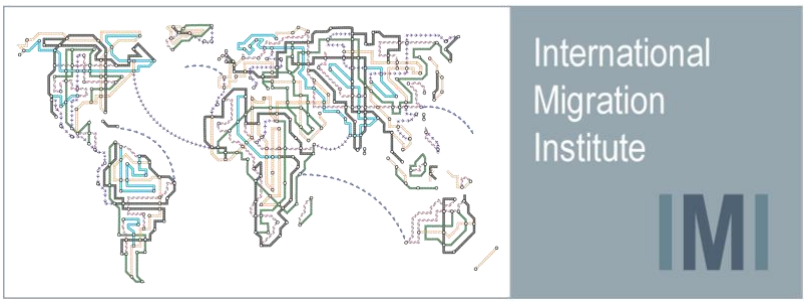

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Preaching to the Choir:

The Impact of Restrictive Migration Policies and Information Campaigns on Aspirations to Migrate

Antoine Pécoud & Filip Savatic

PACES Project Working paper No.10

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Abstract

To what extent do restrictive migration policies and information campaigns about the dangers of irregular migration shape people's aspirations to migrate? While destination states in the Global North increasingly seek to stop and discourage irregular migration through securitized and externalized policies alongside campaigns raising awareness about the risks of irregular routes, the extent to which these achieve their goal of depressing migration aspirations remains largely unknown. Building upon frameworks regarding migration "drivers" and "aspirations and capabilities," we argue that migration aspirations are primarily shaped by contextual and personal circumstances, while policies and information about risks play only a secondary role. Their impact will therefore depend upon people's prior aspirations: those with strong desires to migrate will be undeterred by policies and information, while those committed to staying will be reinforced in their decision to remain. Only a marginal group of undecided individuals may be influenced by policies and information, and primarily towards avoiding irregular pathways rather than abandoning migration altogether. We test this conceptual model empirically through 243 semi-structured interviews of longstanding residents across six localities in Algeria (Mostaganem and Sétif), Ethiopia (Adama and Kebri Beyah), and Nigeria (Abuja and Osogbo). Our findings support the framework: the stronger one's aspirations to migrate, the less likely that policies and information campaigns dampen people's desires or influence their thinking. Overall, our results suggest that current policies and information campaigns aimed at deterrence largely fail to achieve their stated objective of significantly reducing migration aspirations.

Keywords: migration aspirations, migration information campaigns, migration drivers, securitization, externalization, aspirations and capabilities framework, migration policies, international migration, irregular migration, Africa, Algeria, Ethiopia, Nigeria

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1 Introduction

Since the end of the Cold War, prominent migrant destination states in the Global North have increasingly adopted restrictive and coercive policy measures in an ostensible attempt to stop the crossing of their borders by individuals without any prior authorization (including those potentially seeking asylum). This "securitization" of migration takes numerous forms, from reinforced border controls, to the detection, detention, and deportation of individuals with an irregular status, to sanctions for non-migrants who assist or abet "irregular migration" (including through the criminalization of humanitarian assistance), and beyond (de Haas, Natter, and Vezzoli 2018; EUFRA 2014; Savatic 2021). These policies are promoted by, and reinforce, public discourses which frame migration as a security threat. They are also directly tied to the "externalization" of migration control, understood as the development of inter-state partnerships to prevent the onward migration of persons located in countries of origin or transit (Menjivar 2014). This involves the reinforcement of state capacities to detect, detain, and deport migrants, the facilitation of returns—including of third-country nationals who only transited a state—and the financing of other programs that aim to disincentivize emigration by bolstering local economic opportunities (Hyndman and Mountz 2008; Lavenex 2006; Reslow 2019). Pressure from the Global North exerted through externalization has, in turn, fueled the securitization of migration policies across the Global South.

In tandem with increasingly coercive migration governance, information campaigns (ICs) have become a commonly implemented policy tools worldwide, and especially in the deterrence and externalization strategies put in place by European states in Africa and the Middle East (Alpes and Sorensen 2015; Heller 2014; Maâ, Van Dessel, and van Neste-Gottignies 2023; Watkins 2025). The core objective of these campaigns is to diffuse messages about the dangers of "illegal" (or "irregular") migration in order to disincentivize individuals from emigrating in such a manner. Although different forms of ICs regarding migration have existed since the 1990s, they have grown in prominence in the past two decades together with the adoption of securitized and externalized migration policies. States and institutions of the Global North have increasingly financed the implementation of such campaigns across the Global South; those of the Global South have in certain cases themselves launched campaigns, in line with the growing securitization of their own policies. While not explicitly coercive, ICs aim at preventing migration through an emphasis on the risks of "illegal" routes, thus making them a mechanism for a form of psychological deterrence.

Despite these developments, there remains significant debate as to the effectiveness of policies which aim to deter individuals from leaving their current places of residence. Do they shape migration aspirations and increase the overall immobility of targeted populations? Why might they influence certain individuals, but not others in similar circumstances? While securitization and externalization have been criticized for bolstering authoritarian governance and for undermining fundamental human rights across both the Global North and Global South (Micinski and Norman 2026; Savatic et al. 2024), it remains unclear whether they achieve their central ostensible objective of deterring (irregular) migration. With respect to restrictive policies, there is extensive evidence that they primarily trigger categorical, spatial, or temporal substitution effects (Czaika and de Haas 2013, 2016; de Haas 2023; Mesnard et al. 2024), i.e. leading individuals to, respectively, switch the type of visas they request, shift to different migratory routes or abandon plans to return home, or rush or delay their planned migrations abroad. Policies thus fail to stop (irregular) migrant arrivals, which is reflected in the ongoing rise in both regular and irregular migrations worldwide (Frontex 2026; Gramlich 2026; McAuliffe and Oucho 2024; OECD 2025; Passel and Krogstad 2025)—but nevertheless play a role in shaping migration aspirations.

With respect to ICs, while they have been the object of growing scholarly attention, their actual impact remains largely unknown. Despite rich scholarship on various aspects of different campaigns, the issue of impact has remained understudied until recently. Several factors explain this gap. First, critical migration studies scholarship, which has taken a central role in examining ICs, prioritizes the examination of governance patterns and social costs over policy evaluation (Watkins 2020, 2025). Second, much scholarship has rested on an implicit assumption that migration policies fail, thereby taking the ineffectiveness of ICs for granted (Czaika and de Haas 2013, 2016). Third, there has been institutional indifference from major funders of ICs, such as the European Union (EU) and International Organization for Migration (IOM), toward an evaluation of effects, suggesting that impact is of secondary importance even to implementers, and fueling interpretations that ICs have merely symbolic functions (Morgenstern 2025). Finally, and perhaps most notably, major methodological difficulties complicate the conduct of robust evaluations of success; it is difficult to isolate the impact of information on migration aspirations given the numerous drivers shaping people's decision-making.

For this study, we examine the relationship between policies and ICs which aim to deter (irregular) migration and the aspirations of individuals to leave or remain. We argue that both policies and ICs are likely to have differential effects on individuals given the strength of their underlying desire to migrate. Drawing on the "aspirations and capabilities" framework and scholarship on "complex migration drivers" (Carling and Schewel 2018; Czaika and Reinprecht 2022; de Haas 2021), we propose that there are numerous factors (or "drivers") which shape migration aspirations and decision-making which supersede the importance of policies or information about risks. Macro-level structural factors (such as global inequalities), meso-level factors (family expectations and structures, norms, etc.) and micro-level factors (personal life circumstances) are all involved in shaping aspirations and play a predominant role in their evolution over time. Policies that seek to depress aspirations to migrate, and campaigns which emphasize the dangers of (irregular) migration and/or provide information about the aforementioned policies, are going to have a marginal impact which can only be understood given baseline aspirations shaped by other drivers.

Thus, we go beyond a general assessment of impact by distinguishing between different subgroups of people given their aspirations. We suggest that the influence of policies and ICs largely depends upon people's prior aspirations: while ICs may convince people who already believe that migration is dangerous and unattractive to stay in their place of residence, they are unlikely to impact those who are determined to try their luck. In other words, those who do not aspire to migrate will be reinforced in their decision as they are exposed to information about restrictive policies and risks. In contrast, those who strongly aspire to migrate because of numerous other factors will not be deterred. Finally, those who are uncertain might be influenced by policies and information, although this may primarily preclude their desire to migrate "irregularly" while their aspiration to migrate "regularly" remains intact. Altogether, policies and information are not entirely irrelevant, but they are unlikely to achieve their central objective of stopping individuals who are most likely to migrate (irregularly) from doing so. Instead, they "preach to the choir" made up of individuals already committed to staying in their current place of residence.

We test our theoretical model empirically by examining 243 semi-structured interviews with longstanding residents of six localities in three African countries: Mostaganem and Sétif in Algeria, Adama and Kebri Beyah in Ethiopia, and Abuja and Osogbo in Nigeria. Interviewees were asked about their communities, their lives, and their thoughts on migration, as well as specific questions about their awareness of migration policies (national and foreign) as well as about ICs that aim to discourage individuals from leaving their homes. They were also asked about their aspirations to remain or leave their current place of residence, and the degree to which they felt that they themselves as well as individuals in their communities were influenced by either policies and/or information about the

dangers of irregular migration. Wide-reaching details and insights derived from these interviews permit us to evaluate the degree of awareness of restrictive migration policies and ICs, as well as the degree to which they may have an impact on people's aspirations to migrate/stay.

Our findings largely support our analytical framework. In general, we find that individuals across all contexts are aware of migration policy restrictions and the risks associated with irregular migration. At the same time, there is a nearly universal belief that policy restrictions and ICs are ineffective as migration is driven by other factors, including economic hardship and difficult life circumstances, all while corruption and non-implementation undermine nominal restrictions on departures. In addition, most individuals are only aware of and consider the impact of national policies and ICs, while there is limited awareness of the policies and ICs funded or implemented by Global North states and organizations beyond vague understandings of the need for visas and the possibilities for expulsions. For nearly all respondents, national socio-economic policies, along with potential avenues for regular migration, were most relevant for shaping aspirations and decision-making.

The way in which interviewees reflected on migration and their personal aspirations also support our central expectations. First, when individuals with low aspirations to migrate are aware of restrictive policies and ICs, these appear to reinforce their preexisting attitudes and beliefs. In contrast, individuals with high aspirations to migrate, while being slightly more aware of policies and ICs, believe that neither have an impact on themselves or others. They tend to be unsurprised by the information provided (as they already know about the hardships of migration) and/or find it too contradictory with other available information (about the success of other people's journeys). It is only with individuals with weak aspirations to migrate (or remain at home) that policies and ICs may have an impact. However, this effect remains marginal and, at most, does not dampen migration aspirations in general, but only discourages individuals from "irregular" migration. Altogether, given that undecided individuals make up a small proportion of the potential audience of deterrent policies and ICs, our findings call into question their effectiveness and indicate that they are unlikely to have a widespread impact on overall aspirations or on behaviors.

Ultimately, our study has significant implications for policy design and opens avenues for further research on policy effectiveness. We acknowledge that, despite the extent of the research conducted across numerous localities, we are unable to robustly establish or reject the existence of a causal link between policies and ICs, on the one hand, and migration aspirations, on the other hand. Research in other locations, as well as longitudinal or experimental studies, is needed to further assess the potential validity of our theoretical model. Nevertheless, our findings provide clear indications that, as deployed, restrictive policies and ICs are unlikely to achieve their stated goals. To do so, relevant stakeholders should likely consider more nuanced approaches and a greater focus on local socio-economic realities—along with the establishment of viable regular avenues for migration—in order to develop more effective migration governance.

The remainder of this study is structured as follows. We first discuss the broader debate over the failure/success of immigration policies at large, along with the scholarship on ICs, demonstrating that the question of their impact remains open to debate. In turn, we develop our analytical argument regarding the potential differential impact of policies and ICs given people's underlying aspirations. We then detail our empirical research design, and present the results derived from the interviews conducted across all six localities. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of our study along with limitations and avenues for further research.

2 The impacts of migration policies and information campaigns

2.1 Migration policies

Despite decades of research, and putting aside normative, legal, and political concerns, the actual impact of securitization and externalization on migration aspirations, decision-making, and flows remains contested. Despite reinforced controls, unauthorized migration continues, a situation interpreted as evidence of the ineffectiveness—or purely symbolic nature—of securitized policy measures (Mesnard et al. 2024; Slaven and Boswell 2019). Indeed, numerous studies confirm that restrictive policies do not decrease migration volumes; rather, they trigger categorical, spatial, or temporal substitution effects (Czaika and de Haas 2013, 2016; de Haas 2023).

Categorical substitution involves switching from certain migratory avenues, such as work visas, to others, such as family reunification or asylum, or from regular to irregular routes. Spatial substitution involves shifts to different—typically more dangerous—migratory routes across land and sea, or declines in migration to certain destinations with corresponding rises to others. Temporal substitution involves "now-or-never" migrations in anticipation of restrictions, or shifts away from circular migration patterns toward permanent settlement, as migrants fear they will be unable to return to countries of settlement if they leave. These substitution effects demonstrate that while policies shape how, when, and where people migrate, they fail in their central aim of reducing overall migration flows, particularly when they attempt to coerce compliance while running counter to deeply rooted migration drivers (Castles 2004).

This assessment, however, deserves more nuanced consideration. The relationship between policies and migration is neither entirely ineffective nor straightforwardly deterministic. First, all else equal, migratory flows would likely be greater if restrictive policies were systematically eliminated. The mere existence of substitution effects reveals that policies factor into migration decision-making; people do not ignore restrictions but rather adapt their strategies in response. Second, aggregate assessments of policy failure may obscure variation in effectiveness across different policy types, implementation contexts, and migrant populations. Certain measures—such as targeted enforcement at specific border crossings or visa restrictions—may indeed reduce flows along those specific pathways, even if overall migration levels remain unchanged or increase through alternative channels. Third, the temporal dimension matters: policies may have different short-term versus long-term effects, with initial deterrence giving way to adaptation as migrants develop new strategies and information networks.

Moreover, while numerous studies have documented the devastating effects of restrictive policies on human well-being—including increased deaths during border crossings, prolonged family separations, and the entrenchment of exploitative smuggling networks (Martinez et al. 2015; Salas, Ayon, and Gurrola 2013; Stacciarini 2015)—their specific ability to deter migration by fundamentally reshaping migration aspirations remains unclear. This distinction is crucial: policies may successfully obstruct certain pathways without dampening the underlying desire to migrate. If aspirations remain strong, individuals will continue seeking alternative routes, waiting for opportunities, or accepting greater risks. Understanding whether and how policies affect aspirations—rather than merely behaviors—is therefore essential for assessing their impacts and for designing more effective and humane migration governance.

2.2 Information campaigns

In turn, ICs have become a well-established policy instrument tied to the externalization and securitization of migration control. Although they have been deployed since the 1990s in Europe, they

have gained unprecedented popularity among European policymakers as of 2015 and the "migration crisis" stemming from the arrival of over 1 million people—primarily Syrian refugees—by sea on and foot.[1] Their core assumption is that people across the Global South are ignorant of the harsh conditions in which migrants live in destination countries, as well as of the dangers of irregular migration. The objective of ICs is therefore to disseminate information in order to incite would-be migrants to stay at home (Van Dessel 2021, 2023). This call for people to remain immobile is frequently complemented by messages centered on the need for people to contribute to the development of their country.[2] More generally, ICs are based upon the assumption that individuals are rational actors whose behavior is shaped by available information (Pécoud 2010).

While not specific to Europe, ICs are particularly salient in European migration governance and in attempts by European governments and institutions to control migration from Africa and the Middle East. Since 2015, the European Commission alone has allocated more than 40 million euros to ICs (Caso and Carling 2024). By the late 2010s, the European Migration Network (EMN) (2019) identified 130 ICs deployed by the European Commission and EU member states. The growing popularity of such campaigns among policymakers has bolstered scholarship on the topic, which is now burgeoning into several directions.

A first body of research examines ICs in terms of their aesthetics, audience and infrastructure. This includes content-analysis of the texts, pictures, videos and arguments that are mobilized (de Jong and Dannecker 2017; Nieuwenhuys and Pécoud 2007). In particular, ICs have progressively moved away from traditional supports (billboards, posters, newspapers, television and radio advertisements, etc.) towards other strategies, such as events (workshops, music concerts, roadshows, or theatre productions) and new technologies (social media or websites). The audience of ICs consists of both supposed "potential migrants" (also called "would-be migrants" or "premigrants"), meaning people who have not migrated but might do so in the future, as well as "transit" migrants, who left their country to possibly reach Europe and need to be convinced to interrupt their journey and/or return home. ICs may also target migrants already in countries of settlement, with the objective of inciting them to return home, in which case they are often connected to "assisted voluntary return" (AVR) programs.[3]

A second stream of research focuses on actors. While the European Commission and EU member-states are key funders of IC, they often rely on other actors to implement them (Brändle 2024; Brändle and Tolochko 2023; Jinkang, Cappi and Musarò 2023; Molenaar and Jucker 2021; Oeppen 2016; Schenetti et al. 2025). These include international organizations (notably the IOM), as well as certain civil society groups. One of the reasons why non-state actors are solicited is to lessen the visibility of Global North funding states in the campaigns, as many believe it can jeopardize the credibility of ICs' messages (Watkins and Van Dessel 2026). This is also why ICs increasingly involve local actors, including experts and returnees/expelled migrants, all of whom are solicited to speak to fellow citizens who have not yet migrated according to a 'peer-to-peer' logic (Glyniadaki, Ratzmann, and Stier 2025; Maâ, Van Dessel, and Savio Vammen 2023; Schenetti and Mazzucato 2024; Vammen 2022). Journalists of the Global South are similarly solicited to convey negative messages about migration, sometimes to the

[1] For a discussion of the use of the term "crisis" to describe what happened in 2015 and about migration in general, see Cantat, Pécoud and Thiollet (2023) and Savatic et al. (2024).

[2] According to Dennison, Piccoli, and Carmo Duarte (2025), the analysis of ICs should include the campaigns set up in the Global North to disseminate correct information about migration to their own citizens. This is usually done to combat racism and discrimination and to improve social cohesion. In general, however, such campaigns are distinguished and studied separately, and we do not consider them here.

[3] AVR programs are most notably implemented worldwide by the IOM. For more information, see IOM (2018).

detriment of press freedom (Jinkang, Cappi, and Musarò 2023). Other studies highlight the role of policy-makers in the Global North (Schenetti et al. 2025), as well as private companies—notably communication firms, tech companies and online social networks—involved with the development and implementation of ICs (Brändle and Tolochko 2023).

A third body of research critically investigates the ethical implications of ICs. According to their advocates, ICs avoid coercive or violent measures (like border control or expulsions), and prevent harm while empowering people by informing them. Yet, they are criticized for spreading "anxiety-inducing messages," for example by showing dead bodies, which can provoke traumas among potential migrants (Morgenstern 2025; Schenetti 2025). In addition, they have been shown to lack credibility and provide biased information, for instance by portraying migration as a predominantly negative experience and by silencing the stories of migrants who succeed; this contradicts states' democratic imperative to function as neutral and reliable information-providers (Brändle 2024). From a normative perspective, ICs are accused of violating human rights when states discourage potential asylum-seekers from leaving their homes and thereby jeopardize their right to seek protection (Gammeltoft-Hansen and Tan 2018).

Finally, a fourth body of research assesses the place of ICs in the politics of migration. As noted above, ICs are intricately tied to the rising securitization and externalization of migration control. In addition, ICs are characterized by the confusion between traditional police and control-oriented borderwork with humanitarian objectives centered on the protection of migrants. ICs are thus closely aligned on the flight against 'smuggling' and 'trafficking', two areas of policy in which security and protection agendas conflate into what Musarò (2019) calls "compassionate repression." In line with a Foucault-inspired "governmentality" approach, ICs have also been interpreted as a shift in the way states govern migration: rather than merely controlling people on the move, they aim to "discipline" migrants and shape their mentalities, in order to persuade them of adopting a behavior that is presented as in their interests (Rodriguez 2019; Watkins 2020, 2025). This displaces control away from the border and into people's intimate worldviews, emotions and aspirations (Williams 2020). By no longer aiming to only control people's mobility, but to shape behavior through communication strategies (Pécoud 2023), ICs contribute to a "border spectacle" by showcasing migration failures (Van Dessel 2021, 2023) and reinforcing a securitized understanding of human mobility.

While this scholarship has developed key insights into ICs, the issue of their impact has remained understudied, at least until recently. In a 2015 report, Browne (2015) noted that "there is extremely little evidence on the impact and effectiveness of these campaigns." In turn, in their extensive review, Pagogna and Sakdapolrak (2021: 1) concluded that "future research is advised to focus on the impact of ICs on migrants' aspirations." More recently, Caso and Carling (2024: 3) wrote that "large quantitative studies assessing the reach and effect of these campaigns on migration aspirations are almost non-existent."

There are several reasons for the limited evaluation of impacts. First, scholarship on ICs originated in the field of critical migration studies, which does not prioritize policy evaluation. Rather, this work examines how policies designed to deter migration have led states to develop new governance patterns (such as externalization or humanitarian borderwork), along with their social and human costs. In addition, as mentioned above, research on ICs has often rested on an implicit assumption that migration policies fail, thus taking the ineffectiveness of ICs for granted.

A second reason lies in the striking indifference of the very institutions that set up ICs towards the evaluation of their initiatives. While the EU or the IOM, for example, keep launching new ICs, they

have commissioned only a handful of policy evaluations.[4] Such a lack of institutional knowledge gives the impression that the question of impact is of secondary importance even to ICs funders and implementers. It further fuels the view that ICs are not designed to work but have, as Morgenstern (2025) and Oeppen (2016) have argued, a merely symbolic function.

Third, the lack of studies on the impact of ICs is also tied to major methodological challenges. As noted by Chan and Trauner (2023), the impact of ICs can be evaluated in very different ways. First, their ultimate objective is to reduce irregular migration, but determining a causal link between ICs and reduced migration is exceptionally difficult given the multitude of factors that affect migration flows. Second, another objective of ICs is to provide information to modify would-be migrants' worldviews about the risk and desirability of migration. It is, however, difficult to isolate the effects of ICs on perceptions of migration as they constitute just one source of information among many others, and potential migrants are also exposed to alternative worldviews, for example from the friends and family members who have managed to migrate and speak more positively of this experience (Trauner et al. 2024). There is also no direct correlation between worldviews and behaviors: even if people change their minds, this does not mean that they will change their plans, especially if core structural constraints remain unchanged. One can therefore envisage a scenario in which ICs convince people of the risks associated with migration, without diminishing migration flows.

Despite these methodological challenges, several recent studies seriously investigate the impact of IC. Caso and Carling (2024), in particular, find that ICs have no impact on the aspiration to migrate in various regions across the world. Yet, they also show many people around the world have been exposed to ICs, and that the key message retained by these audiences is the warning against irregular migration. This means that ICs may have succeeded in diffusing their key message. However, in a study in Algeria, Lafleur and Marfouk (2025) also find that ICs have no impact on the willingness to engage in irregular migration, regardless of their widespread prevalence.

Moreover, examinations of the impact of ICs are increasingly conducted by economists, who have deployed sophisticated methodological tools in their evaluations. Their results are often nuanced: several recent studies document increased perceptions of risks among the audiences of ICs in different African countries (Tjaden and Dunsch 2021; Tjaden and Gninafon 2022). Tjaden (2023) nevertheless argues that, while risk perception matters, it is far less important than other macro-structural factors. Certain findings suggest that, to maximize impact, ICs should be deployed in tandem with other measures, such as vocational training opportunities (Bah et al. 2023), or complemented by "emotional" strategies, like face-to-face encounters with returnees (Florio, 2025). Altogether, however, the question of impact calls for further analysis.

3 The differential impacts of policies and information given baseline aspirations

In this study, we examine the extent to which people are aware of restrictive migration policies as well as ICs about these policies and the dangers of irregular migration—and the degree to which both shape migration aspirations. We posit that policies and ICs will have differential impacts on people, depending on their underlying aspirations largely determined by other factors. Drawing on theories of migration

[4] For examples of IOM's evaluation of ICs, see Dunsch, Tjaden, and Quiviger (2019), Hebie, Sessou, and Tjaden (2023), and Tjaden, Morgenstern, and Laczko (2018).

decision-making, we understand migration as connected to numerous factors interacting in "complex driver environments" (Czaika and Reinprecht 2022). The interaction of macro-level factors (economic conditions, inequality, etc.), meso-level factors (family structures, social networks, etc.), and micro-level factors (personal circumstances, triggering events, etc.) shapes individuals' "aspirations and capabilities" to migrate—i.e. their desire to migrate and their capacity (resources, physical ability, etc.) to do so (Carling and Schewel 2018; de Haas 2021). We argue that these driver environments primarily determine migration aspirations, while policies and information about risks play only a secondary role in relation to the established underlying desire to migrate or remain in one's place of residence.

In other words, we argue that policies and ICs will impact aspirations differently depending on baseline desires; their effect depends on whether a person has little desire to migrate, is uncertain about migration, or has a strong desire to migrate. In this vein, we propose three ideal-type scenarios. First, for people with low aspirations to migrate, policies and ICs are fundamentally irrelevant, as their sedentary objectives are already met. This group is unlikely to seek information about migration. If exposed to policies and ICs, they will likely feel reinforced in their belief that staying is preferable to emigrating. This may be the most frequent scenario, given that "the vast majority of people typically exposed to [information] campaigns were not going to migrate in the short-term anyway" (Bah et al. 2023: 3). Deterrence efforts thus amount to "preaching to the choir" of individuals unlikely to migrate. This being said, a paradoxical effect, whereby campaigns prompt certain people with initially low aspirations to migrate to change their mind and consider migration, cannot be discounted (Caso and Carling 2024).

Second, a person who has a strong aspiration to migrate will likely be both more informed about risks, as well as unmoved by any new information about them. Indeed, studies of migration aspirations have shown that people who seriously consider leaving their country are keen to be well-informed, including about dangers and risks; they are therefore potentially more receptive to ICs, but also less affected by such information, and tend to remain convinced of their chances of success (Beber and Scacco 2022). Attention to the messages delivered in ICs does not mean that attitudes towards migration will necessarily change. In addition, people who consider migrating are also likely to look for information elsewhere, including via their social networks, leading them to consider stories of other people's migration experiences. Altogether, the underlying drivers which move people to aspire to migrate, from personal life situations, to local economic conditions, to family and social norms, and beyond, will take precedence over policies and information. Coercive policies and ICs will rarely, if ever, dissuade these individuals from pursuing migration. At most, they may lead people to consider when, how, and where to migrate (for example, by triggering a delay in plans as one seeks further financial resources before departing).

Finally, for those uncertain about migrating or staying, policies and information may impact aspirations. Although this group may be less prevalent, there are certainly many people who have neither embraced nor rejected migration outright. Their aspirations are not fixed and may therefore evolve through exposure to new information about migration policies or the dangers of (irregular) migration. Undecided people may have some knowledge about migration while remaining open to new sources of information that influence their thinking. New information, included those provided via ICs, may thus play a role in determining whether they develop low or high aspirations to migrate. However, in this context, while greater awareness of policy restrictions or risks could convince them that (irregular) migration is too costly or risky, it is more likely that such information will determine the modalities of their journeys (in line with the categorical, spatial, and temporal substitution effects discussed above), such as timing, route, visa type, irregular versus regular migration (at least where such options are available). In particular, ICs may deter irregular migration while leaving the overall desire to migrate "regularly" largely unchanged.

In particular, for this group, aspirations and capabilities are not clearly separated; people's understanding of their capabilities shapes their aspirations. As a result, information influences whether individuals perceive they have the capability to leave, which in turn reshapes their aspirations. For instance, learning about the large sums required to pay smugglers may lead someone to realize they lack the necessary resources to migrate, shifting their aspirations. While objective assessments of capabilities may be theoretically possible, they are in practice rooted in perceptions and intricately linked to aspirations. As discussed below, while the undecided category may be numerically small from an analytical standpoint, the people within it are most likely exposed to be influenced by deterrent policies and ICs.

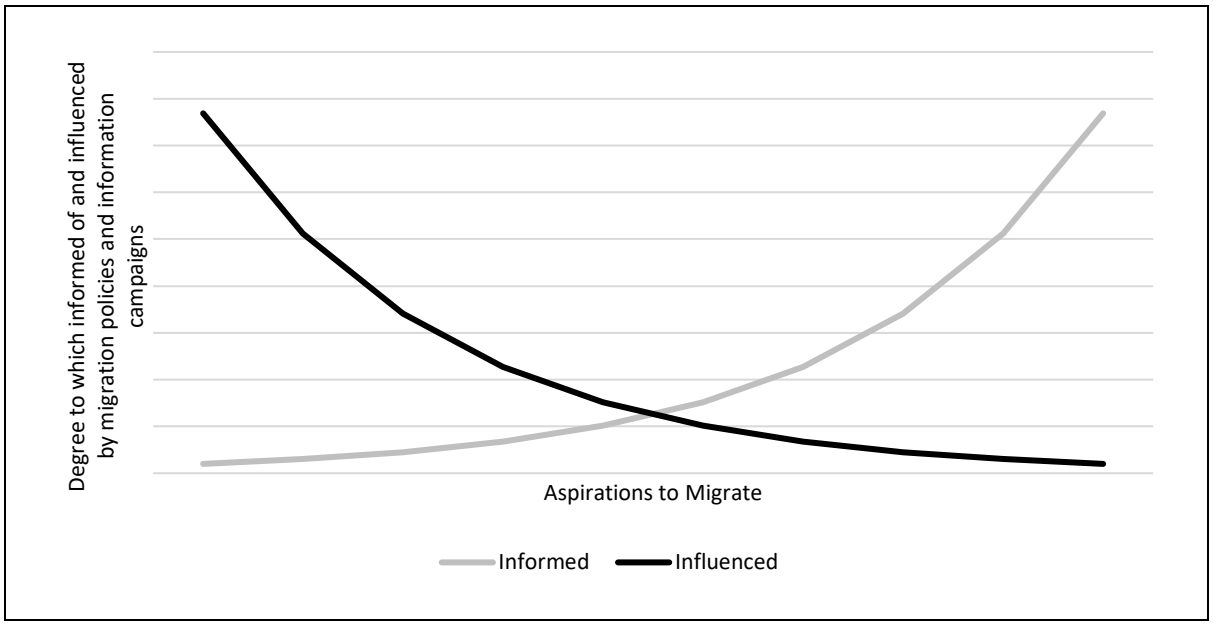

Figure 1: Schematic of Argument

Altogether, our theoretical argumentation is illustrated schematically by Figure 1. Overall, we posit that there is an inverse relationship between aspirations and the impacts of policies and ICs: the greater the desire to migrate, the less that deterrence influences decision-making. Conversely, there is likely a positive association between aspirations and the degree to which people are informed about migration, including restrictive policies and the dangers associated with irregular migration. When considering these dynamics, policies and ICs are unlikely to have a significant impact on migration aspirations. In the case of low aspirations, ICs are possibly impactful, but useless. While they may reinforce people's desire to remain in their place of residence, this does not change any behavior. In the case of high aspiration, they are powerless. People with a strong desire to migrate obtain information from an array of sources, many of which will undermine efforts at deterrence (when people hear about successful migration endeavors) and/or make information sharing redundant (when they hear about failed migration journeys). More fundamentally, high aspirations stem from deeply-entrenched life conditions (for example, desperation, resources, networks, social norms, family structures, etc.), which in turn fuel the belief that migration should be undertaken, regardless of the costs and risks. It is only with respect to certain intermediate cases, where people are undecided about migration, where policies and ICs may have an impact. Even then, any impacts will be minimal, at best making individuals less likely to pursue irregular migration or triggering other categorical, spatial, or temporal considerations, without a shift in underlying aspirations.

It is important to note that these scenarios presume that people are at home, with no prior or recent migration experience. That is the focus of our analysis here. However, both restrictive policies and ICs

also target migrants in transit, with the aim of discouraging onward movement to the Global North. Brekke and Beyer (2019) find that migrants and refugees in transit in Sudan are sympathetic to the warnings issued in ICs, which echo their own experiences, but find the information relayed as redundant, and therefore unlikely to modify beliefs or behavior. Similarly, Molenaar and Jucker (2021) analyze an EU-funded campaign implemented in Mali across three audiences: Malians with no migration experience, West African transit migrants, and Malian returnees. This campaign had little impact on transit migrants and young people with strong aspirations, but did affect returnees, who displayed increased risk awareness and lower likelihood of re-migration. Yet returnees are more sensitive precisely because they already know about migration hardships and thus agree from the start with campaign messaging. This serves as further evidence that ICs often reinforce existing views influencing them without changing their plans. While we do not focus on recent migrants or persons in transit here, our analytical framework may carry over to these populations as well.

4 Research Design

To assess the validity of our theoretical arguments, we draw on fieldwork conducted across six locations in three African countries: Algeria, Ethiopia, and Nigeria. These three countries were selected for their large populations, diverse colonial histories (Ethiopia being non-colonized), and experiences with conflict, political crises, and international development interventions. All three also have distinct migration profiles with extensive histories of internal and international migration, and variable levels of exposure to EU migration policy interventions, including ICs and return policies.

Table 1 provides short descriptions of the six localities (two per country). Research site selection aimed to capture variation in migration contexts while ensuring geographical diversity across North, East, and West Africa. Within each country, we selected two locations differing in size, proximity to borders or coasts, and economic profiles. In Algeria, Sétif represents a major inland city while Mostaganem a smaller, coastal town. In Nigeria, Abuja is the capital city and major urban area while Osogbo is a relatively small city for the country located between Abuja and the megacity of Lagos in the southwest. In Ethiopia, Adama is a major city located just under 100 km southeast of Addis Ababa, the capital, while Kebri Beyah is a small town in eastern Ethiopia located near the border with the Somaliland region of Somalia. Each city has a unique socio-economic and demographic profile, allowing us to assess how policies and information may shape aspirations across an array of contexts.

Table 1: Research Locations

Country	Location	Population	Description	Interviews
Algeria	Mostaganem	~245 thousand	Relatively small city on the Mediterranean coast in the northwest.	40 residents
Algeria	Sétif	~495 thousand	One of the largest cities in Algeria and major hub in the northeast, roughly 75km inland from the Mediterranean.	40 residents
Ethiopia	Adama	~430 thousand	One of the largest cities in Ethiopia, located in the middle of the country, roughly 100km southeast from the capital, Addis Ababa.	40 residents

Ethiopia	Kebri Beyah	~20 thousand	Small town near the border with the Somaliland region of Somalia in the east of the country.	38 residents
Nigeria	Abuja	~1.5 million	Capital city of Nigeria, located in the middle of the country.	43 residents
Nigeria	Osogbo	~200 thousand	A relatively small city in the southwestern part of the country, roughly 200km northeast of Lagos.	42 residents
Note: *A total of 243 residents were interviewed across all locations.*				

Each location has a distinct relationship with migration, be it international/national and regular/irregular. In Algeria, Sétif is a major economic center and a magnet for internal migrants as well as immigrants from Africa and the Middle East while Mostaganem is a coastal town with a developing tourist industry in an area where irregular migrants depart on boats to reach Spain/Europe. In Ethiopia, Adama is a rising economic center, strategically located near the capital and experiencing rapid industrialization and expansion, making it a focal point for internal migration, investment, and socio-political engagement. It has also been marked by the migration of many women to Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, to find employment as domestic workers. In contrast, Kebri Beyah is a small provincial town on the country's periphery, where a large segment of the population constitutes registered refugees from Somalia. In Nigeria, Abuja represents a major center of economic and political activity, and a diverse hub for internal migrants while Osogbo represents a smaller city which has experienced significant internal and international immigration as well as emigration.

Across all locations, research participants were identified through multiple entry points. Local research partners were hired to identify and recruit participants and conduct interviews. Recruitment was done using a mix of snowball sampling and door-to-door recruitment. When necessary, for door-to-door recruitment, permissions were obtained from local government authorities; researchers presented PACES flyers and the copies of local governmental approvals to interested participants. In the case of snowball sampling, the consent was obtained from respondents directly. Interviews were conducted in locally spoken languages and subsequently transcribed and translated into English for analysis.

Residents were defined as nationals of the countries in question who have lived in their respective neighborhoods for over ten years. This ensured that these participants had long-term familiarity with the socio-economic changes in each city and had not engaged in recent internal or international migrations. Gender balance was also a key consideration in participant recruitment. Overall, between 38-43 residents were interviewed in each location, ensuring roughly comparable sample sizes while allowing for minor variation based on field conditions and respondent availability. For the purposes of the analysis here, we focus on residents because they are the primary target for policies and ICs which aim to discourage international migration to the Global North. While policies and ICs also aim to deter the onward migration to the Global North of individuals who have already migrated within the Global South, for analytical consistency we only compare residents across locations.

Fieldwork was conducted across the six locations from April 2024 through December 2025 as part of the European Union Horizon Programme funded PACES project (grant number 101094279). All interviews were anonymized with recordings and transcripts following the PACES project ethical guidelines. Interviews were semi-structured, following a pre-defined protocol. Interviewees were asked

open-ended questions followed by multiple-choice questions on an array of topics pertaining to their place of residence, lives, migration aspirations, perspectives on migration, and awareness of migration policies and information campaigns. The open-ended questions offered opportunities to obtain in-depth information from each individual participant, while the multiple-choice questions permitted direct quantitative comparisons of responses across locations.

During the interviews, respondents were asked a series of open-ended questions about their awareness of national or foreign policies that regulate migration. The questions specifically referred to the return or expulsion of nationals from other countries, a policy measure that often receives media attention and is used to deter irregular emigration. Other questions pertained to ICs designed to discourage people from migrating and whether respondents felt that either policies and/or ICs influence migration aspirations or decisions, either generally or personally. All questions were deliberately generic, focusing on overall awareness and opinion; the source(s) of information (TV, radio, social media, etc.) was not specified.

Tables 2-4 provide an overview of the demographic profiles of the 243 residents who were interviewed. As shown, interviewees were relatively evenly distributed by gender (138 men, 105 women), with the majority (157 individuals) aged 18-39. Educational profiles varied by country: Algerian respondents were highly educated, with nearly half holding master's degrees or above, while the Ethiopian and Nigerian samples had more secondary-educated respondents, though Nigeria showed significant bachelor-level representation. Employment rates were highest in Nigeria (89% employed), lowest in Ethiopia (58% employed), with Algeria in between (67.5%). Civil status and parenthood varied, with Nigerian and Ethiopian respondents more likely to be married (60% or 50%, respectively) and have children (61% or 59%, respectively), with Algerian respondents being predominantly single (56%) and without children (60%). In addition, migration aspirations differed markedly across contexts, as discussed below. Overall, the diversity of demographic backgrounds allows us to identify whether knowledge of policies and ICs varies across different profiles, urban areas, and national contexts and how it relates to migration aspirations.

Table 2: Profile of Interviewees in Algeria

Category	Mostaganem	Sétif	Total
Age			
Below 20:	0	0	0
20-29:	12	17	29
30-39:	12	10	22
40-49:	12	8	20
50-59:	4	3	7
Above 60:	0	2	2
No reply:	0	0	0
Gender			
Man:	22	24	46
Woman:	18	16	34
Civil status			
Single:	20	25	45
Married:	18	15	33
Divorced:	2	0	2
Children			
Yes:	17	14	31
No:	23	25	48
No reply:	0	1	1
Education			
Up to secondary:	14	8	22
Bachelor:	8	11	19
Master or above:	18	21	39
No reply:	0	0	0
Employment			
Yes:	25	29	54
No:	15	11	26
Aspiration to Migrate			
Strong or very strong:	13	11	24
Neither weak nor strong:	4	6	10
Weak or very weak:	2	0	2
Aspiration to Stay			
Strong or very strong:	16	17	33
Neither weak nor strong:	4	5	9
Weak or very weak:	0	0	0
Don't know or no reply:	0	2	2
Note: *80 residents were interviewed in total, 40 in each location.*			

Table 3: Profile of Interviewees in Ethiopia

Category	Adama	Kebri Beyah	Total
Age			
Below 20:	0	2	2
20-29:	11	15	26
30-39:	22	6	28
40-49:	5	12	17
50-59:	2	2	4
Above 60:	0	1	1
No reply:	0	0	0
Gender			
Man:	22	23	45
Woman:	18	15	33
Civil status			
Single:	20	12	32
Married:	16	22	38
Divorced:	4	4	8
Children			
Yes:	19	26	45
No:	21	10	31
No reply:	0	2	2
Education			
Up to secondary:	24	22	46
Bachelor:	14	16	30
Master or above:	2	0	2
No reply:	0	0	0
Employment			
Yes:	25	20	45
No:	15	18	33
Aspiration to Migrate			
Strong or very strong:	13	17	30
Neither weak nor strong:	1	0	1
Weak or very weak:	0	0	0
Aspiration to Stay			
Strong or very strong:	24	18	42
Neither weak nor strong:	2	3	5
Weak or very weak:	0	0	0
Don't know or no reply:	0	0	0
Note: *78 residents were interviewed in total, 40 in Adama and 38 in Kebri Beyah.*			

Table 4: Profile of Interviewees in Nigeria

Category	Abuja	Osogbo	Total
Age			
Below 20:	1	0	1
20-29:	10	10	20
30-39:	11	18	29
40-49:	14	12	26
50-59:	5	2	7
Above 60:	1	0	1
No reply:	1	0	0
Gender			
Man:	26	21	47
Woman:	17	21	38
Civil status			
Single:	20	11	31
Married:	20	31	51
Widowed:	3	0	3
Children			
Yes:	22	30	52
No:	20	12	32
No reply:	1	0	1
Education			
Up to secondary:	25	9	34
Bachelor:	13	24	37
Master or above:	5	8	13
No reply:	0	1	1
Employment			
Yes:	36	40	76
No:	7	2	9
Aspiration to Migrate			
Strong or very strong:	14	20	34
Neither weak nor strong:	1	1	2
Weak or very weak:	2	2	4
Aspiration to Stay			
Strong or very strong:	20	17	37
Neither weak nor strong:	6	1	7
Weak or very weak:	0	1	1
Don't know or no reply:	0	0	0
Note: *85 residents were interviewed in total, 43 in Abuja and 42 in Osogbo.*			

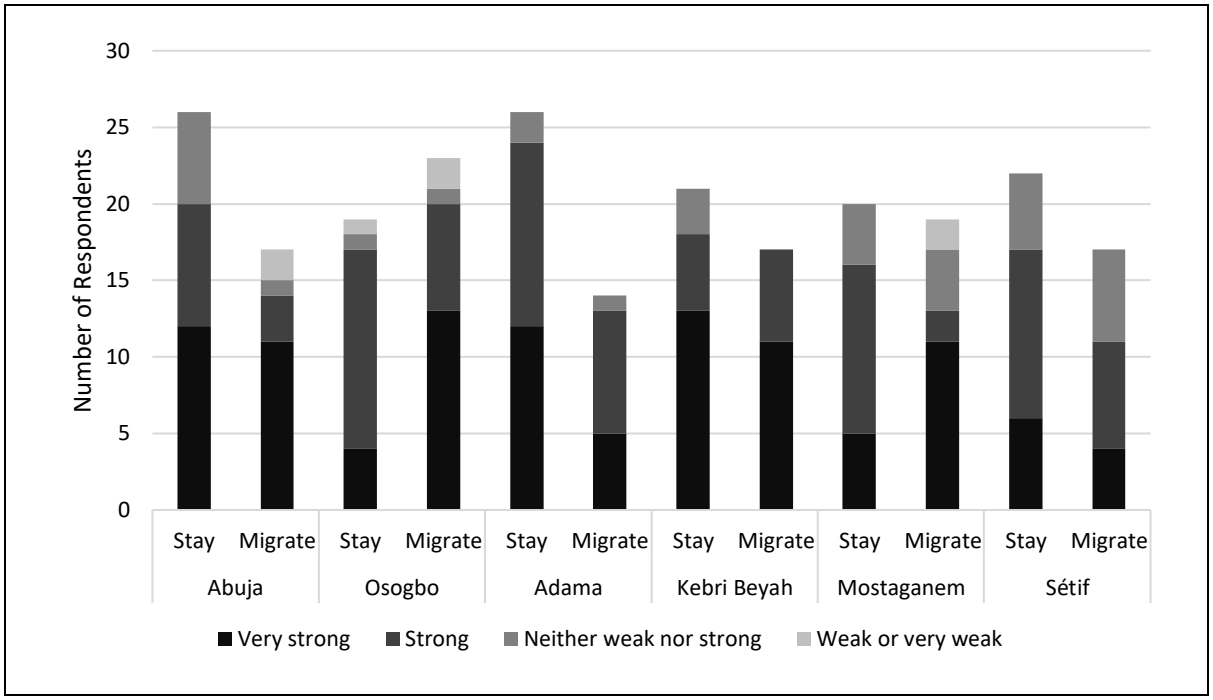

Figure 2: Migration Aspirations by Location

5 Results

5.1 *Aspirations across localities*

The central focus of our analysis pertains to the relationship between policies and ICs designed to deter irregular migration to the Global North and the migration aspirations of populations across the Global South. Near the conclusion of each interview, participants were asked whether they aspired to migrate or remain in their current place of residence. A follow-up question measured the strength of this aspiration using a five-point Likert scale ranging from "very weak" to "very strong," with "neither weak nor strong" as the midpoint. For clarity in presenting results, at times we aggregate responses of "very weak" and "weak" into one category, and "very strong" and "strong" into another.

Tables 2-4 illustrate the variation in aspirations to migrate or stay among respondents across all six locations. Remarkably, across all localities, people tend to express strong aspirations in either direction: either a strong desire to migrate or a strong desire to stay. Relatively few individuals occupy the liminal middle ground, with only 26% in Algeria, 8% in Ethiopia, and 16% in Nigeria, (or 17% of all 243 individuals), indicating "neither weak nor strong," "weak," or "very weak" aspirations. This suggests that most interviewees have reached a firm decision about whether to migrate/stay, though it is important to note that expressing a strong desire to migrate does not necessarily mean individuals have taken concrete preparatory steps such as obtaining a passport or identifying specific opportunities.

Figure 2 presents this variation in migration/staying aspirations across all six localities. Given that extremely few respondents selected the "weak" or "very weak" options, these categories have been aggregated for visual clarity. The data reveal certain patterns: in every locality except Osogbo, more individuals expressed a desire to stay than to migrate, and across all localities the vast majority indicated either "very strong" or "strong" aspirations to stay/migrate. The small number of respondents who indicated "weak or very weak" aspirations were predominantly oriented toward migration rather than staying, and were concentrated in three locations: Abuja, Osogbo, and Mostaganem. Overall, although the small number of people with liminal aspirations constitutes a limitation for our analysis, the existence of three distinct groups of individuals ensures that we can examine the way in which

awareness of policies and information regarding irregular migration relate to people's desire to migrate/stay.

Table 5 reveals certain demographic patterns in migration aspirations, many of which align with expectations. Individuals over 40 years of age, those who are married, and those with children were substantially less likely to aspire to migrate. This pattern is unsurprising given the additional challenges and responsibilities these groups face when contemplating migration. These demographic characteristics thus appear to orient individuals toward sedentariness. More surprisingly, gender, employment status, and educational achievement do not show strong associations with migration aspirations. Across all locations, just over half of both men (57%) and women (55%) indicated a preference to stay rather than migrate. Similarly, employed and unemployed individuals showed nearly identical patterns, with 54% and 56%, respectively, preferring to stay. This pattern is surprising, but employment may inspire a tension whereby one has more resources with which to finance emigration but also a reason to remain in one's place of residence—with the opposite for those who are unemployed.

The relationship between education and migration aspirations reveals a more nuanced pattern. While individuals with up to a secondary education showed a relatively higher preference for staying (66%), those with bachelor's degrees were more likely to aspire to migrate (57%). Interestingly, this reverses among those with master's degrees or higher, with 58% preferring to stay. Overall, however, gender, employment status, and educational attainment do not appear to be decisive factors shaping migration aspirations, whereas age, marital status, and parenthood emerge as more influential variables, generally pushing individuals toward sedentariness.

Table 5: Migration Aspirations given Demographics

Category	Stay		Migrate	
Age				
Below 40:	76	48%	82	52%
40 and above:	59	70%	25	30%
Gender				
Man:	78	57%	60	43%
Woman:	57	55%	47	45%
Civil Status				
Single:	42	39%	66	61%
Married:	85	70%	36	30%
Divorced/Widowed:	8	62%	5	38%
Children				
No	44	40%	67	60%
Yes	90	71%	37	29%
Employed				
No:	37	54%	31	46%
Yes	98	56%	76	44%
Education				
Up to Secondary:	67	66%	35	34%
Tertiary – Bachelor	37	43%	49	57%
Tertiary – Master and above:	31	58%	22	42%
Note: *243 residents interviewed across six locations. Totals by category are less than 243 when interviewees responded "I don't know" or did not answer a question.*				

The diversity of our respondent pool—spanning six distinct localities and representing a wide range of demographic profiles—provides valuable insight into how individual life circumstances may influence migration aspirations. Importantly for our analysis, the interviewed population divides into two substantial groups with strong but opposing desires: one group firmly aspiring to migrate and another firmly committed to staying, with a smaller intermediate group expressing greater uncertainty. This distribution creates a fruitful foundation for evaluating how policies and information about migration may shape personal aspirations across different contexts and populations.

5.2 Common perspectives: Irregular migration as last resort

Before examining the relationship between policies, information, and migration aspirations in detail, it is essential to highlight overarching findings that emerged consistently across all six research locations. This commonality may reflect broader perspectives on migration prevalent throughout Africa and the Global South more generally. The interviews provide a rich contextual background, revealing how people perceive migration policies and information campaigns, and how this awareness influences their aspirations to migrate or stay.

A striking and consistent finding across all interviews, transcending localities and demographic profiles, is that irregular migration (usually called "illegal" by interviewees) is persistently viewed as risky, dangerous, and fundamentally undesirable, while regular (or "legal") migration is seen as the optimal pathway for those wishing to leave their homes. Nearly all respondents demonstrated some awareness that people traveling via irregular land and sea routes have died, failed to reach their destinations, or been forcibly returned to their places of origin. Consequently, irregular migration is regarded, at best, as a desperate last resort, and, at worst, as something reprehensible that should be actively discouraged and prevented. In particular, those with no migration aspirations often associate irregular migration with the betrayal of family members who are left behind to fear for the lives of their departed loved ones. In general, whether individuals aspire to migrate or to stay, and regardless of their backgrounds, the sentiment remains consistent: irregular migration is undesirable and, for some, is immoral.

The following accounts from diverse individuals across the six research sites illustrate these shared perspectives. In Kebri Beyah, a young woman with strong migration aspirations emphasizes her preference for regular pathways, noting that those who migrate "illegally" (locally called *tahriib*) typically do so without family consent:

> "I would like to get a visa, passport, and money to go abroad…This will help my decision not to go by sea, which is risky. With the right documents, I would be able to migrate with safety and no problems…When I see [people] come back, it does affect me. They say good things about abroad, even though their journey there was very difficult. This is why I want to go the legal way with the proper documents…It is mostly young people who decide to go abroad, especially those going through illegal migration (*tahriib*). Parents do not agree because they do not want their kids to die at sea. Young people chose to migrate in order to have a better future from what they have been living and seeing growing up. They actually run away without the parents knowing…The government does not allow people to migrate, especially through *tahriib*. They do not allow migration and don't give visas. Those migrating do it secretly and without the knowledge of their parents and the government."
>
> *- Interview KF10R: 19-year-old single woman with secondary education and a very strong aspiration to migrate*

This testimony encapsulates a commonly held perspective: even among those with a strong desire to migrate, irregular routes are recognized as dangerous and undertaken only when regular pathways are blocked. The risks associated with irregular migration (particularly sea crossings in boats) are widely known, making regular migration optimal, if possible. Those who do engage in irregular migration do so out of desperation in pursuit of a better life, not because they view it as a desirable option.

Beyond personal risk, irregular migration is widely seen as imposing significant hardship on families. Another young woman from Kebri Beyah explicitly contrasts family involvement in "legal" versus "illegal" migration, highlighting how the former receives broad family support while the latter is often an individual undertaking conducted without consent:

> "For legal migration, the entire family and sometimes even extended family members are usually involved, often providing financial support before the journey. In contrast, for *tahriib* ['illegal migration'], individuals often leave without informing their families, knowing they would not receive consent. No parent would willingly allow their child to risk their life for anything in this world…The government does not permit illegal migration and actively discourages people from taking such risks. If someone is found attempting to migrate illegally, they may face imprisonment. However, for legal migration, the government provides support and facilitates the relocation process for its citizens."
>
> *- Interview KF8R: 24-year-old married woman with children, secondary education, and a very strong aspiration to migrate*

The emotional burden placed on families is further illustrated by a middle-aged woman in Sétif who recounted the devastating loss of nine family members at sea, including a 14-year-old boy. Her account reveals how such tragedies circulate widely through social media and potentially influence attitudes toward irregular migration:

> "I see a lot [of information] on social media. They say that your parents suffer for you, that if you go to sea you will die. I have experience with a friend; nine members of her family went and they all died at sea, including her son. How could she have thought of letting her 14-year-old son go with her family? Three of her brothers, with their wives and children, as well as her son, all died in one day…They posted it on social media and everyone cried and sympathized with her…It has influenced a lot of people. There were many parents who gave their children the OK to leave, but when they see this, they change their minds and oppose their migration, especially irregular migration."
>
> *- Interview SZ15R: 43-year-old single woman with a master's degree and "neither weak nor strong" migration aspirations*

Given the centrality of family across all research localities, irregular departures may be stigmatized socially. Families may be criticized for permitting members to undertake such high risks, while those who migrate without family support are seen as defying social cohesion and causing suffering to those left behind. Emotional costs thus compound the physical risks associated with irregular migration, making it something to be avoided if possible.

Among respondents with no aspiration to migrate, irregular migration is frequently characterized not merely as unwise but as fundamentally reprehensible and a phenomenon to be actively combatted. Three women from Adama, Kebri Beyah, and Osogbo, respectively, articulated particularly strong views about the destructiveness of irregular migration:

> "The policies I know are to prepare your passport properly and follow legal procedures...Otherwise…you are not allowed to go illegally. If you refuse and take the risk, you are destroying your life, and you might not get where you want. You might be left on the road, and you are not hurting anyone but yourself."
>
> - *Interview AL7R: 43-year-old married woman with no children, secondary education, and a strong aspiration to stay*

> "[Information] has an impact because when someone migrates illegally and then gets sent back, they open the eyes of the community. They make people aware of the hardships they face, showing that migrating illegally isn't good...My message to the community is this: regarding illegal migration, I would say to the youth, believe in your country and work here. If you migrate, you will cause suffering to yourselves and your parents. Instead of spending a lot of money on migration, use that money to start a business here, avoid causing distress to your parents, and trust in your homeland."
>
> - *Interview KA8R: 33-year-old married woman with children, secondary education, and a strong aspiration to stay*

> "There are campaigns around us that our ladies should not be fooled that there is work abroad. There is no work. They are just using them for prostitution and they are ruining their life...I feel terribly, terribly bad because I feel that our ladies, their eyes are opened, so they should know it...they are still playing people, they are deceiving people that there is one job somewhere. That they will give you one million Naira for one job. So it's really, really [painful to] me that our ladies are only covetous, they are after the money. They are not really after their own health and life."
>
> - *Interview OB5R: 30-year-old married woman with no children, a master's degree, and a strong aspiration to stay*

These testimonies reveal a moral dimension to the rejection of irregular migration, which is perceived as selfish and destructive. The third respondent's comments about trafficking and exploitation add another layer, suggesting that irregular migration exposes vulnerable people—particularly women—to severe abuse and exploitation. The fact that there is widespread awareness of the dangers of irregular migration makes the decision to undertake it especially reprehensible.

Even among respondents who refrain from explicit moral condemnations, there remains a pervasive belief that young people considering migration should either remain in their countries or pursue only legal migration pathways. A man from Kebri Beyah articulates this balanced perspective:

> "Safety is one of the benefits of staying in your country. If you do migrate, it should be legally with all proper documentation and a complete passport…My advice to the youth is to stay in their country legally, work here and avoid illegal migration. I also suggest that the government should work to prevent favoritism and ensure equality for everyone."
>
> - *Interview KA2R: 29-year-old married man with children, a bachelor's degree, and a strong aspiration to stay*

This respondent's message encapsulates a widely shared view: staying at home offers safety, while migration, if pursued at all, must be through legal channels. Moreover, staying is framed not only as

personally safer but as beneficial for national development. (Irregular) migration is thus potentially detrimental not only to one's family but to one's country of origin.

Relatedly, across all localities, irregular migration is understood as something undertaken primarily by younger individuals, often characterized simply as "youth" or as someone's "children," as is made clear from the quotes above. Given the extreme risks involved, few respondents imagine older individuals attempting such journeys. This generational framing places parents and extended families in a central role as they seek to influence young people to remain at home or, if the desire to migrate is strong, to pursue exclusively legal avenues for departure.

The consistent portrayal of irregular migrants as young people also reinforces the narrative of irregular migration as, driven by desperation or naïveté rather than careful planning. This framing reinforces a moral and practical case for deterrence, positioning families and communities as actors who must guide their younger members away from such a dangerous choice. The remarkable consistency of these perspectives across six diverse localities, varied demographic profiles, and different migration aspirations suggests a widely embedded cultural framework for understanding migration. This framework positions regular migration as legitimate and desirable (when feasible), irregular migration as dangerous and morally problematic, family cohesion as paramount, and staying at home as both safe and honorable. These shared understandings form the backdrop against which policies and ICs operate, and against which individuals negotiate their own migration aspirations.

5.3 *Awareness of policies and information campaigns*

Common perspectives regarding irregular migration are rooted in widespread awareness of its occurrence and associated risks. While we do not have the data to understand why this is the case, this awareness may stem in part from implementation of ICs that have aimed to discourage individuals from pursuing irregular migration in particular—but also emigration in general—and have shaped narratives regarding its dangers. There are also indications that people have obtained this awareness from various other sources: news, social media, word-of-mouth, etc. At the same time, in all six localities, respondents were aware of some form of ICs; while there are local particularities with respect to the nature and extent of these campaigns as well as the media utilized to relay information, the information relayed primarily aimed to highlight the risks associated with irregular migration across land and sea.

In addition, throughout all six localities, many individuals indicate an awareness of major national policies that relate to migration—or are perceived to be related to migration. In contrast, nearly no respondents relayed any ideas about the specific policies of other countries (in the Global North) beyond vague notions regarding the need for visas and the possibility that individuals with an irregular status may be returned to their country of origin. People are primarily concerned with national policies, including those that aim to deter "illegal" (i.e. irregular) migration along with those which may facilitate "legal" (i.e. regular) migration. National social welfare and economic policies are also seen as intricately related to the deterrence of irregular migration specifically and emigration more generally. This focus is pronounced in all six localities, although national differences naturally come to the forefront.

Table 6: Aspiration for Migration/Stay and Awareness of Policies and Information Campaigns

Aspiration	Non-Migration Policy Awareness				Migration Policy Awareness				Info Campaign Awareness				Return Policy Awareness			
	Yes		No		Yes		No		Yes		No		Yes		No	
"Strong" or "Very Strong" *Migrate*	24	28%	61	72%	27	31%	59	69%	33	39%	52	61%	10	12%	75	88%
"Strong" or "Very Strong" *Stay*	23	21%	87	79%	26	23%	85	77%	39	34%	75	66%	14	12%	99	88%
"Neither Weak nor Strong," "Weak," or "Very Weak," *Migrate* or *Stay*	9	23%	30	77%	9	23%	31	78%	16	40%	24	60%	2	5%	39	95%

Note: *243 residents interviewed across six locations. Totals by category are less than 243 when interviewees responded "I don't know" or did not answer a question.*

Table 6 presents the relationship between migration aspirations and awareness of various policies and ICs. First, while those with strong aspirations to migrate show slightly higher awareness of non-migration policies (28% versus 21%) and migration policies (31% versus 23%) compared to those with strong aspirations to stay, these differences are modest. Second, people are notably more aware of ICs across all groups, with 39% of those aspiring to migrate, 34% of those aspiring to stay, and 40% of the undecided reporting that they know of efforts to share information about the risks associated with (irregular) migration. Importantly, this relatively uniform distribution suggests that campaigns are reaching populations broadly rather than being actively sought out by those planning to migrate. Third, awareness of return policies is strikingly low across all categories, at 12% for those with strong aspirations to migrate or stay, and dropping to 5% among the undecided. Overall, the overarching pattern is one of generally low awareness, indicating that neither restrictive policies nor ICs have achieved widespread recognition among potential migrants or non-migrants alike. While this means that the degree to which people are informed about migration opportunities and risks may not be related to migration aspirations, it does indicate that messaging regarding migration across societies—in part through ICs—has created common awareness of risks even if people do not feel they know anything specific about policies or related campaigns.

In Algeria, ICs regarding irregular migration are extremely diverse and widespread, and deployed by both the national government and a variety of non-governmental actors. The national government has financed and published an array of public service announcements which aim to discourage irregular migration, and relayed them via TV, radio, and social media. In addition, respondents have indicated that religious leaders and online "influencers" have also played a role in attempts to discourage irregular migration. The following accounts of two men from Sétif and Mostaganem, respectively, illustrate the degree to which campaigns aiming to discourage irregular migration are widespread:

> "Everywhere: on social media they run awareness campaigns, on television they show adverts. You're watching something and they show you an advert where they show a group that left in a small boat and drowned. Then it says, 'Why are you leaving? Why are you putting yourself at risk?'"

- Interview SZ37R: 20-year-old single man with no children, a bachelor's degree, and a strong desire to migrate

> "In the mosques, they raise awareness and advise people not to emigrate irregularly. There are also videos of people who live there and share their experiences. When migrants return, they say, 'Things are not like they used to be.' It is true that when they say this, some people here think that 'they do not want us to leave,' but when you investigate further, you discover that it is true, some things have changed…I think the people who have the most influence in giving advice are the mosques and social media influencers, especially those who live [abroad], as they have more credibility and people follow their advice… [while] if you give [someone] advice from here, he'll say that 'you haven't been there and you don't know… I think [raising awareness] is good because, even though there are laws, it's not enough…when [young people] go out on the street and all they hear is 'I'm leaving, I'm leaving, I'm leaving,' they also think about leaving.'"

- Interview MZ09R: 33-year-old single man with no children, a master's degree, and a strong aspiration to stay

The prevalence of ICs in Algeria is repeated by the vast majority of individuals who were interviewed in both cities. These campaigns clearly aim to shock the national public and thereby discourage individuals from choosing to leave the country irregularly. While, these messages may be perceived differently by people with aspirations to migrate as opposed to those with aspirations to stay, it is clear that attempts to discourage irregular migration through the spread of information are common. Both the national government and local actors are involved with the development and dissemination of these campaigns, and awareness of them and their content is common regardless of demographic profile or migration aspirations.

Beyond information campaigns, in Algeria, respondents also interpreted broader social and economic policies through a migration lens. Specifically, national social and economic policies are perceived to be intrinsically related to efforts to stem (irregular) emigration from the country. Over the course of the past few years, a number of national social welfare policies have been adopted, including expanded unemployment benefits for recent university graduates who have not found work, new preferential loans for entrepreneurs, and expanded social housing. Many individuals believe that such policies have been adopted with the goal of disincentivizing emigration. Additional actions, such as delays with the issuance of university diplomas—notably for medical professionals—is also perceived as a strategy deployed by the government to stymie the emigration of highly educated and qualified individuals. The following accounts from two men from Sétif and Mostaganem, respectively, reflect these beliefs regarding national policies:

> "Algeria is now trying to take many measures to prevent people from migrating. It is offering more job opportunities, housing, everything people are looking for. They have introduced bank loans, but you have to have a job, and to do all this you need to have a job. Now they have increased the salaries of teachers, those in the education sector, healthcare, they have increased the salaries of all of them, they are trying to do this to reduce the *harga* [irregular migration by sea]. [This has happened] in recent years, it wasn't like that before. It seems to me that it's to reduce the migration rate, because there were people who left their jobs and migrated. When they get their visa, they leave and don't come back."

- Interview MZ12R: 36-year-old married woman with children, a bachelor's degree, and a strong aspiration to stay

"Here [the government tries] to make it difficult, especially for doctors [to migrate]. They don't validate their diplomas so they can't leave. If you've studied medicine for seven years, you've also done your specialization, but your diploma isn't validated, [so] you can't leave here. I say that studying medicine here is like buying a house with only the keys, without the papers."

- Interview SZ22R: 25-year-old single woman, with no children, a bachelor's degree, and a very strong aspiration to migrate

These accounts, and others like them, typically follow the question "How does the government view international migration? Does it try to regulate it, facilitate it or constrain it?" or "Are you aware of policies of any kind (education, healthcare, transport, technology) by the national government or other authorities that influence migration?" In the case of Algeria, respondents view national social policies as directly related to emigration, and a primary mechanism (apart from the ICs discussed above) via which national governments sought to discourage both regular and irregular migration. Respondents almost never mention specific migration policies or efforts at direct interdiction or deterrence of irregular departures, which is a striking difference from other research sites. The social or economic policies adopted by the national government, although not explicitly about migration, are seen as the central to its regulation.

In Nigeria, ICs appear to be significantly less prominent than in Algeria, with substantially fewer respondents indicating knowledge of efforts to spread awareness regarding irregular migration.[5] Those who are aware have typically heard announcements discouraging irregular migration on the radio. It appears that certain locally active non-governmental organizations have been involved in spreading information about the dangers of irregular migration. In contrast, neither the national government nor local governments appear engaged. The following accounts from three individuals from Abuja relay the way independent organizations have sought to raise awareness:

"On WAZOBIA FM [there was a program] encouraging people to stay in Nigeria so we all can build Nigeria and make it a better place, that where they are running [to], it's other people that make the place to be good, so let's stay in our country and build ourselves too. Nigeria is blessed, what they have over there, we also have it here even more than they have…Of course, I believe Nigeria is a blessed country."

- Interview AJ12R: 24-year-old single woman with no children, secondary education, and a very strong aspiration to migrate

"In terms of leaving Nigeria to other countries, I think they have started doing something like trying to restrict people in terms of denying their visa and making the visa process very tedious and hard to get… … …There is a general Radio Human Rights station in our country in the city center here, they call it Brekete family. We do hear people [who] went to the radio centre television to encourage Nigerians not to leave but to stay back [and] work here, that here will be better. But an organized campaign, I have not heard [about that]... [The Brekete family station] are trying to create hope. You know the reason is some of the stories we are hearing about our

[5] This finding is consistent with Caso and Carling (2024), who remark that exposure to ICs varies greatly across the world: in their sample of 10 countries, Nigeria is among the least exposed, reaching less than 40% of the population compared to nearly 60% in Guinea, Afghanistan or Ethiopia.

> citizens that travel overseas, some of the countries they pass through. So because of that, individuals are now taking it upon themselves to encourage people to work hard here and train themselves and get a better life here, but we are yet to see a better life and a better government policy that will really discourage us from travelling overseas."
>
> *- Interview AJ3R: 37-year-old married man with no information provided regarding children, a bachelor's degree, and a very strong aspiration to migrate*

> "Yes, there are campaigns telling people to stay back in the country, develop the country and all that…I think Action Aid also does something like that, which I know they have done some of those campaigns…I buy the idea because if we don't develop our own community and country then who will? You can go out, yes, but try and come back with ideas and develop the country and your community."
>
> *- Interview AP2R: 32-year-old single man with no children, a master's degree, and a very strong aspiration to stay*

In turn, lack of national efforts to spread information is tied to a perception that the government authorities are not taking significant steps to address the challenges posed by emigration from the country. All three respondents felt that the public authorities should do more to further economic development and in that way discourage emigration. The following statement from a woman in Abuja reflects this perspective, and a broader approval of messages calling for the government to implement socio-economic policies that would disincentivize emigration:

> "On [a radio show called 'Fadan Fita' ["Opening Fight"], on FM 10.3], they call out to the government saying the government should help those that are migrating, saying our children need to stay back at home and help those around them even if it is to open a private hospital…sometimes they do give the masses a chance to call and speak…[the message] is good, [it] is to help bring development here."
>
> *- Interview AJ14R: 50-year-old married woman with children, secondary education, and a strong aspiration to stay*

Overall, interviewees in Nigeria had little to say when asked if they were aware of government policies—Nigerian or foreign—that aim to regulate migration. Few were aware of any specific policies, such as the need for visas and the possibilities for deportation from foreign countries. In contrast, a sentiment that the Nigerian government should do more to foster economic development, which would thereby discourage emigration, in line with the messages heard on radio programs, was more prevalent.

Lastly, in Ethiopia, highly distinct local realities in Adama and Kebri Beyah shape awareness of policies and ICs as well as perspectives on migration. These cases demonstrated how localities in the same country may be affected by local policies, thereby leading residents to have unique understandings of migration and what it represents. In Adama, the possibility for individuals—notably women—to migrate to the Gulf and Saudi Arabia to work as domestic help is prominent. In contrast, in Kebri Beyah, there is no knowledge of this avenue for regular migration, with migration understood primarily in relation to the large population of refugees who have settled in the town. While some families successfully applied for resettlement to a country in the Global North, most refugees have been living in the town for a long time, with limited prospects for "regular" onward migration. As a result of these distinctions, interviewees in the two localities had differing thoughts on the viability of irregular migration and what should be done about it.

In Adama, people are largely aware of the possibilities for regular migration to the Gulf, as well as of ICs led by the government that recount the dangers of irregular migration. News of the return of individuals with an irregular status in Saudi Arabia, back to Ethiopia was also widespread. These realities trigger broad awareness of the dangers of irregular migration, the possibility for return, the potential existence of regular avenues, and the actions of the national government to both facilitate regular and discourage or interdict irregular migration. The following accounts from three women in Adama reflect these different dimensions:

> "From the policies I heard from the media, it is announced that migration is preferred to be done legally and, when you also think of it, it is preferred to go legally because there will be death, you could fall into the sea, and the like, so the legal way is preferable. Finishing every process from here and going legally is preferred, and this is the awareness I have…In the past 15 days, as I have said, almost 17000 migrants have been returned from Arab countries. From them, 18 children and 60 young men were included…I forgot the exact name of the place, but it was from an Arab country, and it was because they were illegal, some were in jail, and one of the Arab countries was saying, 'take your citizens from me,' so this was the reason…they [the Ethiopians] lived there for years, there were even individuals who formed a family. As I told you, there were children born there from those returnees…The community doesn't have awareness of such issues, but they follow the news very well. But their focus is on the political issues or on the issues of violence and instability."
>
> *- Interview AL4R: 26-year-old single woman with no children, a bachelor's degree, and a very strong aspiration to migrate*

> "I know that illegal migration is prohibited. They should have a passport. Also, all of the medical tests should be fulfilled. They have to be HIV-negative. They have to be free from any kind of disease. Also, because your fingerprints will be taken, if you have been deported before, you will be caught if you are planning to go. If you also escape from where you are working without finishing your contract, you will get caught because your fingerprint is already there. Your fingerprints show everything about you…There are agencies that send money to different countries, so you will start your process with the information you get from the agencies. The agencies will teach you the language and give you different information, but you should go to them and pay to get the service…If you are illegal, you will be deported. And the government also announced this. The government announced that it would let |its] citizens go back to their countries, and currently many migrants are coming back from jail. They were already forgotten for about 25 and 30 years in jail, and currently the government is taking them back."
>
> *- Interview AL10R: 27-year-old married woman with no children, secondary education, and a very strong aspiration to migrate*

> "In the past few years, the government started to facilitate legal migration especially to the Arab countries. It even provided training for many migrants. There is an exit exam for the trainees after completing their training. If they pass the exit exam, there is a certificate given to them which they took to the countries they get permission to work. However the government does not tolerate the illegal migration at all. The government helped thousands male migrants who went to Saudi Arabia illegally for them to return to their country safely."

- Interview AZ12R: 42-year-old married woman with children, secondary education, and a very strong aspiration to stay

Thus, all three women, as with numerous fellow residents of Adama, are aware of the existence of agencies which facilitate regular migration to "Arab" countries, the return of numerous individuals from those countries who fell into an irregular status, and the government's effort to prevent irregular migration, both through measures such as the facilitation of returns as well as through information campaigns. In Adama, information is spread via "government media" and "announcements," and the existence of regular channels for emigration is perceived as tied with efforts to stem irregular migration. Respondents view these actions as linked and coherent.

In Kebri Beyah, the situation is markedly different. No interviewees discussed the existence of opportunities to migrate to the Gulf countries. In contrast, local and international NGOs, such as the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), have implemented ICs to discourage irregular migration, and awareness of these campaigns is widespread.[6] This was the only locality in which foreign organizations were mentioned, and this is likely related to the size of the town (the least populated research site) and the fact that it is the only one which contains a large settlement of refugees:

> "Awareness campaigns about the dangers of illegal migration are carried out by many community-based organizations that operate voluntarily without financial incentives. These organizations are more numerous and often more effective than those funded by entities like the UN and other NGOs. We, as young people, have established and run these organizations ourselves, raising awareness and educating our peers about the risks and dangers of illegal migration."
>
> *- Interview KA4R: 27-year-old single man with no children, a bachelor's degree, and a very strong aspiration to migrate*
>
> "I know of two campaigns conducted for youth mobilization, organized by UNHCR and NRC (Norwegian Refugee Council). These were two different and separate occasions, almost a year ago. The main focus of the mobilization was on the risks associated with illegal migration. They also shared information related to safe ways for people to migrate. Additionally, they encouraged youths to apply for scholarship programs abroad instead of migrating illegally and risking their lives."
>
> *- Interview KB11R: 26-year-old single man, with no children, a bachelor's degree, and a very strong aspiration to migrate*
>
> "There was a time when organizations like NRC (Norwegian Refugee Council) used to raise awareness among young people about the dangers of illegal migration. They advised against taking risky journeys and encouraged them to find safer and legal ways to improve their lives such as creating their own businesses in their country."
>
> *- Interview KB12R: 24-year-old single woman with no children, a bachelor's degree, and a strong aspiration to migration*

Thus, there is widespread recognition that ICs about migration dangers had reached the community, while the organizations involved are different in contrast to Adama. Although opinions vary on their effectiveness and the credibility of different implementing organizations, community-based organizations appear to play a particularly important role, with some respondents suggesting that

[6] For more information on these campaigns, see Brekke and Beyer (2019).

locally-initiated groups are more trusted and effective than internationally-funded programs. This preference for community-led initiatives may reflect a deeper skepticism about external interventions. While there are some references to government information campaigns, as in Adama, the primary source of information remains international or local non-governmental organizations.

Moreover, in Kebri Beyah, respondents frequently held the view that the government is actively trying to stop irregular migration, primarily through coercive measures, but that it does not have the resources needed to bolster economic opportunities which would be more effective at disincentivizing emigration. Similarly to respondents in Nigeria, there is a sense that the government should focus more on economic development rather than the direct interdiction of irregular migration. In contrast to Adama, interviewees felt that there were limited opportunities for regular ("legal") migration, with government efforts to address irregular migration being overwhelmingly coercive. The following accounts illustrate these realities:

> "It's better to go legally. A person who goes legally does not face the same hardships as someone who goes illegally. Illegal migration is dangerous and stressful for both the individual and their family. There is also the risk of being sent back…I haven't seen any specific system implemented by the government, but some people have been facilitated to go abroad for educational purposes. There are occasional initiatives to support legal migration, such as scholarships or exchange programs…There have been awareness campaigns conducted by the community and youth organizations, as well as the Office of Social Affairs, to educate people about the dangers of illegal migration which still continue today."
>
> *- Interview KB13R: 23-year-old single woman with no children, secondary education, and a strong aspiration to migrate*
>
> "The government tries to prevent people from migrating illegally and puts considerable effort into it. However, it lacks the facilities and financial resources to effectively manage and prevent this issue. If the government had the resources, it would create skill development programs and job opportunities for the people. Although they dislike illegal migration, their current approach is to arrest and detain those caught attempting to migrate illegally and then return them to their home areas."
>
> *- Interview KA4R: 27-year-old single man with no children, a bachelor's degree, and a very strong aspiration to migrate*
>
> "Certainly, the youth migrate illegally. Since the government does not permit illegal migration, it tries to control it and prevent people from migrating illegally. However, the government has fallen short in creating job opportunities and raising awareness to prevent illegal migration...the government restricts and monitors migration to prevent youth from travelling in groups and migrating illegally."
>
> *- Interview KA2R: 29-year-old married man with children, a bachelor's degree and a strong aspiration to stay*

Altogether, these reflections illustrate an underlying tension between coercive state responses and the perceived need for structural economic change. While awareness of ICs discouraging irregular migration is high, respondents remain focused on what they perceive as a deeper issue: the lack of viable economic opportunities. Interviewees do not believe that the government should stop trying to prevent irregular migration, nor do they dispute the state's right or responsibility to regulate migration generally. However, there is a sense that enforcement-focused approaches are treating symptoms rather than

causes. Respondents question whether interdiction alone can succeed without parallel investments in job creation and economic opportunity. This critique suggests that people believe effective migration governance in contexts like Kebri Beyah requires not just border control or awareness campaigns, but fundamental economic transformation. This contrasts with Adama, where avenues for potential regular migration make the government's actions appear more coherent and effective.

Ultimately, despite the local particularities detailed above, three critical commonalities emerge across all six research localities. First, and consistent with Caso and Carling (2024), awareness of ICs highlighting the dangers of irregular migration is widespread, though the sources and intensity vary considerably. In Algeria, campaigns are multifaceted and pervasive, emanating primarily from the national government through television, radio, social media, religious leaders, and online influencers. In Ethiopia, both government entities and NGOs (particularly in Kebri Beyah) actively spread awareness. Nigeria presents a different picture: only local organizations and independent radio programs have organized campaigns, resulting in more limited awareness. Despite this variation, respondents across all six localities demonstrated cognizance of the dangers associated with irregular migration, most notably the risks of death at sea and physical exploitation. This universal awareness forms the foundation upon which individuals evaluate their migration options.

Second, respondents across all localities consistently framed migration regulation through the lens of national socio-economic policies rather than immigration control measures. Participants held at best vague notions about foreign policies—limited to general awareness of visa requirements and possible deportation—while demonstrating more detailed knowledge of national policies and economic strategies. However, the nature of this domestic policy focus varied significantly. In Algeria, respondents explicitly interpreted recent social welfare expansions, entrepreneurial loans, and diploma authentication delays as deliberate strategies to stem emigration. In contrast, respondents in both Nigeria and Ethiopia emphasized what their governments were *not* doing: failing to foster sufficient economic development to genuinely disincentivize emigration. Moreover, in Nigeria, few could identify any national migration policies. Even in Adama, where government facilitation of regular migration to the Gulf was recognized as a coherent strategy in tandem with attempts to stop irregular departures, the underlying expectation remained that economic opportunity as opposed to information or coercive interdiction would ultimately impact migration decisions.

Third, respondents demonstrated virtually no knowledge of the policies or legal frameworks of countries in the Global North. Their attention remained focused on domestic conditions: whether their own government was creating economic opportunities, facilitating legal pathways, or simply interdicting irregular departures. This suggests that deterrence-oriented policies and ICs originating from the Global North may have limited influence on migration decision-making in the Global South. Instead, aspirations for migration are negotiated primarily in relation to perceived opportunities and constraints within national borders, with destination country policies being secondary to domestic considerations. These patterns carry implications for understanding how deterrence-oriented policies and ICs actually function in practice.

5.4 Policies, information, and aspirations

The perspectives documented thus far—particularly the widespread awareness of irregular migration's dangers and the focus on domestic economic conditions—provide important context for understanding how policies and ICs might influence migration aspirations. As discussed above, we anticipate that individuals with strong aspirations to migrate are unlikely to be deterred by knowledge of risks or restrictive policies, as other factors override these concerns. Conversely, those with strong aspirations

to stay will view information about dangers as validating their decisions and reinforcing the belief that irregular migration is an unwise choice. Finally, individuals with weaker or more ambiguous aspirations may be most susceptible to influence from ICs, as knowledge of risks could dampen emergent migration desires. The reflections of interviewees on how information and policies affect both society in general and their own aspirations specifically offer support for these theoretical expectations.

First, individuals who expressed strong aspirations to migrate consistently indicated that information and policies have minimal impact on migration decision-making, whether for themselves or others in their communities. While these respondents acknowledged that regular migration is preferable, they emphasized that awareness of dangers does not fundamentally alter aspirations when economic desperation is the underlying driver. Many stated explicitly that they would undertake irregular migration despite the known risks if regular pathways remained inaccessible. This pattern emerged across all demographic profiles and research sites, suggesting that migration aspirations are shaped primarily by lack of opportunities at home and awareness of opportunities abroad, rather than by deterrence messaging or restrictive policies. The following reflections from two men in Kebri Beyah with strong migration aspirations illustrate how economic hardship and exposure to successful migrants—not policies or information—drive the desire to leave:

> "What encourages the idea of migration is financial hardship. When a person studies, and their parents have invested in them and raised them through tough conditions, and after completing their education they see that there is no job opportunity in the country, then they decide to migrate because their education brings no result, and they cannot support their parents. That's when migration comes into play. The young person doesn't consult anyone about the decision to migrate, he decides it on his own…The government does not allow people to migrate illegally but they do little to nothing to mitigate this. The government does not provide any encouragement or support to the youth. When someone is caught trying to migrate, they are returned. No action is taken against those who work in human smuggling and facilitate youth migration…There are checkpoints owned by the government which could help control migration by inspecting and stopping people. But it might happen that a vehicle carrying migrants arrives at one of those checkpoints, and once the officer doing the inspection is given money, he might let the vehicle pass…migration is not allowed, and anyone caught doing it should be prosecuted, but senior officials hand over the law enforcement to lower-level officers, and they do not implement it. I have never seen a migrant who was arrested."
>
> *- Interview KF1R: 40-year-old married man with children, secondary education, and a strong aspiration to migrate*

> "The Kebri Beyah community is divided into two groups: refugees and local residents. Refugees are the majority of those going abroad…This has caused some young people to migrate illegally, and follow the path of those who have had a better life [abroad]. For example, when they see a former migrant living a good life, or seeing them on social media, it creates pressure and pessimism among young people, causing them to want to migrate too. Therefore…[the government must ensure that] those who complete their studies here get a job, to avoid illegal migration and despair."
>
> *- Interview KA1R: 30-year-old single man with no children, a bachelor's degree, and a strong aspiration to migrate*

These accounts reveal several interconnected dynamics that undermine efforts to deter irregular migration. As discussed above, interviewees view migration aspirations as fundamentally rooted in local socio-economic realities, such as an inability to find employment after investment in education, the pressure to support parents, and the visible contrast between local poverty and the success of those who have migrated abroad. Again, respondents consistently frame migration governance through the lens of domestic economic policy rather than border control. The fact that governments have failed to create employment opportunities and support systems that would make migration unnecessary make their efforts at interdiction ineffective. As a result, information about the risks of irregular migration and the possibilities of capture and return are secondary considerations, if at all relevant. Enforcement may also be compromised by corruption, as officials accept bribes and allow irregular migration to proceed.

Beyond these broader societal observations, when asked to reflect on their own situations, individuals with strong migration aspirations also indicated that information and policies do not influence their personal decision-making. Instead, they make clear that other factors are driving their aspirations and that they remain prepared to leave irregularly if necessary. The following accounts from respondents from Sétif, Adama, and Kebri Beyah, respectively, are particularly striking in revealing how economic imperatives override any deterrent effects of ICs or policies:

> "The imams even include [information that aims to discourage migration] in their Friday prayers [and] who doesn't go to Friday prayers? Everyone hears it. When [the number of harga [irregular migrants]] went up, they started talking about it a lot on the news and about those who die…It can affect parents, and parents don't let [their children] go. But if I get the chance, I [will] go without hesitation."
>
> *- Interview SZ24R: 26-year-old single man with no children, a master's degree, and a strong aspiration to migrate*
>
> "I don't even need them [documents, visas, permits, diplomas, etc.] now. All I want is to leave the country with the help of international organizations like the UN or the Red Cross. I can't afford life anymore here. I don't want to see my children suffering from hunger. They now even ask strangers on the streets for money to buy some stuff for me…I love my country and my people but people are not as good as they were in the past. Everyone is in trouble. No one is looking at how you are doing these days. I don't have any hope to change my life here…I went to Sudan illegally and even gave birth to my first child. After staying eight years in Sudan, I attempted to go to Europe through Libya but suffered from everything that a human being can suffer from on this Earth. Finally my life was saved by the Red Cross organization and they brought me back to Sudan and then to Ethiopia. After all this I still want to try to go abroad, maybe with the help of the Red Cross if possible."
>
> *- Interview AA9R: 34-year-old divorced woman with children, secondary education, and a strong aspiration to migrate*
>
> "Although I haven't started any process to migrate, I remain hopeful. Seeing that 90% of the people I grew up with have already left gives me hope…It definitely affects me. Seeing people go through hardships, causing their families distress, and then being sent back is discouraging. However, I still want to try and migrate despite the challenges…The main thing that makes me want to migrate is to find better economic opportunities abroad. I also have friends who migrated years ago are now

> doing better and they are supporting their families in Kebri Beyah. That is what motivates me."
>
> *- Interview KB13R: 23-year-old single woman with no children, secondary education, and a strong aspiration to migrate*
>
> "The difference lies in the economic opportunities available. Someone seeking work within the country may not experience much change, but going abroad can lead to significant improvements in their life. The financial opportunities abroad are often better, allowing people to make substantial progress…The main driving force is the financial situation. The desire to find better economic opportunities is the primary factor influencing my decision to migrate."
>
> *- Interview KB12R: 24-year-old single woman with no children, a bachelor's degree, and a strong aspiration to migrate*

All of these individuals have strong aspirations to migrate and are not deterred by information regarding the risks and dangers of irregular migration. While they primarily wish to migrate regularly, they are not discounting the possibility of irregular migration. These testimonies span three countries and diverse personal circumstances—from a young Algerian man exposed to anti-migration messaging in mosques, to an Ethiopian woman who survived severe trauma in Libya yet still seeks to migrate, to two young Ethiopian women motivated by stories of success of their peers abroad. For these individuals, information about policies and risks is, at most, a secondary consideration. Financial hardship, lack of domestic opportunities, and the demonstrated success of those who have migrated are fundamental drivers of migration aspirations, and these are factors that ICs and restrictive policies cannot address. The example of the woman who survived severe trauma yet still seeks to migrate suggests that not only awareness of risks, but even lived experiences of hardship may not dampen aspirations.

Second, individuals with strong aspirations to stay were indeed often those who expressed support for measures to deter irregular migration and who characterized such migration as detrimental to migrants themselves and their families. For these respondents, information about risks associated with irregular migration appears to reinforce their commitment to remaining in place, validating their decision as the safer and more responsible choice. However, these same individuals paradoxically expressed skepticism about the effectiveness of both ICs and restrictive policies in deterring others—particularly young people—from migrating. This tension is revealing—while campaigns may strengthen the resolve of those already inclined to stay, they are universally perceived as largely ineffective in changing the minds of those determined to leave. This skepticism was articulated persistently by interviewees across all research locations, as illustrated by the following reflections from individuals in Sétif, Mostaganem, Adama, and Kebri Beyah, respectively:

> "This year, the Ramadan [television] series dealt with the issue of irregular migration. They try…but I don't think the state is making every effort to prohibit it…They have more influence on mothers, it breaks their hearts more, that's all, but this generation, when they have something in their heads, I don't think they are influenced by a film or a series, no."
>
> *- Interview SZ25R: 24-year-old single woman with no children, a master's degree and a strong aspiration to stay*
>
> "I listen to the radio a lot, where they play recordings of mothers crying [and ask] 'Why are you making your parents suffer?' I don't know if that affects everyone or not, they also show a lot of that on television…People aren't affected by that…because those who have a goal in mind, no one can take it away from them,

not their parents, not posters, not the government, even if they impose fines or prison sentences, it doesn't affect them when they have something in mind."

- Interview MZ12R: 36-year-old married woman with children, a bachelor's degree, and a strong aspiration to stay

"The government always says to go the legal way. They warn not to go through the sea or through the brokers. But our people don't listen to this. They go through the sea; they go through the brokers. Then, by going this way, they pass through a lot of problems. The problem is with them. Now you are observing returnees. But all of this is due to their |the migrants'] problem. But the government facilitates [migration] if they go through a legal process. But the community doesn't listen to this and prefers to go in [an illegal] way. How many of them are left in the sea? You haven't heard in the news recently that a lot of people have passed away. So the government doesn't want this…if they are legal, the government facilitates this properly. It helps them to get hired properly.

- Interview AL7R: 43-year-old married woman with no children, a secondary education, and a strong aspiration to stay

"The reason is that when comparing life in Africa, people believe that illegal migration is better. For example, if a person manages to enter Europe, they might get legal status. Similarly, in the United States, even without legal status, they believe finding a job there is much better than staying in Africa…often, people are not evaluated based on their education when they migrate illegally. If a person enters a country without proper documentation, their education from back home does not benefit them much, unless they pursue further studies within that country. This is what many migrants have told us."

- Interview KA3R: 25-year-old married man with children, a bachelor's degree, and a strong aspiration to stay

These reflections from individuals committed to staying reveal a consistent pattern: while they personally view irregular migration as dangerous and unwise, and while they support their governments' efforts to discourage it, they simultaneously recognize that such efforts have limited impact on those determined to leave. While respondents note, as discussed previously, that campaigns may affect family members (notably mothers) emotionally, this may nevertheless not sway young people. Ultimately, numerous interviewees observe that people continue to migrate irregularly despite government warnings and despite witnessing the suffering of returnees, because the economic opportunities abroad, even if one has an irregular status, are perceived as superior to remaining at home without prospects.

For individuals who clearly aspire to remain in their place of residence, information about the dangers of irregular migration serves an important validating function. These respondents do not need deterrence messaging to convince them to stay given that their decisions are grounded in other factors such as family responsibilities, employment, community ties, or a commitment to contributing to national development. However, awareness of the risks associated with irregular migration reinforces their conviction that staying is the right choice, providing an additional rationale that complements existing reasons for sedentariness. In this sense, ICs appear most effective precisely where they are least needed: among those who were already disinclined to migrate. The following accounts from two married men

with children in Adama and Kebri Beyah, respectively, illustrate how knowledge of migration dangers functions as further post-hoc justification for decisions made on other grounds:

> "Even if I have the documents that are required to go abroad, the responsibilities I have now in my family won't allow me to leave this country. Unless I took all family members with me, it is impossible for me to migrate…I have also heard a lot about the dangers of migration through different government media. The government also brought back many illegal migrants from Arab countries."
>
> *- Interview AZ5R: 40-year-old married man with children, a bachelor's degree, and a strong aspiration to stay*

> "The government strongly opposes illegal migration; the government never advises people to migrate illegally. The government sometimes looks for those who are trying to migrate illegally and stops them...Honestly, illegal migration is a very difficult journey; you can encounter anything. It is one of the things that can shape your life, for better or for worse. I would not want to live in uncertainty; that is why I prefer to stay…Another point is that since illegal migration has become a common dream for people. I personally believe that if you can achieve something in your own country, you should do so. If you see legal opportunities to go elsewhere without migrating illegally, you should take them but I have never thought of migrating illegally (tahriib)...If anyone asks for my opinion, I would advise young people to stay in their own country and contribute to it. The countries people migrate to have been improved by their own people just like you. So, try to make a difference in your own country instead of attempting illegal migration."
>
> *- Interview KA3R: 25-year-old married man with children, a bachelor's degree, and a strong aspiration to stay*

These testimonies reveal how individuals committed to staying construct coherent narratives that interweave multiple rationales for their decisions. The first respondent centers family obligations as the primary barrier to migration, with awareness of dangers gleaned from government media and the visible return of irregular migrants being a secondary consideration reinforcing the aspiration to stay. The second respondent, while accepting that regular migration may be acceptable, believes irregular migration is detrimental given the risks involved while staying allows one to contribute to national development. Both men frame their decisions to stay as active choices rather than default positions, constructing staying as responsible, patriotic, and safer than the alternative. In doing so, they demonstrate how information about migration risks becomes integrated into broader value systems that prioritize family stability, national contribution, and personal security over the potential economic gains that drive others to migrate.

Third, and finally, the small proportion of respondents (17%) who expressed weak or ambiguous migration aspirations—those who indicated "neither weak nor strong," "weak," or "very weak" preferences for either migrating or staying—present a more complex and potentially consequential picture. Unlike those with strong aspirations in either direction, this group appears genuinely uncertain about their future trajectories, making them theoretically more susceptible to influence from external information. Their reflections reveal a notable tension: while they share the widespread skepticism that ICs have an impact on the general public, they simultaneously acknowledge being personally influenced by what they have learned about migration risks. Moreover, they can envision certain individuals avoiding irregular migration as awareness of dangers increases. For this group, the conclusion drawn from risk information is clear: regular migration remains preferable if feasible, but irregular migration

is best avoided. The following reflections from individuals living, respectively, in Sétif, Mostaganem, Abuja, Adama, and Kebri Beyah illustrate these ambiguities:

> "They run awareness campaigns against irregular migration, which leads to death…On television, social media; even if a person brings up this topic with their friends and their friends are aware, they tell them that there are other things they can do…It has had an impact, some people have changed their minds, but not a huge impact, because people are still migrating. People are stubborn; there are still no significant results. There may be one, two or three who are afraid to risk their lives, because they think their lives are too precious to risk. But there is no major impact, because we keep hearing about people who have drowned and so on."
>
> *- Interview SZ15R: 43-year-old single woman, with no children, a master's degree, and "neither weak nor strong" aspirations to migrate*
>
> "On social media, they always post photos of people who went on small boats and died, or, I don't know, disappeared, who haven't been found yet…It [influences] me, and I don't like it when that happens, but we see that after this there are people who leave anyway, so it probably doesn't influence them."
>
> *- Interview MZ37R: 27-year-old single woman with no children, a master's degree, and "neither weak nor strong" aspirations to migrate*
>
> "[Information campaigns] tell people [about] the risks of going out, and that some [people] end up wasting their lives, and that some of those that migrated are not actually going there to set up businesses but become something else. That's why we are being warned about such acts…It is good, as it serves as a means to caution people about illegal migration… those that want to migrate should get legal documents."
>
> *- Interview AP9R: 35-year-old married man with children, secondary education, and "neither weak nor strong" aspirations to stay*
>
> "The government doesn't support migration. Most people migrate without the knowledge of the government following illegal routes. The problem with legal migration is that it takes a lot of time. Even my ex-wife took training for three months after she divorced me but she didn't leave Ethiopia."
>
> *- Interview AZ9R: 35-year-old married man with children, secondary education, and "neither weak nor strong" aspirations to stay*
>
> "People travel abroad in search of a better life, motivated by aims for improved opportunities and better living conditions. Each person who makes this journey aims not only for personal improvement but also to develop their family's life through financial support and larger openings. Those who go abroad usually do not waste their time; instead, they mostly work and earn a living…The one who migrates via the illegal or informal system goes through hunger, suffering and misery, and his life is at risk. So everyone wants to have a safe legal system to migrate to so that they don't risk their lives."
>
> *- Interview KB7R: 44-year-old divorced woman with children, secondary education, and "neither weak nor strong" aspirations to stay*

These testimonies from respondents with ambiguous aspirations reveal several distinctive patterns that differentiate them from those with strong commitments to either migrate or stay. Specifically, respondents demonstrate a more reflective and observational stance toward migration, noting both its potential benefits (improved opportunities, family support) and its severe dangers when pursued irregularly (hunger, suffering, death). Unlike those determined to migrate, they do not dismiss these risks; unlike those committed to staying, they do not morally condemn migration itself. At the same time, they acknowledge that ICs may influence some individuals (such as themselves) even while observing that many others continue to migrate irregularly despite awareness of the risks. The recognition that "there may be one, two or three who are afraid to risk their lives" or that campaigns serve "as a means to caution people" suggests these respondents are influenced themselves, or can imagine others being influenced by them, even if the overall societal impact remains limited.

Ultimately, this group articulates a clear hierarchy of preferences: regular migration is desirable if accessible, staying is acceptable if necessary, but irregular migration is to be avoided due to known risks. This hierarchy suggests that for individuals without strong pre-existing commitments, information about dangers may indeed influence their aspirations: while migration generally remains an option, irregular routes are not seen as viable. In the end, the fact that regular avenues for migration remain limited, the practical effect of ICs and restrictive policies may be to trap this uncertain group in a state of prolonged immobility, with individuals aware that staying offers limited prospects, but feeling that the only accessible pathway for emigration—irregularity—is too dangerous to pursue.[7]

6 Conclusion

This study set out to examine how policies and ICs designed to deter irregular migration to the Global North influence the migration aspirations of populations across three African countries. Drawing on 243 in-depth interviews with individuals across six localities in Algeria, Ethiopia, and Nigeria—-Mostaganem, Sétif, Adama, Kebri Beyah, Abuja, and Osogbo—our findings reveal a complex picture that challenges assumptions underlying attempts at disincentivizing migration and shaping aspirations. Overall, three central findings emerge from our analysis. First, awareness of the dangers associated with irregular migration is nearly universal across all research sites, regardless of demographic profile or migration aspirations. This widespread awareness appears to reflect years of sustained messaging across multiple media platforms and social channels. Although the prevalence of both ICs and awareness is markedly smaller in Nigeria, awareness of the risks associated with irregular migration, including the possibility of return, nevertheless exists. However, this knowledge does not directly translate into deterrence.

Second, in line with our central theoretical expectations, the relationship between awareness of risks and aspirations appears to be mediated by pre-existing commitments and life circumstances. Individuals with strong aspirations to migrate acknowledge the dangers of irregular migration, but emphasize that economic desperation, lack of domestic opportunities, and exposure to successful migrants override concerns about risk. For these individuals, neither information about risks, nor awareness of restrictive migration policies, addresses the fundamental drivers of their migration aspirations. In contrast, individuals with strong aspirations to stay view information about migration dangers as validating their decisions, reinforcing convictions already grounded in family responsibilities, employment, or commitment to national development. Paradoxically, these same individuals express deep skepticism about the effectiveness of ICs or policies to deter others, recognizing that determined migrants will

[7] This finding aligns with Carling's (2002) work on "involuntary immobility."

pursue their migration due to other drivers. There is therefore a nearly universal acknowledgement that socio-economic drivers shape aspirations as opposed to policies and information.

Only the small proportion of respondents with ambiguous aspirations demonstrate potential susceptibility to influence, although even for this group, the practical effect may simply be foreclosure of irregular routes rather than the elimination of all migration aspirations. Even as those who may or may not wish to migrate also acknowledge that a majority of people are unlikely to be swayed by awareness of the risks of irregular migration and restrictive policies, they believe that some individuals may be deterred. Moreover, they themselves explicitly or implicitly admit to being influenced information that is relayed about irregular migration. Policies and campaigns which aim to deter migrants may therefore have some effect on a particular sub-set of individuals who are uncertain about migration.

Third, respondents across all research sites consistently frame migration governance through a domestic rather than international lens. Participants demonstrated knowledge of, and numerous opinions about, both national socio-economic policies as well as government efforts to facilitate or restrict migration. In contrast, they exhibited virtually no knowledge of the policies of Global North states. This domestic orientation reflects a fundamental reality: for potential migrants across all six research sites, the primary determinants of whether and how to migrate are rooted in conditions at home, from the availability of jobs, the success of peers who have migrated, the existence of regular pathways to migration, and the perceived effectiveness of national government interdiction. In the end, while the vast majority of respondents across all localities believe existing policies are ineffectual, they frequently called for further policies to focus on economic development, believing that this will disincentivize (both regular and irregular) emigration.

These findings carry important implications for migration policy and practice. Deterrence-oriented ICs and restrictive policies appear to primarily influence individuals already disinclined to migrate, while having minimal impact on those most determined to leave. The nearly universal skepticism about the effectiveness of both ICs and interdiction policies, expressed even by those who support deterrence efforts, points to a fundamental mismatch between the logic of restriction and awareness-raising and the lived realities driving migration aspirations. Campaigns assume that better information about risks and restrictive policies will lead to different decisions, yet our respondents make clear that they are already aware of the dangers of irregular migratory routes. The decision to migrate reflects not an information deficit but a calculation that the risks of staying, such as economic stagnation, inability to support family, lack of future prospects, etc., outweigh the risks of leaving. From this perspective, providing more or better information about migration dangers cannot fundamentally alter aspirations rooted in desperation and the perceived absence of viable alternatives at home.

Moreover, the consistent emphasis on domestic economic conditions as the primary driver of migration aspirations suggests that effective migration governance requires not just information dissemination or border enforcement, but fundamental economic transformation. Respondents across all sites—whether aspiring to migrate or stay—emphasized that governments should focus on creating employment opportunities, supporting entrepreneurship, and addressing the structural conditions that make emigration seem necessary. In contexts where such opportunities remain limited, even successful deterrence of irregular migration may simply result in prolonged immobility rather than a genuine desire to stay.

Ultimately, while we find significant evidence to support our theoretical argumentation, this study has several limitations that we acknowledge. First, our sample of 243 residents, while diverse in demographic composition and geographic distribution, represents only six localities across three

countries. Different findings might emerge in other regions with distinct migration histories, policy environments, or economic conditions. Second, the small proportion (17%) of respondents with ambiguous or weak migration aspirations limits our ability to draw robust conclusions about this potentially important group; while our findings suggest these individuals may be more susceptible to external influence, the limited sample size precludes a more detailed analysis of such impacts. Third, our research design focused on residents rather than individuals who recently engaged in international (or internal) migration, while this choice allowed us to examine how policies and information influence those who are the primary targets of efforts at migration deterrence, comparisons with recent migrants might reveal additional insights about how actual migration experiences shape aspirations along with policies and information. Fourth, the cross-sectional nature of our data means we cannot observe changes in aspirations over time or track whether exposure to specific campaigns or policies leads to shifts in individual decision-making. Longitudinal research is needed to establish causal relationships between information exposure and aspiration changes, or to identify critical moments when individuals' migration plans crystallize or dissolve. In this vein, additional behavioral data on actual migration attempts, preparation activities, or changes in plans over time would complement our findings on stated preferences and perceived influences.

Considering these limitations, our study opens several avenues for future research. Longitudinal studies tracking individuals' migration aspirations over time would provide crucial evidence about whether ICs indeed influence decision-making trajectories and could distinguish between temporary hesitation and genuine abandonment of migration plans. More detailed investigation of individuals with ambiguous aspirations would be valuable given their potential susceptibility to influence, examining what factors push uncertain individuals toward migration or staying and whether specific types of information prove decisive. Comparative research examining contexts where regular migration pathways are accessible or limited would illuminate how different opportunities mediate campaign effectiveness—our findings suggest that policies appear more coherent where regular options exist alongside deterrent efforts, as is the case in Adama. Investigation of family dynamics could also reveal whether family-targeted messaging proves more effective, particularly given observations that campaigns affect parents emotionally but do not sway determined young migrants. Studies comparing individuals who have and have not been exposed to ICs would be particularly fruitful as well. Finally, future research should examine the widely-held assumption that economic development disincentivizes emigration and how it may influence migration aspirations. ICs which focus on local economic opportunities may be more influential than those pertaining to migration itself in shaping aspirations.

Ultimately, our findings suggest that effective migration governance cannot rely primarily on deterrence if it seeks to shape migration aspirations. Addressing migration pressures requires confronting the structural economic conditions that drive emigration aspirations, a far more complex and resource-intensive undertaking than producing awareness campaigns or supporting interdiction. Future research should continue to examine not just how to deter irregular migration, but how to create conditions in which staying becomes a genuine choice rather than a constrained default. Given that people appear to view irregular migration as a last resort, regular avenues for circular migration are likely to be a more fruitful and effective mechanism for managing migration flows.

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