

## **(Ir)Reversible Journeys: First Migration Drivers and Return Aspiration and Capability**

Cecilia Fortunato, Elena Ambrosetti<sup>1</sup>

### **CONTEXT & AIMS**

Drawing from a qualitative fieldwork focusing on migrants' perceptions of Europe and aspirations for future, the study aims to disentangle the drivers of first migration and their impact on return decision-making. The research has been conducted within the framework of the EU-H2020 Perceptions<sup>2</sup> project, involving 26 partners from 16 transit and destination countries (2019-2023). Scope of the project was identifying and understanding the role of narratives, images and perceptions of Europe held by migrants and persons intending to migrate. Starting from first migration drivers and the possible mismatch between initial perceptions and lived experiences in Europe, we aim at exploring what influences, negatively or positively, the aspiration and the actual capability of return. Our perspective focuses on the individual space of action in the complex intersection between agency and external constraints, allowing for more nuanced and realistic migration categorizations. Given a growing *securitization* paradigm in migration governance (Vezzoli and de Haas, 2020; Czaika & de Haas, 2017; Ceyhan and Tsoukala, 2002), we build our research on the 'aspiration-capability framework' (de Haas, 2014; Carling, 2002; Carling and Schewel, 2018), attempting to explain micro-level migration processes interacting with wider structural settings (institutional, political and economic assets), and meso-levels factors (community, social and family norms, local information environment). The framework introduces concepts like the '*aspiration to migrate*', referring to the conviction that migration is preferable to non-migration on the base of "culturally-defined life projects"; the '*migration ability*', referring to the "context-specific opportunities and obstacles that determine whether an individual is able to convert an aspiration into reality" (Carling 2002); '*human agency*', defined as an individual's ability to "shape his life" (Barker, 2005), or having a significant level of choice over his vital events (Bakewell 2010; Sen 1999), and the '*involuntary immobility*', that is the aspiration to migrate but the inability to do so. In this perspective, all forms of migration may be conceived of as a function of aspirations and capabilities, where the ability to migrate or to stay are important 'freedoms' embedding intrinsic values and instrumental meanings. We draw our research from the assumption that perceptions of "here" and "there", intended as geographical imaginaries, subjective conception of locations, spaces, countries and the people inhabiting these physical spaces, are shaped by macro-structural changes in origin countries and the migration experience and contribute to form aspirations. However, meso or macro-structural constraints may bound capability, that is the freedom to decide where to live (Sen, 1999), decomposed in positive liberties (choice, agency, freedom, resources) and negative liberties (external constraints) (de Haas, 2021). The contribution of the qualitative perspective through in depth interviews is a first step in the challenging task of complex topics' conceptualization, as it is the case for aspirations and capabilities of return. It helps understanding and exploring heterogeneity of trajectories from individual biographies, avoiding a priori standardizations procedures, accessing the perspective of the subject of the study, catching his mental categories and his motivations, expressed in his own words (Corbetta, 2014). To address this complexity, we attempted to answer the following research questions:

- RQ1. What is the perception of home country and how does this contribute to the aspiration of return?
- RQ2. How can migration drivers be a predictor of return aspiration and capability?
- RQ3. What role do macro-level and meso-level factors play in in shaping the capability to return?

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<sup>1</sup> Sapienza University of Rome, cecilia.fortunato@uniroma1.it, elena.ambrosetti@uniroma1.it

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## DATA & METHODS

Qualitative fieldwork has been conducted in winter/spring 2021 across 12 countries of origin, transit and destination<sup>3</sup>. The survey included 101 individual semi-structured interviews to a structured sample of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees from 36 top countries of origin, arrived in Europe after 2015, recruited through practitioners' networks, selected on the base of gender (approximately half male and half female) and migration status (refugees/asylum seekers or migrants). We adopted a specific version of semi-structured interviews, namely problem-centred interviews (PCI), characterized by open questions along with a list of key questions on socio-demographic characteristics and the migration process.

We investigated perceptions of sending, receiving countries and Europe and main motivation for migration through the following two questions: *i) What are your ideas, images, information about EU (or about country of destination)? ii) Why did you decide to migrate to Europe (or to the country of destination), for what reasons?*

Aspiration and capability of return have been explored through the following two questions: *i) What is your current perception of Europe and your origin country? ii) What are your future plans?*

In order to manage and analyse such a large corpus of transcripts, a Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) was applied that combines elements from both the quantitative and the qualitative research traditions, systematically describing the meaning and reducing complexity of qualitative textual data and identifying a predefined set of relevant topics (Schreier, 2013). This is done by assigning parts of the material to the categories of a coding frame. Namely, the issues addressed in the analysis are: individual socio-demographic information, information about the migration process, main reason for migration, perception of Europe prior to arrival, source of information, mismatch between wishes-reality, assessment of own migration experience, future plans.

## RESULTS

According to the aspirations-capabilities framework, results show that there is never a single narrative behind the decision to migrate. Drivers of migration are always multifaceted and interdependent, relating to different life spheres that coexist in different contexts. Human rights' protection, safety, freedom and self-determination are the main motivations for migrants in our sample. The prevalence of external factors (e.g. governments' behavior, political instability, migration regulations), general negative conditions (e.g. violence, war, weak economy etc.) and person-specific threats in the country of origin (persecution and safety concerns) highlighted a major role of push factors over pull factors.

Analyzing ideas, images, and information held by migrants on the origin country, perceptions can be divided into two main frames: the resignation for an idea of perpetual immobility on one hand, and the hope for a brighter future on the other hand, providing contrasting feedbacks on return aspirations, appealing to the idea that conditions at home may be overcome by country's development or migrant's life improvements. A negative perception of home country is based on the idea of unchangeable contexts, poverty-place bounded, with lack of opportunities and social mobility. A positive perception is sustained by the importance of living in a full legal way as citizens of the country, and by important factors like community, family networks and sense of belonging. Moreover, several migrants show a certain degree of awareness on the potential

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<sup>3</sup> Algeria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Egypt, Germany, Greece, Italy, Kosovo, Morocco, Spain and UK

development of home countries in terms of wealth, resources, young bulge, secularization process and family models' transition.

Related to the perceptions of European countries, before the migration experience migrants often view Europe as a homogeneous and unified space, especially in terms of laws, social policies, economic and political systems. Most migrants hold an idealised vision of Europe that in general, is overly optimistic, imagined as a utopian space described also through religious symbolism ("heaven", "promised land", "salvation", "safe harbour"). This view goes along with high expectations of wealth, prosperity and fulfilment. Disparities between living standards in Europe and most sending countries accentuate the positive aspects that life in Europe yields. However, legal status and bureaucracy, regular job inaccessibility, exploitation, discrimination, racism, lack of informal economy and housing system, lack of social networks and family support are some of the key aspects of a negative idea of destination and a re-evaluation of origin country. In case of mismatch between migrants' expectations and experiences, that is aspects of life in destination country that migrants were not expecting to find on their arrival, we identify a higher proportion of migrants with high aspiration of return.

We then analyze aspirations behind the first migration, i.e. migration' drivers. We can identify individual goals and family-strategy goals. In the first domain, individual goals, the aspiration of escaping poverty and economic opportunities, job/education opportunities and self-determination and realization can be categorized as positive and spontaneous and don't provide suggestions in terms of the eventual aspiration of return. However, the aspiration of first migration for many interviewees has been "forced" by the will of escaping family or community control (mainly because of religion, political and sexual orientation) and by the idea of higher level of security and human rights' protection in destination country. This compelled aspiration for first migration suggests that self-determination and escaping family and community control at home can be negatively linked to return aspiration. In some origin countries this appears more relevant than other (Cameroon, Nigeria, UAE). The second domain, family strategy goals, can provide different bases for return aspirations: on one hand, family support at home through remittances and investments (houses, enterprises, lands) in the origin country, as reported by almost all the interviewees, could be linked with a positive aspiration to return; on the other hand, often migrants report the wish to reunite family in Europe and give more opportunities (included health assistance) to other family members, with consequent lower aspiration for return.

Analysing the experiences lived in Europe and future plans, we can finally provide an idea of the actual capability of return. The latter is strictly connected to the capability of first migration from the origin country and of further migration once living in the country of destination, as described by Carling (2002) with the concept of (in)voluntary (im)mobility. Macro-level factors (national and international law and legal status, geopolitics and government relationships) play a major role in shaping the capability of return. More specifically, the impossibility to remain in country of origin can be the consequence of macro-level constraints and negatively associated with the capability of return. In terms of policy, humanitarian and asylum protocols (EU border and migration policies, e.g. Dublin treaty), the iter to obtain regular status in destination and political instability and administrative inefficiency in origin can be negatively associated with the possibility of return. On the other hand, the difficulties experienced in entering the country of destination, due to policy restrictions to immigration may discourage migrants' return and hence push them into permanent settlement. In terms of politics, political instability and violent militia (Cameroon, Nigeria), military (lifelong) enlistment (Eritrea, Yemen, Turkey) and the general absence of fundamental rights' protection (Brasil) have been pointed

out from migrants as a reason for their impossibility of return, despite their aspirations. In terms of geopolitical assets, international relations and conflicts, bilateral agreements, historical and post-colonial ties, cultural ties and regional economic systems may facilitate (as well as impede) return and circular migration. In our sample we could identify several cases of migrants coming from “regional hubs” of countries promoting circular migration or, at least, facilitating intra-mobility (e.g. Nord-West African countries, Turkey/Syria, Turkey/Bulgaria/Kosovo, Syria/Iran, Horn of Africa/Yemen/UAE). Moreover, conflicts and political instability in origin country may affect migrants’ aspirations and capabilities even in transit/destination (Syria, Turkey, Kurdistan). Finally, conservative environment, censorship and lack of freedom of expressions in country of origin are negatively associated with return aspirations and capability.

In our conclusions we highlight the challenges of separating agency from structure and permanent returns from circular migration and transnationalism. The first point can be addressed by the implementation of indicators to operationalize meso and macro key concepts and constraints to migrants’ aspiration and capability of return. For instance, it could be of great interest trying to understand the temporal dimensions of aspirations lying on information exposure (beyond internet penetration index) and migrants’ knowledge (e.g. understanding of global and local phenomena). Challenges in micro-level analysis because of cosmology complexity demand a higher adoption of qualitative perspective through explorative interviews implementing ethnosurveys with multilevel analysis, quantitative and qualitative data, retrospective event history, and prospective plans.

Qualitative approach should go along with an increase of the academic interests in return dynamics through longitudinal surveys for biography monitoring and theoretical hypothesis testing.

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