

# Access to information and decision-making among migrants and refugees who took the Western Balkan route

## Introduction

Italy is both a country of destination and a key transit country for people on the move intending to reach other European countries. This snapshot focuses on the migration experience of refugees and migrants from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh interviewed in Northern Italy after crossing the West Balkan route. It examines respondents' access to migration-related information before and during the migration journey, information gaps that they faced and the role of information in their decision-making around the journey.

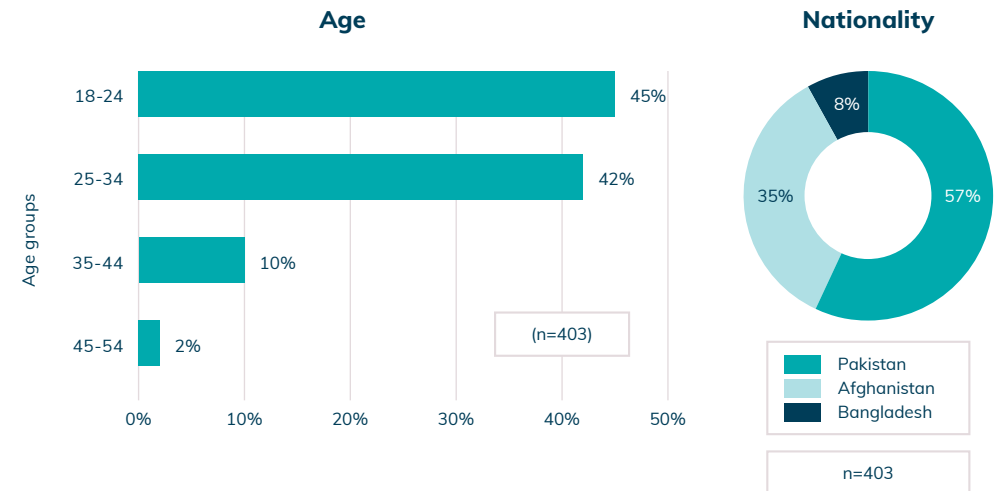
## Key findings

- **A majority of respondents obtained information about the journey:** 70% of respondents obtained information about routes, destinations, costs, risks prior to migrating, and 80% obtained information during their migration journey.
- **The most frequent sources of information were informal, and social.** Before starting their journey, this included friends or family in another country (53%); smugglers (34%); the online community (25%); and friends or family in country of departure (also at 25%). During the journey, other migrants were by far the most cited source (72%), but friends and family in another country and smugglers also remained among the most frequently mentioned sources, in second (25%) and third (24%) place respectively. More formal sources were scarcely reported.
- **The most reliable sources of information were other migrants (35%), followed by friends and family in another country (28%),** the online community (12%) and smugglers (12%).
- **The most common information gaps related to legal processes regarding migration and asylum** (41% of respondents reporting needing this information and not having it), safety and security along the journey (30%), and conditions of journey (19%).
- **New information does not appear to impact on major migration decisions:** most respondents would still have undertaken the migration journey knowing what they know now (51%), while only a small minority said that the information they received during the journey changed their migration plans (16%).

## Profiles

Findings presented in this snapshot are based on 403 4Mi surveys collected between February and May 2023 in Northern Italy<sup>1</sup> among refugees and migrants from Pakistan (n=229), Afghanistan (n=143) and Bangladesh (n=31) (see Figure 1). Considering the small sample among Bangladeshis, any analysis of this group must be interpreted with caution. All respondents were male.<sup>2</sup> The majority of respondents were either aged 18-24 (45% overall, ranging from 40% among Pakistanis to 52% among Afghans), or aged 25-34 (42% - see Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Age and nationality**



- 1 Surveys were collected in two Italian cities: the vast majority in Trieste, at the Eastern border with Slovenia (97.5%); and a small minority in Ventimiglia, at the Western border with France (2.5%). In Trieste, interviews were mostly conducted either in public gathering spaces or a day centre where several local NGOs provide basic services to all, including refugees and migrants.
- 2 Women were extremely hard to access, and only two female respondents were interviewed within the framework of the project. Such a low number of respondents does not allow for any meaningful quantitative data analysis on gender, so this data was discarded from this analysis.

Most respondents said they were asylum seekers at the time of interview (66%), while one-third had irregular immigration status (33%). Only one respondent had been recognised as a refugee in Italy. There were sizeable differences between nationalities: among Afghan nationals, 62% had irregular status, while only 37% were seeking asylum; on the other hand, 81% of Pakistani respondents were seeking asylum in Italy, while 19% had an irregular immigration status. Finally, 94% of Bangladeshi respondents were asylum seekers and only 6% had an irregular immigration status in Italy.

## Route, destinations and intentions

Most respondents had travelled through Iran and Turkey, then entered Europe either through Bulgaria or Greece, and then continued through North Macedonia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Slovenia, before crossing into Italy. Bangladeshi respondents represented an exception, as most of them had travelled directly, and regularly, from their country of departure to Romania by plane through a work visa scheme introduced by Romania in 2022,<sup>3</sup> and from there they continued their journey through Hungary and Slovenia, and finally to Italy.

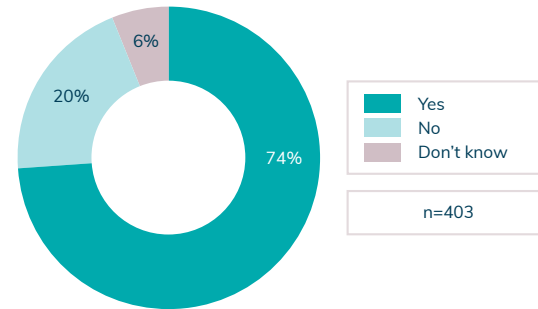
Overall, among the minority who reported that they would continue their migration journey (n=104), the most frequently reported preferred destination was Germany (38%), followed by France (16%) and Europe generally (13%). The UK was the fourth most frequently reported option, with 12% of those who said they were continuing their journey (see Figure 2).<sup>4</sup>

3 See The Business Standard (2022) [5,400 Bangladeshis get work visas to Romania](#). However, the scheme has shown shortcomings as many Bangladeshi nationals then migrate onwards to other EU countries; see Dumitrescu, R. (2023) [Foreign workers set to work in Romania keep leaving for western Europe](#). Romania Insider. Some reports indicate that this would be due to strong differences between the conditions Bangladeshi workers were promised before migrating, and the reality they faced upon arrival in Romania; see Kanunjna, A. D (2022) [Bangladeshi migrants in Romania: From regular to undocumented](#). InfoMigrants.

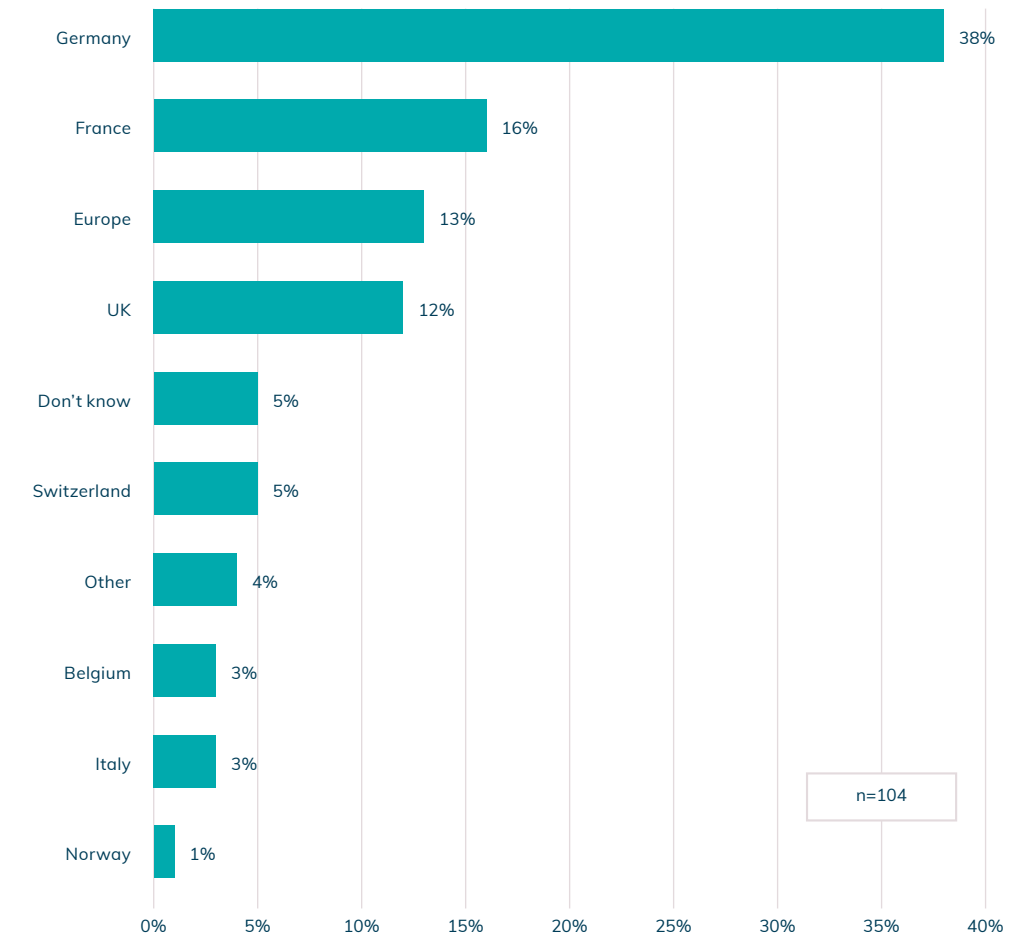
4 Only 20% of respondents stated they planned to move onward to another location. However, it is important to note that this may be a case of under-reporting, given that a majority of refugees and migrants who travel through Trieste (based on data from a local NGO) continue their journey. This underreporting may be due to participants being unwilling to share their intentions, or to participants who are passing through rapidly (some only remain in Trieste for a few hours) being less likely to consent to an interview.

**Figure 2. Intended destination**

Have you reached the end of your journey?



**Preferred destination**



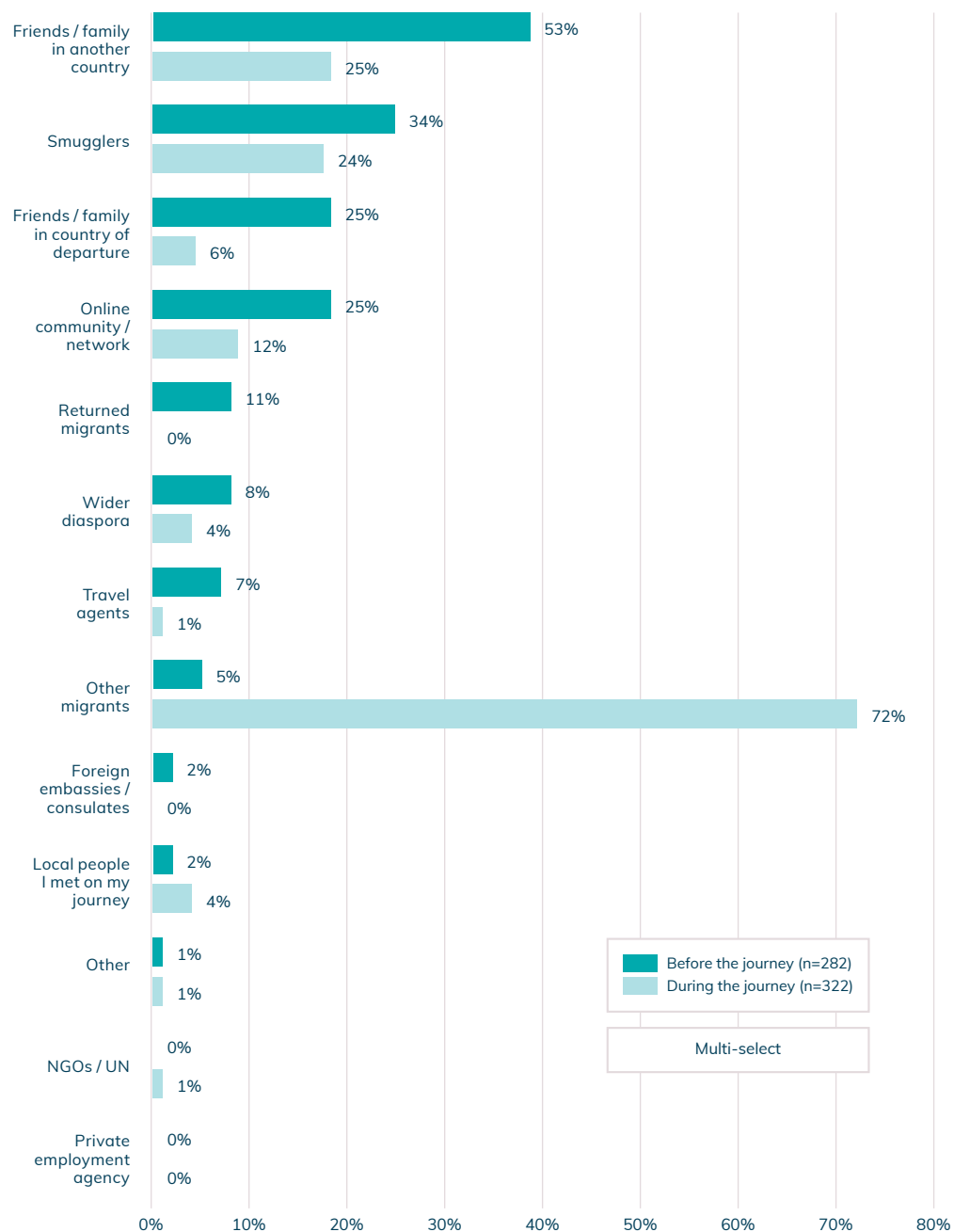
When asked about circumstances which might lead them to change their intended destination, those still planning to move on most often said they did not know (27%), while 24% indicated policy changes that might decrease their chances of entering their destination countries, and 18% stated that no circumstances could lead them to change their mind.

## Respondents mostly obtained information on migration from sources among their personal and social network

70% of respondents said they obtained information about routes, destinations, costs, and risks prior to migrating. This means that almost one-third of respondents (30%) did not. The share of those who did not obtain information before their departure was similar among Afghan and Pakistani respondents (29% and 27% respectively) while it was much higher among Bangladeshi nationals (61%).

Among the 70% of respondents in the total sample who did obtain information before migrating (n=282), the most frequent sources of information were from among their personal and social networks, including friends or family in another country (53%); smugglers (34%); the online community (25%); and friends or family in country of departure (also at 25%) (see Figure 3). However, the few (12) Bangladeshi respondents who obtained information before migrating most frequently mentioned travel agents (n=5), likely related to the work visa scheme that they passed through.

**Figure 3. What were your sources of information about routes, destinations, costs, risks, etc.?**



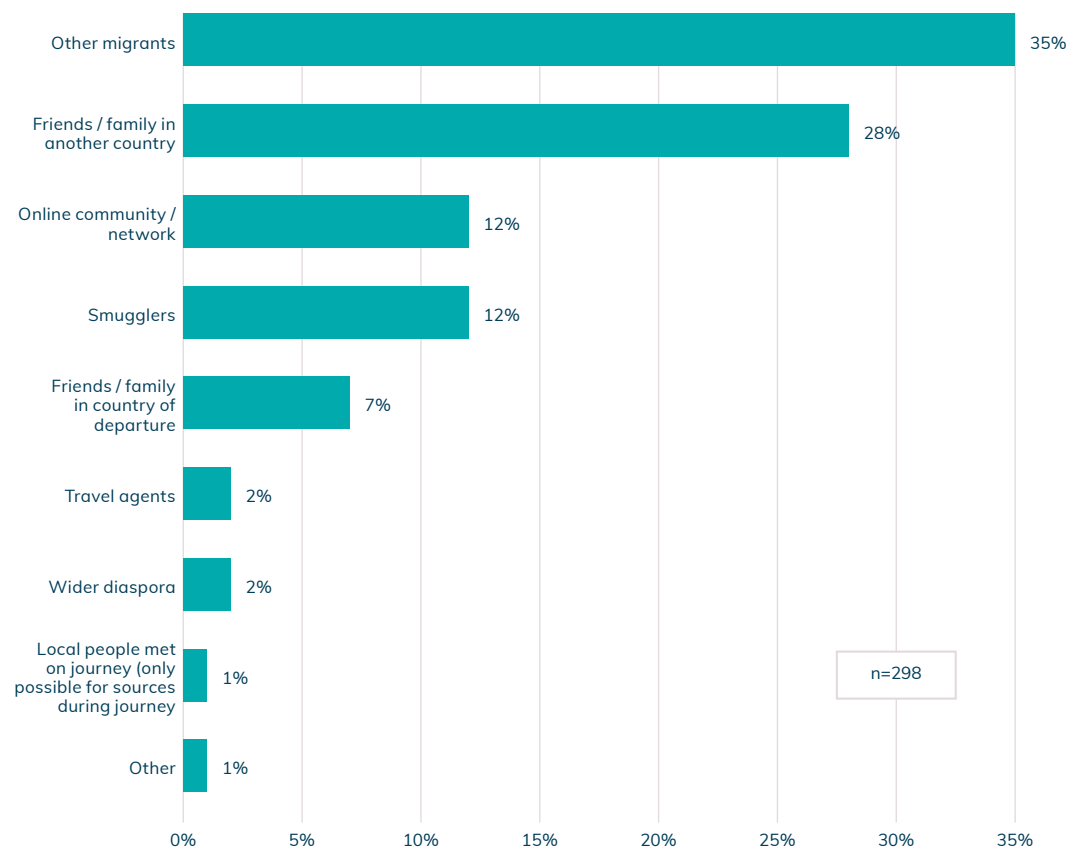
80% of respondents obtained information during their journey, 10% more than those who obtained information before migrating. On the journey, other migrants are by far the most cited source of information (72%). Friends/family in another country and smugglers rank in second (25%) and third (24%) place, respectively, but are less frequently used than before the journey. Findings differed depending on nationality to some extent, with respondents from Pakistan and Bangladesh obtaining information from smugglers more often (30% and 47% respectively) compared to Afghan respondents (12%). This difference between nationality groups is interesting, and further exploration of the dynamics of smuggling, particularly before the journey and among Afghans, is merited.

More “official” sources of information such as NGOs and UN agencies or national authorities were barely mentioned, either prior to (1 and 6 times respectively) or during the journey (3 and 1 time, respectively). According to a local key informant in Trieste, trust toward institutional actors along the Balkan route is very low among people on the move. The Red Cross has also found that trust in humanitarian organisations is low among refugees and migrants on the move: “[o]ne quarter of all migrants (25%) expressed fear that accessing humanitarian assistance and protection from humanitarian organisations may increase risks of detention or deportation.”<sup>5</sup>

When asked about what sources of information they considered to be most reliable, respondents most often cited other migrants (35%), followed by friends and family in another country (28%), the online community (12%) and smugglers (12% - see Figure 4).<sup>6</sup>

Afghan respondents were less likely to indicate smugglers among the most reliable sources (4%), compared to other nationalities.

**Figure 4. What has been the most reliable source of information?**



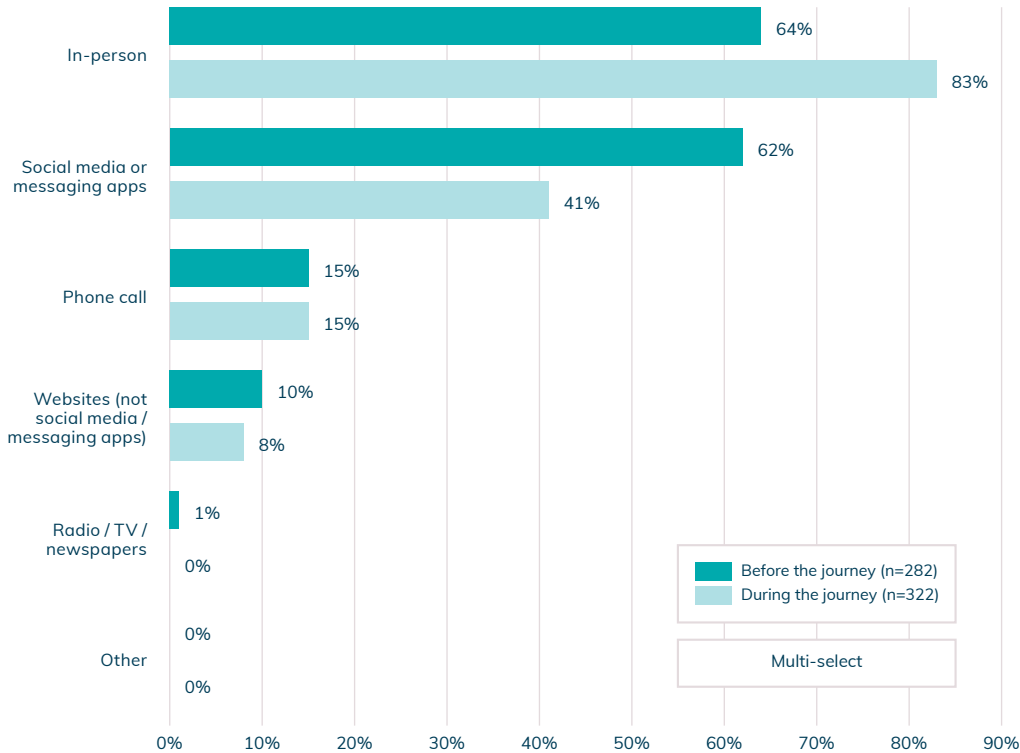
## Information is most often obtained via social media and in-person

As for the means used to gather migration-related information (see Figure 5), prior to departing, respondents mostly obtained information in-person (64%) or used social media/messaging apps (62%). In contrast, during their journey, respondents mostly obtained information through in-person interactions (83%), which aligns with the prominence of other migrants as a source of information.

<sup>5</sup> Red Cross Global Migration Lab (2022) [Migrants' Perspectives: Building Trust in Humanitarian Action](#).

<sup>6</sup> 36 observations about respondents answering “Returned migrants” were taken out of Figure 4 due to an error identified during data processing. This modification does not have an impact on the rest of the analysis.

**Figure 5. Means to obtain information**



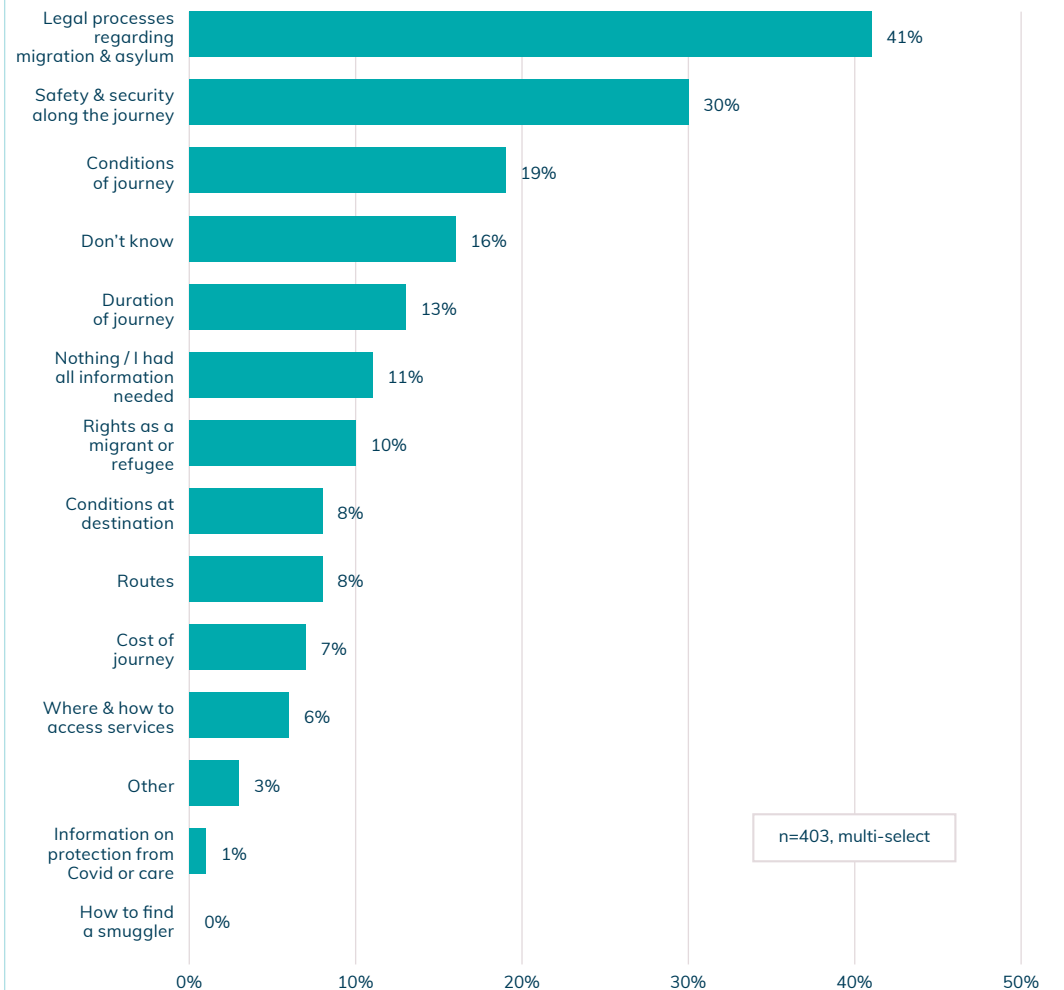
This reliance on obtaining information in-person is perhaps at least partially explained by phone access: 47% of respondents reported not having had access to a phone during their journey (48% had a smartphone and 5% had a basic phone). Afghan respondents much more frequently reported that they did not have access to a phone (66%) than Pakistani and Bangladeshi respondents (38% and 29%, respectively).

Among those respondents who did have access to a phone, 89% used it to keep in touch with their family, again indicating the importance of links with family and friends. It was also used, but less frequently, to look for information on the journey (31%) or contact smugglers (25%). There is anecdotal evidence from respondents of "remote smuggling" mechanisms, where the smuggler sends GPS locations to refugees and migrants, avoiding any more direct contact, but this data was not collected systematically.

## Information gaps persist

Only 11% of respondents said they had all the information they needed (see Figure 6). 41% needed information on legal processes regarding migration and asylum, 30% on safety and security along the journey, 30% on safety and security along the journey, and 19% on the conditions of the journey.

**Figure 6. Information that was not received, and would have been useful**



At least one of the most frequent information gaps – on legal processes regarding migration and asylum – was the type of information that the more official sources, and least used sources, could be expected to provide. The other gaps - about the journey conditions and safety - suggest that despite their frequent use, perceived reliability, and likelihood of having information on these topics, sources such as other migrants do not provide complete information. This might be due to the fluid situation along the migration routes and unpredictable conditions along the journey, but also on the part of sources such as smugglers who might have an interest in downplaying the risks and difficulties their “clients” will face. This would be in line with the finding that 62% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they had been intentionally misled by smugglers.

## Awareness and information do not necessarily dictate decisions on migration

Many respondents considered that they were aware and informed regarding their migration. There were information gaps, however: 32% of respondents stated not having been aware of the difficulties and risks that they might face during the journey before they migrated.

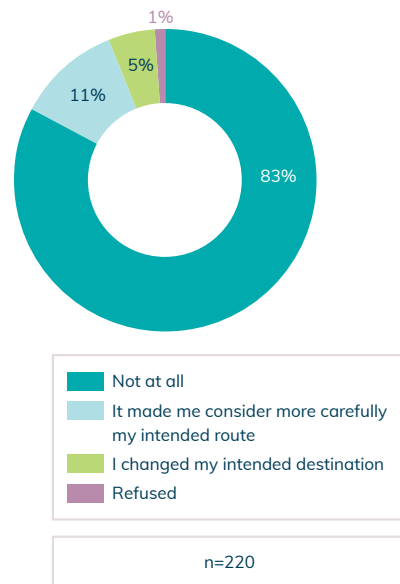
Information on policy does seem to be particularly lacking: 43% of respondents reported not having been aware of the restrictions regarding asylum in their destination country before they started their journey. In addition, 53% of respondents said that they had not received any information about policies and restrictions to entering their intended destination on the journey (23% said they had received information from NGOs, and 20% from family and friends). This is of interest, considering the share of respondents who said that policy changes might lead them to change their destination.

At the same time, few respondents said that the information they received during the journey changed their migration plans (16%), and a majority would still have undertaken the journey knowing what they know now (51%) (see Figure 7), questioning to what degree additional information impacts migration plans.

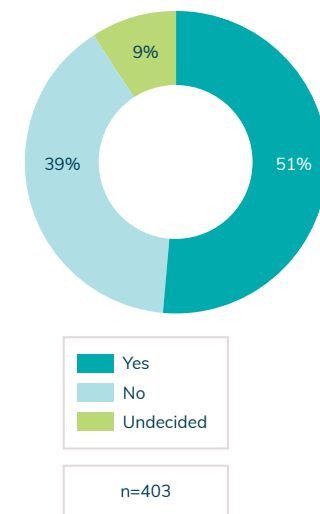
Migration-related decision-making is complex, and while accurate information is important for anyone making decisions, the decisions depend on numerous factors that vary according to each individual and their circumstances. The analysis here indicates the importance of personal and social networks for information, and factors beyond information about the journey and destination also play an important role in migrants' decision-making, perhaps not least those personal and social networks themselves.

**Figure 7. Awareness and decision-making**

**Did this information change your intentions?**



**Would you have started the journey knowing what you know now?**



According to additional information shared by the enumerators, many respondents said that they knew the journey would be difficult, but they still did not expect it to be as bad as it turned out. Additionally, thinking about decision-making and past experiences might also be influenced by the respondents' circumstances at the time of interview: being in a very difficult situation might lead respondents to think that conditions at destination were not worth the risks and suffering faced, while having found some stability might lead them to say the contrary. When asking people to evaluate their experience and decision-making, there are a number of factors that might influence that evaluation beyond their actual past experiences, including current conditions.



## 4Mi data collection

[4Mi](#) is the Mixed Migration Centre's flagship primary data collection system, an innovative approach that helps fill knowledge gaps, and inform policy and response regarding the nature of mixed migratory movements and the protection risks for refugees and migrants on the move. 4Mi field enumerators are currently collecting data through direct interviews with refugees and migrants in Asia and the Pacific, Eastern and Southern Africa, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, North Africa, and West Africa.

Note that the sampling approach means that the findings derived from the surveyed sample provide rich insights, but the figures cannot be used to make inferences about the total population. See more 4Mi analysis and details on methodology at: [www.mixedmigration.org/4mi](http://www.mixedmigration.org/4mi)