ODI Insights

Journeys to Europe
The role of policy in migrant decision-making

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This policy brief provides an overview of research by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) to increase understanding of the journeys made by migrants. Based on in-depth interviews with more than 50 migrants, refugees and asylum seekers who have recently arrived in four European cities (Berlin, London, Madrid and Manchester), it explores: the journeys migrants take; the factors that drive them; and the capacity of destination country migration policies to influence people's decisions, both before their journey begins and along the way. Based on these findings, we make three key policy recommendations that could lead to the better management of, and a more effective and positive response to, the current migration crisis in Europe.

1. **Make journeys safer:** Act now to minimise the appalling humanitarian and economic consequences of policies that aim to deter migration.

2. **Create a faster, fairer European Union (EU) asylum system:** Build an effective regional response by investing in a better functioning, EU-wide asylum processing system; strengthening the EU's arbitration role; and reforming the Dublin Regulation.

3. **Make the most of migration.** Capitalise on the positive impacts of migration by: publicly communicating its social and economic benefits; encouraging circular migration; and investing in economic integration programmes for new arrivals.

ODI Insights is a new series of research papers, policy briefings and outreach activities that address urgent and unresolved development priorities and challenges. As well as reaching new audiences, the aim of Insights is to ensure that ODI's high-quality research and analysis influences policy debates and provides innovative solutions to bring about practical change. This Insights policy briefing on migration is the first in the series.

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Europe's migration crisis

With more than one million migrants reaching Europe, 2015 may well become known as the year of Europe's migration crisis. The persistence and intensification of crises in other parts of the world – some of them slow-burning (Eritrea), others more acute (Syria) – fuelled the largest movement of migrants and refugees into Europe since World War II. With some exceptions, the European response has been guided by strategies of containment, restriction and deterrence. Rather than welcoming, settling and integrating the new arrivals, many EU member states have tried to drive them away from their borders through an escalation of restrictive migration policies designed to stop people coming in the first place.

Such policies can work in two main ways. The first is the direct control that stops people in their tracks: a person cannot easily cross a border with a 10-foot wall, or legally board a plane without a visa.

The second is the alteration of migrants' mindsets. As well as physically blocking people's way, deterrence strategies aim to discourage people from leaving their home country. Governments want these policies to 'send a message'. They focus on amplifying that message as loudly as possible, so that people thousands of miles away – people who might not have even started their migration journeys – are able to hear it. This approach operates on the assumption that by transmitting negative signals and messages, governments can change someone's mind about migrating, at least to a particular place.

Our research aimed to find out whether such an approach works. Can governments, by discouraging human movement, really change the mind of someone who is thinking of migrating? To what extent are migrants' journeys really determined by the actions of European states?

To answer these questions, we explored the journeys and decision-making processes of more than 50 migrants, refugees and asylum seekers (from Eritrea, Senegal and Syria) who have recently arrived in four European cities (Berlin, London, Madrid, Manchester). That is because, in order to understand the role that policy may (or may not) play in shaping the dynamics of international migration, it is first important to understand the ways in which individuals process information, think through their options, and select courses of action. To what extent, and under what conditions, does migration policy matter?

Last year, almost 4,000 migrants died in in the Mediterranean, making Europe the world's most dangerous destination for irregular migrants.

Migrants in Hungarian detention centre.
Photo by migrant interviewees.

Research findings

Five key findings have emerged from the research:

1. The journey itself influences the migration decision-making process

Picture a road movie. So rarely are these about what happens once the protagonists reach their destination. They tell stories of transformation along the way – of people met, friendships made, chance moments encountered. All of these shape how the narrative plays out. So too in real life. Migration journeys are often lengthy, costly – an average of £2,680 among those we interviewed (Figure 1) – and exhausting. Given the length and complexity of migrants' journeys, their destinations and travel plans often change en route. Journeys are guided by people's hopes for a viable future, and their perceptions – their feelings – can change over time. It is not surprising, therefore, that a migrant's initial choice of destination may not be their final destination.

2. Precarious journeys are often the norm

Last year, almost 4,000 migrants died in in the Mediterranean, making Europe the world's most dangerous destination for irregular migrants. The vulnerability that is so often part of irregular migration creates opportunities for other people to exploit migrants and refugees along the way, including smugglers, armed groups, officials and 'ordinary' citizens. And many do so: a total of 36% of the people within our sample were extorted in some way, and almost half of the Eritreans we spoke to were kidnapped for ransom (see Senait's story in Box 1).

Box 1: Senait's story

Having fled national service in Eritrea, Senait hired a smuggler to get her across the Ethiopia–Sudan border for £350. After six exhausting days, involving long periods walking in the sun and crossing a crocodile-infested river, they arrived in Sudan. Once there, the Ethiopian smuggler handed them over to a Sudanese smuggler, who brought them to his camp somewhere near Al Hajer. Then came the news: Senait and the others would now have to pay £1,000 (instead of the agreed-on fee of £350) to continue the journey.

Panicking, the family called Senait's brother-in-law in the US who, in turn, contacted the smugglers. They told him they would sell Senait if the family didn't pay up. He was told to wire the money to Khartoum, where Senait would also be sent once the money arrived. She stayed in Al Hajer for one week in a mud house guarded by Sudanese men armed with knives. She was given dirty water that not even animals wanted to drink, and some flour once a day, with which she made some dry flatbreads on the fire. When her family paid up, she was taken to Khartoum as per the agreement.
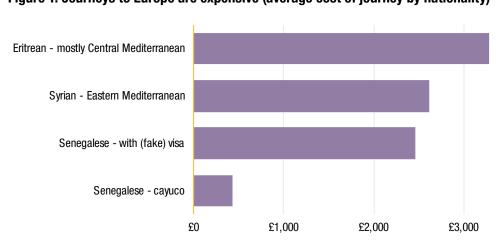
Figure 1. Journeys to Europe are expensive (average cost of journey by nationality)

Note: Averages based on 45 interviews where information on costs was recorded

3. Anti-migration messages transmitted by European governments are unlikely to drastically alter migrants' decisions

People make decisions on the basis of 'trusted' information. In order for information to count – for it to prove influential – it first needs to be trusted. We find that who transfers the message matters as much as the message itself. It seems that information becomes trustworthy when it is transmitted by known social connections – those with whom the individual already shares a relationship of (at least some) trust. Given that European governments have no such initial bond with potential migrants, it is unlikely that their attempts to change people's mind about migration will have much traction or result in any significant change in behaviour.

In contrast, trusted information can normalise both the idea of migration as a viable livelihood option as well as particular migration pathways – the sheer number of Syrians taking the Balkans route throughout 2015 is a case in point. And with that normalisation comes a perceived sense of familiarity. When family, friends and other members of the same 'imagined community' have already made their way across a particular border and have ended up living in a particular place, a 'space of belonging' is created. Making the journey then becomes a normal course of action, despite the level of risk involved (indeed, the risk is part of what is normal about it).

4. Unilateral preventive measures might shift migration flows from one country to the next, but at the regional EU level they make little difference

Governments believe they can control migration flows. Our evidence suggests this may be possible in some senses, but not in others. Preventive migration policies, particularly those that aim to deter migration, appear to matter little. At best, direct controls like border fences and detention can divert the flow of migrants, essentially passing the buck from one country to the next. But they do not appear capable of preventing migration in an absolute sense (see Box 2).

5. Migration trajectories are influenced less by restrictive migration policies, and more by perceptions of 'welcoming-ness', labour market opportunities and access to education
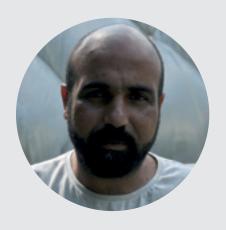
For those with young children – and even for those without, but who are thinking long-term – access to good schooling is central. The (perceived) likelihood of getting a job is also important, as are safety and human rights. These are all part of what it means for a country to be seen as welcoming by migrants. Likewise, those we interviewed seemed more influenced by migration policies that made life a little easier (faster asylum-processing procedures are just one example).

Box 2: Do fences change people's minds?

The Hungarian government was the first to build fences last summer. In justifying that decision, prime minister, Viktor Orban, claimed Europe had 'sent out invitations to the migrants', and that these fences were key to protecting Hungarians against the 'brutal threat' of mass migration. In a media interview, a government spokesperson put it more directly: 'This is a necessary step [...] We need to stop the flood'.

Are these fences effective in changing people's minds? When we posed this question to a group of Syrian men in Berlin, they told us fences were unlikely to affect people's journeys: 'Syrians will find a way. It may be harder and more expensive, but they will find another route.' They told us that once people have begun their journeys they continue until they achieve their goal.

Saliou from Senegal arrived in Europe a few years ago. Photo: Gabriel Pecot

Mousa

Age: 33
Born: Damascus, Syria
Migration cost: £6,910
Migration duration: 2 months

Berlin, Germany (June 2015)

Having paid a taxi £500 to drive from Budapest across Austria, Mousa finally made it to Germany – 'a country where you can find work'. He went to stay with his sister in Berlin, before applying for asylum.

Budapest, Hungary

Soon after crossing into Hungary, he was caught by the police and taken to a centre. There, he saw other Syrians being beaten with sticks and tasers. Upon release, Mousa's fingerprints were taken.

Skopje, Macedonia

As Mousa made his way towards Serbia on foot, his travelling group was caught by the police and returned to Greece. After a second attempt, he made it through Macedonia and into Serbia.

Chios, Greece

In the end he took a boat from Izmir to the Greek island of Chios, where he was held in a 'bad' and 'dirty' camp by the authorities.

Mersin, Turkey

The plan had been to get to Italy by boat. However, after being scammed out of more than £5,000 by a smuggler who suddenly disappeared, Mousa spent the next month and a half in Turkey.

Sahnaya, Syria (April 2015)

Mousa had been waiting a long time for things to get better in Syria. But as the bombings and armed forces got closer, he made a decision with his family to go.

Berlin

GERMANY

Munich

Salzburg

AUSTRIA

Budapest

HUNGARY

Belgrade

SERBIA

Skopje

MACEDONIA

Thessaloniki

GREECE

Izmir

Chios

TURKEY

Mersin

Aleppo

SYRIA

Sahnaya

Scale 500 km

Policy recommendations

1. Journeys: make them safer

In 2015, 3,899 migrants died trying to reach Europe (Missing Migrants Project, 2015). Many more have sustained physical injuries and psychological trauma, and have spent a fortune in the process of getting here. As this study has shown, it is not always possible to deter migration by continuing to make these routes more dangerous and expensive. The priority – and moral imperative – is to make journeys safer.

Expand legal channels of migration: The expansion of legal channels of migration would allow people to travel directly from one country to the next, removing much of the precariousness from their journey. It would have the added advantage of crippling the smuggling networks European leaders are so keen to combat through force (with little impact to date) by removing demand for their services.

Implement humanitarian visas: A humanitarian visa scheme would permit asylum seekers to travel legally to Europe in whatever way they can afford. As Alexander Betts explains: 'Small consular outposts could be created outside the European Union, in places like Bodrum in Turkey or Zuwara in Libya…At these transit points people could be quickly screened and those with a plausible asylum claim would be allowed access to Europe' (Betts, 2015). Such an approach would actually prove fairer (and safer) than the status quo: direct flights to Europe are far cheaper than the average irregular journey.

Expand search-and-rescue missions in the Mediterranean: The expansion of search-and-rescue missions is just one of several basic humanitarian options that should be scaled up. In 2014, the Italian-led Mare Nostrum operation saved an estimated 170,000 lives, and there is very little evidence – including from our own study – to suggest that these measures alone increase the likelihood of more people migrating.

2. Arrivals: create a faster, fairer EU system

EU institutions have struggled to mobilise a joint and coordinated response to the migration crisis. But the crisis is undoubtedly a regional one, and must be dealt with as such. Our study shows that while unilateral action might occasionally divert flows of migrants, it fails to alter the overall dynamics at the European level. What's more, new opinion poll data suggest that most EU citizens are actually in favour of stronger EU involvement in migration and asylum policy decisions across Europe (EC, 2015).

Invest in a better-functioning, EU-wide asylum processing system: Current unevenness in the way different EU member states treat and process asylum claims is one factor that influences the journeys made by asylum seekers. In order to address this, and to help remove much of the uncertainty people usually experience, the process must move faster and it must be fairer. This means that the relevant departments and organisations in member states must have the resources they need to do the job. At the same time, those making decisions on applications need to pay closer attention to the realities of migration. There is, at present, a serious tension between the complex and shifting dynamics of migration and rigid asylum procedures that demand a linear story backed up by proof. Our research shows that people fleeing as a result of well-founded fears of persecution rarely go directly from 'A' to 'B', but instead pass through many other countries. The fact that they do this does not undermine their claim or call into question the credibility of their reasons for leaving.

Strengthen the EU's arbitration role: Failures to examine asylum claims rigorously must be highlighted and addressed, which means that the EU's arbitration role should be strengthened. Migration policy across the EU is a shared competency between the EU itself and its member states. While the EU has limited scope to harmonise the migration and asylum policies of member states, it could be more active in holding them to account when they fail to comply with the rules (see Faure et al., 2015).

Reform the Dublin Regulation: As things stand, the Dublin Regulation, which determines the country responsible for the review of an asylum application, is creating a small number of winners (northern European countries) and a large number of losers (European countries at the EU borders, as well as hundreds of thousands of asylum seekers). This is because of the first-country-of-arrival rule, which states that asylum claims must be processed in the first EU country entered by an asylum seeker. If migration and asylum are to become genuinely shared responsibilities across the EU, then the principles of regional solidarity and fair sharing need to be incorporated into the Dublin Regulation. Reforms scheduled for March 2016 look promising, with the first-country-of-arrival rule up for discussion. Reforms should also consider the preferences of asylum seekers, given that the social networks pulling them towards certain places are the same social networks that will help them once they arrive.

3. Entry and integration: make the most of migration

European politicians and the wider public need to start seeing migrants and refugees as a valuable resource rather than a problem. By following policies that limit the ability of migrants and asylum seekers to build new lives, host countries are missing out on the economic benefits of migration and new arrivals are being robbed of their capacity to support themselves. It doesn't have to be like this. But policy change is unlikely to happen without public and political support.

Communicate more effectively the social and economic benefits of migration: There is a large body of high-quality evidence demonstrating the extraordinary positive impacts of migration, but not enough of it is filtering out into the public domain and discourse. By establishing research and evidence as the basis for fresh discussion, politicians could begin to change the public narrative and, therefore, take bolder policy and political action that makes the most of migration.

Encourage and support circular migration: Labour market conditions have a major influence on many migrants' decisions about where to go. When economic conditions in their host countries deteriorate, most want to return or move elsewhere – if they are able to come back when conditions improve. However, that is rarely an option. People are instead forced into permanent settlement or irregularity. If governments did more to facilitate cross-border mobility in all directions, migrants would be more likely to engage in circular migration – coming and going in response to economic conditions. This would help to remove cases of unwanted 'permanent' migration to Europe. There are lessons to be drawn from a number of successful examples, such as the partnership between Colombia and Spain to encourage circular migration of low-skilled agricultural workers (IOM, 2009).

Invest more in economic integration programmes: Packages of investment in economic integration, including language lessons and work skills training tailored to the economic needs of host countries, would ease the transition of new arrivals, increase their capacity to support themselves (as most wish to) and help to fill labour shortages. Of course, there would be up-front costs for the delivery of such support, but this short-term expense would be off-set by the tax revenue generated by migrants over the longer term.
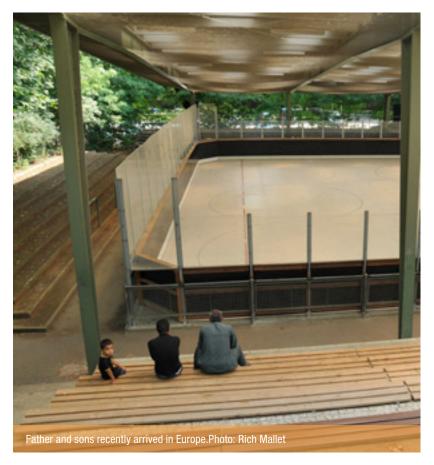
Resettlement programmes for workers are another option. Unlike traditional resettlement programmes that focus on the most vulnerable populations, these programmes re-settle entrepreneurs or those able to work, and provide access to jobs as well as short-term financial assistance. Initiatives such as the regional labour mobility programmes recently trialled in Brazil (targeting Colombian refugees in Ecuador) can both facilitate economic integration and reinforce the principle of fair sharing on a regional basis (Montenegro, 2016).

Read the main report at odi.org/journeys-to-Europe

Conclusion

It is not always possible to change people's minds about migrating. Decisions about whether to go, and where to go, are governed by a wide range of forces – many of them beyond the control of European governments. Migrants are often driven and determined human beings. They are unlikely to be deterred from moving by the threat or implementation of harsher policies. More often than not, restrictive migration policy simply re-routes them to other countries or pushes them even further into dangerous migration channels.

The pursuit of prevention via tougher border controls is, essentially, a race to the bottom. Draconian measures might occasionally (but not always) shift the burden onto neighbouring countries, but they make little difference to migration flows at the regional level. People will continue to come. Because of that reality, the clearest option facing European governments is to manage migration better. And to truly achieve that, collective action that makes the most of migration is necessary.

Father and sons recently arrived in Europe. Photo: Rich Mallet

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