

Formal and Informal Support in Shaping Refugees' Mobility Intentions

Long abstract for European Population Conference 2026

Background and aims

The so-called “welfare magnet hypothesis”, taking the roots from the Borjas’s (1999) seminal study, posits that migrants, particularly the less-skilled ones, are attracted to the destinations offering generous welfare provisions. A considerable body of research has tested the relationship between welfare generosity and migration decisions in different contexts, providing mixed evidence. For instance, recent large-scale, cross-country studies (Müller, 2023; Diop-Christensen & Diop, 2022) have consistently rejected the idea that migrants are primarily drawn to welfare-rich contexts. One-country case studies, using administrative data and employing quasi-experimental approaches, either provide evidence in favour of the welfare magnet hypothesis (Denmark: Agersnap et al., 2020; Austria: Huber & Dellinger, 2022) or show that immigrants do not appear to target destinations with relatively higher benefit levels (Switzerland: Ferwerda et al., 2023). Overall, empirical evidence on the role of welfare in shaping migration decisions remains limited and understudied.

First, most studies focus on general populations of immigrants, with less attention paid to the flows of refugees (exceptions are Ortensi & Barbiano di Belgiojoso, 2022; Huber & Dellinger, 2022; Di Iasio & Wahba, 2024; Diop-Christensen & Diop, 2022). Compared to migrants in general, refugees represent a particular case. Ongoing instability in refugees’ countries of origin typically impedes return migration (Kibreab, 2003; Klinthäll, 2007), while it can increase the likelihood of onward migration. At the same time, refugees face stronger constraints in their mobility, as moving to another EU country becomes possible only after obtaining a stable legal status. Moreover, migration driven by forced displacement represents a highly stressful event that may reduce the willingness to move again.

Second, most analyses rely on aggregate indicators of welfare generosity - such as public social expenditures or composite indices - rather than individual-level data, failing to account for actual access to welfare benefits. This poses a significant limitation, as when attempting to access host country welfare systems, refugees may encounter substantial barriers, including not being able to meet eligibility criteria based on legal status, residency length, or work history (Bloch & Schuster, 2005; Morris, 2002), lack of linguistic and bureaucratic knowledge (Brekke & Brochmann, 2015; Morrice et al., 2021), and experiences of discrimination (Valtonen, 2008).

Finally, most studies examining the welfare magnet hypothesis have concentrated on immigrants' initial destination choices. Meanwhile, the literature focusing on the geographical movements of refugees consistently underlines the complexity and non-linearity of their migration trajectories. Rather than being limited to a single, one-time relocation to a host country, these journeys often involve onward migration as a way to address “dissatisfaction with the outcome of the initial migration process” (Ahrens et al., 2016, p. 96) or as a part of a pre-planned strategy aimed at reaching a preferred destination (van Liempt, 2011).

While welfare provisions are often not easily accessible to refugees, other forms of financial support that do not imply eligibility requirements - such as support from nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) and migrant social networks - may be particularly relevant for understanding their migration intentions. Several studies testing welfare magnet hypothesis underscore the fact that social networks, rather than state support, serve as the main pull factor for economically vulnerable immigrants (Di Iasio, V., & Wahba, 2024; Ferwerda et al., 2023; Boland et al., 2024). These networks help orient onward migrants within new contexts and facilitate access to welfare schemes, public benefits, labour and housing markets, as well as community organisations (Della Puppa et al., 2021). At the same time, little is known about the financial dimension of support provided by social networks. The evidence regarding the role of financial support from NGOs in shaping refugees’ onward migration decisions is even more limited.

To address the gaps and limitations outlined above, this study aims to analyse the impact of different forms of financial support received by refugees in Italy on their intentions to remain in Italy or migrate elsewhere. Italy represents a particularly insightful case for studying onward migration

dynamics, given its role as both a primary entry point and a transit country for asylum seekers due to its geographic position in the Mediterranean (Della Puppa and Sanò, 2021).

The study addresses three key research questions: 1) Does the receipt of formal (from the state) and semi-formal (from NGOs and other private institutions) reduce the refugees' intention to leave Italy? 2) Does informal support (relatives in the country of origin, Italian friends, foreign friends) decrease the likelihood of refugees and asylum seekers to leave Italy? 3) Is the impact of different types of support mediated by the residence status, as well as by other factors, such as living conditions, employment status and Italian language proficiency?

Data and methods

The analysis draws on ItRAS survey, conducted in nine Italian regions between March and August 2024 within the AVRAI (Assessing the vulnerability of refugees and asylum seekers in Italy) research program. The survey targeted refugees, holders of subsidiary or temporary protection (the latter introduced following Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022), asylum seekers with a pending request, and beneficiaries of national protection schemes such as “humanitarian” or “special” permits. After excluding missing cases on the variables used in the analysis, the final analytical sample comprises 1,301 observations.

The dependent variable is self-reported mobility intention for the 12 months following the survey, distinguishing three categories: 1 “Remain in Italy” (reference category), 2 “Move to another country (including to another EU country, outside of EU, go back to the country of origin)”, 3 “No plans (doesn't know, doesn't reply)”. The independent variables used in the first step of the analysis are the two dummy variables indicating whether an individual received formal or informal financial support correspondingly. In the second step, these are replaced by six more detailed indicators specifying the source of support: from public institutions for poor households (allowances, bonuses, etc. from Municipality, Region, National Government); private institutions/organizations and the third sector (Caritas, parishes, associations, NGOs, etc.); family/relatives living in the country of origin or in other countries; Italian friends/acquaintances; foreign friends/acquaintances and/or compatriots; other type of support.

To model migration intentions, we use multinomial logistic regressions. In the first step, we estimate whether the probabilities to move to another country and the probability of having no plans for onward migration rather than remaining in Italy are associated with receiving formal or informal types of support. In the second step, we estimate the models using detailed indicators of financial support. In both steps, we implement three nested models. The first controls for sex, birth cohort, and education. The second adds legal status to assess whether it mediates the effect of different types of financial support. The third further controls for employment status, living arrangement, Italian language proficiency, and type of dwelling.

Results

Figure 1 shows the beta coefficients, expressed in relative risk ratios, from the first step of the analysis focusing on the role of formal and informal types of support in refugees' migration intentions. Formal financial support is negatively associated with the likelihood of intending to move to a third country rather than remain in Italy. However, the coefficient is not statistically significant and tends to get closer to zero as we introduce mediating variables. Formal financial support also reduces the uncertainty about the future plans, and this effect appears to be statistically significant even after introducing additional control variables. In contrast, informal financial support is positively associated with intentions to leave Italy. Although this effect decreases in magnitude after controlling for legal status, employment, living arrangement, Italian language proficiency, and housing conditions, it remains statistically significant. A positive association is also found between receiving informal financial support and uncertainty about the future plans. However, this effect is of a smaller magnitude compared to intentions to leave Italy and it loses statistical significance once mediating variables are introduced.

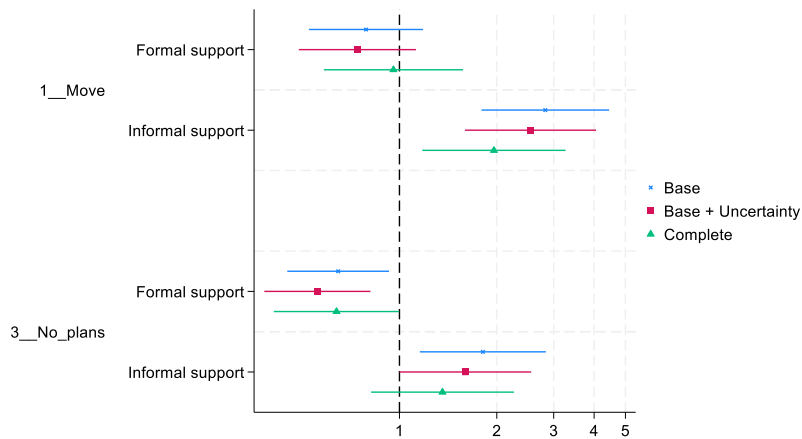


Figure 1. Impact of formal and informal financial support on mobility intentions of refugee. Beta coefficients expressed in relative risk ratios with 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 2 shows the beta coefficients, expressed in relative risk ratios, from the second step of the analysis considering the detailed indicators of formal and informal financial support. Support from public institutions for poor households has no impact on the intentions to move to a third country but reduces the uncertainty about the future plans; the latter effect remains statistically significant even after controlling for mediating variables. Support received from private institutions/organizations and the third sector is negatively, though not statistically significantly, associated with both outcomes. Among the different types of informal support, the most influential ones for onward migration intentions are those received from the friends, both Italian and foreign. However, the impact of financial support received from Italian friends loses statistical significance once employment status, living arrangement, level of Italian language, and type of dwelling are controlled for. These two types of support are also positively associated with the uncertainty about the future plans, although the coefficients become not significant after accounting for mediating factors.

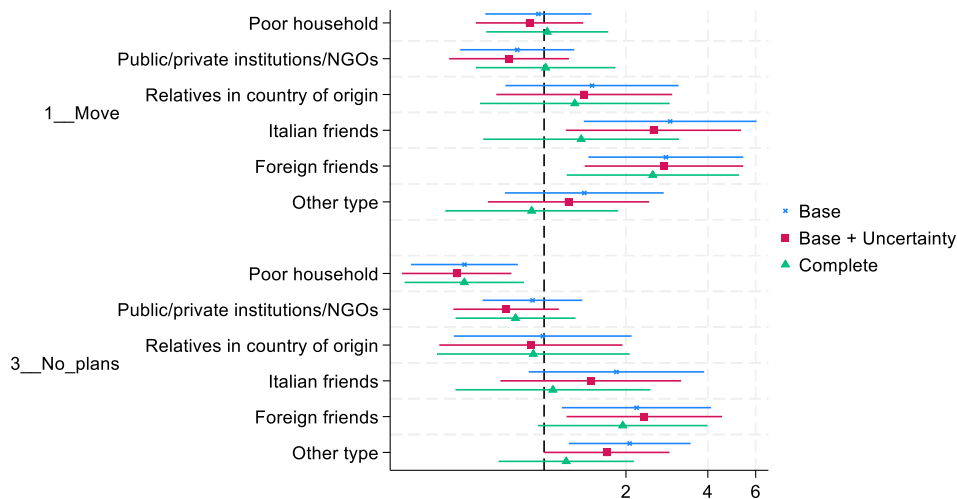


Figure 2. Impact of detailed forms of financial support on mobility intentions of refugee. Beta coefficients expressed in relative risk ratios with 95% confidence intervals.

To conclude, our study does not support the welfare magnet hypothesis among refugees in Italy, reinforcing evidence that social networks, rather than state support, play a central role in shaping mobility decisions of economically vulnerable immigrants (Di Iasio, V., & Wahba, 2024; Ferwerda et al., 2023; Boland et al., 2024). Furthermore, the results suggest that legal status and living conditions (employment status, living arrangements, dwelling conditions, knowledge of Italian) mediate the impact of formal and informal support. However, results tend to be widely confirmed also including these variables.

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