

PACES

Making migration and migration policy decisions
amidst societal transformations



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What matters in decisions to stay and migrate?

The importance of the migration journey

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.

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Key points

“A person is just trying to move on with their life, to make their life better. Normally, you can’t expect someone to remain in the same place for 20 whole years and then still see that their life hasn’t changed at all.”

— 20-year-old woman in Osogbo, Nigeria

- People develop aspirations to migrate over time and shift their position between staying and migrating, and vice versa, in response to changes in society and in their personal life.
- Three broad sets of factors underpin aspirations to stay or migrate: (1) changes in society, which we refer to as social transformation; (2) changes in personal life, which include the family, social ties and migrant networks, and we call the life course; and (3) migration and non-migration policies. These three sets of factors play different roles in shaping aspirations to stay and migrate before and after the migration journey has begun.
- What matters? While social transformations and social norms play a role before migration starts, during the journey their importance diminishes, while the search for security and access to services gains relevance. Migration policies also gain greater importance along the journey, particularly once a migrant has reached high-income destinations.
- Migration policies (regular channels such as residence, work permits and resettlement, and deterrent policies such as information campaigns and return policies), play a limited role in early phases of migration decision-making because (aspiring) migrants perceive the rules of existing regular migration pathways to be costly, time-consuming, and most likely to fail. Only when regular pathways are achievable, such as the recruitment system of domestic workers for the Gulf countries in Ethiopia, do aspiring migrants largely abide by the policy regulations.
- (Aspiring) migrants and their families shun irregular migration and opt for regular migration if at all possible.
- However, lack of opportunities for regular migration from Africa to Europe push individuals towards pursuing irregular migration when they feel that they must leave their homes to find security and achieve improvements to their life situations.

Introduction

Aspirations to stay or migrate are shaped primarily by three sets of factors: (1) changes in the society of residence, (2) changes at more personal level, including within the family, and (3) migration and non-migration policies (in short, (non)migration policies). Which of these factors carries the most weight? And does their relative importance change along the migration journey?

Aspirations to stay in one's place of residence or migrate to another location (close or far) are shaped by a mix of factors which include both societal aspects (such as living conditions, employment opportunities, wages, discrimination, community values and social norms) and life course factors (such as life aspirations, family norms, relationships and ties, people's ability to get married and start a family, or the ambition to start a business). Aspirations are shaped by location, as people perceive and interpret the place where they find themselves, and time, as people's life unfolds and they gather new experiences in changing environments.

Migration policies further complicate this intricate process. They intervene as external factors that tend to target particular groups of individuals given their level of education, type of skills, or assumptions about why they migrate (study, work, family reunification, or conflict). While previous research shows that all these factors play a role in migration decision-making, it is less clear what is relevant before migration ensues and along the migration journey. This policy brief offers a schematic representation at three points in time: (1) before migration, (2) once the migration journey has started and (3) when migrants become embedded in a new place of residence.



Key concepts

Three main categories of factors shape aspirations to stay and migrate: social transformation, non-migration and migration policies, and the life course (see Figure 1). Before exploring their interplay along the migration journey, we define these key concepts.

Social transformation refers to economic, political, cultural, demographic, technological and environmental change which disrupts people's lives. This also includes intangible aspects such as community values, social norms and migrant networks, which may shift and influence life in society. Such change affects people's well-being. Both change and continuity (i.e. lack of change) shape aspirations to stay/migrate. As expressions of political change, policies may be both the backdrop and active drivers in social transformation and thus play a role in the formation of aspirations to stay or migrate. We distinguish between migration and non-migration policies.

Life course refers to change and continuity in people's lives at personal, family and community levels and in their ways of doing and thinking. Events such as a parent's death, having a child, finishing education or becoming unemployed can have important effects on a person's aspirations to stay/migrate. Life course also includes family norms which, for example, may dictate who should migrate to support the family and who should stay behind to care for children, the elderly and the sick.

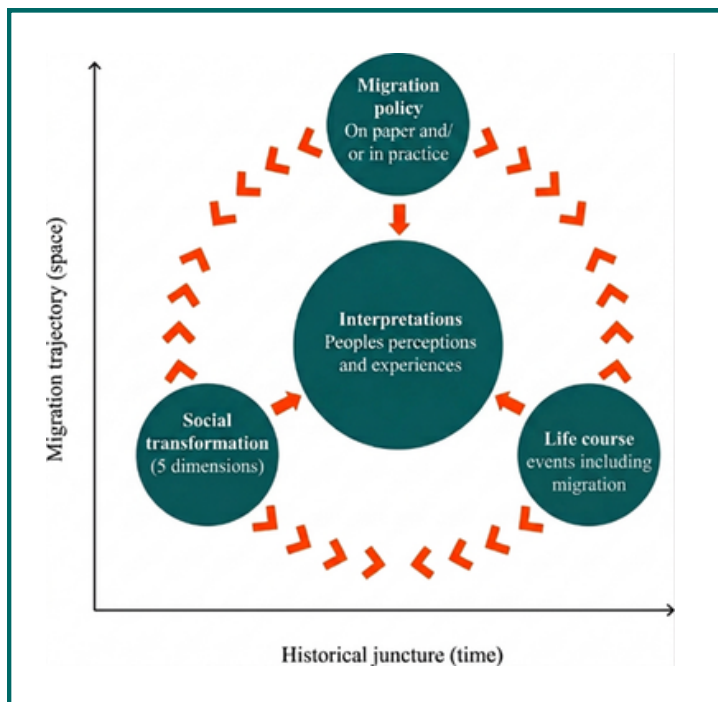


Figure 1. PACES conceptual framework on migration decision-making

Key concepts

Non-migration policies (embedded in Social transformation in Figure 1). In some instances, the lack or slow improvement in living conditions and opportunities to fulfil rapidly-shifting life aspirations are taken as a symbol of ineffective governance and are met with impatience and desires for rapid change, often through migration. In other cases, a wide range of state-promoted non-migration policies (in areas such as education, social welfare, housing or agricultural policy) are responsible for changes in society, altering livelihoods, individual capabilities, and introducing migration as a possible solution to uncertainty.

Consider the disruption that falls upon communities when economic policies aim to restructure the economy away from small-scale farming towards large agrobusinesses or the rapid societal shifts that surround the creation of industrial and technological hubs. These policies reveal the important, but often hidden, role of the state in social transformations and in migration, which is often intertwined with creating or weakening social security, and repelling and retaining forces with respect to migration.

Migration policies refer to a wide range of interventions by governments in the country of origin, along the journey, and at destination, and may include interventions to facilitate or constrain migration. In origin countries, constraints to obtain a passport may already be perceived as migration policies, while at destination the lack of transparency in procedures and timings (such as the length of time to obtain a decision on asylum claims) may be seen as a deterrent aspect of migration policies. The lack of appropriate migration policies, such as the absence of regular pathways, also has an impact by directing migration towards irregular channels.



Osogbo, Nigeria, April 2025

Findings

In the place of origin

In the place of origin, the majority of people have **aspirations to stay** (section A in figure 2). People who aspire to stay often reflect on both social transformation and life course factors in their personal narratives. These individuals generally appear locally embedded, meaning that they feel a sense of belonging and perceive to have an economic and social role in the community and opportunities to engage. While more connected to what is happening in their community, these people engage less with migration policies, meaning that these play a very small role in their own decision-making. Still, we find that even people who do not have an interest in migration have clear ideas on why and how regular and irregular forms of migrations take place.

In the place of origin, a segment of the population has **aspirations to migrate**. Its size varies from place to place, but it tends to concern less than half of the people.[i] When an individual aspires to migrate, knowledge of migration policies increases, while concern with society (including what may improve in the place of residence) diminishes. Aspiring migrants show greater elaborations of the realm of migration possibilities: regular migration, irregular migration or staying against their wishes (involuntary immobile) (section B1, Figure 2).

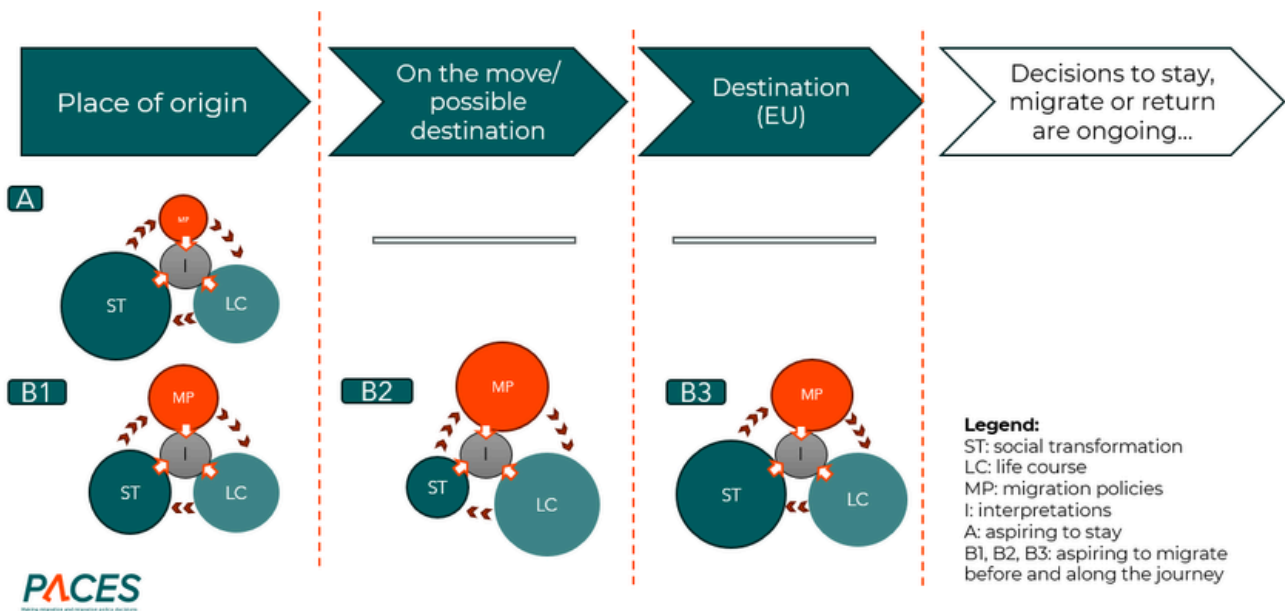


Figure 2. The changing relevance of factors influencing decisions to stay or migrate over the migration journey

[i] In our sample, out of 241 residents 107 (about 44 percent) across six cities in Algeria, Ethiopia and Nigeria had aspirations to migrate. While this may seem a significant figure, it is important to keep in mind that aspirations to migrate are volatile as they are the beginning of a long decision-making process which often does not result in actual migration.

On the move

While people are **on the move and once they arrive in a new country**, they are **disembedded from the community** where they find themselves. In this period, the importance of the key factors shifts again. Either at locations along the journey or shortly after arrival, an individual has little knowledge of the local community, and possibly little interest in learning more if the individual plans to migrate onward in the short term. In this period of local disembeddedness, social norms lose some relevance and the individual's personal conditions gain importance, while knowledge of migration policies grows, often stimulated by contact with other individuals who are also migrating (section B2, Figure 2). Feelings of insecurity increase over the journey as people become more vulnerable in unfamiliar contexts and are exposed to risks and violence.

Migration journeys, adaptation and friendships: insights from a migrant

“Actually, before I leave home, we faced challenges because our town was one of those worst affected by insecurity. We have been hearing from our elderly [older] brothers that they would be leaving to Niger Republic, and some would say they would move on to Algeria. Their decision also shapes our mind to follow their path, we followed their steps into Niger and Algeria. [...] The people one would meet and gradually becomes familiar with, would be the ones to assist him in getting a job, or something to be doing and maintain a living. As we interact, we [...] also related with individuals' stories. We heard some saying they would want to be in this or that country, or go to this or that place. These stories shaped our orientation and decision at various stages and knowing well that we could not go back home, we therefore had to decide to join them. That is how we become friends in various places.”

— 20-year-old Nigerian man in Italy



On the road between Osogbo and Ibadan, Nigeria, April 2025

At the destination

Once an individual has reached some stability in a location which is perceived as **a destination**, the knowledge of society regains relevance as the individual becomes more connected and **embedded in the community**. Embedding and feeling included in the community may grow over time, but is not guaranteed. Local embeddedness may change over time, but in itself it is independent from whether someone has always lived in a particular place or migrated there. With more embedding, social transformation becomes important as time passes, while migration policies and migration networks diminish in importance (section B3, Figure 2). Still, the connection with migration policies remains relatively strong even if a person opts to stay or return. That is due to migrants' legal status – changes in policy may affect their right of stay – and because of many migrants' interest in an eventual return. Migrants may perceive involuntary immobility at destination in cases in which they prefer to migrate but they do not have the resources or migration policy constraints forbid them to do so.

Once in high-income countries, a sigh of relief can be drawn as kidnappings and random forms of violence can be avoided, although some migrants may still face threats to pay back the debts they incurred to migrate. A sense of security also depends on the legal status of asylum seekers and migrants. Asylum seekers and migrants who have been in a country for a long time but whose status remains undecided, may feel high levels of insecurity while they are 'stuck' in a state of uncertainty and disembeddedness (as shown in section B2, Figure 2).



Mostaganem, Algeria, June 2024

What changes with migration then?

- Migration policies are more relevant for those who aspire to migrate, subsequently shaping migration decisions about the form, direction or timing of their migration.
- People who intend to migrate do so no matter what: how they do it is shaped by opportunity structures that policies provide or block.
- Along the migration journey, social transformation plays a less important role than the life course, especially for people on the move or upon arrival to a new destination.
- Community values and social and family norms seem to lose relevance over the course of the journey, while access to services and migration policies grow in importance.
- Over time, as migrants' local embeddedness grows, migration policy may become less relevant and social transformation more pertinent.

“Sincerely, I had no prior idea about travel documents, because as you can see, I just came here by sea. I therefore had no idea about travel documents. I did not look for any either. [...] as I came here now, I begin to realize there is the issue of travel documents. Also, my interaction with you has made this crystal clear that one cannot travel without documents; the same also for travel by air, one must have a passport.”

— 20-year-old Nigerian man in Italy

Policy implications

- Migration policies, particularly those that seek to deter migration, are unlikely to shape aspirations in places of origin.
- Knowledge about migration policies is greater among migrants who are “on the move” or in a (potential) “destination” country. Nevertheless, this knowledge is often generic and based on assumptions and hearsay. Most information that circulates is through informal networks and concern experiences and pathways of irregular migration.
- (Aspiring) migrants consistently prefer regular over irregular migration.

Recommendations and conclusions

Migration policies are less important in aspirations and decisions to migrate and to stay than social transformation and life course. However, migration policies gain importance along the journey and both enable and constrain the decision to stay or to move onward for migrants, particularly those who are already in Europe.

The window of opportunity for migration policies to alter migration aspirations is very small. Policies that facilitate migration – either open or active recruitment – tend to become known and be used by aspiring migrants. Deterrent policies, which go against people's intentions, are much less able to shape migration in their intended way.

Main destination country governments should develop pathways for regular migration and work within the context of social transformations and life aspirations: interventions that aim to stymie migration will only push individuals towards irregularity.

Much more relevant than migration policies are the role of the (origin) state and its non-migration policies, including social welfare, education, agricultural or housing policies. The state can be a provider of stability, opportunities, protection and, in so doing, influence aspirations to stay or migrate.

Lack of security is an important element of migration. Security, particularly when insecurity is found in locations close to people's origin community, is well noted and appreciated. Feelings of security seem to decrease along the journey as migrants traverse places where they are subjected to violence (either direct or witnessed), making the last step towards Europe indeed a step to seek greater security. Ultimately, for many migrants, migration is not about having more, but about having peace and security.

“Yes, I have come across repeated cautions alike that especially along the routes through the Sahara. We have heard that the fierce wind of the Sahara tends to make people weak and sometimes even die. But with all what we heard, we still had to leave because this was the only option we had. There is a Hausa man's saying: “Anything that will force a rat out of its hole, the hole must have been hotter than the fire itself”. So, we had to leave our homes in search for places with relative safety. If we die in the process, then that would be our destiny, ditto if we survive.”

— **20-year-old Nigerian man in Italy**

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