



PACES

Making migration and migration policy decisions
amidst societal transformations

The TMA framework: reflections on its implementation in the PACES project

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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

Migration aspirations, how they emerge, and what they signal have been a central concern in migration research. However, it remains difficult to answer why similar external conditions and mechanisms lead one person to aspire to migrate while another, in the same circumstances, chooses to stay. To study this decision-making process, we proposed the Temporal Multilevel Analysis (TMA) framework, which studies how people develop aspirations to either stay or migrate. The framework embeds individuals in a changing society (social transformation) as their life unfolds (life course), recognizing that decisions are shaped by both societal conditions and personal circumstances. The TMA framework accounts for time – since people’s perspectives are based on past experiences, the present situation and future expectations – and place – as migrants reevaluate the decision to stay, return or migrate onward as they move along their journey. Migration and non-migration policies also play a role in shaping society and migration options. Ultimately, this framework was proposed to analyze both tangible and intangible factors that shape decisions to stay and migrate among residents and migrants in eight countries (five in Africa and three in Europe), thus considering economic and political factors alongside social norms, values, security and social protection. But how valuable was it in practice? This paper offers a thoughtful analysis of the application of this framework. It reflects on the concepts, analytical dimensions and key questions we established at the outset of the project and assesses the benefits and limitations of the analytical framework as applied in the PACES project. We conclude the paper with the main lessons learned and some ideas of how this framework could be used in the future.

Keywords: migration aspirations, social transformation, life course, perceptions, expectations, values, social norms

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1. Introduction

Migration aspirations, how they emerge, and what they signal have been a central concern in migration research. Research has increasingly zoomed into the specificities of societal conditions and personal characteristics that explain migration aspirations, but has been more tentative in exploring how changes at both societal and personal levels shape aspirations to migrate as well as why, within similar circumstances, most people aspire to stay (de Haas, 2021; Schewel, 2020). Understanding the decision-making process as people develop aspirations to stay or migrate has been central to the research in the PACES project. The project's main research question was:

*How do 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 the migration journeys)?*

To answer this ambitious question, the PACES researchers adopted an integrated approach that examined structural and personal (including family) factors in different locations and times (past-present-future), including along the migration journey. This approach was captured in the Temporal Multilevel Analysis (TMA) framework, which built on existing theoretical propositions, factors and mechanisms central in migration decisions (Aslany et al., 2021; Carling & Schewel, 2018; Castles, 2010; Czaika, 2015; Czaika & Reinprecht, 2022; de Haas, 2021; de Haas et al., 2020; De Jong & Fawcett, 1981; Van Hear et al., 2018).

Far from opening new grounds or seeking to generate a grand integrated theory, we found inspiration from the theoretical approach first proposed by Merton (1949) and further elaborated by Castles (2007) that “middle-range theorisation of contemporary migration could be the analysis of a particular migration system linking specific countries of origin, transit and destination, within the context of the wider social relations of globalisation and social transformation” (Castles (2007, p. 365). From this perspective, it is feasible to include the structure – intended as states, international agencies, local authorities as well as social networks and transnational communities among others – and agency, referring to the action of people and groups as they react and adapt to change. Castles also already indicated that these factors unfold “in a broader temporal and spatial context”, making time and space important dimensions (Castles, 2007, p. 365). Ultimately, our framework strongly relied on the social transformation approach (Castles, 2010; Castles et al., 2015; de Haas et al., 2020) and brought it together with the life course approach (Kley, 2011) to capture the changes that influence decision-making in society and in people’s personal lives. Conscious of the breadth of this approach, the TMA framework was envisioned as an overarching analytical lens that brought together a careful selection of valuable concepts to study the mechanisms underpinning migration decision-making in specific contexts.

This paper offers a reflection on the choices made in the TMA framework, shedding light on the benefits it provided and the shortcomings that emerged. After a brief introduction of the framework and its elements, we share insights on the concepts utilised, followed by

a reflection on the two central dimensional perspectives—multilevel and change over time and space—and some insights on the mechanisms observed. This reflection paper concludes with ideas of the next steps in the adaptation and application of the TMA framework to study migration decision-making.

2. The Temporal Multilevel Analysis framework: a brief introduction

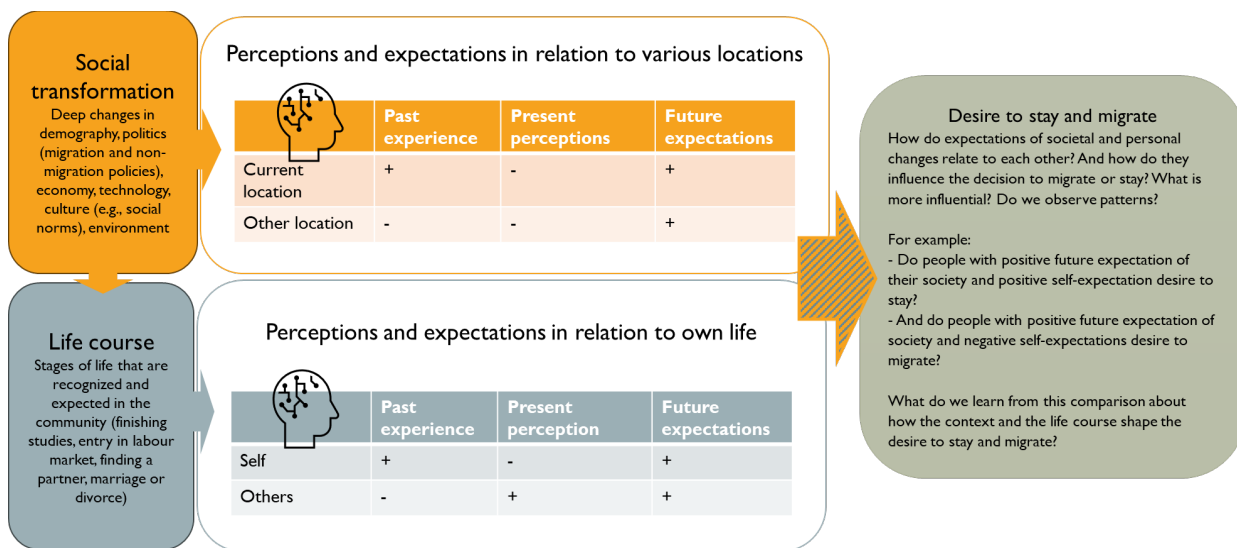
The Temporal Multilevel Analysis (TMA) framework (Vezzoli et al., 2024) is an integrated approach that crosses several analytical levels and conceptualizes migration as a temporally embedded process in which aspirations, opportunities, constraints, and values evolve across individual life courses and changing societal contexts. Moreover, it conceptualizes that place—of one’s residence, transit or elsewhere—shapes perceptions of structural change and life opportunities, influencing decision to stay or migrate.

The framework emerged from the conceptual ambitions and methodological approaches of the PACES research team. It provided the conceptual backdrop for the collection and analysis of data on residents and migrants in their communities of origin, along their journey and at destination.¹ In doing so, it relied on four sets of concepts—social transformation and life course; values and social norms; perceptions and expectations; migration and non-migration policies—and two analytical dimensions—the interplay of multilevel factors and decision-making over time and space (see figure 1). Before starting the reflections gained over the course of the project, we briefly introduce all these components.

To begin with, the pillar concepts are based on the Social Transformation approach (ST) developed by de Haas et al. (2020), building on Castles (2010) and incorporating contributions from Zelinsky (1971) and Skeldon. This framework emphasizes the importance of examining how various social dimensions—such as economics, politics, technology, demography, and culture—interact and shape society in unique ways. It recognizes that social change impacts different segments of the population in diverse ways. This structural, or macro, perspective is interconnected with the micro perspective, which includes a **life course** approach (LC) that captures the phases and experiences associated with an individual’s life journey. These intersecting factors, including gender, class, ethnicity, (dis)ability, religion, and sexuality, create multiple pathways influenced by the specific time and place in which life unfolds.

¹ The results of the various field studies are available on the PACES website: <https://www.iss.nl/en/research/research-projects/making-migration-and-migration-policy-decisions>

Figure 1. Temporal Multilevel Analytical framework



Source: Vezzoli et al. (2024)

The second set of concepts links structural and individual levels by incorporating social norms and values, which are often overlooked in decision-making studies. **Values**, and goals, reflect what gives meaning and direction to life and what is central to an individual's value system. **Social norms** are established values adhered to a particular social group. Relevant social norms include those that concern gender, age, behavior of parents and children and also migration. Through the framework, we sought to understand how individuals understood the values and social norms in society and personally, asking people to reflect on (mis)matches between the two.

The third pair of concepts help us understand how people make sense of the world and their position in it at present and in the future. The TMA framework highlights **perceptions**, defined as personal observations and evaluations of one's own circumstances, which focus on the past and the present. **Expectations** encompass beliefs about what will happen—or should happen—in the future. As with the other concepts just described, we consider both the societal and individual level. Thus, we capture two types of expectations: (i) societal expectations which pertain to what a person expects to happen in society, with no specific relation to what the person wants; and (ii) personal expectations which relate to what a person expects will take place in relation to his life, including the expectation of attaining valued goals.

Lastly, policies are considered and approached broadly to acknowledge their relevance in influencing migration decisions. The TMA framework defines **policies** as a set of laws, regulations, procedures, or administrative actions enacted by governments and other public institutions at the local, national or supra-national level. **Non-migration policies** refer to those not originally designed to manage migration, yet they significantly affect individuals' mobility decisions, behaviors, and migration outcomes (Bakewell et al., 2024).

Conversely, **migration policies** are specifically designed to influence the volume, origin, direction, and internal composition of migration flows (Czaika & de Haas, 2013, p. 489).

When we consider the analytical dimensions, the TMA framework considers the interplay of **multilevel** factors, addressing how changes in the country, regional, city, community, family and personal levels influence the decision-making process regarding migration and proposes a spatial-temporal comparative framework.

From the framework, the PACES research team derived nine key questions to generate new knowledge on the mechanisms and the factors that underpin decisions to stay or migrate, and to explore the role of future expectations in decision-making (see Table 1). While the inclusion of factors and mechanisms is self-explanatory, the inclusion of expectations may seem odd. Expectations add an important temporal dimension that has been considered central in migration theories. For example, neoclassical economics studies rely on the notion of 'expected income' at a potential destination to calculate the financial benefit that may justify migration (Borjas, 1987; Harris & Todaro, 1970; Sjaastad, 1962). In this research, expectations go beyond earnings to include a wider array of factors that reflect the expectations that people have of the current location in a broader sense (e.g. regarding the future of the community and their own life), which may explain aspirations to stay or migrate. We sought to observe these three elements—mechanisms, factors and expectations—at the societal and individual levels and at their intersection.

The TMA framework was adopted because of its potential benefits in studying the processes of making decisions to stay and migrate: it is **dynamic** as it allows for the shifting importance of factors as people adapt to social change; it is **implicitly comparative** and suitable for multi-sited research; and disciplinarily and methodologically **flexible**, enabling the collaboration of researchers with different disciplinary backgrounds (sociology, economics, geography, political science, social psychology, public policy) and different methodologies (interviews, surveys, lab-in the field-experiment, case studies). However, it is also inherently complex, raising questions from the onset about the feasibility of bringing together the heterogeneous concepts and mechanisms described above in an empirically manageable way across different sites, methods, and migrant profiles. After its implementation in the field and an analytical phase, we reflect on how the TMA framework performed to explain the emergence and evolution of aspirations to stay or migrate at the individual level.

Table 1. Questions driving research on migration decision-making in the PACES project
Source: authors' elaboration.

Elements shaping aspirations stay or migrate Levels	Mechanisms	Factors	Expectations
Societal	1) How does the changing social context, including migration and non-migration policies, influence the desire to stay/migrate?	4) What societal factors have the most direct/salient impact on the desire to stay/migrate in changing social contexts?	7) How are expectations of future social change connected with the desire to stay/migrate?
Individual	2) How do the life cycle and life experiences influence the desire to stay/migrate?	5) What is the role of personal factors on the desire to stay/migrate?	8) How are expectations of future personal change connected with the desire to stay/migrate?
Interplay	3) How do 1 and 2 interact and influence the desire to stay/migrate?	6) What are the prevailing combinations of factors, at different levels, that interact to produce the desire to stay/migrate?	9) How do 7 and 8 interplay and shape desire to stay/migrate?

3. Concepts

A grounding element of the TMA framework is the notion that migration decision should be conceived as a continuum rather than a discrete event. This perspective frames the understanding of migration decision-making in two ways: first, when we go beyond binary outcomes—migration or stay—we observe how the majority of aspirations belong to a grey in-between area. Second, this perspective opens up opportunities to explore whether different combinations of factors may be associated with specific aspiration strengths, for example what underpins very strong migration aspirations in comparison to ambivalent

migration/stay aspirations. This perspective set the stage for the diverse research components in the project which researchers could easily design.

During the elaboration of the TMA framework, researchers developed a glossary to capture and clearly define the central concepts (Natter and Vezzoli 2024).² Nevertheless, during the project implementation, conceptual differences came to the surface among the researchers and with participants. This is rather common in research and does not deserve particular attention here, with the exception of two key terms that flared up in discussions, raising discomfort across various research phases. The first term is **migration**. As migration researchers, we are familiar with multiple definitions of migration, from those in official statistics to colloquial forms that include travelling, going on an adventure (Jónsson, 2008), and many other colorful expressions. From the start, we decided that we would observe but not study internal migration. Otherwise, aware of this richness but also with the ambition to accommodate a diversity of perspectives and experiences, we did not start with a strict definition of migration. Indeed, when researchers and participants were both referring to **migration**, participants in some African cities understood a very specific type of migration, e.g., internal or irregular or female migration. In the same area of inquiry, questions about migration brokers or facilitators and about the migration journey were strongly context-dependent and intertwined with local practices and community values. Whilst this ‘chaos’ was a challenge, it held educational value as we could observe how terms were colored by local knowledge, inviting questions about local migration histories. For example, in Adama (Ethiopia) questions about migration were automatically answered as if we asked specifically about ‘international migration of women to the Middle East and the Gulf’, a phenomenon that has gained strength in the last 15 years. The gender connotation and the specific destinations applied to this migration strengthened our understanding that, even when migration is commonly discussed, each locality has hidden assumptions of migration that need to be revealed upon embarking on research.

The second concept that posed great challenge was the term **‘transit’**, which we used interchangeably with the term **migrants en route**. With these terms we referred to migrants who left their place of long-term residence irrespective of their migration status or reasons for leaving and spent between 3 months (minimum) and 5 years (maximum) in the current location. It soon became clear that assumptions about transit as a temporary ‘in-between’ space and time (Harvey, 1990) hardly reflected reality, confirming previous research findings (Ahrens & King, 2022; Collyer et al., 2012). In the past, this term has been problematised for different reasons: it assumes that migration has a clear starting and end point, that countries traversed on the way to the destination are places where migrants exclusively transit, leading to their label of ‘transit countries’, and that the migrants who find themselves in these locations are always transiting (Collyer et al., 2012; Halfacree & Boyle, 1993; Missbach & Phillips, 2020). This ignores how migrants often undertake frequent non-linear movements between countries, with often no predetermined destination (Carling &

² The Glossary also included concepts used in the other main PACES research component, which focused on the decision-making process amongst policymakers.

Haugen, 2021; Jung, 2022). Our research confirmed this critique. For instance, migrants in Niger who had indicated they were migrating onward sometime settled in Niger, while migrants in Spain and Italy who had been living in these countries for several years and seemed 'settled' may instead be considered 'in transit' given their precarious living conditions, scant social networks, and most importantly, due to their uncertain policy/administrative status. While being 'in transit' generally refers to being in a **geographical place of passage**, our observations led us to conclude that **transit becomes a life situation** where various factors, particularly migration policies but also host societies' closure to accepting migrants, **keep migrants' life uncertain for extended periods of time**. While uncertainty may be welcomed by some migrants who find that it keeps options open, protracted cases of uncertain living conditions both in origin countries (Dimova & Fromell, 2025) and in countries of destination (Cabezón-Fernández et al., 2026; Mýtna Kureková et al., work in progress) appear to be experienced more negatively.

Beyond the measurement challenges, which saw us adjust the length of stay to ensure harmonious data across the research components, we gained insights that moved towards a contextualized interpretation of migrants who are in transit physically but also passing through the experience of gaining familiarity and becoming embedded into the community of residence. Clearly, vulnerability seems part of 'being in transit' physically or in terms of being unable to control various aspects of life, such as permits and documents, access to housing and public services. This instability was enhanced by unpredictable and lengthy pathways to legalization and barriers in social integration in the sense of intermingled cross-cutting relations with the majority population, learning of the language and moving on with an ordinary life. In this understanding of transit, personal action spaces and understandings of the local context—both in the cities and countries where they reside—can be quite limited. This reflected the realities of many migrants in vulnerable and uncertain legal situation in Italy, Spain and Slovakia who participated in our research. It leads us to a renewed awareness of the unsuitability of the term 'transit migrant' defined purely from the perspective of temporality (3 months-5 years), while retaining the value of understanding migrants in a state of flux as a way to examine the process of transit migration or, alternatively, studying places of transit (rather the imprecise transit country) and the people who inhabit them, temporarily or permanently.

In the coming subsections, we focus on the four sets of concepts that were central in the TMA framework. While they proved valuable, they also presented challenges that required adjustments, as discussed below.

3.1 Social transformation and life course

Migration decision-making is a long-term process that generally matures over time and rarely reflects a single moment in time. In many ways, it is deeply linked to the long-term process that underpins **social transformation and life course**, which are at the core of the TMA framework and have guided PACES research. From this perspective, research team

members could examine how broader socio-economic and political transformations gradually reshape—or at times abruptly disrupt—the balance between aspirations to stay and aspirations to migrate. At the same time, social norms often evolve more slowly, providing continuity and stability in people’s preferences, even amidst profound change. Understanding the interaction between rapid social transformations and more enduring social norms has been central to explaining migration behaviour and has been at the core of some of PACES’ empirical analysis. This two-level analytical vantagepoint brings to light a number of these misaligned processes. On the one hand, the rapid growth of personal life aspirations as education levels increase are contrasted with the failure of local economic conditions to quickly offer what people aspire to. Or the misalignment between norms of reciprocity (at the family level and in the community) and the lack of ability to meet them because of increasing costs of living. On the other hand, social norms and traditions often act as a constraint to rapidly changing aspirations.

By placing attention on the perspectives of research participants – which included both residents and migrants – within this dynamic framework, the empirical research has also captured how social transformations are interpreted, experienced, or sometimes not consciously perceived at all. It is to be expected that people do not mention “social transformation”, “structural change” or “development trajectories” as migration reasons. Rather, they speak about more immediate and familiar concerns: not finding a job after studying, struggling to become independent, not being able to support relatives, delaying marriage or family formation, feeling unsafe, or sensing that the kind of life they value is no longer achievable where they are. In that sense, the researcher’s task is to reconnect these personal accounts to wider processes of economic, political, educational, demographic and cultural change. The framework was useful because it reminded us of the processes that underpin social transformation, which become migration-relevant only when they are expressed as part of people’s own lived experiences and timelines.

This reflection, while valuable, also suggests that **the distinction between social transformation and life course is useful, but has its limitations**. Analytically, it is helpful to separate them. Empirically, however, they are often hard to pull apart. A changing labour market, a new education policy, rising housing costs, insecurity, or shifting gender norms matter because they affect people’s ability to move through expected stages of life: studying, working, becoming independent, marrying, parenting, gaining recognition, or contributing to the household. What matters is not simply that change is taking place, but whether people feel that this change allows them to move forward in life, or instead blocks, delays or redirects their plans. The TMA framework therefore helps move the analysis away from asking whether macro or micro factors matter more. What it shows, more interestingly, is **how broader transformations are made sense of through situated biographies, and how migration or staying can emerge from the fit, or misfit, between social change and personal timing and aspirations**.

At the same time, the adoption of a life course approach that goes beyond conventional indicators such as age, gender, education, or employment, highlighted the importance of

socially expected roles within families and communities, and the tensions that emerge when these roles become unattainable or overly restrictive. Changing educational opportunities and gender expectations, for example, reveal how social transformation reshapes both aspirations and perceptions of belonging and success.

An important reflection from using the TMA framework is that many of the concepts adopted have proven difficult to capture directly in empirical research. The data (transcripts and survey data) require careful interpretation and contextualisation to connect individual narratives to broader structural change. As a helpful tool achieving that, mapping studies about cities (for research conducted in Africa) or specific migrant communities (for migrants interviewed in Europe) were conducted prior to the fieldwork. These served as background material for the respective research teams to familiarize themselves with the development of a city or the characteristics of the respective migrant or citizen (or both) community, to be better able to formulate contextualized questions and to sensitize ourselves to specific realities and experiences. The mapping studies also provided important context for understanding and then interpreting structural characteristics and social changes as a factor in decision-making of migrants and stayers. However, during the data collection, respondents often struggled with questions that elicited the state of society—from infrastructure to healthcare and education—in the present and the past, those questions that sought to understand the expected life phases in the community (life scripts), or even gender differences, while direct questions on values or expected social roles (for men and women, married and unmarried) frequently generated limited or ambiguous responses. This underlines the gap between the analytical categories and questions used by researchers to capture fine-grained dynamics and the ways in which participants themselves understand and articulate their experiences.

Finally, the research also demonstrates how difficult it is to disentangle social transformation, policy environments, and life-course dynamics from one another. Applying the TMA framework therefore means examining migration decision-making across multiple dimensions simultaneously: across time, across different spatial contexts, and across different stages of the life course. In doing so, the framework moves beyond static and cross-sectional understandings of migration and provides a more comprehensive account of how migration aspirations and decisions evolve within changing social, economic, and political environments.

3.2 Values and social norms

The concepts of values and social norms were an important theme in the qualitative and quantitative data collection tools designed in various research components. Capturing values and social norms has been crucial for identifying different stages of social and cultural change within the broader context of social transformation, particularly through an intergenerational lens. The focus on values and social norms, which is often confined to studies in social psychology, sociology, or anthropology, has allowed us to better understand residents' and migrants' interpretations of social transformation, their life

aspirations, and the spatial strategies they employ to achieve those aspirations, even though some aspects are less tangible.

This approach yielded interesting results, allowing us to gain deeper insights into the decision-making process of residents and migrants in Ethiopia, Nigeria and Algeria, and migrants in Italy, Spain and Slovakia. Through the interviews with migrants in Italy, Spain, and Slovakia, we also gained valuable insights into personal and community values that helped us better understand the decisions migrants made during their journeys and assess the strength of their intentions. When comparing values of the host society with the origin society, some identified differences in the strength of the community life (for instance, in Spain in comparison with Nigeria), but there were others who saw similar values, e.g. the importance of family life (in Slovakia and in origin country). Likewise, the urge and value of belonging (to a community, to a group), that was hard to materialize in the context of weak integration mechanisms and limited community-level activities in some contexts, at times led to decision to move on in order to find a place where one “fits better”.

A notable trend in the narratives, shared by both younger and older interviewees, was the increasing materialistic values among younger generations compared to older ones. For instance, in Algeria, residents from Mostaganem and Sétif noted that younger people prioritize ownership of goods (like houses and cars) and leisure activities, reflecting individual aspirations with less emphasis on the communal values centered around familial support. However, we also captured an interesting insight: while many individuals acknowledged this trend in their communities, when asked about their personal values, they indicated health, family, and community, somehow indicating that they themselves held “deeper”, more immaterial values.

Eliciting social norms was the central part of the experiments on social norms and migration policies in Ethiopia and Nigeria. The research team used a well-established methodology in behavioural economics to identify norms that are relevant in migration decision making, with a focus mainly on gender (Krupka & Weber, 2013). Compared to numerous earlier small-scale, context-dependent studies on the links between social norms and migration, this part of the project enabled the measurement of generalizable and comparable social norms across 146 communities in 5 cities Ethiopia and Nigeria. It also allowed these norms to be linked to the migration aspirations and the self-assessed probability of migrating of more than 1200 young adults in these countries.

As part of the open-ended interviews of residents in Ethiopia and Nigeria, we noticed that while participants were able to articulate their individual and community values clearly, many struggled to understand our questions regarding “what do people value in this community” as a way to capture perceptions of social norms. However, once participants engaged with the set of questions on community, personal values and social norms, the questions sparked reflections which prompted them to think critically about their own values and social norms, which, in turn, helped us identify some intriguing findings. For

example, many young people felt that social expectations of getting an education, finding a job, getting married and starting a family were still desirable and they were trying to pursue these life goals, but many found them to be unachievable due to low earnings and high cost of living. As a result, many expressed frustration about their inability to fulfill their socially expected roles and, especially, to start supporting their parents, in accordance with social norms.

Taken together, the quantitative and the qualitative research on migration norms as part of PACES makes valuable contributions to the literature. Earlier literature highlights the influence of migration culture or family norms on migration decisions. The interviews and field experiment within PACES also revealed widespread gendered norms, strong assumptions about what migration means (e.g. irregular migration may be an opportunity or something to avoid depending on the location), and the important role of mothers and fathers in supporting the decision to migrate. Considering migration decisions as a personal and independent choice is a persistent trend across various social positions in the countries of origin. However, most African migrants in Europe denied that family expectations shaped their choice to migrate. They characterized their decision as personal and independent even if often supported by their family (emotionally, financially or practically via providing networks). The qualitative results were corroborated by the quantitative norm elicitation exercise with residents in Ethiopia and Nigeria, which found that although social norms and parental norms do play an important role in individual aspiration formation and migration decision making, the role of personal agency emerges as an important independent driver of behaviour and not just a residue of social pressure.

A general reflection on including questions on values and social norms leads us to an important challenge: how do we assess the contribution of norms and values to migration decisions? Or which values matter and which are irrelevant in migration decisions? Although there are instances when a participant would clearly state that they aspire to stay because parents need to be supported and so they would never want to be away from their parents, the connection is often intangible and, in most cases, much more tenuous. For example, valuing honesty may lead some individuals to reject irregular migration, believing that irregular migration violates the law and justifies governments in destination countries to impose stricter migration barriers. These individuals may not be likely engage in irregular migration. Yet establishing a direct link between honesty, the rejection of irregular migration and decisions to stay or migrate remains difficult.

In sum, despite the challenges encountered, incorporating values and social norms into the analysis improved our understanding of how social and individual factors interplay in migration decisions, suggesting that the value they add deserves renewed efforts to overcome the challenges.

3.3 Perceptions and expectations

In the TMA framework, the two concepts of perceptions and expectations are evaluators of how people feel about current circumstances and their outlook on the future. Perceptions summarize how people feel about the past and the present, and expectations indicate what people imagine as a likely future. We elicited participants' perceptions on very specific factors, such as education, healthcare, social protection, their socio-economic standing, and on more general aspects, such as on the community as a whole, or on their personal life overall. These perceptions are interlinked with future expectations, which we also elicited about specific social aspects, the overall community or their personal life.

PACES researchers applied these concepts to the specific focus of their research, so that in the experiments conducted in Ethiopia and Nigeria, the research team drew on individuals' perceptions of the values held in their communities and expectations regarding the appropriateness of specific migration decisions. African migrants in Italy, Slovakia and Spain were asked about their expectations in realizing their goals in their current location, revealing that many of the migrants interviewed felt that they could fulfil their life aspirations locally, but they perceived important barriers, such as language skills. They were also asked to rate their socio-economic standing in their community of origin in the past, their present socio-economic standing and their future expectations *in situ*. This provided a valuable comparative set of answers with perceptions of the past and present and expectations of the future, across African migrants in the three countries. While we may be inclined to think that once the hardship of the journey is over migrants' living conditions improve in the EU, perceptions of the past were frequently positive in some specific aspects (such as access to housing on countries of origin, community life), and at times much more positive than the perceptions of their current situations.

When considering expectations, we experienced several challenges, particularly among residents in Ethiopia and, to a lesser extent, in Nigeria. While expectations are an in-built navigation system that help us make choices through life (Kahneman, 2011), not everyone may be familiar or comfortable talking about the future. Three specific challenges emerged. First, expectations presented or understood as hope. The natural tendency for local researchers was to understand expectation as hope and in some cases it became clear that in the local language it was difficult to find a good word to translate expectation. This was the case in Amharic and Afan Oromo, where researchers sought to elicit expectations but participants generally expressed their hopes for the future. As a result, expectations were positive, very generic or matter of fact, with statements such as, "Of course the future will be good!".

Second, eliciting expectations also seemed to trigger cultural and, possibly, religious norms about expressing ideas about the future. We found hesitation in vocalizing future expectations, with statements such as "I don't know", "I can't tell the future!" and "Only God

knows”.³ A third observations concerns the relevance of the context in which future expectations were elicited: in a more dynamic context, such as Adama, people's awareness that things may unfold in new directions seemed more active, meaning that people seemed to have already been actively thinking about future change. For example, conditional thinking was common with ‘if...then’ formulations. In locations where people expressed that things did not change, people seemed to disengage with future expectations and fall back on hope for a better future.

Lastly, the difficulty of eliciting expectations seemed to also be connected with participants’ personal situation: people in situations of insecurity—as when access to food and shelter are uncertain—seem to show less interest in thinking about the future. For migrants who are still transiting, in particular, the future may be very compressed. We were surprised to find that even migrants who have lived in Italy for considerable duration (7-8 years) expressed uncertainty with respect to their (mid-future settlement there. Likewise, a considerable large share of student migrants in Slovakia were unable to think ahead in the future, which is a combination of the stage of life, but clearly also of a reflection of a lack of study-work pathway for foreign student graduates that would contribute to a more stable future and its clearer contours. As expressed at the beginning of this section, being ‘in transit’ may mean being in a place of passage but also in a long-term situation of instability and vulnerability. Aside from being a methodological difficulty, being in prolonged precarious situations may impact people’s temporal horizon and ability to think and plan for the future.

What does this mean for decisions to stay and migrate? The work with perceptions and expectations was useful, but not straightforward: we observed problem of wording or translation, expectations expressed as hope, reluctance to speak about the future, and uncertainty and vulnerability not giving a space for planning ahead and developing expectations. The difficulty of working with them tells us something important. The ability to imagine, compare and express possible futures depends on security, resources, social position, and on whether people feel they have some control over what happens next. For migration decision-making, this matters. Aspirations to stay or migrate are shaped not only by how people evaluate their present circumstances, but also by whether they can imagine a future *in situ* in which valued goals become attainable. In this sense, expectations help us avoid a simple comparison between present conditions “here” and imagined opportunities “elsewhere”. They point instead to temporal horizons, uncertainty, and the conditions that make future-oriented thinking possible.

³ In the experiment on social norms (Dimova and Fromell 2025), there researchers elicited the norms using a 6-rank scale rather than an odd-number one so that people could not hide behind the “zero” or the “I don't know”. They had enough variability==6 choices=== but had to always choose something more to the left or more to the right of 0.

3.4 Migration and non-migration policies

Migration and non-migration policies formed part of the analytical focus in the TMA framework, with the goal of exploring their implications for migration norms, migration aspirations and probability of migrating or, rather, enabling or encouraging staying. Migration policies were conceived as a set of meso-level factors because they were largely associated with imposition by external actors (i.e., EU or Member State policies), while non-migration policies were placed closer to the social transformation (macro-level) dimension as they are generally part of development processes and the changing context in which people live. Implicitly, this involved analysing non-migration policies focusing on dynamism - more than in the case of migration policies. Policies might play various roles along the migration decision-making process, i.e. from forming an aspiration to a realized migration to Europe, including policies' role in enabling sustainable and desirable 'staying'.⁴ This aspect was not elaborated further in the initial operationalisation of the framework.

When we refer to migration and non-migration policies, we consider any state-driven policy that can shape migration. While migration policies are easily grasped, non-migration policies require some explanation. A conceptual paper about non-migration policies by a PACES research team focused on transport policy, agricultural policy, social welfare policy and educational policy to map how non-migration policies might affect migration decisions. It systematically evaluated non-migration policies' source of impact, locus, level, and logic of impact on migration decisions and found some evidence that non-migration policies intervene in general living and working environment and both indirectly or directly shape the context in which individuals make migration choices (Bakewell et al., 2024). Although the authors' focus was on four different non-migration policies, their analysis - relying on desk research and review of past works - was embedded in reflecting how these policies are part of or a reaction to social transformation in origin countries, and how they might powerfully change the everyday lives of individuals. This approach was then reflected in questionnaire design that, for example, integrated questions about personal reflections and values in relation to stronger or weaker economic development (e.g. infrastructure development).

Social welfare policies were also explored in a quantitative study that explored access to and generosity of welfare as a factor explaining global migration flows across time (3 decades) and space (bilateral inflows and outflows in a global context) (Guzi & Mýtna Kureková, 2025). Their quantitative approach struggled - due to data limitations - with reflecting more strongly the role of life-course factors, but could zoom in a set of social welfare policies in a fairly granular way. Overall, while non-migration policies have important migration consequences, the main challenge is to identify the range of relevant policies and the difficulty in determining their relative importance (Bakewell et al., 2024).

⁴ Questions about migration and non-migration policies were included in the qualitative field work and surveys conducted in Africa and in Europe.

Migration policies may be easier to identify than non-migration policies, but they can also take various forms and be implemented in various countries: while much of the focus in European context is on entry visas, work permit policies and asylum policies in countries of destination, migration policies exist in countries of origin, where we may observe bilateral agreements and in transit countries where we may see the proliferation of border controls. Regardless of the issuing country, migration policies are intended to be visible and influential in the countries where potential migrants originate or pass through. While past research has shown that limited factual information on migration policies reaches potential migrants, the TMA framework included questions about migration policies to gather empirical evidence of how they perceived the specific policies, including their intended objectives, and if this knowledge played any role in their migration decision. Information campaigns and return policies are two types of policies that were integrated in various components of PACES research (Pécoud & Savatic, 2026, work in progress). It also explored the role of origin country policies, aimed at enhancing regular migration (via reducing the cost of passports and visas or exploring bilateral labor agreements between northern and southern countries) or discouraging irregular migration (via government efforts to reduce the production of fake passports and visas).

Combining both types of policy within the framework has proved very useful, generating four main observations. First, we were able to gather additional evidence on the connections between level of availability and access to services, or social protection, and decision-making processes. In particular, we noticed that even when there is a strong provision of services by the state in the country of origin, people may still aspire to migrate if they do not feel they can realise their life aspirations, as in the case of Algeria.

Second, both migration and integration policies are important in shaping who migrates, but even more so who stays. Among our participants, there were migrants who had lived in other European countries before arriving in Spain, where they were told by friends and family member that they would find it was easier to find a job and obtain 'papers'. Thus, integration policies and policies that grant access to services, such as access to language courses, institutional integration to school system or access to healthcare, can encourage moving both in positive ways (e.g. by enabling future migration through earning a degree acceptable across the EU) or in negative ways (e.g. by limiting opportunities to stay at the end of work permit or study programme). Non-migration policies can contribute to sustainable staying, and the lack of these aspects can contribute to leaving.

Third, considering migration and non-migration policies together helped to identify how, depending on the stage of the migration journey, different policies carry greater weight in the decision-making process. It is important to clarify that research participants were not provided with sets of policies to evaluate or rank. Rather, they were given the space to describe and explain which policies they perceived were relevant for migration.

Fourth, combined, these findings showed that while some elements in the TMA framework are primarily influential in a specific location, e.g., social and migration norms may be more relevant in the community of origin, policies play a role in all locations, with a significant

impact of non-migration policies at origin and relevance of migration policies in destination countries, especially when considering their role in shaping the future migration decision (stay-move onward-return). Furthermore, a different combination of policies may be relevant in each location.

An important conceptual and methodological challenge lies in assessing the range and richness of different migration and non-migration policies, and robustly identifying those that matter more/less than others. Here the contextual interpretation of research participants' narratives was helpful: we took individual stories and showed how these policies (or a specific policy) might become the tipping point for a decision in one way or another. This process, revealed how migration decisions are volatile in responding to and engaging with factors that the individuals cannot control, and often cannot predict (Vezzoli & Jolivet, 2026).

Ultimately, this approach also highlighted how, for the most part, it is not migration policies that carry the most weight in the process, confirming previous research (e.g. Mazzilli, Hagen-Zanker & Leon-Himmelstine, 2023). Further work on non-migration policies along the lines of systematic investigation of how (mechanisms), at what stage of migration decision (for whom) and in what way (direct/indirect) they matter seems to offer a fruitful line for future research.

4. Analytical dimensions and mechanisms

The concepts presented in the previous section were intersected with two analytical dimensions. The first dimension refers to observing how decisions to stay or migrate are influenced by the interplay of factors that analytically belong to different levels. At the macro-level we find sets of societal factors, which we refer to as the social transformation, while at the micro-level we observe personal life occurrences, which we call the life course. Our analysis of meso-level factors mainly focused on the policy realm, social norms (e.g. gendered migration norms), as well as community life and social support.

The second analytical dimension captures the temporal and spatial aspects of decision-making, which assesses and reassesses one's aspirations and decisions to follow through with migration, or to stay, as society and one's life play out. The temporal aspect is extremely important as a lens to observe what changes, what is noticed by people and how these changes influence preferences to stay *in situ* or to go elsewhere. Spatial change is connected with temporal change, particularly for migrants who change their physical and social environment while they are on the move, influencing their decisions to stay, migrate onward or return. Spatial comparisons may also be relevant for residents, especially for those with an active migrant network or have a family migration history.

How did these conceptual propositions work in practice? What were the gains and drawbacks of applying a temporal multilevel analysis framework? The next two sub-sections offer some reflections on the value of these dimensional lenses and the specific mechanisms they helped us observe.

4.1 The interplay of multilevel factors

One of the values of the TMA framework has been its attempt to build on factors that have been found to be empirically relevant in people's decisions to stay and migrate and push the boundaries by trying to see how people understand these societal and personal factors, how they react to changes that affect these factors and how people express their aspirations to stay or migrate amidst change. This meant bringing together factors across different analytical levels that are often considered separately. We had confidence in the feasibility of this approach thanks to the research team's past experience. For instance, Kureková incorporated the role of major social changes (e.g. political and economic transition in the post-communist countries) in explaining micro-level decisions to migrate or to stay in the context of East-West intra-EU mobility (Kureková, 2011), while Jolivet integrated changing macro-, meso- and microlevel dimensions of welfare to understand their role in migration aspirations and decisions in the place of origin, after the first international migration, and after long onward migration trajectories (Jolivet, 2024).

The TMA framework enabled us to easily operationalise the complex interplay of factors at multiple levels that shape migration decision-making. Despite the framework's comprehensiveness, the project's research design and work organisation were structured around a series of related and complementary, yet independent research areas/tasks. While some researchers focused on the interplay of meso- and micro-level aspects, such as on how gender norms influenced individual decision-making, others focused on the interplay of macro- and meso-level factors, to assess how policies are understood in the community and through social networks, and others yet took a closer look at the link between macro-level and micro-level factors, such as how perceptions of social protection influence life and migration aspirations.

While seemingly disparate, when brought together the research components provided **complementary findings that helped the research team draw some overarching conclusions**. For instance, societal factors appear to matter less for residents who aspire to migrate and these continue to matter less along the migration journey until they gain relevance at destination, when they can determine staying or migrating onward. We have also identified that migration and non-migration policies have a greater influence on the decision-making process at the point of origin (i.e. whether to stay or migrate), whereas along the journey, policies have a lesser influence compared to the influence of meso and micro drivers. (Vezzoli et al., 2026). Through this methodological approach, we could derive findings that can travel beyond specific communities or cities, which is **a crucial result for shaping and informing the policy context**.

A second clear benefit of the multilevel analysis was its ability to bring to the fore the fact that **certain changes happen simultaneously but at different speeds** and following different rhythms (Vezzoli, 2022). For example, a lifespan has a shorter duration and a different cycle from economic growth or technological advancement; while we may need to wait a few years to see the result of economic policies, a person cannot wait years to find employment, both to earn an income or to start a career. Socio-economic development plans have little to offer an individual until they actually start to deliver better economic opportunities and standards of living. This applies to many situations such as the desire to form a family and the availability or affordability of housing, childcare services and facilities. By considering at once the macro-level as perceived by people and their life circumstances, needs and desires, we gather valuable observations of the dynamics between socio-economic change, the ability or willingness to wait for improvement *in situ* and the connections between these macro-level factors and the desire to start a life where the desired conditions are already in place.

Thirdly, we identified elements that emerged that were important in the different research components, such as the role of uncertainty in migration decisions. At the macrolevel, growing uncertainty in society may not be directly associated with greater migration aspirations, but migration may begin to enter the realm of possibilities, particularly in societies with a strong migration history, but also in societies where the focus is still on building a good life locally. At the microlevel, we observed the uncertainty and precarious living conditions that underpinned migration aspirations of people who had a **difficult family history since childhood** such as the loss of a parent, being an illegitimate child or being forced by one of the parents into undesired situations, e.g., traditional sacrifice, female genital mutilation, where migration provided an escape from guaranteed hardship and few possibilities for a way out. The lack of human rights and social protection and cultural norms made leaving their community the only viable option. These observations are valuable for research as they are **the source of new potential research questions**.

PACES also explored the mechanisms through which fundamental shifts in the broader social context (for instance, urban economic expansion) trigger changes at the meso- and microlevels in what people do and what they find important to secure livelihoods. We also explore ideas of the good life at the community, family and individual levels. To do so, we combined the TMA framework with insights from developmental and cultural psychology (Greenfield, 2009). This combined framework enabled us to connect macro-level transformations with meso-level shifts in community, family and household relations, and micro-level change in norms, values and behaviours across generations. It enabled us to better understand the mechanisms of adaptation and interpretation that explain how individual aspirations are shaped by social transformations, and ultimately identify patterns in deeply personal and internal processes of interpretation through which social transformation shapes migration decision-making (Jolivet et al., 2026).

Despite these advantages, the TMA framework also presented some real challenges. First, and to start from the technical and smallest, the comprehensiveness of the TMA framework

meant that the questionnaires included large number of questions that tried to capture the participants' past experiences, current living conditions and future aspirations and expectations both in their personal and family life and in their community of residence. The length of the questionnaire proved to be a challenge for data collectors and participants, making some of the answers not as rich as we had hoped. Nevertheless, interview transcripts were valuable as **the long narratives provide answers to specific questions as well as information on how participants made sense of what was happening around them**, making the analysis of the entire interviews enriching and thought provoking for the researchers.

Second, disentangling social transformation from the life course resulted to be much more difficult than generally assumed. As already observed in Section 3.1, the interplay of factors shaping migration decisions was very fluid as participants described societal factors and made them personal by relating them to their family, their own life and connected this 'sense making' to their aspirations to migrate or to stay. For example, some participants with university degrees in Adama (Ethiopia) described the politically-linked difficulties in obtaining government jobs, which have historically been an expected next step for those with advanced degrees. The inability to secure safe government jobs worried their families and stunted their aspirations to secure a livelihood and start a family, raising aspirations to migrate as a means to start a life elsewhere. In this case, is the difficulty of finding a job that pays sufficient wages a societal factor resulting from political and economic reasons or is it the individual's inability to secure a government job? Or is it perhaps a combination of both?

A third limitation of the TMA framework has been to make sufficiently visible the key role of the **meso-level in our visual representations of the framework**. Since the proposal stage, we understood the meso-level as strongly intertwined with both the life course and social transformation components. Furthermore, what is categorized as meso-level varies across discipline in the social sciences. Not explicitly visualising the meso-level in the visual representation of the TMA framework allowed us to remain open to diverse epistemologies and free from limiting categories. Nevertheless, our interview guides, and questionnaires include questions of factors that can be categorized as meso-level factors. The empirical material also showed how (non)migration policies, gender, families, networks, diaspora links, social media, community expectations, information flows and formal or informal intermediaries intertwined and played a central role (Cabezón-Fernández et al., 2026; Dimova & Fromell, 2025; Jolivet et al., 2026). In the future, the meso-level will require more explicit theoretical attention.

Last, making sense of the extensive and rich data and **reflecting on the framework once the data had been collected was difficult**. This was due to the nature of the TMA framework and the purposeful lack of hypotheses to test. On some occasions, this situation led to the temptation of falling back into listing factors that drive migration decisions, which was in direct opposition to the objective of the framework. Overall, however, the PACES material

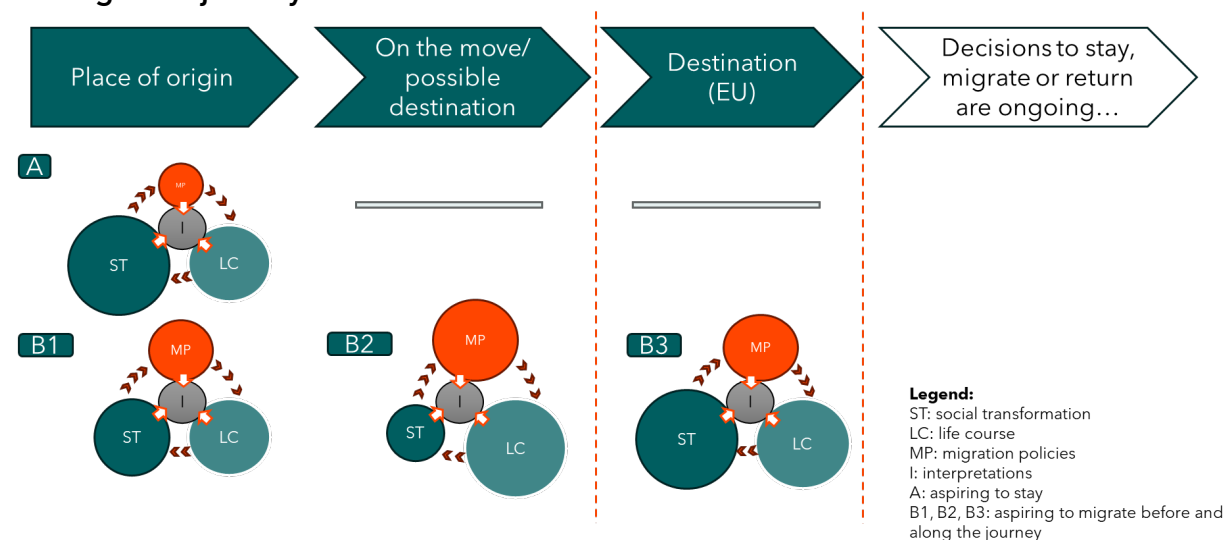
showed that factors do not work in isolation, and that their meaning is not stable across contexts or across the migration journey. **The same factor can push, enable, constrain, delay or redirect migration depending on when it is experienced, where it is experienced, and how it interacts with people's biographies, resources and perceived options.** This becomes especially clear when decision-making is followed across time and space, which we will discuss next.

In sum, we appreciate how the TMA framework enabled research teams to carve out specific research areas that came together in a comparative fashion to answer the main research question. However, more guided focus including the development of some hypothesis, may reduce uncertainty and streamline the process from the data collection to the analysis and identification of the findings.

4.2 Decision-making over time and space

In designing the project's analytical and empirical tools, it was crucial to capture how time and space influence migrants' decision-making regarding their aspirations to stay, migrate, or return. Our approach, which does not focus exclusively on countries of origin and transit or solely on migrants, has enabled us to understand processes of social transformation, particularly in countries of origin, and, to a lesser extent, in countries of transit and potential destination. This perspective revealed that macro drivers—such as structural or contextual factors like access to education or environmental conditions—have a more significant impact on the decision to migrate in places of origin. Their influence decreases during transit through various localities but increases again in the settlement locations of Italy, Spain, and Slovakia. We observe that in areas where individual agency is limited, migrants' awareness of the transit location's contextual characteristics diminishes. Instead, their attention shifts to understanding aspects essential for meeting their immediate daily needs (see Figure 2).

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



Source: Vezzoli et al. (2026, p. 6)

An interesting observation by following decision-making across time and space is an observation about security, which does not mean the same thing at origin, during the journey, and at destination. It may first refer to political violence, livelihood insecurity or family vulnerability; later to bodily safety, exploitation or risks along the route; and later again to legal status, housing, work, mental health or protection from exclusion. Policies also change in meaning. They may be irrelevant to residents who do not aspire to migrate, become practical constraints or opportunities for those considering departure, and later become central to decisions about settlement, onward movement or return. **This is where the TMA framework is most useful: not in identifying yet another set of factors, but in showing how their meaning, weight and interaction change across the migration process.**

To complement the micro-level perspectives developed within specific contexts in different locations in Africa and in Europe, a separate PACES research task used quantitative methodology relying on country-level data (Guzi & Mýtna Kureková, 2025). In retrospect, this task served as a test of the applicability of the TMA framework within a distinct methodological approach. While their empirical analysis was constrained by the available aggregate data, the authors explicitly engaged with the PACES' broader conceptual framework and analytical ambitions in multiple ways. The life-course dimension was considered by empirically testing the different roles that social welfare inclusion might play for male and female migrants and by estimating the models specifically for African migration to European countries. Social transformation aspects were covered by the employed method- panel analysis - which was done on the basis of compiling a database spanning three decades (1990-2020), i.e. considering the respective factors over time. Bilateral migration flows database, which included macro-level data about GDP levels, unemployment rates, migrant networks, changes in migration policies as well as several variables related to social welfare included information for 19 countries, covering global

dynamics and changes, thus reflecting PACES ambition to study migration decision-making across space. Lastly, not only inward migration (inflows) was considered in the analysis but also outward migration (outflows) were taken into account, thus attempting to engage with different stages along migrant decision-making axis.

By covering the span of three decades, this research task contribute a key finding: social welfare policies have a different impact on migration from African countries compared to the global context. On average, these policies are less significant for migrants from Africa. It was also noteworthy that they did not find significant differences between males and females regarding the influence of social welfare policies on migration decisions. Nevertheless, it showed that while these policies matter, their effect is relatively small. The primary drivers of migration inflows and outflows are economic disparities, migration policies, and established networks. Additionally, our findings indicate that welfare states do not hinder return migration; rather, they appear to empower migrants, making them more mobile.

The last set of questions about “expectations” generated valuable insights about what participants imagined unfolding in the future. Aside from the challenges already discussed in section 3.3 about answers about hope rather than expectations, it was also surprising how, in several cases, the narrative may have been very positive, including positive expectations about society and personal life, but the participant would indicate migration aspirations. The opposite was also true, with negative perceptions and expectations and aspirations to stay (Jolivet et al., 2026). While an intriguing set of questions that give insight into people's way of thinking and making decisions, we cannot indicate at this moment that future expectations are associated with decisions to stay or migrate.

In terms of what participants expected, more generally, we observe that often participants expected improvements, at time accompanied with an “of course it is going to be better!”, while in some cases the expectations were for ‘more of the same’, which may imply more underperformance or corruption. Overall, it was rare for people to have negative expectations. This limited range of expectations was a valuable insight in itself as it contrasted with the outcomes of the scenario-building activities carried out in the PACES project, where participants concluded that future developments are to be expected in many areas of social life, at a faster pace of change and with more abrupt disruption to the status quo, with clear consequences on migration patterns (Bonfiglio & Vezzoli, 2026).

A temporal perspective also enabled the exploration of the volatility of aspirations to stay and migrate. While research has shown that migration aspirations, in particular, are often not followed through with plans to migrate and actual migration, research on what leads to this volatility has been limited. The framework’s consideration of past and present perceptions and future expectations provided the platform to explore how people explain their aspirations to stay or migrate at the micro-level. This information, along with data on what people value, the view on social norms on migration, i.e., how they feel about (ir)regular migration, and the reference groups that emerge in their narrative provide, makes it possible for researchers to reflect on the uncertainty of motives and their possible

change, leading to a good understanding on when aspirations would move in the opposite direction. We conclude that even when people indicate strong or very strong aspirations to stay and migrate, their volatility remains important enough to make us question the value of aspirations to stay and migrate (Vezzoli & Jolivet, 2026).

By exploring the sources of uncertainty that underpin volatility in migration aspirations, we also uncovered three mechanisms that help us explain their non-linearity and variability: maturation, reconfiguration and tipping point. **Maturation** mechanisms that explain volatility aspirations (from aspiration to stay to aspirations to migrate or vice versa) by the emergence or completion of an idea or project. For example, getting a diploma. **Reconfiguration mechanisms** linked to changes associated with learning experiences, cumulative events, and transitions over the life course that shape priorities and aspirations over time. **Tipping points** refer to isolated events that lead to sudden shifts in aspirations to stay or to migrate (Vezzoli & Jolivet, 2026).

The strengths of this approach lie in the fieldwork conducted in various African countries, focusing on both residents and migrants. This research has effectively captured perceptions of social transformation, allowing for the identification of diverse speeds of social transformation and cultural change, as previously noted, and how these factors influence decision-making processes. However, one of the main challenges in applying this spatiotemporal design has been the difficulty in conducting a true longitudinal study. Studying migrants in transit presents greater challenges due to the nature of the study's objectives. We were able to identify some of the factors influencing decision-making at both the origin and destination, but much less was captured regarding the transit between countries. Even when great efforts were made to have baseline surveys in Niger, Tunisia, and Italy, followed by subsequent longitudinal waves, we encountered significant challenges. The primary issue was reestablishing contact with migrants six months after the initial contact and again at twelve months. As time progressed, the sample became increasingly diluted, compromising the representativeness of the data. As a result, much of our data provides a snapshot of a specific point in time rather than a continuous record of the factors that influence the decision-making process. What we did in PACES was a step forward, but this methodological issue raises questions about the feasibility of observing changes in decision-making in migrants lives along their journeys without adapting PACES research design. Furthermore, its feasibility is uncertain due to practical as well as political reasons⁵ As a result, analyses fall back on retrospective reconstructions of migrants who recount their circumstances and motives for migration at origin and along the journey.

This brings us to a second reflection regarding our research design the subjectivity and interpretation inherent in the participants' narratives from the fieldwork. Some questions that arise from fieldwork are: How can we effectively encourage people to share their memories of the past? When is this important, and what aspects hold significance for them?

⁵ In the PACES project, we initially intended to collect data in Libya, which became impossible due to instability. Tunisia was selected instead, which also became increasingly impracticable over the course of the project.

Do all individuals contemplate the future in the same manner? Additionally, how do different locations become part of people's awareness and consciousness? While also in this case these challenges are operational in nature, the ability to collect meaningful data is certainly a potential weakness.

Despite these challenges, the TMA framework was very helpful in designing and structuring complex research questions in migration research. Future research should focus on designing methodologies that enable better tracking of migrants, that combine surveys with mobile ethnographies when this is feasible, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the drivers and capabilities within 'transit' countries, and to capture the particularities of cultural settings and their specific perceptions of time and space.

5. Moving forward: final reflections and conclusions

5.1 Main strengths, weaknesses and challenges

Much can be appreciated about the Temporal Multilevel Analysis framework in retrospect. One of its major strengths and contributions has been its conceptualisation of migration decisions as a continuum rather than as a single moment in time, making it necessary to conceptualize decision-making as the outcome of interrelated factors such as individual life trajectories, the reality of and perceptions about the city or country/community of residence, and expectations for the future. Accordingly, the PACES project also achieved a nuanced interpretation about the role of policies, and this was possible because we assessed their relevance across time and space, using different research methodologies and perspectives. The PACES research design, and the fact that the partners continued to collaborate in a horizontal and close-knit group and to have discussions *across* research tasks and components, contribute to mutual learning. This also enabled the reconsideration of results in diverse perspectives and enhanced the development of comparative insights, which are more likely to be transferable and generalisable across empirical contexts, across research components.

Yet, the implementation of the TMA was an important learning opportunity that made us reflect critically on the positionality of us as researchers, mostly informed by Western academia concepts and approaches, and that of our research participants. We realized that the concepts used in Western academia and generally from the researchers' perspective must be 'adapted' better to the different viewpoints of the informants. Not only because of the 'distance' or 'difficulty' that these concepts may entail in terms of their understanding by the key informants or communities they are aimed at, but also because of the informants' lack of 'identification' with them. In some cases, concepts such as "transit" or even "migration trajectory" have not been understood by the research participants.

Despite the comprehensiveness and advantages of the TMA framework, some partners experienced that its application in the field did not sufficiently reflect important factors in migration, such as the environmental dimension and the meso-level. This reflects an incongruence between this framework's conceptual breadth and its implementation by researchers with specific perspectives, disciplinary backgrounds and areas of interest. In practice, researchers could focus on specific areas – such as on social norms or on specific policies – by adopting the broader setup – past, present and future across multiple levels. However, this comes at the expense of the comparability of the data. A focus on (non)migration policies in Europe came at a price of more information on the origin community and the migration journey simply due to the sheer length of the questionnaire and interviews. On the other hand, interviews carried out in Africa could have had explored further the role of social media and networks.

A final reflection was that the complexity of the TMA framework turned out to be excessive and somewhat of a limitation for some research components. Its complexity was less helpful when homing in on more specific factors, such as the role of information campaigns in origin countries in shaping migrant decisions (Pécoud & Savatic, 2026). Furthermore, the framework is not suited to arrive at causal explanation. This, however, was not its ambitions as its strength lies in providing a flexible and adaptive framework to analyze, contextualize and interpret a multi-factor phenomenon, such as migration.

5.2 What did we learn?

Looking back at the implementation of the TMA framework, perhaps the most important lesson is that its value did not lie in proving that migration decisions are complex. We knew this already. Nor did it simply confirm that economic, political, social, personal and policy-related factors all play a role. This is now a fairly established point in migration research. What the framework helped us see more clearly is how these factors become relevant in people's lives, at particular moments, in particular places, and through particular biographical situations. In other words, the main learning was less about adding new factors to the analysis than about understanding how their meaning and relative importance shift over time and across the migration journey.

One lesson that came out strongly is that social transformation is difficult to capture in direct connections to aspirations to stay and migrate. People usually speak about not finding a job after studying, not being able to start an adult life, not seeing a future for their children, feeling unsafe, being unable to support relatives, or seeing expectations around gender, family and success change around them. This means that social transformation only becomes visible analytically when it is connected to people's lives from a life course approach. In practice, we often had to pass through the personal in order to understand the structural. The framework was useful precisely because it pushed us to make this connection, but it also showed that keeping social change and individual biographies too

neatly separated can be misleading. They are distinct concepts, but in people's narratives they are deeply entangled.

A second learning concerns the changing relevance of factors along the migration process. At origin, aspirations to stay or migrate often appeared to be shaped by the relationship between local change, personal aspirations and expectations about the future. But once migration became a more concrete project, people's attention often shifted. Information, money, routes, risks, contacts, legal options and migration policies became more important. During the journey, especially in situations of insecurity or vulnerability, decision-making could become much more immediate and pragmatic. Broader social or political conditions did not disappear, but they were often pushed into the background by urgent concerns. At destination, the wider context became important again, though in a different way: legal status, access to work, welfare, language learning, housing, education, healthcare and social inclusion shaped whether people imagined staying, returning or moving onward. This was one of the clearest benefits of thinking about migration as a process rather than as a single decision.

The work also helped us better understand the role of policies. One of the points that became clearer is that migration policies are not always central at the beginning of the process. For many residents, migration aspirations seem to emerge first from life circumstances and from the perceived impossibility of realising valued goals locally. Migration policies become more relevant later, once migration has already become imaginable or desirable. They may then shape where people go, how they move, whether they move regularly or irregularly, and how risky or feasible migration appears. It is even possible to state that the impossibility of migrating regularly is making migration policies even more invisible and irrelevant as potential migrants bypass the possible pursuit of regular migration pathways, knowing already that they will be rejected. At the same time, non-migration policies often matter in more indirect but very powerful ways. Education, employment, welfare, agricultural policy, housing, transport, infrastructure and access to services shape everyday life and therefore shape the conditions under which staying becomes possible, attractive, frustrating or untenable. This is a reminder that a focus on migration policy largely disregards a wide range of other policies that are more impactful on migration aspirations.

Some of the most interesting insights also came from what was difficult to study. Values, social norms, perceptions and expectations were central to the framework, but they were not always easy to elicit. Expectations, in particular, were often expressed as hope, faith, uncertainty, or reluctance to say too much about the future. This was not only a methodological problem. It told us something important about the different conditions under which people imagine the future. For some participants, especially those living with insecurity, legal uncertainty or prolonged precarity, the future was not an open field of planning. It was much more compressed, shaped by immediate concerns such as shelter,

income, documents, food, safety or care. This suggests that aspirations are not only about what people want. They are also about whether people are in a position to imagine, compare,

The framework gave considerable attention to policies, but the empirical material repeatedly pointed to the role of families, migrant networks, diaspora ties, community expectations, social media, brokers, intermediaries and information flows. These do not simply sit between the structural and the individual; they actively shape how people understand their options. They influence what people know, what they believe to be possible, which risks they consider acceptable, and how they interpret success or failure. Future work with the TMA framework should make this level more visible, not by adding yet another list of factors, but by treating it as a set of mechanisms through which aspirations are formed, sustained, redirected or abandoned.

5.3 Suggested next steps

The TMA framework is probably most useful when it is not treated as a checklist to be applied mechanically. Its strength lies in the discipline it imposes on the analysis: asking when factors matter, for whom, in relation to which life circumstances, and at what point in the migration process. But the project also showed the practical limits of working with such a broad framework. It requires strong contextual knowledge, local partners, time for familiarisation, careful translation of concepts, and methods that can connect rich narratives with comparative analysis. In that sense, one of the main lessons of PACES is also methodological: if we want to move from factors to mechanisms, we need research designs that give enough time and space to understand how people themselves connect change, biography, policy and future possibilities. What are the next steps for the Temporal Multilevel Analysis Framework then? Its further elaborations could focus more on understanding the mechanisms of *how different factors matter* in terms of their relative importance and *how they interact and interrelate*. This would require additional time to delve into the mechanism, and possibly also different methodologies to be able to better connect the different analytical levels and identify the sequence and relative explanatory power of different levels or factors (e.g. QCA analysis; multilevel econometric modeling). Another step could be to make more explicit the role of macro-level factors and the environmental transition as dimensions in the decision-making process to observe in future field work with migrants and stayers. Lastly, this framework could be a valuable pedagogical tool for students of migration. Likewise, it can work as an interdisciplinary tool for migration scholars, who can situate and position their research (e.g. at different levels), and thereby engage in dialogue more easily with each other. Between its pedagogical and applied research function, it seems that the TMA framework provides sufficient benefits to retain and adapt for future research and teaching on decisions to stay and migrate.

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