



Mixed
Migration
Centre



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Why people migrate

Insights and key messages drawn from a decade of MMC research and 4Mi data collection

This is the second in a series of state-of-play knowledge papers that address topical mixed migration issues and present key messages drawn from MMC's research, expert analysis, and 4Mi data.

Find the first paper, with our key messages on human smuggling, [here](#).

Refugees and migrants embark on journeys along mixed migration routes for a myriad of reasons. Understanding why people leave their home countries or move onward, and what influences their decision-making, is essential to better understand mixed migration and inform evidence-based migration policies and protection responses.

The question of why people migrate — the drivers and decision-making processes their journeys entail — has therefore been a primary focus of the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC). This paper, based on a decade of extensive research and expert analysis, including more than 100,000 4Mi surveys of refugees and migrants, synthesizes our key insights and sets out five key messages.

Introduction

Why do people migrate? Under what conditions do people develop aspirations to migrate? And under what conditions are they able to realize those aspirations? Why do relatively large numbers of people from certain countries embark on long-distance international migration journeys, while others, in ostensibly similar contexts or countries, do not? How do people decide when to migrate, and where to go? Why do some of the millions of displaced people around the world decide to move onwards from their initial hosting country, while others do not? Why has the Covid-19 pandemic led to much smaller migratory movements along some routes, and to increasing numbers along others?

Exploring the drivers of migration and the decision to migrate has taken centre-stage in the field of migration studies. It is a crucial aspect of understanding and explaining human mobility. It has also been a key focus of policymakers and politicians in destination countries who often ask: "Why do they come?" For some, the corollary to this question is: "How can we stop them?" This second question lies at the core of many of the "migration and development" policies and programmes implemented by destination countries in origin and transit countries, most notably the recent €5bn [European Union Emergency Trust Fund for stability and addressing root causes of irregular migration and displaced persons in Africa](#).

Applying a mixed migration lens — and acknowledging the mixed motivations of most people who are on the move — is particularly useful when exploring this question of why people migrate. Unpacking the drivers of mixed migratory movements and the choices people are making in terms of their journeys and destinations has been a key focus of the research, analysis and data collection conducted by MMC (and its predecessor, the Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat). MMC's flagship data-collection programme, 4Mi, has surveyed more than 100,000 refugees and migrants since 2014. 4Mi's questionnaires cover why people left, the alternatives they explored, destination choices, influences on decision-making, and much more.¹ The findings have been published extensively in MMC's research reports, 4Mi snapshots, articles and presentations over the past decade, offering new evidence-based insights that challenge simplistic assumptions and provide the nuance and empirical evidence that is so lacking from increasingly polarised policy debates.²

Other organisations have also published a wealth of studies and reports on this topic. While such literature has influenced our thinking and contributed to this paper, this series of "state-of-play" knowledge papers presents MMC's own key messages and therefore does not include extensive references to external sources.

Almost all people leave for multiple reasons

The vast majority of people on the move have several, often intertwined reasons for migrating. Economic considerations are frequently a structural driver of the decision to migrate — everyone needs a livelihood — but rarely exist in isolation; they often go hand in hand with other reasons. Additionally, it is important not to overlook the range of economic drivers of migration.

Different drivers along different routes

While armed conflict prompts large-scale displacement from several locations in West Africa, mixed migration movements in and from the region as a whole are to a large extent driven by economic factors. Mixed migration movements from Afghanistan, by contrast, are more strongly related to violence and insecurity. However, 4Mi data also shows that motivations vary along different routes from the same country or region. People on the

1 More information on 4Mi can be found [here](#). While this paper draws heavily on insights from our 4Mi data, this series of "state-of-play" knowledge papers does not include substantive data and numbers from 4Mi. 4Mi data can be accessed through [4Mi Interactive](#) and is available in many of the previous publications on drivers and decision making (see next footnote and annex).

2 See MMC resources on [drivers of migration](#).

route from the Horn of Africa towards Yemen and Saudi Arabia, for example, are primarily moving for economic reasons, while those moving from the Horn towards North Africa and Europe are also moving because of a lack of rights. People may choose different destinations according to their primary needs, but perhaps also to their expectations about what destinations countries will offer.

Climate change as an indirect driver

Few 4Mi respondents spontaneously mention climate change or environmental factors when asked to list the reasons for migration; although when prompted to consider such factors specifically, the proportion of respondents who acknowledge their influence rises. This suggests that, unless a sudden-onset environmental disaster has forced people to move, environmental factors are usually further to the back of people's mind. In other words, environmental factors are often an underlying, or indirect, driver of migration. Certain drivers act as stress multipliers, affecting other migration drivers. Environmental factors, for example, can affect livelihoods, conflict, and health – all of which respondents cite as primary drivers when asked an open question about their motives for migrating.

Binary thinking leads to incomplete policy responses

Given the subject's complexity, an over-simplistic approach to migration drivers is doomed to fail and to result in a flawed understanding. There are indeed important legal distinctions between refugees and migrants, and being a refugee comes with additional rights to international protection. However, such binary thinking is best avoided when exploring why people migrate and what drives them. Refugees are [by definition](#) "people who have fled war, violence, conflict or persecution and have crossed an international border to find safety in another country". However, especially when they engage in onward movement, refugees may have other motivations to move, including economic ones. Similarly, migrants may have left their country of origin voluntarily and primarily because of economic factors, but along the way they may become victims of human trafficking, face violent smugglers, and end up in countries in crisis or in the throes of armed conflict, all situations from which they want to flee to find safety. Conditions evolve during (onward) migration journeys, and different drivers might come into play at different stages, prompting new decisions. So while it is important to acknowledge the legal distinction between refugees and migrants, "forced" and "voluntary" migration are better understood as points on a spectrum than as a dichotomy.

A similar example of unhelpful binary thinking is the "war-or-poverty" dualism, which obscures migration's complexities and its centrality to many people's

aspirations. While media narratives and political rhetoric frequently portray economic reasons for migration as somehow less deserving of sympathy than drivers related to conflict or persecution, it is important to understand how compelling such economic factors can be. For instance, in West Africa, the socio-cultural imperatives to provide for one's family are extraordinarily strong and may even be felt as "life-or-death" choices. To create adequate policy responses, explanations of why people migrate must consider the various and interlinked drivers of decisions to migrate. As we will see later, this binary or even single-track thinking is also one of the flaws of the "root causes" approach to drivers, one which sees job creation and economic development as a panacea for reducing migration.

Key message 1:

Refugees and migrants rarely leave their place of origin for a single, isolated reason; generally, departure drivers are multiple and intertwined. Some drivers, such as climate change, are indirect, and may affect other drivers, and different people may leave the same place for different reasons, and head to different destinations. Forced and voluntary mobility are often better understood as points on a spectrum than mutually exclusive categories.

Should I stay or should I go? A combination of aspirations to move and capabilities to do so

The key drivers of migration – conflict and insecurity; persecution; environmental conditions; lack of adequate access to jobs, education, and services; family situation, etc – may or may not lead to a need or aspiration to migrate. And not all of those who aspire to migrate will go on to decide to do so, or act on that decision and leave. Whether aspiration leads to decision and then action hinges upon many other factors, including, crucially, capability to migrate,³ which in turn depends on resources – such as social and financial capital and access to diaspora networks – as well as external (bureaucratic, logistical and political) factors that influence access to migration channels. Different combinations of aspiration and capability create four broad (and often overlapping) categories of migration outcome: i) staying in place

3 Carling, J. & Schewel, K. (2018) [Revisiting aspiration and ability in international migration](#) Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 44:6, 945-963, DOI: 10.1080/1369183X.2017.1384146

voluntarily; ii) staying in place involuntarily; iii) moving voluntarily; and iv) moving involuntarily (however, as discussed above, voluntary and forced mobility, but also immobility, are points on a spectrum, and individual situations will not all fit neatly into one outcome.)

Covid-19 illustrates the importance the aspiration-capability nexus. The pandemic is likely to have increased aspirations to move, strengthening drivers related to economic opportunities, access to services, armed conflict, and persecution. But it is also likely to have limited capability to move by reducing requisite resources and by impeding mobility through the introduction of restrictions such as lockdowns and border closures. The inseparability of aspiration and capability goes a long way to explaining why the impact of Covid-19 on mobility differs in different regions and contexts, leading to increased movements along some routes, and decreased movements along others.

The risks of staying

The disproportionate focus on the drivers of migration and decision-making often causes an important question to be overlooked: given that most people do not migrate, why is it that those who do migrate decide not stay where they are? In other words, what are the risks of staying, both in terms of personal safety and of unfulfilled life aspirations? Most 4Mi respondents did not see any alternatives to migrating in the way they did; they saw it as their only viable option.

Where to go?

Political and policy discussions on migration dominated by a "root causes" narrative (explored further below) lead to an overly narrow focus on why people leave their places of origin, often referred to as "push" factors. Consequently, many other factors that play into the decision to migrate, and the options that are explored, tend to be overlooked. For instance, there is a strong demand for migrant labour in many destination countries, and such "pull factors" are just as important as their "push" counterparts.

Key message 2:

The decision to leave depends not only on aspirations (impacted by multiple migration drivers), but also on the risks of staying, and the resources and capacity for moving. Understanding the complexities of the decision to leave (or stay) and where to go if the decision to migrate is taken, is essential.

Most people don't migrate

Mixed immobility

Hundreds of millions of people across the world choose not – or are unable – to migrate despite facing similar drivers as others who do migrate, such as socioeconomic insecurity, dire geoclimatic conditions, conflict, and failed governance. Given wide disparities in wages, work, and wellbeing between countries around the world, the general propensity for people to stay put is, when viewed through the blinkers of a "root causes" mindset, somewhat perplexing. So instead of asking why people migrate, perhaps an even more pertinent question is, why are more people not migrating?⁴

We need to better understand immobility, as a better understanding of non-migration also leads to a better understanding of decision-making around migration. Just as migration and mobility are mixed, immobility is mixed too and can also be placed at different points along a forced–voluntary spectrum.

Key message 3:

Since most people in the world do not migrate, we need to better understand immobility, as it would also contribute to a better understanding of drivers and decision-making around migration.

Individual agency, determination and risk awareness should not be underestimated

It is important to recognise people's agency in decision-making around migration. Like with many life-changing decisions, people often seek advice and information from others, but the act of migrating in many cases is ultimately the result of individual agency. Those forcibly displaced will often feel they had no alternative options for their survival nor even the opportunity to engage in any kind of deliberate decision-making process, but it should be acknowledged that even forcibly displaced people exercise some level of agency about when to flee, where to flee to, and whom and what to take or leave behind.

Friends and family are the main influencers on the decision to migrate. In contrast, the role of smugglers

4 Schewel, K. (2021) Staying put. Why it's time to pay more attention to mixed immobility. In: Horwood, C. & Frouws, B. (eds) (2021) [Mixed Migration Review 2021](#) Mixed Migration Centre.

and social media is relatively small.⁵ This is contrary to how their role is often portrayed – and exaggerated – in policy circles and media, where they tend to be painted as unscrupulous criminals stoking dreams and aspirations and directly encouraging people to migrate. The influence of smugglers does increase, however, after people have decided to migrate and once they are on the move, as smugglers make decisions about route and means of transport for instance, and become a key source of information in general.

Risk awareness, determination, and resilience

As we know, people along mixed migration routes face severe risks. But even before they set off, they are generally well aware of many of these risks and show a high level of resilience and preparedness to endure them. 4Mi data reveal the strength of people's determination and resilience. On the journey, people take active measures to mitigate risks, such as travelling in a group, planning carefully, maintaining regular contact with other migrants, and avoiding carrying cash. Despite the prevalence of abuses, many respondents (who are all surveyed while en route) say they would migrate again, even knowing what they know now. At the same time, many would not encourage others to migrate. Though open to multiple interpretations, this suggests that migration is an individual project; that one person is willing to take risks and sometimes pay a high price for migrating does not mean that he or she would recommend others do the same.

Key message 4:

It is important to recognize people's individual agency in the decision-making process on migration before leaving. The role of smugglers encouraging people to migrate is overestimated. Many people are well aware of the risks, but show resilience and determination to realise their migratory aspirations.

'Root causes': a dishonest and ineffective approach to the drivers of migration

In recent years, there has been a strong focus on and narrative around the so-called "root causes" of migration, with the assumption that numbers of displaced people and irregular migrants will drop once these causes – or drivers – are addressed.⁶ It frames human mobility as a problem to be solved, rather than as something that can be harnessed for positive outcomes.

The framing of migration and displacement as a problem triggers restrictive policy responses to the detriment of refugees and migrants on the move. It also incentivizes foreign and development policy to remain focused on keeping people where they are and on migration objectives, instead of on where development assistance can be most needed.

A simplistic metaphor which fails to paint the whole picture

The "root causes" narrative over-simplifies the decision to leave and obscures the role of politics in triggering the conflicts and humanitarian crises that lead people to leave their homes. It often ignores the underlying drivers of migration. It diverts attention and responsibility away from the behaviour of states, multinational companies, and systemic factors that feed a global cycle of instability and inequality and thus cause people to embark on mixed migration journeys. These include investments into the defence industry that produces the weapons used in conflicts around the world, the dependency on fossil fuels such as oil and gas, as well as trade barriers or subsidies to industries and sectors such as agriculture and fisheries that undermine the economic viability of those sectors and the availability of jobs in countries of origin.

Key message 5:

Approaching the decision to move using the "root causes" narrative in public and policy discourse frames it as a simplistic issue and a problem to be solved, rather than a complex phenomenon to be better understood. It diverts resources, attention and accountability away from many of the real 'root causes'.

⁵ For example, only 3% of 2,500 4Mi respondents in West Africa who used a smuggler (surveyed in 2021) said their smuggler had pressured them into using their services, while just 15 % of 2,083 4Mi respondents surveyed in 2021 in West and North Africa [said smugglers had influenced their decision to migrate](#).

⁶ Bram Frouws (2020) [Op-Ed: Mistaken metaphor: the 'root causes' approach to migration is both dishonest and ineffective](#) Mixed Migration Centre

Conclusion

This paper distilled and summarized key insights from a decade of MMC research, expert analysis, and data collection on migration drivers and decision-making. Based on these insights, MMC presents five targeted key messages that we consider crucial for much-needed nuance and evidence-based discussions on the overall question of why people migrate. In line with our overall strategic objectives, this paper is meant to contribute to advancing the understanding of mixed migration drivers and decision-making and to informing policies and programmatic responses based on knowledge, discernment, and evidence, rather than assumptions, feelings, and political ideology. At the same time, these messages are a call to challenge received wisdoms, so that we — in partnership with other agencies, research institutions, think tanks and, importantly, refugees and migrants themselves — continue to advance our understanding of mixed migration drivers and decision making.

These messages are not meant to be set in stone or to mark the end of our extensive focus on why people migrate. Knowledge and insights always evolve, based on new research and more reflection. We will surely gain new insights over the years to come, and we will keep discussing the issue of drivers and decision making. The Mixed Migration Centre is looking forward to the conversation!

Annex 1.

MMC resources on migration drivers and decision making

4Mi Interactive portals

Mixed migration during Covid-19, including why people leave, and whether Covid-19 was an influencing factor.

<https://mixedmigration.org/4mi/4mi-interactive/mixed-migration-during-covid-19/>

Regularly updated data on mixed migration from ongoing 4Mi interviews, including on why people leave, what influences that decision, aspirations and intentions and alternatives to migration.

<https://mixedmigration.org/4mi/4mi-interactive/data-on-mixed-migration/>

Data on recently returned refugees and migrants in Afghanistan, including on influences on the decision to return and future migration intentions.

<https://mixedmigration.org/4mi/4mi-interactive/data-on-returnees/>

4Mi snapshots

MMC (2021): [How to migrate north: Factors behind Central American refugees' and migrants' decisions in Mexico](#)

MMC (2021): [Profiles and drivers of Rohingya moving to Malaysia](#)

MMC (2021): [Aspirations and intended destinations of people on the move in Sudan](#)

MMC (2020): [Impact of Covid-19 on the decision to migrate](#)

Find here all 4Mi snapshots with a focus on drivers of migration and decision making

Articles

MMC (2021): [Forced displacement and \(im\)mobility: what's climate change got to do with it?](#)

MMC (2020): [Op-Ed: Mistaken metaphor: the 'root causes' approach to migration is both dishonest and ineffective](#)

MMC (2018): [Drivers revisited. Why people migrate](#)

Find [here](#) all MMC articles

Research reports and briefing papers

MMC (2022): [Climate-related events and environmental stressors' roles in driving migration in West and North Africa](#)

MMC (2021): [Moving on: Exploring onward migration of refugees and migrants from East Africa](#)

MMC (2021): [A transit country no more: Refugees and asylum seekers in Indonesia](#)

MMC (2021): ["Fixing" people in place through policy and development?](#)

MMC (2021): [A Gateway Re-opens: the growing popularity of the Atlantic route as told by those who risk it](#)

MMC (2021): [Migration drivers and decision-making of West and Central Africans on the move in West and North Africa](#)

MMC (2020): [Weak links: Challenging the climate and migration paradigm in the Horn of Africa and Yemen](#)

Find [here](#) all MMC research reports and [here](#) all briefing papers with a focus on drivers of migration and decision making.

MMC's annual 'Mixed Migration Review', including data, essays and interviews on migration drivers and decision making

MMC (2021): [Mixed Migration Review 2021](#)

MMC (2020): [Mixed Migration Review 2020](#)

MMC (2019): [Mixed Migration Review 2019](#)

MMC (2018): [Mixed Migration Review 2018](#)



The MMC is a global network consisting of six regional hubs and a central unit in Geneva engaged in data collection, research, analysis and policy development on mixed migration. The MMC is a leading source for independent and high-quality data, research, analysis and expertise on mixed migration. The MMC aims to increase understanding of mixed migration, to positively impact global and regional migration policies, to inform evidence-based protection responses for people on the move and to stimulate forward thinking in public and policy debates on mixed migration. The MMC's overarching focus is on human rights and protection for all people on the move.

The MMC is part of and governed by the Danish Refugee Council (DRC). Global and regional MMC teams are based in Copenhagen, Dakar, Geneva, Nairobi, Tunis, Bogota and Dhaka.

The views set out in this report are those of the Mixed Migration Centre and do not necessarily reflect the official opinion of the Danish Refugee Council or any of the donors supporting the work of MMC or this report. Responsibility for the content of this report lies entirely with the MMC

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