# Innovative methods for studying migration dynamics: Insights from the DYNAMIG project

Authors: Tobias Heidland, Omololá Olarinde, Lena Detlefsen,
Carlotta Minnella, Necla Acik

# DYNAMIG

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- **This report presents methodological insights from the DYNAMIG project, which studies migration decision-making as a dynamic and evolving process rather than a one-off choice.**

- **Gender mainstreaming is essential. Gender norms and inequalities shape migration aspirations and constraints and affect who can be reached by different research methods.**

- **Social media advertising enables fast, scalable recruitment for survey experiments in the Global South, but systematically produces gender and access biases that require active correction and monitoring.**

- **Elite conjoint survey experiments provide structured and rare evidence on how policymakers and experts understand migration drivers and policy levers, complementing migrant-focused data.**

- **Digital diaries capture migration decision-making as it unfolds over time, revealing shifts in aspirations, emotions, and information that retrospective approaches miss.**

- **Visual elicitation tools, such as the Blob Bridge, help access affective and relational dimensions of migration that are difficult to verbalize through standard interviews.**

- **Overall, the report shows that migration research benefits from combining complementary methods within designs that are context-sensitive, ethically grounded, especially if researchers are aware of and appropriately deal with their limits.**

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# About the authors

**Tobias Heidland** is Director of the DYNAMIG Project, Professor of Economics at Kiel University, and heads the Research Center for International Development at the Kiel Institute for the World Economy.

**Omololá Olárìndé** is a Lecturer in the Economics Department at Elizade University in Nigeria. She is also an active member of the Network of Migration Research on Africa (NOMRA).

**Lena Detlefsen** was a postdoctoral researcher at the Kiel Institute for the World Economy.

**Carlotta Minnella** is a Research Fellow at the Migration Policy Centre, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, at the European University Institute in Florence.

**Necla Acik** is a Post-doctoral Fellow specialising in Migration Studies at Middlesex University London, UK.

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# Executive summary

This report presents five innovative methods and lessons learned regarding their application from the DYNAMIG project. First, systematic gender mainstreaming, grounded in intersectional analysis, demonstrates how gender norms and inequalities shape who migrates, how decisions are made, and who is reachable by research. Second, large-scale recruitment via social media advertising proves to be a fast and scalable tool for survey experiments in the Global South, while also revealing persistent gender and access biases that require active correction. Third, elite conjoint survey experiments provide rare, structured insights into how policymakers conceptualize migration drivers and policy levers. Fourth, digital diaries capture migration decision-making as it unfolds, revealing temporal shifts in aspirations, information, and emotions that retrospective methods miss. Fifth, visual elicitation tools such as the Blob Bridge enable access to affective and relational dimensions of migration that are otherwise difficult to verbalize.

Across methods, three overarching lessons emerge: migration research must be context-sensitive and ethically grounded, while it can benefit from a plurality of complementary methods.

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# Introduction

*Tobias Heidland (Kiel Institute)*

DYNAMIG set out to address an unresolved problem: to understand migration and the effects of migration policy, we need to understand how people make decisions under changing circumstances. Existing theories describe broad drivers, but they struggle to capture how aspirations form, how expectations shift, and how policy signals interact with lived realities. Our consortium therefore adopted a deliberately multidimensional approach, which combined micro-level, meso-level, and macro-level data and methods. We used qualitative and quantitative methods to provide different angles to overlapping questions. This methodological choice defines the project and underpins the contributions collected in this volume, in which we highlight five key approaches used in the project and point out takeaways for their use in future research.

The chapters are organized around five methodological approaches that also mirror the different empirical methods we applied in DYNAMIG. The opening chapter examines how gender mainstreaming and intersectional analysis can be systematically integrated into all stages of migration research, from conceptualization through sampling, fieldwork, data analysis, and interpretation. The second chapter turns to large-scale data collection and presents social-media advertising as a viable strategy for recruiting diverse samples for online survey experiments, a method that also works in settings where sampling with traditional personal interviews might be prohibitively expensive or logistically infeasible. The third contribution focuses on elite survey experiments and outlines how conjoint designs can be adapted to capture policymakers' beliefs about migration drivers and governance. The fourth chapter analyses digital diaries as a tool for tracing decision-

making processes over time and documenting how aspirations, capabilities, and constraints evolve. The fifth chapter discusses a visual elicitation technique that helps access the affective and relational dimensions of migration trajectories, such as hope, anxiety, obligations to family members, and interactions with other migrants. Together, these chapters illustrate how different methodological lenses reveal complementary aspects of migration decision-making.

Several cross-cutting themes emerge across the volume. The first concerns the need for context-sensitive design. Gendered social norms, digital access, institutional hierarchies, and mobility patterns all shape who can be reached, what can be asked, and how data are produced. Methodological tools must therefore be adapted to the specific empirical settings. The second theme is complementarity. The approaches presented here operate at different levels of analysis and capture distinct dimensions of migration decisions: affective experience, stated preferences, institutional reasoning, temporal micro-sequences, and structural inequalities. Their combined use produces a more holistic understanding than any single method could generate. A third theme is the importance of feasibility and rigor in challenging research environments. Each chapter highlights practical constraints, such as gender imbalances in online recruitment, the fragility of access to elite respondents, the hard work involved in sustaining diary participation, as well as ethical considerations, and shows how careful design, self-critical diagnostic checks, and collaboration across institutions in a consortium can mitigate them.

Taken together, the contributions demonstrate that studying migration as a dynamic process can benefit from methodological approaches that are themselves flexible and multi-layered. We hope these contributions prove useful to colleagues across the social sciences and will be adopted more frequently in the future.

# Mainstreaming gender: Sensitivity and inclusion in migration studies

***Omololá Olarinde (Elizade University)***

Academic scholarship has moved beyond treating gender as a singular analytic lens following Crenshaw's (1991) watershed conceptualization of intersectionality. It is now well established that gender intersects with, and can exacerbate, inequalities across multiple social categories (Izaguirre and Walsham, 2021). Although debates continue regarding extending intersectionality beyond Crenshaw's original emphasis on race, class, and income, an increasing number of studies now deploy intersectional thinking to move past the earlier "add women and stir" approach to migration research (Aslany et al., 2021; Bastia et al., 2023. This subsection draws on lessons learned during the DYNAMIG project fieldwork to highlight critical practices for mainstreaming gender in migration research.

A central tool is the Gender Action Plan (GAP), which helps maintain a gendered analytical lens throughout the project cycle. Several comprehensive GAP frameworks exist (Boland and Tschalaer, 2021), but designing a project-specific one is critical. One effective strategy is to distil complex gender requirements into a practical checklist that prompts researchers, during design, fieldwork, analysis, and report writing to consider contexts where gendered vulnerability or inequality may not be immediately visible, such as in survey design and sample accessibility. Collaborative efforts by multidisciplinary teams in multiple sites that can take into account disciplinary and country-specific variations are critical to developing the

GAP. In DYNAMIG project, this was achieved through the representation of all team members from all research countries and a mix of disciplines within the Gender Committee. Such early-stage integration ensures that multiple contexts of gender are embedded from the outset rather than retrofitted.

The GAP should be designed to cover all stages of the project. At the research design stage, it is essential to understand the key variables that produce intersections of inequality. These can include race or ethnicity, income, age, education and employment level. This mix of variables can be context- and project-specific. Crucially, gender mainstreaming has moved beyond women's studies to consider effects on men and other gender identities. Although women often remain disproportionately disadvantaged (Connell, 2014), shifts in masculinity and the experiences of non-binary LGBTQI+ individuals are frequently overlooked. Moreover, in contexts where certain gender identities are criminalized or culturally suppressed, capturing these experiences becomes particularly challenging.

To account for different contexts, a reflexive consideration of what gender discrimination means and how underrepresented groups can be included is necessary. Thus, researchers must reflect critically on definitions of gender discrimination across cultural settings. For example, Muraina and Ajímátanraẹjẹ (2023) show that among the Yoruba, women may simultaneously hold marked social status and experience strong patriarchal constraints, highlighting the need for nuanced probing that transcends surface-level interpretations. As such, assumptions about gender roles must be regularly discussed within international research consortia to ensure contextually grounded analysis. Recent scholarship has also emphasized social norms as key meso-level institutions shaping gender hierarchies and influencing migrant agency within families and communities (Carling

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and Collins, 2018). These are critical to understand how choices are constrained or enabled beyond the individual in different country-contexts.

During fieldwork, researchers should anticipate unequal response rates across genders, even with strong project design. Responsiveness varies by context, time of day, survey mode, safety concerns, mobility constraints, and access to social networks. For instance, taking interviews of potential migrants at passport offices risks excluding women who lack the financial means to advance their migration aspirations. Thus, multiple sampling sites must be considered with a gender lens. Additionally, online surveys may underrepresent women who are offline during peak childcare hours or who have workdays structured around caregiving, unless they are scheduled accordingly or randomized by time (see the chapter by Detlefsen and Heidland in this volume). The GAP should therefore guide continuous assessment of gender representation and permit purposive strategies to address under-representation through adjustments in timing, location, and recruitment channels. Early detection of gaps in gender inclusion is essential for addressing these issues during the data collection stage, before they become embedded in the final dataset.

Language is another important element of gender mainstreaming. Gender-sensitive and gender-inclusive language must be integrated into the GAP and reinforced in fieldwork protocols. In our DYNAMIG experience, general questions about "differences between men and women" in our sample in Kenya, Morocco, and Nigeria often generated uniform or flat responses. More specific probes, around financial support, responsibilities, and expectations, revealed strong normative patterns. In our fieldwork sample in Kenya, Morocco, and Nigeria, for example, respondents noted equal educational opportunities but diverged sharply when discussing responsibilities: men emphasized their own role but overlooked that of women, whereas women also claimed responsibilities that men failed to recognize.

These experiences highlight that gendered differences can be normalized and respondents may not immediately perceive disparities unless prompted with specific, context-relevant questions. Effective gender-sensitive interviewing requires attentiveness to subtle cues, hesitations, contradictions, or generalized claims, and the ability to introduce targeted follow-up questions that unpack underlying norms and power dynamics.

Inclusive language should explicitly reference all genders, including LGBTQI+ categories, and interviewer training must prepare field teams for navigating contexts where some identities are criminalized. While all interviews in Kenya, Morocco, and Nigeria were conducted in English, respondents occasionally introduced vernacular expressions. The research team was prepared for this by ensuring familiarity with the relevant local languages. It is considered best practice to rehearse gender-related terminology in the indigenous languages of the region before going into the field.

The internal organization and culture of the research team also shapes gender mainstreaming. Hierarchies within project teams, such as senior versus junior researchers, age groups and methodological traditions, can unintentionally silence certain members. Teams that foster open, critical conversations create space for deeper interrogation of concepts across disciplines and country contexts, ultimately improving the robustness of gender mainstreaming. Within the DYNAMIG project, this was operationalized by intentionally soliciting contextual interpretation of gendered phenomena from all team members. This collaborative and reflexive strategy ensured that no single perspective prevailed and that gender analysis reflected the multiplicity of social realities encountered across field sites.

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Nonetheless, some institutional gender constraints are deeply embedded and may not be resolved within a single project cycle. In such cases, it is necessary to acknowledge these limitations explicitly and indicate the limitations around the representation of different gendered office and field experiences and country contexts. In the DYNAMIG fieldwork in Morocco, Kenya, Nigeria and Senegal, cases of LGBTQI were only measured among transit migrants (Kenya and Morocco) and identifying them explicitly in Nigeria was constrained by legal, normative, and access barriers.

Conclusively, gender mainstreaming must span all stages of the project cycle and should begin at the earliest phases of project design. Inclusivity requires moving beyond treating gender as a single variable of interest toward recognizing how it structures intersecting inequalities across contexts. Gender also shapes migrant agency, mediated by normative expectations that constrain how migration aspirations are formed, pursued, and achieved. Ensuring that these dynamics are critically and consistently integrated strengthens the validity and relevance of gendered migration research.

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# Using advertising on social media for large-scale recruitment of respondents for surveys and experiments in developing countries

*Lena Detlefsen and Tobias Heidland (Kiel Institute)*

Recruiting large and diverse samples for online choice experiments in the Global South poses substantial challenges, especially where reliable sampling frames are scarce and fieldwork is costly. In the DYNAMIG project, we used advertising through social media as it offers a way to leverage the exceptionally large user base of social media platforms. This has been made possible by widespread mobile-phone penetration and increased access to the internet in developing countries, where an estimated 84 percent of the population now owns a mobile phone and access to smartphones is growing. While in Africa the figures are lower, the number of people with access to the internet and with mobile phones has been surging in the last 15 years. For example, in Kenya, 54.9 percent of the population above the age of 15 owned a smartphone (Worldbank, 2025).

Building on methodological work by Rosenzweig et al. (2025), who systematically evaluated the potential and limits of Facebook-based sampling for survey experiments, in Detlefsen et al. (2025a; 2025b) we employed Meta advertisements to recruit respondents for the project's multi-country migration conjoint studies.

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These were pre-registered experiments with, among other things, power analyses guiding the size of the samples. Participants were compensated with mobile phone airtime via engagespark, equivalent to approximately 0.70 USD, reflecting both a reimbursement for data usage and time spent on the survey, a compensation compatible with EU funding rules. This chapter describes how this method was implemented in practice, which methodological insights emerged, and how it complements the broader mixed-methods approach within DYNAMIG.

Recruitment for the main experiments in spring 2025 focused on Kenya and Nigeria, selected for their importance as origin and transit contexts, the diversity of their migration environments and the large population using social media. Across both countries, the ads targeted individuals aged 18 to 40 who had active internet access and used Meta on mobile devices or computers, precisely the demographic most relevant for migration decision-making (Detlefsen and Marten, 2025). The first main study recruited a full sample of 12,300 respondents (Kenya: 5,177; Nigeria: 7,123) with only a few days of campaigning in each country. Part of this success was due to a form of snowballing, where respondents distributed the invitation to the survey in their networks quickly. Much greater numbers would have been possible, especially if the focus were to get young men. Recruiting women is harder.

To be able to exclude bots, a potential risk when recruiting participants online with an open survey, especially when compensating respondents, we added CAPTCHA verification and honeypot questions. We also made clear in the introduction that quality checks will be done. Each phone number was only allowed to participate once. After applying standard quality checks, including attention tests, minimum completion times, and the exclusion of patterned or inconsistent responses, the final analytic sample comprised 10,756 respondents, indicating an overall high quality of

the sample. This distinction between the recruited sample and the analytic sample is primarily driven by standard data-quality diagnostics rather than recruitment failures.

The advertisements used in the recruitment campaign consisted of a few variants of simple static images and a short text inviting people to share their thoughts about emigrating (see Figure 1).

The design was intentionally minimal to work well on small screens and not to unduly prime participants or induce disproportionate attraction or discouragement among certain respondent types to participate in the experiment. We used English in both Kenya and Nigeria, although the approach can be readily translated or adapted for other contexts. In this implementation, advertise-ments did not vary, except for given airtime amounts, across countries or demographic strata, though



Figure 1: Example of advertisement shown on Meta

Meta's tools allow such customization if researchers aim to tailor the appeal of a recruitment message to particular subgroups. No advertisements were rejected during Meta's review process, but when setting up the process, we encountered issues because the typical researcher's account does not have an advertising track record with Meta.

Respondents who clicked on the Meta advertisement were directed immediately to a LimeSurvey landing page that began with a detailed consent form compliant with the

stringent ethics review procedure our project was subject to, given the EU's and national rules in Germany, Kenya, and Nigeria. Targeting relied on Meta's demographic and geographic filters. Ads were shown to users within the preselected age range, to both men and women, and across each country. We put additional emphasis on the recruitment of women with specially targeted ads, since the initial samples, especially in Nigeria, were highly male-dominated (over 90 percent male). Even in those female-targeted rounds, we often had male respondents, showing the importance of not just relying on the profiles of users from the ad platform but also having a short demographic questionnaire as part of the survey. Despite targeted efforts, female respondents remained underrepresented after several rounds of data collection: 22.9 percent of Kenyan respondents and 18.2 percent of Nigerian respondents identified as women, mirroring observations in Rosenzweig et al. (2025) that Meta's inferred demographic information is imperfect, particularly where mobile phones are shared, survey links are shared in the networks, or where user profiles do not accurately reflect actual demographics. However, given the relative ease of recruiting additional people, we could have continued targeting women. Our statistical power for analyses of female respondents was, however, already high enough for the pre-registered tests we had set out to study.

We kept control of sampling through the structure of ad sets, which define the budget, schedule, and targeting parameters of each sub-campaign. We used fixed daily budgets and monitored results manually, enabling close oversight of respondent flow and preventing Meta's optimization algorithms from over-recruiting the cheapest respondent types—typically young men. We addressed underrepresentation by resampling or extending recruitment for specific demographic or geographic groups when needed.

Because nearly all respondents accessed the survey via mobile devices, the questionnaire and the conjoint tasks were optimized for small screens. This is essential for maintaining data quality, as longer or more complex survey designs would likely increase drop-off and encourage satisficing under local bandwidth constraints.

The methodological insights gained through this implementation concern both recruitment dynamics and respondent behavior within the conjoint tasks. Recruitment volumes were high and rapid, but skewed by gender and, to a lesser extent, by education and urbanity—patterns consistent with the broader literature on Meta sampling in the Global South and in line with what we anticipated. Overall, respondents engaged well with the conjoint tasks. Respondents evaluated three pairs of hypothetical migration scenarios, yielding up to 73,800 evaluated profiles in the full sample and 64,536 in the analytic sample. These tasks varied key migration-related attributes, including death and return risks, migration costs, income at destination, permit type, host attitudes, and access to public services. Completion rates of the conjoint tasks were high, and the exclusion of implausibly fast respondents ensured that remaining cases were of solid analytical quality. Evidence on comprehension or task difficulty can be expanded once internal diagnostics are available.

Ethical and logistical considerations were central to the study's design. Informed consent was obtained on entry, and all data was stored in accordance with data-protection requirements. No personally identifiable data was collected beyond phone numbers needed for airtime compensation delivery. Because the study design also incorporated follow-up surveys, consent for recontact was gathered during the initial wave. A high proportion of respondents agreed to be recontacted, and follow-up

invitations were sent about five months later by SMS, yielding response rates of around 25 percent at first contact.

Gender-biased recruitment and phone sharing were recurring challenges. Even with gender-targeted ads, many completed surveys came from men due to the quicker spread of survey links within male networks.  This necessitates collecting accurate demographic information directly within the survey rather than relying on Meta's inferred data. Moreover, time-of-day optimization yielded only limited improvements in the gender balance. These observations echo Rosenzweig et al. (2025)'s findings on the limitations of Meta's demographic inference models and the need for researchers to directly verify demographic information within the survey instrument itself.

Within DYNAMIG's use of mixed methods, the social media-based recruitment's primary advantage lies in the speed and volume with which it can access young, mobile, and digitally connected respondents. These constitute the most relevant for migration decision-making in the project's focus countries. The conjoint experiments collected through this method provide detailed causal insights into preferences over aspects of migration and the role of norms, narrative, and perceptions, while other components of DYNAMIG provide the qualitative context needed to understand how these affect migrations. That complementarity strengthens the overall analysis.

In conclusion, Meta advertising proved to be an effective tool for recruiting large samples for complex conjoint experiments in the Global South. The method delivered rapid and scalable access to key demographic groups but required careful steering and monitoring to avoid self-selection patterns reinforced by Meta's optimization algorithms. The approach's limitations, most notably gender imbalances and the inability to reach the entire population, underscore that more traditional

surveys and field experiments continue to be needed. When combined with careful data-quality checks and embedded in a broader mixed-methods strategy, Meta advertising becomes a powerful and flexible addition to the migration research toolkit.

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# Elite survey experiments as a tool for examining policymakers' perspectives on migration

*Carlotta Minnella (European University Institute)*

Understanding how policymakers and expert stakeholders interpret the drivers of migration is central to DYNAMIG's objectives. While experiments, surveys, and qualitative interviews with migrants reveal how individuals experience and interpret migration conditions from the ground up, elite knowledge claims shape the institutional and political contexts in which these decisions unfold. Capturing these perspectives is analytically valuable but notoriously difficult, as elite populations are small, dispersed across institutional hierarchies, and often shielded by formal gatekeeping structures. Existing research has emphasized the relative paucity of large-N data on elite beliefs about the causes and governance of migration. Against this background, one of DYNAMIG's methodological innovations has been to develop and implement an elite survey strategy that combines a conjoint experiment with a standard survey instrument to generate comparable, multidimensional evidence on how policy actors conceptualize migration choices and migration governance. This chapter describes the design, implementation, and methodological lessons of this elite survey experiment within DYNAMIG.

Conjoint experiments, which require respondents to choose among attributes in multidimensional scenarios, are widely regarded as a uniquely effective method for

studying policy preferences (Kantorowicz, 2022). They have been used extensively to examine migration issues, including decision-making and public attitudes (e.g., Detlefsen et al., 2022; Egami and Imai, 2018; Hainmueller et al., 2014; Hainmueller et al., 2015; Jeannet et al., 2023). Despite their advantages, conjoint designs also present challenges in elite research, notably limited access, low response rates, and small sample sizes. Recent work has overcome such issues, demonstrating the suitability of conjoint methodology for elite survey experiments (e.g., Berz and Jankowski, 2022; Rehmert, 2020).

In DYNAMIG, we drew on this methodological foundation to capture elite knowledge claims about the drivers of migration from Africa to Europe (see Minnella et al., 2025). We employed a two-part survey strategy: a conjoint survey experiment and a standard survey questionnaire, administered as a paired experiment through the LimeSurvey platform. The survey used a within-subject treatment design and was administered to a heterogeneous pooled sample of officials and experts to mitigate low response rates. Prior research identifies that design approach as particularly effective when a representative elite sample is unattainable (Kertzer and Renshon, 2022). As a further mitigation strategy to the risk of low statistical power, all participants were asked to complete eight conjoint tasks, instead of a smaller number common with members of the general population. Each task consisted of two hypothetical migration scenarios composed of seven experimental dimensions (D1–D7). Additionally, the survey circulation period was extended multiple times to provide participants with sufficient time to respond.

Recruitment followed a carefully staged process designed to address the inherent difficulties of accessing elite respondents. Nevertheless, these challenges persisted and were especially difficult to overcome in some countries, where local political conditions and the varying degrees of freedom available to policy actors constrained

participation. We proceeded in three sequential steps. In the first stage, the EUI team identified key high-level officials as *gatekeepers*—including heads of units, directors, ambassadors, EU member state representatives responsible for migration, EMN contact points, African Union officials overseeing intra-African migration, and national officials managing migration regulation in the African case-study countries. Several gatekeepers were contacted directly, either in person or online, to secure their cooperation in circulating the survey or obtaining internal approval for its distribution. For instance, DG HOME reviewed the survey and agreed to disseminate it centrally to its policy units, EMN contact points, and the EU Asylum Agency, while the Italian Ministry of Labor similarly shared it internally. The African outreach benefited from collaboration with DYNAMIG's African partners and from developing direct relationships with leading gatekeepers within AU institutions, which helped mitigate concerns about the export of information to European servers under GDPR rules. In the second stage, the survey was distributed more broadly through the mailing lists of the EUI's Robert Schuman Centre, the EUI Migration Policy Centre, and the European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM). A blog post outlining the project's goals accompanied this wider outreach. The third stage targeted a wider elite audience through social media platforms such as LinkedIn and Bluesky, using a dedicated link to assess differences in response quality across the three recruitment stages.

Ultimately, 272 officials completed the full questionnaire, specifically 182 for Europe and 90 for Africa. The total number of officials actually recruited exceeded 700 policy actors, but less than half completed all the eight tasks of the conjoint experiment, pointing to a significant level of respondent burden and to the unavoidable trade-offs inherent in any mitigation strategy.

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The LimeSurvey platform enabled seamless integration of the conjoint tasks and the standard survey items, which asked about respondents' professional background, institutional role, and broader perceptions of migration drivers and policy interventions. Reporting the survey's average completion time (upfront) is also important, as it allows readers to assess task difficulty and respondent burden. For the researcher, it allows checking the quality of responses as unreasonably fast or slow responses might indicate a lack of care in reading instructions or distractions during the survey.

Several methodological insights emerged during implementation. The staged recruitment process proved effective for accessing elite subpopulations that would otherwise be out of reach. Despite the effort, though, sample sizes remained below target for part of the heuristic objectives of the study (the subgroup analysis). One likely reason is the high opportunity cost policymakers perceive, as well as whether their institution's culture supports close engagement with researchers. Meanwhile, it is not a viable option to offer financial incentives, so highlighting the value of participation is the best approach.

Gatekeeper approval was especially important for EU institutional actors, who often operate within rigid communication channels and cannot participate in external surveys without formal clearance. African participation depended on building trust particularly strongly.

An additional factor that limited the sample size was the effect of localization of knowledge production efforts within Africa (e.g., Arowosegbe, 2016; Shivakoti and Milner, 2022; Thondhlana and Garwe, 2021). The EUI team circumvented this issue, as well as sensitivities around the export of information to Europe-based servers outside Africa, as required by the GDPR, by relying on the recruitment of Africa-

based survey subjects by DYNAMIG's African research partners. The EUI team also developed a direct link to some of the leading gatekeepers in Africa (e.g., with officials from the African Union) in order to build trust and facilitate dissemination.

Within the broader mixed-methods structure of DYNAMIG, the elite survey provides a complementary vantage point for understanding how policy actors interpret the dynamics that shape migration decisions and how they evaluate the influence of national, regional, and EU-level policies. These perspectives can be compared with evidence from migrant surveys, digital diaries, and qualitative fieldwork to identify convergences and divergences across actors situated at different levels of the migration system. Such triangulation has been central to DYNAMIG's analytical approach, ensuring that resulting policy insights are grounded both in lived experiences and in institutional reasoning.

In conclusion, the study shows that complex experimental designs can be successfully implemented among elite respondents when recruitment is carefully staged, and appropriate methodological safeguards are in place. The within-subject conjoint framework enables observing how elites weigh multiple migration-related factors simultaneously, yielding nuanced evidence on both institutional and cognitive interpretations of migration drivers. Although small sample sizes and uneven response rates are inherent to elite research, the methodological approach developed here offers a valuable and scalable addition to the migration research toolkit. It enables structured, comparative analysis of policy-relevant perspectives among actors whose views are often difficult to access and insufficiently documented. As such, elite survey experiments have constituted an important methodological asset within DYNAMIG, enabling systematic and comparable insights into policy actors' reasoning that would otherwise remain inaccessible.

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# Digital diaries as a complementary method in migration research: Lessons from the DYNAMIG project

**Necla Acik (Middlesex University)**

Understanding how migration decisions are made requires methodological approaches capable of tracing lived experience as it unfolds. Traditional methods such as cross-sectional surveys and qualitative interviews, which rely on retrospective narratives, may filter out experiences and thoughts that respondents perceive as unimportant or too mundane to mention, even when these elements are central to their decision-making trajectories. Yet migration is rarely a single event; it is a dynamic, uncertain, and temporally extended process shaped by shifting emotions, evolving information, fluctuating constraints, and ongoing interactions with social, bureaucratic, and economic structures (Carling and Schewel, 2018; Kofman et al., 2023; 2025). Capturing this processual nature demands methods that can follow change across time and space and allow participants to record and communicate these changes in the moment, or as close to it as possible. Digital diaries, particularly audio, video, and text entries submitted via smartphones, offer one such complementary tool. Rather than replacing conventional methods, they introduce immediacy, reduce recall bias, and reveal affective, embodied, and everyday dimensions of decision-making that are difficult to access through interviews alone (Bernays at al., 2014; Bolger et al., 2003; Elliott, 1997; Monrouxe, 2009). They also enable sustained engagement when researchers and participants

are geographically dispersed, making them well-suited for studying mobile or hard-to-reach populations. Their participatory character, allowing participants to choose when, how, and what they record, further enriches temporal and experiential layers of migration narratives (Herron et al., 2019; Mendoza et al., 2021).

In the DYNAMIG project, digital diaries were introduced as an innovative and complementary method to study migration decision-making among aspiring migrants, refugees, and migrants in transit in Kenya, Nigeria, and Morocco (Kofman et al., 2025). Following initial in-depth interviews conducted by local partners, focused on past and current experiences, aspirations, and plans, a total of 56 participants across the three countries expressed interest in participating in the digital diaries. Of these, 18 remained through to the end and contributed to the diary phase between January and September 2024. This represents an attrition rate of 32 per cent.

Among those who dropped out, the largest group, around one third, were deemed ineligible because they either did not have WhatsApp, had no valid phone number, or, in the case of respondents from Morocco, were French speakers. A smaller proportion responded to initial contact but did not follow up. One female Sub-Saharan African migrant in Morocco strongly declined to participate in anything related to Morocco, expressing extreme frustration with her situation and requesting no further contact. In Kenya, two female refugees also withdrew due to livelihood pressures. Finally, of the 18 participants who submitted diary entries, only 13 follow-up interviews were arranged because the project was coming to an end.

Using a dedicated WhatsApp account managed by a researcher at Middlesex University London, participants submitted entries at least once per month and received small data bundles to cover connectivity costs. Over the period, they jointly

produced 287 diary entries in multiple formats: voice notes, videos, text messages, photographs, screenshots of conversations with migration intermediaries, and links to social media content shaping their thinking. This multimodality revealed everyday realities, uncertainties, and negotiations that would have been difficult to access through interviews alone.

To consolidate and clarify emerging themes, the diary phase concluded with 13 online follow-up interviews. These final conversations not only explored participants' experiences with the method but also allowed researchers to trace the narrative threads running through six months of diary submissions. Together, the diaries generated a rich, longitudinal dataset illuminating how individuals shift from aspiration to preparation, how they negotiate access to information, and how social networks, intermediaries, and digital media continuously shape their migration decisions.

Three phases of the "pre-migration journey" emerged inductively from the diaries:

- Pledge to 'japa': a mental and emotional commitment to leave, driven by frustration, hope, and comparisons with peers abroad.
- Exploring options: searching, comparing routes, and evaluating risks via peers, brokers, social media, and recruitment networks.
- Getting the documentation ready: navigating bureaucratic constraints, securing passports, visas, and financing.

These phases illustrate the rich temporal detail that digital diaries can capture when participants are allowed to record experiences inductively rather than following a strict set of prompts (Acik, 2025).

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A major methodological contribution of the DYNAMIG digital diaries lies in their ability to capture reflections close to the moment of experience, thereby reducing retrospective distortion (Bolger, Davis and Rafaeli, 2003). For migration research, such temporal immediacy is crucial: decisions to move evolve in response to economic shocks, personal crises, policy changes, shifting emotions, and encounters with others (Kofman et al., 2025). In the DYNAMIG study, participants recorded moments of frustration at work, conversations with friends about new migration routes, anxieties about dangerous crossings, and sudden optimism upon learning about potential opportunities abroad. These reflections, offered in real time, revealed subtle fluctuations in aspiration and resolve that conventional interviews rarely capture.

Another significant contribution of the method was its ability to generate deeper insight into the broader digital ecosystem of migration intermediaries. Participants shared a rich array of multimodal material, audio recordings, videos, photographs, text messages, and screenshots, each adding depth and contextual nuance to their accounts. Through WhatsApp they documented workplaces, family settings, and everyday environments, as well as conversations with brokers, peers, and returnees, providing vivid insight into the material and relational dimensions of migration decision-making. Links to TikTok videos, Facebook reels, and other social media posts further illustrated how online content shaped their aspirations and concerns, revealing how digital media, influencers, and platform-based actors mediate imaginaries, information flows, and the broader processes through which migration decisions take form.

Alongside these strengths, the method also presented notable ethical and practical challenges. Sustaining participant engagement over nine months required substantial labor: the researcher needed to respond promptly to entries, send

reminders, ensure timely data transfer, and remain encouraging without becoming intrusive. This ongoing responsiveness was ethically important for maintaining trust and supporting participants after they shared sensitive reflections, but it also entailed continuous emotional and administrative work. The multimodal nature of submissions added further complexity. Each diary entry, whether a voice note, video, or screenshot, had to be downloaded, organized, anonymized, and securely stored, and personal data such as participants' names, phone numbers, and original interview transcripts had to be transferred securely from Morocco, Kenya, and Nigeria to the UK, with necessary details communicated back to partners in Africa. Conducting the research remotely, therefore, intensified confidentiality concerns, and clear communication about anonymization procedures, secure storage, and data use was thus essential to sustaining confidence in the process.

In DYNAMIG, digital diaries were intentionally designed as a complementary, rather than replacement, method within a broader mixed-methods framework. This approach was particularly well-suited to a population expected to be mobile and to the project's transnational structure. The lead diary researcher was based in the UK, while participants were dispersed across three African countries and most were actively pursuing migration aspirations, making mobility a likely and ongoing part of their lives. WhatsApp, a platform already central to participants' everyday communication, reduced barriers to participation and produced more spontaneous, authentic reflections. Critically, the digital diaries were made possible through a collective effort across the research consortium. Local partners established trust, identified participants, facilitated data bundle transfers, and helped maintain contact when numbers changed or participants became inactive. This multi-layered collaboration was essential; without it, sustained remote diary collection would not have been feasible.

Despite challenges, attrition, connectivity issues, and device changes, the study exceeded its expected participant numbers and generated a rich data collection. The success of the DYNAMIG diaries demonstrates that, when integrated into a collaborative and carefully supported design, digital diaries are both feasible and powerful in low-resource, transnational research contexts. Ultimately, digital diaries offer not only a rich window into migration decision-making processes but also a methodological tool attuned to the increasingly digital nature of mobility itself. They enable researchers to trace how people imagine, plan, and negotiate movement over time, not merely whether they move, but how they decide.

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# The use of the Blob Bridge in the DYNAMIG project

**Necla Acik (Middlesex University)**

Within the DYNAMIG project, particular emphasis was placed on exploring the migration aspirations, plans, and trajectories of migrants, as well as their decision-making processes, both within Africa and across the diaspora. To achieve this, the semi-structured interview guide was carefully designed to address both the practical and affective dimensions of migration (Kofman et al., 2025). In its final section, focused on emotions and desires, a visual tool the Blob Bridge (Blob Tree, 2025a; Wilson and Long, 2018), was incorporated to elicit deeper, more reflective narratives from respondents.

Visual elicitation techniques, used as complementary and integrated methods (Brailas, 2020; Olmo-Extremera et al., 2024), are widely recognized for their capacity to evoke rich, reflective narratives by engaging memory and emotion (Harper, 2002; Pain, 2012). They can also transform interviews into collaborative meaning-making processes, allowing participants to guide interpretation. The use of a pre-existing visual stimulus provides structure while simultaneously inviting open interpretation, helping respondents articulate complex or intangible experiences (Rose, 2016; Mitchell, 2011).

In the DYNAMIG fieldwork conducted in Kenya, Morocco, and Nigeria, the Blob Bridge integrated in the questionnaire guide, invited participants to associate themselves with figures depicted in various positions along a bridge; some starting their journey, others crossing, and some arriving on the other side. Each character

displayed distinct emotional and relational states, prompting rich discussions about personal journeys, hopes, and struggles. Respondents frequently interpreted the bridge as a metaphor for their own migration experiences: the beginning representing departure or aspiration, the crossing symbolizing uncertainty and transition, and the far side embodying arrival, success, or a sense of belonging. Others identified with figures that appeared stuck or hesitant, describing feelings of frustration, disorientation, or vulnerability. This method proved particularly valuable for revealing dimensions of migration that are often difficult to articulate through conventional questioning. The visual prompt encouraged reflection on aspirations, social norms, cultural expectations, and personal narratives, providing a non-threatening and creative way to access emotionally charged experiences.

Feedback from research partners highlighted that participants enjoyed this activity and found it engaging. For researchers, it offered a reliable way to access layered emotional and identity-based content even in short encounters where rapport-building opportunities were limited. Thus, the Blob Bridge enriched the data collection within the DYNAMIG project's qualitative methodology, demonstrating how visual tools can enhance understanding of migration processes and decision-making.

The Blob Bridge and other variations developed from the original Blob Tree were created by Pip Wilson and Ian Long as non-verbal tools for exploring emotions and relationships (Wilson and Long, 2018). Initially designed for educational and therapeutic use, the Blobs are intentionally abstract, devoid of gender, age, race, or cultural identifiers, which makes them universally interpretable. Participants project their own meanings onto the figures, using the images as mirrors for emotional and relational states. The creators' goal was to enable people of all backgrounds and ages to express feelings that might otherwise be difficult to verbalize.

Over time, the Blob tools have been adapted for a variety of research and practice contexts, including education, counselling, organizational development, and community engagement. Their simplicity, emotional resonance, and visual accessibility make them especially suitable for cross-cultural and multilingual environments. The images are copyright-protected but available for purchase and licensed research use at affordable prices via its website BlobTree.com.

The use of visual tools within the DYNAMIG project was inspired by prior experience with the Blob methodology in another migration-focused study, the Migrant Men's Well-Being in Diversity project. That project, led by CJD Hamburg + Eutin and partners and involving DYNAMIG member Necla Acik as a key collaborator, employed the Blob Tree to facilitate discussions with young migrant men about well-being, discrimination, and encounters with authority (CJD Hamburg + Eutin and partners, 2015; Fox et al., 2020). The Manchester research team, who introduced the visual prompt, found that the Blob Tree effectively fostered trust and encouraged participants to share introspective, emotionally grounded narratives about their lived experiences. These promising outcomes directly informed DYNAMIG's decision to integrate the Blob Bridge into its qualitative fieldwork.

Within DYNAMIG, the Blob Bridge proved particularly effective in stimulating reflection on migration, identity, and belonging. Its metaphor of crossing, a bridge linking departure, transition, and arrival, resonated strongly with participants' own journeys, allowing them to articulate complex emotions associated with movement, aspiration, and uncertainty. Together, these two projects illustrate the expanding role of Blob tools as accessible, ethically sound, and empirically rich instruments for eliciting nuanced insights into the emotional and social dimensions of migration.

Beyond the Blob Bridge and Blob Tree, the wider family of Blob tools, including the Blob River, Blob Mountains, and Blob Family, offers a diverse repertoire of metaphors that can be meaningfully applied to migration studies (Blob Tree, 2025b). Each image depicts anonymous, non-identifiable "blob" figures engaged in everyday interactions and emotional states, allowing participants to project their own interpretations without the constraints of specific cultural or social cues. The Blob Tree, for example, which is the most frequently used illustration, can facilitate discussions about aspiration, stagnation, and mobility. Such visual metaphors offer researchers flexible and culturally adaptable tools for engaging participants in conversations about movement, aspirations, norms, identity, and change, themes that sit at the heart of migration experiences.

The use of the Blob Bridge in DYNAMIG's fieldwork revealed several interlinked advantages that underscore its methodological and ethical value in migration research. The abstract, non-identifying figures of the Blob Bridge enabled participants to project their own emotions and experiences safely, encouraging the externalization of complex feelings in a non-threatening way. The bridge metaphor itself, symbolizing transition, uncertainty, and progress, resonated strongly with the themes of migration and movement, prompting deep personal reflection. Its cultural neutrality allowed participants from diverse backgrounds to engage freely with the imagery, while its intuitive design facilitated introspection and the linking of visual metaphors to lived narratives. Importantly, the tool proved practical and effective even in short interview encounters, easing rapport between researchers and participants and generating emotionally rich data. At the same time, ethical and practical considerations were carefully observed throughout the research. The Blob Bridge and related images are copyright-protected but can be easily and affordably licensed for academic use (Wilson and Long, 2018). Overall, the DYNAMIG project demonstrates that the Blob Bridge is far more than a visual aid. It is a catalyst for

emotional storytelling and provides a deeper understanding of the migration experience. Its ability to evoke migration as a journey encompassing both aspiration and struggle positions it as a valuable addition to the qualitative researcher's toolkit. Building on earlier applications of EU co-funded projects, such as the Migrant Men's Well-Being in Diversity project, DYNAMIG highlights how creative, ethically grounded visual tools can enrich participatory and cross-cultural research on human mobility and decision-making.

# DYNAMIG

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**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