

PACES

Making migration and migration policy decisions
amidst societal transformations



Funded by
the European Union

From Deterrence to Credible Choice: Rethinking Migration Policy at Origin

This policy brief draws from insights that emerged from the PACES project based on qualitative and quantitative data (2024-2026) about migration decision-making along the full migration journey between Africa and Europe

PACES project Policy Brief No.3, D4.7 – April 2026



Executive Summary

Migration policy at origin often starts from a simple assumption: people move irregularly because they underestimate the risks. PACES evidence from Algeria, Ethiopia, and Nigeria points to a different diagnosis. Many prospective migrants already know the risks. What they often lack are credible alternatives, trusted support, and realistic pathways that can compete with economic insecurity, family expectations, blocked opportunities, and visible examples of success abroad. Research conducted in Algeria, Ethiopia, and Nigeria, migration shows that decision-making is not a response to information, but a process shaped by social relations, household dynamics, gendered expectations, life-stage pressures, and the perceived credibility of available futures. Policies based mainly on the idea of an information deficit are therefore likely to miss their target.

This matters because policies built around risk communication are unlikely to shift the choices of those most committed to migration. At best, they may reinforce the views of people inclined to stay or delay decisions among the undecided. Without practical access to regular mobility options, deterrence can produce frustrated aspirations and immobility rather than meaningful choice. It can also lead those most committed to migration to take increasingly irregular routes.

The policy lesson is clear: the challenge is not simply to inform people better. It is to make safer and regular options more visible, usable, and socially credible. Policy should move faster from deterrence to decision-support, from abstract references to legal pathways to practical access systems, and from success measured by fewer departures to success measured by agency, safety, and equity. Research by Dimova & Fromell (2025) further shows that people are willing to migrate legally and averse to migrating illegally. Policy success should therefore be judged by whether interventions expand safe, credible choices – not only by whether departures fall.

Table 1: From deterrence assumptions to decision-making realities

Conventional policy assumption	Findings
People migrate because they underestimate risk	Risk awareness is already widespread
Better information will discourage irregular migration	Information has limited effects when aspirations to migrate are strong
Decisions are treated as largely individual (rational choice theory)	Migration decisions are shaped by households, norms, gender, life stage, and social relations
Legal pathways are assumed to offer a credible alternative	Alternatives matter only when they are visible, accessible, and credible
Policy Recommendations	
Stop funding standalone deterrence campaigns unless they are independently evaluated.	
Build pathway navigation systems that combine information, counselling, referral, matching, and application support.	
Design programmes around decision-making over time, including life events, tipping points, and changing aspirations.	
Treat gendered constraint as a core design issue, not an inclusion add-on.	
Measure success through safety, agency, access equity, and credibility - not only reduced movement.	

The limits of deterrence-oriented information campaigns. Awareness of irregular migration risks is widespread. Respondents are familiar with the dangers of the journey. Yet knowledge of these risks does not change migration intentions. For people with strong aspirations to migrate, warnings about danger are often outweighed by economic insecurity, blocked opportunities, family expectations, or the visible success of peers abroad. For those already inclined to stay, such campaigns may simply reinforce an existing position.

Migration decisions are not individual choices. Evidence from Ethiopia and Nigeria shows that aspirations are shaped through social norms, destination networks, and pressures linked to life stages. Migration is more socially acceptable for young men than for young women, especially where destination networks are weak, migration is internal, or marriage pressure is strong. Girls may report lower migration aspirations not because they value mobility less, but because they anticipate family resistance, reputational costs, or the absence of trusted support. Policies that treat migration as a neutral individual choice overlook these constraints.

Migration governance in countries of origin is less visible and less meaningful to intended audiences than policymakers assume. Respondents in PACES interpret migration through domestic realities: employment, education, public services, family responsibilities, and the credibility of regular migration opportunities. Awareness of foreign-funded deterrence policies or information campaigns is limited, while trust is often placed in personal networks, community narratives, returnees, and observed outcomes. This points to a (policy) gap. Thus, when legal pathways are invoked only in general terms, without guidance, support, or credibility, they do not shape decision-making. The issue is whether realistic and socially accessible alternatives are available.

Taken together, these findings call into question assumptions that shape migration policy. Migration decisions are not made by isolated individuals and they change over time. Aspirations strengthen, weaken, or are reconfigured in response to life events, social pressures, and changing opportunities. Policy therefore needs to move beyond static categories of “potential migrants” and engage with migration decision-making as a dynamic and socially embedded process.

The implications for policy are clear. First, EU migration policy should rely less on standalone deterrence campaigns as instruments of behavioural change. Second, the language of “legal pathways” should be matched by credible access systems that combine information with counselling, referral, matching, and practical support. Third, policy design should take account of the fact that migration decisions evolve over time rather than assuming fixed categories of potential migrants. Fourth, gendered forms of constraint should be treated as a central design issue rather than a secondary one. Finally, policy success should be judged not only by reduced departures, but also by whether interventions provide meaningful choice, improve safety, and reduce unequal barriers to mobility.

This policy brief synthesises the PACES findings on migration decision-making and translates them into practical implications for policy design.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction: Rethinking Migration Decision-Making at Origin	5
2. The policy problem: Risk information is not the missing element.....	7
3. Migration decisions are social, gendered and time-sensitive	10
4. Migration Decisions Change Over Time.....	13
5. What a Better Policy Approach Looks Like	15
6. Policy Recommendations.....	19
1. End the overreliance on standalone deterrence campaigns	19
2. Replace “legal pathways” rhetoric with credible access systems.....	19
3. Design migration policy around decision-making over time	19
4. Make gendered constraint a core design issue	19
5. Judge policy success by agency, safety, and equity – not only by reduced departures	20
7. Conclusion	21
Bibliography	21

Tables and Figures

Table 1: From deterrence assumptions to decision-making realities.....	2
Table 2: From deterrence to credible support.....	18
Figure 1: Migration decisions are socially shaped, not individually made	12
Picture 1: "When you have my life, it's difficult to talk about choice!" (SH, 2024).....	14
Picture 2: "We know the dangers of the desert and the sea. That's not the problem." (SH, 2023).....	20

1. Introduction: Rethinking Migration Decision-Making at Origin

Migration policymaking presents itself as evidence-based and attentive to complexity. Yet many policies directed at countries of origin still rest on wrong assumptions about why people migrate and what might influence their decisions. One of the most common is that people leave because they underestimate the risks involved, and that better information about the dangers of irregular migration will discourage them from moving. Evidence from PACES suggests otherwise. In many cases, people are already well aware of these risks. The problem is less a lack of information than a limited understanding, on the policy side, of how migration decisions are made.

This brief draws on two strands of PACES research. The first, by Pécoud and Savatic, examines the limits of the information-deficit approach. Based on research in Algeria, Ethiopia, and Nigeria, it shows that awareness of migration risks is widespread and that the effects of deterrent policies and information campaigns depend on prior aspirations. People who are committed to leaving are not persuaded by warnings. Those who are inclined to stay find their views confirmed, but they are not the primary target of these interventions.¹

The second strand of evidence, developed by Dimova and Fromell, shows the limits of treating migration as an individual and socially neutral choice. Their research demonstrates that migration aspirations are filtered through social norms, parental influence, gendered expectations, destination networks, and life-stage pressures. In this perspective, aspirations are not private preferences waiting to be measured. They are shaped, authorised, constrained, and sometimes suppressed through household relations and wider normative environments. This is particularly visible in the case of young women, whose mobility is more heavily conditioned by marriage pressure, social acceptability, and the strength of trusted networks at destination.²

Taken together, these findings point to a weakness in current migration policy at origin. Too often, policy assumes that people lack knowledge when they may instead be weighing known risks against limited prospects at home. It also tends to treat migration as an individual choice, when in practice decisions are often negotiated within households and shaped by wider social expectations. This means that policy cannot be improved simply by refining communication tools or by invoking mobility options in general terms. It requires a better understanding of how aspirations take shape, how they shift over time, and how social conditions affect whether they can be acted upon.

Migration decisions do not emerge from information alone. They are shaped by economic pressure, uneven opportunities, family expectations, gender norms, and people's sense of what futures are realistically available to them. They also change. Intentions may strengthen, weaken, or be redirected in response to major life events, changing responsibilities, or external shocks.

¹ Pécoud, Antoine and Filip Savatic. 'Preaching to the Choir: The Impact of Restrictive Migration Policies and Information Campaigns on Aspirations to Migrate', Working paper, 2026.

² Dimova, Ralitzka and Hanna Fromell. 'Social Norms and Migration: Evidence from Ethiopia and Nigeria', IMI Working Paper No. 190 / PACES Working Paper No. 8, 2025.

Policies often underperform because they address “potential migrants” as if they were a fixed category, rather than people whose plans and constraints evolve over time.

Seen in this light, the issue is not simply that some policy instruments are ineffective at the margins. It is that much migration governance still relies on an inadequate account of decision-making. Treating mobility primarily as a response to poor information misses the extent to which migration is socially shaped and embedded in unequal conditions. As the earlier PACES policy brief on safe pathways³ argues, more effective responses need to connect information with referral, counselling, and practical access, while remaining grounded in how decisions are made in real contexts.

This brief argues that migration governance at origin will continue to fall short if it treats awareness as persuasion, assumes aspiration is equivalent to free choice, or presents legal pathways without making them meaningfully accessible. Drawing on PACES evidence, it examines why deterrence campaigns have limited influence on those most likely to move, how household dynamics and social norms shape aspirations, and what a more credible and context-sensitive policy response might look like.

³ Cortinovis, Roberto. ‘Unpacking the EU “Route-based Approach” to Migration: The Role of Safe Pathways’, PACES Project Policy Brief No. 1, 2024. Within PACES, evidence shows how clear, credible regular pathways available in Adama, Ethiopia – whether domestic care employment in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf – are seen as a feasible and appropriate way to migrate, and become a priority for those seeking opportunities abroad.

2. The Policy Problem: Risk information is Not the Missing Element

Since the 2015 “migration crisis”, the context of migration policies has been characterized by the emergence of deterrent information campaigns as well as the increasingly securitized and externalized migration policies of the Global North to deter irregular migration. The dominant policy approach has since been to show people the dangers of irregular migration, in order to make them less likely to move. PACES shows this is the wrong starting point. Respondents across research sites were aware of deaths at sea, violence, exploitation, detention, deception, debt, failed journeys, and return. Deterrence messaging is not addressing an informational void.

The stronger the aspiration to migrate, the less likely additional risk information is to alter the underlying decision. For those determined to leave, warnings are weighed against unemployment, blocked mobility, family expectations, political frustration, and the visible success of peers abroad. For those already inclined to stay, campaigns mostly reinforce existing views. The more relevant group is the undecided, but even there the likely outcome is often delay, hesitation, or rejection of irregular routes while the aspiration to migrate remains.

This changes the policy question. The issue is not whether people have heard about risk. It is whether the alternatives to irregular migration are credible enough to shape decisions. Abstract references to safe or legal pathways do little when people cannot see how those routes work, whether they are eligible, whom to trust, or how to move from information to access.

In their contribution to PACES, Pécoud and Savatic show that migration aspirations are shaped by contextual and personal circumstances, while policies and information about risks play a secondary role.⁴ Their core finding is not that information campaigns never matter, but that their effects depend on prior aspirations and are weakest among those most committed to

Definitions box

“Irregular migration” refers to movement that takes place outside the legal or administrative frameworks governing entry, stay, or work in a destination country. For policy, this means that irregular migration is not only something to be prevented—it is also produced by gaps between mobility aspirations and accessible legal options.

Deterrence policies aim to reduce irregular migration by discouraging people from moving. They often rely on communicating the risks, costs, and negative consequences of migration.

Migration information campaigns are a common deterrence tool. They typically:

- highlight dangers
- warn about threats on journeys
- promote messages about staying or pursuing “safe and legal pathways”

For policy, this suggests that information campaigns are most useful when they form part of **broader decision-support systems**, rather than functioning as standalone deterrence tools.

These campaigns are usually based on the assumption that people migrate because they lack accurate information about risks.

⁴ Pécoud, Antoine and Filip Savatic. ‘Preaching to the Choir: The Impact of Restrictive Migration Policies and Information Campaigns on Aspirations to Migrate’, Working paper, 2026.

leaving.⁵ Across the six research sites in Algeria, Ethiopia, and Nigeria, irregular migration was generally understood as dangerous, undesirable, and often morally troubling, while regular migration was widely seen as preferable when available. This means deterrence campaigns enter environments where risk is already socially known, narrated, and debated.⁶

This is precisely why deterrence has limited impact on those most likely to move. Among those strongly committed to migration, warnings rarely displace aspiration. Among those already inclined to stay, they may confirm existing views. Among the undecided, they may discourage irregular routes, but not necessarily produce a stable preference for staying. The result may be suspended mobility: people remain in place while continuing to aspire to leave. A programme that records fewer departures may appear successful while producing frustration, blocked mobility, or distrust in institutions.

Pécoud and Savatic's formulation shows that what policymakers often interpret as a communication problem is better understood as a credibility problem. If everyday life is experienced as stagnant or exclusionary, then official warnings do not displace aspiration; they are simply weighed against a different hierarchy of risks, one in which staying may appear more threatening than leaving.⁷

For those already inclined to stay, information campaigns tend to reinforce rather than transform. They validate decisions grounded in family commitments, local attachment, employment, moral objections to irregular migration, or broader ideas of responsibility. In that sense, many deterrence efforts do exactly what Pécoud and Savatic's title suggests: they preach to the choir. They strengthen attitudes that were already there, while leaving the core target population largely unmoved. This is not an incidental weakness or a minor implementation failure. It is a structural limitation of campaigns designed around an information-deficit model.

What research is this brief based on?

This brief draws on two PACES working papers. Pécoud and Savatic conducted **243 semi-structured interviews** with longstanding residents in six locations: Mostaganem and Sétif in Algeria; Adama and Kebri Beyah in Ethiopia; and Abuja and Osogbo in Nigeria. The interviews explored migration aspirations, awareness of migration policies and information campaigns, and perceptions of irregular migration risks.

Dimova and Fromell conducted a **vignette-based survey** with young people aged **18-25** and one parent in Ethiopia and Nigeria. The survey covered **616 parent-adult child pairs in Ethiopia** and **603 in Nigeria**, across Adama, Jijjiga/Kebribeya, Abuja, and Osogbo. It examined how gender, social norms, parental influence, destination networks, migration purpose, and marriage pressure shape migration aspirations.

Together, these studies provide qualitative and survey-based evidence on how migration decisions are shaped over time by information, social expectations, household dynamics, and the credibility of available alternatives.

⁵ Pécoud, Antoine. 'Informing Migrants to Manage Migration? An Analysis of IOM's Information Campaigns', in *The Politics of International Migration Management*, 2010.

⁶ Pécoud, Antoine. 'Migration Control as Communication? Voluntary Returns, Information Campaigns and the Justification of Contested Migration/Border Governance', *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, 2023.

⁷ Van Dessel, Joren. 'Externalization through Awareness-Raising', *Territory, Politics, Governance*, 2021.

If deterrence-oriented interventions push some undecided individuals away from irregular routes without creating realistic access to regular mobility, the result is not a preference for staying.

A further challenge for migration policy is that respondents do not primarily interpret migration governance through an EU or Global North lens. They understand migration through domestic conditions: the availability of jobs, the quality of services, the conduct of national authorities, the credibility of regular migration channels, and the visible experiences of relatives, returnees, and peers. Pécoud and Savatic find limited awareness of the policies and campaigns funded or implemented by Global North actors beyond vague understandings of visas and deportation.⁸ Much of the Global North-funded deterrence programming aims to be legible to intended audiences, when in fact its visibility is weak and its relevance is often secondary to domestic opportunity structures.^{9 10 11} Local campaigns and other sources of information (social networks, social media and the news) stand behind the widespread awareness of irregular migration risks.

This helps explain why abstract invocations of “safe and legal pathways” do so little on the ground. The PACES safe-pathways brief¹² makes the point clearly: information about regular options has limited effect when it is generic, not coupled with practical counselling, and not linked to concrete access. Worse, if policy promises mobility options without showing how they can actually be navigated, it risks raising expectations without building credibility. The issue is not only that deterrence underperforms. It is that policy too often offers an implausible alternative—legal migration as rhetoric rather than as a visible and usable route.

Even in the case of legal pathways, the dominant architecture has often prioritised containment over access. Information provision instruments have been shaped more by the objective of discouraging movement than by a genuine effort to support people in understanding and reaching existing mobility options. The result is a contradiction at the heart of current policy: states want safe pathways to function as alternatives to irregular migration, yet the systems through which those pathways could become practically reachable remain fragmented, opaque, and underdeveloped.

This requires a shift away towards a more honest policy vocabulary. The goal should not be to “correct” ignorance that is not there, but to engage with and recognise structural frustration, household dynamics, and being serious about building alternatives that are not merely named but navigable.

⁸ Pagogna, Raffaella and Patrick Sakdapolrak. ‘Disciplining Migration Aspirations through Migration-Information Campaigns: A Systematic Review of the Literature’, *Geography Compass*, 2021, 15(9): e12585.

⁹ Oeppen, Ceri. ‘Leaving Afghanistan! Are You Sure? European Efforts to Deter Potential Migrants through Information Campaigns’, *Human Geography*, 2016, 9(2): 57-68.

¹⁰ Molenaar, Floor and Joris Jucker. ‘Mali Is My Eldorado’: The Effectiveness of EU-Funded Information Campaigns on Migration, ADMIGOV Deliverable 6.4, 2021.

¹¹ Lafleur, Jean-Michel and Abdeslam Marfouk. ‘Effects of Information Provision on Undocumented Migration to Europe: Evidence from a Survey Experiment’, GLO Discussion Paper No. 1655, 2025.

¹² Cortinovis, Roberto. ‘Unpacking the EU “Route-based Approach” to Migration: The Role of Safe Pathways’, PACES Project Policy Brief No. 1, 2024

3. Migration Decisions are Social, Gendered and Time-Sensitive

Migration decisions are not made in ignorance. They are not made in isolation either. Migration aspirations are shaped by social norms, personal norms, parental influence, destination networks, and life-stage pressures. In practice, people do not simply choose migration; they negotiate whether mobility is acceptable, possible, timely, and socially authorised.

PACES' second contribution is to move beyond the fiction of the autonomous decision-maker. Dimova and Fromell's study distinguishes between what respondents believe is socially acceptable in their community and what they personally judge to be appropriate. That distinction matters because it reveals how aspiration can be constrained before it ever becomes visible in survey responses or policy categories.¹³

This is especially visible in the gendered patterning of mobility. The evidence from Ethiopia and Nigeria is strikingly consistent on one point: migration is more socially acceptable for young men than for young women. This holds across both shared social norms and personal normative judgments. The gap is not trivial. The authors describe it as substantial, roughly equivalent to a full step on the social-appropriateness scale. In policy terms, this means that mobility is not simply unequally accessed; it is unequally authorised. Who is seen as a legitimate migrant depends in part on gender before any visa process, programme eligibility criterion, or labour market filter enters the picture. That should alter how policymakers think about "demand" for migration opportunities. It is not enough to ask who expresses interest. One must also ask whose interest can be socially voiced without sanction.¹⁴

Migration is more socially acceptable for young men than for young women. Girls' migration becomes more constrained when destination networks are weak, when migration is internal rather than international, when migration is framed around family support, and when marriage pressure is strong. As a result, lower expressed female aspiration should not automatically be read as lower interest. It may reflect suppressed aspiration: preference filtered through constraint. These are not incidental variables. They map the social conditions under which young women's mobility is judged risky, inappropriate, or incompatible with expected roles. In practical terms, this means that female mobility is more dependent on trusted destination ties, on timing, and on the ability to move before certain normative thresholds close available options.¹⁵

The relevance of marriage is especially significant for policy. Youth mobility programming often operates with a flat age category—usually 18 to 25—without paying serious attention to the

¹³ Dimova, Ralitza and Hanna Fromell. 'Social Norms and Migration: Evidence from Ethiopia and Nigeria', IMI Working Paper No. 190 / PACES Working Paper No. 8, 2025.

¹⁴ Bašić, Zvonimir and Eugenio Verrina. 'Personal Norms—and Not Only Social Norms—Shape Economic Behavior', *Journal of Public Economics*, 2024, 239: 105255.

¹⁵ Belloni, Milena. 'Breaking Free from Tradition: Women, National Service and Migration in Eritrea', *Migration Letters*, 2019, 16(4): 491-501.

transitions within that period. But Dimova and Fromell show that marriage expectations can sharply reshape the acceptability of migration, especially for young women. This means that policies may arrive too late for the people they are supposedly designed to reach. A scholarship programme, labour mobility opportunity, or pathway navigation intervention launched for “youth” in the abstract may miss those whose room for mobility has already narrowed under family or community pressure. A life-stage blind policy is not neutral. It is mistimed.

Once social norms are controlled for, girls may report higher aspirations than boys. That result should give policymakers pause. It suggests that what often appears to be lower female aspiration may actually be suppressed aspiration—preference filtered through constraint. This is exactly the kind of mechanism that standard surveys miss when they take stated aspiration at face value. A woman may report lower willingness to migrate not because she values mobility less, but because she is anticipating family resistance, social stigma, marriage expectations, or the absence of trusted contacts at destination. A policy framework that reads such responses as free preference will misrecognise inequality as choice.

The household dimension reinforces this point. Migration decisions are not simply taken by individuals and then announced to others; they are negotiated within relational structures. Dimova and Fromell show that parental norms remain significant even when personal and social norms are taken into account. The exact configuration differs by country. In Nigeria, parental influence appears especially consequential in some domains, and mothers’ preferences can significantly shape outcomes, including girls’ international migration probability relative to boys. In Ethiopia, both mothers and fathers tend to evaluate migration more negatively than young people themselves, and the regional variation is also marked, with lower acceptance of girls’ migration in Jigjiga and Kebribeyah than in Adama. These differences matter because they show that “the household” is not a single actor, but a site of power, bargaining, generational tension, and context-specific hierarchy.¹⁶

At the same time, Dimova and Fromell’s research does not collapse everything into structure. One of its strengths is that it preserves room for agency. Personal norms continue to matter even after accounting for social and parental norms. The argument is not that individuals are prisoners of social expectation, but that they act within normative environments that shape what is thinkable, acceptable, and feasible. This produces a more sophisticated view of migration decision-making than either the purely voluntarist account favoured by some policy designs or the overly deterministic view that leaves no room for choice. The policy challenge is therefore not simply to “empower” individuals in the abstract, but to reduce the gap between aspiration and the social conditions of acting on it.

The implication is not that policy should “work around” families or communities as though they were simple obstacles. It is that policy must recognise migration decision-making as socially negotiated. This means integrating household and gender analysis into programme design, identifying where aspiration is likely to be suppressed rather than absent, and paying particular

¹⁶ Akerlof, George and Rachel Kranton. ‘Economics and Identity’, *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 2000, 115(3): 715-753.

attention to destination-network building, trusted intermediaries, and timing around key life transitions. If Section 2 exposed the failure of treating migration as an information problem, Section 3 exposes the failure of treating it as an individual one. In both cases, policy underperforms because it starts from the wrong social model of decision-making.

Figure 1: Migration decisions are socially shaped, not individually made



4. Migration Decisions Change Over Time

Timing also matters. Aspirations are not fixed; they change through education, work, family responsibilities, marriage, bereavement, crises, and sudden opportunities. Static categories such as “potential migrant” miss the fact that people move in and out of aspiration, hesitation, postponement, and renewed intent. Policy needs to engage this process over time rather than treating decisions as one-off behavioural responses.

If migration policy is to take “societal transformations” seriously, it needs to move beyond treating the term as background context or broad rhetoric. The PACES evidence suggests something more precise: the social conditions under which migration decisions are made are themselves shifting, and policy continues to lag behind those changes. What is changing is not simply the volume of mobility or the intensity of migration pressures. What is changing is the relationship between aspiration, authority, and legitimacy. Migration decisions are being made in societies where expectations about work, adulthood, gender, family responsibility, and mobility are in flux. Policies that continue to imagine a self-contained individual making a one-off decision in response to information are therefore missing the social terrain on which decisions are actually formed.¹⁷

A useful conceptual anchor here is the **Temporal Multilevel Analysis Framework** developed by Vezzoli, Mýtna Kureková and Schewel.¹⁸ Their approach moves beyond the idea that decisions to stay or migrate are one-off individual choices triggered by a single factor or event. Instead, migration decision-making is understood as unfolding over time and across multiple levels of social life, shaped by changing personal circumstances, household relations, social expectations, and wider structural conditions. This perspective reinforces the idea that aspirations are not fixed preferences but evolving orientations that are continuously reassessed in relation to life events, perceived opportunities, and social constraints. It also helps explain why static policy categories such as “potential migrants” are analytically weak: people move in and out of aspiration, hesitation, postponement, and renewed intent. A more realistic policy approach must therefore recognise that decisions to stay or migrate are temporal, relational, and socially embedded processes rather than isolated behavioural choices.¹⁹

Temporal Multilevel Analysis Framework

The TMA framework developed by Vezzoli, Mýtna Kureková, and Schewel shows that decisions to migrate or stay unfold over time and across multiple levels of influence.

The framework highlights three insights:

1. Decisions evolve over time
2. Decisions are shaped at multiple levels
3. Aspiration and action are distinct

For policy, effective responses need to engage decision-making as a **dynamic, socially embedded process**, and support people at different stages—from early aspiration to active planning and possible departure.

¹⁷ de Haas, H., Natter, K., & Vezzoli, S. (2018). ‘Growing restrictiveness or changing selection? The nature and evolution of migration policies’, *International Migration Review*, 52(2): 324-367.

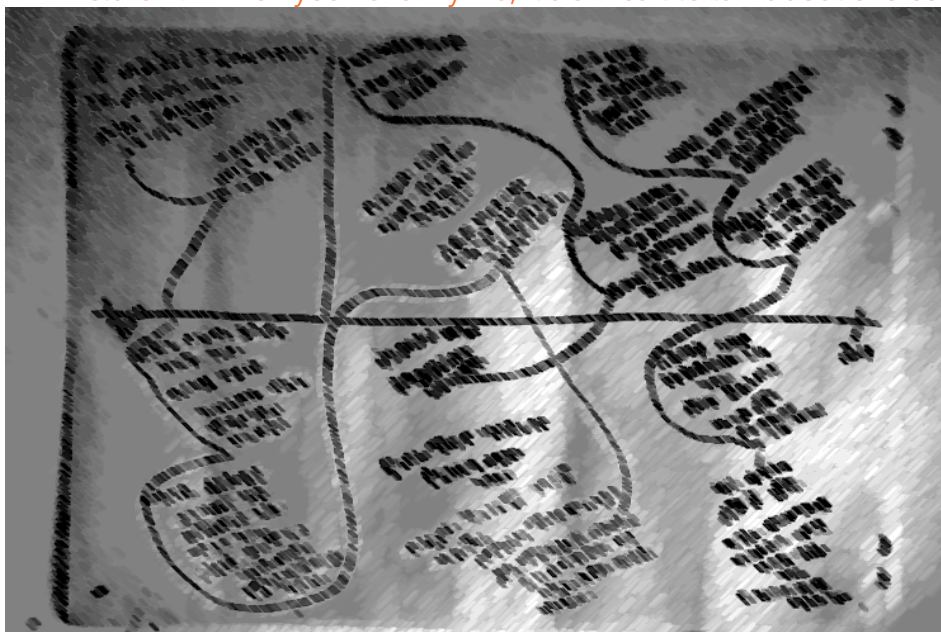
¹⁸ Vezzoli, S., Mýtna Kureková, L., Schewel, K. (2024). Researching decisions to stay and migrate: A Temporal Multilevel Analysis framework. IMI Working Paper No. 178 / PACES Project Working Paper No. 1. Den Haag: ISS.

¹⁹ As Oliver Bakewell reminds us, migration decisions emerge through the interaction between structure and agency, as people interpret, negotiate, and act within social conditions they did not choose. Bakewell,

PACES emphasises that migration aspiration is not static but evolves through processes of maturation, reconfiguration, and tipping points. Aspirations shift as people accumulate education, responsibilities, disappointments, and social experience. They can also crystallise rapidly in response to external shocks such as economic crisis, violence, political uncertainty, or sudden opportunity. This temporal understanding matters because it dislodges another quiet assumption in migration policy: that target groups are static and that behavioural correction can be delivered through one-off interventions. If aspirations change across the life course, then policy must stop treating migration decision-making as a fixed yes-or-no preference and start engaging it as a staged and socially mediated process.

This brings life experiences back into the centre of policy analysis. Too often, migration policy abstracts from lived experience and speaks in simplified categories: “potential migrant,” “irregular migrant,” “youth,” “female applicant,” “returnee.” But the PACES evidence suggests that what matters are the trajectories through which people arrive at aspiration: cycles of frustration, exposure to social comparison, family obligations, interrupted education, blocked employment, changing health, and moments of rupture or recalibration. A policy that sees aspiration only as a measurable variable misses the lived process through which it is produced. It misses the fact that decisions to move or stay may be revised many times before any actual movement occurs. In that sense, life experience is not context. It is part of the migration decision-making process.

Picture 1: "When you have my life, it's difficult to talk about choice!"



The lifelines of a migrant woman in Addis Ababa, illustrating how personal, domestic, social, economic and political factors are intertwined throughout any migration journey.

*Addis Abeba, May 2024
(transcripts anonymised)*

Oliver. 'Some Reflections on Structure and Agency in Migration Theory', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 2010, 36(10): 1689-1708.

5. What a Better Policy Approach Looks Like

A more effective approach would start from the actual conditions under which migration decisions are made. It would not treat awareness as persuasion, aspiration as free choice, or legal pathways as credible simply because they exist on paper. It would connect information to counselling, referral, matching, and practical access; engage household and community dynamics in a dialogue where they shape decisions; and evaluate success by whether people have safer and more realistic choices.

This is not an argument against information. Information can help people make safer and more realistic decisions when it is connected to real options. But information has limited value when it is used to correct presumed ignorance or discourage movement without changing the conditions that make migration attractive, necessary, or socially expected. The policy shift is therefore from deterrence messaging to decision-support: information linked to counselling, referral, matching, application assistance, and practical access.

A better approach requires making regular pathways credible. Legal routes influence decision-making only when people can see how they work, assess whether they are eligible, trust the intermediaries involved, and receive support to navigate the process. If regular pathways remain abstract, fragmented, or administratively remote, they cannot function as meaningful alternatives to irregular migration. In this sense, pathway policy is not only about creating more opportunities; it is about making existing and future opportunities visible, usable, and socially trusted.

Policy also needs to be designed around time. Migration aspirations are not fixed preferences. They evolve through education, employment, family responsibilities, marriage, crisis, disappointment, and sudden opportunity. A single information campaign cannot respond to this complexity. Early-stage aspirations may require investment in local opportunity, social support, and credible advice. Later-stage planning may require transparent pathway information, documentation support, referral, and safeguards against exploitation. Programmes should therefore be stage-sensitive rather than built around static categories of “potential migrants.”

Finally, policy must address unequal conditions of choice. PACES shows that mobility is not equally authorised for everyone. Young women in particular may face stronger household scrutiny, weaker destination networks, reputational concerns, and marriage-related pressure. Gender-neutral programming can therefore reproduce unequal access if it ignores the social conditions that shape who can act on migration aspirations. A credible policy approach should treat gendered constraint as a core design issue, not an inclusion add-on.

Taken together, these shifts point to a different organising principle for migration governance at origin: from behaviour correction to decision-support; from containment to credible access; from static targeting to time-sensitive programming; from gender-neutral assumptions to gender-responsive design; and from measuring success by reduced departures to assessing whether policy expands agency, safety, and equity.

Policy is more likely to work when it supports informed and realistic choices rather than trying to correct presumed ignorance. Thomas Gammeltoft-Hansen and Nikolas Tan’s critique of the

deterrence paradigm makes that point explicit. Their argument is that refugee and migration governance has been organised around deterrence as both a practical tool and a political reflex, despite mounting evidence of its limited effectiveness and considerable human costs.²⁰ The findings presented in PACES suggest that deterrence is weak not only because it fails to stop those most determined to move, but also because it rests on a faulty diagnosis of human mobility. A deterrence-centred framework misreads both the logic of aspiration and the normative stakes of migration governance. It narrows policy to the prevention of movement rather than the organisation of safer, fairer, and more credible forms.

In that sense, the question raised by PACES is not whether deterrence can be made marginally smarter. It is whether it should continue to serve as the organising principle of policy at all.

What follows from the evidence, then, is not simply the need for better tools, but the need for a different policy horizon. **The first priority is to move away from standalone deterrence tools.** Information campaigns should no longer be treated as primary instruments for reducing irregular migration from countries of origin. The evidence suggests that where they have an effect, it is limited and highly uneven: they reinforce the decisions of those already inclined to stay, do little to shift the most determined aspirants, and affect mainly a narrower undecided group whose underlying aspiration to migrate often remains intact. In policy terms, this means that awareness-raising should not be funded or justified as if it were a robust behavioural lever in its own right. Where information provision is retained, it should be embedded within wider forms of practical support and evaluated against realistic goals rather than symbolic expectations.

The second priority is to replace the rhetoric of legal pathways with credible access architecture. The problem is not only that safe and legal options remain too limited; it is also that they are too often abstract, fragmented, or administratively remote. The PACES safe-pathways brief²¹ shows that admission systems are weakened by informational, logistical, and administrative barriers, and that even where labour or protection pathways exist, access is often blocked by poor matching systems, processing bottlenecks, and inadequate counselling. For this brief, that matters because it reframes the policy gap. The issue is not simply the number of pathways, but whether they are visible, navigable, and socially credible to those considering migration. Policy should therefore invest in integrated systems that combine information, counselling, referral, and support in actually accessing mobility options.

The safe-pathways brief is particularly helpful in showing what such a shift would entail in practice. It calls for integrated responses that link information provision, referral mechanisms, and targeted support in accessing pathways. It also insists that efforts to expand pathways should be grounded in evidence on how migration decisions evolve across different stages of journeys and in different contexts.²² This is precisely where PACES adds value. It shows that such evidence cannot be limited to route management or border dynamics; it must also include social norms, household authority, life transitions, and the unequal credibility of possible futures. A realistic access architecture is not just administrative. It is social.

²⁰ Gammeltoft-Hansen, Thomas and Nikolas F. Tan. 'The End of the Deterrence Paradigm? Future Directions for Global Refugee Policy', *Journal on Migration and Human Security*, 2017, 5(1): 28-56.

²¹ Cortinovis, Roberto. 'Unpacking the EU "Route-based Approach" to Migration: The Role of Safe Pathways', PACES Project Policy Brief No. 1, 2024

²² Ibid.

This is also why the distinction between “regular” and “irregular” migration cannot be treated as a simple description of migrant behaviour. Nicholas de Genova’s analysis of migrant “illegality” is helpful here because it shifts attention from migrants’ legal status as a fixed attribute to the political and administrative processes through which irregularity is produced. His argument is not simply that undocumented migrants are vulnerable to deportation, but that deportability itself becomes a mode of governance.²³ This insight matters for this brief because it complicates the policy language of “safe and legal alternatives”. When regular pathways are narrow, opaque, and difficult to navigate, while enforcement-heavy approaches continue to close routes and harden categories, policy does not merely sort people into regular and irregular channels. It actively participates in producing the conditions under which some forms of movement become illegalised. In that sense, **irregularity is not simply what policy tries to prevent; it is also one of the outcomes policy helps generate when the promise of legality is not matched by credible, accessible routes.** This is precisely why a pathway agenda cannot be reduced to rhetorical commitment. Unless legal routes are materially reachable, the policy system continues to expand the very field of irregularity it claims to reduce.

A more credible access architecture is not only a matter of efficiency; it is also a way of reducing the policy production of irregularity. The third priority is to design policy around decision-making over time. A lifecycle-informed approach is more plausible than static segmentation because aspirations evolve through maturation, reconfiguration, and tipping points. Early-stage aspirants are more influenced by domestic opportunity structures, life experience, and social expectations; those closer to departure are more responsive to the actual availability of legal pathways and administrative processes. A better policy approach would therefore sequence interventions rather than applying uniform tools to heterogeneous populations. At earlier stages, the focus should be on structural opportunity, education, employment, and social support. At later stages, it should shift toward transparent pathway information, accessible procedures, and practical navigation support. The point is not to instrumentalise the life course, but to stop pretending that the same intervention makes sense at every stage of aspiration formation.²⁴

The fourth priority is to treat gendered mobility as a design issue, not an inclusion issue. PACES shows that women’s migration is constrained not only by formal barriers but by weaker social permission structures. Weak destination networks matter more for girls. Marriage pressure suppresses their mobility more sharply. Household dynamics shape whether aspirations can be acted upon, and standard survey evidence may understate female aspiration when norms suppress what women say they want. This means that gender-neutral mobility policy is not neutral in effect. A better approach would explicitly address the social conditions of access: investing in trusted destination networks, working through credible intermediaries, engaging household decision-makers where appropriate, and timing programmes around key transitions rather than assuming a flat youth target group. Policies that aim to expand women’s mobility without addressing the normative architecture around that mobility will continue to overpromise and underdeliver.

²³ de Genova, Nicholas. ‘Migrant “Illegality” and Deportability in Everyday Life’, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 2002, 31: 419–447.

²⁴ Andersson, Ruben. *‘Illegality, Inc.: Clandestine Migration and the Business of Bordering Europe’*, University of California Press, 2014.

The fifth priority is to judge policy success differently. Current migration governance is too often assessed through reduced departures, slowed arrivals, or disrupted routes. PACES points to the limitations of that framing. A more defensible set of metrics would ask whether policy expands credible choice, improves safety, reduces unequal barriers to access, and supports informed agency rather than merely lowering visible movement in the short term.

A sixth priority, implicit across all the evidence, is to take policy legibility seriously. Too many interventions are designed as though their existence is self-evidently meaningful to intended audiences. But if people do not perceive programming as relevant, trustworthy, or practically accessible, then formal policy design matters less than policymakers assume. Better policy would pay more attention to who is seen as a credible messenger, how information travels through local social worlds, and what kinds of institutions or intermediaries are trusted. This does not mean outsourcing policy to “community engagement” as a buzzword. It means taking seriously that credibility is socially produced and that official communication competes with lived evidence, family knowledge, and community narrative.

Taken together, these priorities imply a different organising principle for migration governance at origin. Policy should no longer begin from the assumption that behaviour changes when risk is better communicated. It should begin from the recognition that migration decisions are socially mediated choices made under unequal conditions. That means rebalancing away from deterrence and toward support systems that are evidence-based, socially grounded, and capable of making alternatives real rather than rhetorical. The issue is not whether policy can influence migration decisions. It can. The issue is whether it is willing to engage the actual mechanisms through which those decisions are made.

Table 2: From deterrence to credible support

Less effective approach	Evidence-based and human approach
Standalone awareness campaigns	Integrated decision-support
Abstract references to legal pathways	Counselling, referral, and practical access
Static categories of “potential migrants”	Time-sensitive and stage-specific programming
Gender-neutral design assumptions	Gender-responsive design
Success measured mainly by reduced departures	Success measured through safety, agency, and equity
Policy is more likely to work when it supports informed and realistic choices rather than trying to correct presumed ignorance.	

6. Policy Recommendations

1. End the overreliance on standalone deterrence campaigns

EU institutions, Member States, and donors should stop treating information campaigns as primary tools for reducing irregular migration. Where information provision is retained, it should be embedded in broader decision-support systems and evaluated against realistic outcomes.

Practical actions: require independent evaluation; discontinue campaigns that show only awareness gains; fund campaigns only when linked to counselling, referral, or pathway navigation.

Suggested indicators: share of programmes with referral mechanisms; evidence of changed decision quality rather than only awareness; documented unintended effects such as route displacement or blocked mobility.

2. Replace “legal pathways” rhetoric with credible access systems

Regular pathways influence decision-making only when people can see, trust, and use them. Policy should invest in systems that make options navigable, not merely visible.

Practical actions: fund pathway navigation hubs; provide transparent eligibility information; support matching, documentation, application assistance, and referral; strengthen visa-processing and recognition systems where relevant.

Suggested indicators: pathway uptake by target groups; application completion rates; processing times; user trust and perceived credibility; equity of access by gender, location, and socioeconomic position.

3. Design migration policy around decision-making over time

Migration aspirations evolve through life events, social pressure, crises, and opportunities. Policy should replace static targeting with stage-sensitive programming.

Practical actions: distinguish early aspiration, active planning, imminent departure, return, and suspended mobility; pair early-stage structural support with later-stage practical mobility guidance; build flexibility for tipping points such as economic shocks, conflict, job loss, or family change.

Suggested indicators: ability to reach people before high-risk departure; uptake of support at different decision stages; changes in perceived options over time.

4. Make gendered constraint a core design issue

Gender-neutral mobility policy is not neutral where household authority, marriage pressure, social reputation, and weak destination networks limit women’s mobility.

Practical actions: integrate gender analysis into all origin-country migration programming; build trusted destination networks and mentoring; include safeguarding and family-engagement strategies where appropriate; time programmes around key transitions that narrow women’s

room for mobility.

Suggested indicators: female uptake and completion; reasons for non-uptake; access to trusted support; safety outcomes; changes in household and community acceptability.

5. Judge policy success by agency, safety, and equity – not only by reduced departures

Reduced movement is an inadequate measure of success. It can reflect delayed movement, route displacement, immobility traps, or unequal access to mobility.

Practical actions: revise monitoring frameworks; include indicators on safe access, informed decision-making, pathway credibility, protection outcomes, and differential effects by gender and social position.

Suggested indicators: improved access to regular options; reduced exposure to harm; reduced inequality in pathway uptake; user-reported ability to make informed and realistic choices.

Picture 2: “We know the dangers of the desert and the sea. That's not the problem.” (Sfax, 2023, Samuel Hall)



7. Conclusion

The evidence from PACES calls for a different starting point for migration policy at origin.

The problem is not that prospective migrants do not understand risk. Many do.

The problem is that policy often misunderstands how migration decisions are made and underestimates the importance of credible alternatives.

Migration decisions are socially negotiated, gendered, and shaped over time. They are made in relation to households, norms, opportunities, constraints, and the perceived credibility of possible futures. Policy that focuses mainly on deterrence will continue to confuse communication with credibility and immobility with choice.

A stronger policy approach would support informed agency, practical access, and safer mobility. It would make regular options real enough to matter.

Bibliography

- Alpes, Maybritt Jill and Ninna Nyberg Sørensen. 'Migration Risk Campaigns Are Based on Wrong Assumptions', DIIS Policy Brief, 2015.
- Bakewell, Oliver. 'Some Reflections on Structure and Agency in Migration Theory', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 2010, 36(10): 1689-1708.
- Bašić, Zvonimir and Eugenio Verrina. 'Personal Norms—and Not Only Social Norms—Shape Economic Behavior', *Journal of Public Economics*, 2024, 239: 105255.
- Belloni, Milena. 'Breaking Free from Tradition: Women, National Service and Migration in Eritrea', *Migration Letters*, 2019, 16(4): 491-501.
- Carling, Jørgen and Kerilyn Schewel. 'Revisiting Aspiration and Ability in International Migration', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 2017, 44(6): 945-963.
- Cortinovis, Roberto. 'Unpacking the EU "Route-based Approach" to Migration: The Role of Safe Pathways', PACES Project Policy Brief No. 1, 2024.
- de Haas, Hein. 'A Theory of Migration: The Aspirations-Capabilities Framework', *Comparative Migration Studies*, 2021, 9(8).
- de Haas, H., Natter, K., & Vezzoli, S. (2018). 'Growing restrictiveness or changing selection? The nature and evolution of migration policies', *International Migration Review*, 52(2): 324-367.
- Dimova, Ralitzka and Hanna Fromell. 'Social Norms and Migration: Evidence from Ethiopia and Nigeria', IMI Working Paper No. 190 / PACES Working Paper No. 8, 2025.
- Gammeltoft-Hansen, Thomas and Nikolas F. Tan. 'The End of the Deterrence Paradigm? Future Directions for Global Refugee Policy', *Journal on Migration and Human Security*, 2017, 5(1).
- Lafleur, Jean-Michel and Abdeslam Marfouk. 'Effects of Information Provision on Undocumented Migration to Europe: Evidence from a Survey Experiment', GLO Discussion Paper No. 1655, 2025.
- Majidi, Nassim. 2025. "Deterring Migration in Times of Crises: The Ethics of Behavioural Change in Migration Information Campaigns." *American Behavioural Scientist* 69(6): 732-753.

- Majidi, Nassim. 2017. 'Uninformed Decisions and Missing Networks: The Return of Refugee from Kenya to Somalia.' *Espace populations sociétés* 2017/1.
- Molenaar, Floor and Joris Jucker. "'Mali Is My Eldorado": The Effectiveness of EU-Funded Information Campaigns on Migration', ADMIGOV Deliverable 6.4, 2021.
- Musarò, Pierluigi. 'Aware Migrants: The Role of Information Campaigns in the Management of Migration', *European Journal of Communication*, 2019, 34(6): 629-640.
- Nicolle, Herve. 'The implications of (mis)managing transit migration'. MIGNEX Policy Brief. Oslo: Peace Research Institute Oslo, 2023.
- Oeppen, Ceri. 'Leaving Afghanistan! Are You Sure? European Efforts to Deter Potential Migrants through Information Campaigns', *Human Geography*, 2016, 9(2): 57-68.
- Pagogna, Raffaella and Patrick Sakdapolrak. 'Disciplining Migration Aspirations through Migration-Information Campaigns: A Systematic Review of the Literature', *Geography Compass*, 2021, 15(9): e12585.
- Pécoud, Antoine and Filip Savatic. 'Preaching to the Choir: The Impact of Restrictive Migration Policies and Information Campaigns on Aspirations to Migrate', Working paper, 2026.
- Pécoud, Antoine. 'Informing Migrants to Manage Migration? An Analysis of IOM's Information Campaigns', in Martin Geiger and Antoine Pécoud (eds.), *The Politics of International Migration Management*, 2010, pp. 184-201.
- Pécoud, Antoine. 'Migration Control as Communication? Voluntary Returns, Information Campaigns and the Justification of Contested Migration/Border Governance', *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, 2023.
- Schewel, Kerilyn. 'Understanding Immobility: Moving Beyond the Mobility Bias in Migration Studies', *International Migration Review*, 2020, 54(2): 328-355.
- Trauner, Florian, Jan-Paul Brekke, Ilke Adam, Ousman Nyan Cham and Kjersti Thorbjørnsrud. "'It's Not about the Information, It's about the Situation": Understanding the Misalignment between EU Deterrence Messaging and Migrants' Narratives', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 2024, 50(14): 3379-3395.
- Van Dessel, Joren. 'Externalization through "Awareness-Raising": The Border Spectacle of EU Migration Information Campaigns in Niger', *Territory, Politics, Governance*, 2021, 11(4): 749-769.
- Vezzoli, S., Mýtna Kureková, L., Schewel, K. (2024). Researching decisions to stay and migrate: A Temporal Multilevel Analysis framework. IMI Working Paper No. 178 / PACES Project Working Paper No. 1. Den Haag: ISS.
- Watkins, Jessica. 'Migration Information Campaigns: Pastoral Government and the Credible Messenger Model', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 2025, online first.

Authors

Samuel Hall East Africa

Acknowledgements

The PACES project has received funding under the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme, grant agreement N 101094279.

Views and opinions expressed are those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

We acknowledge the contribution of our numerous research participants who donated their time to share their life and migration experiences, their life aspirations, expectations and their dreams of a better future. In the PACES project, we seek to give them a voice, share their concerns with decision-makers with the objectives of creating more equal societies where all, regardless of nationality, may enjoy the right of freedom of movement.

Scan the QR code or visit www.iss.nl/PACES to view the materials generated by the PACES partners.



This work © 2026 is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

