilifi, interviews were conducted in Likoni, Mtwapa, and Changamwe, areas known for informal work, port-related employment, and tourism opportunities. Rural areas such as Kikambala, Mijikenda, and Shimolatewa were also included due to their experiences of out-migration linked to limited economic prospects.

Fieldwork in **Morocco** was conducted in the capital Rabat and in Casablanca, both of which are major hubs for internal and transit migration. These cities offer formal and informal employment, higher education institutions attracting international students, and are centres for migrant support networks and NGOs. Sub-Saharan African migrants were primarily recruited through workshops organised in collaboration with local NGOs. Moroccan participants were recruited via researcher networks and snowball sampling.

Most of the **Nigerian** fieldwork took place in Lagos State, covering a range of socio-economic contexts. Interviews were held in affluent and administrative areas such as Ikoyi, Ikeja, and Alausa, as well as middle-income and artistic communities like Festac and Ibeju-Lekki, and lower-income areas such as Akoka, which has a significant student population. A smaller number of interviews were conducted in Ondo and Ekiti States. However, given the regional disparities in Nigeria— particularly in the North West and North East, which are more agrarian, have larger Muslim populations, and are more affected by internal displacement—the focus on the South West means the sample does not fully reflect Nigeria's broader socio-demographic landscape, even though respondents from Northern Nigeria were represented in the sample. Participants were recruited through convenience

sampling in locations where potential respondents were most likely to be found, such as passport offices, consular office vicinities, migrant shelters and other public spaces.

Graph 7 Countries where interviews were conducted and the country of origin of migrants residing in Morocco, Kenya and Nigeria.
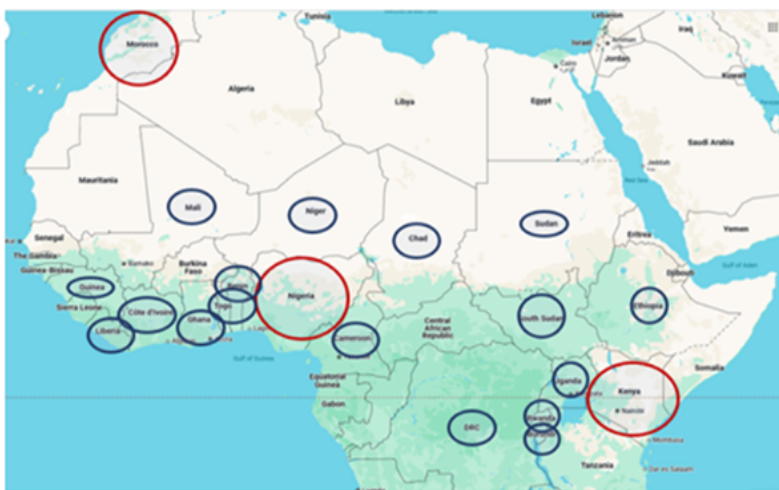
Fieldwork in **Italy** took place in Florence, Bologna, and the coastal cities of Cesena and Ravenna, located in the regions of Tuscany and Emilia-Romagna. Participants were recruited through diaspora and migrant organisations, Italian NGOs, church and religious groups, and the researcher's social networks. All interviews were conducted by a single researcher. Of the 14 interviews conducted, 10 were with Nigerians and 4 with Moroccans. Participants in the **UK** were recruited through Kenyan, Moroccan, and Nigerian Facebook communities, as well as through individuals working in NGOs in the North West of England (where the researcher was based), and through the social networks of partners in Kenya and Nigeria. Despite identifying and contacting a large group of potential participants, many were reluctant to be interviewed. Nevertheless, a total of 10 respondents from all three communities were successfully interviewed. These sessions, averaging 80 minutes, were the longest conducted across the entire project.

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The majority of interviews were conducted face-to-face, with only a small number carried out via Zoom—specifically, a few in the UK, one in Italy, and one in Morocco—due to respondent preference and geographical distance. All interviews were audio-recorded, with a few exceptions in Kenya where participants did not provide consent for recording; in these cases, detailed notes were taken instead. The language of the interviews varied by country. In the UK and Nigeria, all interviews were conducted in English. In Kenya, the majority were carried out in Kiswahili. In Morocco, over half of the interviews were conducted in French, a smaller proportion in Arabic, and the remainder in English. In Italy, most interviews were conducted in English, with a few conducted in Italian. All interviews were

Table 1 Fieldwork overview

	Kenya	Nigeria	Morocco	Italy	UK
Time	Nov '23-Feb '24	Oct '23 - Feb '24	Jan-March '24	June- Nov '24	Jan- Oct '24
Interview language	English=5 Kiswahili=62	English=46	French= 25 English=13 Arabic= 4	English=10 Italian= 4	English=10
Locations of interviews	Nairobi=38 Mombasa=21 Kilifi=8	Lagos State=41 Ondo/Ekitit States=5	Rabat=25 Casablanca=17	Tuscany= 8 Emilia-Romagna=6	North-West England=7, Midlands=1, South Engl.= 2
Online	0	0	1	1	4
	2	3	3	3	3
Nationality/ Status	Kenyans=37 Refugees/Non-Kenyans=30	Nigerians=44 Non-Nigerians =2	Moroccans= 11 Sub-Saharan=31	Nigerians=9 Moroccans=5	Nigerians=4 Kenyans=4 Moroccans=2
Average length of interviews	50mins	50 mins	48mins	55 mins	80 mins
Interviewee in the field	6	6	3	1	1

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subsequently translated into English and transcribed by the researchers to facilitate comparative data analysis across all research partners (see Table 1).

Challenges during fieldwork of the semi-structured interviews

Ethical approval was sought from the respective institutions in all five countries where fieldwork was carried out prior to the beginning of the fieldwork. In addition to that, in Kenya and Morocco, research permits to visit the fields and recruit potential participants was also needed to be obtained from the respective national or regional authorities.

Accessing refugees in Kenya and Sub-Saharan migrants in Morocco posed several challenges. In Kenya, gatekeepers—individuals who support refugees in their daily lives—played a crucial role in facilitating access. Refugees were often unresponsive or declined to participate when approached directly, without gatekeeper involvement. Initially, gaining the trust of these gatekeepers was difficult, as they questioned the purpose of the research. Their influence reflects broader research fatigue among refugee communities, where past studies have yielded few tangible outcomes. As a result, gatekeeping has become a form of protection, allowing communities to control the flow of information and ensure it is shared only with trusted actors. In Morocco, accessing Sub-Saharan migrants required collaborating with NGOs and organising a joint workshop required official permission form the ministry. Most of the interviews with these migrants were conducted during these workshops. Thus, gaining initial access to the field proved to be challenging at first, but were overcome as collaboration and trust was established.

In Italy, no Kenyan migrants were interviewed as the Kenyan community, though small and growing, lacked established organizations in the fieldwork areas. Furthermore, despite being one of the largest non-European communities in Italy (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, 2022), Moroccans were generally more reluctant to participate, although four finally agreed to be interviewed. Recruitment among Nigerians was significantly easier, partly due to the involvement of more established diaspora organizations, whose members were generally open— and at times eager—to share their experiences, resulting in the sample in Italy leaning more towards Nigerians. In the UK however, all three groups were included, although only 10 participants were eventually interviewed as the fieldwork needed to be wrapped up. There was a general research fatigue among respondents with some questioning the benefits of the research for themselves or their communities and struggling to fit in extra time for the interview given their challenging work-life balance.

Selecting a purposeful sample to ensure a socio-demographically diverse population as well as with different migration aspirations and status proved to be a challenge during fieldwork. In Kenya the team therefore interviewed larger number of respondents to ensure a balanced representation of aspiring/intending migrants. In Kenya, two stakeholder interviews were conducted with recruitment agencies, while in Nigeria, three stakeholders were interviewed. The analysis of these interviews was kept separate from that of the target group interviews. In Morocco, the UK and Italy several respondents were also community advocates or NGO representatives and thus they were de facto interviewed as stakeholders. In the data analysis therefore, apart from the five interviews with stakeholders in Nigeria and Kenya, we did not distinguish between the stakeholder and aspiring/intending migrant interviews as a stakeholder could at the same time be an aspiring migrant, a return migrant or a respondent with no migration aspirations. A brief overview of the

diversity of the final sampling population will be shown below and more detailed discussion in the next chapter (04) as well as in Chapter 06 on Intermediaries.

Data analysis of semi-structured interviews

All interview transcripts were anonymised prior to coding, and ID codes were assigned to each participant. These were later replaced with pseudonyms selected by the researcher, along with details of their country of interview, gender, and whether they were a refugee, in transit, or a returnee. Coding was carried out by all partners using a common skeleton coding tree, which broadly followed the structure of the semi-structured interviews and covered the following areas:

    1) Migration aspirations and journeys,

    2) Family, peers, community, and norms,

    3) Infrastructure and intermediaries,

    4) Policy and governance,

    5) Emotions, desires, and identity.

This deductive approach provided a shared starting point for the coding process and ensured that the analysis addressed the research questions and aims. It was complemented by an inductive coding approach, which allowed categories, themes, and codes to emerge organically from the data (Bingham, 2023).

The coding strategy varied between countries. In Nigeria, all interviews were coded by the lead researcher to ensure consistency and reliability in the coding process. In Kenya and Morocco, coding was undertaken by a team of three researchers in each country. The interview transcripts for Italy and UK were coded by the same researcher in the UK. All sections of each transcript were coded to ensure that no

information was excluded at this initial stage of analysis. The same text could be coded under multiple codes to capture different interpretations. Regular meetings were held within each country team and across all teams to discuss coding progress, review and revise code labels, and ensure consistency across the dataset. This collaborative process supported the development of a common coding structure while allowing space for country-specific codes to emerge. It enhanced the transparency and reliability of the coding process and helped minimise researcher bias, as coding was conducted generously—typically at the paragraph level—with overlapping codes applied where appropriate. This method of 'organising' the data enabled researchers to break down large volumes of text, group related content under thematic areas, and identify patterns and emerging themes both within and across countries (Welsh 2002).

Following the coding phase, the next step involved the creation of node memos. These comprised detailed summaries of each level 1 node (parent node) and its sub-nodes (level 2, child nodes), including key quotes and references to the original interviews, along with basic characteristics of the respondents for each country. The node memos were compiled in Word documents and shared with all partners. Analysing the node memos across all countries formed a crucial step in synthesising emerging themes for comparative analysis. This made the analysis more transparent, systematic, and robust, as all partners participated in the discussion and interpretation of themes from the detailed node memo summaries. The process enabled the identification of both similarities and differences across countries and facilitated the development of a common analytical framework and the structure of the final report. The report writing was led by Middlesex University London, with all partners contributing to the thematic sections and overall analysis.

Digital diaries and follow up interviews

In addition to the semi-structured interviews, participants who had previously been interviewed in Kenya, Nigeria, and Morocco were invited to take part in a digital diary component, facilitated by a researcher at Middlesex University London, between January and September 2024. To support ongoing communication via WhatsApp during the diary period, participants received monthly airtime worth approximately 10 Euros, provided by research partners in their respective countries. Although initial interest in participating in the digital diaries was high (16 from Nigeria, 17 from Morocco, and 23 from Kenya), the number of participants who ultimately consented and submitted at least one diary entry was lower (n=18). This was partly due to non-responses to outreach from the UK-based researcher (n=5), changes in phone numbers (n=5), or participants not using WhatsApp (n=12). In Morocco, five individuals were excluded due to a language barrier, and seven participants replied to initial contact but did not give consent to continue. 22 gave consent to be included and four dropped out. The final number of active participants nearly doubled the original target for the digital diary method. As a result, managing the digital diaries took up considerably more of the researcher's time than initially anticipated.

A designated phone was used to communicate with the participants. An initial phone call was arranged to talk the respondent through the process before asking for their consent which was given via WhatsApp either by confirming by text or voice message. Participants were instructed to send a diary entry at least once a month and were sent reminders and instructions if they didn't. Most entries were acknowledged promptly by the researcher and apologies given when there was a delay with the response. The transfer of the data through the partners in Kenya, Nigeria and Morocco ran smoothly and respondents were informed of any delays in

the transfer. Overall, throughout the digital diaries collection, no major ethical issues occurred.

A total of 18 participants remained engaged throughout the full six-month period: eight from Nigeria, six from Kenya, and four from Morocco, with a gender distribution of 13 men and five women. All four Moroccan participants were men, three of whom were originally from Sub-Saharan Africa (Ivory Coast and Guinea). In Kenya, the group included three men and two women; the women and one of the men were refugees from Burundi, Congo, and Rwanda. In Nigeria, all participants were Nigerian nationals, comprising three women and three men. Participants from Morocco, Kenya, and Nigeria who took part in the digital diaries were either aspiring or intending to migrate. Some had only vague ideas about where they wanted to go and how to get there, while others were actively preparing by gathering paperwork, searching for jobs, and seeking sponsors abroad. The refugees in Kenya and the migrants in Morocco had already left their home countries and intended to settle in their current host countries. However, some were still exploring opportunities to migrate to a Western country in search of greater stability. None of the digital diary participants were 'on the move' at the time of data collection.

Participants were reminded to submit at least one entry per month in order to remain eligible for the monthly data bundle, which was transferred by the research partners in their respective countries. However, participants were only removed from the sample if they failed to submit entries over several consecutive months. Two refugee women from Kenya, despite providing initial consent, withdrew from the study after a few months of participation.

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A total of 287 entries were submitted across all formats, including audio, video, and text messages, as well as links and screenshots. Of these, 160 were personal submissions:

- 78 were voice messages, ranging in length from a few minutes to around 20 minutes
- 60 were text messages, varying from a single sentence to a few short paragraphs
- 22 were personal videos, each up to two minutes in length

In addition, participants submitted:

- 49 screenshots, mainly of inquiries related to migration
- 51 links, primarily to Facebook or TikTok reels

The level of engagement with the digital diaries varied significantly. For instance, one young single female respondent from Nigeria submitted 24 voice messages and 14 text messages, while a male middle-aged married respondent sent 50 links (mostly to Facebook) along with 7 short voice messages and 19 brief text messages. Other participants submitted voice messages mainly when reminded to do so, typically around the time the monthly data bundle was due to be transferred. However, the quantity of submissions did not necessarily reflect their quality. Some participants who contributed less frequently or with shorter entries nonetheless addressed highly relevant topics and provided valuable insights.

The digital diary phase concluded with final online interviews, which began in July 2024—six months after participants were recruited—and ended in November 2024 when 13 follow-up interviews were conducted. These interviews were held via Zoom and lasted an average of 35 minutes. They focused on developments since the initial interview (to which the researcher had access via the country partners),

clarifications and follow-ups from diary submissions, and participants' experiences of the digital diary process.

The transfer of participants' details and their initial interview transcripts from the African partners to the UK partner was carried out in accordance with data protection protocols, as outlined in the ethics approval documentation—i.e., using password-protected documents. All submitted audio and video messages were transcribed, coded, and node memos were produced. The follow-up interviews served to clarify and explore topics that emerged during the diary phase. While these interviews were not systematically coded in the same way as the digital diary submissions, relevant insights were incorporated into the overall analysis.

The most populated codes from the digital diaries related to livelihoods, with participants frequently describing their struggles to make ends meet and discussing their journey planning (See table 2 below). There was an almost equal number of references to taking regular routes and the dangers associated with irregular migration routes. Other prominent themes included reasons for migration, the documentation process, and the role of intermediaries. Notably, participants appeared more forthcoming in expressing their frustrations with government institutions during the digital diary entries—sentiments that were less openly voiced in the semi-structured interviews. The digital diaries thus provided more nuanced insights into the decision-making processes of aspiring and intending migrants and the various factors influencing their choices. These insights will be explored further in Chapters 05 and 06, which focus on navigating migration and the migration infrastructure.

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Table 2 Level 1 coding tree from the digital diary submissions

Level 1 codes	Files	References
Communication with researcher (instructions/reminder/ airtime/ asking for help/ acknowledging receipt, explaining late reply)	18	199
Emotions of voice messages (tired, neutral, positive, loathing, sad, agitated)	16	70
Livelihood struggles (inflation, health costs, in transit, refugee, working conditions etc.)	14	103
Planning journey/paperwork (on regular/irregular routes, reason for migration, visa, etc.)	14	128
Government (corruption, bad government, call to act, no support of citizens)	8	17
Intermediaries (agencies, traffickers, NGOs, online services, bloggers, podcasts)	5	13
Gender (sex trafficking, domestic work abroad, sexual harassment, seeking partner abroad)	7	23
Family/Peers (migrate as a family, marriage plans, peers have it better abroad, giving advice to peers)	7	21
Follow-up interview (arranging it)	14	14

The socio-demographic characteristics of the sample

A total of 179 respondents were interviewed, comprising 45.7% women (n=80) and 54.3% men (n=95). Among the African sample, 43% (n=66) were women and 56.3% (n=85) were men. The proportion of male respondents was higher in Morocco and Nigeria, each with 59.5% men (n=25), compared to Kenya, where men made up 52.2% (n=35) of the sample. In the diaspora, 14 women and 10 men were interviewed. Of these, 7 women and 3 men were based in the UK. In Italy, the number of male and female respondents was equal. Overall, 45.7% of respondents interviewed for the Dynamig study were women (see 04 for more detailed discussion on gender).

Table 3 (below) provides further details of the socio-demographic characteristics of the sample which was collected during the interviews with respondents. These characteristics will be discussed in more detail in the relevant chapters. One key aspect to note here however, is the makeup of the sample within each country.

The Kenyan sample comprises 67 respondents, split between 37 Kenyan nationals and 30 refugees or other African nationals from Congo, Uganda, South Sudan, Burundi, and Rwanda residing in Kenya. Among the Kenyan nationals, 22 are returnees with previous experience working in GCC countries, while 15 are aspiring migrants who have never migrated. Migration intentions also differ among Kenyans: some plan to migrate for short-term work contracts abroad, while others are undecided or have no such plans. Refugees report a wide range of statuses, ranging from aspiring to migrate for work and awaiting resettlement through UNHCR, to returning home or settling permanently in Kenya.

In Morocco, the sample is made up of 73.8% Sub-Saharan migrants from and 26.2% Moroccan nationals, reflecting varied migration trajectories and levels of engagement with formal intermediaries. Sub-Saharan migrants tend to rely on informal brokers or traffickers, particularly for trans-Saharan or maritime journeys, turning to civil society organisations once settled. In contrast, Moroccan respondents generally pursue regular migration channels with minimal intermediary use. Demographic and socio-economic contrasts are also evident: Sub-Saharan migrants are mainly young, single men with lower education levels and no stable employment, while Moroccan respondents are better educated, with many holding university degrees, full-time jobs, and international study experience. Migration motivations diverge: education is the dominant driver among Moroccans, whereas Sub-Saharan migrants cite employment, conflict, family reunification, and aspirational careers (e.g., football, music). Current aspirations also reflect this

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Table 3 The socio-demographic characteristics of the sample

	Kenya	Morocco	Nigeria	Diaspora	Total N	Total (%)
Men	52.2%	59.5%	59.5%	41.7%	95	54.3%
Women	47.8%	40.5%	40.5%	58.3%	80	45.7%
Age 18-29	37.9%	42.9%	34.1%	12.5%	60	34.7%
Age 30-39	39.4%	38.1%	39.0%	20.8%	63	36.4%
Age 40-60	22.7%	19.0%	26.8%	66.7%	50	28.9%
Married	38.5%	16.7%	35.7%	58.3%	61	35.3%
Single	49.2%	83.3%	61.9%	25.0%	99	57.2%
Christian	69.7%	40.5%	76.2%	62.5%	110	63.2%
Muslim	30.3%	47.6%	21.4%	33.3%	57	32.8%
Level of education						
Elementary/none	15.2%	21.4%	9.8%	0.0%	23	13.3%
Secondary/Highschool/College	51.5%	33.3%	12.2%	20.8%	58	33.5%
Vocational/Other	18.2%	4.8%	24.4%	4.2%	25	14.5%
University	15.2%	40.5%	53.7%	75.0%	67	38.7%
Current Employment						
Employed (FT/PT)	9.2%	33.3%	32.5%	87.5%	54	31.6%
Self-employed	47.7%	9.5%	42.5%	0.0%	52	30.4%
Unemployed/daily wage/ seasonal	36.9%	54.8%	22.5%	0.0%	56	32.7%
Home maker/carer/ student/other	6.2%	2.4%	2.5%	12.5%	9	5.3%
Sector of employment						
Formal	10.5%	50.0%	48.7%	94.1%	51	38.3%
Informal	86.0%	35.0%	48.7%	0.0%	75	56.4%
Refugees/Sub-Saharan migrants	44.8%	73.8%	4.8%	N.A.	63	41.7%
Nationals of country	55.2%	26.2%	95.2%	N.A.	88	58.3%
Returnee	32.8%	9.5%	7.1%	N.A.	29	19.2%
Total N	67	42	43	14	170	

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divide—half of Moroccans wish to migrate again, while many Sub-Saharan migrants are still in transit or wish to settle in Morocco.

The Nigerian sample consists of 43 respondents, the vast majority of whom are Nigerian nationals (with just two from Republic of Benin and Chad). The sample is notable for its homogeneity and low levels of actual migration: 72% have not migrated, and only three individuals are returnees, two temporary migrants who migrate seasonally for contract work in the music industry and three who have migrated for leisure. This contrasts with the more mobile and diverse Kenyan and Moroccan samples. Most Nigerian participants are aspiring migrants, particularly interested in study and work routes abroad, favouring destinations such as the UK, Germany, US and Canada.

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04 To move or not to: decision-making and heterogeneous populations

Introduction

In Chapter 02, the migration characteristics of each of the three countries were outlined. In this chapter we first begin to explore the general economic, social and political conditions motivating individuals to migrate before considering how the heterogeneity of migrants may shape their aspirations, their plans and capacity to move. Amongst the most significant characteristics identified in the migration literature and amongst our interviewees were age and generation, educational levels and gender, though other aspects such as religion, ethnicity and location are also relevant.

Much of the literature on migration decision-making gives information on breakdown by age and gender and to a lesser extent on educational level, but we seek to go beyond simply classifying populations into categories. Our aim is to examine how such differentiation and heterogeneity shape mobilities, aspirations, the capability of individuals to migrate, regularly and irregularly through their access to resources, social networks and information. The outcomes of aspirations and capacity to migrate also need to take into account how individuals relate to their families and communities and the norms pertaining to different categories. Some are encouraged to migrate, others to stay. Caring responsibilities may lead to individuals being pressured to stay or not feeling they can leave due to their responsibilities. Others may feel they can better provide for their families by leaving and sending back

remittances. The work offered on the journey, in transit and at destination may differ for women and men with the former often being offered little protection.

In the first section, general motivations for migration are outlined for each of the countries before in the second section, drawing on the literature and our research findings, to explore the key dimensions of heterogeneity – age, education and gender.

Section 1 Motivations for Migrating

Kenya

Economic migration is a result of a strong desire to "escape poverty and underdevelopment at origin by moving into more developed countries." (Akanle 2022). The majority of the economic migrants destined for the Gulf Cooperation Countries (GCC), indicated that they were driven to migrate by several issues, such as lack of employment or decent jobs available in the country. The number of labour migrants from Kenya has grown since 2005 and was estimated to be between 57,000 to 100,000 in 2014 (Malit and Youha,2016). The unemployment rate in Kenya has risen since 2017 from 7 percent peaking at 13 percent by 2022 (see Graph 8 below). By 2024, it was reported that youth unemployment stood at 34.27 percent (Parliament of Kenya 2024). Unemployment has been linked to population growth, changes in migration flow, more younger educated people from whom there is a high demand for formal and decent employment.

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Graph 8 Unemployment rate in Kenya and Sub-Saharan Africa average, Total and Youth, % 2010−2023
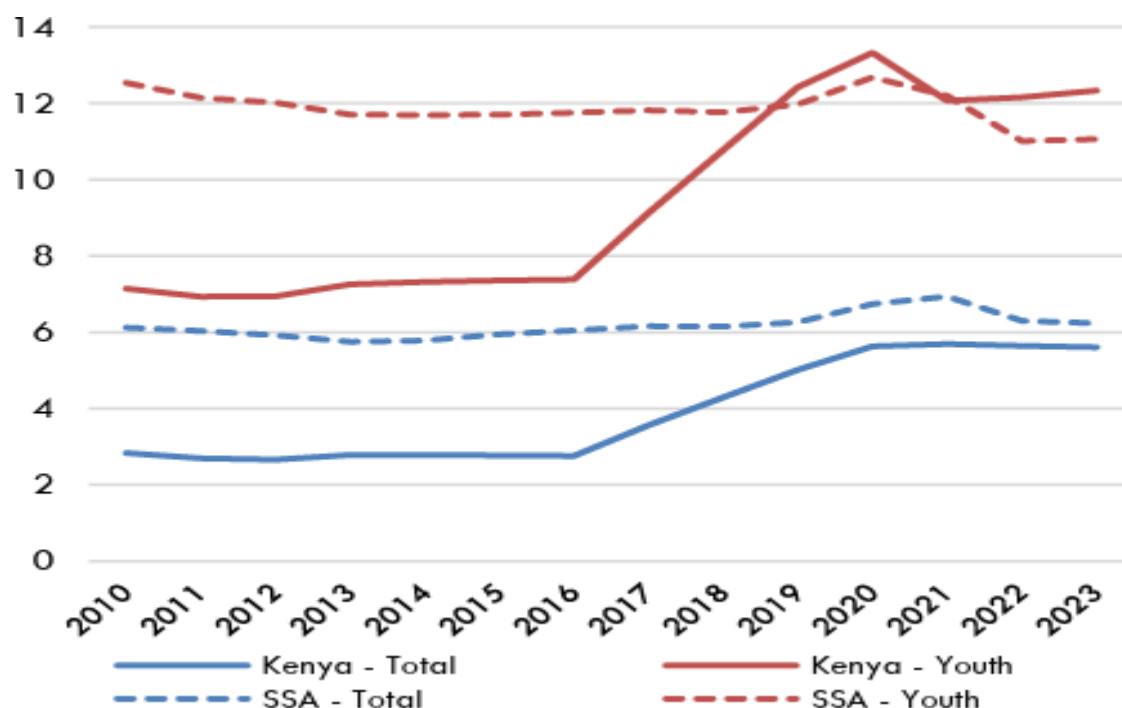
Second, the economic conditions in the country have been unstable in the past three years pushing many to consider migration to address their economic and social needs. Don, a 42-year-old Kenyan returnee is motivated to continue migrating because:

> the economy here in Kenya is terrible, there is no money, and it is very unbearable. Out there it is easy to save because I do not spend my money on food and accommodation since it is provided, here the little I get is finished on food rent and transport.

At the time of our research, the government of Kenya had introduced the Finance Bill 2024 that would increase the tax demands on different sectors across the country as well as impact Kenyan migrant workers. Furthermore, the government aimed to tax remittances sent home through a levy which it was argued would lead many to use informal tax remitting services to avoid the tax. The Finance Bill led to

massive protests from July 2024 that escalated over the space of three months. This led to massive closure of small and medium businesses and relocation of multinational businesses as well as significant layoffs and lack of employment pathways for graduates to take advantage of. At the same time, the Government of Kenya had brokered bilateral labour migration agreements with Saudia Arabia for nurses and Germany for labour migrants with varied skills sets (e.g. bus drivers).

Based on the responses in our research, Kenyan potential migrants were also looking for opportunities to grow their skills and experience different cultures while earning a good salary. Those aspiring to migrate were attracted to by the income they would receive often translating the currency to the local one (Riyal/Euros/Pounds to Kenya Shilling) as illustrated by Mosi, a 26-year-old male Kenyan returnee:

> If I migrate and start earning in different currencies it will change my ability since it will be interesting when I change the dollar to shillings so that after I can invest."

They are encouraged to migrate to save for investment purposes but often fail to recognise that they will be liable to other expenses.

Whereas, for refugees, many sought out asylum in Kenya and fled due to conflict and civil unrest in their respective countries. Although a few decided to make Kenya their home, most of the refugees expressed a strong interest in migrating for economic and job opportunities mostly in western countries. They were motivated because of some of the restrictions in Kenya to access jobs or open businesses due to their status. According to Article 28(6) of the Refugee Bill 2021, refugees in Kenya are allowed to start businesses, work, and practice trades or professions, provided their qualifications are verified by the Kenyan government (Halakhe and Kara 2025). There have been a number of studies that have illustrated the contributions of refugees to the Kenyan economy especially the host counties providing that right

to work would be of value to the economy of Kenya (Betts, Omata and Sterck, 2018).

Migrants and refugees are motivated by the potential to earn in stronger currencies, which they believe would enable them to improve their financial situation and invest in their family's future. The attraction to destination countries such as Canada, the USA, and the UK is due to the abundance of job opportunities and higher pay compared to their respective situation at the time.

For refugees, Kenya represents a secure country providing them with peace and protection needed from their respective countries. Many refugees have resided in Kenya for an extended period in a protracted state without being able to fully integrate locally, be resettled nor consider voluntary return and reintegration, because the current state in their respective countries remains volatile. As such, the motivations to migrate have been linked to the limited opportunities available to them in Kenya such as employment, further education in higher learning, access to quality health as well as freedom to move due to the Encampment Policy.[2] These refugees experience spatial immobility in Kenya where they are "forced to remain in one's position by structures set up by national and supranational migration regimes ...referred to as internal externalities." (Wajsberg 2020: 95; Schapendonk 2017).

Some refugees were aware that they could seek resettlement in Kenya to other countries but were not sure of the process. Makori from DRC said *"I could hear that when you go to Kenya, you can get resettlement and go out to European countries"* (42, M, DRC, Refugee/Aspiring/ No plans). Other refugees had already identified

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[2] The Encampment Policy of Kenya has been an unwritten policy that requires all refugees to reside and remain in the camps except for refugees who are undergoing the resettlement process (e.g. interviewing); require special medical and psychological care unavailable in the camps; those pursing education unavailable in the camps; and those experiencing insecurity in the camps.

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ideal resettlement countries covering all their needs in terms of safety, ease of integration and a sense of security as illustrated by Ayo:

> I would love to go to Sweden because it's a good, cool country and I love the country that's why I want to explore…it's a country full of peace and their lifestyle is amazing." (27, Queer, DRC, Refugee, Kenya).

Swedish integration programmes are typically considered very liberal because of their rights-based approach, which attempts to facilitate refugees' social inclusion through language, housing, and employment aid. However, this and many other policy approaches have evolved, and more restrictions have been put in place in terms of asylum rights (Borselli and Meijl 2021).

Despite being optimistic about moving to other countries of their choosing and doing research on options they can consider, they are hindered by the asylum system that requires them to be recognised as refugees and documented and follow the UNHCR resettlement process which often takes a very long time. Resettlement as one of the durable solutions for refugees especially is a process that requires one to be recognised as a refugee in the host country by UNHCR and government-led refugee status determination (RSD) process. Responses in our research revealed that refugees were motivated to migrate, whether it's through resettlement or voluntarily migrating to western countries, to have better access to quality education and healthcare.

Respondents in the UK diaspora were quite trenchant in their critiques of the political situation in Kenya. In particular, they referred to public sector inefficiency which they attributed to a culture of corruption, self-interest and misuse of public funds for luxury goods rather than investing in education and leadership development. They also felt that efforts to improve governance, such as civic competence training (e.g., Centre for Devolved Governance), had some success but

were not sustained due to government changes and so called for a new generation of civic-minded leaders to break cycles of inefficiency and corruption.

Morocco

Over the second half of the twentieth century, Morocco evolved into one of the world's leading emigration countries. Moroccans now form one of Western Europe's largest and most dispersed migrant communities, numbering well over two million people of Moroccan descent (de Haas, 2007b). This migratory dynamic reflects a complex interplay of structural and individual motivations, where both economic and non-economic factors shape migration decisions. In line with Skeldon's (1997:52) framework of global regionalization, Morocco exemplifies a country where increasing development and state formation have produced an integrated migration system involving both local and international movements.

Despite significant efforts in recent decades to promote economic and social development—including decentralization, gender equality, infrastructural investments, and civil liberties—youth in Morocco continue to grow up with the imagination of elsewhere. This vision is shaped by the desire for broader opportunities, social protection, and personal freedoms. According to the Arab Barometer, nearly 70% of Moroccans under the age of 30 years express a desire to leave the country. Morocco ranks 23rd out of 177 countries in the global index of human flight and brain drain, a striking figure considering the absence of war or political collapse (Bossen, 2023).

Among the most prominent motivations to migrate is economic hardship. Unemployment rates in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region are among the highest globally, particularly among youth, and educational attainment often fails

to translate into better job prospects (Bossen, 2023). In Morocco, economic disparities are compounded by widespread perceptions of state neglect, with limited access to healthcare, social protection, and meaningful support for career development. The country's economy, while relatively strong within the African context, continues to grapple with the lingering impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and a devastating earthquake in 2023, which killed over 3,000 people and displaced 15,000 (Panara, 2024). As Aziza, a 20-year-old female Moroccan interviewee notes:

> But I think the kind of encouragement that exists is the lack of opportunities here in Morocco. When you don't find one, you decide automatically to migrate.

While de Haas (2007b) has contested the notion that migration is driven solely by poverty or lack of development, he also acknowledges that economic motivations remain dominant. Through empirical research, de Haas confirmed that most Moroccan migrants are driven by the aspiration to improve their living conditions and access stable sources of income. Likewise, the European Training Foundation (2013) identifies economic hardship as the most commonly declared reason for migration. McMurray (2001:153), in his study *In and Out of Morocco*, describes the prototypical migrant as a

> poor young man from the countryside" whose primary objective is to return home wealthier and more respected. Migration, for many, is an act of familial sacrifice—Moroccan youth often frame their journey abroad as a mission to "save the family back home."

At the same time, migration is not solely about economic gain. The allure of host countries—freedom, modernity, and democratic governance—plays an important role. Moroccan journalist Fouad Laroui observed during a visit to Amsterdam that many Moroccans migrate in search of "emancipation," noting that true modernity centres on individual agency (Laroui, 2013). Moudden (2013) echoes this view by emphasizing that democratic aspirations are not devoid of material logic: democracies often correlate with prosperity. Therefore, even when motivations appear non-economic, they often reflect deeper financial rationales.

Social status is another powerful non-material factor shaping migratory decisions. In many rural communities, migration confers symbolic capital. Anbi (2013a) refers to the "social hierarchy dictated by migration," where returnees from Europe are seen as village heroes, admired for their courage and contributions to their families. This social recognition translates into tangible expressions of success: building homes, sponsoring religious events, and financing pilgrimages (de Haas, 2007:27). Migration thus becomes not only a path to economic advancement but also a key avenue for upward social mobility and community prestige.

However, beyond economic conditions and symbolic aspirations, one of the most under-discussed but deeply consequential drivers of emigration is Morocco's education system. which also acts as a push factor for Moroccan students seeking opportunities abroad. As Aziza, a 20-year-old aspiring Moroccan argues,

> Honestly, you can see it in the programmes in the universities are not diverse enough. They are not all the same, medicine or engineering. It's not organized or well- oriented. Plus, even the salaries are not good, especially in the public administration in Morocco, and so on. It's the same thing, if someone doesn't have a good education, they won't be able to find a job, even if they have a good master. (MAR_F_20_Aziza)

Despite the expansion of domestic private universities, many Moroccan students perceive foreign education as offering better academic quality, international exposure, and career prospects. The high costs of private education at home, combined with the desire for globally recognized qualifications, often motivate young Moroccans to migrate. As Kamal, a Moroccan returnee, noted:

> Education, not even primarily, the only reason was education. It was to go and study and possibly what I thought at first is that well I'll come back to Morocco after my studies. Moreover, I had a scholarship at one point when I was in engineering school. (MAR_M_39_ Kamal)

These testimonies highlight how education remains a complex driver of migration in Morocco, simultaneously attracting foreign students while encouraging Moroccan youth to pursue educational migration pathways abroad. Indeed, educational migration often intersects with the broader economic narrative. Many of Morocco's most talented students leave not only for higher academic standards but also for the

greater economic rewards that are believed to follow foreign credentials. Unfortunately, this growing trend of "brain drain" deprives the Moroccan labour market of its most skilled individuals, thereby reinforcing cycles of underdevelopment. It is thus vital for Moroccan policymakers to rethink the domestic education system—not only in terms of access and quality, but also in terms of the broader developmental and migratory consequences it produces.

In sum, Moroccan emigration is shaped by a constellation of motivations: persistent economic hardships, perceptions of state neglect, aspirations for democratic freedoms, social expectations of masculinity, and the structural weaknesses of the national education system. While economic reasons remain central, they are intertwined with symbolic, cultural, and institutional factors that together sustain the Moroccan culture of migration. As de Haas (2007b) concludes, migration is not merely an act of survival but a strategic project of transformation, one in which individuals seek to reposition themselves within both local and global hierarchies.

Nigeria

Persistent low remuneration in government positions and high unemployment rates in Nigeria have failed to provide financial stability or retain skilled professionals, leading to significant emigration. In the UK, Nigeria is among the first five primary medical qualifications from outside the UK and EEA (GMC, 2022). As of Q4 2023, Nigeria's unemployment rate stood at 5.0 per cent under the new methodology by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), but youth underemployment and job dissatisfaction remain widespread (NBS, 2024). Only a tiny minority of Nigerians can be said to be truly "gainfully" employed. Youths are particularly affected, for they are less likely to secure formal employment even though 70 per cent of the population is under the age of 30 years, and 42 per cent under the age of 15 years (Ogwo, 2022).

Deteriorating economic conditions, widespread insecurity—including rampant kidnapping across various parts of Nigeria—and protracted insurgencies, particularly in the North-East (e.g., Boko Haram and ISWAP activities), have contributed to many Nigerians emigrating (Ezeabasili 2025). While efforts have been made to bolster local security through regional vigilante groups, their impact has been mixed (Onuoha Nwangwu, Ugwueze (2023). In the South-West, the Western Nigeria Security Network, popularly known as Amotekun, was launched in 2020 to combat rising insecurity (Nwoko 2021). Similar outfits include Ebube Agu in the South-East, established by the South-East Governors Forum in 2021, and various local vigilante groups such as the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) in the North-East and Hisbah in the North-West and North-Central (Nanbuihe, Ashindorbe and Odobo (2023). However, these initiatives often lack adequate funding, legal clarity, or coordination with federal security forces, limiting their reach (Olaniyan & Onuoha, 2021).

University strikes, particularly between 2009 and 2022, severely impacted public education quality in Nigeria through prolonged and unpredictable academic disruptions. These strikes, fuelling frustration with the government, contributed to the proliferation of private universities and increased aspirations among students to pursue education abroad (Nkanu, Otu and Utu-Baku, 2023).

Thus, the lack of critical infrastructure—such as healthcare, education, and transportation—has significantly contributed to the rise in migration from Nigeria. Infrastructure challenges, particularly in the power and transportation sectors, have been identified as major impediments to economic growth (Foster and Pushak, 2022). For instance, the Manufacturers Association of Nigeria (MAN) estimates that inadequate power supply results in an annual economic loss of approximately ₦10 trillion (about $22 billion), accounting for nearly 2 per cent of the country's GDP

(Vanguard, 4 March 2025). Additionally, Nigeria's road network is underdeveloped, with only about 30 per cent of its estimated 200,000 km of roads paved, leading to transportation inefficiencies that hinder economic activities (Foster and Pushak, 2022).

Poor healthcare infrastructure in Nigeria has led to high staff turnover, further overburdening the remaining employees. The country faces a severe shortage of skilled health workers, with a density of only 1.83 per 1,000 people, significantly below the World Health Organization's recommended threshold of 4.45 per 1,000 (WHO 2023). This shortage is exacerbated by the emigration of medical professionals seeking better opportunities abroad. In response, the Nigerian government approved the National Policy on Health Workforce Migration in August 2024, aiming to mitigate brain drain and encourage the return of health professionals from the diaspora. The policy introduces targeted incentives for healthcare workers, especially those in rural areas, including special programmes, improved medical supplies, mortgages for facilities, tax breaks, and regular salary reviews. However, the policy lacks specificity regarding economic incentives and improvements in salaries, which could undermine its effectiveness. Additionally, potential disparities in state-level incentive programs might lead to the uneven distribution of healthcare workers (Olatunji et al. 2024). The policy also does not directly address the issue of reducing working hours, a substantial factor in worker satisfaction.

Despite these challenges, many Nigerians remain optimistic that improvements in economic conditions and infrastructure could encourage citizens to stay and contribute to national development. Some view regular migration as a temporary strategy to acquire resources or skills to facilitate systemic changes within the country. A view from Damilola, Nigerian in the UK diaspora summed it up:

I just want to put it out there that it's not because Nigerians don't want to stay at home that they are migrating, most Nigerians would prefer to stay at home. If I could get the level of support I have here in Nigeria, I would be in Nigeria tomorrow. […] If I can fend for myself financially in Nigeria I would be in Nigeria, with the outage of power, bad roads, bad leadership, I would be there tomorrow. (UK_NGR_F_Damilola)
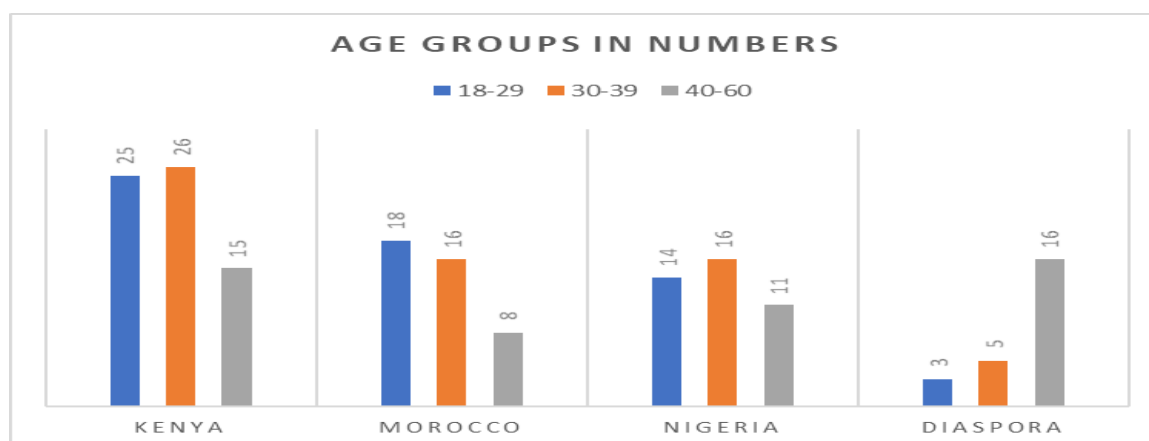
Section 2 Heterogeneous Decision-Making

In this section, the heterogeneous nature of decision-making identified in the general literature is presented for each characteristic before moving onto the evidence that emerged in our own research.

Age

Age is a key determinant of migration aspirations, preparations, and outcomes. Though it is known that youth have high aspirations to be mobile, there is little data on youth mobility (Belmonte and MacMahon 2019). The literature consistently shows that younger individuals are more likely to aspire to migrate internationally (Aslany et al. 2021; Nieri et al. 2012). Age influences migration aspirations not only through its biological component but also captures various characteristics that shape its significance, including propensity to take risks, ability to migrate, work opportunities abroad, cultural and social constructs around adulthood, just to mention a few. Younger people also generally face higher levels of unemployment or work informally. For the educated this represents high levels of under-utilisation of qualifications which applies to our three countries. As we shall see in the three countries, age also combines with life course or life stage, such as partnering with someone, getting married or having children, and family dynamics.

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Graph 9 Age group of interviewees by country in numbers

AGE GROUPS IN NUMBERS

■ 18-29 ■ 30-39 ■ 40-60

KENYA: 25, 26, 15
MOROCCO: 18, 16, 8
NIGERIA: 14, 16, 11
DIASPORA: 3, 5, 16

Source: Dynamig socio-demographic sample of interviews

Kenya

Although researchers indicate that there is limited evidence to illustrate that age plays an important role in the decision to migrate, the results of our research reveal that age determined choice of destination. Among Kenyan nationals aspiring to migrate, younger and first-time migrants usually aged between 18 and 25 years were recent entrants to the job market and were exploring job opportunities lacking in Kenya. Many are drawn to the Gulf Cooperation Countries as there has been a recent culture of migration to the region linked to economic opportunities. In addition, they found that there were easier and available pathways to employment where recruitment agencies often covered their migration costs (e.g. processing of passport, identification of employer, payment of pre-departure training, visa costs, health assessments and air ticket) that would be deducted from their pay once the migrant starts work (see Chapter 06 for a more detailed discussion). Aspiring migrants such as the 25-year-old Kenyan respondent Chiumbo reflect the sentiments of most aspiring young migrants with no travel experience. He states that his migration plans

> started when I finished my first degree is when I looked for the passport. I am now prepared I already have a passport and have paid the agent so that when an opportunity arises I just get a visa, go for

> interview and go. I have aspiration to move to abroad for better opportunities which include working and earning a living with my driving ability.

However, it was notable that older and/or experienced migrants aged 25 years and above preferred western countries in Europe (Germany and UK), North America (Canada and USA) and Australia due to better pay and protective measures in place in employment. Although they had migrated first to the GCC, their experiences made them evaluate their worth in terms of earnings and the type of work they aspired to do in western countries. Whilst there were younger and experienced migrants who also desired to migrate to western countries, they all often started with GCC. Jabari had migration experience in the GCC and was in the process of planning his migration to Canada based on his own research. As a heavy truck driver, he stated that Canada is the preferred destination "b*ecause of the diverse culture they have and also, they have good job opportunities, and they are friendly, and it will be a long-term migration plan for a truck drivers' job*" (Jabari_KEN_28_M_Returnee). The sentiment was not shared by others who were less optimistic of travelling abroad as their migration experience informed their decision to return and stay in Kenya. Hakizimana, a 40-year-old Kenyan returnee stated that:

> I am not planning to migrate; I am content here and with things. Migration is not about taking it, it is about creating a livelihood. I do not envy other migrants, my first encounter with African migrants in Madrid and Milan was not good, most of them lack papers, sleep on the streets, no future, no progress in Europe, not utilising one's skills through employment based on their employability. This has really influenced my decision to stay back and build in Kenya. Going and coming back home, I can invest, back home, I am here, and I am able to work all over the globe.

Age also was a factor in determining who is to migrate. Aisha, a 26-year-old female aspiring migrant who noted that the older children had a better access to opportunities (e.g. education). This means all investments are pumped on the first and second- born on the assumption that investing in the older children may assist the younger siblings who can get additional support from the older children. However, in her case, the older children did not do so well and dropped out of school adding pressure on her to explore migration as a pathway to reduce the

financial burdens on the household. This sentiment is shared by Amara, a 25-year-old Kenyan female respondent who is unemployed, who stated that "*my family wants the best for me and being the first born if am able to go and get a job then I can be able to bring along my siblings*".

On the other hand, for refugees, age was not a factor to seek resettlement options or aspire to migrate. The conditions the refugees were living in over time influenced their desire to aspire to migrate to access opportunities that they lack in Kenya (e.g. education, health, security).

Morocco

In the Moroccan research, age plays a critical role in shaping migration aspirations, strategies, and outcomes. Amongst various respondents, younger individuals often perceived themselves as more adaptable, resilient, and capable of taking risks. For many, youthfulness represented an asset: a period when hardships could be better endured, and when migration offered a real opportunity to secure a better future. As one young female Moroccan respondent put it, being in one's twenties meant that *"everything is doable"* with energy and determination compensating for uncertainties (MAR_F_21_Kawtar). This sense of adaptability often fuelled willingness to undertake even dangerous or uncertain journeys. Several Sub-Saharan young migrants mentioned that they preferred to migrate earlier rather than later, believing that youth conferred both physical endurance and social flexibility. The desire to seize opportunities before aging limited their chances was a recurrent theme. In contrast, Bamidele, a 29-year-old interviewee from the Ivory Coast, reflected that had he migrated earlier, he might have advanced further professionally, noting that starting anew in his thirties was much more difficult.

> Yes, if I had left earlier, I would be more ahead in terms of being able to progress. But didn't leave quickly. I can't see myself just entering and leaving for Europe like that. With my age, I'm in my thirties, I can't see myself starting from scratch. Starting from scratch is a new life. So, it doesn't surprise me.
> (MAR_M_29_Ivory Coast_Bamidele)

Similarly, Kamari, a 28-year-old respondent from Mali also addressed the age factor:
"Yes, very well. I think if I had been a little older, it would have complicated my life."
However, not all migrants saw age as a decisive factor. Older individuals, some in their thirties or beyond, emphasized that the decision to migrate was more connected to necessity than to their stage in life. Whether young or old, migration was perceived as the only viable option when faced with economic hardship, political instability, or family responsibilities.

Family dynamics also intersect with age in important ways. In several testimonies, younger family members were either pressured or expected to migrate to support relatives through remittances. In other cases, youth could be a reason for hesitating: some individuals felt "too young" to face the independence and loneliness that migration might entail. Age, therefore, could either accelerate or delay the decision to move, depending on personal perceptions of readiness and familial expectations. When asked if they had any plans to study, Salima, a 20-year-old Moroccan woman, responded *"to be honest, no. I felt that I was very young to go to another country and live there. My worst fear back then was this".* (MAR_F_20_Salima).

Moreover, responsibilities often change with age. Older migrants described a sense of urgency to build stability, highlighting concerns over securing employment, starting families, and achieving personal goals before it was "too late". Some framed migration as part of a larger life project involving both personal achievement and future familial obligations. In sum, while youthfulness often emboldens migration aspirations by fostering a sense of resilience and opportunity, age can also introduce additional layers of pressure and urgency. Migration decisions in Morocco, therefore, are not simply a matter of youthful ambition or adult necessity, but a negotiation between individual life stages, family expectations, and perceived windows of opportunity.

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Nigeria

The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that 86.5per cent of migrant workers are within the prime working age range of 25 to 64 years (ILO, 2021). In 2022, 70 per cent of Nigerians aged 18-35 surveyed by the African Polling Institute reported they would relocate if given the opportunity, a marked jump from 39% across all age groups in 2019. Moreover, the number of passports newly issued or renewed almost doubled, from one million in 2021 to 1.9 million in 2022.

Literature on migration highlights three common themes linking age to migration patterns. First, younger workers are more likely to benefit from migration, as they have a longer time horizon to gain returns on their relocation investment. Abdul puts it this way:

> Actually, recently we are hearing a lot of news concerning the Canada, that they are empowering and employing, self-employed people and while I'm self-employed, still young, early at 20s, so I think I should use maybe just 5 years of my years to hustle and see how I can make it. (NG_M_20_Abdul).

Both Abdul and Nicholas perceive that opportunities decline with age, for Nicholas, who is older, his response evokes a sense of urgency *"Before 35, I should be able to achieve all those things."* (NG_M_34_Nicholas).

Second, migration rates remain higher in larger cohorts due to increased labour market pressures, driving more individuals to seek opportunities abroad. Older people within working age, continue to aspire to migrate as Lebari puts it:

> The ability, the healthiness is what matters, not age. People count on age and I don't know what is the function of age. Age is just a number. If I want to travel unless you want to deny me that opportunity of traveling that you will say age." (NG_M_45_Lebari).

Third, age affects migration tendencies, with older populations in origin and destination countries showing more risk aversion. The Nigeria data reflects an underrepresented area—participants' perceptions of age in migration. Some participants expressed concerns that opportunities diminish with age, particularly

after reaching 40, affecting their motivation to complete their migration plans quickly (NG_M_20_Abdul and NG_M_34_Nicholas). This view conforms with findings that younger workers expect higher returns from migration (Bossavie & Gorlach, 2021). Another respondent expressed more risk aversion to the migration experience with older age (NG_M_27_Segun) (Huber & Nowotny, 2020; Roca Paz and Uebelmesser, 2021). Segun says: "*and also as a young individual there is also nothing to lose from trying out different options*".

Most respondents who addressed the question of age were men, for women, we had to deduce the association from the larger transcript and discussions with stakeholders, for example, for Joy (NG_F_20_Joy), who took an irregular journey to Mali at 17 (she was 20 at the time of the interview), age played an important role in her vulnerability and ability to discern whether to travel with strangers without telling her mum. This vulnerability of younger women was raised at the Nigeria country workshop (8-9 May 2024) with an emphasis from stakeholders that younger women had different attitudes to risk and less discernment. Extended periods of information access and access to counselling were suggested to improve the migration decision-making capabilities of this group.

Education

Level of education is usually mentioned in analyses of potential and actual migrants but this often fails to explore more fully what levels of education mean for their attitudes towards migration, including being in transit (see Morocco) and the possibilities of accessing particular routes and opportunities, for example a study/work route. As we shall see, in general the highly educated are able to access regular routes and to a greater extent apply directly to universities and work (Berriane et al. 2021).

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The average level of education is high amongst our interviewees (see Graph 10), especially among Nigerians and Moroccans if compared with the characteristics of irregular migrants managing to reach Europe. Even among Sub-Saharan migrants in Morocco there are a number with university education while others seek to gain higher qualifications. Educational access has been substantially expanded in the tertiary sector and the opening up of private universities in all our countries also attract students from other African countries.

Graph 10 Levels of Education of Interviewees
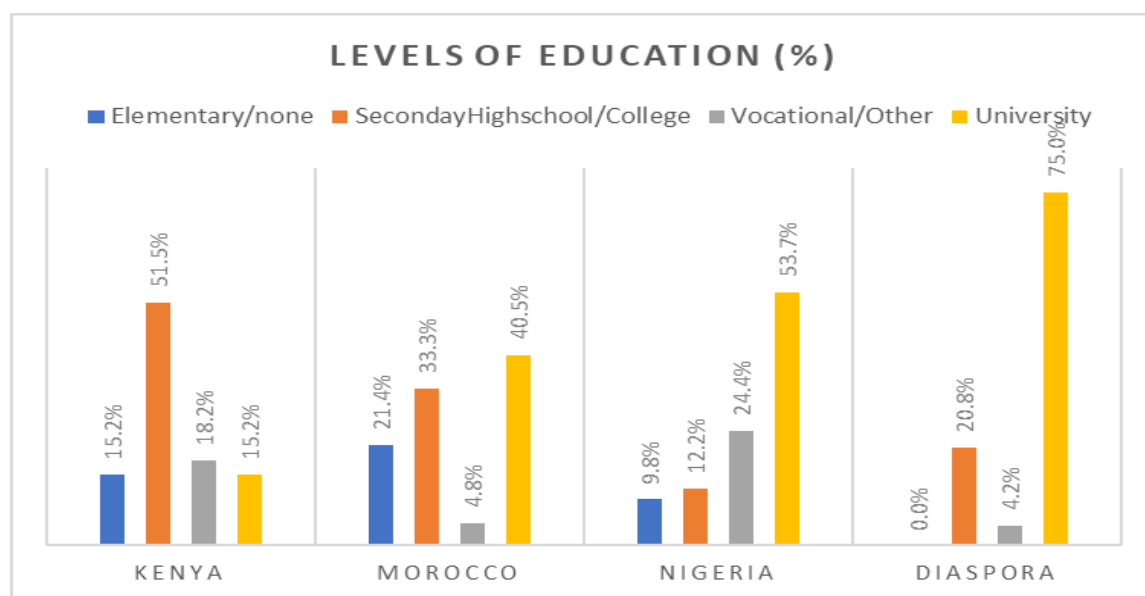
Source: Dynamig socio-demographic sample of interviews

Kenya

Most Kenyan potential/return migrants have at least a high school certificate. A small percentage have higher educational qualifications such as a Masters, but have yet to secure employment in Kenya. Some deskill to access any income generating opportunity – especially in the GCC— leading to brain waste. Some aspiring refugees saw accessing education as a pathway to their destination countries. By seeking further education in destination countries, they would be in a better position

to access the local job market because they have acquired the training. This aligns with Patterson's (2023) argument that refugees dream of future opportunities for them and their families that will help them leave the camp and thereby giving them the right to move. He further adds that the young refugees who were born at Kakuma Camp saw education and mobility meant that they could aspire to develop a better future for their people. Migration aspirations is an ongoing desire for many refugees who want to contribute to their local economy as well as give back to their country of origin, but the pathways available to them may be limited with time and resource constraints.

Baker, Due and Rose (2021) highlight that there is little understanding from lived experiences of how the transition from education to employment has been for refugees who have gone through the process. Yet, refugees such as those from South Sudan have a strong interest in seeking educational opportunities abroad. Amara, a young woman, age 18, states that

> I am still at the beginning of the journey. I am still held back by education, and I believe I have one step since. I will finish school with a certificate so I can further my education"

while Kamau (male, age 28) is interested in

> further studies in the United Kingdom because the education system is good and there are so many part-time opportunities for students… Migration has been the ultimate, but I don't know what next.

The challenge faced by refugees is accessing these opportunities within the UNHCR system. There are a number of initiatives that facilitate further education for refugees. For instance, there is the UNHCR DAFI programme which is the Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative designed to train refugees in teaching and leadership that will lead to employment. The programme will help refugees enrol into public higher education institutions globally as part of its commitments to the Global Compact on Refugees under the pledge of leave no one behind. However, participants in this study did not mention any existing initiatives that they were exploring educational pathways, indicating they were independently seeking

opportunities for themselves based on information they have gathered with various sources. Although a few Kenyan nationals expressed interest in seeking further education, most were focused on employment opportunities available to them.

Morocco

Education represents both a push and a pull factor in the migration decisions of individuals in Morocco. Aspirations for education intersect with employment opportunities, age, and gender to create complex migration trajectories, where the promise of better educational outcomes often motivates movement, but realities on the ground reshape those aspirations.

For many Sub-Saharan migrants, education is seen as a critical pathway toward socio-economic mobility. Some individuals migrated specifically to pursue university degrees, vocational training, or skill-building opportunities. As Chiumbo from Cameroon states:

> After high school, you have to go to university. How can you go to university, if you don't have anything? You can't. How can you concentrate in school while the lecturer is teaching you if you are thinking about how to make money? Barbing is not the type of trade that can finance you while you want to study, pay your bills. (MAR_M_31_GN.CO_Chiumbo)

Aspirations among Sub-Saharan migrants ranged from seeking professional certifications, enrolling in master's programmes, to accessing better resources and teaching environments. However, upon arrival, many encountered challenges that tempered their expectations. The ideal of "studying abroad" often met the practical difficulties of navigating bureaucratic systems, securing legal residency, and coping with the cost of education. Without valid residence permits, obtaining diplomas or certifications became difficult, leaving many migrants unable to formalize their training and transform it into tangible career opportunities.

Access to educational and training opportunities proved highly uneven. While a few Sub-Saharan migrants managed to enroll in professional courses—such as nursing, business management, translation, or technical trades—many others were deterred by high fees, complex administrative procedures, or simply a lack of information about available programmes. Several testimonies highlighted frustrations related to incomplete training programs or being asked for unexpected payments to obtain certifications.

Some migrants had to work simultaneously to finance their studies, a challenge that often led to discontinuation or failure to complete their education. Moreover, opportunities were often segregated by field: while some areas such as nursing offered clearer pathways to certification and employment, others—particularly fields requiring formal accreditation or higher education degrees—remained largely inaccessible without significant financial and institutional support. As Nala, a Cameroonian migrant notes:

> In the night, I work in the joint, in the day, and call center. I saw that call center is not, it's too difficult. You cannot work and do school. But I leave it, I find another job. (MAR_F_35_Nala).

Ali, a migrant from Togo, has had a similar experience,

> That's how I enrolled. I started, I worked, I went to do labour. And in the evening, I went to classes. That's what I did until I got my diploma. And after all, I was looking for work, but I didn't have a residence permit. It was a bit complicated. (MAR_M_43_Togo_Ali)

The perception that Morocco does not offer sufficient career development opportunities further exacerbated this disillusionment. This broader sense of systemic neglect fuelled a growing aspiration among many to either continue migrating onward or to seek opportunities elsewhere when initial education projects failed to materialize into tangible socio-economic advancement. Thus many interviewees expressed feelings of abandonment, emphasizing that both migrants and Moroccan citizens face similar structural obstacles: limited support for professional integration, high unemployment rates among graduates, and

inadequate governmental programs to help young people transition from education to the labor market.

Nigeria

In Nigeria, a very high proportion of our interviewees had a higher education or equivalent qualification, a group that has been seen as seeking to flee or japa from the Yoruba expression *já pa*, meaning "to run" or "to flee reflecting a sense of a country not working and without a future (Liu 2024). *Japa* also encourages a revised understanding of destination "choice" in migration. While individuals see migration as a chance for self-improvement and hope, it also contributes to a larger issue of brain drain—where skilled and educated individuals leave Nigeria, depriving the country of talent and innovation.

This paradox is evident in the tension between individual success and national decline—while "Japa" offers personal growth, it exacerbates Nigeria's economic stagnation by exporting skilled labour without structures for reintegration. It thus has multiple dimensions ranging from a response to systemic failure (economic hardship, insecurity, lack of governance), an act of resistance against exploitation and stagnation and a pursuit of self-determination in an environment that limits opportunity. Mercy says:

> my father already believed because he studied abroad. So, he believes that the educational system there is better here, is better there than here. So that's why he wanted us to study abroad. (NG_F_20_Mercy).

Onduka captures the delay in education due to strikes at some public universities as he views his education relative to his peers abroad "*The people that we started [university education] together; they will soon be done.*" (NG_M_21_Onduka).

Although Canada, the US and the UK remain top of destinations sought, the middle class captures a range of people with varying financial situations, travel timelines

and appetites for adventure. Japa has hit the medical profession especially hard.
The Nigerian Medical Association said, in 2022, at least 50 doctors were leaving the
country each week.

Data from popular destinations, such as the UK and Canada, suggest that education
is the primary migration pathway and that student numbers have increased rapidly in
the past few years but will have fallen off due to restrictions placed on international
students. In the UK, the Office for National Statistics reported an increase in
Nigerian students, from 6,798 in 2017 to 59,053 in 2022 but in 2024 due to changes
in immigration regulations preventing postgraduate students bringing in family
members, numbers fell by two-thirds. In Canada, Immigration, Refugees and
Citizenship Canada reported an increase in the number of study permits issued from
12,565 in 2017 to 37,314 in 2022 but Canada has now applied lower numbers to
international student entries. This trend dates to early post-independence, with a
shift in perception about the growing educational gaps between Nigeria and
destinations abroad over time, for Adunni, a stakeholder who had her secondary to
degree education abroad

> I'm not sure people like me got a superior education. It was okay, but I'm I'm I'm pretty sure one would
> have gotten an equally sound education at that time…different now, then our education systems were
> pretty good. But it was the fashion then, and er…parents…erm…kind of felt this is a good thing to do for
> your child … (NG_F_Adunni)

Gender

The role of gender in migration and the need for disaggregated data have received
considerable attention globally (Kofman and Raghuram 2015; Mora and Piper
2021). Cultures or norms of migration may be differentiated, especially according to
age, gender and marital status. Gender norms that portray women's or girls'
unaccompanied migration as indecent or less ideal do not necessarily limit girls'

migration aspirations but rather shape the particular forms that aspirations take, for instance, how or with whom aspiring migrants hope to migrate (Thorsen, 2010). The application of stringent and constraining norms to women (Ferrant et al. 2014; Salomone and Ruyssen 2018) may lead them to seek to migrate to avoid discrimination or cultural practices, such as early and forced marriages (Belloni, 2019) or the stigmatisation of separation and divorce. Others migrate to escape domestic and gender violence or lack of employment opportunities. Both men and women may seek to escape from norms limiting their sexual orientation (Cortés 2023). Mobility is equally important for young people. While men's mobility is part of households' economics and strengthens their family status, women's mobility is rather seen as a personal project geared towards acquiring life skills in cities (Bolay 2021).

As in other regions of the world, it took some time for women's mobility in Africa to be recognised in migration studies. Caroline Wright (1995) has detailed the previous gender blindness and growing awareness in the 1980s of women's mobility. In Southern Africa labour migration during the colonial period was mainly, but not exclusively, undertaken by men. By the 1980s the gender specificity of labour migration came to be recognised and investigated, showing that independence in the 1950s and 1960s brought an end to the legislative control restricting women's mobility in many countries.

Nearly two decades ago, Diop and D'Aloisio (2006) highlighted issues that had not adequately been taken into account. These concerned the fact that women were also migrating to meet their own needs rather than joining a husband or family (Adepoju,2005) and that the migration of skilled workers was felt most acutely in the health sector depleting the supply of health care workers in African countries. At the same time, there was indication of brain circulation, particularly within Southern

Africa. They also called for the deskilling experienced post migration to be taken seriously and argued that policies regarding migration must be institutionalized so that migrants can and will migrate with rights which they could access.

Yet, gendered mobilities in Africa have received less attention in the growing literature on gendered migration in the global South than in other regions (Anastasiadou et al. 2023; Bastia and Piper 2023). For example, it has been argued that until recently, much of the literature on West African migration has tended to ignore gender perspectives or tended to focus on women 'as' gender while men were portrayed as, perhaps unwittingly, neutral or un-gendered. Now key gendered themes in Anglophone West African literature, such as femininization of migration, migration as social becoming, changing migration aspirations, remittances and return migration), have emerged (Setrana and Kleist 2022).

In general, the literature on decision-making shows that men are more likely to aspire to migrate compared to women (Aslany et al. 2021). However, the gender component of migration aspirations and migration outcomes varies greatly across and within countries. This depends on a wide variety of factors; ranging from the distinct work opportunities in different places for men and women, to migration representing an escape from social restrictions and domestic violence for women (Nieri et al. 2012). As such, the influence of gender on migration aspirations and outcomes is multi-layered and a critical factor for consideration. In relation to gender norms, Aslany et al. (2021) mention that opinions on gender roles can convey attitudes towards change that influence migration aspirations.

For Carling et al. (2023), gender is among the few determinants that always affect migration aspirations in the same direction, if there is any effect at all. In 16 of their research areas of the MIGNEX project in Africa, Asia and the Middle East, gender

made no difference, but in the nine where it did, the effect is consistently that being female is associated with a lower likelihood of having resolute migration aspirations – that is, it has a negative effect. Gender also shapes the expected and experienced risks on migration journeys. In some research areas, the idea of women travelling alone is stigmatised or women are perceived to be at higher risk of experiencing exploitation and discrimination if migrating, not least during their journey. Therefore, in some areas people said it was best to stay, showing the profound impact gender norms can have on migration dynamics. Indeed, the gendering of migration has several dimensions. Men and women might leave in different numbers, go to different destinations or be mobile in different ways, for instance. These differences are shaped by local gender norms in a community as well as gender differences in migration opportunities (e.g., for certain types of work or for marriage). Women tend to be employed disproportionately in domestic and care work as well as skilled migrants in the health sector and form the majority of family reunification and marriage migrants.

There may be differential access to, deployment of and outcomes from networks in migration. Sha (2021b) highlights the lack of attention paid to gender differences and the ways that social norms and gender roles, gendered divisions of labour, gender hierarchies and power relations, and gendered government policies, come together to shape the way that migrant networks operate for men and women. For example, Toma and Vause (2014) found that women tend to rely on close family ties, long-established and geographically concentrated networks, possibly due to different friendship and social circles which influence the information and help available to them (Muanamoha et al. 2010).

 In Africa, institutional rules such as property rights, gender roles and access to credit, that have affected women's migration, are changing gradually (Ohonba &

Agbontaen-Eghafona, 2019; Teye et al. 2023). Discriminatory social norms prevalent across the globe and also in Africa (OECD, SIGI, 2021; Olarinde et al. 2023) correlate with larger volumes of women's migration up to a threshold after which higher discrimination means lower migration (Ferrant et al. 2014). Women's decision to migrate is often influenced by their family responsibilities, such as caring for children or elderly relatives (Hidrobo et al. 2022). Furthermore, limited access by women to information communication and technology (ICT) tools may arise from discriminatory social norms such as unequal decision-making power in the household (OECD SIGI, 2021). On the other hand, access to ICT among migrant women may help them to communicate with family left behind, facilitating their role as distant caregivers (Andersson, 2019; Cogo, 2017). In addition, policy may portray women as victims and in 'protecting' them restrict their freedom to migrate, as Bisong (2019) highlights for the ECOWAS region.

While in the countries of our research, the range in the percentage of female migrants is relatively small -Nigeria (451 percent), Morocco (49.8 per cent), and Kenya (51.0 per cent) (UNDESA, 2017), these percentages correspond to the percentages of citizens migrating from the country. Our interviews (see Graph 12) are with migrants which may be very different as it is in Morocco where Sub-Saharans are in the majority male. In Nigeria, the higher proportion of males reflects the fact that it was more difficult to get women to be interviewed.

![DYNAMIG]

Graph 11 Top 10 African destination (left) and origin (right) countries by sex
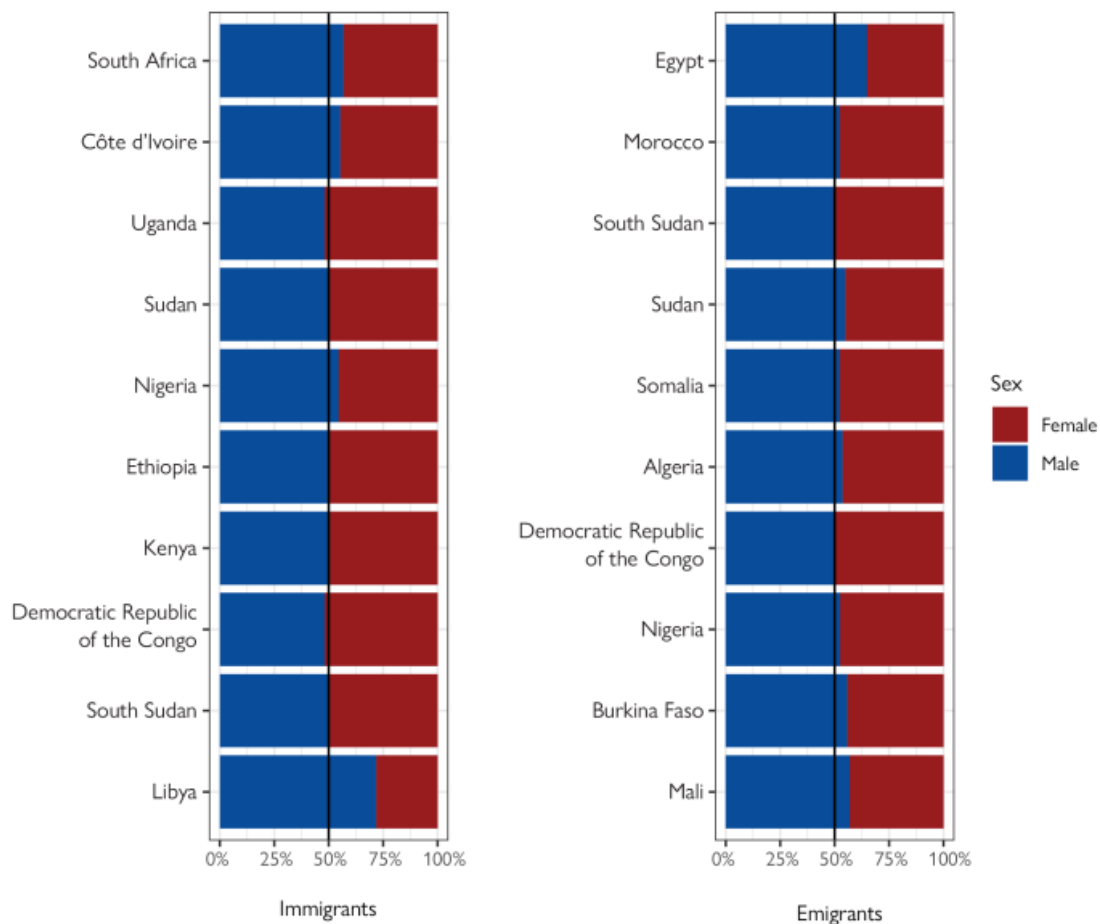
Source: UNHCR, n.d.a.

Graph 12 Gender of interviewees by country
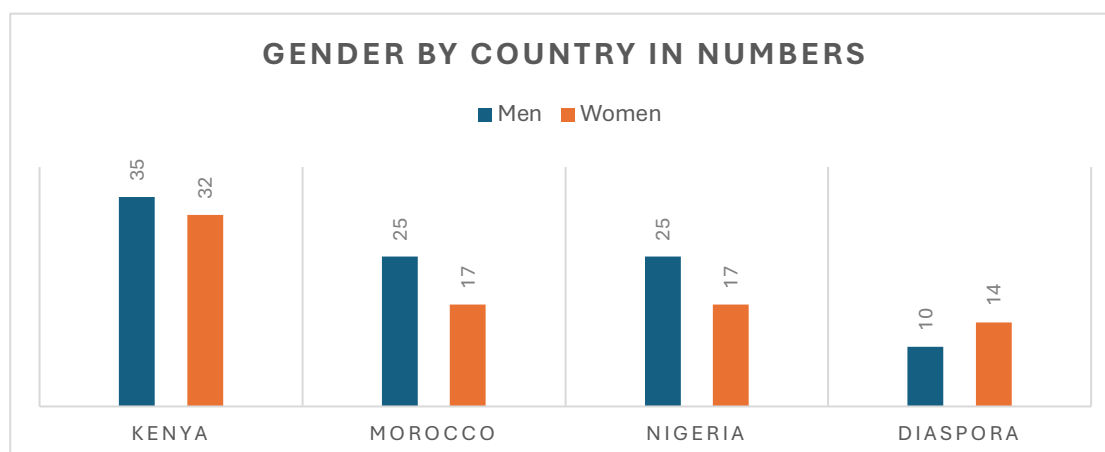
Source: Dynamig socio-demographic sample of interviews

Kenya

Gender used to shape the decision making of migrant households as male migrants were preferred over female migrants due to their roles and responsibilities in the household. Migration literature shows in Kenya (and other African countries) that migration became a rite of passage for men and the high expectation for men to take care of household needs. Women were expected to stay behind and manage the household. Nevertheless, women have migrated regardless but did not have access to opportunities that were male dominated. In addition, they used women's *Chamaas* (savings group) to source for funding for their migration journey.

Although the results of our research revealed that men still have a high expectation to be the primary migrant to support the household, the same sentiment is held by female- led households where the commitment to take care of the household needs takes precedence. Therefore, the experiences of men and women in migration differ significantly from the decision-making phase to the migration experience.

In terms of Kenyan migrants at the decision-making stage, both men and women had an equal chance of migrating and being supported by rthe esources of the household. This challenges the old perception that only the male child can migrate to support the household. Women in the transportation industry often dream of becoming drivers for small family cars. This sets them apart from their male counterparts, who typically drive buses, lorries and trucks. When it comes to personal growth, women excel in various aspects compared to men. They are known for their ability to elevate themselves to higher social classes and achieve success. They are adept at saving money and are generally more knowledgeable, valued, and respected in society. Wangari, a 34-year-old female Kenyan returnee, noted that:

> in terms of personal growth, the women do well off and go high class, but men do not change much. The women are good at saving. They are also more knowledgeable valued and respected.

All Kenyan respondents, both male and female, were fully aware of the gendered jobs that they both would be doing. Women typically engage in domestic tasks, such as cooking, cleaning, and childcare, while men often pursue labour-intensive jobs.

The family dynamic determines whether someone will migrate to support the household or their migration is limited due to the responsibilities in the household. Results showed that some 'First born' men felt pressured to migrate to support the family which influenced their migration decisions. Mosi, a 26-year-old male Kenyan returnee, migrated to support the needs of his nephews (e.g. school fees, household needs, clothing). The decision to migrate was spurred with the need to financially support the home.

Women's migration decisions were limited by their motherhood duties in the home, if they were an orphan, or there was a disabled person in the household. This is consistent with existing literature (Camlin et al. 2014, Ghimire et al. 2020) that suggests that women with household responsibilities are less likely to migrate, especially if the household is heavily dependent on them. Women often face unique challenges and may be perceived differently than men when it comes to work opportunities. Men's migration is often associated with financial provision, while women's experiences can include additional vulnerabilities.

In terms of those displaced by conflict and civil unrest in their country and seek asylum in Kenya, it was noted that men stayed behind to fight while women fled with the children and parents to avoid abuse and violence. Although, in some cases, it was recognised that women play an important role in facilitating the movement to safety to Kenya for household members with the support of family resources. Amara recalled that her

> mum was supported by family and relatives to migrate from South Sudan to Kakuma and my cousin also supported me to move from Kakuma to Nairobi. Overall, in South Sudan, Women migrate with children while the men remain behind to participate in conflict". (KEN_18_W_SSD_Refugee)

This suggests that although women flee, they are tasked with the duty of taking care of younger and less able persons to secure a safe environment for the household.

In terms of livelihoods of migrants in Kenya (including transit/ asylum seekers/refugees), most worked in the informal sector. Women provided domestic services including washing clothes, house cleaning, taking care of children, persons with disability, carrying water, selling food items (tea, mandazi and other meals). Men worked or aspired to work in construction sites, transportation (tuk tuk) and boda boda (motor bikes). They also worked in security, teaching, law and trading in electronics or shop items. Respondents, stated that both men and women perceived that they could work in any sector if provided with the opportunity and finances to start their business, but women had easier access to job opportunities than men.

Morocco Gender profoundly shapes both the decision to migrate and the experience of migration itself. Social norms, family expectations, cultural attitudes, and perceived risks contributed to differentiated opportunities, vulnerabilities, and aspirations for men and women. While economic necessity motivated both men and women to migrate, gendered aspirations differed markedly. Men's migration is often seen as an economic mission to improve the family's financial standing, while women's migration tends to be framed around personal development—seeking autonomy, life experience, or escape from restrictive cultural practices. Many women expressed aspirations to acquire life skills, education, or freedom from oppressive conditions, including forced marriages, domestic violence, and limited professional opportunities. As Chinara from Nigeria notes,

> Yes. You know there is violence, women violence in Nigeria [...] They can't do anything, yeah. And, well, if you go to station, you go to maybe police station in Nigeria, the man is always right [...] They beat women, they harass women, in any slight opportunity. But in this place, I find out that it's not like that. Because women are more valuable than the men. (MAR_F_34_NRA_Chinara).

However, these aspirations often clash with societal expectations that women should prioritize family cohesion and caregiving over personal growth. Despite these challenges, several women displayed remarkable agency, framing migration as a path toward empowerment rather than mere survival.

Cultural expectations around appropriate behaviour often influence the ways men and women navigate migration. Men are generally expected to take greater risks and are more likely to embark on longer and more perilous overland journeys. As Emem, a Cameroonian migrant notes:

> Yes, there is a difference because it's the man who provides for the families, it's the man who feeds the family. Given the situation I was in, I saved children. I have children. Given the situation I found myself in, I had to leave. (MAR_M_45_CAM_Emem).

Amadi from Senegal adds:

> I can say in a certain way, yes, but regarding the decision to migrate for women, sometimes it's very difficult. The family are not really inclined to support this kind of choice, but at the end, sometimes they support it, but regarding the parents, sometimes they are afraid to letting their children leave the house, go abroad, it's lonely I think there is a difference when it comes to the gender. They are more supportive to let the men go out than the women. (MAR_M_26__SEN_Amadi).

Several accounts described how men often had no choice but to walk through dangerous terrains, whereas women, whenever possible, accessed safer transportation such as cars. Femi from Cameroon says

> Yes, women's migration experience is different from men's because women are easier to move than men. If she wants to fulfil her dream of going to Europe, easily, and physically, we can appreciate her, we can give her everything she needs. But the man, no, it's something else, he has to work. A woman can get there, maybe find a rich man, and take a chance with him but, it's not the same thing [...] in the migration route, even on the road, there are always solutions for women. But even though they are abused, there are always solutions, unlike men. Yes, because the woman, we cannot see her leave. There is always someone who will say no, I'll take you, I'll take you, I'll take you.". (MAR_M_38__CAM_Femi)

However, seeking safer means did not guarantee protection. Women migrants reported facing heightened vulnerabilities throughout their journeys, including harassment, violence, exploitation, and, in the worst cases, sexual assault. Hibo from Guinea Conakry says:

> But it's true that when you're a woman, you have more violence, violation, there are many of those people. There, we are a little diverse, it's the same path. It's that the man suffers, it's what he's doing there, that's how it is. But the woman still, that's it, because you're a woman, there are people who will offend you, for the woman, it's not easy [...] There are people who are mentally ill, they rape you. Sometimes, there are women who... They rape you. Yes, they rape you. (MAR_F_39_GN.CO_Hibo)

Migration, therefore, offers women no immunity from danger; it merely alters the forms of risk they encounter. Being female during migration is often synonymous with additional exposure to exploitation while simultaneously navigating cultural restrictions on mobility. Femi from Cameroon tells:

> Yes, she was the only woman in our convoy. So the gentleman says no. After the girl says, she had the courage. A Cameroonian girl, Bassa. She's from our tribe, we call it Bassa. She got in the car with the gentleman. Everything didn't even happen when she started touching the gentleman. He ejaculated directly. He said Yallah, he started saying Yallah, Yallah. He was all happy and then he brought us back. Since that day I had the trauma. Until now I spoke with the girl, I told her frankly if you weren't there we'd be dead, now. Many stories in the desert are not good. For myself, it's more... It was in Tamanrasset. Algeria. It's in Algeria, the Algerian desert. There are indeed many things, that happen when you pass through the Algerian desert, there are always things that have... A driver did things that were not normal. (MAR_M_38_CAM_Femi)

Family and societal norms around marriage and familial responsibilities heavily influenced women's migration decisions. Unaccompanied migration by young women is often stigmatized, perceived as indecent, or as a sign of rebelliousness against traditional roles. In several testimonies, women spoke of the expectation to prioritize marriage, caregiving duties, and the reputation of the family over personal aspirations. Marriage, in particular, emerged as a critical factor: some women described having to renegotiate migration plans with partners, with marital obligations often taking precedence over educational or professional ambitions. In certain cases, women deferred or abandoned migration altogether to fulfil family expectations, highlighting how gender norms extend beyond the journey itself into shaping life trajectories**.**

Gender not only shapes migration journeys but also profoundly affects experiences in the host country. While some women described instances of receiving special consideration—such as easier access to humanitarian assistance or safer employment opportunities—others emphasized the increase in social control they

experienced upon arrival. Women were often more easily absorbed into certain labour markets, particularly domestic work or caregiving roles (Merrouni 2019), but faced greater scrutiny over their movements and behaviour.

> Of course. Especially here in Morocco. Especially here in Morocco, it's very... Well, when you're a woman, you have the possibility of getting a job at any time…But for men, it's a bit difficult [...] Sometimes, you're working and you can't get your salary. They give it to you in instalments. If they have to pay you for a month, for example, 2000 dirhams, they tell you 1500 so you can come back. I don't know if you understand me. So, at that moment, it's a bit difficult. However, for women, when they work per month. It's a fixed salary, that's what they give them. So, the woman has more, in my opinion, if we analyze it, the woman has more chances to evolve here in Morocco than the man." (MAR_M_29_IV_Bamidele).

In contrast, male migrants frequently faced harsher economic competition and employment precarity but were granted slightly more social autonomy.

Educational and employment opportunities are deeply intertwined in this dynamic, acting as both drivers and barriers. Many migrants, men and women, see education as a gateway to better prospects, with university graduates often migrating to further their studies or enhance their careers, while those with limited education view migration as a means of economic survival. For most Moroccan interviewees, the main goal for migrating is for better education that would later on allow them to have better opportunities. Sub-Saharan migrants, on the other hand, seek migration mainly to find job opportunities and have a better quality of life.

Employment prospects push individuals, regardless of their gender to migrate, as a lack of job opportunities in their home countries drives them to seek financial stability abroad. However, these choices are also shaped by age to a certain extent. Younger individuals, believing they have more flexibility and resilience, prefer to take risks in migration at a younger age, whereas others believed that age did not matter and were set on migrating and creating a better future for themselves no matter how old or young they were.

At the same time, gendered experiences influence migration patterns, with women factoring in safety concerns more than men, who often perceive female migration as

easier despite its unique challenges. Ultimately, education, employment, gender and age are deeply interconnected, shaping not just the decision to migrate but also the strategies individuals use to secure stability and success.

Nigeria

Gender was a significant factor across all thematic areas, including migration aspirations, intentions, history, livelihood and security, social norms, and information flows. Women in Nigeria were generally less likely than men to express migration aspirations and more inclined to abandon plans if local livelihoods improved. While the "breadwinner effect" (Aslany et al. 2021) is typically used to explain male migration from poorer countries, our findings show that it operates across gender and income levels in Nigeria. Norms around women's financial roles in the household are shifting, and both men and women experiencing breadwinner pressure viewed migration as a viable livelihood strategy in the absence of opportunities at origin.

Shifting gender norms were particularly evident in how women framed migration— often as a pathway to financial independence and a means of contributing to family welfare. Mivwodere captured this sentiment: "*Like my siblings. They are married. They say that if you don't have money, men will talk to you anyhow.*" (NG_F_34_ Mivwodere). At the same time, traditional expectations of men as primary providers persisted. As Peter observed:

> I think from the aspect of a man being the head of a family, it might actually help him get better… financial stability, because when you travel… men are more responsible for their family than females. (NG_M_29_Peter).

These nuanced gendered motivations carry implications for migration governance, particularly in designing interventions that reflect evolving household roles and responsibilities. The societal expectation that men must provide for their families remained strong, especially among single men with no dependents, who often faced

social pressure to account for their earnings. When asked how family, friends, and the community shape his migration decisions, Nicholas responded: "*That's what they say. You what are you doing with your money? You don't have family. As if I don't have a plan*." (NG_M_34_Nicholas). A broader social expectation also framed young women's post-education trajectories, as captured by one respondent:

> People just generally assume that once you're done with school and you're done with NYSC [National Youth Service Corp – a compulsory one year service after tertiary education] and all that, the next thing you should be thinking of is either marriage or migration. (chuckles). (NG_F_24_Rachael)

Gender norms were also shifting around labour market roles. Women were increasingly accepted in traditionally male-dominated fields such as sound engineering and mechanics. Successful female migrants were often perceived as more accomplished than their male counterparts. However, when women's migration journeys failed, they were judged more harshly than men, revealing persistent double standards. Familial expectations around return also differed by gender. As Peluola noted:

> But I guess they expect the men to you know come back and like influence their society and then, most African families probably don't want their women to [like] marry from there. So, they also want them to [like] come back and get a husband. (NG_F_18_Peluola).

This underscores how women's mobility is not only constrained by economic and caregiving roles but also by implicit expectations of marriageability and return.

Mothers with young children emerged as particularly vulnerable. Their caregiving responsibilities limited both livelihood options and the feasibility of migration. One respondent described the dilemma: *"Hmm, it's [groundnut roasting] [not] working, because now I'm carrying a baby… sometimes it may be on the fire and it will burn."* (NG_F_20_ Joy). These challenges highlight the urgent need for family-sensitive migration policies that address hidden aspirations, caregiving constraints, and the unequal burdens women face when balancing care with economic survival.

Respondents reported diverse migration trajectories, including irregular, regular (primarily intra-regional), and mixed migration pathways. Two key patterns stood out. First, familial status strongly influenced aspirations—single women were more likely to express a desire to migrate. Second, the decision to disclose migration intentions was often shaped by anticipated family support or disapproval. Some women, such as Joy (NG_F_20) and Mivwodere (NG_F_34), avoided sharing their plans with relatives who might object, revealing how social control can suppress the open expression of aspirations.

Conclusion

General motivations are primarily economic, that is to get away from economic situations that offer few opportunities and improve one's standard of living. This has been accompanied by a reduction in the public sector, and with it, the availability of more secure and well-paid jobs, particularly relevant for the more educated. It was a sentiment expressed most strongly by the japa phenomenon in Nigeria but also evident among Moroccan interviews. This is accompanied by a feeling that educational facilities are better elsewhere. In professional jobs, poor working conditions as in the health sector drives individuals to take up opportunities in Europe, North America and GCC. Many in Kenya and Nigeria were unemployed or under-employed. Political instability and corruption also play their part both amongst those seeking to leave Nigeria and of Sub-Saharans in Morocco. In Morocco there is also a desire to live a more modern liberated life.

In terms of the heterogeneous variables contributing to decision-making, some felt that age was important in when one left since a number wanted to leave whilst young, when they were adaptable and willing to take mor risks and had a longer period in which to make gains from migration. Interestingly in Nigeria, it was usually men who brought up this issue. However, age has to be taken into account together

with stage in life, family expectations and windows of opportunity. Education too as a stratifying factor is very important in enabling potential highly educated migrants in Morocco and Nigeria to take advantage of regular routes through education or combining education with work.

Gender is considered significant in terms of aspirations, intentions, livelihood social norms, and information flows.

In Nigeria women were generally less likely than men to express migration aspirations and more inclined to abandon plans if local livelihoods improved. Changing gender norms around their financial roles in the household are shifting and have meant women too have increasingly become breadwinners. Whilst it has become easier to enter traditionally male fields, less skilled migration to the GCC remains largely restricted to traditional gender roles. Gender is also responsive to family situations with single women more likely to migrate but expected to return home to get married, hence imposing expectations of their mobility. Although, as in Kenya, men and women have equal chances of migrating at the decision-making stage, women may find their options limited by caring responsibilities. Gender not only shapes migration journeys, where women moving irregularly are particularly subject to sexual violence and exploitation. This too may apply to those moving within a kafala system as in the GCC countries where they are often confined to the household and have little rights protection and widescale exposure to discrimination, abuse and exploitation with limited support provided by the migrants' countries of origin (Oucho et al., 2023:16).

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05 Navigating Migration

In this chapter Navigating Migration we draw upon key elements of the existing literature on social navigation, which has been widely used to elucidate the processes and practices that prospective and actual migrants pursue in planning and undertaking their journeys. Unlike the focus on irregular and risky journeys analysed in much of the literature on Africa, especially West Africa (Schapendonk 2018; Vigh 2006, 2009), our research covered both regular and irregular journeys and explored migrants' knowledge of migration regulations and policies shaping their intentions and plans as well as their considerations of which kind of migration trajectory (see Chapter 07) they might follow.

Journeys are envisaged and facilitated through a range of relationships with family, friends and peers as well as social media which has become increasingly accessible in the past decade and which provides different kinds of information, and also enabling those on the move and settled in other countries to maintain contacts with those in their countries of origin. In this chapter we focus on these more informal modes of information deployed in navigating migration, leaving to the next chapter a discussion of the use of the more formal infrastructure of intermediaries, such as recruitment agencies, NGOs and international organisations that enable and assist migrants and refugees in migrating.

In the first section of the chapter, we highlight how our analysis of navigating and developing strategies for journeys builds on the literature on social navigation and how migrants leverage different forms of social media and weigh it up in addition to advice, information and support received from family, friends and peers.
In the second section, we explore in greater depth the informal aspects of navigation (families, friends and social media) and strategy in planning and undertaking

migration and the consideration of migrants about regular or irregular routes in the three country studies. We end with the views of those in the diaspora about the difficulties of preparing for journeys, obtaining relevant documentation necessary for regular migration and the problems of irregular migrations.

Section 1 Social navigation

Following Vigh (2006, 2009) on youth from West Africa making their way to Europe, the concept of social navigation has been widely adopted (Kuschminder 2021; Schapendonk 2018, Schapendonk et al. 2020; Triandafyllidou, 2019) to capture the practices and processes involving irregular migrants in their journeys and their engagement with diverse informal and formal actors within changing social environments. In the course of their journeys across borders and different mobility regimes, migrants deploy strategies to confront risks and steer through pathways which may be neither straightforward nor those they envisaged at the outset. Journeys involve multiple stages with decisions having to be constantly (re)made, and hence involving constant adjustment in their attempt to attain their imagined goal. Social navigation highlights agency of migrants within constrained and often conflictual environments, and the use of social networks, local and transnational, to enable irregular migrants to counteract difficult and exploitative conditions, often during protracted journeys. More recently, the challenges of navigating journeys have been applied to return. Though some may have returned voluntarily, for example among Nigerians, primarily they have been forcibly returned from African countries such as Libya, Morocco and Tunisia (Uzomah et al. 2024).

The irregular migrants depicted in most studies, tended to be young males, particularly those from West Africa (Schapendonk 2018. Schapendonk et al. 2021; Vigh 2009) who had taken risky routes across the Mediterranean to reach Europe. Furthermore, Kuschminder (2021) notes in her comparative study of Eritreans and

Nigerians that the level of education was low. Apart from two Nigerians with higher education, the vast majority of her respondents interviewed in Italy had not completed secondary education. However, as elaborated in Chapter 04, the heterogeneity of migrants (in particular age, education, gender) is relevant in terms of the resources they have to hand, especially in their ability to use regular routes, on the one hand, or be pushed into irregular routes to migrate, on the other. Regular routes, especially for those seeking to reach Europe or North America, tend to require considerable resources and, are more likely to be used by those with higher levels of education. This group can utilise both education and work or a combination of them as reasons to acquire the necessary documentation to reach their destinations.

Although the acquisition of information was an important aspect of the literature on navigation, it tended to focus on social networks rather than social media and digital infrastructure as important aspects of the social environment. This might have had to do with the period when many of the studies were undertaken i.e. between 2013 and 2017. In contrast, in this chapter we shall bring together the role of family, friends and peers together with different forms of social media in supporting migrants and refugees in navigating both regular and irregular routes towards destinations in Africa and beyond (Europe, GCC, North America). We leave for the next chapter engagement with and the role of more organised and formal infrastructure and intermediaries which are also central to the conceptualisation of social navigation.

Family and friends are crucial in providing support and encouragement through financial assistance and encouragement though they can also serve to dissuade individuals from migrating. Social networks may also develop post migration and act as safety nets, especially among those with shared backgrounds, offering resources

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for jobs, housing, and emotional support, as was the case in Morocco among black Africans and in Kenya with refugees from the same country. Social media helps convey informal and formal information about travel routes and places to live and assists migrants in creating and maintaining networks while travelling towards various destinations (Dekker et al. 2016; Dekker & Engbersen 2014).

Its use in Africa has grown considerably in the past decade to around 570 million internet users in 2022, representing a doubling of the number of internet users compared to 2015. Social media has the potential to change, impact and influence migrants' decision-making (Dekker et al. 2016; Martin & Hayford 2021), navigate their migration journey, and help them settle in their place of destination (see Abdul Rueda and Olarinde 2024 for a more extensive discussion of the use of social media during Covid). However, one should not assume social media impacts decision making in a simple way, or to the same extent on different individuals or that it is a monolithic entity (Adegoke 2023). Furthermore, individuals may combine a variety of sources from proximate family and friends to diverse forms of widely shared social media. Many combine different sources with one means being used to validate or discard another.

Section 2 Country Studies

Kenya

In Kenya, there are several networks that have been used by migrants and refugees mostly to source information on destination countries, the opportunities available to them (e.g. jobs and work environment), lifestyles, neighbourhoods and the climate. Such networks range from traditional networks to new types of networks operating within a complex migration system interacting with attributes and relationships (Mabogunje (1970: 4) with feedback mechanisms that help to inform migration

decision making. These migration systems link families/community members in a physical and virtual space with other interacting networks such as recruitment agencies and brokers (formal and informal) that provide specific information on labour migration. In addition, migrants are navigating social environments that are equally dynamic where actors, individuals and institutions change and can influence the trajectories of migrants (Vigh, 2009) (see Chapter 07).

Family networks emerged as a crucial support system for the migration journey for all Kenyan migrants. Families provided essential financial, emotional and spiritual support that significantly encouraged aspiring migrants to decide to migrate. Familial support manifests in multiple ways and includes financial assistance for travel expense, visa application, health assessment, pre-departure training and any additional expected costs in the destination country. Jabari reported that "My family are the main financial supporters as family members will facilitate migration whether covering the cost of travel assisting with visa fees or providing funds to establish myself in a foreign country (28, M, Kenya, Returnee). Bahati, a 23 old aspiring female Kenyan migrant, also explained her journey was facilitated and planned in partnership with family members who encouraged her so she can support the family by remittances which is highly revered within the household as a symbol of progress and migration success.

Family members help may help newcomers integrate into their new environment by introducing them to social networks, community groups and cultural events. Abasi remarked that **"**I have brothers, the first is in Riyadh doing driving and the second one has been to Riyadh and Qatar also doing driving. They only come back once in a while to visit. The other young ones are still at home" (33, M, Kenya, Returnee). Generally, the views from many aspiring migrants, highlighted that the family provided a lot of support for their migration journeys and respondents. Mosi (26, M,

Kenya, Returnee), for example, is grateful for the support as he recalls how the family views his migration as helping support the family needs, despite lacking the finances to support his journey.

Families also provide emotional support and valuable insights especially for those who have migrated previously that informs the decision to migrate. Jabari adds that the emotional support he received from family in his migration journey encouraged him and eased his feelings of anxiety and uncertainty. He also valued information from family members who migrated previously and gave him information ranging from the immigration process to community resources in the destination country when trying to integrate.

Some refugees seeking assistance while in Kenya received support from community organizations, churches, and NGOs, which provide food, shelter, and assistance with integration into new environments (see also Morocco). Those who had existing connections from their country of origin such as Ayo (30, Queer man, DRC, Refugee) used these networks to access resources and opportunities, including where to register as a refugee. However, there are sentiments of abandonment among refugees when friends and family who have migrated seem to forget about those remaining behind. There is a notable awareness and concern about the treatment of migrants in various countries, leading some to dismiss specific destinations, such as Saudi Arabia, due to negative reports shared through social media. Ultimately, the narrative illustrates a complex interplay of hope, fear, and the search for reliable information among refugees navigating the challenging landscape of migration.

Social media is used as a critical information source for both migrants and refugees, Popular platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram, professional

networking sites such as Linkedin and X (formerly Twitter) along with websites, organizations, and refugee assistance programs (Wamuyu et al. 2019). These digital platforms provided migrants and refugees in this study with information regarding migration pathways, employment opportunities and resettlement options (Dekker, Engbersen, and Vonk, 2018). A study by USIU-A on social media use identified an age specific pattern on the platform usage. WhatsApp is popular for instant messaging and group chats, facilitating personal and community communication and also used to seek support for migrants in distress through Whatsapp groups in destination countries (Wamuyu et al. 2019).

While Facebook was commonly used by people aged 18 – 40 years to gather visual insights and comments from existing migrants and returnees. X and LinkedIn for Networking was widely used for professional networking and real-time news updates, shaping conversations Linkedin and X were mostly used by users over the age of 30 years and above as a professional networking platform to connect with other migrants or institutions or gather additional information. Most respondents in this study revealed their preference for certain platforms. For instance, Simba (30, M, Kenya) uses LinkedIn to apply for jobs and others have used it to access to real time policy discussions on migration such as the BLMAs. Facebook provided insights on policy discussions on migration from Kenya including engagements between governments. Eshe stated:

> "WhatsApp and Facebook are the social media that I mostly rely on to get information, to some extent that the information is very specific and cannot be found on other platforms. Having had different conversations and going through history and listening from other people's stories and lifestyle experience and having peace in their nation". (Eshe, 22, F, Rwanda, Refugee).

Both migrants and refugees are leveraging social media to access information, to do further online research on destination options, while utilizing personal networks enables individuals to make well-informed choices about migration and potential opportunities overseas. Monifa (32, F, Burundi, Refugee) explained how:

social media and websites is where I get most of my information which I keenly use them in my daily routine so that I can be able to apply to different jobs so that when I land a contract the employer can be able to pay for the expenses which include the travelling cost, tickets, transit and also for me to be able to attain a visa from the embassy in order to be able to migrate to the country that the job is being offered.

She expressed strong aspirations to migrate for economic opportunities in a similar way Kenyan labour migrants solicit information from recruitment agencies.

Kenyan labour migrants were also looking for opportunities to grow their skills and experience different cultures while earning a good salary. Those aspiring to migrate were attracted by the income they would receive, often translating the currency to the local one (Riyal/Euros/Pounds to Kenya Shilling) as explained by Mosi:

> If I migrate and start earning in different currencies it will change my ability since it will be interesting when I change the dollar to shillings so that after I can invest. (26, M, Kenya).

They are encouraged to migrate to save for investment purposes but often fail to recognise that they will be liable to other expenses. The sentiment is shared with Bahati who assessed that:

> If I migrate, I will make a huge difference and I will earn a living through being a nursing assistant who are being paid 2,500 Kenya shillings (*US$18*) per hour that will lead to 25,000 (*US$196*) after ten hours and after a ten days it will be 250,000 (*US$1,960*) which will also mean that after a hundred days it would have accumulated to 2,500,000 *(US$19,600)* which I don't know how I can make that money here in Kenya. (Bahati, 23, F, Kenya).

The research findings indicate that migrants and refugees in Kenya actively seek safe and legal migration pathways but face significant barriers in accessing them due to restrictive immigration policies in destination countries. Respondents revealed sophisticated information gathering strategies from multiple sources, particularly relying on those with lived migration experiences to inform their decision making. For some, preparations for a legal route was halted by caring responsibilities for children such as Halima who explained that:

> I have a passport already and waiting for free travel. [I want to go] anywhere, even if I am told I go to Saudi, Dubai, Qatar, I will go. I have about 6 children whom I am educating. Mine is one but my brother left me, others. I pay rent and buy food so I am stuck. Everybody depends on me (Halima, 31, F, Kenya).

Refugees aspire to migrate but lack understanding of the process for obtaining the documents needed to migrate. Their primary concern was the lack of documentation available to them that will ease their mobility. The process of receiving documents in Kenya is quite slow and some respondents have indicated that it may be on purpose. The refugee document allows them to access not only income generating opportunities but also services such as health and also helps their children gain access to education. When Makori was reflecting on the Blob bridge, he expressed how he is stuck as he is

> still in a question mark asking myself will it be possible to go out? Will it be possible to be resettled? Will my children get a good education? Stop being a refugee? Why are diseases following me because of stress? Here is different but I am not happy. I do not see myself here and have changed status and better opportunity. The worst-case scenario is return me to my country and yet conflict is still going on. The best-case scenario is I get myself in European countries. (Malori, 42, M, DRC, Refugee, Kenya).

He expressed his willingness to explore irregular routes provided he reaches his desired destination.

However, most respondents in our research were discouraged from taking irregular routes due to the stories of deaths and maltreatment. Amara recalled on her journey to seek asylum in Kenya, they encountered some people

> along the way who had been murdered. I have watched migrants' journey through the Mediterranean Sea on YouTube, but it did not impact my desire to migrate since I always plan to use the regular route through education. One of my friends started the journey through the irregular route but came back due to the many challenges that she observed along the way. (18, F, South Sudan, Refugee,Kenya).

Most of the knowledge on these precarious routes are documented in social media and news channels accessible to both migrants and refugees.

But not all aspiring migrants were aware of the struggles migrants face in destination countries despite the heightened media attention on protection cases in the GCC. They undergo a selective process of only viewing success stories to encourage the decision to migrate avoid sensitive material in X or TikTok on abuse experienced my migrants. Social media may create an unrealistic image or experience of life abroad.

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Migrants should therefore ensure balancing the false narrative with the reality and review the available evidence, including that obtained from returnees, yet migrant households may hold a fixed perception that people living abroad are more successful (associated with remittances, clothing, type of employment).

Overall, the cost of the migration journey is a major concern among aspiring and returnee migrants. They suggest it's too expensive and needs time to raise the funds. Some have used the *Kafala system* where the financial burden is on the employer and recruitment agency facilitating the labour migration opportunity. However, reports of abuse, lack of protection and support from the government of Kenya has been highlighted as a severe limitation and sometimes associated with modern slavery conditions (Migrant Rights.org) Recruitment agencies in Kenya imposed high fees for jobs in the GCC most of which people could not afford (Business and Human Rights Resource Centre 2023). The Recruitment Advisor (Mugalla 2022) found that 76 percent of Kenyan migrants pay migrant fees related to labour migration recruitment opportunities, but it is not documented. This identified a gap in financial reporting on whether the fees violated Kenyan laws such as the *Labour Institutions Act (2007).* Others are discouraged from migrating as it is no longer financially viable. At the time of the study, the economic cost of living in Kenya began to rise and many begun to cut costs on their expenses. To respond to the high cost of labour migration, the Government of Kenya introduced the *Labour Migration and Management Bill (2024)* that regulated the activities of the recruitment agencies, including ensuring that they were liable for any costs incurred by the migrant especially those in need of repatriation. However, there is evidence that the costs borne to migrants is still increasing (Migrant Rights Organization).

> The government does not help at all. [You] look for job opportunities, for women open more industries. [The government needs to] reduce taxes and open other options then people can work [and] to stop corruption. We are just talking but they won't do anything for us. Every Kenyan who lives here should get a good salary. The first salary should be at least Ksh 25,000 [US$250] for a start. The company should deal with the person direct to reduce cartels and have an agreement with the individual. (Halima, 31, W, Kenya, Aspiring Migrant/Planning)

Morocco

Migration in and through Morocco unfolds within complex social ecosystems, where personal networks and diasporic ties often shape how migrants, both Moroccans and Sub-Saharans navigate their journeys. In a context often perceived as limited in institutional guidance and legal pathways, these social connections become crucial to decision-making. Moroccan migrants aspiring to reach Europe or North America for study or work often rely on family abroad or social media for guidance, while some actively avoid Western destinations due to fears of cultural alienation. Similarly, sub-Saharan migrants in Morocco, who often view the country as either a transit point or a possible destination, depend heavily on diasporic networks for information, logistical, and financial support.

As in Kenya, migration is frequently influenced by family traditions, with previous generations shaping the aspirations of younger ones and with family, friends and peers significantly impacting on migrants by providing information, encouragement, and support. In the absence of accessible or trustworthy institutional support, many migrants rely heavily on personal networks and diasporic communities to navigate their migration journeys. These networks, composed of family members, friends, acquaintances, or even distant contacts on social media, often serve as both information hubs and emotional anchors. They play a crucial role in shaping decisions about destination countries, modes of travel, and expectations upon arrival, and are seen by some migrants as the most important and reliable sources of information: "No, I saw it like that on television, but I was never interested. Because there, well, I wanted a valid source. And that source was my friend (Aadan, 37, M, migrant from Ivory Coast, Marocco).

Friends also play a significant role in shaping migration decisions, with many migrants encouraged by peers who have already moved abroad or achieved success in another country. "I have some of my friends in Europe, they told me about the condition of life from there and to say, here you have a degree of school, you cannot stay in a country where you don't have a degree". (Amadou, 30, M, migrant from Cameroon, Morocco).

However, many migrants travelled alone without family or friends, leading to feelings of isolation in the host country. They often lack a support network, making integration challenging. Arriving without connections makes accessing resources difficult. Lone migrants face additional hardships during the migration process. Also, solitary migration leads to significant emotional burdens.

For many, diaspora members provide guidance on bureaucratic processes, share advice on finding housing or work, and sometimes even offer financial support for the journey. This aspect was visible in the statement: "When I arrived, there was a sister who was here. She welcomed me... was my tutor for 7 years until I became financially independent... through her I met several other people... I was able to settle in, have other contacts" (Zendaya, 31, W, migrant from Ivory Coast, Morocco). This reliance on informal channels becomes essential in a context where official information about migration programmes, scholarships, or legal procedures is often inaccessible or unclear. Several migrants mentioned learning about destination countries, particularly Europe or Canada, through conversations with friends or relatives who had already made the journey. Fraji explained that his friend in France encouraged him to pass through Morocco because it was peaceful compared to other countries in the region, demonstrating how personal network heavily influences migration decisions (Faraji, 28, M, migrant from Guinea Conakry, Morocco).

Through diasporic connections, migration often runs in families, where older generations paved the way for younger ones to consider living abroad, leading to well-established family networks across countries. Family members abroad also shape views of migration as they share experiences and encourage relatives to seek better opportunities overseas. As Salima explains:

> My aunt lives in Algeria. It's been 20 years since she married an Algerian. And mother's aunts, all three, are living in Italy. I have other aunts also living in France and Italy. I have an uncle who is living in Canada. So almost my whole family." (Salima, 20, F, Morocco).

Diaspora ties also strongly influence destination preferences. The presence of a sibling in France, for example, or knowledge that many Senegalese students are studying in Morocco, makes those countries more attractive. Migrants often associate these locations with emotional familiarity and the promise of support, which can reduce the perceived risks of migration. These relationships also help mitigate feelings of alienation, particularly in host countries where integration is difficult due to language, culture, or legal status. However, the influence of diasporas is not always entirely positive. Some migrants reported that they embarked on their journey with overly optimistic expectations shaped by diaspora narratives, only to confront harsher realities upon arrival. In some cases, migrants were told that crossing from Morocco to Europe would be "easy," only to discover the journey was dangerous and prolonged, this was expressed for example by Femi: "So, I didn't have the chance, and I thought I would try to go to the other side. Because it was said that once you arrive in Morocco, it's easy to cross to Europe." (32, M, migrant from Cameroon, Morocco).

Diaspora communities, whether physically present or connected digitally, thus serve a dual function. On one hand, they are crucial sources of information, logistical help, and emotional resilience. On the other, they can propagate misinformation or unrealistic portrayals of life abroad. These tensions make it clear that migrants do

not make decisions in isolation, they navigate a complex web of relationships and representations, constantly weighing risk, trust, and aspiration.

A strong sense of solidarity may emerge among migrants, especially those from similar backgrounds, as amongst black Africans in Morocco. Migrants often bond over shared hardships and experiences, such as dangerous journeys or struggles to find stability. The migrant community often acts as a safety net, helping individuals find jobs, housing, and emotional support. Many migrants consider others from their region or country as "brothers," fostering a sense of belonging, support, and shared struggle. Support networks among migrants are vital, community members help each other find housing or work.

> As for the blacks, when we see another like that guy there, I can call him a brother. Even though he is from Ethiopia, he is from South Africa […] we are family in thoughts. Maybe all of us are trying to chase one goal [...] how to survive, how to gain freedom, how to just be happy. (Chiumbo, 31, M, migrant from Guinea Conakry, Morocco).

> Despite our difference of language, that for us black people, black guys […] you can say your brother. It is not that your brother biologically, but your brother, maybe, in the same hustle, the same struggle, the same reason that made you leave your home, maybe the same reason this guy left his house. (Chiumbo, 31, M, migrant from Guinea Conakry, Morocco).

Migrants often face obstacles in connecting with local communities due to language or cultural barriers, and some prefer isolation over forced assimilation. Language barriers constituted a major obstacle to accessing education and training. Although associations offered literacy and language classes (in French, English, or Arabic) to facilitate integration, access remained limited and inconsistent across regions. Migrants who spoke only limited French or Arabic struggled more to pursue formal studies, enroll in professional courses, or even access basic services. "*I would prefer to stay in Morocco. But in Morocco, you know now, there are plenty of issues. Plenty. We cannot have a proper job. As we, the English-speaking people, we cannot have a proper job*" (Faraji,28, M, migrant from Guinea Conakry, Morocco). Religious and charitable organizations play an essential role in supporting migrants

by providing food, clothing, and healthcare, which helps them feel less isolated (see Chapter 06).

Beyond friends, social media and messaging apps are crucial for maintaining connections with friends and family, providing a means to share information about migration opportunities and life abroad. "*Yes, yes social media. WhatsApp, Facebook, everything. Well, we have to keep in contact and discuss every day*". (Amadou, 30, M, migrant from Cameroon, Morocco). However, whilst a few sub-Saharan migrants were led to migrate through social media and felt it was important for young Africans, many stated that social media had not played a part in enticing them to migrate but that it had been friends who had encouraged them to leave. Amongst Moroccans, there were also differences between those who turned to a range of social media (Instagram, TikTok, Facebook) to follow Moroccans in Canada and the US and saw the freedom and creativity they enjoy. On the other hand, some were very strategic in finding a consultant to help them with the paper work to apply for a masters in Canada.

Responses to questions in the Migration Aspirations and Journeys node, explored the practical and financial constraints and challenges faced by migrants following irregular and regular routes. Migrants often come to Morocco because of its borders with Europe. When life in Morocco gets harder or crossing borders become difficult, migrants go to other Maghreb countries (Tunisia) to transit through them to Europe (Italy). We shall explore this in greater depth in Chapter 07 Migrant Trajectories. Some of the migrants in Morocco discussed the journey they had undertaken and how the risks they encountered have been handled.
Regular migration routes are widely viewed as safer and more desirable, but the accessibility gap remains substantial. While bilateral and regional agreements such as ECOWAS and Morocco–Ivory Coast visa waivers technically facilitate migration

through simplified processes and free movement provisions, barriers such as limited awareness, incomplete implementation, limited partnerships, and daunting administrative requirements hinder the possibility for legal migration. For example, some migrants were not aware of Moroccan government scholarships or bilateral education partnerships (Aziza, 20, W, Morocco). Others were discouraged by visa processes requiring documents they could not access or afford to prepare, such as birth certificates, lease contracts, or work permits (Amadi, 26, M, migrant from Senegal, Morocco and Ali, 43, M, migrant from Togo, Morocco).

In the absence of accessible regular routes, migrants often default to irregular migration, despite the dangers and undertaking lengthy journeys across several countries. The interviews vividly describe migrants hiding in forests, facing extortion, or enduring violence from border officials. As Faraji put it: "I will advise you to do it legally. This road we are using is very, very risky" (Faraji, 28, M, migrant from Guinea Conakry, Morocco). And yet, for many, irregularity feels like the only viable path as migrants are seeking a better life in absence of accessible legal migration options.

> The journey to Europe is risky, it's a bit risky. I've already experienced it. So, I decided to come to Casablanca to focus for two, two and a half years. The money I want to earn, currently Canada has opened up, and they need immigrants to work. Even if I can finance it from there. There it's flight. If I have a good company to help me, a good company, I'll go there. To seek it there. You see. That's the current idea that I have in my head. Honestly, it tires my mind." (Jengo, 27, M, migrant from Mali, Morocco)
>
> If you try to imagine the best-case scenario for the future years, let me say, danger, afraid, sometimes you look afraid, sometimes you find it difficult even to survive, but sometimes it's very, very dangerous. Because we the migrants in Morocco, the way people are focusing to cross to go to Europe, we can do everything. Everything. We sleep in the forest. It is not safe. So that is part of the danger. to cross in Mediterranean which of course 3000 euros can take you by plane directly to Europe where you want to go so let me say it's funny it's funny that is my experience I'm observing okay if I want to give somebody advice I will advise you for you to do the procedure Legally. Legally. That is the main thing. But this, this road we are using is very, very risky. I will not advise anyone to use the road". (Faraji, 28, M, migrant from Guinea Conakry, Morocco).
> .
> I plan to travel by plane directly. I don't want to use this Mediterranean anymore because of the things I am facing, the accidents, you see, I cannot use the Mediterranean anymore…. Because as a student you just have to apply for a university over there. And they give you a student? Yeah. If they accept you now, they will send you the invitation and everything. You go to the embassy, you do the procedure. (Faraji, 28, M, migrant from Guinea Conakry, Morocco).

Thus, many face dangers and are scared to migrate to Europe by boat. Migrants often go through complicated routes to reach their destination in Europe, as a continent that is seen as a safe space and preferred over the country of origin in certain cases. The decision to go to Europe is also shaped by the presence of friends and family there. As a Moroccan deportee recounted:

> I failed. I've already… I had an experience by going to Istanbul, I was really trying to reach the west of Europe since I was in the east of Europe. I went to Bulgaria and Greece, but I still didn't reach the west of Europe. It was my goal because of all the opportunities that you can find there. I went there, I tried a lot of things… (Amine, 28, M, Morocco).

Western countries are generally attractive for people seeking to migrate for education and to have favourable living conditions. The US and Canada are generally the attractive options because of the opportunities they offer, although this may alter with increasingly hostile attitude towards migrants in the US and reduction in labour migration and international students in Canada. For the short-term migration plans of Moroccans, they often involve migration for education purposes in European countries or in North America (Adil, 19, M, Morocco), with an intention to return to Morocco (Kawtar, 21, F, Morocco).

For Sub-Saharan Africans, Europe and North America are also highly aspirational destinations, associated with education, employment, and success. However, these destinations are often perceived as distant or unattainable due to restrictive visa policies, bureaucracy, and threats associated with irregular migration. Some migrants, particularly those with academic ambitions, initially aim for the U.S. or Canada but are ultimately deterred by financial barriers (Imani, 20, F, migrant from Cameroon, Morocco).

Some, however, from Morocco as well as other African countries, prefer not to live in western societies. "Honestly, I have a personal preference. I don't want to live in a Western society. Not Europe, not the USA. It's either the Middle East or Asia like

Indonesia." (Aziza, 20, W, Morocco). Beyond legal access, migrants evaluate destinations based on cultural proximity, safety, and the treatment they receive. Some Moroccans for instance prefer long-term migration to Muslim-majority countries and avoided Western countries due to religious and cultural differences (Aziza, 20, W, Morocco) (Farid, 20, M, Morocco).

Gulf countries and intra-African destinations like Morocco and Senegal emerge as more pragmatic choices, offering cultural familiarity, fewer bureaucratic hurdles, or proximity to home. For some, Morocco shifts from being a transit country to a potential destination, especially when integration, employment, or safety seem attainable. For example, Ikenna, a migrant from Ghana age 44, presented an example of the readiness of some migrants to settle in Morocco in the presence of favourable conditions such as employment. Over time, many migrants reassess their goals in response to obstacles encountered along the journey such as violence, administrative exclusion, or emotional fatigue, leading to more flexible, grounded decisions.

Nigeria

As in Kenya and Morocco, the role of family is highly significant in providing information to facilitate regular migration journeys from the country. In our data, the family was a source of accurate information on preparing for migration journey. However, existing studies on information and migration from Nigeria predominantly focusses on irregular migration where information shared with family members and peers about migration is often inconsistent and may not always give an accurate depiction of conditions in destination countries (Obi et al, 2020). In the case of regular migration, the information shared with respondents was tailored to their specific needs and proved useful to their migration journeys.

In some instances, the family dissuaded migrants from a journey that they judge as potentially dangerous. Not telling community members about migration journey in one case averted the stigma attached to a failed irregular migration journey. *"But my grandmother didn't allow me. She said I should not travel, that they want to send me to errr, prostitute"* (Kambili, 31, F, Nigeria).

Whether the family had the financial means to support or not, they gave hope and other forms of encouragement to aspiring migrants. Collective aspirations also shifted when aspiring migrants demonstrated their inability to make a living in Nigeria (it's about time to support this 'boy'). In addition, other community members (such as a professor) who had succeeded abroad was sharing opportunities particularly with aspiring migrants at higher levels of education (Masters). Monetary support was available in the case that the family could afford it. However, the most frequent was non-financial support through information sharing, encouragement, and prayers. In a rare instance, the respondent did not have access to support for their migration decision. *"I have some of my family members that have been very, very encouraging when it comes to me travelling"* (Godwin, 44, M, Nigeria). *"Yeah my dad is aware and he's also playing his part but he's not capable of finance as well because tired, old enough".* (Abdul, 20, M, Nigeria).

Migration was viewed as a rite of passage, a socially expected milestone after completing an education that can usher in new life stages and status (Aslany et al. 2021, Kofman et al. 2023). *"People just generally assume that once you're done with school and you're done with NYSC and all that that the next thing you should be thinking of is either marriage or migration."* (Rachael, 24, F, Nigeria).

Respondents used a variety of information sources and were often, even if not always, careful to verify the integrity of the information. As in Kenya, they frequently used a mix of information sources including formal websites, radio and television, and also social media. While social media was often used it was not a dominant source of information and many respondents were aware of the risk of not verifying and thereby validating information. As the 20 year old female respondent Mercy stated "If I see a video that talks about a link or I see a post about a university, I go to websites to verify that what I have seen and read actually correct" (the 20 year old male Segun "you have a lot of people now sharing their travel experience having YouTube videos on how they did this and how they did that and the likes so yes those are things that happen."

Most respondents spoke about how they think that external institutions could ease the migration process, in particular through simpler visa processes. They discussed the difficulty of getting a visa appointment as well as a more direct and user-friendly sources of information from the consular offices (which to them meant replacing international recruitment agencies). Respondents also wanted the cost of migration to be reduced through removing middlemen (agents), improving the chance of getting a visa through better information systems but also cutting the cost of travel. A key idea from the respondents was that foreign countries wanted skilled migrants whom they encouraged through visa lotteries and regular employment channels. Some had detailed knowledge of application processes.

Respondents spoke about their perceptions of government programmes. They perceived government as not doing enough to sustain the economy so that people could make a livelihood for themselves at source but also that government appeared not to want people to migrate through policies targeting increased local production while not doing enough to make those policies work. Respondents also mentioned

the type of support they have received (employability training etc). A few

respondents had received some form of assistance such as employability training.

One respondent felt that the National Youth Service Corps programme was useful to

introduce them to the world of work by assuring one year of employment after

graduation.

Several Nigerian respondents mentioned a desire to maintain linkages with their

origin by keeping their migration short-term, by having a visitation or a return plan

and in one case citing normative cultural obligations to maintain ties with origin.

They mention conditions under which professionals may be incentivised to remain,

by increasing remuneration. They also shared ideas about how the financial

institutions could help amortise payments in manageable bits.

> Especially, I'm talking about UK. UK's process is very straightforward and direct. As far as you have the money, you will definitely get approve, but unlike US and Canada, you can go through the whole process and at the end of the day, they will deny you of your visa." (Benjamin, 33, M, Nigeria)

> Errr, there's a document that UK schools' issue is called CASS. Errr, that CASS enables us to be able to successfully apply for err a visa from the home country here. And errr the school is such that before you even submit your documents to the embassy, they will have assessed your documents and tell you, oh, this is missing; this is what you should add. This is what you should remove. You know, there's this kind of guidance and errr they help to streamline the things you should do and the things you should not do. So, there is zero, there should be, or let me say, there is a zero likelihood of not getting the visa. And there should be zero challenges because the school already takes us through the step-by-step emm, process of getting a visa." (Richmond, 30, M, Nigeria)

Narratives of migration ranged from successful stories to stories about destinations

that were no better than staying, to stories of struggle to overcome difficulties at the

destination and the accompanying hope that struggles breed great results. Irregular

journeys and lack of documentation were more likely to be associated with negative

narratives than regular journeys. This fits with the idea (de Haas 2023) that

migration itself was associated with positive emotions but there were specific

migration types that respondents found negative, and that migration itself was not a

problem as was the possibility of obtaining documentation. One key finding that

aligns with the works of Carling, as well as DeHaas, is that negative narratives about

migration did not affect the aspiration to migrate among our respondents but affected their choices in terms of migration route and destination choices.

The Livelihood and Security node includes the respondents' perceptions about the skills they will require to be employable abroad. One noted that it depends on whom you know

> in Africa, even if you are so creative to take those opportunities, if you don't know the right person that can get you to the right place, where those opportunities or those things that you have created, you would not really get to have that opportunity to take. But if you're out of the country, there are better opportunities for you. (Richmond, 30, M, Nigeria)

The discussions held among participants in the digital diaries expressed a clear preference for migrating legally which is perceived as a safer route and helps to avoid risks such as sex trafficking. Many stated that migration had been on their minds constantly), that they had conducted research on the topic, and that some have begun learning the language in preparation for their potential destination. Others are taking practical steps, such as obtaining a passport. Two participants discuss their contacts abroad, hoping to receive support and guidance from them. One participant has a girlfriend in Europe and hopes this relationship will provide an entry route. Some have not yet decided which country or migration route to take, while one participant states that he does not mind which country he goes to.

Concerns about migrant safety in GCC countries are also raised, particularly after one participant's friend, who migrated there on a labour contract, passed away. Some acknowledged the dangers and risks of the sea route, including death and torture. The discrimination against sub-Saharan Black African migrants is also a significant concern. Despite the risks, some individuals take these dangerous routes due to a lack of funds for regular migration. Some attempt to apply for asylum, while others have made multiple failed attempts to cross the sea and have resigned themselves to the idea that they may never reach their intended destination.

Young migrants often take the dangerous journey because they feel they have no other options or resources for migration which was the decision of a young man *to cross* to Italy as he saw it as his only chance for a better future. A blogger (DD_01_NGR_M_Lawrence**)** noted many links about the dangerous sea route and makes the point that this is the way people without money travel. He talks about groups of Nigerians leaving and crossing the dangerous sea and that some argue it's better to risk their lives and try their chance than staying in Nigeria. A group of 100 Nigerians wanted to cross from Morocco but were caught by the authorities and mistreated. Many of them died of hunger. He shares a facebook link of a reel of migrants being in distress at sea and people falling into the sea which had 140K views and 274 shares. He knows of group of 15 Nigerian's leaving recently and who are now on the road to Libya; they say better to die on the road than stay in Nigeria. That's how desperate people are here.

Another person (Victoria, 30, F, Nigerian, Digital Diaries) met a woman who was returned from the UK. She is a hairdresser whom she met in a women's shelter. Now she is finding a way to travel again and went to Ghana to work and save money and is going to the Seychelles which does not require visas for Nigerians and she can sort out her paperwork from there and *"that place I can actually go to any country of my choice and do the documentation there".* Her friend has a lot of knowledge about destination countries and what is required to get there. Others, as recounted by the migration blogger, manage to get to Europe (Cyprus) but get stuck and have to return but then worked again to save money and is now again abroad.

Diasporas

Though regular routes may be preferred, they are not without considerable obstacles as our diaspora respondents had encountered in their preparations and journeys. Among them the biggest hurdles were the financial burden and paperwork and documentation. Many individuals struggle to afford migration costs, which include visa fees, travel expenses, and relocation costs. Some attempt to save up over years, while others seek external funding through scholarships, sponsors, or loans. Lack of funds is a significant barrier. Agents charge high fees for assistance, and even online consultations onmigration can be expensive. Moreover, the process of obtaining passports, visas, and required permits is often time-consuming and costly. The bureaucratic hurdles, including corruption and inefficiencies in document processing, make legal migration particularly challenging. Some cities issue passports more quickly than others, but at a higher cost. Officers often demand bribes, requiring applicants to negotiate for lower fees.

The migration process involves frequent changes, obstacles, and delays, leading to emotional strain. Even after making payments and securing support letters, applicants sometimes face visa denials, reinforcing the feeling of being discriminated against as Nigerian passport holders. Applicants often have to readjust their plans and deal with unexpected requirements. Delays may arise due to visa denials. One migrant was initially denied a UK visa to attend her brother's wedding but later gained entry after qualifying as a psychiatrist. Another applicant was denied entry because the UK Home Office questioned the legitimacy of her marriage. Also, in the country, process of getting papers from officials including workplace was very slow; took a whole month of chasing to get a simple transcript of her diploma, that she needs in order to apply for visa. Many individuals spend years preparing for migration, saving money, and taking necessary exams. However, changing regulations, financial constraints, and administrative hurdles often delay their plans. However, due to financial and bureaucratic constraints, some individuals

explore alternative pathways, such as step-by-step migration through visa-free countries or relying on migration agents who promise easier routes, often at high costs.

Some migrants see student visas as a strategic entry point to settle in the UK. Many Kenyan students have used this route, working part-time to finance their stay before securing employment and permanent residency. One migrant advised his younger brother in Morocco to come on a student visa rather than marrying a British woman for residency. However, student routes are expensive and limit job opportunities compared to the US, making settlement challenging.

The prolonged waiting period and uncertainty surrounding migration significantly impact individuals' personal and professional lives. These include career and relationship disruptions. Many experience frustration, uncertainty, and self-doubt as they navigate the migration process, especially when facing obstacles like visa denials or financial constraints Migration presents challenges at every stage, as the diaspora interviews reveal—navigating complex immigration policies, balancing family expectations and responsibilities, pursuing personal and professional goals, and responding to socio-economic and political pressures remains an ongoing process even after arrival. Insights from the digital diaries, both from those with migration aspirations and from refugees in Kenya and Sub-Saharan migrants in Morocco who had already migrated, shed light on how these struggles begin long before departure, shaping the very foundations of the migration journey and its outcomes. The final section of this chapter draws on these digital diaries to explore how the decision-making process unfolds.

Insights from the digital diaries: The pre-departure 'migration journey'

The analysis of the submissions made through the digital diaries vividly illustrate that migration is not a singular event but a prolonged and nonlinear journey—one that begins well before physical movement through what can be termed as the 'pre-migration journey'. This involves the gradual formation of migration intentions, the exploration of options and efforts to overcome financial and bureaucratic barriers. The 'pre-migration journey' can be broadly understood in three stages which are not fixed but are fluid and overlap.

The first stage is the formation of a mental commitment to migrate – what we refer to as 'the pledge to japa', borrowing from the Nigerian Yoruba term meaning "to run away". This phase is typically shaped by deep frustration with deteriorating socio-economic and political conditions and a mounting sense of hopelessness about the future. Migration becomes not only a means of escape but also a path to opportunity and dignity – a "wise" choice, as one participant put it. As Benjamin a 31-year-old from Kenya reflected in a text message sent on 30/01/2024:

> As I embark on this journey, I do so with hope in my heart and determination in my spirit. I may not know what lies ahead, but I know that I am ready to face it, armed with nothing but my dreams and the courage to pursue them.

This mental preparation demands emotional resolve and clarity, as for many it marks a profound and risky life decision.

The second stage is characterised by actively searching for viable migration options, evaluating potential routes and weighing the risks and opportunities of each. For many, this is a daunting process, involving navigation of a complex and often opaque landscape of information, advice and actors – deciding, for example,

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whether to rely on recruitment agencies, trust the recommendations of friends or approach a promising broker. Participants reported having to distinguish between what held genuine potential and what was likely to be a waste of time, or even outright fraud. At this stage, informal intermediaries played a prominent role. Respondents turned to a wide range of sources, including peers who had migrated, self-proclaimed migration advisers and influencers sharing tips and success stories via platforms like TikTok, Facebook and Instagram. This increased the pressure that those who try hard and don't give up will eventually succeed. This stage, then, reflects not only logistical uncertainty but also considerable emotional vulnerability, where "a leap of faith" is needed to embark on the migration journey, as expressed by Agnes from Kenya, who aspires to migrate.

The third stage involves preparing the practical requirements for migration: obtaining the necessary documents (such as birth certificates, passports and visas), securing employment contracts or study placements, and, most importantly, raising the funds to cover these costs. This phase often brings inequalities and vulnerabilities into stark relief. Some participants lacked even basic identification documents, while others were unable to cover the costs of migration. Those without sufficient funds frequently relied on recruitment agencies to obtain employment, especially in the Gulf states as will be shown in Chapter 06, where employers sometimes cover the upfront fees. However, this route came with serious risks: exploitative labour conditions, restrictions on mobility and limited recourse in cases of abuse, as the semi-structured interviews with Kenyan returnees revealed. For refugees in Kenya and sub-Saharan migrants in Morocco who had already left their home countries, additional barriers persisted, as many legal pathways and services were restricted to citizens. While some intended to settle in their current locations, others hoped for resettlement through UNHCR, leaving them in a state of prolonged uncertainty.

Conclusion

The digital diaries reveal that migration decision-making is a complex and deeply social process that begins well before physical movement, shaped by a range of intermediaries. Analysis of the semi-structured interviews also showed that family and friends in countries of origin play a central role, offering advice, information, and sometimes discouragement. Peers and diasporic contacts with established links abroad also influence decisions, encouraging others to follow or offering guidance based on lived experience. Social media emerges as a powerful but varied tool: some migrants are inspired by it, others use it selectively to verify opportunities or navigate administrative procedures, while some express scepticism and rely more on trusted individuals for critical information. These insights highlight the pre-departure phase as a critical focal point for research and policy, particularly as many aspiring migrants—including refugees and those in transit—face significant barriers to regular migration and are increasingly vulnerable to high-risk, exploitative alternatives. Addressing these challenges requires proactive investment in early-stage support: countering online misinformation, regulating digital intermediaries, simplifying bureaucratic procedures for documentation and visas, and expanding safe, legal migration pathways, especially for non-citizens and displaced populations. The following chapter builds on these findings by examining the role of formal infrastructure in supporting migration planning, transit, and settlement.

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06 Migration Infrastructure: Formal and Informal Intermediaries

Understanding how migration happens—how people navigate their journeys, access information, and mobilise resources—requires a close examination of the infrastructures that enable, shape, and constrain mobility. These infrastructures consist of formal and informal institutions, actors, and technologies that facilitate or hinder movement. They include intermediaries, digital tools, commercial recruitment agents, NGOs, social networks, and regulatory frameworks. Collectively, they constitute what Xiang and Lindquist (2014: 124) term migration infrastructure: "the systematically interlinked technologies, institutions, and actors that facilitate and condition mobility." Duvell and Preiss (2022) emphasise that for many migrants, journeys would be practically impossible without these infrastructures due to limited access to information, support, and resources.

Far from being neutral logistical systems, migration infrastructures actively steer, stratify, and shape migrant subjectivities. As Lin et al. (2017: 2) observe, "not only are these infrastructures creating unequal categories of migrants […] they are also (re)inventing migration as a series of cultures and norms that, on the one hand, serve to discriminate against certain mobilities, and, on the other, present themselves as windows of opportunity to migrants." Drawing from Star (1999), infrastructures are best understood not as static backgrounds but as dynamic and relational entities that come into being through organized practice.

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A migrant's trajectory is thus always embedded within and co-produced by a web of material systems (such as visa regimes or transport networks), institutional arrangements (such as policies or civil society organisations), and everyday practices (including social media use and informal advice from family and peers). This layered, interactive mesh constitutes what Collins (2021) refers to as the "middle space" between macro-level structures and individual agency. Migration infrastructures are inherently social, temporal, and interrelated, shaping mobility across the entire migratory continuum—from the initial decision to move, through departure and transit, to arrival and the maintenance of translocal networks (Muller and Tuitjet 2023: 560).

Building on AbdouMaliq Simone's (2004) notion of people as infrastructure, Muller and Tuitjet (2023) further underscore how migrants themselves act as systems of support, mediation, and knowledge-sharing. Migrants often become informal facilitators of mobility, offering access to opportunities and resources for others in their networks (see Chapter 05 on family, friends and peers).

Intermediaries play a particularly crucial role in temporary labour migration, especially in regions where systems like the kafala or quasi-kafala frameworks govern migration, such as in the Gulf and wider Middle East (HRW, 2020). Under the kafala (sponsorship) system, a migrant worker's visa is tied to their employer, making their legal residency and status in the host country entirely dependent on the employer. This dependency creates a significant power imbalance, often exposing workers to exploitation. Migrants—especially domestic workers—frequently have to go through intermediaries to secure employment, many of whom operate outside formal regulatory frameworks, further increasing the risks of abuse. This is especially relevant for East African migrants (e.g., Ethiopians, Ugandans, and Kenyans), as well as for migrants from Ghana and Nigeria (Fernandez 2013;

Awumbila 2019). Importantly, intermediaries also facilitate rural–urban mobilities within countries such as Ghana, demonstrating their significance across multiple scales of movement.

The analysis of the three countries draws primarily from the node memos on migration infrastructures, based on both interview data and digital diaries. As we will show, different forms of intermediaries play a decisive role in shaping migration trajectories across countries, depending on the type of mobility, legal frameworks, and broader socio-political contexts.

In Kenya, our sample includes two distinct groups: refugees and Kenyan labour returnees from the GCC countries. Both rely heavily on intermediaries, but of very different kinds. Refugees often navigate informal networks and humanitarian actors, while labour migrants typically engage with recruitment agencies and other informal and formalised intermediaries.

In Morocco, most Sub-Saharan African migrants have used irregular routes to enter the country. Some remain in transit, still attempting to reach Europe, while others are settling more permanently in Morocco (see Chapter 07). This contrasts with Moroccan nationals, some of whom have returned after studying abroad, while others plan to migrate through regular pathways, particularly for education.

In Nigeria, most respondents had not yet migrated but expressed high aspirations to do so. Their plans included studying abroad, taking up short-term contract work in the GCC, or migrating to Western Europe as skilled workers. This group demonstrated the greatest flexibility in engaging with various facilitators—ranging from direct applications to universities and employers, to recruitment agencies, social networks, and the Nigerian diaspora—to explore available pathways.

Insights from the digital diaries also highlight the growing influence of digital intermediaries—such as social media influencers, podcasts, and mobile apps—as key sources of migration-related information and guidance. Insights from digital diaries also shed light on the ambivalent attitudes and the complexities of using intermediaries in migration.

The following section explores the migration aspirations and experiences of Kenyan migrants—both prospective and returning—as well as refugees, offering a closer look at how different infrastructures function in practice.

Kenya

Among the Kenyan sample, 30 respondents are refugees or other African nationals residing in Kenya, while 37 are Kenyan citizens. Of the Kenyan nationals, more than half (n=22) are returnees who have previously worked in GCC countries. The remaining 15 are aspiring migrants who have never migrated before.

The graph below presents the distribution of these three respondent groups by economic activity. It reveals a clear divide: the vast majority of refugees are economically inactive. A similarly high level of inactivity is observed among aspiring Kenyan migrants, with 47.1 percent not currently engaged in economic activity. In contrast, only 14.3 percent of returnees are economically inactive, indicating that this group is in a comparatively stronger financial position. As the subsequent analysis will show, returnees are also more likely to have engaged with employment agencies to facilitate their migration.

Graph 13 Economic Activity by Migration Status for Kenya

Economic activity by migration status for Kenya (N=67)

Migration Status	Employed/self-employed	Economically inactive
Refugees	37,0%	63,0%
Kenyan returnees	85,7%	14,3%
Kenyan aspiring	52,9%	47,1%

■ Employed/self-employed ■ Economically inactive
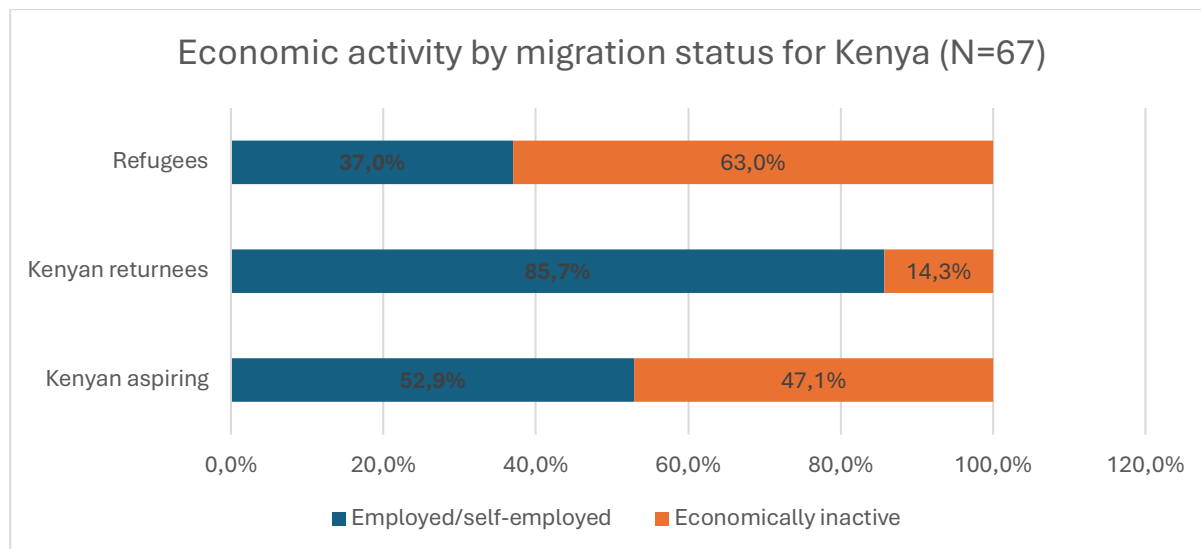
Source: Dynamig socio-demographic sample of interviews

When asked about their current migration status, the 22 Kenyan returnees expressed varied intentions: 7 stated they do not plan to migrate again, 6 have secured new contracts and are preparing to leave, and 5 intend to migrate but have no concrete plans yet. Among the 15 Kenyan aspiring migrants, only 2 reported having no intention to migrate, while 9 expressed a desire to migrate in the future, 4 are currently in the planning stages, and 1 has already secured a labour contract. Refugees reported a broad range of statuses: 10 said they are currently in transit, 4 are awaiting responses from the UN regarding resettlement, 5 intend to migrate, and 4 are actively making concrete plans. Only a small number of refugees indicated that they had settled permanently in Kenya.

In the following section we will show the reliance of Kenyan nationals on employment agencies to facilitate their labour migration mainly to the GCC countries, while refugees, on the other hand, largely relied on NGOs and social networks for information on opportunities available to them in Kenya including consulting the UNHCR on the relocation process. Occasionally, some refugees consulted recruitment agencies to find out more information on job opportunities in

the GCC, but did not follow through on the process due to their refugee status in the country. Private recruitment agencies operating in Kenya can only provide services to its nationals.

Recruitment Agencies

Employment agencies and migration agents play a significant and multi-faceted role in facilitating labour migration for Kenyans, especially to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Dubai. They have been operating since 1998 when there were five to over 1000 by 2015 (ILO, 2017:55). They offer critical intermediary services that include document preparation, immigration advice, securing employment offers, and arranging logistics. They generate income from fees charged to potential migrants and commissions from their clients in the GCC (ILO, 2017). The recruitment agencies are coordinated by the National Employment Authority (NEA) that also ensures that all potential labour migrants undertake the Pre-Departure Training handled by the National Industrial Training Authority (NITA). Most employment agents operate out of major urban centres like Nairobi and Mombasa, which poses accessibility challenges for potential migrants living in rural or remote areas. While the Kenyan government has established official recruitment bodies—such as the National Employment Authority Management Information System (NEAMIS) under the State Department of Labour and the Diaspora Placement Agency (DPA) under the State Department of Diaspora Affairs—none of the respondents in this study reported being aware of these platforms.

Many respondents in this study rely on recruitment services to navigate the complexities of immigration and labour requirements in the destination countries. Some of the aspiring migrants and returnees have also depended on the recruitment

agencies to support them to apply for national passports as part of the labour migration facilitation package. The costs are usually covered by the employer in the destination country which will be refunded once they start work. At the most basic level, migrants engage with employment agencies -sometimes consulting multiple agents- to obtain tailored information and guidance on available migration pathways. Jabari, a truck driver, a returnee who worked for a US company in Afghanistan, explained that: *"I have three travel agents. Migration agents have been able to shape my decisions since they are able to assess individual's eligibility for various immigration pathways based on their qualifications, skills, work experience, financial situation, and personal circumstances. They provide advice on the most suitable visa options and migration pathways available, taking into account the individuals goals and preferences."* (28, M, Kenya, Returnee).

However, migrants face numerous hurdles before they can be matched with an employer and secure sponsorship for their visa application. Acquiring the necessary documentation can present 'serious challenges' as Mosi remarked (26, M, Kenya, Returnee). For instance, not all respondents possessed a birth certificate, which is crucial for applying for a passport. A birth certificate and national Identity document is required for a Kenyan to apply for a national passport using a digital platform (e-Citizen). Several migrants indicated that the process was neither straightforward nor quick[3]. Beyond the costs involved, the passport application process itself could be burdensome, with waiting times of up to 10 months. One respondent remarked that it takes so long *"that some forget they had [even] applied for the passport"* (Nuru, 23, M, Kenya, Returnee). Support in obtaining travel documents is thus a vital service provided by agencies.

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[3] The process of applying for passports has changed overtime as a security measure. Previously, a national ID was not required to apply but with the rise of fraudulent passports by non-Kenyans, the government put in this measure in the new generation East African Community passport for Kenyans as a way of ensuring only Kenyan nationals are eligible to apply. In addition, the new passport opened up more opportunities to Kenyans as East African Community citizens to move more freely and take up other opportunities in Partner States such as Uganda, Rwanda, Tanzania, Burundi, and South Sudan.

Additionally, agencies often arrange mandatory medical examinations, basic training relevant to specific job markets, and preparation on the socio-legal context and expected code of conduct in destination countries—particularly for the GCC and in sectors such as domestic work. Yusuf described his experience working with agents as providing training, sorting out paperwork and getting him ready for travel just within a month:
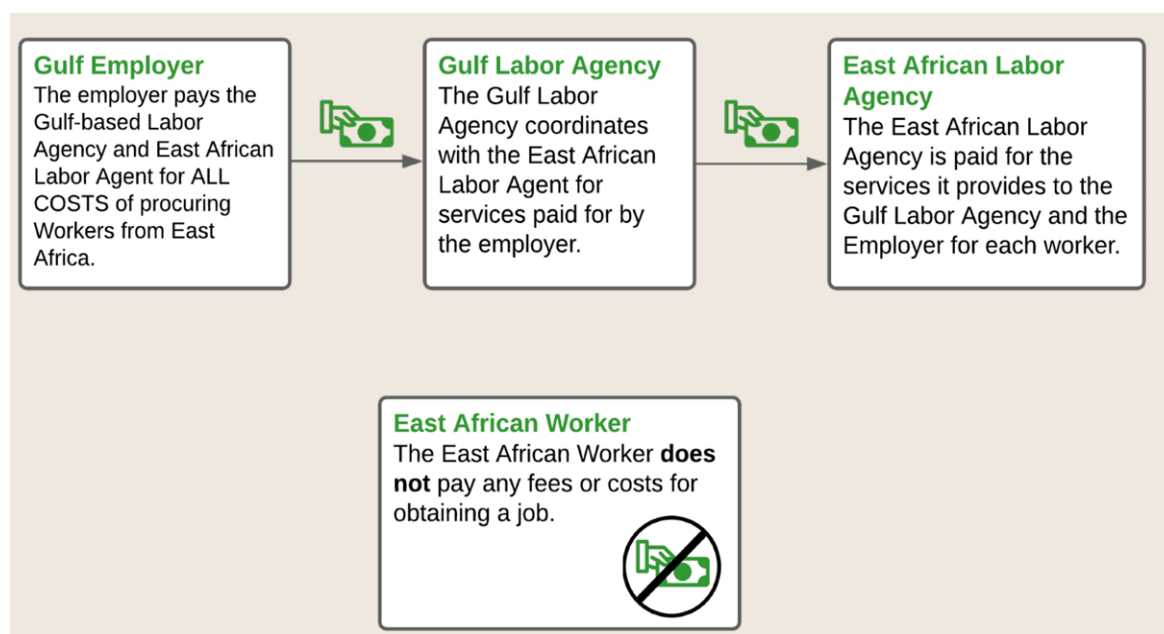
> I got an agent here who lived in Nairobi. He asked for my school and birth certificate, but I did not have the birth certificate, so I went for training and learned about cleaning the house, taking care of the child, giving medicine to the sick and house management   in general. This was for 1 month. While learning the birth certificate was being processed and then passport. After one month everything was ready, and we travelled. You are called like 2 days before and told to prepare yourself as you are going to travel in two days." (26, M, Kenya, Returnee).

There is a growing body of critical literature on the rapid expansion of fee-charging recruitment agencies—particularly in Asia's domestic work sector—which traps migrants in cycles of debt (Jones et al., 2023). In a study commission by the IOM, Bylander (2019) identifies two common forms of debt-related migration: first, migration financed through wage deductions—effectively an "advance sale" of future labour with no upfront costs, although the legality of such deductions is often unclear; and second, migration funded by independent loans, in which prospective migrants or their families borrow to cover recruitment and travel expenses. This practice has been identified by Verite (2021a) in terms of the impact of debt bondage for labour migrants while Ochieng (2025) highlights the dangers of debt bondage on labour migrants in Qatar.

In our research, the cost of migration is a major concern for the respondents. The ability to pay agency fees—or have them covered by the employer—can significantly shape a migrant's journey. Fees ranged from €700 to €1,000 (approximately Ksh 100,000–150,000), a sum beyond the reach of many. This can delay migration plans or lead migrants to seek agencies that do not require upfront fees which come with its own risks and creates vulnerabilities. However, those who managed to raise the funds found the process considerably smoother such as Wangari (34, W, Kenya,

Returnee). Most of the Kenyan respondents' experience with recruitment is illustrated by Graph 14 below where the employer covered his cost for migration. This is a recruitment model outlined by Verite (2021a):

Graph 14 Employer pays recruitment agency to facilitate migration

Gulf Employer
The employer pays the Gulf-based Labor Agency and East African Labor Agent for ALL COSTS of procuring Workers from East Africa.

Gulf Labor Agency
The Gulf Labor Agency coordinates with the East African Labor Agent for services paid for by the employer.

East African Labor Agency
The East African Labor Agency is paid for the services it provides to the Gulf Labor Agency and the Employer for each worker.

East African Worker
The East African Worker **does not** pay any fees or costs for obtaining a job.

Source: Vertie (2021a:20)

This model—where aspiring migrants do not pay fees upfront—is often preferred by respondents, as it reduces the financial burden and makes migration more accessible. Agents who cover migration costs encourage movement, especially for those who lack the means to fund the process themselves. Dafina (42, M, Kenya, Returnee) described how a supportive agent offered him options, outlined the potential returns, and managed the job search and contract negotiations. He paid Ksh 150,000 for a job linked to the World Cup that paid Ksh 70,000 per month for ten months, with the agent handling logistics and advising on the process.

Being able to pay agency fees is also seen as increasing the chances of better support and job matching. Faraja (25, M, Kenya, Aspiring Migrant), a recent graduate, felt confident in securing suitable employment, having already obtained a

passport and paid an agent to ensure he could act quickly once an opportunity arose. Aspiring migrants who cannot afford documentation or journey costs often rely on agents or employers to finance the process upfront. However, this often involves signing binding contracts without clear information about job nature, salary, or conditions. Reported issues included signing contracts in foreign languages (Wangari, 34, W, Kenya, Returnee), receiving contracts only at the airport, lower-than-promised salaries (Abasi, 33, M, Kenya Returnee), being deployed to jobs outside their skill area (Tafari, 34, M, Kenya, Returnee), and horrendous working conditions (Rehema, 37, F, Kenya, Returnee).

Rehema, a 37-year-old returnee from Kenya, shared a harrowing journey of working in the Gulf, marked by exploitation, abuse, and misinformation. Initially lured by promises of free travel and quick processing, she found herself doing domestic work instead of salon jobs, facing mistreatment, withheld wages, and threats when she sought to return home. In contrast, her experience in Dubai was more positive, with respectful employers and fair treatment. However, in Oman, she again faced abuse, including confinement and neglect when ill:

When you meet the agent, and you tell him you want free travel, the agent does everything and it goes very fast. […] I became sick and she was not paying me and when I wanted to come back, she said I have bought you and I have to get back my money. […] while there I was treated as a slave. […] I was still told to work hard so that I get my ticket." — (37, W, Kenya, Returnee).
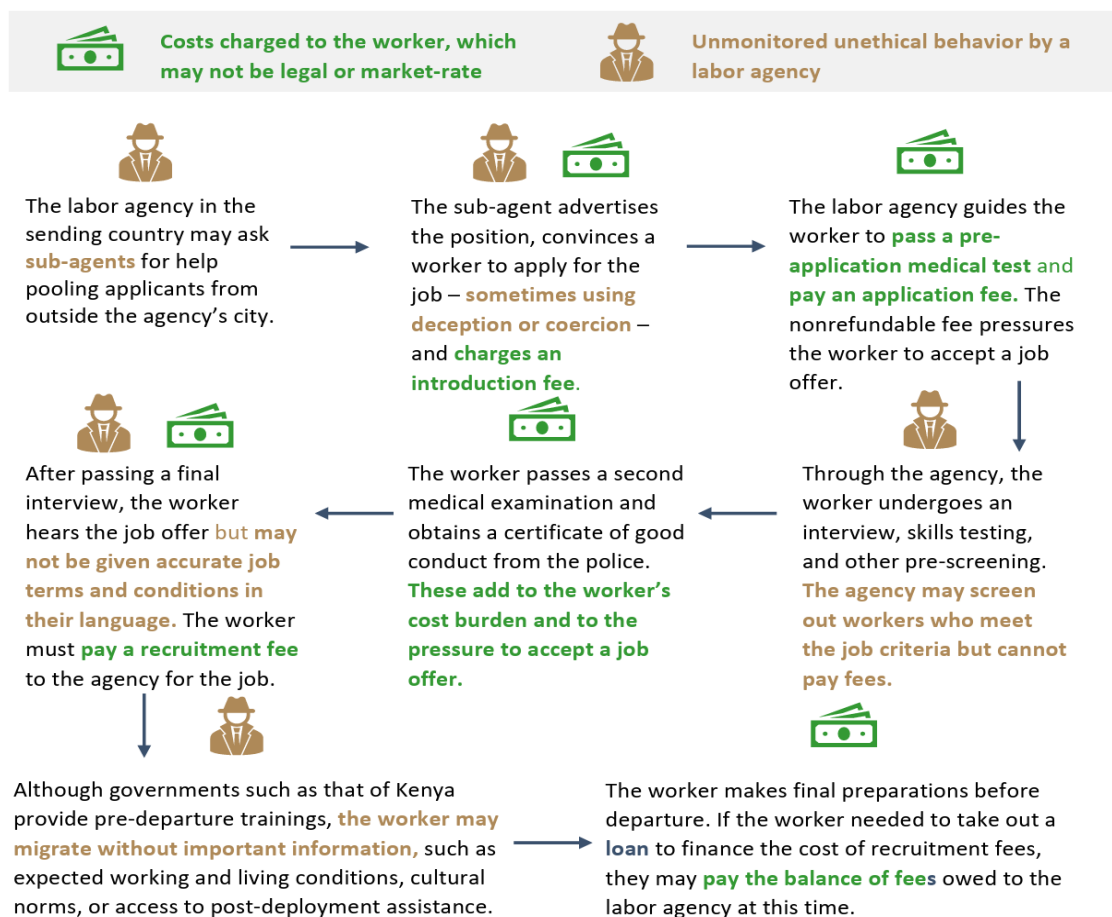
These experiences highlight a common practice of 'bait and switch' (Verite, 2021a: 29) where labour migrants are duped into job opportunities that do not exist and are forced to take up other work. These situations expose migrants to exploitation and risk of trafficking and place them in debt bondage. Aspiring migrants thus take

calculated risks, seeking more trustworthy agents, better employment terms, and preferable destinations. Finding a credible agent and sponsor is therefore a key strategy to manage the risks of committing to a labour contract in the GCC with limited control or information.

Ochieng (2024) highlights a structural gap in Kenya's labour migration system, especially in relation to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. Unlike the UK, where labour recruitment is governed by a bilateral government-to-government agreement offering greater protection, GCC recruitment is facilitated through private agencies known for charging exorbitant fees, engaging in corrupt practices, and altering contracts. Verite (2021b:14) illustrates some of the typical risks faced by aspiring migrants during the recruitment process (see Graph 15).

Despite the risks involved, many aspiring migrants rely heavily on employment agencies, often viewing them as the only viable pathway to migration. For example, Dalali, a returnee, admitted she "didn't know how to go about it" without the help of an agency (W, Kenya, Returnee). Several respondents chose agencies recommended by family or friends, while others specifically sought out those with offices in both Kenya and the destination country, hoping for continued support in case of problems. A common grievance was that agency support often ended once the contract was signed and the migrant boarded the plane. Certified or government-approved agencies were therefore generally seen as more trustworthy and as more likely to intervene if problems arise during the migration process (Mumbi, 31, F, Kenya).

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Graph 15 Typical risks to workers and companies during recruitment procedures in the sending country

Costs charged to the worker, which may not be legal or market-rate

Unmonitored unethical behavior by a labor agency

The labor agency in the sending country may ask **sub-agents** for help pooling applicants from outside the agency's city.

The sub-agent advertises the position, convinces a worker to apply for the job – **sometimes using deception or coercion** – and **charges an introduction fee**.

The labor agency guides the worker to **pass a pre-application medical test** and **pay an application fee.** The nonrefundable fee pressures the worker to accept a job offer.

After passing a final interview, the worker hears the job offer **but may not be given accurate job terms and conditions in their language.** The worker must **pay a recruitment fee** to the agency for the job.

The worker passes a second medical examination and obtains a certificate of good conduct from the police. **These add to the worker's cost burden and to the pressure to accept a job offer.**

Through the agency, the worker undergoes an interview, skills testing, and other pre-screening. **The agency may screen out workers who meet the job criteria but cannot pay fees.**

Although governments such as that of Kenya provide pre-departure trainings, **the worker may migrate without important information,** such as expected working and living conditions, cultural norms, or access to post-deployment assistance.

The worker makes final preparations before departure. If the worker needed to take out a **loan** to finance the cost of recruitment fees, they may **pay the balance of fees** owed to the labor agency at this time.

Source: Verite (2021b:14)

Nuru, a returnee, initially worked with the same agent her cousin had used and was able to negotiate a deferred payment arrangement (23, M, Kenya, Returnee). Though the agent was hesitant—citing past instances of non-payment—Nuru's assurance was enough for him to proceed, and she repaid the balance in her second month abroad. While such arrangements might appear to be goodwill gestures, they are often strategic decisions by agencies to support migrants who align with their recruitment needs. Similarly, offering free accommodation, transport,

and access to training or interviews in the capital is not simply generosity; it is a calculated effort to widen their recruitment pool.

The agents themselves varied widely: all maintained offices in Kenya while collaborating with recruitment agencies in the destination country, while others were far less formal—one respondent recalled meeting their agent only once, outside a building. Many participants expressed a preference for agents with visible infrastructure, which they associated with legitimacy. Unregistered or unlicensed agents or agencies, however, are more likely to engage in unethical practices that puts the labour migrants at risk. For instance, the documentation process remains burdensome, especially for those far from major cities using formal or informal agents. Numerous respondents shared experiences of broken promises and abandonment once they reached their destination. For instance, Abasi (33, M, Returnee) noted that agents *"do not offer any help or support when you are stranded,"* while Wangari (34, W, Returnee) explained, *"the agent's contract ended when I travelled there and did not follow up at the airport."* The risk of being defrauded by unaccountable agents is high, particularly since many operate purely for profit without oversight.

Having already used the same agency and gained experience working abroad, some returnees expressed greater confidence in securing better contracts and targeting more desirable destinations, including specific GCC countries or even Europe. These returnees, particularly those planning to re-emigrate, are often well-prepared, with documents in order and established relationships with agents. They are more strategic in their job search, focusing on opportunities that offer improved pay and labour rights. For instance, Furaha (42, M, Kenya, Returnee) shared his readiness to migrate to Europe after experience work life in Qatar and now expects better pay due to his experience. He has all the required documentation and is

waiting for his agent to identify a suitable opportunity. In contrast, older aspiring migrants or those with limited financial resources and remain heavily reliant on agencies, which exert significant control over available opportunities and destination countries. Shani (50, W, Returnee, Kenya) was completely dependent on her cousin's agent to assist her financially for any opportunities in Qatar or Saudi Arabia.

However, not all respondents maintained trust in agencies. Negative past experiences led some, particularly younger migrants, to turn to social media for information and opportunities. Bahati (23, F, Aspiring Migrant) explained that after a bad experience with an agency, she now uses platforms like WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook to gather information. She also described seeing widely circulated videos of domestic workers being abused in the Middle East, which discouraged her from seeking work there due to safety concerns. This growing reliance on digital platforms highlights a shift in how some migrants navigate information gathering and risk assessment, reflecting both the gaps in formal systems and the increasing influence of online narratives in shaping migration choices.

Intermediaries and refugees

For many refugees in the sample from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Rwanda, Burundi, and South Sudan, their journey to Kenya marked their first experience of cross-border migration. These journeys were typically undertaken in groups, often with family members and fellow community members, traveling on foot or using any available means of transport—most commonly overcrowded trucks— passing through Uganda en route to relative safety. Their accounts reveal the severe risks encountered along the way, especially by women and children who faced heightened vulnerability to gender-based violence, illness, hunger, and

exhaustion. Talleraas et al. (2024) stress the importance of focusing not only on the destination but also on the journey itself, which is often marked by immense suffering and danger for refugees. Many respondents shared stories of personal loss and trauma before even reaching Kenya. Adisa, for example, recalled, "my own children got lost during the war. I left Congo and went to Kampala and stayed in Kampala for one week so we asked lorry people for lifts" (43, W, DRC). Some initially remained near their home countries, hoping for a quick return, but ongoing conflict forced them to continue moving. Makori explained, "We went somewhere where you sit waiting to go back home, but things worsened. Then we continued moving and we got ourselves here" (42, M, DRC, Refugee). Many cited the search for stronger protection as the reason they moved on to Kenya after initially staying in Uganda (Safiya, 32, F DRC; Larry, 54, M, DRC, Adisa, 43, F, DRC). However, even in Kenya, safety was not guaranteed. Safiya described harrowing experiences of physical and sexual violence, with little to no support: "My experience was very bad, I was raped and was never helped. […] I was stabbed. […] I have marks on the body from running away" (32, F, DRC, Refugee).

Throughout their journeys, refugees relied heavily on intermediaries—family members, friends, community contacts, and even strangers or church organizations—who helped them navigate the complex and risky process of migration. These intermediaries played vital roles in facilitating border crossings, offering shelter and food, overcoming language barriers, and providing emotional and logistical support. Larry explained, "I did not stay in Uganda because many of our past friends who were from Congo said that Kenya was better compared to Uganda. So long as one is hardworking one could make it" (54, M, DRC). While Taji (48, M, DRC) relied on church networks, which used their limited resources to secure affordable transport. For Taji, language posed a major challenge, and he had to find someone who could speak French or help him communicate in English. Most

refugees, like Desta (26, F, DRC), relied on lifts from good Samaritans and made their way to Nairobi with help from family. Others, however, were forced to pay exorbitant amounts for transport.

Those lacking documentation had trouble crossing the border, often resorting to bribery to enter the country. Dembe recounted, "I had USD 2000 with me when I fled, which I used to pay transportation and pay some people at the borders" (30, M, Burundi). Ayo shared how a family friend supported him with money where he paid USD 100 for a car to take him across, as he had no identification documents (27, Q, DRC). Strategic planning by family members already in Kenya enabled some refugees to make the journey more discreetly. For example, Mutesa described how his wife travelled with only her identification to avoid drawing attention, while their children were temporarily left with a friend, then moved through a network of trusted contacts before eventually being brought to Kenya (49, M, Rwanda, in Kenya).

A small number of refugees, particularly from Burundi, were able to use their East African Community (EAC) passports to legally cross into Kenya, often fleeing persecution or community disputes. However, most lacked official documentation from the outset or lost it along the way (Desta, 26, F, DRC and Makori, 42, M, DRC in Kenya). This absence of documentation made it harder to regularize their status upon arrival, delaying access to essential services and the ability to rebuild their lives as East African citizens in Kenya (Okello, 2024). Joshua, on the other hand, relied on brokers multiple times to help him cross borders between Tanzania, Burundi, and Uganda while searching for his wife and children. After working in Malawi for four years, he heard that his family was still alive and staying in a refugee camp. Without a valid passport, he was unable to travel through official channels and instead depended on these intermediaries to navigate the region. The brokers facilitated his movement across borders and in some cases, he also had to bribe

border official. During his search, he eventually learned that his wife and children had continued to Kenya, prompting him to follow them to Kenya. Joshua's experience further illustrates the complexity of refugee journeys. Without valid travel documents, he relied on brokers to cross multiple borders in search of his family, paying bribes where necessary. After years of informal work in Malawi, he eventually reunited with his family in Kenya.

Gaining official refugee status was a critical goal for many refugees, as it granted the legal right to remain in Kenya, access to shelter and aid, and eligibility for resettlement. This status was typically processed in UNHCR-run camps in collaboration with the Kenyan Refugee Affairs Secretariat (RAS). These camps also represented a gateway to potential resettlement in Western countries such as the USA, Canada, the UK, or Australia. However, the resettlement process often involves prolonged waiting times, far exceeding the intended average of two years and sometimes stretching beyond a decade. McNally et al. (2025) highlight that refugees face challenges in accessing resettlement offices and report a lack of transparency in the process. Due to Kenya's Encampment Policy[4], refugees are often restricted in their movement outside designated camps, leading to a prolonged state of uncertainty. For instance, Chinara (41, F, Burundi) was issued documents tying her to Kakuma, without updates or information on future travel. Nonetheless, some, like Makori (42, M, DRC), remain hopeful, believing Kenya offers a path to resettlement in Europe.

Thomas, a Congolese participant in the digital diaries project, has lived in Kenya for over 15 years. Though no longer in a refugee camp and running a modest business,

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[4] The Encampment Policy of Kenya has been an unwritten policy that requires all refugees to reside and remain in the camps except for refugees who are undergoing the resettlement process (e.g. interviewing); require special medical and psychological care unavailable in the camps; those pursing education unavailable in the camps; and those experiencing insecurity in the camps. (Human Rights Watch Website. https://www.hrw.org/reports/2002/kenyugan/kenyugan1002%20ap%20alter-20.htm)

he has been waiting three years for resettlement. His statelessness severely limits both his and his children's ability to integrate, access services, or secure a stable future (Digital Diaries_09_KEN_M_Thomas). Refugees like Thomas often lack documentation that would grant freedom of movement or access to formal recruitment channels for employment abroad, such as in the GCC. Since most employment agencies only serve Kenyan nationals, refugees gather information on available opportunities but rely instead on UNHCR and its partners for support. As Adisa noted, they mostly engage with offices like UNHCR and Shauri Moyo, having no contact with recruitment organisations (43, F, DRC, Kenya).

Refugees who had onward migration aspiration consulted with recruitment agencies in Kenya but it is rare. Although organisations like Talent Beyond Boundaries offer limited pathways for employment and skill development, our respondents were not aware of them and remained largely dependent on the UNHCR and other implementing partners. Socio-demographic data from 28 refugees revealed varied intentions: 10 identified as "in transit," 4 awaited UN updates on resettlement, 5 planned to settle in Kenya, another 5 were considering migration, and 4 were actively planning it. Delays in resettlement have led some refugees to seek alternative pathways. Some work as interpreters for the UNHCR, gaining insider knowledge of the system (Balakian, 2025), while others—particularly young women expressed strong interest in labour migration. Among them were Furaha (age 25), Ayana (age 28), and Faraja (age 20) from Rwanda, and Monifa from Burundi (age 32), who all saw themselves as being transit migrants. Botti and Phillips (2021:9) define onward migration as the movement from an initial destination to a new place of settlement, "often happens within mixed migration flows, and may occur for different reasons. Onward migration can be regular and irregular". Their study found that motivations for onward migration included better living standards, personal freedom, and freedom from oppression.
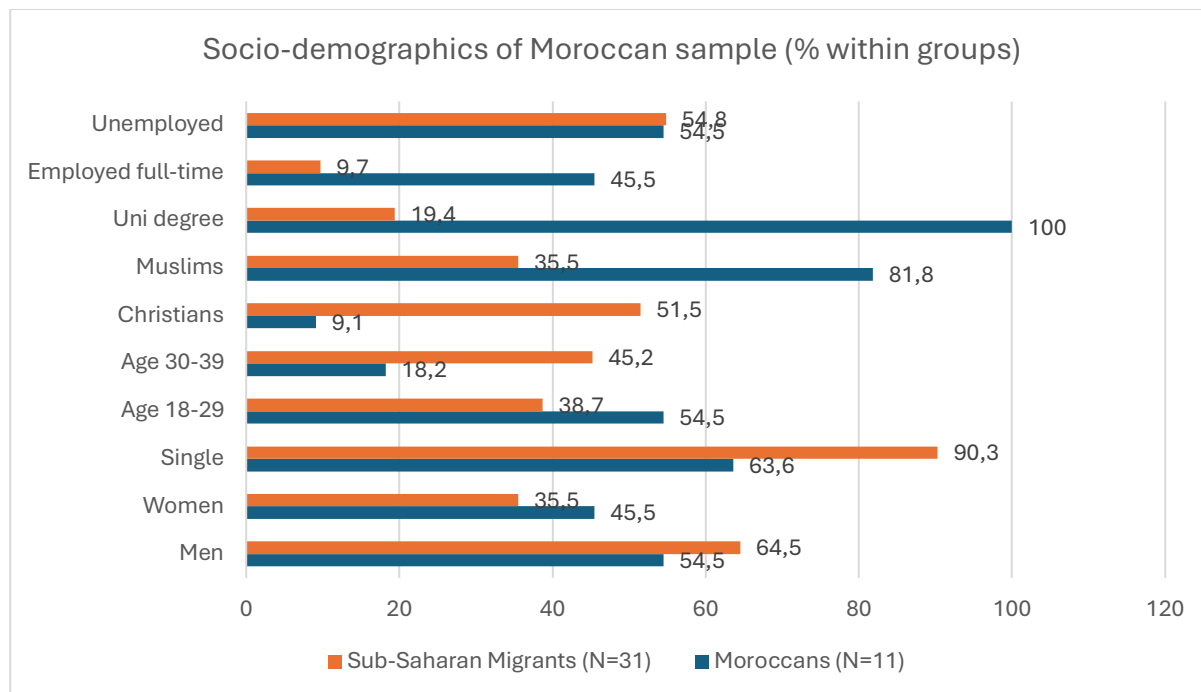
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For many refugees in the DYNAMIG study, Kenya was a temporary stop as they considered onward migration to other destinations that aligned with their long-term aspirations. However, most refugees lack the documents—such as UNHCR Laissez Passer—required for formal migration. Instead, they rely on informal networks, brokers, and community ties for mobility. Travel often involved moving in groups for safety, supported by NGOs, churches, or local residents. While some paid for transport using savings or sold belongings, others relied on goodwill and ad hoc arrangements. These informal strategies highlight the resilience of refugees navigating movement under conditions of legal and economic precarity.

Morocco

The Moroccan fieldwork reveals divergent patterns of engagement with intermediaries, shaped by nationality, legal status, and migration trajectories. Reliance on formal migration agencies among respondents was relatively low, corresponding with the composition of the sample—73.8 percent Sub-Saharan migrants versus 26.2 percent Moroccans. Sub-Saharan migrants typically depend on human traffickers and informal brokers for trans-Saharan journeys and maritime crossings, later turning to civil society organisations during periods of settlement or preparation for further migration. Moroccan respondents, by contrast, largely pursue regular migration channels, with limited engagement with formal intermediaries.

These differences are partly explained by socio-demographic characteristics. Sub-Saharan migrants in the sample are predominantly young, single men without university degrees or full-time employment. Conversely, all Moroccan respondents hold university degrees, nearly half are employed full-time, 36.4 per cent have studied abroad, and 45.5 per cent are women. Among Moroccan returnees, most are older, married, and employed, while those who have not migrated yet face a higher incidence of unemployment.

Graph 16 Socio-demographics in Morocco

Socio-demographics of Moroccan sample (% within groups)

Category	Sub-Saharan Migrants (N=31)	Moroccans (N=11)
Unemployed	54,8	54,5
Employed full-time	9,7	45,5
Uni degree	19,4	100
Muslims	35,5	81,8
Christians	51,5	9,1
Age 30-39	45,2	18,2
Age 18-29	38,7	54,5
Single	90,3	63,6
Women	35,5	45,5
Men	64,5	54,5

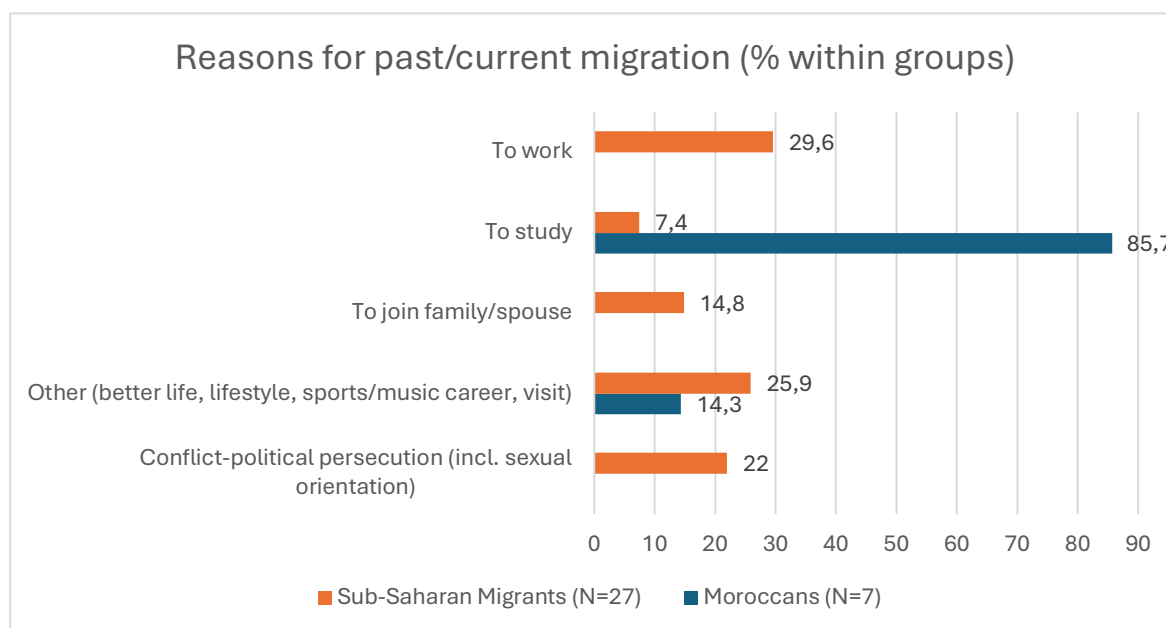■ Sub-Saharan Migrants (N=31) ■ Moroccans (N=11)

Source: Dynamig socio-demographic sample of interviews

This divergence extends to migration motivations. Moroccans overwhelmingly cite education as the main driver, while Sub-Saharan migrants report varied motivations, including employment, escape from conflict or persecution, family reunification, and aspirations such as professional football or music careers. Though some respondents interpreted these questions in terms of present rather than past motivations, the contrast between structured and precarious migration trajectories remains pronounced.

Current aspirations largely reinforce this divide. Half of the Moroccan respondents intend to migrate again, while 40 per cent—primarily returnees—have no further plans to emigrate. Among Sub-Saharan migrants, only 6.5 per cent are actively planning onward migration. A significant proportion (35.5 per cent) wish to settle in Morocco, while others describe themselves a s still in transit (38.7 per cent), and a minority (12.9 per cent) intend to return home (see Chapter 07).

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Graph 17 Morocco: Reasons for migration

Reasons for past/current migration (% within groups)

- To work — Sub-Saharan Migrants: 29,6
- To study — Sub-Saharan Migrants: 7,4; Moroccans: 85,7
- To join family/spouse — Sub-Saharan Migrants: 14,8
- Other (better life, lifestyle, sports/music career, visit) — Sub-Saharan Migrants: 25,9; Moroccans: 14,3
- Conflict-political persecution (incl. sexual orientation) — Sub-Saharan Migrants: 22

■ Sub-Saharan Migrants (N=27)   ■ Moroccans (N=7)

Source: Dynamig socio-demographic sample of interviews

Intermediaries

Among Moroccans, the use of formal migration agencies remains minimal. Aziza, a 20-Year-old University student, prefers to research study options independently, stating: "You can't always trust agencies" (MAR_F_20). Kawtar (21) likewise finds it simpler to apply without intermediaries (MAR_F_21). Farid (20), however, chose to engage a consultant known for assisting with visa documentation to pursue his studies abroad, after a relative's success: "He is known… and helps me gather the possible documents for the visa" (MAR_M_20).

Among Sub-Saharan migrants, awareness of formal recruitment agencies exists, but legal ineligibility and cost present barriers. Jengo (27) from Mali, for example, hopes for company sponsorship abroad but remains ineligible in Morocco (MAR_M_27). Diallo (32) from Ivory Coast left his CV with a local agency and has awaited a match

for ten months (MAR_M_32). Bamidele (29) argues that "word of mouth" is preferable since it avoids fees (MAR_M_29). Others, like Zendaya (31), rely on informal community networks and express no knowledge of agencies (MAR_F_31). Only Zuri (30), an Ethiopian woman, reports prior experience with an agency in Dubai, where she repaid the costs through work (MAR_F_30). Overall, most migrants navigate employment and settlement through peer networks formed during transit or within local diasporas (see Chapter 05).

One of the most salient themes under the 'intermediaries' code was the role of informal agents—primarily human traffickers—in facilitating movement across the Sahara. Fifteen Sub-Saharan respondents recounted using such services, most of them single men, along with three single women. These journeys were marked by extreme hardship, including exposure to death, violence, theft, and sexual abuse. As Amadou (30) from Cameroon explained, the journey's feasibility depended on access to those *who "control the business of transportation,"* who could navigate police patrols and border controls (MAR_M_30). Other accounts—such as Amari's (25)—detailed gendered differences, where men walked through the desert while women travelled by car (MAR_M_25). Femi (38) described how a driver attempted to coerce a female migrant into sex under threat of abandoning the group in the desert*: "When you're abandoned in the desert, it means you're going to die*" (MAR_M_38).

The system of human smuggling is structured through informal but organised networks. Migrants receive contact details at each stage of the journey—Cameroon to Nigeria, then Niger, Algeria, and Morocco—with payments made in instalments, depending on progress. Femi recounted paying 8,000 MAD and spending over a month on the road due to funding delays (MAR_M_38). Smuggling operates at scale, often leveraging digital media for promotion. Amine (28), a Moroccan involved

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in trafficking, described networks facilitating movement through Turkey to Europe and claimed that 80 per cent of YouTube content encourages illegal migration (MAR_M_28). Trust in smugglers is difficult to establish; contact is usually made in person and offline to avoid detection.

Despite the dangers, many migrants continue their journeys until they either reach Europe or abandon their plans and settle in Moroccan cities such as Rabat or Casablanca, where access to work and support is more viable. It is here that civil society organisations and NGOs become central actors in migrants' lives. However, it is essential to locate these organisations within a broader political landscape. NGOs in Morocco do not operate in a vacuum—they are embedded in state-mandated frameworks, often positioned as service-providing intermediaries that fill governance gaps, but simultaneously subject to state regulation and constraints (see Berriane and de Haas 2012; Norman 2020; Stock et al. 2020).

NGOs and civil society organisations play a critical role in assisting migrants, offering support with asylum processes, healthcare, and employment, especially for vulnerable groups such as women and LGBTQ+ individuals. These organisations often advocate for legal reforms and the integration of migrants into society. However, their ability to provide consistent support is undermined by the broader political landscape. The implementation of migration policies in Morocco has been marked by inconsistencies and inefficiencies, which hinder these organisations' effectiveness (Jacobs 2019). In many cases, migrants are left unaware of available programmes, as they are poorly communicated or too temporary to create lasting change.

As highlighted in the experiences of Aadan (MAR_M_37_ Ivory Coast), the limited number of NGO programmes offering long-term training or support for migrants

exacerbates this issue. Moreover, these organisations often face restrictions on their activities and are forced to navigate a political environment that is less conducive to the comprehensive integration of migrants. As Ali (MAR_M_43_Togo), a member of a humanitarian association supporting migrants points out, even regularisation campaigns that could assist migrants often fail to reach all groups equitably, such as Anglophones, demonstrating a selective and inconsistent application of such initiatives.

Nevertheless, civil society and NGOs emerged as the second most discussed theme in the Moroccan data. International organisations such as the UNHCR and IOM play key roles in documentation, regularisation, and return programmes. Kamari (28) from Mali noted that such associations make Morocco more appealing than Algeria for Sub-Saharans (MAR_M_28). Ikenna (44) from Ghana credited the UNHCR with helping him obtain asylum documents after experiencing homelessness (MAR_M_44). Zuri (30), initially unaware of these resources, settled in Morocco only after receiving support from the UNHCR (MAR_F_30).

Local NGOs also act as gatekeepers to IOM return assistance. Amadou, for example, considered return after severe hardship but ultimately declined to do so (MAR_M_30). Faith-based organisations such as Caritas provide immediate aid. Chinara (34) from Nigeria described how religious networks help connect migrants to support (MAR_F_34), while Mael, a French volunteer, described a person-centred approach involving food, clothing, and hygiene kits (MAR_M_53). Muslim migrants, including unaccompanied minors like Odion (22), also access these services regardless of faith (MAR_M_22).

The 2005 deaths at Ceuta and Melilla spurred a new phase of civil society engagement. As Hakima (60) explains, her association was founded in direct

response to the tragedy and has since become a recognised partner in advocacy and service provision (MAR_F_60). Migrants themselves often staff these organisations: Makena (36), a health worker from Cameroon, volunteers to treat injured migrants near Melilla; Femi combats trafficking networks targeting young women (MAR_M_38).

Yet significant gaps remain. Some migrants are unaware of available services, while others fear visibility. Nala, a Cameroonian volunteer, noted that insecurity keeps migrants inside (MAR_F_35). Nia (23) and Zendaya (31) echoed this: the former lacked contact details, while the latter found psychological reassurance in ethnic associations despite not requiring aid (MAR_F_23_Nia; MAR_F_31_Zendaya).

The migration experience in Morocco is fundamentally shaped by a complex web of intermediaries—formal, informal, institutional, and community-based—whose roles and influence reflect broader political and structural dynamics. These intermediaries mediate nearly every stage of the migrant journey, from border crossings to legal status acquisition and access to basic services. Bureaucratic institutions, for example, serve as powerful intermediaries that determine migrants' legal recognition through convoluted and often inconsistent visa and residency procedures. Their inefficiency and opacity not only prolong uncertainty but also institutionalise unequal treatment, as seen in Ola's account of feeling secondary to Moroccan citizens despite holding legal residency (MAR_F_30_Ivory Coast_Ola). At the same time, civil society organisations and NGOs act as critical intermediaries that attempt to counterbalance these state-imposed barriers, offering legal assistance, healthcare, and support for integration. However, their ability to act is limited by the very governance structures they aim to navigate, often leaving them unable to address systemic injustices at scale. Religious institutions and grassroots networks similarly step in where formal support is lacking, shaping migrants' daily realities through

moral authority, community aid, or material support. Informal intermediaries—such as smugglers, brokers, or community leaders—also play a significant role, particularly in contexts of legal ambiguity or state neglect, guiding migrants through both protective and exploitative channels. In each case, the intermediary not only facilitates or obstructs access to resources but also redefines power relations between migrants and the state. Thus, migration in Morocco is not simply governed by law or policy, but by a constellation of actors whose involvement fundamentally structures the risks, possibilities, and outcomes of the migrant experience.

Nigeria

The Nigerian sample presents a distinct profile compared to the Kenyan and Moroccan cases, particularly in terms of nationality, migration experience, and current mobility status. Nearly all respondents in the Nigerian sample (N=43) are Nigerian nationals, with only two individuals originating from other African countries (the Republic of Benin and Chad), suggesting a relative homogeneity in terms of national background. In contrast to the more diverse migrant and returnee populations seen in Morocco and Kenya, the Nigerian sample focussed on economic migrants. Notably, 28% of participants have migration experiences, within and outside Africa, 12 individuals comprise returnees from within Africa, temporary migrants who move for music or sports, and persons who have moved within West Africa, highlighting the minimal cross-border mobility within the sample.

Intermediaries play a crucial role in shaping migration experiences, acting as both facilitators and exploiters. The stories of Joy, Jimoh, and Ibrahim, drawn from a Nigerian context, illustrate the diverse ways in which intermediaries influence migration outcomes. Joy, (NG_F_20), while working as a caterer, became frustrated with her working conditions, particularly the determination of her active working hours. She had started working after her father passed to help support herself and

her siblings. At the food catering job, Joy was approached by a woman who seemed to be a way out of her burdens. Carling et al. (2023) document similar cases in Nigeria in which insecurity of livelihoods, particularly among women, drives migration aspirations. The woman appeared kind and made several promises to the 17-year-old Joy, who did not mention to her mum that she was embarking on a journey, because her mum lived in another community, but also she thought her mum would discourage her journey. By the time Joy realised she had taken a wrong turn, she was already in Mali. In a rare turn of events, Joy was able to escape and find help. While she has not overcome her socioeconomic circumstances, after her rescue, she has settled, getting married and raising a family, while still struggling to make ends meet. Her experience has discouraged her from future migration. Jimoh from Chad (NG_Chad_M_27) got educated to the Masters degree level, thinking it would get him a job and pull him out of poverty. But, he says, elitism and nepotism make it impossible for someone with no "connections" such as himself to get employed. He sees migration as a means of improving his livelihood and has moved within West Africa, trying to make a living. He was at the time of the interview living in a migrant shelter for males.

Ibrahim (NG_M_21) had been rescued from Libya and returned to Nigeria. Ibrahim grew up in Northern Nigeria, Kano, as an orphan being raised by his uncle, who was a trader and his uncle's wife, a farmer. Ibrahim had faced difficulties at home from childhood, particularly because his uncle asked him to engage in housework all day and did not enrol him in school, even though his cousins were going to school. When Ibrahim raised the problem with his uncle, he was called an 'evil child' and asked to continue work. Ibrahim felt he had little chance to advance in life in that household and ran away from home at age 10. He pushed wheelbarrows (being a porter carrying merchandise for people in the market is a common occupation for low-skilled, low-income earners in Nigeria), carrying merchandise in the market for a

paltry fee for a living. Homeless, Ibrahim slept in the market next to his wheelbarrow and kept his earnings with an elderly seller who had a stall at the market. He overheard some strangers speaking about migrating to Libya while in the market and he approached them. They agreed to take him on the trip and he retrieved his savings from the elderly man and joined them on the journey. At the time of the interview, Ibrahim was 21, he had benefited from assisted voluntary return from Libya, but could not establish his Nigerian citizenship because he had no identity papers and could not identify the places he had grown up in.

The migration experiences of the respondents reveal the critical role of formal infrastructure and migration intermediaries in shaping their migration trajectories. Formal infrastructure refers to established systems, institutions, and networks that facilitate migration, such as travel documentation, educational pathways, skill acquisition programs, and formal employment opportunities. Migration intermediaries, on the other hand, are individuals or organisations that facilitate or influence the migration process, including travel agents, educational institutions, employers, and even personal connections. The cases of Ibidapo, Vincent, and Gloria highlight how access to formal infrastructure can significantly influence migration outcomes. Ibidapo and Vincent are both skilled professionals in the music industry whose migration journeys have been facilitated by their professional skills and connections.

Ibidapo (NG_M_43) is a musician whose skills have taken him to South Africa, the United Kingdom, Singapore, and Cape Verde. He plans to continue temporary migrations across the globe, working on his album or promoting it, but is split on whether to live permanently abroad, because he thinks it is a 'trap' if he does not have the right opportunity. Ibidapo considers that his trips offer him a competitive advantage over his peers. He has learnt new work cultures and new skills, but also

thinks that he has unique skills to offer his colleagues. Ibidapo takes advantage of temporary work opportunities for professional development. Ibidapo believes he could get a music album and, with the right opportunity, may stay for two years or forever in the United States. What he is not ready to do is give up his career and become deskilled and then be forced to make ends meet by doing jobs he is not passionate about. Migrants did not see their journey as permanent, describing a desire to return to origin "home", regularly as seen on other scholarly work as documented by Makina (2012) and Mensah (2020).

Similar to Ibidapo, in industry Vincent (NG_M_41) described himself as a sound engineer; he plays several local percussion instruments, including the talking drum, which has taken him to West Africa but also brought him in contact with others in the music industry from the United States. He plans to migrate to the United States because he thinks he has a niche in teaching local instruments there. Vincent has travelled to Ghana and also to the Republic of Benin as a student. He got a study visit to China but was unable to meet the financial requirements for travel and had to abandon the trip.

Gloria (NG_Benin_F_30) is Beninese and lives in Lagos, where she has spent most of her adult life. She visits Benin Republic occasionally, she mentioned two visits in the interview. One of those visits lasted for a year and a half, yet she could not find any marketable activity. Her mates, whom she attended primary school with, got married in Benin, and Gloria also got a marriage proposal then but did not marry early. Her discussion of marriage was as a means of mutual support. At the time of the interview, Gloria was married to a Pastor (Church worker) but her husband travelled frequently and was seldom at home. When he did come home, he would not have enough money to leave for the family. Gloria is struggling to make a living in Lagos, as well. With her secondary school level education, and soft skills, she has

worked mostly in marketing. She feels her employers try to take advantage of her, by paying her meagre sums for long hours of work. Gloria, was conflicted about her further migration plans, she had not advanced economically in Nigeria and she did not know much about other countries or how to obtain travel documentation. At the time of the interview, she was enrolled in a skill acquisition program and was trying to market this to her friends. She wanted to continue her marketing job but wanted more independence, she needed money to own the products she sold (health pills and syrups).

The case of Gbago further illustrates the role of intermediaries, particularly in the context of return migration. After three decades in the United Kingdom, Gbago was deported and had to rely on the assistance of Sarah (NG_F_Sarah), a migration support worker, for his reintegration. Sarah's support as an intermediary highlights how migration intermediaries are not limited to facilitating outbound migration but also play a critical role in supporting returnees. In contrast, Adunni's migration experience is shaped by her family's role as migration intermediaries, providing her with access to education in the United Kingdom and maintaining her ties with both the UK and Nigeria. Adunni's family acted as intermediaries, securing her migration pathway through education. In addition, in Nigeria, the data largely reflects prospective migrants' perspectives, with intermediaries such as migration agencies playing a significant role in shaping imagined futures rather than actual migration outcomes. Many aspiring migrants in the Nigerian sample were particularly interested in the study and work route, actively seeking university programmes or skilled visas abroad. Preferred destinations included the UK and the US, where established Nigerian diasporas already provide informal support networks. Consequently, respondents frequently relied on contacts with family, peers, or professional colleagues for advice and information. Moreover, given the high levels of education in the Nigerian sample, many participants expressed confidence in

navigating application processes independently, often preferring to apply directly to universities or overseas jobs rather than relying on agencies.

The accounts from respondents reveal the central and multifaceted role that employment and migration agencies play as intermediaries in shaping migration aspirations and trajectories in Nigeria. They highlight both the enabling and problematic dimensions of these intermediaries within a highly unequal and often opaque migration system. Firstly, agencies are portrayed as essential facilitators of migration, particularly for those who can afford their services. Wesley (NG_M_35) underscores the importance of using a "genuine" agency, highlighting that such intermediaries have privileged access to information and established procedures, which significantly increase the likelihood of visa approval: "Once that person brings everything... the chance of getting the visa is on the high side. Like 90 per cent, 90 or 95 per cent." This trust in the efficacy of certain agencies shows how intermediaries become gatekeepers to mobility, controlling access to opportunity through both their expertise and their networks. Their services, while transactional, are deeply valued for their ability to streamline a process often perceived as complex or inaccessible. Similarly, Peter (NG_M_29) illustrates how agencies act as ongoing support systems that not only facilitate migration but also maintain connections with foreign institutions: "they always stay connected with the universities abroad that I want to go and study in." This reflects a broader trend of outsourcing not only logistical arrangements but also decision-making and planning to intermediaries, who thereby shape migrants' expectations, destinations, and experiences.

However, this reliance on agencies is not uncritical. Segun and Richmond's experiences also reflect the influence of family as intermediaries, with their parents initially hesitant but eventually supporting their migration aspirations. Richmond

(NG_M_30) had also been on a school trip to Liberia and Ghana. Richmond wants to go to Canada, where he thinks he can have better opportunities, but his parents were initially not supportive of his aspirations. More recently, after attending an African Renaissance conference, his parents became more supportive of his plans, possibly because of the temporality of his initial migration. He is pressing them to realise he may not always be in the same country with them. Richmond feels that without some exposure to global travel his opportunities are limited.

Segun (NG_M_27) problematises the role of agencies in encouraging migration through fear-based narratives about economic instability and national decline: "most local agencies would want to paint a strong amount of the reality of the fear of staying in Nigeria... you need to leave the country." Here, agencies are not neutral service providers but active agents in the social construction of migration as both necessary and desirable, often for reasons that may serve their own financial interests. This reflects broader critiques of the migration industry, which can exploit local anxieties and profit from the commodification of migration dreams. Segun also expresses growing public scepticism and fear around the legitimacy of agencies: "people tend to be a little bit afraid of \[agencies] in this time and age." This suggests a shift in public perception, likely shaped by increasing awareness of fraudulent or exploitative practices. The distinction Wesley makes between "genuine" and other agencies further supports this, revealing a fragmented landscape where trust and legitimacy are critical yet unstable.

Overall, these experiences of respondents illustrate how employment and migration agencies in Nigeria operate as powerful intermediaries that structure not just the logistics but the very desirability and feasibility of migration. They offer access and assistance, but also influence decision-making through their narratives and commercial motives. This dual role—as both facilitators and framers of migration—

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underscores the importance of understanding intermediaries not merely as service providers, but as actors embedded in the broader political economy of migration.

Digital Diaries and Insights into Intermediaries

Further insights into the role of intermediaries in the Nigerian migration context were gained through digital diary submissions. These diaries offered a more nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics of migration planning and decision-making. In the early phases of migration, agencies play a critical intermediary role, bridging the gap between local economic constraints and the perceived opportunities abroad. Within the Nigerian context, migration agencies are vital conduits of migration knowledge, particularly when many individuals are unaware of legal migration pathways, such as job-seeker visas or study opportunities. However, while some participants did acknowledge the role of agencies, it was clear that they also relied on a combination of social media, peers, family, and social networks to gather information and follow up on leads. One participant noted that although they used agencies, they would also consult with family and peers to explore other opportunities: *"I mostly rely on social media, but I also consult with my family for advice on how to go about my plans"* (DD_04_NGR_M_Joseph).

For economically constrained migrants, agencies often represent a promising, though costly, pathway to migration. Agencies become especially crucial for those who lack the financial means to independently organize their journey, obtain a visa, or secure employment. Many migrants turn to agencies because they provide an all-inclusive service that facilitates these complex and costly processes. One participant explained how they used an agency because it was the only viable option*:*

> I don't have enough money to apply for the visa and prepare everything by myself. The agency helped me secure a job abroad, and they handled everything. (DD_07_NGR_F_Emilia).

Despite the financial burden associated with agency services, migrants are often willing to pay high fees, particularly when alternative pathways appear inaccessible or too complicated to navigate on their own.

However, while agencies are viewed as offering more reliable pathways, the process is not without its ambiguities. Some participants expressed reservations about the exploitative practices of agencies, even as they relied on them. One respondent described how an agency had arranged domestic work in Cairo under repayment conditions that required one year of unpaid labour: "*She only had to get her passport… she needs to pay them back for a year*" (DD_03_NGR_F_Victoria). Although the arrangement was framed as "legal," it raised concerns about coercion and deception. These dynamics mirror the broader trend of debt-financed migration, where intermediaries create arrangements that, while legally permissible, often function similarly to indentured labour (Bylander, 2019; Verite, 2021a; HRW, 2020). Similar patterns have been documented in East and West African migration pipelines to the Gulf States, where migrants are often promised jobs under false pretences and find themselves in precarious, exploitative conditions (Ochieng, 2025; Awumbila et al., 2019).

Trust in brokers is influenced by a complex interplay of necessity, emotional appeal, and aspirational alignment. Migrants often turn to agencies not only for instrumental access to migration opportunities but also for a sense of hope and shared values. One Nigerian respondent described how an agency earned her trust by offering emotional support for her future NGO, positioning themselves not merely as facilitators but as co-navigators of uncertain futures. This dynamic resonates with Alpes' (2017) concept of the "moral economy of departure," where trust is built not only through practical assistance but also through empathy, shared aspirations, and emotional bonding. Migration agencies, therefore, become integral to the life

projects of migrants, acting as partners in their pursuit of better futures (Balakian, 2025). Agencies also contribute to the symbolic economy of migration, weaving emotionally resonant narratives of success. These narratives are often reinforced by stories of peers who have successfully migrated with the help of an agency, despite the significant costs involved. One participant shared:

> She got the admission letter and the agent helped her to work it out… when I chatted to him, he now sent me the breakdown of millions [sighs!]. (DD_03_NGR_F_Victoria).

The emotional economy also helps agencies retain clients, as they foster loyalty through personalized messaging, promises of support, and the branding of "safe migration"—even when the services provided are minimal and the fees exorbitant. For instance, one participant reported that agencies often charge steep fees for short training sessions, such as ₦50,000 for a 30-minute consultation. In addition, agencies build trust by showcasing success stories and offering structured guidance, particularly for study-abroad routes to Canada or the UK, which are perceived as more achievable with agency support. This reflects how migration brokers mobilize affective economies of hope and certainty in uncertain migratory landscapes, as argued by Andersson (2014). Drawing on his analysis of European border controls, which manage migrants not only spatially but also temporally—subjecting them to prolonged periods of waiting and uncertainty—Andersson also highlights how these temporal dynamics influence the strategies of migration brokers, who often provide migrants with a sense of hope and certainty amid the unpredictability of their journeys.

The financialisaton of migration is increasingly evident in the availability of large loans for educational migration. One participant described how an agency, VESTI, offers loans of up to ₦100 million (€60,000) for prospective students unable to afford international tuition upfront. However, these loans come with long repayment terms, sometimes extending up to ten years:

They said I can borrow as much as 100 million… It's just for the school… but still, you have to pay back. It will take at least 10 years. (DD_03_NGR_F_Victoria).

These financial arrangements reflect debt-based migration infrastructures observed in Southeast Asia and East Africa, where migrants' futures are collateralized through long-term repayment schemes (Bylander, 2019; Jones, Ksaifi & Clark, 2022). In such cases, migration becomes a long-term gamble—relying not on security, but on hope. This form of "deferred payment" or "migration-through-debt" is akin to bonded labour or indentured servitude, where the legal framework is ambiguous, but the perceived benefits of migration outweigh the risks of exploitation (Plambech, 2017). Although these arrangements are framed as legal and cost-effective, respondents express concerns about potential exploitation and trafficking, underscoring the fragility of protection mechanisms in such transactions.

Respondents consistently expressed ambivalence toward migration agencies— relying on them for migration opportunities, while recognizing their exploitative tendencies. This tension reflects what Talleraas et al. (2024) refer to as the "infrastructure of ambiguity," where formal and informal migration pathways blur, and migrants navigate overlapping systems of promise and precarity. As noted in broader African migration contexts (Stock, 2020; Botti & Phillips, 2021), when state-led migration mechanisms are absent or exclusionary, intermediaries often fill the gap, reproducing systemic inequalities under the guise of facilitation.

The digital diaries provided a valuable lens through which to capture these ambivalent attitudes and the complexities of using intermediaries in migration. Respondents' narratives of exploring migration opportunities, following leads, and engaging with both agencies and informal networks provided a richer and more in-depth understanding of the migration process. These diaries shed light on the contested role of intermediaries, revealing how migrants, despite the exploitative

nature of some intermediaries, view them as essential in the pursuit of migration and better futures.

Conclusion

This chapter builds directly on Chapter 05, which explored how migrants navigate their journeys through informal strategies shaped by social networks and digital media. Shifting focus, Chapter 06 has examined how formal infrastructures—such as recruitment agencies, NGOs, and international organisations—also play a pivotal role in shaping migration pathways. Drawing on interviews and digital diaries, it highlights the layered and intersecting nature of migration infrastructures, showing how migrants rely on a mix of formal and informal intermediaries depending on their legal status, socio-economic position, mobility goals, and needs. While nationals of Kenya, Nigeria, and Morocco often accessed regulated intermediaries for skilled migration, further education or family reunion, refugees in Kenya and sub-Saharan migrants in Morocco relied more on humanitarian actors and informal brokers.

The analysis of empirical evidence shows that agencies are both heavily relied upon and viewed with caution. They often serve as essential channels to migration for those facing financial and informational barriers, offering all-inclusive services—from job placement to visa facilitation. Yet these same services can involve exploitative practices, such as debt-financed migration and misleading job contracts. Respondents—especially returnees who had previously used agency services—described these intermediaries as both enablers and sources of risk, highlighting the blurred line between facilitation and coercion within what Talleraas et al. (2024) term the "infrastructure of ambiguity." Moreover, migrants' trust in these intermediaries is shaped not only by practical needs but also by emotional, aspirational, and symbolic considerations. Agencies often position themselves as co-navigators of hopeful futures, tapping into affective economies of trust and success. These dynamics are

especially pronounced where regular migration pathways are inaccessible or exclusionary, compelling (aspiring) migrants and refugees to turn to intermediaries—whether regulated or informal—for support.

This chapter has expanded the analysis introduced in Chapter 05 on how migrants navigate their journeys by placing formal and informal migration infrastructures at the centre of inquiry. While Chapter 05 focused on informal networks—family, friends, peers, and social media—as tools of social navigation during the pre-migration phase, this chapter has examined how a wide array of intermediaries, from commercial recruitment agencies to NGOs and humanitarian organisations, shape and enable mobility in diverse and unequal ways.

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07 Migrant Trajectories

As with the literature on navigation and journeys, discussed in Chapters 05 and 06, and with which it is closely associated and has flourished in recent years, viewing migration through the framework of trajectories (Caarls et al. 2021; Ciabarri and Simonsen 2024; Schapendonk et al. 2021; Snel et al. 2021; Van Geel and Mazzucato. 2018; Wissink, et al. 2017) represents a way of moving beyond understanding mobility as linear but as dynamic and consisting of multiple movements which may go in different directions. Schapendonk et al. 2020 suggest that the 'trajectory approach' covers (1) different phases that migration may involve (2) different forms of facilitation at (3) different moments of time. Black et al. (2021) emphasise the fact that decisions are not made at a single point in time, but that there is some level of future orientation, whilst decisions may be regularly returned to and adjusted through the life course (see also Chapter 05). Applying a trajectory approach also allows one to follow chronologically the different stages over the life course (Mazzucato and Ogden 2025).

The spatialities and temporalities may be quite disparate over the life course. For example, a period of difficult and dangerous journeys through different countries, as experienced by many West African youth, then a period of transit which may be interrupted by a return visit to the country of origin, may result in the realisation that the country still offers no opportunities, and thus generate a return to the country of what had been transit but eventually becomes one of more long-term settlement. The latter term does not necessarily mean permanence for there may still be some uncertainty depending on personal circumstances. In other instances we may have repeated migrations to different countries due to conditions or pay being poor in the first country of migration and the search for better employment and opportunities followed by a period of return, or what has been called serial migration (Parreñas

and Silvey 2019), and as we saw with Kenyans labour migrants in the GCC. We also see how previous experience shapes continuing evaluation of prospects and blockages. Having settled in a country, circumstances, such as loss of employment, may lead a migrant to move onwards in search of greater security to another country (Montagna et al. 2021). Others have moved to escape from racism and poor representations of black people, as has been the case of Nigerians leaving Italy for Germany or the UK. As Caarls et al. (2021) note, intra-European mobility of African populations is quite common. In the case of the UK, this is no longer straightforward post Brexit and its withdrawal from the EU which no longer permits EU citizen mobility. Others may search for better work-family life conditions in their professions and eye countries such as Australia and Canada.

Although the application of concepts of navigation and trajectories opens up a non-linear perspective, our research indicates complexity within categories such as transit and return where indeterminacy and temporalities play a large role. Someone may initially find themselves in transit in the sense of being on a journey to a desired destination. They may then either realise they cannot progress, the journey is too risky or they do not want to because the conditions in the country are relatively satisfactory, in which case they may decide to settle. Others may decide not to proceed further and return to their country of origin. Many regular migrants too may also not know their intentions at the beginning of their journey but wait to see whether they can bring their family over or can find employment to their destination. Others find work in countries where only fixed term employment is permitted for less skilled employment, as in the GCC, which is the case of Africans in the Middle East and GCC countries.

Hence, there may be multiple trajectories within categories such as transit and return. The notion of **transit migration** originally emerged in the 1990s as a concept

reflecting the increasing complexity and diversity of migrations to the European Union of those arriving at its Southern and Eastern borders (Bredeloup 2012; Collyer et al. 2012; Collyer and de Haas 2012). From the early 1990s, with the introduction of visas by Spain and Italy, and the institutionalisation of the Schengen area in 1997, Morocco became a country of settlement (Berriane et al. 2013). In the face of border violence, sub-Saharan Africans have decided to remain in the country, often settling in the major cities (Casablanca, Fez and Rabat), where they find jobs in the informal service sector, domestic households, petty trade, and construction (Berriane et al. 2013), rather than pursuing their journey to Spain (Ustubici, 2016). Students, especially from Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Gabon and Senegal, have grown in number (European Training Foundation 2021:17) with some settling despite originally intending to move on (Berriane 2015). Hence 'transit' may only correspond to the first stage and be converted into something more stable and settled, as we have seen for example in our interviews in Morocco (MAR_M_49_NRA_Berko, MAR_M_38_CAM_Femi and MAR_M_26_SEN_Amadi). Transiting was part of the planned journey but the actual parameters of the transiting may emerge in relation to a changing socio-economic, political and policy environment. A transit status may become long term, when attempts to move on fail, as in attempts to cross to European countries or with refugees who cannot acquire the documentation for resettlement or labour migration, as is the case in Kenya. Hence transiting doesn't just refer to a halt in a single journey but may involve complex moves, a period allowing for the accumulation of resources and acquisition of skills and strategies. Indeed, transit migration remains an under-studied area (Czaika and Reinprecht 2022: 71) although there has been growing attention to the phenomenon beyond Europe (Missbach and Phillips 2020). Transiting also warrants greater disaggregation by age, gender and socio-economic status.

Temporary, whether forced or desired, may be built into plans from the outset. As we have seen, GCC countries in particular do not permit long term residence for

less skilled employment but others plan only to be abroad for short periods, for example, in the music industry, as exemplified by several male Nigerians. Both modalities of short-term circulations and temporary labour migration lead to periods of migration interspersed with return (Makina 2012; Mensah 2020).

In terms of **return** (Flahaux 2021; King and Kuschminder 2022; Weldemariam et al. 2023), there are many dimensions, including motivations and circumstances, time they have been away, the places they return to, whether return is sustainable and the modalities of reintegration. Most problematic is the distinction between voluntary and force which is frequently not clear cut as exemplified in the term Assisted Voluntary Return (King and Kuschminder 2022:11). Increasing the number of returns has become a central policy position of the EU in the past decade (King and Kuschminder 2022).

Migrants may aspire to return to their country of origin but upon doing so find that they are not satisfied and consequently re-emigrate or move to another country. Despite the challenges, many migrants aspire to return home someday with the resources and skills acquired abroad: Some want to invest in businesses or community projects, such as orphanages, to support those left behind. Others see migration as a temporary means to gain financial stability before coming back with acquired skills or remigrating, often to different countries with better labour conditions and remuneration, as the literature on serial migration for domestic workers has outlined (Parreñas 2021; Parreñas et al. 2019).

Desiring to return may also not be acted upon due to considerations such as the education of children as Wasaki and Julius in the Kenyan diaspora in the UK highlight (UK_KEN_M_50_Wasaki; UK_KEN_M_41_Julius). At the same time children may not want to return resulting in some parents splitting their time between

countries. So whether return takes place or a person splits their time between countries often depends on familial and generational relationships. Return is often enacted at a point in the life course, for example, the end of postgraduate studies or retirement, although others return after long years away but before retirement due to a feeling of not belonging or disappointment in what they have achieved in their country of immigration or wishing their children to know the culture of their culture of origin.

Some may accept 'voluntary' return because they have no alternative to stay in the country with an irregular status. Increasing levels of migrants have been returned from Europe and North African countries as part of AVVR programmes in collaboration with IOM. Different countries however face different regulations. For example, in Morocco, a return support project like FORAS supports sub-Saharan migrants from mainly francophone countries such as Guinea, Mali, Cameroon, Togo Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo and Senegal who volunteer to return to their origin countries. Sub-Saharan African migrants who are outside the targeted countries for FORAS like Nigeria are sometimes directly or indirectly coerced to return home or returned haphazardly. Between 2019 and 2023, over 29,000 Nigerians who were stranded along the Central Mediterranean route and from other countries, through the combined efforts of IOM and the Nigerian government, were assisted to return home (IOM, 2023). Though deported from France to Nigeria, some still want to try again as is the case of Lawrence (NG_M_44_Lawrence). The return is often challenging and traumatic, especially for those who are deported after a long period abroad where they have built a life for themselves, as happened to an older male sent back from the UK to Nigeria. Other younger individuals eventually find employment and reinsertion, for example the case of a Moroccan deported from Turkey whilst trying to reach Western Europe (Amine MAR_M_28). Return can be seen as the failure of the individual (Uzomah et

al. 2024) who is often given little voice in return and reintegration programmes (Nozarian et al. 2025).

Having highlighted the complexity of trajectories, such as transit and return, the rest of the chapter covers the multiple trajectories of transit, return, and settlement followed by our respondents in the African countries and diasporas. Their trajectories highlight the links between places of origin, transit and destination, and demonstrating the openness and fluidity of decision-making over space and time.

Kenya

Many **refugees** have arrived in Kenya as a result of conflicts in countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, and South Sudan. They typically travel in groups alongside other community members, often walking or utilizing available transportation, such as trucks, to make their way to Kenya through Uganda. Unfortunately, the journey is perilous, especially for children and women who travel in large numbers. Many perish due to the lack of food and the prevalence of gender-based violence. Meanwhile, men often stay behind, holding onto the hope that the conflict will eventually cease, or they attempt to locate their missing family members. A few particularly from Burundi have migrated to Kenya because of conflicts with community leaders through legal channels using EAC passport.

Their future trajectories may be unclear, especially of refugees who are torn between wanting to return, remain or to progress onwards, as indicated by several interviewees in Kenya. Lack of opportunities and feeling stuck may push them to migrate onwards, especially the case of refugees in Kenya.

> My life is hopeless, and I feel stuck sometimes I feel like going back to Congo. I want to return to Congo because I have struggled but I think I'm confused. I'm not happy here in Kenya. (Fola 38, F, DRC, Refugee, Kenya)

> I like Kenya but I have the spirit of patriotism and I want to go back to Sudan and help. I'm also thinking about going for further studies in the United Kingdom because the education system is good and there are so many part-time opportunities for students. I have not yet started my visa…..I'm confused. I don't know whether to go back to South Sudan or the UK or remain in Kenya. Migration has been the ultimate, but I don't know what next. (Kamau, 28, M, Refugee, South Sudan, Kenya)

Refugees have a perception of the migration experience and journey. They have imagined the journey before it has happened but as an economic migrant. Younger refugees' perception of their status and their freedom and ability to choose migration destination may reveal the lack of knowledge they have in their resettlement options.

Many refugees aspire to relocate to Western countries, such as the USA, Australia, Canada, and the UK, for resettlement rather than returning to their countries of origin or staying in Kenya. They seek to utilize the UNHCR resettlement processes to achieve this goal. Younger refugees' perception of their status and their freedom and ability to choose migration destination may reveal the lack of knowledge they have in their resettlement options. Don expressed the concern all migrants have in destination countries regarding race relations among other issues. He explains that:

> Because of the rise in Black Lives Matter and the racism differential instances we prefer countries that are less racial and also their lifestyle and religion should be as accepted as we have here in Kenya the job opportunities are and with better pay. When I last went to Qatar, I was being paid 70,000 [Kenya Shillings, about US$700) plus food and accommodation. Now I expect better pay because I have experience and exposure. I already have a passport, as for the Visa just waiting for the invite and it will be ready. I have talked to the agent that if he sees a job with a good salary, he alerts me and immediately I start processing everything. The economy here in Kenya is terrible, there is no money, and it is very unbearable. Out there it is easy to save because I do not spend my money on food and accommodation since it is provided, here the little I get is finished on food rent and transport. (Don, 42, M, Kenya, Returnee)

Don's previous experiences exposed him to the risks that undocumented migrants face and possible deskilling he witnessed amongst African migrants in Europe. His migration experience has encouraged him to stay behind to contribute to the development of the economy. Migration experiences can also push migrants to aspire to stay as they have tested another environment and deemed home to be best.

The complexity of journeys by labour migrants within the EAC should also be noted .

> I have travelled a lot through school doing music in Uganda which is where I developed the passion for traveling. After I left school, I went and lived in Sudan first where I worked at a company in southern Sudan that used to supply food. There I used to live with a lot of Kenyans and Ethiopians and even had this first Kenyan girlfriend which is what made me want to come to Kenya. Since I already had experience living in South Sudan, I was open to move. I went to Nairobi first, before relocating to Mombasa and finally Kilifi where I currently live. (Tariq KEN 30, M, Uganda, Labour Migrant)

Many Kenyans aspire to seek better employment opportunities in the Gulf Countries and have migrated in pursuit of this goal. As we have seen in Chapters 05 and 06, they often rely on family members, friends, peers, and social media to search for opportunities, and then contact employment agents to facilitate the migration process. While some have successfully returned and still aspire to migrate again, others have chosen to stay in Kenya and pursue business ventures. However, there are also those who have been disappointed with their previous migration experiences, particularly in Saudi Arabia. They have reported issues such as overworking, sleepless nights, and other employment-related challenges such as employers taking their money, and deportation. Some women in Saudi Arabia had very bad experiences and a total absence of consular assistance. As a result, they have decided not to return to the Gulf Countries and instead focus on establishing businesses in Kenya (Tafari 34, M, Kenya, Returnee).

Returning migrants believe that they have gained valuable insights from their migration experiences and are now equipped to make informed decisions about whether to migrate again or settle in Kenya. They recognize that a successful migration can lead to increased financial stability and help them achieve their personal and professional goals. Yet a number of male and female returnees have migrated several times to different GCC countries, even when they experienced very poor and dehumanising experiences, such as lack of sleep, poor food, lack of time off, being treated badly and underpaid compared to what they have been promised.

I have stayed in Qatar. I came back last year. In March 2007 I left the country and went to Qatar. Before I left, I was doing small contracts…then I travelled. I went and came back. They give leave after two years then paid leave of 2 months. But when you come for leave voluntarily you are only paid one month. I spent 15 years going and staying for two years and coming back to leave the last one I stayed for 3 years because of corona. (Sefu 42, M, Kenya, Returnee).

Others had very poor experiences but still returned to a GCC country.

When I arrived here [Kenya], I never came back with anything while there I was treated as a slave. Then I went to Dubai for two years. The people are learned they were very good people treated me well and gave me gifts. Then I went to Oman and there were problems. People should be taught and should know their rights. I did not know what I was going to do there.. When people are unable to work, they are beaten, some eyes swollen, and we sleep while seated in that office. Sometimes we are 20 people until we are taken by the boss and the food is tea and biscuits. (Rehema 37, F, Kenya, Returnee)

Migrant's' previous experiences may expose them to the risks of undocumented migrants face and possible deskilling and poor conditions, witnessed amongst African migrants in Europe. Migration experiences can also push migrants to aspire to stay as they have tasted another environment and deemed home to be best, though it may be mixed.

Yes, I have plans to migrate, I have an agency of people being recruited. I want to go back to Dubai it was better than here (Kenya). The treatment as labourers is different, I am in the security field. In Dubai they believe security is the eyes of Dubai because they make the first contact to anyone who arrives hence the rationale for treating us very well. The way we live we are given a house, food and transport. Speaks of lack of corruption and health care. (James 34, M, Kenya, Returnee).

My migration opportunity opened a new portal for my life, now I have experience about working out and I can now do better work and bargain for a better salary. At the moment, I am also choosing the kind of job I want, not like previously when I just accepted without choice. I have information, for example I cannot go to Saudi Arabia, because I have researched and know how they treat their employees. The opportunity of working in Qatar has transformed me emotionally (become calmer) the chance to be patient and composed. I have also been transformed socially and financially; I now have my computer business though we are working with my brother. When I go back, I will ask for more money and better living standards) intellectually, I am more informed. (Don 42, M, Kenya Returnee)

On the one, hand, it may encourage them to stay behind to contribute to the development of the economy.

I am not planning to migrate; I am content here and with things. Migration is not about taking it, it is about creating a livelihood. I do not envy other migrants, my first encounter with African migrants in Madrid and Milan was not good, most of them lack papers, sleep on the streets , no future, no progress in Europe, not utilising one's skills through employment based on their employability. This has really influenced my decision to stay back and build in Kenya. Going and coming back home, I can invest, back home, I am here, and I am able to work all over the globe. (Hakazimana KEN 40, M, Kenya, Returnee)

Morocco

As we have seen, migration is often a fluid and evolving process, with initial plans shifting due to lived experiences in the host country. Among the migrants who arrived in Morocco intending to transit to another destination, many ultimately chose to stay, though their reasons and challenges varied. To some extent possibilities to remain in the country have reflected two regularisation initiatives a decade ago, especially for women and children, have opened more possibilities for settlement (Cherti and Grant 2013).

Initial plans may shift due to lived experiences in the host country. Among the migrants who arrived in Morocco intending to transit to another destination, many ultimately chose to stay, though their reasons and challenges varied. Their decisions to remain fall into three key patterns: those who stayed due to better opportunities and conditions than their home countries, those who initially planned to move on but faced barriers, and those who remain uncertain due to legal or cultural difficulties.

For some migrants, Morocco provided better opportunities than their home countries, making settlement an appealing choice. Economic prospects, education, and stability were significant factors in their decision to stay. One migrant initially aimed to be a resident in Morocco and gain expertise in his field of interest. At the same time, he also seeks to return home hoping to apply his skills in his country of origin (MAR_M_37_IV_Aadan). Similarly, another migrant saw Morocco as a place that trained and supported her, offering better career prospects than her country of origin, despite the opportunities she had back home. The presence of NGOs further reinforced Hadiza's decision to stay:

> I had more opportunities here than in Ivory Coast… Here, I would say the financing programme for immigrants' projects. […] NGO 1 directed me to CEC. They were looking for migrants who needed financing for this kind of project. (MAR_F_40_IV_Hadiza).

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Some migrants found stability in Morocco through employment and education. A student pursuing a master's degree expressed contentment with life in Morocco, making further migration unnecessary (MAR_M_26_SEN_Amadi). Meanwhile, an established French social worker in Morocco had already settled and built a livelihood (MAR_M_53_FR_Mael). In some cases, Morocco's relative safety played an important role. One migrant, who had initially planned to transit to Europe, reconsidered after deciding to get married, noting that Morocco was safer than his home country:

> Before my intention is to get money here and go to Nigeria I establish my tailor, but the risk there is a lot. Kidnapping is bad"; "I'm planning to marry now [...] I'm not going to Nigeria. Money I would use to buy tickets in Nigeria. Going to Nigeria to go and do work, I will collapse" (MAR_M_49__NRA_Berko).

Several migrants arrived in Morocco with the intention of using it as a stepping stone to Europe but eventually abandoned this plan, either because they saw viable alternatives in Morocco or due to failed migration attempts. One migrant initially aimed to cross to Spain

> Danger, this time it was not easy because also Morocco cannot accept people staying in danger because many immigrants who come to danger are coming to cross [...] They told us we cannot cross like that, it's not good, the water is not clear, it's not quiet, it's not good to return to our house. I have my fourth brother, he tried to send me money for this time, but he doesn't have something because he no longer works for this time in Spain. I come back to Casablanca, to help me again to have my money" (MAR_M_30_CAM_Amadou),

Ultimately, Amadou decided to stay, though he struggled with documentation issues that prevented him from accessing stable employment:

> I want to stay in Morocco but the original problem in Morocco is when you don't have papers here, you cannot have a good job, you cannot do anything, business, everything. (MAR_M_30_CAM_Amadou)

Another had similar experiences, he stopped thinking about going to Europe and thinks that getting papers in Morocco is way better and gives her many opportunities. A part of this change is also due to the hospitality of Moroccans and her perception that life was better (MAR_M_28_CAM_Jabari).

For some, the experience of attempting migration reshaped their views. One individual, who had tried multiple times to cross to Europe, eventually shifted his mindset. He realized that success was not necessarily tied to Europe and decided to build his life in Morocco instead.

> When I was in Guinea, I said I wanted to go to Europe. I thought when I go to Europe, everything will be fine. My life is okay. Everything will be easy. It's just like anything that I need, I'm confident, will be easy in Europe. But now that I'm in Morocco, I realize that it doesn't matter where you are, it's just how you arrange yourself and organize yourself. That's what matters. That's what the experience I have gained in this immigration. It doesn't matter whether you're in England, Canada, France Morocco, or Casablanca. You can still make it in Safi. It depends on you. (MAR_M_31_GN.CO_Chiumbo).

Another migrant initially planned to stay temporarily but found that Morocco offered more favourable conditions compared to other countries in the region, particularly with the availability of an employment contract, which encouraged her to settle "Here we are free, we are comfortable. Here you can see a Moroccan, you can pose with him, you can even eat from the same plate with him but in Lebanon it's not like that" (MAR_F_29_IV_Abeba).

Despite the decision to stay, several migrants continue to struggle with legal and social barriers, leaving their futures uncertain between staying in Morocco, returning to their country, or transiting to Europe. The lack of legal documentation is a recurring issue, limiting employment opportunities and making stability difficult. One migrant, for example, expressed a desire to settle but acknowledged that ongoing issues with work permits and cultural adaptation might force him to reconsider migration elsewhere

> I plan to settle in Morocco but I think with the situation we are experiencing where we can no longer even regulate problems, residence permits no longer allow us to live long in Morocco because there are conditions that try to disrupt my life. (MAR_M_38_CAM_Femi).

Similarly, another individual wished to stay long-term but faced difficulties due to the absence of legal status and perceived racism in Morocco. She had initially fled her home country to escape forced marriage and was seeking asylum, but without secure legal footing, her prospects for staying remained unclear.

> I don't want to stay in Morocco. There is nothing here for me. You don't have the papers, you don't have anything to help your family, that's why I can't stay here. It's not my country, and even the people here are always saying that we're not Moroccans. They call us "mon ami"[...] Even though this isn't our country, we think of it as home. But people keep reminding us, that we're strangers. That's it's not our country and that we should go back home (MAR_F_30_ETH_Zuri)

Personal and family dynamics also influenced decisions. One woman joined her husband in Morocco, who was deeply attached to the country, but she herself felt no strong desire to stay. Her decision depended entirely on her husband's willingness to remain, indicating that settlement choices are not always individual but can be shaped by family and relationships:

> I came to follow my husband to Morocco because I lived in Cameroon, I had stability, and I had a job. Well, living at a distance is very painful. The man came, he returned, he came, he left. So, it became very, very, very difficult for me. So, I decided to follow him here and when I arrived here, I was in extreme precariousness. I lived in a gloomy room where there wasn't even an opening or a window for you and your children" (MAR_F_36_CAM_Makena).

Return migration among Moroccans highlight a strong tendency to return to their home country. Interviews with Moroccan returnees (3 individuals) demonstrate this pattern, showing that many migrants return to Morocco after spending years abroad. This trend is particularly prevalent among older individuals who choose to settle in Morocco after extended periods of living in other countries. However, younger Moroccans also reflect this tendency, often expressing their intention to return to Morocco eventually, even while pursuing migration plans. Common reasons for these return aspirations include family ties, patriotism, and a desire to contribute to the development of their country. All of these interviewees had a university level education.

For many Moroccans who have spent years or even their entire lives abroad, returning home is not always the seamless transition one might expect. The idea of coming back is often tied to personal, professional, or family reasons, but the reality of reintegrating into Moroccan society can be far more complicated. While Morocco is their homeland, it is not always a place where they immediately feel at home.

Hakima's story (MAR_F_60_Hakima) reflects this struggle. Having lived abroad for 45 years as the child of immigrants, she had few ties with the Moroccan community while growing up. When she finally returned, she was met with an unexpected challenge, despite being Moroccan, she still felt like an outsider. The transition was difficult, as she was often perceived as a foreigner, making it hard to fully integrate into the country she was supposed to belong to.

For Kamal (MAR_M_39_Kamal), the decision to return was a mix of family and professional aspirations. He wanted his children to be more familiar with Arabic and saw an opportunity to contribute to Morocco's development. His years abroad were marked by financial struggles and the challenge of balancing student life with survival. Immersed in French culture, coming back to Morocco meant facing a different kind of challenge which is adapting to social norms while maintaining his personal independence. The weight of expectations and cultural shifts made reintegration more complex than he had anticipated.

Rachid's return (MAR_M_46_Rachid), on the other hand, was driven by professional ambition. He had always intended to return to Morocco after completing his studies, but when he struggled to secure a good position in France, he decided to come back earlier than expected. However, the job he found in Morocco did not meet his expectations, leading him to return to France temporarily before eventually settling in Morocco. His perception of the country remains positive, yet compared to France, he sees Morocco as still underdeveloped, particularly in terms of healthcare.

Each of these returnees carries a unique story, but a common theme emerges: the complexity of coming back. While Morocco is home, it is not always a place where returnees feel immediately comfortable. The challenge is not just about readjusting to a different way of life but also about navigating the fine line between being

Moroccan and being perceived as someone who no longer fully belongs. Their experiences abroad shaped them, and whether it is cultural differences, professional expectations, or societal norms, the return home is often more of a negotiation than a straightforward reunion.

Morocco has also received Moroccan returnees who have been deported from European countries. Whether they stay or try to migrate again depends on finding employment. Amine (MAR_M_28_ MAR) saw himself as falling off the blob bridge but trying again. He had in the meantime found himself a job in call centre, a sector many returnees work in. Nevertheless, he was still uncertain whether he would make another attempt or not as he ruminated on the problems of irregular migration.

For many Sub-Saharan African migrants in Morocco, the journey was never meant to be permanent. Some came seeking stability, some to earn a living before returning home, and others simply because they had no other choice. Yet, as time passes, many find themselves wanting to leave, not necessarily because their home countries offer a better life, but because Morocco never truly felt like home either. Their reasons for returning are shaped by a mix of personal, economic, and emotional struggles, each carrying its own weight.

For Bamidele (MAR_M_29_IV), employment is the deciding factor. His goal was never to settle in Morocco or move to Europe; he just needed a job, a stepping stone to eventually returning home. But without work, staying becomes increasingly difficult. His plan is to go back once his country is politically stable, ideally after gaining enough experience in Morocco to invest back home. Similarly, Ebere is tied to her family (MAR_F_33_IV_Ebere). She has been working in Morocco, but exhaustion is setting in. The distance, the weight of responsibilities, and the fatigue

of being away push her toward home. Once there, she plans to study before setting her sights on Spain, seeing her return as just one phase of a longer journey.

For others, leaving is not just a choice, it's a desperate attempt to regain a sense of belonging. Imani (MAR_F_20_CAM_Imani), for instance, sought help from an association to return home for the sake of her little brother, but she was denied the chance because of her refugee status. Trapped in a country where she feels rejected and lost, with financial struggles weighing her down, the desire to leave is strong, but the means to do so are out of reach. Ola's story is different, yet the feeling is the same. She left her country after war tore it apart, with no one left to return to. But now, Morocco no longer feels like a refuge. The work is difficult, the conditions precarious, and the exhaustion is unshakable. The pull of home, even a broken one, feels stronger than the reality of staying in Morocco, and she has already begun the process of going back

> I'm tired. I want to go back, for now [...] I don't feel comfortable here anymore. Already, we're going to work for Moroccan women. Sometimes you go to work, you have to force yourself to do certain things" (MAR_F_30_IV_Ola).

For all of the sub-Saharan migrants, the return home is not necessarily a return to comfort or certainty. Some are waiting for the right moment, others are preparing for the next step, and a few are stuck in between, unable to leave even when they want to.

Nigeria

Migration trajectories in Nigeria reflect complex journeys among a heterogeneous sample. These trajectories highlight the diversity of migration experiences, ranging from economic necessity to professional aspirations and the complexities of return. They reveal that migration is not a uniform process but a series of decisions shaped

by individual aspirations, family dynamics, economic pressures, and personal experiences.

Joy's (NG_F_20_Joy), story fits the common narrative of migration affected by livelihood challenges and misinformation. Working as a caterer after her father's death, Joy struggled with poor working conditions. A woman who seemed kind offered her a way out, but this promise turned into deception. Joy found herself trafficked and in Mali plotted her escape. Despite her escape and return, her experience has left her with a cautious view of migration. Joy's case aligns with Carling et al. (2023), who document how insecurity of livelihoods, especially among young women, fuels migration aspirations in Nigeria. Jimoh's (NG_Chad_M_27_Jimoh) journey demonstrates similar impacts of economic hardship on migration aspirations. Despite earning a Master's degree, he faced unemployment due to nepotism and elitism, leading him to seek better opportunities within West Africa.

Ibidapo's (NG_M_43_Ibidapo) journey highlights the potential of temporary migration for skill development and professional growth. As documented by Makina (2012) and Mensah (2020), migrants express a desire to maintain ties with origin. As a musician, Ibidapo has travelled to South Africa, the United Kingdom, Singapore, and Cape Verde, leveraging his musical talent. For Ibidapo, migration is a means to expand his career, but he is cautious about long-term relocation without the right opportunity. His temporary journeys allow him to maintain his career without being trapped in an unfamiliar labour market.

Lawrence's (NG_M_44_Lawrence) experience reveals how some migrants use multiple routes to reach their destinations. His journey began with Cape Verde to 'open his passport' given his perception that previous travel history improves his

chances of obtaining a visa outside Africa. Having obtained a visitor's visa to Spain, he overstays and violates the conditions of entry by engaging in work on a Spanish farm. After an expired work contract in Spain two years later, and unable to get new work, Lawrence migrated by road, crossing to France irregularly. He was eventually deported from France and at the time of the interview was obtaining a passport, and planning another migration to Europe. This stepwise approach highlights the complex paths that some migrants navigate to achieve their migration goals. Vincent, a sound engineer, uses his musical skills to access migration opportunities, he thinks he might shift to a more permanent stay if he gets the right opportunity, aiming to teach African percussion instruments in the United States.

Gbago's story, as revealed by Sarah (NG_F_SI1_Sarah), a stakeholder who works with migrants, captures the challenges of reintegration after long-term migration. Deported after over three decades living in the United Kingdom, he returned to Nigeria without belongings or a support network. Struggling to adjust, Gbago's experience reflects the difficulties of return migration, where the migrant's sense of identity is tested. Ibrahim's case (NG_M_21_ brahim) is similar, but from a different angle. Having left home as a child due to neglect, he migrated to Libya, where he was later rescued and returned. His reintegration is challenged by a lack of identity papers and a disconnection from his home community.

Adunni (NG_F_SI3_Adunni), a stakeholder, shares her personal experience which shows how family decisions can shape migration. Sent to the United Kingdom for secondary education by her elite family, she spent years in the UK but struggled with a sense of belonging. Her return to Nigeria was complicated by her marriage, which eventually ended, leaving her split between two worlds. This reflects Heraclitus' saying never the same river which captures the transformative power of migration on the individual and in this instance of migrants (Carling 2024; Portes

2010). Segun and Richmond, in contrast, have been exposed to migration for leisure. Later, they sought educational migration with parental support, which their parents were not inclined to initially, though their parents' attitudes have shifted over time, to become more supportive.

Diasporas

Another group who spoke of their trajectories and current experiences of living in Europe were those from the diasporas in Italy and the UK. A number of countries have substantial and growing diasporic communities in Europe (Cohen 2023) arising from labour migration (regular and irregular), family reunification, students, asylum seekers and refugees. Diasporas play an important role in sending remittances, investing in businesses and entrepreneurship (Elo and Minto-Coy 2019), supplying information and resources as we have previously seen, transferring skills, providing health (Taslakian et al. 2020) and welfare services, facilitating continuing migration through family reunification and marriage, and helping their co-nationals settle into the country of destination. Diasporic members may also get involved in social and political mobilisations and institutions, for example as they have done recently in Nigeria (Akanle 2022). Having family members and friends in the diaspora who provide practical advice about employment, housing, services and education may facilitate the process of migration and settling in. At the same time those in the diaspora may become wary of assisting large numbers of their extended family for whom they are held responsible.

In Italy and the UK, there are large diasporic populations from African countries. Nigerians in the UK form the second largest Nigerian population outside of Africa after the USA (270,000 born in the UK in the 2021 census) with Italy having the largest number in Europe. Moroccans have large populations in a number of European countries with Italy having the 3rd largest in Europe (487,000). Kenyan-

born are significant in the UK (138, 490 in 2021 census) though many are South Asians who were forced out in the 1970s. Our migrants fit well with Caarls et al. (2021) finding that the majority of African migrants entered the EU directly rather than in a stepwise manner.

Amongst our respondents in the two countries, all of those in the UK had migrated through skilled worker visas, especially in the health sector, family reunification or as students. One Moroccan migrant had previously been in Italy but had when they lost their job with had no state support and then moved onward. All in the UK had university degrees. In Italy, some of the respondents had entered irregularly through land and sea routes to work but had subsequently been regularised while a large group had come as family migrants. In educational terms, they had finished secondary school or university so very different to the irregular migrants interviewed in many post-2015 studies (Kuschminder 2021). More than in the UK, a number had entered through family reunification which is easier in Italy than in the UK which has one of the most restrictive policies regulating this form of migration (Kofman 2018).

Interviews in the diaspora indicate the problems irregular and regular migrants have in settling in. In particular migrants highlight issues faced in accessing the labour market, acquiring more secure statuses and citizenship, the role of migrant associations and other agencies and of government policy which has made it more difficult for them to establish themselves during a period of increasingly hostile environments both in Italy and the UK.

In Italy, a lack of direct help from local authorities is a recurring theme, with migrants often left to rely on the goodwill of their peers or associations. In the face of limited support from municipalities, Nigerians in Italy struggled to meet migrants' needs, particularly undocumented individuals, pregnant women, and families. Housing,

education, and childcare are cited as key gaps. Thus, migrant associations had to provide essential services like language courses, job assistance, and document processing, often compensating for limited government action. These groups also mediate with authorities and advocate for migrants. "Migrant associations have emerged as vital intermediaries between migrants and government authorities. They help in negotiating legal matters and advocating for the rights of migrants, especially in family-related issues where social workers and judges are reluctant to engage with migrants directly (IT_M_50_NGR_Damijo). Social workers are crucial in connecting migrants with municipalities, but their personal biases and lack of cultural sensitivity can negatively affect the support migrants receive.

Initiatives like "Passport at Your Doorstep" aim to streamline identification processes for Nigerians, bridging gaps caused by limited embassy access in smaller cities. A number of recommendations were put forward for the Nigerian government. These included calls for systemic reforms to address governance failures and create opportunities, reducing the push factors driving migration and highlighted as priorities the need to reduce unrest and mitigate the impact of foreign exploitation.

It was felt that immigration laws make it difficult for migrants to become self-employed, with too much bureaucracy in setting up businesses. One way to facilitate starting businesses is to acquire citizenship. Some migrants have successfully acquired Italian citizenship such as Joke, a Nigerian woman who obtained citizenship and is planning to open an African market shop (IT_F_46_NGR_Joke). However, only 10% of people in the community successfully obtain citizenship, as the process has become longer and more difficult. Residency permit renewals have also become more complex. Previously, citizenship applications took a few months, but now the process can take up to three years. Some migrants are hesitant to apply

for citizenship due to perceived discrimination and exploitative procedures. (IT_M_25_MAR_Youseef).

Settling in is helped by having relatives, *as a* Nigerian woman explained because her sister was in the country (IT_F_50_NGR_Ireti). Yet some migrants avoid bringing extended family members as they must vouch for them, which can cause legal trouble if they overstay or violate visa terms. (IT_F_50_NGR_Ireti). Migrants struggle to understand Italian immigration procedures and require multilingual guidance on documentation and driving licenses. The lack of government support if unemployed made it difficult, so many Moroccans moved from Italy to France seeking better opportunities.

Among the UK diasporic respondents, issues were raised around visa policies and access to employment. Visa policies heavily impact migrants' job prospects and settlement plans. Healthcare recruitment plays a crucial role—one Nigerian nurse wanted to migrate earlier but faced saturation in the UK nursing sector. A decade later, psychiatrists from Nigeria were facing similar challenges (UK_NGR_F_34_Eniola). Skilled Worker visas are often granted when no UK applicants are available, yet visa applications and extensions are expensive and restrictive. Some migrants feel trapped by sponsorship issues, unable to switch jobs or take part in industrial actions. Fears of recruitment policy changes led some to apply for over 200 jobs, highlighting the desperation of migrant workers.

Migrant families often struggle with visa policies that separate them. One mother accelerated her job search to ensure her eldest son could join on a dependent visa before turning 18 years, but delays meant he was initially left behind. A brother-in-law rejected a UK job offer because he could not afford to bring his family with him. High visa fees for dependents create financial burdens and limit family migration, a

situation that has become even more acute with increase in minimum income for bringing in partners and children since 2024. Some migrants see student visas as a strategic entry point to settle in the UK. Many Kenyan students have used this route, working part-time to finance their stay before securing employment and permanent residency. Nevertheless, student fees routes are very expensive for international students and limit job opportunities compared to the US, making settlement challenging.

A key issue raised by some migrants concerns engagement with their home countries. There is a feeling that their governments do not give them support or recognition was expressed by our interviewees. Hence diasporic communities feel under-utilized despite their professional expertise and willingness to contribute to national development. Wasaki, a migrant from Kenya stated

> Although remittances are the highest source of foreign revenue in Kenya, there needs to be greater awareness about this so that it's not just individuals who benefit from the remittances but that they are more sustainable and more widely spread. If we build the capacity then pressure to send back money will ease off, and Kenyan's in the diaspora would not salve themselves to death trying to make extra money to send back home. (UK_KEN_M_50_Wasaki).

The person further suggested that "the Kenyan government should adapt a similar policy to that of the Indian government (NRI Non-Resident Indian) to encourage Kenyans in the diaspora to invest back home in return for tax relief and other privileges. "Currently if I sent money back home it gets taxed heavily. Instead there is still a lack of understanding how to bring back the resources".

Conclusion

In this chapter we have explored the multiple faces of migration trajectories or phases followed by respondents across African countries and their diasporas. In particular we have highlighted the complexities of those pursuing various forms of transit and return migrations. The latter combines contemplating return as well as

actual and multiple returns. These trajectories highlight the dynamic links between places of origin, transit and destination and demonstrate the fluidity in the decision-making process of the respondents in space and time and….. Migration is not a single step but a series of decisions often undertaken by respondents in multiple stages to reflect their changing socio-economic and life course and migration regulations governing their labour and lives in particular countries.

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08 Conclusion

D2.3 has presented the results of extensive fieldwork in three African countries with very different migrant contexts and migration policies as well as in Italy and the UK, countries with large African diasporas. Unlike many studies which primarily focus on one type of migrant in relation to type of move or status, such as regular or irregular, the 179 interviews in total were largely conducted with individuals who covered the full spectrum from those who did not aspire to those who had migrated. We included both migrants and refugees although a number of migrants were fleeing political persecution and discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation without requesting asylum. Our sample covered those who did not aspire to migrate, those who did and had, to different degrees, engaged in planning their move, those who had moved and were either in transit or had arrived at their destination in another country, and finally those who had returned to their country of origin, either as a result of deportation, from temporary labour migrations, or after long years living abroad. A few of our interviews were with migrant support organisations, particularly those assisting sub-Saharan migrants in Morocco or migrants forced to return in Morocco and Nigeria.

In addition to these interviews, 18 of the respondents agreed to participate in submitting their thoughts about potential migration or past experiences of it for a digital diary running over a period of 6 months. These submissions engender a more longitudinal understanding of how migration intentions unfold and options are explored over time, illustrating that migration is not a singular event but a prolonged and non-linear journey, and one that begins well before any physical movement. We also were able to capture aspects of long-term change through our interviews with individuals in the diaspora, both in relation to their experiences of migration as well

as their continuing relationship with countries of origin and their family and friends, some of whom they assisted in migrating through giving advice and support.

The decision to migrate or remain was also examined with attention to variations in the influence of age, gender, and education on mobility, aspirations, and capabilities, and how these variables affected the navigation of journeys and experiences of work and living in transit and destination situations. Additionally, the analysis considered how individuals related to their families and communities, and how social norms impacted different demographic categories.

Age is considered to matter in terms of young people willing to take more risks as well as feeling they have longer to maximise the benefits of migration. However, it can also be closely related to life stage, especially in terms of forging partnerships, getting married and having children, all of which can change responsibilities to others. Young people, both men and women with few resources are especially vulnerable, though in different ways. Women may be more likely to undertake their journeys in cars but at the expense of sexual exploitation, in some cases turning into sexual trafficking.

Educational qualifications, which were at a particularly high level among our Nigerian as well as Moroccan respondents, enables access to regular routes based on educational and professional training and applications for skilled work in Europe and North. Educational levels were lower in Kenya, especially among women. ADD. Hence, education is a key parameter of stratification in migration opportunities and the infrastructures they relied upon.

Lastly whilst gender norms have changed with women increasingly becoming breadwinners, they are still often restricted by their caring responsibilities. Though

traditional male sectors may have opened up to some extent, the greatest opportunities still lie in feminised sectors, such as domestic and care work, into which many women from Kenya have migrated on temporary contracts to GCC countries. However, the bilateral agreements that have been concluded with some GCC countries fail to offer adequate protection. Gender roles are still also responsive to family situations with single women more likely to migrate but expected to return home to get married, hence imposing restrictions on their mobility.

Whilst the richness of our data is daunting and challenging in its analysis, it enabled us to probe the nuances of particular categories and how they evolved as well as to capture similarities and differences across categories. The variety of situations and contexts raised the question of who can access certain migratory statuses and under what conditions. One of the most pertinent distinctions in migration research and policymaking is between regular and irregular. We found that most migrants wished to use regular routes but that these are expensive and bureaucratic, requiring considerable resources and knowledge and were thus more likely to be accessed by the educated and those with socio-economic resources. Some, as with two Nigerian musicians, who had spent time abroad, and though aspiring to a better life, were only willing to pursue this goal through legal channels that would allow them to further develop their professional skills and maintain links with their country of origin. Similarly, among Moroccans, all of whom had university degrees, regular routes were the preferred option. Migrants and refugees in Kenya had a strong awareness of the challenges of irregular migration and had a keen interest in exploring available legal and safe pathways to migration to their desired destination. In the case of refugees, they viewed themselves as people in transit as their displacement was forced due to the conditions in their respective countries. The

majority did not see Kenya as their final destination but a transit country where they can explore different migration pathways available to them.

As we showed in Chapters 05 and 06, migration is shaped by intersecting informal and formal infrastructures that co-produce mobility outcomes across different stages of the journey—from forming intentions, exploring options, preparing for departure, and continuing through to migration in the destination and diaspora. Migration decisions and navigating journeys unfold not just through individual or social agency, but through multilayered systems of intermediaries, institutions, and technologies, which interact to either enable or constrain mobility across the migratory continuum. Respondents relied on a diverse mix of information sources. In addition to advice from family, peers, and community members, many joined social media groups that encouraged migration and shared relevant information. Many weighed up the evidence they acquired from different sources, including social media. Some also followed influencers and visited official websites. Information about the risks associated with migration, or the negative attitudes and behaviours towards migrants in destination countries, provoked different responses. Although it did not deter some respondents, who simply reconsidered or adjusted their intended routes and destinations, it did dissuade others.

However, migrants are not passive recipients of these systems but navigate them strategically, albeit within highly constrained conditions, often resorting to informal and formal infrastructures that facilitate and condition their mobility. We have shown how migrants' ability to move is mediated through dynamic, context-specific infrastructures. These range from regulated intermediaries operating within legal frameworks to informal brokers and digital platforms, all of which play differing roles depending on the migrant's legal status, socio-economic resources, and the national or regional policy environment.

Our findings demonstrate that access to these infrastructures is deeply stratified. Nationals from Kenya, Nigeria, and Morocco were generally more able to make use of formal, and therefore more regulated, intermediaries—particularly for skilled migration or student visas. Yet even here, financial capacity played a decisive role. For those with fewer resources, commercial recruitment agencies often provided the only viable pathway, but these came with limited guarantees about the quality of employment or living conditions, especially in cases of labour migration to the Gulf under the kafala system or similar arrangements. In contrast, refugees and sub-Saharan migrants in Morocco and Kenya, who often lacked legal status or access to regular channels, relied more heavily on NGOs, international organisations and informal brokers to facilitate their mobility or to support their integration in transit or destination countries.

Importantly, migration infrastructures are not static logistical tools but dynamic and relational systems that create and reinforce social and legal hierarchies. As Lin et al. (2017) and Muller and Tuitjet (2023) observe, these infrastructures shape not only who can move, but how they move and under what conditions. They produce differentiated migrant subjectivities and experiences, steering migrants into segmented pathways. Migrants themselves also become part of these infrastructures—as conveyors of knowledge, informal facilitators, or support systems for others in their networks—or what Simone (2004) calls "people as infrastructure."

Understanding these infrastructures is therefore critical for both research and policy. As many aspiring migrants, including refugees and those already in transit, continue to face limited access to regular pathways and are often exposed to high-risk alternatives, there is an urgent need for more equitable and transparent migration systems. This includes addressing misinformation, regulating intermediaries,

simplifying bureaucratic procedures, and expanding access to safe legal channels—particularly for vulnerable and displaced populations.

Access to these infrastructures is deeply unequal and often determines whether migration is regular, irregular, supported, or precarious. Understanding these interlocking systems is essential for designing policies that better support migrants—especially the most vulnerable—throughout the full migratory continuum. Only by attending to the infrastructures of mobility can we fully grasp how migration happens, for whom, and with what consequences

Furthermore, migration is not a single event as underscored by the complexities of trajectories or phases. We saw that trajectories reveal that migrants themselves evolve, and both the origin and destination contexts undergo transformation, which in turn influences long-term migration outcomes. If we take the case of transit, seen as an uncertain stage and status, it can be one that evolves into a more settled status, either because the attempts to move forward have failed or the place has been found to have more potential than expected, as has been the situation with a growing number of sub-Saharan migrants in Morocco. This is no longer simply a transit country but also one of settlement for a number of African migrants. For many refugees in Kenya, the country was a temporary stop as they considered onward migration to other destinations that aligned with their long-term aspirations. However, most refugees lack the documents—such as UNHCR Laissez Passer—required for formal migration, and hence remain in long-term transit.

Migration trajectories also highlight the complexities of return. Respondents who had spent many years abroad, often undocumented, faced significant challenges reconnecting with their countries of origin due to a lack of legal status, financial resources, or social ties. Others, as with a number of Kenyan migrants, repeatedly

returned and re-emigrated to GCC countries and where return resulted from periods of temporary labour contracts. Return may also be an aspiration desired but not achieved, whether by someone with a precarious status, as with certain sub-Saharan migrants in Morocco, or those more settled in European diasporas yearning to return.

The different ways of navigating migrations through recourse to a wide variety of formal and informal infrastructure and the trajectories produced generate considerable complexity in the how and modalities of migrations within and beyond Africa. So too does the stratified access to regular routes warrant recognition by academics and policymakers. This is a conversation we look forward to having shortly with D8.1: *Identifying misalignments between policies and migrants' decision-making.*

About DYNAMIG

DYNAMIG is a three-year project that aims to create a more thorough understanding of how people make decisions on whether and how to migrate. Focusing on Africa and Europe, we will analyse to what extent the diverse experiences of migrants are taken into consideration when migration policies – or policies that impact migration – are made. We will also look at how effective these policies are in shaping migrants' decisions and behaviour.

Website

dynamig.org