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What matters in migrants' decision-making?

Insights from the migration
journeys along Africa and Europe

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Abstract

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

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

Keywords: migrant decision-making, drivers, transit, regular migration, irregular migration, agency, capabilities, capital, Africa, Europe

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Contents

1	Introduction	5
2	Analytical framework	7
2.1	A Temporal Multilevel Analysis Framework to research decisions to stay and migrate	8
3	Research Design	9
3.1	Quantitative Data	10
3.2	Qualitative Data	11
3.3	Contextualizing the country of origin	12
4	Nigerian migrants' decisions through time and space	14
4.1	At the beginning: the influence of macro and meso drivers	15
4.2	Journeys through (in)secure spaces of (non-)opportunities	18
4.3	Last locality? Facing (non-)inclusion challenges in Europe ...	21
4.4	'Travel is the key to knowledge': Using experience to inform decision-making	25
5	Concluding Remarks.....	27
6	References	29

1 Introduction

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

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

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

With the aim of contributing to understanding the decision-making process in the current contexts of diverse challenges and uncertainties, Vezzoli et al. (2024) redefined the core question of ‘why people migrate’, to explore how people make decisions amidst social transformations and everyday personal change (life course). These scholars developed the Temporal Multilevel Analysis framework (TMA) with the aim to evaluate how changes in society, individual life experiences and migration policy shape decisions to stay or migrate over time (over a lifetime and across generations) and across space (across countries and along migration journeys). While individual decision-making processes involve several steps, from the emergence of migration aspirations to actual migration, this paper focuses specifically

on the emergence of aspirations to migrate, stay, or return. To examine this important stage, the paper addresses three main research questions:

- 1. What macro-, meso-, and micro-drivers influence the decision-making process at the place of origin and during the migration journey?*
- 2. How does the influence of these drivers evolve along the journey, considering changes in location and the passage of time?*
- 3. How are aspirations and capabilities put into practice through migrants' exercise of agency in different localities?*

As these questions suggest, we seek to identify drivers and capabilities not as static factors but as part of a dynamic process that is constantly evolving and can be understood through the concepts of Social Transformation and the Life Course. At each moment in time, migrants make decisions in a constantly changing environment, while their circumstances continue to unfold as routes change and they adjust their plans and reassess whether to continue their journey, stay or return.

In this paper we rely on the TMA framework and complement it with four other approaches. First, to address the macro-, meso-, and micro-level drivers, we adopt the concept of 'complex migration drivers' (Carling & Schewel, 2018; Van Hear et al., 2018; Czaika & Reinprecht, 2022; de Haas, 2021; Triandafyllidou, 2023). Second, to further understand the role of agency, we draw on the 'aspirations-capabilities' framework, which is based on social transformation and combines structure and agency – the capacity of social actors to reflect on their position, devise strategies, and take action to achieve their goals (Sewell, 1992, as cited in Bakewell, 2010). Third, we examine the influence of class and draw on the Bourdesian conceptualization developed through the work of Van Hear (2014, 2018) which allows us to analyze how migrants mobilize different forms of capital to fulfil their aspirations within spaces of 'unequal' structures. Finally, for a thorough analysis of space, we incorporate the concept of subjective or individual action space (Wolpert, 1951; Fawcett, 1985) which is defined as 'the geographical and temporal distribution of the ensemble of opportunities and constraints, both local and distant, that individuals exploit and address as they endeavor to survive and improve their lives' (Painter et al. 1994, 452).

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

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

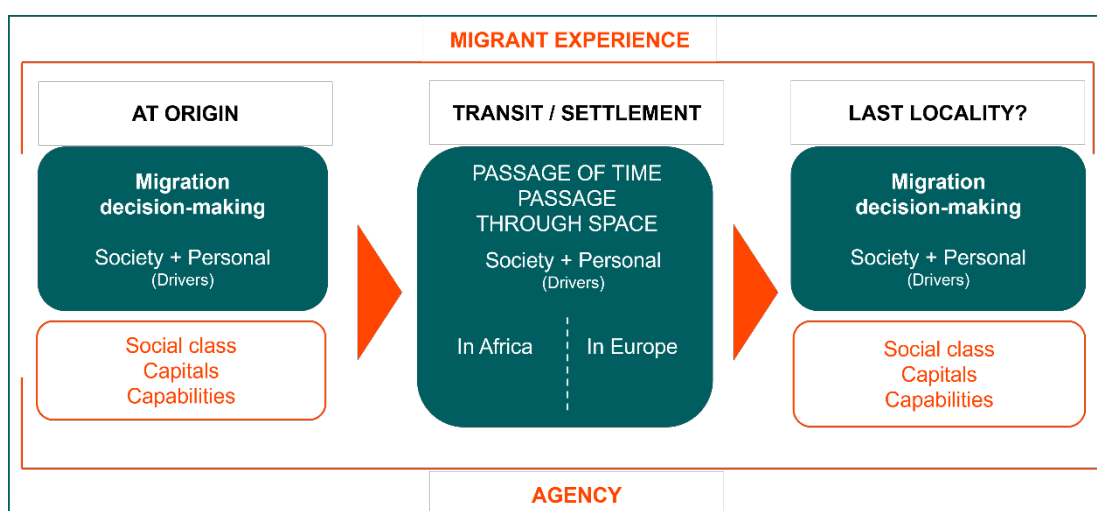
2 Analytical framework

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

Hein de Haas's simple definition of human mobility encompasses multiple layers including social fields characterized by 'power disparities due to inequalities, racialized representations and national mythscapes [which] facilitate and legitimate differential mobility and fixity' (Glick Schiller et al. 2013, 183). Since the 2000s, migration research has examined how social inequalities, associated with the expansion of the capitalist system and globalization have interacted with mobility. Research reflected in the 'mobility turn' as well as on 'transnationalism' and 'cosmopolitanism' captured this reflection within migration studies. Over the years, we have also observed how these global economic processes have legitimized certain forms of migration while excluding others. In a world beset by growing levels of risk (Beck, 2009), these processes often reproduce inequalities and hierarchies established through colonialism and sustained through post-colonial continuities (Fechter & Walsh, 2013), as well as through neocolonial processes that hierarchize bodies and knowledge in the Global North and Global South. These processes both classify and shape migration flows, pushing people towards (un)desirable pathways. As societies face a multitude of interconnected crises or 'polycrisis' (Wray et al. 2023; Lawrence et al. 2024) for which workable solutions may not be readily available, the sense of general, multidimensional uncertainty may be increasing. In parallel, forms of migration that governments often label as 'undesirable' may be diversifying and increasing in scale.

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

Figure 1. Conceptualization of the decision-making process and the migrant experience



Source: Authors' own elaboration

The next step is to present the specific lens of the Temporal Multilevel Analysis framework, along with the core analytical tools that underpin it.

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

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

The TMA framework shares similarities with approaches that have explored how specific factors (or ‘drivers’) affect (non-)migration decision-making, not as individual factors but through their interaction. Van Hear et al. (2018) proposed that drivers are structural elements that enable and constrain social actors’ exercise of agency. Intertwining macro-, meso- and micro-level drivers results in different combinations, or clusters, of ‘complex drivers’ that operate as more than the sum of their individual parts and shape the ‘specific form and structure of population movements’ (2018: 934). In a similar approach, Czaika and Reinprecht (2022) distinguish between slow-changing ‘predisposing’ factors, such as broad societal inequalities, which create the context for movement, and proximate ‘triggering’ drivers, such as specific job offers or sudden conflicts, which connect structural disparities to immediate decision-making contexts. The effects of drivers vary in terms of temporality (ranging from gradual transitions to rapid shocks), selectivity (affecting different social groups unequally based on age, gender, social status, etc.), and space (affecting different geographical areas). Consequently, migration outcomes emerge from the non-linear interactions of these multidimensional elements, whereby

economic, political, social, and environmental factors cluster together to enable, constrain, or trigger decisions, often accumulating until a ‘tipping point’ is reached that transforms aspirations into mobility.

Ultimately, Czaika and Reinprecht (2022, 56) develop a typology of nine driver dimensions (demographic, economic, environmental, human development, individual, politico-institutional, security, -cultural and supranational) and 24 driving factors (divided by dimension) which interact within ‘complex driver environments’ to shape migration decisions. Thus, (non-)migration rarely stems from a single driver, but instead arises from clusters of factors which produce non-linear interaction effects (meaning that the influence of one driver depends on the presence and intensity of others). These drivers can also accumulate in ways that suddenly set larger population movements in motion. Importantly, in the ‘complex driver environment’ approach, these factors remain relevant throughout people’s lives, whether or not they are on a migratory journey.

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

The strength of the TMA framework lies in its ability to embed decisions to stay or migrate in social changes over time and across different spaces, allowing for the observation of the pace and impact of these changes at the macro (societal), meso (community), and micro (individual) levels. In other words, within the broad categories of social transformation and life course, it explores what happens, independently in territories and societies, and how interactions between changing factors create different social contexts and personal strategies, including mobility and/or migration. It is these spaces that, under globalization and capitalist expansion, have undergone shifts that bring both benefits, such as the ability to fulfil a wider variety of life aspirations, as well as challenges, such as the risks that come from polycrises. In these places of ‘change’, we can observe how they are differently perceived and in response to it, choose for strategies involving (im)mobility or (im)migration. The TMA framework is particularly suited for this type of analysis as it incorporates both gradual changes over time and specific life events and experiences (Vezzoli et al., 2024).

3 Research Design

Using the theoretical analytical framework outlined above, we explore how the migration journey shapes the migration decision-making process of Nigerian migrants with at least one international migration experience. We distinguish between migrants who had a direct journey and those who had an indirect journey. Here, individuals with a direct journey are those who migrated from Nigeria to a European destination by plane, and with a visa, without any stop in-between. Individuals in this category

might have migrated onwards within Europe after their arrival. Individuals with an indirect journey are those who aimed to migrate to an international destination (not necessarily in Europe) and stayed (for a shorter or longer period) in other international destinations in Africa before reaching Europe. Indirect journeys involve travelling without a visa and often with an unclear destination, meaning that even once in Europe, this group of migrants may not have reached their final destination. The distinction between the two types of migration journeys is central in identifying what shape migration decisions take and how these decisions are (re)interpreted over time.

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

3.1 Quantitative Data

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

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

Consent rates varied significantly: 177/503 in Italy (35%), 507/512 in Niger (99%), and 465/531 in Tunisia (88%), substantially limiting the Italian longitudinal sample for subsequent follow-up. Stratified random sampling was applied for round one, while a census approach was used for round two, because of shrinking pools of eligible participants. Completion rates exceeded targets in most cases: Italy yielded 96 and 59 interviews across the two rounds; Niger, 60 and 30; Tunisia, 60 and 25. For this paper, we focus on the data collected among Nigerian respondents who participated in the longitudinal follow-ups, particularly their responses to two open-ended questions:

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

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

The final sample comprises 70 responses from Nigerian respondents: 42 were collected in Niger, 18 in Tunisia and 10 in Italy. Due to the lack of a population frame allowing for randomized sampling, the data is neither representative nor generalizable to larger populations. However, the volume of interviews allows us to identify findings that are likely to be relevant beyond the study sample. In addition, a few limitations related to the specific fieldwork sites should be considered: in Italy, respondents recruited

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

² Data collection itself took place remotely. Surveys were conducted over the phone using WhatsApp or Signal, with the enumerator completing the survey in ODK while speaking with the respondent. In Tunisia, enumerators were permitted to recruit participants in person and subsequently schedule a follow-up telephone appointment to complete the survey.

in reception centers are overrepresented. Additionally, self-selection bias from low baseline consent rates affected longitudinal representativeness. Conversely, in Niger, budget constraints limited longitudinal sample sizes despite very high consent rates for follow-ups. Thirdly, remote-only data collection in Tunisia reduced sampling diversity and extended timelines. Remote data collection made respondents less likely to participate, making it more difficult to meet the sampling target. Finally, half of the interviews with Nigerians took place in Niger.

3.2 Qualitative Data

In parallel with the survey data, the second data set consists of in-depth interviews conducted to study decision-making of migrants in Africa and in Europe (Spain, Italy and Slovakia). Our focus was on examining migration trajectories and understanding decision-making at departure as well as along the migration journeys. Our analyses allowed us to assess how individual- and policy-level factors and conditions influenced interviewee choices, including decisions about their eventual ‘destination’. (Non-)migration policies were also considered important elements in their decision-making.

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

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

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

In this paper we focus particularly on the interviews with Nigerian citizens who migrated to Europe and were residing in Spain (30), Italy (17) and Slovakia (12). We conducted a qualitative content analysis drawing on the framework technique (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994), that is, using a matrix with guiding questions. The questions covered five dimensions: (1) the context in Nigeria before departure; (2) knowledge and perceptions of migration (community and individual levels) before departure; (3) drivers and triggers along the journey; (4) transformations in defining the standard of life and good life along the journey; and (5) individual transformation through migration.

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

³ It is important to mention that, due to the difficulties in accessing Nigerian migrants in Italy, 80% of the participants currently reside in ‘projects’, state- or privately funded facilities that accommodate asylum seekers, refugees or migrants in vulnerable situations. In some cases, these facilities also provide food, language courses and employment training. In Spain, a Nigerian NGO assisted in recruiting participants, some of whom were part of the NGO. Furthermore, as the interviewees were geographically dispersed across Slovakia, about one-third of the interviews were conducted online, while those in Spain and Italy were conducted in person.

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

Edo State), the Southeast, with 15 participants (predominantly in Spain, including 8 from Imo and 4 from Anambra), and the Southwest with 9 out of 10 participants from Lagos (5 residing in Slovakia).

Among the interviewees, the most heterogeneous sample is found in Spain, which also has the largest sample size. In Spain, 12 individuals had completed university studies in Nigeria and migrated from various states. In contrast, the interviewees in Slovakia exhibit the least diversity: 4 out of 5 interviewees, all of whom hold university degrees from Nigerian universities, are originally from Lagos State, compared with only two interviewees in Spain. In Italy, the situation is quite different: the majority of participants had attained only primary or secondary education, with only two individuals (out of 17) having completed university studies (see Table 1).

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

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

Source: the authors

There are far more male than female participants in all three countries, although the difference is slightly smaller in Italy, with 11 men and 6 women. The average age is similar across the three countries, at around 30. The longest period since arrival is recorded in Spain and the shortest in Slovakia.

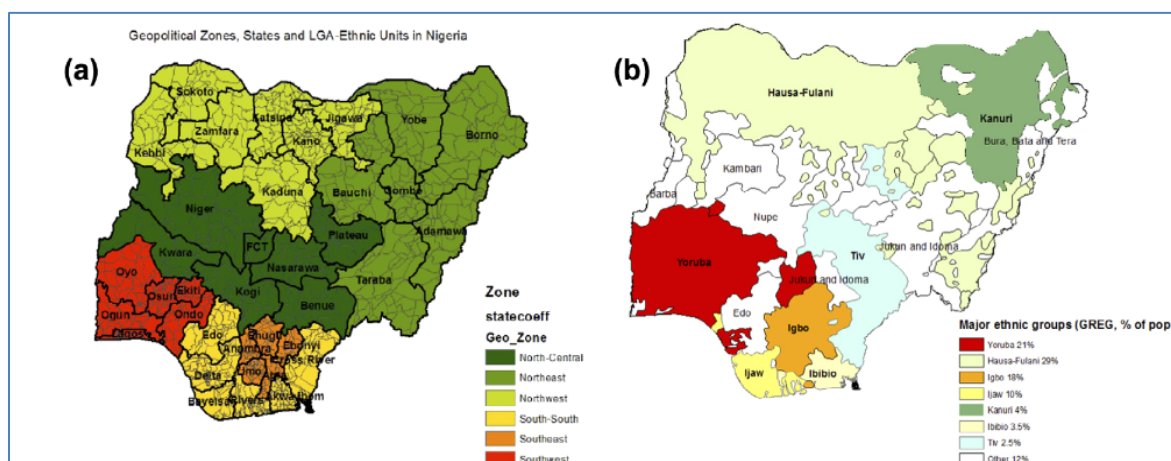
The temporal and sociospatial diversity found in our sample reflects the structural context in Nigeria and its impact on lives and livelihoods, as we will see next.

3.3 Contextualizing the country of origin

Nigeria is one of Africa's largest nations in terms of population and territory. As a multi-ethnic and culturally diverse federation, Nigeria has a three-tier system of government. The country comprises 36 states as well as one Federal Capital Territory (FCT), which includes the capital city of Abuja, where the federal government is located. According to Nicolle et al. (2024), the country is home to approximately 87 million Christians, primarily in the south, and more than 90 million Muslims, mostly in the north. Following Archibong (2018), Nigeria can be divided into six geopolitical zones, which broadly correspond to the geographical distribution of major ethnic groups: Yoruba, Hausa-Fulani, Igbo, Ijaw, Kanuri, Ibibio and Tiv (see Figure 2).

Ethnoreligious conflicts in Nigeria date back several decades before independence from colonial rule (Ihuoma, 2025), including the Hausa-Igbo riots of 1945. They intensified during the Biafran War (1967–1970) and continued through the Kaduna and Kano riots in the late 1980s and early 1990s. More recent episodes include the Shariah Crisis of 2000 and election-related violence in 2011 (NSRP, 2014).

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



Source: Archibong (2018)

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

Ethnicity is crucial in understanding socio-spatial inequalities in Nigeria, a country rich in resources, particularly oil. As noted by Ihuoma (2025), these social inequalities have been institutionalized by the legacy of colonial rule and exacerbated by ‘post-independence elitism’ and ‘market-oriented policies.’ This has led to disparities between elite privilege and grassroots deprivation, characterized by vertical hierarchies of power in which social class shapes access to resources and services, and horizontal inequalities across ethnic and religious lines. In Nigeria, the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo populations are the three largest groups and have often been marginalized from political power and economic opportunities, especially in the Northwest and Northeast geopolitical zones. These groups consistently report lower levels of wealth, education, and access to electricity compared to the national average. However, there have been notable improvements over time in narrowing the ethnic gap in access to water and sanitation (Archibong, 2018).

These various factors create a map of contrasting regions: some boast thriving economies and full access to health services and education, through programs developed between 2015 and 2017 (Ajayi, 2019), while others wrestle with poverty, which affects 37% of the population, alongside limited access to essential services and infrastructure. Climate change exacerbates these challenges, contributing to increased food scarcity and droughts, as well as to rising incidents of violence over agricultural control

and ongoing food and nutrition insecurity in states like Borno, Katsina, and parts of the Kaduna region⁵. Finally, regarding access to the job market, Nigeria has low unemployment rates but high levels of underemployment, with many individuals working less than 40 hours per week.

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

4 Nigerian migrants' decisions through time and space

This study addresses one of the questions at the heart of migration studies since its inception: *What factors influence people's decisions to stay or to migrate?*

The TMA developed in the project (Vezzoli et al., 2024) draws on literature addressing this question from various theoretical perspectives. Theoretical approaches to the analysis of aspirations and capabilities were used to inform the concepts of agency and capitals. Agency is understood as a link between social structure and individual development over the life course (Bakewell, 2010; Van Hear et al., 2018; de Haas, 2021), while capitals provides a framework for analyzing how people gain access to and mobilize resources to achieve their goals (Van Hear, 2004, 2014). This is possible even in contexts where people's space of action (Wolpert, 1951; Fawcett, 1985) is limited by barriers such as territorial insecurity or obstacles to inclusion such as a lack of knowledge of the local language or procedures for applying for residency.

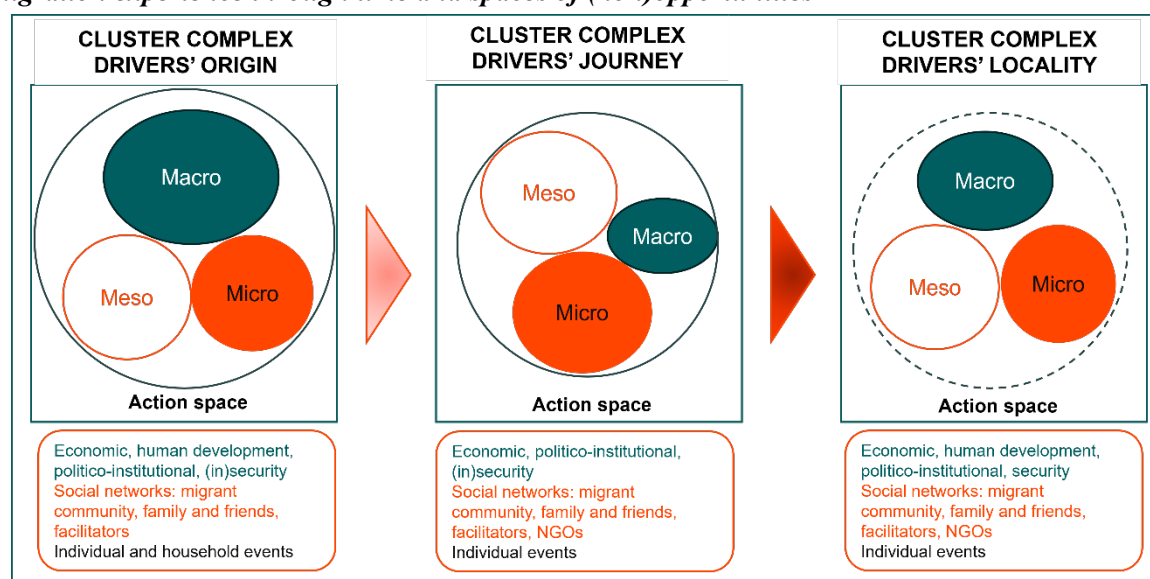
We decided to include the initial decision-making at the place of origin in the analysis as a determining moment for understanding the later decision-making processes in their journeys. Adopting a comprehensive approach by studying all stages of the migration journey, rather than focusing exclusively on what migration studies refer to as 'transit', we develop two key insights.

First, we highlight the significance of the drivers operating within the country of origin in relation to the social position that individuals occupy within its social structure, which in this case study is strongly shaped by ethnic and religious affiliation (Archibong, 2018; Ihouma, 2025). These intertwined factors determine the type of pathways migrants are able to undertake as they mobilize capitals and exercise their agency, placing them within one migration regime or another (direct and safe, or indirect and dangerous), which in turn impacts their lives and subsequent decision-making processes.

Second, beginning the study of the migration journey at its point of origin has also allowed us to explore how the influence of the clusters of 'complex drivers' which comprise macro-, meso- and micro-drivers, evolves throughout the migration experience (Carling & Schewel, 2018; Van Hear et al., 2018; Czaika & Reinprecht, 2022; de Haas, 2021, Triandafyllidou, 2023). In addition, we observe how past experiences are interpreted and influence present and future decisions. During the 'en route' stage (rather than 'in transit'), social transformations of the localities become less relevant in decision-making in favour of individual aspects related to the life course, as proposed by Vezzoli et al. (2026). Therefore, analyzing migration across time and geographic space allows us to identify how the influence of macro-drivers is reduced during transit as migrants' freedom of action decreases (see Figure 3).

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

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



Source: Authors' own elaboration

In particular, we argue that the cluster of complex drivers varies, depending on the stage of the journey. These drivers are influenced by how far into the journey migrants have progressed, the opportunities within the spaces they have travelled through, and the micro-level experiences that people have along different stages of the journey. These factors determine whether people decide to stay (as 'stayers by choice' or 'stayers by necessity'; (Van Hear, 2014), migrate or return. This is followed by the process of mobilizing capital in order to implement the decision made. Moreover, as we will point out, migrants develop what is called mobility capital (Kaufmann, 2004; Moret, 2020), based on knowledge acquired during previous stages of the journey, with some also developing spatial mobility capital (Riaño et al., 2022).

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

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

When we asked Nigerians living in Spain, Italy and Slovakia what had led them to migrate from their country of origin, a cluster of complex drivers emerged. At the macro level these included economic factors such as labour market and employment conditions, inequalities and living conditions; education, services and training opportunities (human development); public provision, civil and political rights (politico-institutional factors); and conflict, the political situation and repression (security factors) following the terms used by Czaika & Reinprecht (2022).

Regarding economic factors, we encountered various narratives. For some migration was driven by the need to meet basic individual or family needs: 'So, like, on my own side, we are seven in the family, my brothers, so it was so difficult. So, I have to move and work outside and find a way to survive.'

(ES_08). Others mentioned the inability to access skilled employment commensurate with their educational qualifications (undergraduate or postgraduate) that would enable them to pursue their desired career path. This was the case for a 37-year-old woman interviewed in Slovakia who explained: 'I belong to the class that values education. So my milestone is to get the highest degree, like PhD. I'm married already. I have a house already in Nigeria. So [migration is] just to get the PhD, then save some money and establish some business.' (SK_10).

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

In other cases, various forms of violence perpetrated by other ethnic groups, the state or terrorist groups led people from all walks of life to decide to migrate or even forced them to migrate when extreme violence reached their doorstep. This was the case for a 20-year-old man in Italy, who expressed it as follows: 'My life was good at home, it was just the insecurity that caused these huge disruptions and there was no option other than to leave home and come here.' (IT_04). Similarly, other interviewees in Italy and Spain described their experiences:

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

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

Amongst those interviewed, we found people who had migrated due to several riots and confrontations between ethnoreligious groups, including the riots of 1999 and the violence following the elections in 2017 and 2023 (Tuki, 2025). This was because they had belonged to political opposition groups to the party in power in the past, as expressed by a 25-year-old man in Spain or more recently, as expressed by a 32-year-old man in Italy.

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

'I was a youth leader in my country for Labor Party [...] we want to say no, we want a better Nigeria. So that is where I have issues with the... opposition government. They were

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

threatening me after the election, the presidential election 2023 [...] I decided to leave the country because they were looking for me.’ (IT_29).

Some of the interviewees pointed out the social inequalities arising from the lack of governance in relation to economic and violence-related issues, which are intertwined with social class, ethnic and religious affiliations, in line with the literature reviewed (Archibong, 2018; Tuki, 2025). Through their affiliations, the interviewees interpret the structural situation in their country and the impact, or lack thereof, of these structures on their individual circumstances. A 32-year-old man living in Spain stated:

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

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

When the decision to migrate was made, participants accumulated and mobilized capitals to start their journey. We found that participants from wealthy and educated backgrounds (those who had access to bachelor's- or master's-level studies) were able to mobilize the necessary capitals to travel to Europe via shorter and safer routes. In contrast, those from a lower social class and/or a disadvantaged ethnic or religious group who had experienced discrimination in their place of residence, as discussed by Archibong, (2018) and Tuki, (2025), did not have the capabilities to do so. Consequently, they believed that their only option was to take the longer and riskier routes through Africa, in line with Tajden's (2023) findings. Moreover, those migrating when violence erupted had no time to consider which route to take, even if they had access to resources: ‘(...) at the time it happens, there was intense confusion and it was a kind of “myself first”! Because it was related to me that my father was about to be killed and when they couldn't find him, I heard they were coming to chase me out, so I ran away.’ (IT_04)

Nigerian migrants who could travel directly had the capabilities to mobilize the necessary capitals to apply for visas to travel to Europe. Most participants applied for study and work visas (mainly PhD students and footballers in Slovakia), as well as family reunification visas (in Spain and Italy). Those applying for visas to Spain and Italy required less capital, as Spain and Italy both have embassies in Lagos and Abuja, as well as an Italian consulate in Lagos. However, those who migrated to Slovakia required greater capital and the capacity to mobilize it, as there is no Slovak diplomatic representation in Nigeria. They had to incur additional expenses to travel to the Slovak Embassies either in Ghana or Kenya, in addition to the costs of preparing the required documents to apply for a residence permit⁷. A 38-year-old male and a 37-year-old female participant in Slovakia provide clear examples of the capital, time and capabilities required to manage the visa application procedure:

⁷ The issue date should be within the last 90 days, they need a completed official form in Slovak, a valid passport (valid for at least 6 months beyond intended stay), a document proving the purpose of stay (e.g., work contract, university admission), a clean criminal record, apostilled or super-legalized, proof of accommodation (lease, property deed, or hostel confirmation), and proof of financial coverage (amounting to the subsistence minimum, or roughly €284/month).

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

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

However, as we can infer from the SK_08 narrative, obtaining a visa may require several applications, as a male participant in his 32s in Spain points out: ‘It takes a lot of money, and you have to go through the visa process, and sometimes you get denied, sometimes you get accepted. That’s basically it.’

Regarding migrants who did not access direct routes, we found different reasons. To start, we found those who had not considered the need for travel documents due to a lack of knowledge about what international migration requires. This scenario highlights these migrants’ lack of awareness of migration policies compared with those who migrated for reasons such as family reunification, studies, or employment arranged with a company at the destination before migrating. A 41-year-old male interviewee in Italy shares his reflections on how his awareness and understanding of migration policies evolved throughout his journey.

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

Other migrants tried, but they did not have the capabilities to mobilize the capitals to achieve it. Some participants point out the difficulties involved in the application processes including those related to Nigerian national migration policies, as illustrated by a 43-year-old male interviewee in Spain: ‘To pass immigration, it’s difficult in Nigeria. They take it like animals. Asking us a question, what do I do there, what do I want to do there. [...] That’s why me too, I didn’t pass there.’ (ES_25)

Migrants’ accounts of their decision to leave Nigeria show how macro-level drivers combine with individual-level events to influence the decision to migrate, thereby initiating the migratory process. At this point, social status and the ability to mobilize resources determine whether migrants can access direct, safe routes or indirect, dangerous ones in the search for a place of opportunity where one can build a good life. Furthermore, migrant communities and networks are essential for beginning the migration journey, as we will see next.

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

Starting with the analysis of the decision-making processes of Nigerian migrants who migrated to Europe via direct and safer routes, it is important to note that, even though we refer to this route as ‘direct’, some migrants still transited through other countries when applying for their visas and travelling to Europe.

Some Nigerians who moved through family reunification, transited other spaces of action in other EU countries before settling in the countries where the interviews took place. We observe from their narratives that the imagined destinations did not match the reality they encountered, as pointed out by a 44-year-old male interviewee in Spain, who moved from France to Austria and resided for a while in Vienna. He had a particular perception on the place where he lived: ‘When I got to Austria, I did not like the lifestyles because most of the citizens were there on the street trafficking drugs or maybe

whatever. It wasn't like the kind of life I wanted, so I needed somewhere I would go to have a life of responsibility. I had to leave Austria to Spain.' (ES_27)

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

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

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

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

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

This interviewee's experience is similar to that of others who moved to other EU countries before deciding to migrate to Spain, Italy or Slovakia. Some of the interviewees even transited through Ukraine and were living there when the invasion began in 2022, as recounted by a 32-year-old male participant in Spain. More broadly, language barriers contribute to the preference to migrate to Anglophone countries.

Turning to the experiences of Nigerian migrants travelling via indirect routes, we now incorporate the narratives of respondents to the longitudinal survey in Niger and Tunisia.⁸ One of the key findings is that, despite the difficulties of the geographical journey and the challenges they face along the route, migrants develop capabilities throughout the journey. For instance, abilities that help them decide whether to settle or continue their migration journey to the next locality to achieve the aspired opportunities and develop a good life. Contrary to Van Hears' proposal in 2004 that migrants only travel 'as far as their money would take them', our findings show that, through the strategies they implement

⁸ Here, we include only responses to the open-ended questions in the survey.

in their daily lives, migrants demonstrate their capability to stay by choice for a while in order to gather resources and mobilize capitals, and continue their journey when opportunities arise.

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

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

For those whose journey continues, a common experience is exposure to violence and insecurity when transiting through Libya, Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco. Some report having been victims of violent incidents perpetrated by terrorist groups, institutional staff or rapists, which affected their well-being and decision-making about whether to continue or turn back along the route. While some migrants may have started the journey in a vulnerable position, the journey itself makes most migrants vulnerable. A female migrant in Tunisia explains how her experience impacted her decision-making:

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

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

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

An interview in which a 25-year-old male participant in Italy recounts his journey reveals his evolving strategies in Algeria that led him to Tunisia and, later, Italy. This migratory process enabled him to acquire cultural and social capital, which he converted into economic capital through various opportunities over time:

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

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

As a result, their perception of the locations where they find themselves shifts from viewing them as potential spaces of opportunity to seeing them as areas devoid of opportunities. This nurtures the aspiration to migrate onwards, triggering the decision to cross the Mediterranean Sea and migrate to Europe, in search of a secure space in which to build a good life. Thus, we can say that time and space become ‘fluid’ during a transition experienced as either suspended or compressed, creating a sense of time that shifts dramatically from one moment to the next. Furthermore, migrant networks, friends, family and facilitators encountered during the migration journey had a clear impact on decisions about where to move next. Lastly, our interviews with individuals who migrated in the mid 2000s, compared with those who migrated more recently, reveal that about 20 years later, situations of inequality and violence persist, as illustrated by a female migrant already in Italy: ‘I did not expect what I saw on the road, what I saw for the second time is not what I saw [the first time].’ This is a sign that the journey is becoming increasingly dangerous (from 2015 to 2023). ‘The second trip was terrible. [...] our trauma for the journey is something that really shocked me.’ (IT_29)

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

In this phase of the migrant experience of our participants, we focus on the period just before their arrival in Spain, Italy and Slovakia. Except for migrants who moved to join their family members, these locations were not the aspired destination at origin; instead, English-speaking countries such as the UK,

the US or Canada had been on their minds. However, destinations were generally not clearly defined before departure and gradually emerged from information shared within migrant communities among family and friends, who transmitted cultural capital about the opportunities these countries had to offer (Triandafyllidou et al. 2023).

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

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

'I begin stay with him, I think around one year, before I rent a, I get one accommodation, so I stay there with my other friends. So, from there, I got a job, I'm working there, with my, I call *jefe* [boss]. I work with him around three years, but I think he have crisis or whatever, so, we start working on other place, one way or other to get another job.' (ES_23)

Furthermore, migration-related and non-migration-related NGOs emerge as actors that provide social protection to migrants upon their arrival in these new and unfamiliar places. Some participants arrived in Italy or Spain by crossing the sea and being rescued by humanitarian agencies, while others entered the country irregularly. Some participants in Italy and Spain are currently enrolled in these support programmes, whereas in Spain some arrived as part of them. A 42-year-old male participant interviewed in Spain remained in the programme, whereas others had abandoned the programme due to difficulties including restrictions on working in the first period of the programme:

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

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

'I get along much easier with fellow foreigners. So, I do attend church. A good number of the congregation, they are foreigners. And as much as the priest is Slovak, but... Then, where I mostly hang out, a good number of them are foreigners. But they are some Slovak people. It's football, yes. So, I have some Slovak people. Well, for me, I don't think it

would be that difficult to make Slovak friends and as much as they want you to speak the language and it's not that easy.' (SK_12)

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

This could partly be explained by migrants' reduced action space, as their daily life practices mostly take place within their community spaces and in limited spaces of encounter, particularly for those participating in international protection programmes as addressed by IT_04 before:

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

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

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

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

Moreover, these narratives highlight the limited intercultural exchange experienced by participants, who report discriminatory attitudes primarily related to skin color. On this topic, the reflection of a 26-year-old male interviewee in Italy on his feelings of being unable to hide his racial traits is particularly revealing and is echoed by a 34-year-old female interviewee in Spain:

‘But here, you go out, they say he's Nero, you are Bianco, that's another problem. It was a little better in Niger, where we have blacks, in Libya we have blacks also, but they are more white. So when you go, you wear this colour, it's a problem for us, believe me. Before, they say when I was young, when I was small, but now I realize it's true. It's a big problem for us. I don't know why, because anywhere you go, they try to separate you from others, I don't know. And you cannot hide it, you see. They see you, and they know you, even your hair alone says this is who you are, the color of your hair is still...’ (IT_27)

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

Despite these conditions that make living in these three countries less than ideal, it is striking that the majority aspire to stay in their current locations, an aspiration that in some cases is linked to the fulfillment of basic needs, particularly safety. A 31-year-old male interviewee in Slovakia described being able to walk alone at night when returning from university and feeling safe. This is particularly important for those who have experienced violence during their migration journey, but it is also significant for migrants who come from places where a lack of security constrains daily life.⁹

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

Migrants realize that they also need time to learn and adapt, as a male 49-year-old participant living in Spain pointed out: Learning and adapting to the system takes time’. They can feel lost when trying to understand the system, which can be frustrating, as illustrated by the experiences of a migrant in Spain in an irregular situation with limited social networks, and a migrant in Slovakia:

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

‘I think it's not easy to actually navigate through Slovak bureaucracy, you need someone that actually understands the system to help you to navigate that bureaucracy very well. I think just the language and the bureaucracy makes it a bit difficult to integrate, and probably the present government it's not making it fun as well.’ (SK_05)

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

⁹ Feeling safe while walking on the street and being in public spaces was a very important aspect of Brazilian migrants’ experiences living in the UK, where they felt they no longer had to be constantly on guard (Randell, 2016).
IMI Working Papers Series, No. 195

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

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

The narratives analyzed in this section show how the social position of Nigerians in their country of origin to some extent influences their social position in their current localities. One way in which this is reflected is by access to stable and skilled labour markets, as opposed to labour markets characterized by informality and precariousness, such as intensive agriculture in Almería, Spain. Moreover, we also observe that safety in their current locations is fundamental to their aspirations to stay after their often unsafe transits through Africa (although some found safe opportunities in Niger), and this is also relevant for those who arrived directly. Taking into account these initial factors and how they shape migrants’ new spaces of action, we observe that the drivers constituting the ‘complex driver’ as conceptualized by Van Hear et al. (2018) at this later stage of the trajectory are security and migration policies — particularly the need to obtain legal status and residence permits — and social protection policies — including access to national social protection systems, particularly health and education.

Within this framework, we also consider meso-level drivers, namely social networks and NGOs (Triandafyllidou, 2023). NGOs primarily influence those who have arrived in situations of greater vulnerability and have accessed international protection and reception programmes, while family networks and migrant communities primarily influence those who arrived through family reunification and those who already had relatives living in these countries or Europe. The migrant community plays a vital role in providing informal social protection, particularly for those who have arrived in precarious circumstances and require access to basic resources. This network also provides migrants with cultural capital that helps them navigate life in these countries, particularly the labour market. For those in relatively more privileged positions, the migrant community offers a sense of belonging through participation in religious gatherings and leisure activities.

4.4 *‘Travel is the key to knowledge’: Using experience to inform decision-making*

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

From our analysis, we can draw several conclusions. Firstly, participants’ responses show how specific lessons from real-life experiences directly influence future decision-making, which may differ from decisions made in the past. A Nigerian 22-year-old male participant in Agadez explains that, unlike in the past, he would seek to reduce the risks involved when choosing a route: ‘I won’t take the risk when I have the option of choosing the easiest route, regardless of how much I have to spend, as long as it isn’t more expensive than what I can afford’ (Q2.NR15). Another interviewee points out the need to accumulate sufficient financial resources to draw on during the journey, particularly when travelling through different localities in Africa: ‘I’ve realized that you need money – enough money, or a job that will enable you to earn a lot of money, or someone who’ll lend you money to fund your trip’ (Q2.NR6). Similarly, migrants in Spain and in Niger pointed to the relevance of building social and cultural capital before migrating in future:

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

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

For most of interviewees, past experiences have underscored that obtaining visas is essential for migrating via direct and safe routes. A female participant in Agadez expressed this view in her narrative: ‘My thinking has changed with regard to security. I've realized that, in order to migrate, I absolutely need documents that will allow me to travel freely.’ Some interviewees, particularly those who experienced violence in Africa or while crossing the sea to reach Europe, were reluctant to express their feelings, while others expressed them indirectly. This illustrates how participants' past experiences shape their present. One interviewee in Italy explains this further: ‘My concern is how to move forward and not dwell on the past’ (Q1. IR10).

Regarding personal transformation resulting from the migration experience as a whole, a large proportion of those interviewed – regardless of whether they were in Africa or Europe at the time of the interview – emphasized the importance of the experience (or ‘travelling’) as a learning process. This learning extended beyond migration itself, in a broader, life-enhancing sense, as a participant in Slovakia and another in Italy illustrate:

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

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

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

¹⁰ This expression comes from a title of a popular Hausa book “Tafiya Mabudin Ilimi” by the renowned Hausa writer and Nigerian nationalist, Dr. Abubakar Imam. It is commonly used to describe the extent to which travelling as a hobby can enrich someone's knowledge of life in general.

These quotations suggest that migration is perceived as an important learning process. Moreover, we observe how 'mobile capital' (Moret, 2020) develops, which refers to the ability to generate and/or evaluate options for staying put or moving on; the competence to migrate, including knowledge of strategies for contacting networks and generating economic capital; and the ability to make sense of one's experiences. Indeed, the migration experience enables migrants to make more informed decisions about their next steps, which, according to the migrants themselves, helps to mitigate risk. This, in turn, gives migrants a greater sense of control over their decision-making, spatial movement and management of time and space. These experiences contribute to a sense of resilience and empowerment among the migrants interviewed.

5 Concluding Remarks

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

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

Firstly, as previously mentioned, the analysis of decision-making processes during migration journeys should include the initial decision-making process at the point of departure. Analyzing migrants' situations prior to departure, while they were still in their places of origin, has enabled us to identify two key factors in shaping the migration journey: class and ethno-religious affiliation. These factors directly influence access to capitals that can be mobilized to enable migration through direct and safe routes or alternatively, through indirect and dangerous pathways. However, while these factors are decisive at the point of origin, their influence wanes as the migration journey unfolds. Even in European destinations, migrants may still occupy different social positions within the social structure, yet their experiences become more similar as they face common challenges such as language barriers, difficulties navigating migration policies, and challenges to inclusion in the host society, while becoming part of the same migrant communities.

Secondly, starting the analysis at the origin of the migration journey enabled us to explore how the clusters of complex drivers influencing the decision-making process evolves as the migration experience unfolds through space and time (See Figure 3). We observe that, at the point of origin, the complex driver is composed of a cluster of macro-, meso- and micro-drivers, with macro-level drivers exerting the greatest influence on the decision to migrate. The situation of social inequality, perpetuated for decades by colonial and subsequent governments during a period of limited democracy (Archibong, 2019; Ihouma, 2020) and state fragility (Triandafyllidou, 2023), contributes to aspirations to migrate and preparations for the journey.

As migrants pass through different localities through space and time following either direct or indirect pathways, we observe that their action space decreases compared with that at origin. This limits their

awareness of and access to social protection, desired job opportunities and other structural factors in the localities they pass through. In addition, in the case of migrants 'en route' through Africa via indirect and unsafe pathways, the complex driver cluster is formed by economic and security factors, and to a lesser extent (non-)migration policies (Bakewell, et al. 2024). Insecurity increases along the route, including at the first possible international stop on the journey, in Niger, where migrants have already reported experiencing various forms of violence at the hands of smugglers, traffickers and even state institutions. In these spaces, security emerges as a principal driver of the decision to continue the journey even among those who did not migrate for security reasons in their country of origin. In both direct and indirect migration routes, migrant networks, family and friends, as well as other facilitators and agencies, emerge as central meso-level drivers in decision-making. They are fundamental in facilitating access to and the development of cultural and social capital and, to a lesser extent, economic capital. Here, spatial mobility capital (Riaño et al. 2022) is useful for analyzing local practices in which migrants become 'stayers by choice' (for instance, those who decide to settle in Niger as a place of opportunity) or 'stayers by need', gathering capitals until they are ready to continue their journey (Van Hear, 2014).

However, as the journey progresses towards European destinations that were not the initial aspiration of those migrating via indirect routes, macro-level drivers become increasingly influential in decisions about whether to continue the migration journey or remain in the current locality. At this point in the migration journey, migration policies become more influential, as residence permits are fundamental to working legally and accessing other rights. In addition, non-migration policies also emerge as influential, particularly in relation to access to health and education systems. This is especially relevant for migrants who migrated for educational reasons and for those who moved through family reunification and have children with them.

Third, analysis of the practices developed by the participants along their journeys, suggests that, contrary to Van Hear's (2004) original idea that migrants continue their journey 'as far as their money will take them', they continue their journey as far as their motivation takes them. This depends on clusters of complex drivers and access to opportunities while moving through different places over time. An analysis of participants' practices in different locations shows that they can exercise their agency to try to move towards places where they believe they can achieve the good life they aspire to. In both safe and unsafe contexts, being 'stayers by choice' or 'stayers by necessity' migrants can mobilize social, cultural and/or economic capital to varying degrees and convert it into spatial mobility capital (Riaño et al., 2022). That is, they use these forms of capital to migrate across different territorial scales, exercising their agency by making informed decisions along the journey. Mobility capital (Moret, 2020) could be understood as the knowledge gained through the migration experience, which is a transformative life experience, as migrants learn from their own and others' experiences.

It is important to note that this study has clear limitations, such as its small sample size and its reliance on participants present-day accounts of past decision-making processes. The study highlights two areas for future research. One area for future research is the concept of transit. Our study makes clear that migrants do not perceive themselves as being 'in transit' in the localities where they are trying to establish the conditions for a good life. In fact, this period emerges as a temporary in-between space, in which migrants sometimes do not even have a clear destination in mind, challenging the assumption of being 'in transit' in parts of the scientific literature, and supporting critiques of this assumption by others (Collyer, Düvell and de Haas, 2012; Ahrens & King 2023). Thus, while 'in transit' typically refers to a geographical location, our observations suggest that it can also describe a life situation. In this context, various factors, particularly migration policies and the reluctance of host societies to accept migrants, contribute to prolonged uncertainty in migrants' lives. These findings provide a renewed understanding of the limitations of the term 'transit migrant', which is defined solely on the basis of duration of stay

(ranging from three months to five years). Despite its shortcomings, the concept remains valuable for studying migrants in a state of flux. This suggests two alternative approaches: examining transit migration as a process or, alternatively, focusing on places of transit, rather than on the vague notion of a ‘transit country’ and the individuals who temporarily or permanently inhabit these areas.

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

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