



PACES

Making migration and migration policy decisions
amidst societal transformations

What matters in migrants' decision-making?

Insights from the migration journeys along Africa and Europe

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PACES (Making migration and migration policy decisions amidst societal transformation) is a 40-month research project (2023-2026) that examines decisions to stay and migrate over time and space, researches the politics of knowledge in migration policy and seeks to use its insights to inform future migration policies and governance. PACES is carried out by a consortium of 14 partners in Europe, Africa and the USA.

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Abstract

In this paper, we address the factors that influence the decision-making process of Nigerian migrants along their migrant journeys, whether at origin or in transit localities within the African-European space. We explore how the journey – geographical but also the personal journey implied in the migration process – shapes migration decision-making and aspirations to migrate, stay and return. As we analyze the influence of drivers (macro, meso and micro) along the migration experience, we also examine how migrants exercise their agency transforming aspirations to migrate, stay or return into actions through capabilities. This involves the mobilization of capitals within their individual subjective space across new spaces of (non)opportunities.

This paper builds on a mixed methods research design that combines quantitative and qualitative data. First, a survey administered to 1546 migrants (in total) in transit countries (Niger, Tunisia and Italy) and completed in three waves (longitudinal survey), captures migrant experiences along the Central Mediterranean route. Second, we conducted 59 in-depth interviews with Nigerian migrants in Spain, Italy, and Slovakia focusing on their decision-making processes throughout their entire migration journey (from departure to their current location at the time of the interview).

This study highlights that macro-level factors (e.g. social transformation) and migrants' perceptions of these factors (e.g. economic fluctuations, levels of violence, and quality of governance) have a significant influence on decision-making processes before departure in Nigeria. Confirming previous research findings, we find that class is associated with an individual's ability to access the capital required for migration via shorter, safer routes (e.g. visas and direct travel to Europe), or longer, more dangerous routes (e.g. undocumented travel through various African countries). However, as the journey progresses, macro-level factors become progressively less significant in comparison to meso- (culture of migration, transnational intermediaries, etc.) and micro-level factors (personal resources, migration experiences, etc.) which gain greater influence on personal decision-making. This occurs because, during the migration process, immediate needs emerge as a predominant concern in reduced spaces of action. Once in Europe, we observe a rebalancing of the influence of meso- and macro-level drivers (such as migration policies) on decision-making. Moreover, we find that migrants from different social backgrounds face similar challenges regarding their capability to settle and participate fully in social life.

Keywords: Decision making, migration drivers, transit, regular and irregular migration, agency, capabilities, capitals, Africa, Europe

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1. Introduction

One of the core questions central to migration studies is why individuals migrate. This seemingly simple question has sparked the curiosity of scholars from various disciplines over the past 150 years. While early researchers focused on identifying general trends in migration (Ravenstein, 1885), the analytical frameworks in use today have evolved significantly. Today, migration scholars rely on general social theories and middle-range approaches to achieve more nuanced perspectives that capture the intricate dimensions and effects that constitute the multifaceted nature of migration. This paper places itself in this tradition with its objective of exploring how the journey – geographical but also the personal journey implied in the migration process – shapes migration decision-making and aspirations to migrate, stay and return.

The development of more sophisticated approaches has been propelled by the recognition of migration as a fundamental aspect of contemporary society, particularly in an era characterized by risk (Beck, 2009). At present, people across different geographical regions are experiencing the impacts of a "polycrisis," (Wray et al. 2023; Lawrence et al. 2024) where multiple and accelerated crises overlap both in time and space. Consequently, individuals face growing uncertainty in their lives, prompting them to adopt diverse socio-spatial strategies in pursuit of well-being and the elusive notion of a "good life", which may feel unattainable in their places of residence. Seeking a "good life" elsewhere is also uncertain and involves risks, even more so because mobility is immersed in migration regimes (Glick Schiller et al., 2013) that are increasingly selective with respect to gender, race, ethnicity, religion and class, as well as temporary and characterized by limited rights protection (Boucher & Gest, 2018). These aspects condition access to migration systems (Mabogunje, 1970), while migrant networks are influenced by selective hierarchies of power. In general, unequal structures underpin the decision-making processes of (non)migrants as they develop aspirations to migrate, remain in their current location or return during their migration journey.

While mobility and migration have increased to some extent across world regions, public discourses about migration across the Global North tend to be homogenising and polarized presenting migrants as victims or villains (Triandafyllidou, 2017; Müller-Funk, et al. 2023), and dispossessing them of their agency. Some of these narratives have supported the development of legal frameworks for policymaking that show a tendency to restrict migration flows (López-Sala and Moreno-Amador, 2020). In the European-African space, nation-states have strengthened their migration policies specifically to contain and reduce so-called "irregular migration". Mechanisms based on the securitization of migration, such as enhancing border controls, externalizing the management of borders in non-EU countries, and criminalizing humanitarian assistance (Pecoud & Savatic, 2026) have been implemented. Additionally, there are attempts to deter migration through public awareness campaigns that sometimes act as a cover for borderwork (Watkins et al. 2026). However, the outcome of these measures is well-

documented: while failing to reduce the absolute scale of migration flows, they increase the insecurity faced by migrants along their journey.

With the aim of contributing to understand the decision-making process in the current contexts of diverse challenges and uncertainties, the PACES project redefined the core question of “why people migrate” to explore how people make decisions amidst social transformations and everyday personal change. Vezzoli et al., (2024) articulated a Temporal Multilevel Analysis framework (TMA) as an overarching approach that integrates a set of analytical tools from multiple levels of analysis: macro-structural, meso-community, and micro-individual, with a particular emphasis on the migration decision-making process.

Its principal aim is to evaluate how changes in society, individual life experiences and migration policy shape decisions to stay or to migrate over time (over a lifetime and across generations) and across space (across countries and along migration journeys). While individual decision-making processes include several steps from the emergence of migration aspiration to actual migration, the analysis in PACES focused only on the emergence of aspirations to migrate, stay or return. To study this important step, this paper addresses three main research questions:

1. What macro, meso, and micro drivers influence the decision-making process at the origin and the migration journey’?
2. How does this influence evolve along the journey, considering the change of locations and the passage of time?
3. How are the aspirations and capabilities put into practice in different localities through agency?

As these questions suggest, we seek to identify drivers and capabilities not as static factors but as part of a dynamic process in constant evolution, captured by the notions of social transformation and life course. At each moment in time, migrants make decisions in a constantly changing environment, while their reality is also continuously unfolding over changing routes as they adjust their plans and reassess whether to continue their journey, stay or return.

In this paper we rely on the TMA framework, which brings together Social Transformation and Life cycle, and complement it with four other approaches: 1) To address the macro-, meso-, and micro-level drivers, we adopt the concept of 'complex migration drivers' (Carling & Schewel, 2018; Van Hear et al., 2018; Czaika & Reinprecht, 2022; de Haas, 2021; Triandafyllidou, 2023). 2) To further understand the role of agency, we draw from the 'aspirations and capabilities' framework, which is based on social transformation and combines structure and agency – the capacity of social actors to reflect on their position, devise strategies, and take action to achieve their goals (Sewell, 1992, as cited in Bakewell, 2010). 3) We also examine the influence of class and the Bourdesian conceptualization through the work of Van Hear (2014; 2018) which allows us to analyze how migrants

mobilize capitals to fulfil their aspirations within spaces of 'unequal' structures. Finally, 4) for a thorough analysis of space, we incorporate the concept of subjective or individual action space (Wolpert, 1951; Fawcett, 1985) which is defined as "the geographical and temporal distribution of the ensemble of opportunities and constraints, both local and distant, that individuals exploit and address as they endeavor to survive and improve their lives" (Painter et al. 1994: 452).

For the analysis, we combine two data sets (quantitative and qualitative) on Nigerian migrants as they make their decisions along the migration journey in the African-European space. The first dataset is a survey administered to migrants in transit in Niger, Tunisia and Italy which was completed in three waves (longitudinal survey) and captures migrant experiences along the Central Mediterranean route. The second dataset includes a total of 59 in-depth interviews of Nigerian migrants conducted in Spain, Italy and Slovakia. By combining these two datasets, we have gained insight into the migration experiences of Nigerians in two specific locations on the African migration route (Niger and Tunisia). We have also gained an interpretative perspective on the journeys of those currently in Spain, Italy and Slovakia through Africa and Europe. We find that the migration journey plays an important role in shaping decision-making, making certain factors gain and lose importance as place familiarity changes and the individual action space reduces and expands and access to capitals shifts.

This paper is organized as follows: First, we outline the analytical tools employed in the study of migrant decision-making during their journey. Next, we describe the methods and data on which our case study is based. Next, we present the main findings of the case study. Finally, we present our concluding remarks.

2. Analytical framework

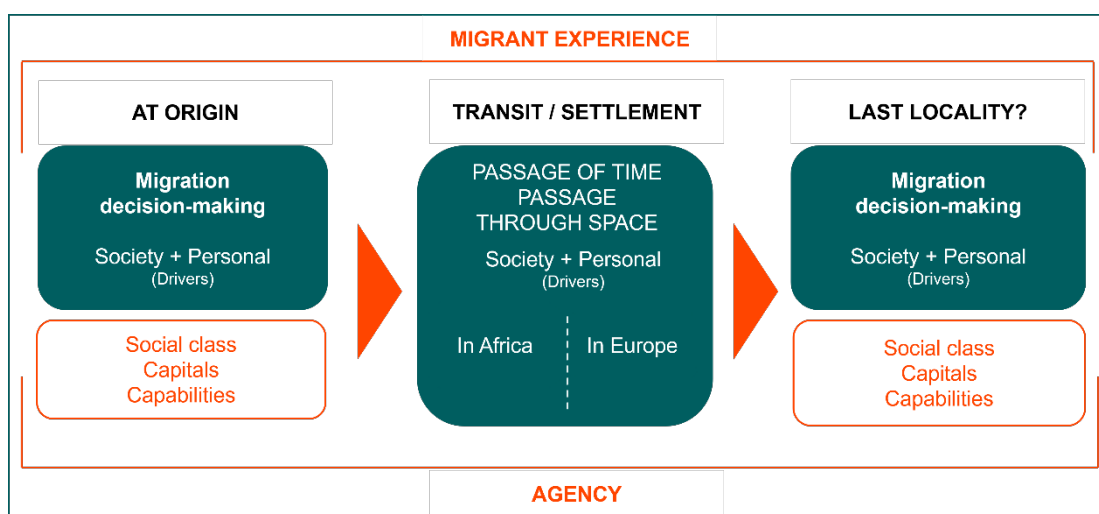
Human mobility is defined as people's capability to choose where to live, including the option to stay, rather than as the act of moving or migrating itself (de Haas, 2021: 1).

Hein de Haas's simple definition of human mobility hides multiple layers including social fields characterized by "power disparities due to inequalities, racialized representations and national mythscapes [which] facilitate and legitimate differential mobility and fixity" (Glick Schiller et al. 2013: 183). Since the 2000s, migration research has examined how social inequalities, which have been part and parcel of the expansion of the capitalist system linked to globalization, have interacted with mobility. Research reflected in the Mobility Turn as well as on Transnationalism and Cosmopolitanism captured this reflection within migration studies. Over the years, we have also observed how these global economic processes have legitimized certain forms of migration while excluding others.

In a world beset by growing levels of risk (Beck, 2009), these processes often retrace historical boundaries set by colonialism and post-colonial continuities (Fechter & Walsh, 2013), as well as neocolonial processes that hierarchize bodies and knowledge in the Global North and Global South. This both classifies and shapes migration flows, pushing people towards (un)desirable pathways. As humanity is faced with a multitude of crises or 'polycrisis' (Wray et al. 2023; Lawrence et al. 2024) that may not have workable solutions, the sense of general multidimensional uncertainty may be on the increase. In parallel, forms of migration that governments often label as 'undesirable' may be diversifying and numerically on the rise.

It is in this crisis-prone context that we seek to better understand people's "choice of where to live"—or, in other words, the decision-making process of migrants during their journeys as they observe, and learn, about other societies and ways of life and identify the best place to fulfil their life aspirations. This complex process intertwines structural and individual factors embedded in an unequal system of nation-states competing for resources and exerting control over mobility across regions through the design of migration policies. Within this context, we observe networks of flows based on "relationships between mobility and immobility, localization and transnational connections, experiences and imaginaries of migration, and rootedness and cosmopolitan openness" (Glick Schiller et al., 2013: 183). These relationships are essential for understanding the decision-making processes of migrants acting in time and space, in social structures of different geographical contexts. It is against this backdrop, incorporating input from general social theories to middle-range theories (Bakewell, 2010), that we adopt the Temporal Multilevel Analysis framework (TMA), an overarching umbrella of theoretical approaches which provides an analytical toolkit to understand the complex set of factors that influence the decision-making process of migrants (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Envision of the decision-making process along with the migrant experience



Source: Authors' elaboration

The next step is to present the specific lens of the Temporal Multilevel Analysis framework, along with the core analytical tools upon which we have relied that are integrated into it.

2.1. A Temporal Multilevel Analysis Framework to research decisions to stay and migrate

This paper adopts the TMA framework, which analyzes “the forces and mechanisms that operate in the formation of migration aspirations and desires to stay by exploring societal and personal changes” (for a full review see Vezzoli et al. 2024). It suggests that three sets of factors shape aspirations to stay and migrate: changes in the society of residence (such as living conditions, employment opportunities, wages, discrimination, community values, etc.), changes at more personal level, including within the family (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, etc.), and migration and non-migration policies (in short, (non)migration policies) (Bakewell, et al., 2024). In sum, aspirations are shaped by how people perceive and interpret the location where they find themselves at specific points in time, as people’s lives unfold and they gather new experiences in changing environments. In brief, the decision-making process is envisioned as the interplay of structural and individual factors, i.e. “social transformation” and “life course”, with (non)migration policies, often being a driving force of societal and personal changes.

The TMA framework shares similarities with approaches that have explored how specific factors (or “drivers”) affect (non)migration decision-making, not as individual factors but in interaction. Van Hear et al. (2018) proposed that drivers are structural elements that enable and constrain the exercise of agency of social actors. Intertwining macro, meso and micro drivers result in different combinations, or clusters into sets of ‘complex drivers’, operating more than a sum and shaping the ‘specific form and structure of population movements’ (2018: 934). In a similar approach, Czaika and Reinprecht (2022) distinguish between slow-changing “predisposing” factors, such as broad societal inequalities, which create the context for movement, and proximate “triggering” drivers, like specific job offers or sudden conflicts, which connect structural disparities into immediate decision contexts. The effects of drivers are unique with respect to temporality (ranging from gradual transitions to rapid shocks), selectivity (affecting different social groups unequally based on age, gender, social status, etc.), and space (affecting different geographic areas). Consequently, migration outcomes emerge from the non-linear interactions of these multidimensional elements, where economic, political, social, and environmental factors cluster together to enable, constrain, or trigger decisions, often accumulating until a “tipping point” is reached and transforms aspirations into mobility.

Ultimately, Czaika and Reinprecht (2022: 56) develop a typology of 9 driver dimensions (Demographic, economic, environmental, human development, individual, politico-institutional, security, socio-cultural and supranational) and 24 driving factors (divided per dimension) which interact together in “complex driver environments” to shape migration decisions. Thus, (non-)migration rarely stems from a single driver, but instead arises from

clusters of factors which produce non-linear interaction effects (meaning the influence of one driver depends on the presence and intensity of others). These drivers can also accumulate in such a way to suddenly set larger population movements in motion. Importantly, in the “complex driver environment” approach the factors are constantly relevant across people’s lives, whether or not they are on a migratory journey.

The constant relevance of factors is one of the features that distinguishes the ‘complex driver environments’ approach from the TMA framework. In fact, the two share similar conceptual approaches, such as the inclusion of multilevel factors, the understanding that interactions occur across these levels and that the outcomes are non-linear. Yet, these two approaches also differ in important ways. The TMA framework, in its first setup, is less focused on the meso level and is less precise about the role of agency. The Life Course captures the phases that unfold throughout an individual's lifespan, which are shaped by diverse journeys influenced by factors such as age, gender, education, ethnicity, religion, and socio-economic status or class (Anthias, 2012). This intersectional lens implies the existence and the impact of social divisions and hierarchical structures but is less explicit about the agency of people who move across these life phases. Nevertheless, it envisions migrants as individuals who are constantly immersed in decision-making in their pursuit of what has been termed “the good life” (Schewel, 2022). This ideal life is characterized by the achievement of “valued goals” (De Jong & Fawcett, 1981), which are assumed to be typically aligned with the predominant values accepted within their community or social group, from which social norms are also derived.

The strength of the TMA framework is its intent to embed decisions to stay/migrate in social changes over time and across different spaces, allowing for the observation of the speed and impact of these changes at the macro (societal), meso (community), and micro (individual) levels. In other words, within the broad categories of Social Transformation and Life Course, it explores what happens, independently and regardless of migration, and how the interaction of changing factors creates different social contexts and personal strategies. It is these spaces that, under globalization and capitalist expansion, have undergone shifts that bring about benefits - e.g. ability to fulfil a wider variety of life aspirations - as well as challenges - e.g. risks that come from polycrises. In these places of ‘change’, we can observe various forms of migration as people observe and adapt to change. The TMA framework is particularly suited for this type of analysis as it encompasses not only gradual changes over time but also specific life events and experiences (Vezzoli et al., 2024).

2.2. Aspirations, capabilities and the mobilization of capitals across spaces of action

While the TMA framework provides overarching guidance, three complementary conceptual models provide greater focus: individual action space, aspiration-capability framework and the Bourdesian elaboration of capitals and social class.

To start, while the TMA framework indicates that individuals can be understood as perceiving their society and personal life, it is important to state that people operate in their individual action space. When analyzing the migration journey, we appreciate the concept of “action spaces” (Manvell, 2006) defined by Painter et al. (1994: 452) as “the geographical and temporal distribution of the ensemble of opportunities and constraints, both local and distant, that individuals exploit and address as they strive to survive and improve their lives”. This concept builds on earlier work by Wolpert (1965), who combined the life cycle approach with two key concepts: place utility and field theory. This process helps individuals (in this case, migrants) understand the opportunities and constraints present across localities, allowing individuals to evaluate the possibility of staying or moving and reflect on their capability to achieve it. Second, we rely on the aspiration-capability model, considering that the capability aspect is underdeveloped in the TMA framework. The redefinition of capabilities proposed by de Haas (2021) is further refined in light of previous work by Carling (2002), Preibisch et al. (2016) and Carling & Schewel (2018). According to de Haas (2021), human mobility is the “people’s capability (freedom) to choose where to live—including the option to stay—rather than the act of moving itself” (de Haas, 2021: 31). Within this context, migration is viewed as holding intrinsic value, not merely a means to achieve another goal, and it occurs given a combination of aspirations and the capability to migrate. Migration aspirations are defined as “a function of people’s general life aspirations and perceived geographical opportunity structures” (de Haas 2021: 2). The capability to migrate is characterized as the substantive freedom to leave one’s place of residence and to successfully reach and settle in another location. This encompasses the necessary resources for movement—such as economic, social, human, or institutional resources—as well as the structural conditions that either enable or constrain movement, including legal rights to exit and enter, border regimes, and other ‘conversion factors’ that influence whether resources translate into actual mobility (Schewel, 2026: 12). Agency gains visibility in this approach, with the understanding of it as the power of individuals to freely make choices and perform actions that affect the course of their lives, which is contrasted with structure as a system of rules and resources that shape the extent to which those choices and actions are possible. Two key propositions from de Haas's works (2010; 2021) are essential: first, every migrant possesses a certain degree of agency when deciding to leave their place of residence, as well as when they choose to stop gathering resources at some point. Second, this migratory agency can influence social structures in their place of origin, contributing to the formation of migratory networks that connect early pioneers with later migrants (Randell, 2016).

In line with this framework, several studies have demonstrated how structure, agency, and resources (or capitals) (Van Hear, 2004, 2014; Van Hear et al., 2018) interact across migratory journeys even in spaces where freedom is severely restricted due to different forms of violence, such as areas affected by conflicts and war (Randell, 2016; Nedelcu and Wyss (2026). This work has demonstrated how social networks evolve across migration processes, providing support in the form of financial capital, skills, and knowledge, and

shaping the capabilities and aspirations of individuals thereby influencing the exercise of their agency in shaping migration decisions.

Within this approach, Van Hear (2014) highlights that the ability to mobilize resources when making decisions about whether to stay or move is significantly influenced by an individual's socioeconomic background or class, which has often been overlooked as a significant factor in migrants' decision-making processes (Van Hear, 2014). In his work, Van Hear et al. (2018) expanded the analysis on resources by applying Bourdieu's meta-sociological theory to analyze social class which proposes that individuals occupy social positions (or classes) within social spaces, which he describes as a space of relations between positions, defined by their rank within a distribution of competing powers or forms of capital (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). The notion of capital differs from resources in its own nature: whereas resources are just there (independent of the individuals' actions, in some extent), capitals imply the actions of accumulation, transfer, and conversion. Bourdieu identifies three main types of capital: economic capital, cultural capital (which includes both formal education and informal knowledge), social capital (related to social connections and group membership), and symbolic capital, which refers to how different forms of capital are perceived and recognized as legitimate (Bourdieu, 1987; Wacquant, 2013). According to Van Hear (2014), whether to move or stay put is shaped by the endowment of capitals and the capability of mobilizing them to migrate or to stay, resulting in two categories: the 'stayers by choice' and the 'stayers by necessity' (2014: 8).

Subsequent empirical research has articulated additional "new" capitals to the Bourdesian ones. For example, Kaufmann et al. (2004) defined "mobility capital" as "the capacity of entities (such as goods, information, or individuals) to be mobile in social and geographical space, or the way in which entities access and appropriate the capacity for socio-spatial mobility depending on their circumstances". According to this approach, the ability to legally cross borders and access labour markets, skilled professions or self-employment varies according to access to capital (Kaufmann et al., 2004). Therefore, mobility capital consists of access to mobility options, competence, and appropriation. Similarly, Moret (2020) defines mobility capital in the context of Somali migrants in Europe as 'the ability to engage in cross-border mobility practices at particular times, but also to remain immobile by choice' (2020: 116). This underscores that being capable is fundamental for mobilizing mobility resources and converting them into capital—which can include developing knowledge or building social networks to access essential resources such as housing, support, or information about safer routes for continuing migration journeys. Building on the argument that spatial mobility can become a valuable resource for social mobility, Riaño et al. (2022) propose the concept of "spatial mobility capital" to examine the extent to which, and the conditions under which, geographical movement across national borders represents an asset for social advancement. central role to geographical location, proposing the spatial mobility capital concept. These authors argue that, in order to better understand social mobility processes, it is necessary to examine daily life practices in depth, paying particular attention to the spatial dimension.

This spatial dimension can be grasped by studying the materiality of places, the scales at which migrants move, and the presence or absence of mobility infrastructure in the places across which migrants move, as well as the entities in motion, migration channels, mobility regimes, and forms of support for migrants present in these locations. All these factors are fundamental to comprehending migrants' decision-making processes relating to settlement in localities and social mobility. Elements of this approach are valuable for our analysis, as we will see shortly, since we incorporate the movement through spaces into our analysis of decision-making processes, alongside the migration experience.

3. Research Design

Using the theoretical analytical framework above, we explore how the migration journey shapes the migration decision-making process of Nigerian migrants with at least one international migration experience. We distinguish between migrants who had a direct journey and those who had an indirect journey. Here, individuals with a direct journey refers to those who migrated from Nigeria to a European destination by plane, and with a visa, without any stop in-between. Individuals in this category might have migrated onwards within Europe after their arrival. Individuals with an indirect journey refer to those who aimed to migrate to an international destination (not necessarily Europe) and stayed (for a shorter or longer period) in other international destinations in Africa before reaching Europe. Indirect journeys imply travelling without a visa and often unclear destinations, meaning that even once in Europe, this group of migrants may not have arrived yet. The distinction between the two types of migration journeys is central in identifying what shape migration decisions take and how these decisions are (re)interpreted over time.

We adopt a multi-method research design, including a longitudinal survey of individuals in Niger, Tunisia, and Italy, as well as qualitative interviews with individuals who are in-between transit and settlement in Spain, Italy, and Slovakia. Our extensive and rich datasets are complementary and allow us to identify key shifts in the factors which influence (non-)migration decision-making across both space and time.

3.1. Quantitative data

The quantitative methodology relied on face-to-face, structured close-ended surveys entailing a baseline in Niger (531), Tunisia (531) and Italy (512) as well as two longitudinal follow-ups¹. The baseline used a purposive sampling approach targeting adult African nationals -from any country.

In Italy, fieldwork ran from March to August 2024 and data were collected in reception centers in Turin and Verona. Geographic expansion and progressive relaxation of

¹ To protect research participants and in reflection of the current human rights and civic space context, the organization conducting fieldwork in that country will remain anonymous.

eligibility criteria (nationality scope, maximum length of stay) were necessary adaptations to reach the target of 500 interviews. Enumerators were recruited from migrant and refugee communities. In Niger, the existing nine-enumerator team covered Niamey, Agadez, Zinder, and Diffa, with a deliberate focus on Nigerian respondents (279 reached) with the fieldwork running from April to May 2024. In Tunisia, data collection was conducted by phone in two rounds for each of the three countries² from August 2024 to January 2025.

Consent rates varied significantly: 177/503 in Italy (35%), 507/512 in Niger (99%), and 465/531 in Tunisia (88%), structurally constraining the Italian longitudinal sample from the outset. Stratified random sampling was applied for round one, while a census approach was used for round two, given shrinking pools. Completion rates exceeded targets in most cases: Italy yielded 96 and 59 interviews across the two rounds; Niger, 60 and 30; Tunisia, 60 and 25. For this paper, we focus on the data collected among Nigerians respondents who participated in the longitudinal follow-ups. Particularly on those responding to two open-ended questions:

Q1. LP31. Since we last spoke, what is the single event that most impacted your decision-making with regards to your migration journey, and how has your journey changed as a result of it?

Q2. LP32: How has your thinking about your migration journey evolved since we last spoke, and why?

The final sample comprises 70 responses from Nigerians, of which 42 were collected in Niger, 18 in Tunisia and 10 in Italy. Due to the lack of a population frame allowing for randomized sampling, the data is not representative nor generalizable to larger groups; however, the volume of interviews allows us to identify highly indicative findings. In addition, a few limitations related to the specific fieldwork sites should be considered: in Italy, respondents recruited in reception centers are over-represented. Additionally, self-selection bias from low baseline consent rates affected longitudinal representativeness. Conversely, in Niger, budget constraints capped longitudinal sample sizes despite very high consent rates for follow-ups. Thirdly, remote-only data collection in Tunisia reduced sampling diversity and extended timelines. This affected Nigerian respondents who were particularly reticent to participate, partially offsetting sampling targets. Furthermore, half of the interviews with Nigerians took place in Niger.

3.2. Qualitative data

In parallel to the survey data, the second data set is the in-depth interviews conducted to study decision-making of migrants in Africa and in Europe (Spain, Italy and Slovakia). Our focus was on examining migration trajectories and understanding decisions at departure

² Data collection itself took place remotely - indeed surveys over the phone using WhatsApp or Signal, with the enumerator completing the survey on ODK while speaking to the respondent - enumerators in Tunisia were permitted to do in-person recruitment and then schedule a follow-up appointment to do the survey by phone.

as well as along the migration journeys. Our analyses allowed us to assess how individual-level and policy-level factors and conditions influenced interviewee choices, including about their eventual “destination”. (Non)migration policies were also considered as important elements in their decision making.

The interviews were conducted in two large cities in each country: Alicante and Almeria in Spain, Bergamo and Brescia in Italy, and Bratislava and Košice in Slovakia, resulting in 98 interviews with African migrants between July 2024 to May 2025. We aimed to interview individuals residing in each country for more than 3 months but less than 5 years. Recruitment challenges, especially in Italy and Spain, made this sampling unfeasible, resulting in a final sample comprising respondents who had been living in these countries for longer than 5 years³.

Including countries in Southern Europe, such as Italy and Spain, which are typical entry points for African migrants arriving by sea, as well as the less typical destination of Slovakia, enables us to study migration journeys in diverse contexts, yielding sometimes counterintuitive findings. Prior to starting the fieldwork, each country team prepared a mapping study of Nigerian and other African communities in the respective country that helped us to refine the recruitment approach.

A common questionnaire with 73 questions was prepared and uploaded to the Kobo application, the online software tool used to collect the data in a secure way. The interviews were conducted mostly in English, recorded and transcribed for analytical purposes.

In this paper we focus particularly on the interviews with Nigerian citizens who migrated to Europe, and were residing in Spain (30), Italy (17) and Slovakia (12). We conducted a qualitative content analysis which drew on the framework technique (Ritchie & Spencer, 2002), that is, using a matrix with guiding questions. The questions covered 5 dimensions: (1) The context in Nigeria before departure; (2) Knowledge and perceptions on migration (community and individual levels) before departure; (3) Drivers and triggers along the journey; (4) Transformations in defining the standard of life and good life along the journey, and, (5) individual transformation through migration.

Our sample is quite diverse when looking at the states of origin⁴ aggregated by regions. The most represented regions are the South South, with 18 individuals (mostly in Italy and Spain from Katsina and Kano), the Southeast, with 15 participants (predominantly in Spain

³ It is important to mention that, due to the difficulties in accessing Nigerian migrants in Italy, 80% of the participants currently live in 'projects', which are state- or privately funded facilities where asylum seekers, refugees or migrants in vulnerable situations reside. In some instances, they also receive food, language courses and work training. In Spain, a Nigerian NGO helped us to find participants, some of whom were part of the NGO. Furthermore, due to the interviewees being spread across Slovakia, about a third of the interviews were conducted online, whereas those in Spain and Italy were conducted in person.

⁴ Nigerian is organized 36 state governments, which are further divided into 774 local government areas (LGAs), the smallest administrative units in the country.

from Imo -8- and Anambra -4-), and the Southwest where 9 out of 10 are from Lagos (5 reside in Slovakia).

Among the interviewees, the most heterogeneous sample is found in Spain, where the sample size is also the largest. In Spain, 12 individuals have completed university studies in Nigeria and have migrated from various states. Conversely, the interviewees in Slovakia exhibit the least diversity in state of origin; 4 out of 5 interviewees hail from Lagos State, similar to two interviewees in Spain, all of whom hold university degrees from Nigerian universities. In Italy, the situation is quite different: the majority of participants have attained only primary or secondary education, with only two individuals (out of 17) having completed university studies, specifically from Delta and Edo states (see Table 1).

Table 1. Distribution of qualitative interviews conducted in Italy, Spain and Slovakia

	TOTAL	AGE	GENDER	LEVEL OF EDUCATION	PERIOD OF ARRIVAL	AVERAGE DURATION STAY
SPAIN	30	25-58 Av. 37	7 (F) 23 (M)	1 (Early) 1 (Prim.) 15 (Second.) 11 (M-Bch.)	1999-2024 7 (criteria)	5y< 7 6y> 9 10y> 14
ITALY	17	19-55 Av. 34	6 (F) 11 (M)	1 (Early) 4 (Prim.) 10 (Second.) 2 (M-Bch.)	2010-2024 7 (criteria)	5y< 7 6y> 7 10y> 7
SLOVAKIA	12	19-42 Av. 31	2 (F) 10 (M)	0 (Early) 0 (Prim.) 4 (Second.) 8 (M-Bch.)	2018-2023 12 (criteria)	5y< 7 6y> 2 10y> 0

Source: the authors

There are far more men than women in all three countries, although the difference is slightly smaller in Italy, with 11 men for every 6 women. As regards the average age, the three countries show a similar trend, with the average age standing at around 30. The longest period since arrival is recorded in Spain and the shortest in Slovakia.

The temporal and sociospatial diversity found in our sample reflects the structural context in Nigeria, and its impact in lives and livelihoods as we will see next.

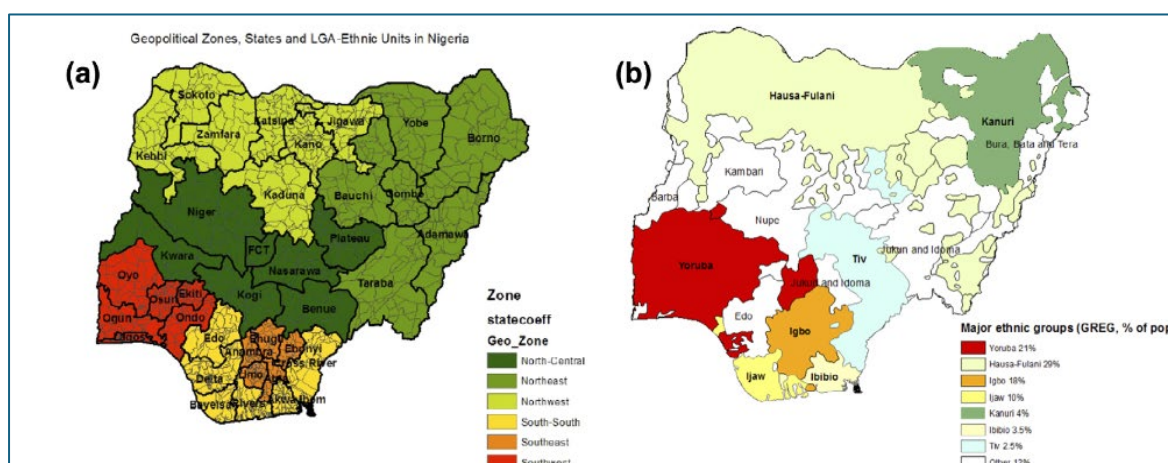
3.3. Contextualizing the origin

Nigeria is one of Africa's largest nations in terms of population and territory. As a multi-ethnic and culturally diverse federation, Nigeria has a three-tier administrative system, with the federal government at the highest level and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) in Abuja. According to Nicolle et al. (2024), the country is home to approximately 87 million Christians, primarily in the south, and over 90 million Muslims, mostly in the north.

Following the work of Archibong (2018), six geopolitical zones emerge when the states are intertwined with the ethnic affiliations of the major groups: Yoruba, Hausa-Fulani, Igbo, Ijaw, Kanuri, Ibibio and Tiv (see Figure 2).

Ethnoreligious conflicts date back decades prior to the independence of the country from the colonial government (Ihuoma, 2025), with the Hausa-Igbo riots of 1945. They intensified during the Biafran War (1967-1970) and continued through the Kaduna and Kano riots in the late 1980s and early 1990s. More recent issues include the Shariah Crisis of 2000 and election-related violence in 2011 (NSRP, 2014).

Figure 2. Geopolitical zones and ethnic affiliation by region in Nigeria



Source: Archibong (2018).

Since gaining independence in 1960 and ratifying its constitution in 1999, Nigeria has had presidents from various ethnic backgrounds. Currently, there are rising tensions between the government and southeastern separatist groups, and clashes between Fulani pastoralists and resident agricultural communities have led to violence, including assassinations and massacres. Furthermore, limited freedom of speech, terrorism from groups like Boko Haram in the northeast, and widespread kidnapping and banditry in the northwest contribute to the perception of Nigeria as a landscape of both safety and danger for its citizens (Nnam et al., 2020; Tuki, 2025).

Ethnicity is crucial in understanding socio-spatial inequalities in Nigeria, a country rich in resources, particularly in the oil sector. As noted by Ihuoma (2025), these social inequalities have been institutionalized by the legacy of colonial rule and exacerbated by "post-independence elitism" and "market-oriented policies." This has led to disparities between elite privilege and grassroots deprivation, characterized by vertical hierarchies of power (social class versus access to resources and services) and horizontal inequalities across ethnic and religious lines. In Nigeria, the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo populations are the three largest groups and have often been marginalized from political power and economic opportunities, especially in the Northwest and Northeast geopolitical zones, which consistently report lower levels of wealth, education, and access

to electricity compared to the national average. However, there have been notable improvements over time in narrowing the ethnic gap in access to water and sanitation (Archibong, 2018).

These various factors create a map of contrasting regions: some boast thriving economies and full access health services and education, through programs developed between 2015 and 2017 (Ajayi, 2019), while others wrestle with poverty, affecting 37% of the population, alongside limited access to essential services and infrastructure. Climate change exacerbates these challenges, leading to increased food scarcity and droughts, as well as rising incidents of violence over agricultural control and ongoing food and nutrition insecurity in states like Borno, Katsina, and parts of the Kaduna region⁵. Finally, regarding access to the job market, Nigeria exhibits a significant disparity characterized by low unemployment rates and high levels of underemployment, with many individuals working less than 40 hours per week.

This situation profoundly impacts on individuals' lives and their visions of society, influenced by their place of birth or residence and the affiliation with a social group (class, ethnicity, and religion). Ihuoma (2025) argues that the sense of deprivation stemming from the mismatch between individuals' expectations and the Nigerian governance failing to ensure public service provision for all social groups fosters unrest. In regions such as the Niger Delta, Northeast, and Middle Belt, this discontent could become a potential "instrument of conflict."

4. Nigerian migrants' decisions through time and space

This study took on the challenging task of answering one of the questions at the heart of migration studies since its inception: what factors influence people's decisions to stay or to migrate?

The TMA developed in the project (Vezzoli, et al., 2024) draws on literature addressing this question from various theoretical perspectives. Theoretical approaches to the analysis of aspirations and capabilities were used to inform the concepts of agency (Bakewell, 2010; Van Hear et al., 2018; de Haas, 2021) as a link between social structure and individual development (life course), and capital as a tool for analyzing how people gain access to and mobilize capitals to achieve their goals (Van Hear 2004, 2014). This is possible even in contexts where their space of action (Wolpert, 1951; Fawcett, 1985) is

⁵ See: Results of Food and Nutrition Insecurity (FNI) Analysis for Current Period (March to May, 2025) and Projected Period (June to August 2025) For Twenty-six (26) States and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) of Nigeria. Retrieved from: https://fscluster.org/sites/default/files/2025-03/FINAL_2025%20_March_Fiche-Nigeria.pdf

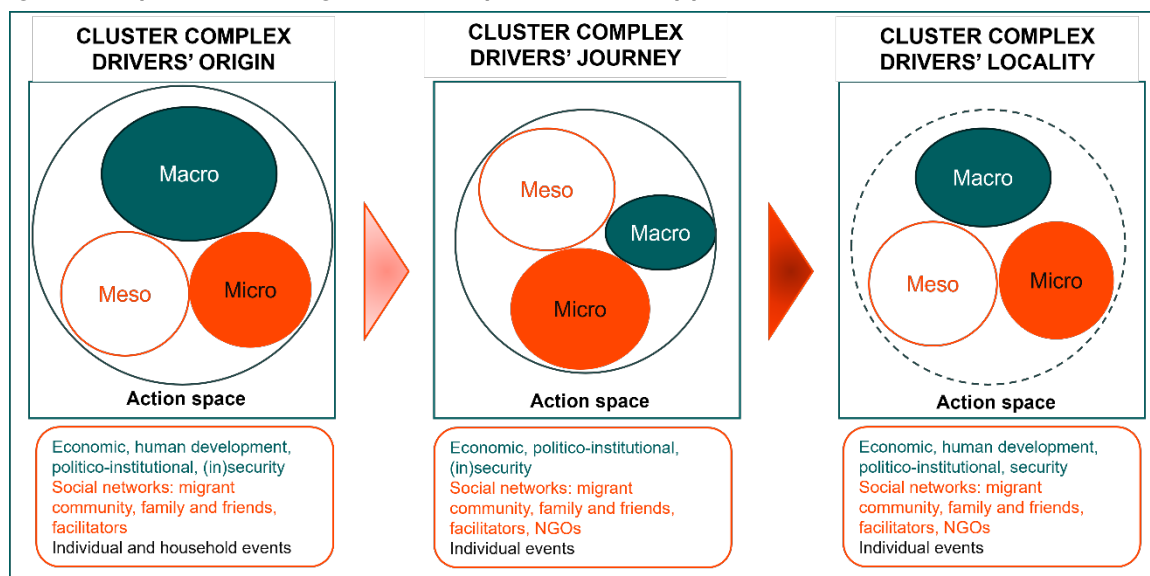
limited by barriers such as territorial insecurity, or obstacles to inclusion such as a lack of knowledge of the local language or procedures for applying for residency.

We decided to include in the analysis the first decision-making at origin as a determinant moment to comprehend the later decision-making processes in periods of passage through time and space (journeys). Adopting a comprehensive approach to studying all stages of the migration journey, rather than focusing exclusively on what migration studies refer to as 'transit', has allowed us to identify two fundamental aspects.

First, the significance of the drivers operating within the country of origin in relation to the social position that individuals occupy in its social structure, which in this case study, is strongly shaped by ethnic and religious affiliation (Archibong, 2018; Ihouma, 2025). These intertwined factors determine the type of pathways migrants will be capable of undertaking their journeys by mobilizing capitals exerting their agency, placing them within one migration regime or another (direct and safe, or indirect and dangerous), which will impact their life's and decision-making process in future experiences.

Second, beginning to study the migration journey from its point of origin has also allowed us to explore the evolution of the influence of the clusters of 'complex drivers' intertwining the macro-, meso- and micro-drivers, along the migration experience (Carling & Schewel, 2018; Van Hear et al., 2018; Czaika & Reinprecht, 2022; de Haas, 2021, Triandafyllidou, 2023). In addition, in this regard, we observe how past experiences are interpreted and influence the present and future decision. While 'en route' (instead of transit), social transformations of the localities lose relevance in decision-making in favor of individual aspects (life course), as proposed by Vezzoli et al. (2026). Therefore, it is an interpretation across time and (geographic) space that allows us to identify how the influence of macro drivers is reduced during transit due to migrants' reduced freedom of action (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Evolution of the cluster complex drivers influence in the decision-making along the migration experience through time and spaces of (non)opportunities



Source: authors' elaboration

Particularly, we argue that, depending on the stage of the journey, the cluster of complex drivers varies. These drivers are influenced by the degree to which space is trespassed, the opportunities within it and the micro-level experiences that people have along the different stages of the journey. These factors determine whether people decide to stay (being 'stayers by choice' or 'stayers by necessity' (Van Hear, 2014), migrate or return. This is followed by the process of mobilizing capital in order to accomplish the decision made. Moreover, as we will point out, migrants develop what is called the mobility capital (Kauffman, 2004; Moret, 2020), based upon the knowledge acquired from the previous stages of the journey, some of them developing the spatial mobility capital (Riaño et al., 2022).

Next, following the schema presented in Figure 1 in section 2 of this paper, and Figure 3, we present the results in four sections following the temporal and spatial logic of the integral migration journey, exploring the beginning, the route and the current locality. In addition, there is a fourth section which sets out migrants' reflections on the impact that their migration experience has had on them, exploring how it has shaped their lives and on their decision-making knowledge for future new decision-making processes on staying migrating or return.

4.1. At the beginning: the influence of macro and meso drivers

When we asked Nigerians living in Spain, Italy and Slovakia what had led them to migrate from their country of origin, a cluster of complex drivers emerged that included economic factors such as labor market and employment, inequalities and living conditions (macro-

level), education, services and training opportunities (human development), public provision, civil and political rights (politico-institutional factors) and conflict, political situation and repression (security factors) (in the terms of Czaika & Reinprecht, 2022).

About the economic factors, we encountered various narratives. For some it was the need to meet basic individual or family needs: “So, like, on my own side, we are seven in the family, my brothers, so it was so difficult. So, I have to move and work outside and find a way to survive.” (ES_08). Others mentioned the inability to access skilled jobs commensurate with educational qualifications (undergraduate or postgraduate) that would enable them to pursue their desired career path, such as the case of a female, 37 years old interviewed in Slovakia who expressed that “I belong to the class that values education. So my milestone is to get the highest degree, like PhD. I'm married already. I have a house already in Nigeria. So [migration is] just to get the PhD, then save some money and establish some business.” (SK_10).

Interestingly, among the skilled migrants who have moved to Spain—especially to Alicante—10 out of 12 stated that their main reason for migrating was family reunification. Most of these participants came to be with their partners, while one migrated to join their mother, who already held Spanish nationality. In all cases of family reunification, the unfavorable economic situation in Nigeria, marked by a lack of job opportunities, was also mentioned.

In other cases, various forms of violence perpetrated by other ethnic groups, the state or terrorist groups lead people from all walks of life to decide to migrate or even be forced to migrate when extreme violence arrived at their door, as 20 years old male in Italy express “my life was good at home, it was just the insecurity that caused these huge disruptions and there was no option other than to leave home and come here.” (IT_04). Similarly, other interviewees in Italy and Spain narrate,

“We have the Igbo, Hausa, and Yoruba. So I happen to be the Igbo, which we know about Biafra... We are the freedom fighter. [...] Then later the police now came to arrest my father, my sister and my brother. Then I have to run away. So after some time, we now heard from our [unclear] television and newspaper that some of us are wanted, which is, I'm also included, so that is why I have to move.” (IT_21)

“I was living good in my country I was living fine, I was... my father is doing well, I'm living good in the eastern part of Nigeria, my brother was going to school, the one that killed, he was a student they killed him.” (ES_13)

Amongst those interviewed, we found people who migrated due to the several riots and confrontations between ethnoreligious groups, for instance, the riots of 1999 or the violence following the elections in 2017 and 2023 (Tuki, 2025). This was because they belonged to political opposition groups to the elected party in the past, as male, 25 years old express in Spain or closely in time, as expressed by 32-year-old men in Italy.

“My migration history is when the IPOB⁶ [Indigenous People of Biafra] started saying, enforcing the seat at home in Nigeria. And it was too risky for young boys out there in my local government in Ogun... There you see unknown government will come out. The government is not doing anything to stop them. And going to the Western part of Nigeria... I don't have a family there. I don't know how to start my life over there. Even at the Northern part, they are not really happy with me. From the Eastern part, they will say you are evil, you are IPOB because of what's going on in the east. So it was too risky.” (ES_12)

“I was a youth leader in my country for Labor Party [...] we want to say no, we want a better Nigeria. So that is where I have issues with the... opposition government. They were threatening me after the election, the presidential election 2023 [...] I decided to leave the country because they were looking for me.” (IT_29).

Some of the interviewees point out the social inequalities derived from the lack of governance in relation to economic and violence issues, intertwined with social class, ethnic and religious affiliations in line with the literature reviewed (Archibong, 2018; Tuki, 2025). Through their affiliations, the interviewees interpret the structural situation of their country and the impact, or lack thereof, of that structure on their individual circumstances. A 32 year old male living in Spain stated that:

“There's a lot of money there. But this money is going into the hands of particular people, which is the politicians. Do you understand? But if, in future, if they can arrange, fashion the way they do things, put on security, kill corruption, do what they are supposed to do, what the people have in mind, that place is a place you can stay and relax and get whatever you want.” (ES_21)

Therefore, by examining these narratives and considering the interviewees' diverse geographical and social backgrounds, we observe that the factors influencing the decision to migrate are multidimensional, intertwining the social structure with the interviewees' individual social positions within it. This is also key in the decision to migrate elsewhere, particularly when participants decided that Nigeria was a space of non-opportunities and when they perceived that the good life they aspired to achieve in the future was also possible elsewhere.

When the decision to migrate is made, participants accumulated and mobilized capitals to start the journey. We found that participants from a wealthy background (who had access to bachelor's or master's level studies) were able to mobilize the necessary capitals to travel to Europe via shorter and safer routes. In contrast, those from a lower social class and/or a disadvantaged ethnic or religious group who had experienced discrimination in their place of residence, as discussed by Archibong, (2018) and Tuki, (2025), were

⁶ Indigenous People of Biafra is a separatist group banned by the Nigerian government as a terrorist organization in September 2017. Several members of IPOB have been charged with treason, which is punishable by the death penalty. Source: European Union Agency for Asylum. <https://www.euaa.europa.eu/country-guidance-nigeria/23-members-separatist-movements-and-individuals-perceived-supporting-them>

uncapable to do so. Consequently, they believed that the only option for them was to take the longer and riskier routes through Africa, in line with Tajden's (2023) findings. Moreover, those migrating when violence had no time to consider which route to take, even if they had access to resources, "(...) at the time it happens, there was intense confusion and it was a kind of 'myself first'! Because it was related to me that my father was about to be killed and when they couldn't find him, I heard they were coming to chase me out, so I ran away." (IT_04)

Nigerian migrants who could travel directly were capable of mobilizing their capitals to apply for visas to travel to Europe. Most of the participants applied for study and work visas (mainly PhD students and footballers in Slovakia) as well as family reunification visas (in Spain and Italy). Those applying for visas to Spain and Italy required less capital, as there are Spanish embassies in Lagos and Abuja and Italian embassies in Lagos and Abuja, as well as an Italian consulate in Lagos. However, those migrating to Slovakia require a greater amount of capital and the capacity to mobilize it, as there is no Slovakian diplomatic representation in Nigeria. They had to incur additional expenses travelling either to the Slovak Embassies in Ghana or Kenya. This travel was a cost in addition to the process of preparing the required documents to apply for a residence permit⁷. A 38-year-old male and a 37-year-old female in Slovakia provide clear examples of the kinds of capital and time required to be capable of managing the visa application procedure:

"I had to travel back to Ghana, move from Ghana to Kenya get my visa. I stayed almost two months in Kenya before moving to Slovakia." (SK_08)

"I had to travel to Nairobi and get all the documents on my side, from Nigerian government, institutions. I needed to get my certificates done, so I had to pay for a trip to Nairobi, stay there for a couple of days and manage. That's not an easy process, if you are from Nigeria. From that point, it was ok, but to get the papers done and that papers have expiration dates, you know. So you need to move on quickly and get everything done." (SK_10)

However, as we could infer from the SK_08 narrative, we must take into account that to get a visa may require several applications, as a male in his 32s in Spain also points out "It takes a lot of money, and you have to go through the visa process, and sometimes you get denied, sometimes you get accepted. That's basically it."

Regarding the migrants who did not access the direct routes, we found different motives. On the one hand, we found those who had not considered the need for travel documents due to a lack of knowledge about international migration. This scenario highlights the lack of awareness of migration policies among these migrants compared to those who migrated for reasons such as family reunification, studies, or being hired by a company at

⁷ Not older than 90 days, completed official form in Slovak, valid passport (valid for at least 6 months beyond intended stay), document proving the purpose of stay (e.g., work contract, university admission), clean criminal record, apostilled or super-legalized, proof of accommodation (lease, property deed, or hostel confirmation), and proof of financial coverage (amounting to the subsistence minimum, or roughly €284.13/month).

the destination before migrating. A 41-year-old male interviewee in Italy shares his reflections on his awareness and learning process regarding migration policies through his experience of the journey.

“Before I got there, they didn't say maybe they used papers. For us, we don't know what the papers are. We don't know.” “If you want to go with flight... I don't know what visa is. I only hear about passport. Till now I don't know what is visa.” (IT_19)

Other migrants tried, but they were not capable of mobilizing the capitals to achieve it. Some participants point out the difficulties on the processes to apply including those involving the Nigerian national migration policies, such as a male, 43 years old interviewed in Spain: “To pass immigration, it's difficult in Nigeria. They take it like animals. Asking us a question, what do I do there, what do I want to do there. [...] That's why me too, I didn't pass there.” (ES_25)

From migrants' accounts of their decision to migrate from Nigeria, we observe how the combination of macro drivers and individual-level events influences the decision to migrate, thus beginning the migratory process. One's social status and ability to mobilize resources at this point determine whether one can access direct, safe routes or indirect, dangerous ones in the search for a place of opportunity where one can build a good life. Furthermore, migrant communities and networks are essential for beginning the journey, as we will see next.

4.2. Journeys through (in)secure spaces of (non)opportunities

Starting with the analysis of the decision-making processes of Nigerian migrants who migrated to Europe via direct and safer routes, we should mention that, even though we refer to this route as 'direct', some of the migrants still transited other countries when applying for the visa and when travelling to Europe.

A part of those who moved through family reunification, some Nigerians transited other spaces of action in another EU countries before settling in the countries where the interviews took place. We observe through their narratives that the imagined destinations did not match the reality they found, as pointed out by a 44-year-old male interviewed in Spain, who moved from France to Austria, residing for a while in Vienna: “When I got to Austria, I did not like the lifestyles because most of the citizens were there on the street trafficking drugs or maybe whatever. It wasn't like the kind of life I wanted, so I needed somewhere I would go to have a life of responsibility. I had to leave Austria to Spain.” (ES_27)

The experience of a 37-year-old male interviewee in Slovakia is insightful. He migrated from Nigeria to Rome as a space of opportunity by having achieved a scholarship to study for a master's degree. He describes the culture shock he experienced when he arrived in the city and encountered 'the real Rome', which was different from his 'imagined Rome':

“I arrived in Rome, Italy. And landing in Italy, I was surprised at what I saw. [...] Because it wasn't what I was expecting. It was a different mentality. I felt like it's

going to be much better than where I was coming from. Because Rome looks like, one, it's too crowded. You see many people sleeping on the street, and you see a lot of migrants. I used to tell my friend back then in Italy, I call Italy senior Africa. The reason is because I think there is no way you're going to step out of the of the house. I'm expecting to see white people, not black people. [...] (SK_05)

In fact, due to an illness, he had to stay in the hospital for a while. He remembered that Italian workers usually assumed he had arrived by sea. This made him feel tired, in addition to the language barriers he encountered in his daily life, particularly at the hospital, as he posits: "If you don't speak Italian then just step aside. You are living in Italy so you should learn Italian. It's not like they don't understand English, they do understand English, but they will be like I'm not going to communicate with you in English".

At this stage in the decision-making process, two Anglophone destinations were on his mind: the United Kingdom, which he ultimately ruled out due to Brexit, and Scotland, where he was considering applying for a scholarship.

And I was just caught in between those two options. [...] Probably I'll just go to Aberdeen, but I still need funds. I have to find a way to get funds for the migration, even though it's a scholarship. I still need to find a way to take care of myself. [...] It was in between that option, then a friend of mine mentioned that there are some options in Czech Republic, in AT&T. I applied there and I was rejected. And I just went back to my phone two months after. And I realized that I got an email from AT&T Slovakia. Saying that 'We saw that you applied to Czech Republic, and you were rejected, but you can try to apply to us. And let's see if we will be able to absorb you'. And that was how I applied."

This interviewees' experience is similar to that of others who have moved to other EU countries before deciding to migrate to Spain, Italy or Slovakia. Some of the interviewees even transited through Ukraine and were living there when the invasion started in 2022, as mentioned a male participant of 32 years old in Spain. Moreover, the language barrier promotes the desire to migrate to Anglophone countries.

Turning to the experiences of Nigerian migrants travelling via indirect routes, we incorporate at this point the narratives of the respondents of the longitudinal survey in Niger and Tunisia.⁸ One of the key findings is that, despite the geographical journey and the challenges they face along the route, Nigerian migrants develop abilities along the journey, or instance whether to settle or continue their migration towards the next locality where to achieve the aspired opportunities to develop a good life. Contrary to Van Hears' proposal in 2004 that migrants only travel "as far as their money would take them", through the strategies they implement in their daily lives, they demonstrate their capability to stay by choice for a while to gather resources and mobilize capitals to continue the journey when the opportunities to do suits them.

⁸ In this we include only the answers to the open-ended questions in the survey.

In Niger, we find a minority of individuals who stated that they completed their journey. Participants were asked: *Since we last spoke, what is the single event that most impacted your decision-making with regards to your migration journey, and how has your journey changed as a result of it?* They express that Niger is a space of opportunities for a better life, due to access to jobs that allows them to settle as pointed out by a woman living in Agadez: "It's the change in circumstances. Being financially stable. I've had enough money to cover my needs for the time being, and I've set up a business that will bring me more money" (Q1.NR11) or a man in Zinder who avers that "I'm managing better here; for the time being, I'm staying in Zinder" (Q1. NR22). The safer environment and welcoming society also encouraged family reunification, as the case of a man in Agadez:

"The thing that had the greatest impact on my decision regarding my migration journey was the simplicity of the people of Niger, their kindness and their acceptance of people like us. Following these events, I asked my family to come and settle here with me so that we could sort out everything needed to continue our journey." (Q1.NR40)

For those who the journey continues, the common experience lived is the insecurity felt when transiting through Libya, Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco. Some of them state being victims of violent incidents perpetrated by terrorist groups, institutional staff or rapists, impacting on their well-being and decision-making processes regarding whether to continue or turn back along the route. While some migrants may have started the journey in a vulnerable position, the journey makes most migrants vulnerable. A female migrant in Tunisia explains how her experience impacted her decision-making:

"The event that had the greatest impact was the kidnapping by the [other West African group]. I took a taxi driven by a Tunisian man who worked with the Ivorians. Instead of taking me to my destination, he sold me off. Fortunately, I managed to call my family and they sent me some money, which helped secure my release. That's why I've moved to another city, and why I'm travelling via [anonymized for safety] – that's the new route, and the way people are currently getting to Lampedusa, because [anonymized for safety] is too heavily monitored." (Q1.TR5)

However, gathering the capital to migrate or to stay requires time, which sometimes enlarges the stay in the localities, becoming 'stayers of necessity' (Van Hear, 2014). As stated by a Nigerian male, 31, in Niamey (Niger), "these days, moving house has become far too expensive and complicated. Due to the costs involved, I have had to stay in one place for longer than I had planned." (Q1.NR.31). A young male living in Spain for one year expressed the difficult time he spent in Morocco: "I spent six months in Morocco, six months, but that six months was hell. I was sleeping in a park like this. I'm not there again, so I've forgotten". (ES_13). Some of them explained how they navigated in these localities to have access to jobs to gather economic capital, involving the mobilization of other capitals. A male of 24 years old in Italy remembers several experiences learning new professions in different countries:

“Well, I started from Nigeria and came to Niger. From Niger, I got into Algeria, and from there to Tunis. You should also know that in every country, I stopped and hustle, looking for different kinds of works to do, some of them I cannot even mention. Example, I worked in a restaurant, in fact I worked even in brothels (where women sell their sexes). As I moved further, I also got to work in cement and construction industries etc. That was how I kept on until I reached Tunis. In Tunis, I worked as a security guard. I did a lot of different works including farming.” (IT_05)

Insightful interview with 25 years old male in Italy recounts his journey, revealing his evolving strategies in Algeria that led him to Tunisia and, later, Italy. This migratory process enabled him to acquire cultural and social capital, which he converted into economic capital in various opportunities over time:

“I stayed in Algeria for good three years though in the first one year, I had been begging along with other beggars. But I was tired of begging in the streets and so I decided to look for a job to do. I went to a construction company and luckily, I got a job there. It was in that same company that I met with a man from Sierra Leone with whom I shared my story. Because he was among the company lead, he now gave me recognition. Although he did not pay me, he promised to teach me how to do the job and... So, after I worked with him for about three years, he now told me to prepare because he got some work to do in Tunisia. I worked with him in Tunisia for about 4 years. You should also know that he was the type of person who had the exposure to travel across many countries. I was still not sure about his move. So, he once told me he got another job in Europe and that he was leaving for Europe. Would I follow him? I answered him that yes, I would follow him anywhere he was going, I didn't have any worry. We woke up at midnight preparing to leave for Europe, he then suddenly had stomachache and felt weak, he couldn't make it. But he told his journey-mates to go with me. I was thinking we were going by car, but I realized we had to cross the sea. I was so shocked seeing how we could cross the sea to Europe. So, that was how I got myself here in Italy. I just got myself here.” (IT_06)

It is crucial to highlight that even individuals who do not migrate due to violence in any form still face some type of violence along their journey. In these scenarios, the migrants' capability to act is limited, and they feel compelled to remain visible in public spaces for the shortest time possible to avoid various forms of violence, reducing their spaces of action to remain safe. As a Nigerian male of 35 years in Niger stated, “My journey has led me to do what's best for me: avoid going out anywhere, stay at home and go to work; I steer clear of places of entertainment and the sort of places people tend to visit, because it's when you go out that you run into trouble - trouble never finds you at work or at home.” (Q1. NR36)

As a result, their perception of the locations in which they find themselves shifts from viewing them as potential spaces of opportunity to seeing them as areas devoid of

opportunities. This nurtures the aspiration to migrate onwards, triggering the decision to cross the Mediterranean Sea and migrate to Europe, seeking a secure space in which to build a good life. Thus, we can say that time and space become "fluid" during a transition that is experienced as suspended or compressed, creating a sense of time that shifts dramatically from one moment to the next. Furthermore, migrant networks, friends, family or facilitators encountered during the migration journey had a clear impact in deciding where to move next. Lastly, our interviews with individuals who migrated in the late 2000s, as well as those who have done so more recently, reveal that over 20 years later, situations of inequality and violence continue to persist, as pointed by a Nigerian migrant already in Italy: "I did not expect what I saw on the road, what I saw for the second time is not what I saw [the first time]." This is a sign that the journey is becoming more and more dangerous (from 2015 to 2023). "The second trip was terrible. [...] our trauma for the journey is something that really shocked me." (IT_29)

4.3. Last locality? Facing (non)inclusion challenges in Europe

At this point of the migrant experience of our participants, we focus now on the temporal moment just before their arrival to Spain, Italy and Slovakia. Except for migrants who moved to join their family members, these locations were not the aspired destination at origin; instead, English-speaking countries such as the UK, the US or Canada had been on their minds. But destinations were generally not clearly defined before departure and gradually emerged from information shared within the migrant community, among family and friends, which transmitted the cultural capital about the opportunities that these countries have to offer (Triandafyllidou et al. 2023).

A 40-year-old male interviewee in Italy stated: "I didn't know anything about Italy. That was only when I travelled to Libya. Some people say that through here you can go to Italy. Through here you can go to Tunis. Where you go to Italy you will be more safer...so that is the only information I had about Italy." Similarly, a Nigerian male who was studying in Ukraine at the time of the Russian invasion says: "Unfortunately, the war started, and I happened to come to Spain. I have an uncle who lives here, and he asked me to come to Spain and to stay with him for a while. So, that's my immigration experience, from Ukraine down to Spain." (ES_10)

The African community plays a crucial role in assisting migrants as they settle in the new localities. Often, it is community members who provide financial support to newly arrived migrants, helping them get established, regardless of whether their arrival was through direct or indirect routes. Those who arrived in a more vulnerable position due to limited capitals received basic assistance, such as food and housing, during the first months after arrival, as a Nigerian male living in Spain posits:

"I begin stay with him, I think around one year, before I rent a, I get one accommodation, so I stay there with my other friends. So, from there, I got a job, I'm working there, with my, I call *jefe* [boss]. I work with him around three years,

but I think he have crisis or whatever, so, we start working on other place, one way or other to get another job." (ES_23)

Furthermore, NGOs (both migrant and non-migrant) emerge as actors that provide social protection to migrants upon their arrival in these new and unfamiliar places. Some of the participants arrived in Italy or Spain by crossing the sea and being rescued by humanitarian agencies, or arriving into the country irregularly. In Italy and Spain some participants are currently enrolled in these supporting programmes, whereas in Spain, some arrived as part of them. A 42-year-old male interviewed in Spain, whereas others had abandoned the programme due to difficulties including the impossibility of working in the first period of the programme.

"Red Cross Roquetas here, they give us working permit, small paper, red paper, you can walk, but you cannot travel out of Spain. I use it, I work for farm work, sometimes I'm a sailor, then the work in the sea, I'm doing. So, later they renew it to me, to one year residence, plastic, from one year now in two years. So, I'm still working, at least my life is better now than before in Nigeria." (ES_16)

For those who arrived in non-precarious conditions, such as the academics, footballers and through family reunification, the African community provides spaces of gathering, and sharing leisure activities, making migrants feel integrated by being embedded in the same culture and language. For instance, a young male studying in Slovakia mentions: "There's an African WhatsApp group. Any information you need, you can always post it there and you'll get support. And once every summer we have a gathering too." (SK_01). Many migrants perceive that the foreign community is more accessible than the local population, as expressed by a Nigerian migrant in Slovakia:

"I get along much easier with fellow foreigners. So, I do attend church. A good number of the congregation, they are foreigners. And as much as the priest is Slovak, but... Then, where I mostly hang out, a good number of them are foreigners. But they are some Slovak people. It's football, yes. So, I have some Slovak people. Well, for me, I don't think it would be that difficult to make Slovak friends and as much as they want you to speak the language and it's not that easy." (SK_12)

In fact, when asking about their inclusion into the local society, some of them refer to 'their community', noting the limited interaction with the local population. This is also shared by migrants living in Italy and Spain for more than five years, even among those who have regularized their administrative situation. "For me, I don't mess [...]with them. I mess with my own people. When I have a little work with them, so... The rest of the time, it's just for me and my black people. I don't know anything about the white people. I don't know how they live, I don't even care, you know?" stated a Nigerian man in his thirties (ES_31).

This could be relatively explained by the reduced action space in which migrants develop their daily life practices which mostly take place within their community spaces and in

limited spaces of encounter, and for those being part of international protection programs as addressed by IT_04 before.

“Sincerely I can't say anything. I don't have even a friend in that place. I keep on from work to home, I have no friends in Brescia, how will I know? If you see me in Brescia, it is that I went to this China supermarket to buy foodstuff and once I bought them, I will go back home.” (IT_06)

This experience is shared by a young student living in Slovakia: 'It's just me, so most of the time I don't go out. I don't go out. It's just me and my wife indoors, and we don't have much reason to want to party’ (SK_05). A similar situation was experienced by a young man living in Spain at the time of the interview:

“This place is like maybe right now currently I'm in an isolated area, this one is isolation because for somebody like me it's good because I know myself I know I like life [...] My life is just basic, the basic things, I eat, I wake up, if I have chance to go to work, or let me not use the word chance because if I have chance that means I have a lot of work but if there is a job for me, then I get up from my bed, I go to work, it's just basic, there is nothing, no extra things attached I don't go out when I'm free, I sit in my house if I have chance, maybe I'm with enough money, I drink beer, have my phone, my personal space, watch film through my telephone, that's all”. (ES_13)

In addition to the constrained spaces where they feel they live, inclusion in local society is hindered by language barriers in three countries. Interviewees avers that opportunities to communicate in English were very limited, particularly in Italy and Spain. However, even in Slovakia, where English is widely spoken, the majority of participants agree that it is necessary to learn the local language to be included in society, as SK_05 pointed out: “When it comes to integration into Slovakia itself, or into mixing with the citizens, it's kind of like a bit of cold and I think the only factor that makes it difficult is just a language. With the kind of schedule in front of me, I kind of work from morning to night and I do not have that luxury of time to go learn the language.” Similarly, IT_09 in Italy avers that: “What's most important, I have to learn the language. It is tough, but I'm still getting there. That's just it! So that's just also the food and the people and also related to catching up with life. So that's me in a way, like I grew up!” (IT_09).

Moreover, these narratives point out the necessity to promote intercultural exchanges, with participants having experienced discriminatory attitudes primarily related to skin color. On this topic, an interviewee of 26 years old in Italy reflection on his feelings of being unable to hide his racial traits is interesting and shared by a 34-year-old female interviewed in Spain:

“But here, you go out, they say he's Nero, you are Bianco, that's another problem. It was a little better in Niger, where we have blacks, in Libya we have blacks also, but they are more white. So when you go, you wear this color, it's a problem for us, believe me. Before, they say when I was young, when I was small, but now I

realize it's true. It's a big problem for us. I don't know why, because anywhere you go, they try to separate you from others, I don't know. And you cannot hide it, you see. They see you, and they know you, even your hair alone says this is who you are, the color of your hair is still..." (IT_27)

"Like I said, as a person of color, there are not a lot of opportunities yet. [...] So, probably go to a country that is centered around equal opportunities for black, for white, for Hispanics. I don't think here gives way to black people that opportunity. That's what I feel. So, yeah, maybe another country. Maybe an English-speaking country." (ES_30)

Despite these conditions that make living in these three countries less than ideal, it is striking that the majority aspire to stay in their current locations, which in some cases is connected to basic needs: these spaces provide safety. A 31-year-old male interviewed in Slovakia mentioned the possibility of walking alone at night when returning from university and feeling safe. This is particularly important for those who have experienced violence during their migration journey, but it is not uncommon for migrants who come from places where a lack of security constrains daily life (ref).⁹

Migration policies are key, as migrants realize that regularizing their situation is fundamental to gaining full access to national job markets and other sectors. The pursuit of regularization contributes to extending their stay in Italy, Spain and Slovakia because of the time-consuming process, as pointed out by Moret (2020), in the case of Somalians in the EU.

Migrants realize that they also need time to "learn and adapt to the system takes time" as a male participant, 49 years old, living in Spain pointed out. They can feel lost when trying to understand the system, which can be frustrating. A Nigerian migrant in Spain in an irregular situation with limited social networks pointed out. The same was true for a Nigerian migrant in Slovakia.

"Coming here, the experience is quite different because there was no friend, nobody to talk to, no family member. And it was so challenging because you feel like you're in the middle of nowhere. Your life is like in a pause. You can't move forward, you can't move back. No work, no people around you. [...] As an immigrant, I am demanded to do a lot of things, including formalization of certificates. And I have to pass through processes like get a language proficiency exam and the number of years it takes for me to gather all those things. So, somehow it's frustrating." (ES_19)

"I think it's not easy to actually navigate through Slovak bureaucracy, you need someone that actually understands the system to help you to navigate that bureaucracy very well. I think just the language and the bureaucracy makes it a

⁹ The importance of feeling safe while walking on the street and being in public spaces was a very important aspect of Brazilian migrants' living in the UK who felt they no longer had to be constantly on guard (Randell, 2016).

bit difficult to integrate, and probably the present government it's not making it fun as well." (SK_05)

Almost all the interviews reveal that migrants are more likely to want to leave if they cannot find the opportunities, they need to develop the good life they have imagined. Access to the job market is the cornerstone of this, as pointed out by a 24-year-old male interviewed in Italy: 'We would much rather stay in Italy. The only challenge is that jobs are not always available in Italy', but they want jobs that are stable and match their desired standard of living. Migrants usually aspire to migrate in that case, but to another city where they perceive more opportunities are available, as explained by a 48-year-old male and a 38-year-old male, both in Spain:

"Because work here is very hard and the work is not stable. I need work to be stable. I think Barcelona is better than here. When I have a friend there, I can move. I can't move alone." (ES_23)

"I think by staying here in Roquetas is also temporary, because you need to make a move. If you find it is not working out, you can change to another city. So, if I find out that here is not giving me what I want, I have to carry my bag and go to another city to make sure I actualize my dream, because I have a dream." (ES_21)

The narratives analyzed in this section show how the social position of Nigerians in their country of origin influences on some extent, their social position at their current localities. One is the access to stable and skilled labor markets, as opposed to labor markets characterized by informality and precariousness, such as intensive agriculture in Almería, Spain. Moreover, we also observe that, compared to what was seen during their transit through Africa (except for those who found such opportunities in Niger), safety in their current locations is fundamental to their aspirations to stay, although this is also relevant for those who arrived directly. Taking into account these initial factors and their influence on the emergence of these new spaces of action, we observe that the drivers constituting the 'complex driver' As Van Hear et al. (2018) at this stage of the trajectory are security and migration policies – the need to gain legal status to obtain residence permits – and social protection policies – access to national social protection systems, particularly health and education.

Within this framework, we also consider the meso drivers of social networks and NGOs (Triandafyllidou, 2023). NGOs primarily influence those who have arrived in situations of greater vulnerability and access to international protection and reception programmes, as well as the family (for those who arrived through family reunification and those who already had relatives living in these countries or Europe) and migrant communities. The migrant community plays a vital role in providing informal social protection, particularly for those who have arrived in precarious circumstances and require basic resources to establish a minimum standard of well-being. This network also transmits cultural capital regarding how life works in these countries, particularly in terms of access to labor markets. For those

who are better off socially, the migrant community offers a sense of belonging through participation in religious gatherings and leisure activities.

4.4. "Travel is the key to knowledge": Using experience to inform decision-making

Finally, in this section we address one of the central questions of this study: how does the migration journey (from the point of origin to the present time and place) affect migrants, and how does its influence decision-making processes at the subsequent stages of the journey?

From our analysis, we can draw several conclusions. Firstly, from their responses we can draw specific lessons from real-life experiences that directly influence future decision-making, which would differ from what they have done in the past. A Nigerian male, 22 in Agadez, point out that, in comparison with his choice made in the past, he will try to reduce the risks when choosing a route : "I won't take the risk when I have the option of choosing the easiest route, regardless of how much I have to spend, as long as it isn't more expensive than what I can afford." (Q2.NR15). Another interviewee point out the need to accumulate sufficient financial resources to use them while on the road, particularly in Africa when trespassing localities in Africa: "I've realized that you need money - enough money, or a job that will enable you to earn a lot of money, or someone who'll lend you money to fund your trip." (Q2.NR6). Similarly, a Nigerian migrant in Spain and in Niger pointed out to the relevance of creating social and cultural capital before migrating in the future

"I think it has changed, because when you are growing, you are getting more experience, so it's not the same experience I had before, I have now. I think so, I think I have changed, I have learned more than I know before [...] I have to move in... When I have a friend there, I can move. When I don't have, when I have money with me to pay house rent, I can move alone." (ES_23)

"Well, there wasn't any one particular incident, but the information and knowledge I've gained about migration is what enables me to be very vigilant and make safer contacts, because as you travel on, the dangers multiply. My journey has been a success, because I always choose the best conditions and take care with everything I do." (Q1-Q2. NR19)

Most of those interviewed agree that obtaining visas is essential for migrating via direct and safe routes. A Nigerian woman in Agadez expressed this view in her narrative: "My thinking has changed with regard to security. I've realized that, in order to migrate, I absolutely need documents that will allow me to travel freely." While some of those interviewed, particularly those who have experienced violence in Africa or while crossing the sea to reach Europe, are reluctant to express their feelings, others do so indirectly. This clearly demonstrates the impact that their past has on their present. One interviewee in

Italy explains this further: 'My concern is how to move forward and not dwell on the past' (Q1. IR10). (Q1. IR10).

About personal transformation resulting from the entire migration experience, a large proportion of those interviewed – regardless of whether they were in Africa or Europe at the time of the interview – emphasized the importance of the experience (or 'travelling') as a learning process. This was not only in relation to migration, but also in a broader, life-enhancing sense, as a Nigerian migrant Slovakia or another in Italy posit

"I don't make the decision in a rush. I actually have to sit down with the options and look at the consequences. If I were to be living in my country and doing the kind of job that I'm doing right now, I wouldn't leave, but my migration experience helped me to understand that there is a reason to actually to actually save for the rainy days" [...] I've lost my aspiration or let me say I've lost my dream. My childhood dream. I lost that. And what I've gained, I've gained a bit of experience, a bit of knowledge." (SK_05)

"Yes, migration is an experience that shapes someone's exposure to life. Because in the course of such travels, you'll visit different places, see different kinds of peoples with different lifestyles, compare to who remains at home and never get to anywhere. It is part of what I learn through migration journey, seeing different kinds of people. In Niger Republic for instance, I saw how people adopt their lifestyle. When I got to Algeria, I have seen another lifestyle. As I got to Tunisia, I also saw difference. These are mainly Arabs but you still see differences among them. I then proceeded to Italy. In a nutshell, travelling (migration) is shaping someone's understanding of life and exposure to it [...] before I left home, I know that travelling [migration in this context] is worth engaging because we been hearing the Hausa proverb: "Travel is the key to Knowledge¹⁰". (IT_04)

In fact, responses to this question highlight the agency they have exerted and developed during their migration journeys, and how they intend to utilize their cultural and mobility capital when planning future steps in their lives, and some express reflections on travelling as life knowledge: "So yes, I feel like I am more resilient, more capable. I have good experiences here, so I managed. I know that if I go to another country I can manage. I can rely on myself, my abilities." (SK_10)

These quotations suggest that migration is perceived as a vital learning process. Moreover, we observe how 'mobile capital' (Moret, 2020) is developed referring to the ability to generate and/or evaluate options for staying put or moving on; the competence to migrate, including knowledge of strategies for contacting networks and generating economic capital; and the ability to make sense of one's experiences. Indeed, the migration experience enables migrants to make informed decisions about their next steps,

¹⁰ This comes from a title of a popular Hausa book "Tafiya Mabudfin Ilimi" by one famous Hausa writer, also a Nigerian nationalist, Dr. Abubakar Imam. People pick it to describe the extent to which travelling as a hobby, can enrich someone's knowledge about life in general.

which, according to the migrants themselves, helps to mitigate risk. This, in turn, gives them a greater sense of control over the decision-making process, their own spatial movement and how they manage time and space. This fosters a sense of resilience and empowerment among the migrants interviewed.

5. Concluding remarks

The aim of this study was to contribute to the understanding of a key question in migration studies: What factors influence people's decisions to migrate? Using diverse analytical tools and the proposed TMA framework (Vezzoli et al., 2024), we analyzed the decision-making process throughout the migration experience. Although the initial focus was on individuals "en route," the study was expanded to include the beginning of the journey. This expansion allowed us to gain a better longitudinal understanding by analyzing the various decisions made at different times and places, all of which are shaped by the experiences and knowledge migrants acquire along the way.

To this end, this study is based on narratives gathered through in-depth interviews with 59 Nigerian migrants living in Spain, Italy, and Slovakia. These interviews were analyzed alongside the responses of 70 Nigerian migrants living in Niger, Tunisia, and Italy who participated in a longitudinal survey and answered two open-ended questions. Analyzing this data enabled us to make theoretical and empirical contributions to the body of knowledge on migrants' decision-making.

Firstly, as previously mentioned elsewhere, the analysis of decision-making processes during periods of passage through time and space (journeys) should include the initial decision-making process at the point of departure. Analyzing migrants' situations prior to departure, while they were still in their place of origin, has enabled us to identify a key factor in shaping the migration journey: the class and ethno-religious affiliation at origin that influence the access to capitals to be mobilized to migrate through direct and safe routes or instead, through indirect and dangerous pathways. However, while these factors are decisive at the point of origin, their influence wanes as the migration journey unfolds. Even in European destinations, migrants find themselves in different social positions within the social structure, yet they face similar challenges such as language barriers, difficulties accessing migration policies, and challenges to inclusion in the host society, where the interviewees remain part of migrant communities.

Secondly, starting the analysis at the origin of the migration journey, enabled us to explore how the clusters of complex drivers influence in decision making process evolves as the migration experience unfolds through the passage of time and space (See figure 3 at the beginning of the Results section). We observe that, at origin, the complex driver is composed of a cluster of macro, meso and micro drivers, where macro drivers have the greatest influence on the decision to migrate. The situation of social inequality, perpetuated for decades by colonial governments and by subsequent governments during a period of limited democracy (Archibong, 2019; Ihouma, 2020) and a fragile state

(Triandafyllidou, 2023), leads to the aspiration to migrate and the preparation of the beginning of the journey.

When trespassing localities through time and space through direct or indirect pathways, we observe that the action space of migrants decreases in comparison to the origin, influencing the unawareness, and inaccessibility to structural factors of the transited localities, such as social protection or accessing the desired job opportunities. In addition, in the case of migrants 'en route' trespassing Africa through indirect and unsafe pathways, the complex driver cluster is formed by economic and security factors, and to a lesser extent (non)migration policies (Bakewell, et al., 2024). Insecurity along the route increases, even at the possible first international stop on the journey, in Niger, where migrants have already reported being subjected to various forms of violence at the hands of smugglers, traffickers or even institutional violence. In these spaces, security emerges as almost the principal driver to continue the journey even for those who did not migrate for security reasons in their country of origin. In any case, migrating through direct or indirect routes shares the influence of the migrant networks, family and friends and other facilitators and agencies are the central meso driver in decision-making. They are fundamental in facilitating cultural and social capital, and economic capital to a lesser extent. Here, spatial mobility capital (Riaño et al. 2022) is useful for analyzing local practices in which migrants become 'stayers by choice' (for instance, those who decide to settle in Niger as a place of opportunities) or 'stayers by need' gathering capitals until they are ready to continue the journey (Van Hear, 2014).

However, as the journey progresses towards destinations in Europe that were not the initial aspiration of those migrating via indirect routes, the influence of macro drivers on the decision to migrate or remain in the current locality increases. It is at this point in time and space that migration policies become more influential, as residence permits are fundamental to working legally and accessing other rights. In addition, non-migration policies also emerge as influential, particularly concerning access to the health and education systems, for example, for migrants who migrated due to education reasons and for those who moved for family reunification and have children with them.

Third, after analyzing the practices developed by the participant migrants along their journeys, the results suggest that, contrary to Van Hear's (2004) original idea that migrants continue their journey 'as far as their money will take them', they continue their journey as far as their motivation takes them. This depends on clusters of complex drivers and accessibility to opportunities while moving through different places over time. An analysis of participants' practices in different locations shows that they can exercise their agency to try to reach a place where they believe they can achieve the good life they aspire to. In both safe and unsafe contexts, being 'stayers by choice' or 'stayers by necessity' migrants are capable to mobilize social, cultural and/or economic capital to a greater or lesser extent and converting it into spatial mobility capital (Riaño et al., 2022) – that is, they use capital to migrate across different territorial scales by exercising their agency, by taking informed decisions along the journey. Mobility capital (Moret, 2020) could be seen as the

knowledge they gain by their migration experience, being a transformative life experience, learning from their own and others' experiences of migration.

It is important to note that this study has clear limitations, such as its small sample size and its focus on interpreting present-day decision-making processes regarding the past. However, it highlights two areas for future research. One area of focus is the examination and study of the concept of transit. From our study, it became clear that migrants do not feel like being in transit in the localities where they are trying to develop an infrastructure to achieve a good life. In fact, this period of time emerges as a temporary in-between space, in which sometimes, they even do not have a clear destination in mind, questioning the assumption of being in transit assumed by part of the scientific literature, and criticized by others (Collyer, Düvell and de Haas, 2012; Ahrens & King 2023). For this reason, while 'in transit' typically refers to a geographical location, our observations suggest that it can also describe a life situation. In this context, various factors, especially migration policies and the reluctance of host societies to accept migrants, create prolonged uncertainty in the lives of migrants. This brings us to a renewed understanding of the limitations of the term "transit migrant," which is defined solely based on the duration of stay (ranging from 3 months to 5 years). While we should recognize its shortcomings, it remains valuable to study migrants in a state of flux. This approach allows us to examine the process of transit migration more effectively or, alternatively, to focus on places of transit—rather than the vague notion of a "transit country" and the individuals who temporarily or permanently inhabit these areas.

Lastly, our data indicates that the indirect routes through Africa have become increasingly dangerous over the past twenty years, with various incidents reported along these paths. This suggests that externalizing borders and implementing other deterrence policies have had minimal impact on reducing migrant flows and have not contributed to enhancing safety along these routes, as noted by Pécout and Savatic (2026) and Watkins et al. (2026). The findings presented in this paper could be valuable in developing experience-based policies aimed at increasing safety and ensuring human rights throughout the entire migration journey.

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