

Drivers of Migration: The Role of Aspirations, Capabilities, and Perceptions

Elena Ambrosetti¹, Cecilia Fortunato, Sara Miccoli, Donatella Strangio

Introduction and theoretical focus

According to de Haas (2021), migration studies has remained under-theorized in the last decades. International migration theories have always tried to understand the complex phenomenon of migration by identifying its patterns, but all the theories seem to be intrinsically linked to nineteenth century economic models and assumptions relating to maximizing family income or simple push-pull models. While empirical studies on migration increased numerically over the time, migration theories seem to have been at an impasse. Over time both qualitative-interpretative and quantitative-positivist procedures did not manage to express the structural factors that influence migration decision. Certainly, among those factors there are the concepts of inequality, power, and state but the net of factors seems to be entangled with many others.

Building on de Haas (2021), we agree that migration studies should be incorporated in a new framework in order to have a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Older theories seem to simplify the category of migrants in two main groups where the first one considers migrants as utility-optimisers and the second one as victims of the capitalism.

To provide a new theoretical framework, the first move to make is the fixing of the “receiving-country bias”, namely the tendency of high-income migrant-receiving countries to focus only on the consequences of migration without further investigating the drivers of migration.

The second move refers to the direct focus on the “human agency” in migration processes: people’s aspirations and capability to migrate depends on many factors like age, gender, knowledge, social contacts, preferences, and perceptions of the world. While older theories seem to portray people as passive beings, current and future theories should prioritize the individual choices by conducting qualitative research to compare them and find regular patterns.

Given the above, the aim of this paper is to disentangle drivers of migration to Europe as narrated by migrants and stakeholders working on the field of migration. This research presents new original insights on migrations drivers. It builds on the qualitative and quantitative fieldwork implemented within Perceptions², a multidisciplinary research project funded by the EU. The aim of this project is to understand the impact of perceptions and narratives about Europe on migration behaviours and associated risks to migrants, as well as host countries. In addition to surveys, interviews and focus groups, the project uses social media platforms as relevant sources of data to investigate narratives and how they spread.

Data & Methods

In Perceptions project countries of origin and/or transit (Algeria, Egypt, Kosovo, Morocco), countries of arrival (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Spain), and countries of destination (Belgium, Germany, UK) have been included in the study, in order to provide typical examples of diverse migration and border security cases.

A mixed-methods approach (quantitative and qualitative) has been designed for fieldwork with the engagement of the following target groups: (i) first-line practitioners from Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), migrant advocacy organizations, local communities, NGOs; (ii) migrants and refugees (both within and outside of Europe); (iii) policymakers, local administrators (iiii) law enforcement and border security authorities (LEAs).

Drawing on a typology constructed by Onwuegbuzie & Collins (2007), the following sampling strategies have been applied: maximum variation sampling to maximize the range of perspectives investigated in the study;

¹ Corresponding author: Elena Ambrosetti, Sapienza University of Rome, elena.ambrosetti@uniroma1.it

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selection of critical case for compelling insights about the phenomenon; snowball/chain recruitment with respondent networks acting as vectors for the expansion of the respondent pool.

An online quantitative survey across the above-mentioned research sites addressed to first-line practitioners was implemented between October and December 2020. The survey aimed to explore perceptions of Europe that first-line practitioners observe among migrants, how practitioners believe inaccurate information may influence migration and the impact of Covid-19 on migration-related work. The online questionnaire was distributed in 14 countries and translated in 11 languages. In total, 788 responses were received, with 589 participants from European countries (the majority from Bulgaria, Italy, and Spain) and 199 from non-European countries (the majority from Algeria). The sample was relatively balanced between participants working in border enforcement and those working in migrant support services.

In order to identify the images, narratives and perceptions migrants have about Europe; the way (sources and channels, formal and informal) these narratives are received and distributed; the possible mismatches between expectations and reality a qualitative fieldwork was implemented during winter and spring 2021. A total of 171 semi-structured in-depth individual interviews with migrants (both within and outside of Europe) and practitioners (NGOs and LEAs) have been carried out between January and April 2021. A particular version of semi-structured interviews has been selected: Problem-centred interviews (PCI), combining inductive and deductive reasoning and allowing the interviewee to determine what is relevant for the narration on the base of his or her individual situation. Migrants have been selected for participating on the base of the main nationalities of migrants arrived in each country after 2015, while in the case of practitioners no limitation was applied. The final sample included 61 refugees and 39 non-refugee migrants, 58 practitioners and 13 LEAs interviewed. The COVID- 19 pandemic required this task to adapt for online fieldwork and telephone interviews when in person interviews were not possible.

The last part of the study, which took place between March and October 2021, was organizing two consecutive iterations of Focus group discussions with local policymakers, experts and civil society organizations. The aim of the task was gathering stakeholders' perspectives and in-depth insights on the needs of policymakers and civil society organizations and outlining measures to improve security. The total number of research participants was 188: 90 interviews, and 17 focus groups with 98 participants in the 12 countries involved. Of the 188 participants, 56 were authority representatives (at the national, local or regional levels), 100 were civil society representatives and 36 were experts.

In this research we aim to study the drivers of migration exploiting the reach database collected within the Perceptions project. More specifically we will use multivariate analysis to study the drivers of migration as narrated by the first-line practitioners in the quantitative survey. To analyze the data collected through qualitative interviews we will use content analysis on the base of specific keywords and themes using NVIVO software.

Preliminary findings

Preliminary results based on quantitative and qualitative interviews involving stakeholders and migrants already provide an interesting picture of the drivers of the recent migration flows to Europe.

The majority of practitioners and stakeholders consider the difficult situation in the countries of origin as one of the main drivers of migration, followed by the positive conditions existing in Europe. In particular, according to the sample who participated in the quantitative survey, the external factors in the countries of origin, such as conflicts, wars, and difficult political situations, play a relevant role in the decision to migrate. The stakeholders involved in the qualitative interviews and focus-groups have indicated three main drivers connected with the country of origin, namely physical security, economic conditions, individual rights and freedom. According to them, these three factors are often interrelated thus affecting each other. Wars, insecurity, political instability negatively affect the economy and compromise the security of places and people; at the same time, bad economic conditions and poor standards of living may undermine the physical

security. Practitioners from countries defined as transit countries (Algeria, Egypt, and Tunisia) consider person-specific threats in the country of origin (such as religious persecution, etc.) to be especially important in motivating migration. Other factors mentioned by some stakeholders are the family ties and, in some cases, connections between countries derived by historical links. Anyway, the majority of stakeholders have specified that usually migration drivers may evolve and adapt during the travel and new drivers can be added to the original ones who led to start the migration process. The positive idea of Europe and the perceptions about specific countries can represent a driver, according to stakeholders, and this is particularly true if this idea is accompanied by a difficult situation in the country of origin. Despite that, stakeholders point out that this cannot be considered as a prevalent factor. Indeed, both practitioners who participated in the quantitative surveys and those involved in qualitative interviews and focus-groups emphasized the interconnection between the conditions at origin and destination and the differences existing between them.

Migrants, like stakeholders, refers about multiple reasons existing behind the decision to migrate, but the majority of them have mentioned physical security and economic conditions as main drivers of their migration. Wars and conflicts, but also difficult political situations, such as instable governments and the absence of democracy, were cited as factors affecting the physical security and then plans to migrate. Another specific factor connected with the previous ones and referred by many migrants is the awareness to not be able to reach personal life goals in the country of origin, due to the lack of education and working opportunities. Although not explicitly stated, the idea of Europe seems to represent an additional driver of the migration towards the European countries. Indeed, the majority of the migrants interviewed see Europe as a safe place, in which freedom and individual rights are respected and education and working conditions are better. Some migrants have mentioned also family ties existing in Europe. Despite that, what emerged the most is the willingness of migrants to leave the country of origin, and this implicitly underlines a prevalence of the situation in country of origin as driver to migrate. Therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic has only partially impacted the drivers of migration. The pandemic has certainly affected some views and perceptions of European life, it has created difficulties connected to movements restrictions and suspension of important integration services, but drivers of migration are still more serious in comparison to restrictions and other problems faced in Europe during the pandemic.

The analysis reveals a certain degree of agreement between stakeholders and migrants. In fact, they both implicitly and explicitly highlight the importance of the external factors existing in the countries of origin, but also emphasizing the interconnection of drivers both in origin and destination countries. In particular, the findings of qualitative interviews with migrants show that drivers of migration are always multifaceted and interdependent and that there is never a single narrative behind the decision to migrate. This confirms the recent meta-theoretical aspirations-capabilities framework that was formulated to understand migration and human mobility (de Haas 2021). In this regard, this paper makes a relevant contribution to the literature dealing with the topic of drivers by providing the perspective of actors directly and indirectly involved in the migration process. This perspective can be essential in population studies dealing with migration.

Additional results will be ready for the EPC 2022.

References:

De Haas, H. (2021). A theory of migration: the aspirations-capabilities framework. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 9(1), 1-35. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-020-00210-4>

Perceptions (2021) Deliverable 3.2 Stakeholder survey summary report

Perceptions (2021) Deliverable 3.3 Stakeholder interviews summary report

Perceptions (2021) Deliverable 3.4 Summary report on Research with Policymakers and CSOs