

Unpacking migrants' information access in the Central Sahel

With the deterioration of the [security situation in the Central Sahel \(Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger\)](#) and the recent decision by the Alliance of Sahel States to withdraw from ECOWAS, the situation for migrants in the region remains precarious and ever-evolving. Access to trustworthy information is imperative in this context so that migrants can make well-informed decisions about their journeys. Therefore, this snapshot delves into the information gaps experienced by people on the move in the Central Sahel, and explores how information is accessed as well as the sources of information most relied upon and trusted.

Key findings

- **The majority of respondents (61%) experienced information gaps**, either before and/or during their journey.
- **Safety/security (40%) and costs (34%)** were the most reported information gaps:
 - **Access to safety and security information was reported as a need**, whether respondents had travelled through dangerous locations (42%) or not (38%).
 - **Amongst respondents who reported information gaps and used a smuggler, almost half (49%) indicated challenges in obtaining costs-related information.**
- **Sources of information evolve throughout the journey:**
 - **Family and friends in another country are the most often cited source of information** by surveyed migrants who obtained information before their journey (71%), whereas 58% cited this source of information during the journey.
 - During their journey, **surveyed migrants obtain information from a broader array of sources** such as other migrants (42%), local communities (37%), travel agents (35%), and smugglers (24%).
- Respondents mostly relied on **direct and interpersonal means of obtaining information**, such as phone calls (80%) and in-person discussions (77%) before departing.

- Surveyed migrants made **minimal use of traditional media (7%), websites (7%) and street adverts (1%)** to obtain information before departure, whereas these channels are the most frequently utilized by information campaigns on irregular migration.
- **Social media and messaging apps are also commonly used** both before and during the journey (51% and 43% respectively), with variations according to nationalities.

Profile of respondents

This snapshot draws from 2,276 interviews conducted with migrants between September 2023 and December 2023 in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger.¹ The number of respondents by country of interview was evenly distributed, with 766 in Burkina Faso, 759 in Mali, and 751 in Niger.² Among all respondents, 58% were men (n=1,325) and 42% were women (n=951).³ The median age of respondents was relatively the same across countries, reaching 28 years and ranging from 18 to 71 among all respondents.

Mixed migration trends in the Central Sahel are dominated by migration between ECOWAS countries, where citizens of member states still had visa-free entry and could stay for up to 90 days at the time of interviews. Respondents were originally from 27 different countries, with most originating from a West African country (91%).⁴ The top five nationalities in the sample account for 55% of total respondents (see Table 1).⁵

- 1 This snapshot is based on data collected following the military coup in Niger in July 2023 and the establishment of the Alliance of Sahel States by Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso in September 2023, therefore the period of data collection coincided with a period of political changes in the region, which might influence migrants' responses.
- 2 Surveys were conducted in nine different locations, namely Ouagadougou, Tenkodogo and Dori in Burkina Faso; Bamako, Gao and Sikasso in Mali; Niamey, Agadez and Diffa in Niger.
- 3 There were differences between countries of interview. In Mali, a balanced representation of both men (51%) and women (49%) was achieved, whereas men constituted a larger proportion of the respondents in Niger and Burkina Faso (66% and 58% respectively).
- 4 Exceptions are Chad (3%), Cameroon (3%) and other countries (3%).
- 5 The most represented nationality among respondents in Burkina Faso was Togolese (26%), while in Niger, 25% of respondents were from Nigeria, and, in Mali 17% of respondents were from Burkina Faso.

Table 1. Top 5 respondent nationalities

| Nationalities | Respondents | Percentages (n=2,276) |
|---------------|-------------|-----------------------|
| Togo | 325 | 14% |
| Nigeria | 291 | 13% |
| Côte d'Ivoire | 248 | 11% |
| Benin | 214 | 9% |
| Burkina Faso | 190 | 8% |

Respondents' aspirations are more inclined towards destinations outside the region.

Among respondents who had not reached their final destination (85%, n=1,940), merely 19% cited a West African country as their preferred ultimate destination. The preferred destinations most frequently mentioned were European countries (42%),⁶ with France (9%) and Italy (8%) emerging as the top two choices. Within West Africa, Mali stands out with 7% of respondents citing it as their preferred final destination. Almost half of the respondents who cited Mali as their preferred destination (n=141) were originally from Burkina Faso (22%), Côte d'Ivoire (16%), or Togo (11%), reflecting a pattern of [migrants from these countries seeking economic opportunities in Mali, primarily in the mining sector.](#)

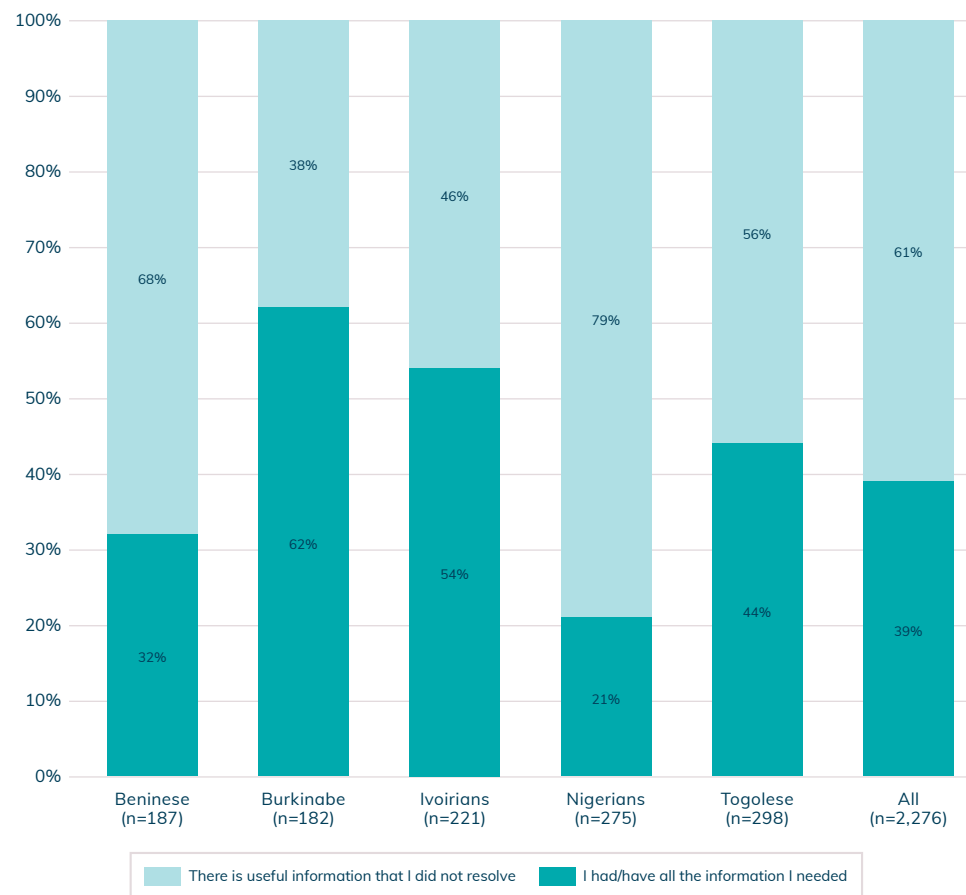
The majority of respondents lacked key information despite widespread access

Most respondents had access to information about routes, itineraries, destinations, costs, and risks before and during their journey. Access to information among respondents only slightly decreased from pre-departure stage (86%, n=1,953) to during their journey (79%, n=1,787), underscoring **migrants' continuous ability to seek and obtain information throughout their journeys.** Men tended to report more often than women that they had access to information both before departure (89%, n=1,181, compared to 81%, n=772, for women) and during their journey (82%, n=1,091, compared to 73%, n=696, for women).

⁶ Other preferred destinations were in North Africa (12%), North America (12%), the Middle East (5%), Central Africa (4%), Latin America (2%), Asia and Oceania (2%), Eastern and Southern Africa (2%).

However, over half of the respondents (61%) still reported not having obtained all the information they needed. Surveyed migrants from **Nigeria** (n=291) most commonly reported experiencing information gaps (79%). On the other hand, 62% of respondents from **Burkina Faso** (n=190) indicated that they had obtained all the information they needed, thus feeling more informed about their journey.

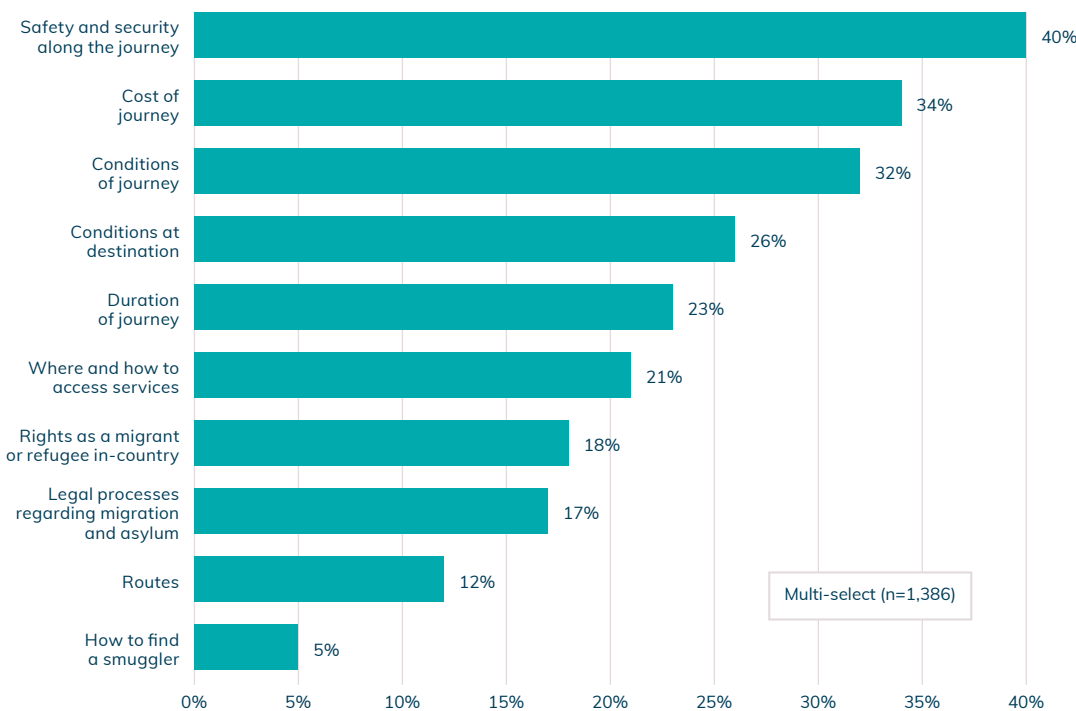
Figure 1. Access to useful information by nationality



The main information gaps pertained to safety, security, conditions and costs of the journey

There seems to be a greater demand for and/or difficulty in obtaining information about the migration journey itself compared to information about accessing services or about rights and legal processes. Among surveyed migrants who had not obtained all the information needed (n=1,386), four of the five most common information gaps were related to their journey, notably the security/safety conditions (40%), the costs (34%), the overall conditions (32%), and the duration (23%) of the journey. Differences between women (n=550) and men (n=836) were minor, with women more frequently reporting than men that they had not received timely information about the length of the journey (27% and 21%, respectively). Conversely, men more often indicated gaps in information about the cost of the journey (37% of men compared to 29% of women).

Figure 2. What information would you have found useful that you didn't get?⁷



⁷ Among respondents who reported an information gap. Other response options included "Information on how to protect myself from Covid or how to get care" (3%), Don't know (3%) and, Other (2%).

Access to safety and security information was reported as a need, regardless of whether respondents had travelled through a dangerous location or not. Amongst the 58% of respondents who reported information gaps, almost half of those who travelled through a [dangerous](#) location (n=809) indicated a lack of information about safety and security (42%). Similarly, 38% of those who did not travel through a dangerous location reported a need for information on safety and security, thus anticipating potential future risks.

Surveyed migrants who used one or more smugglers reported challenges in obtaining costs-related information about their journey. Among respondents who reported information gaps, nearly half (49%) of those who used a smuggler (n=499) mentioned not receiving timely information about the cost of their journey, compared to 26% of those who didn't use a smuggler (n=887). Although [previous MMC research](#) found that using smugglers was perceived as a cost-effective option due to their ability to negotiate smaller bribe payments, the uncertain security and policy landscape in the Central Sahel at the time of data collection might have had an impact on migrants' access to accurate and timely information regarding costs through smugglers.

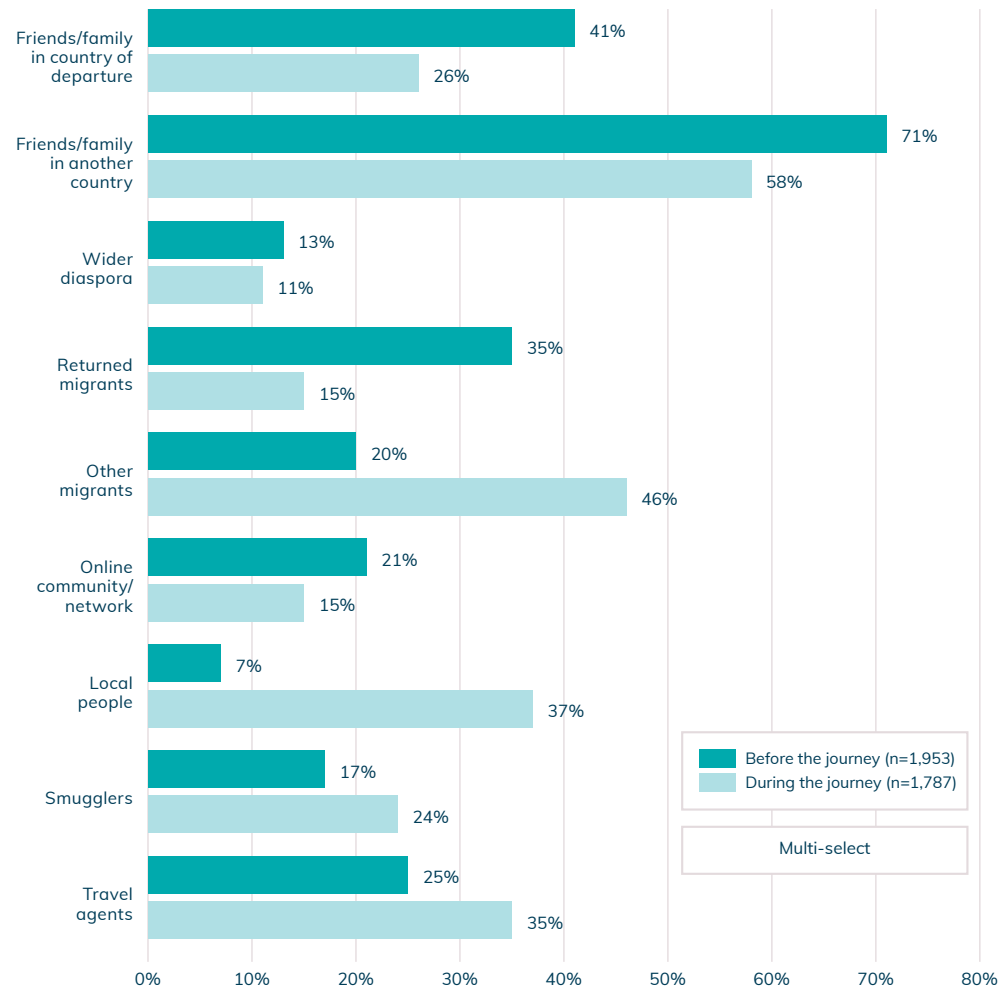
Sources of information shift during the journey

Before departing, respondents primarily relied on family members and friends to obtain information (see Figure 3). Family and friends in another country were, by far, the most frequently cited source of information among surveyed migrants who accessed information before their journey (71%). This was slightly more common for women (74%), compared to men (68%). Other commonly reported sources of information included family members and friends in their country of departure (42%) and returned migrants (35%).

Although family and friends in another country remain the main source of information, other sources emerge as migrants progress on their journey, such as other migrants (42%), local communities (37%), travel agents (35%), and smugglers (24%). The use of travel agents and smugglers as sources of information illustrates the relatively strong role mobility intermediaries⁸ play in the journeys of migrants in the Central Sahel. Men more often relied on smugglers to access information than women (respectively 27% and 19%).

⁸ Mobility intermediaries [encompass both travel agents and smugglers](#). In the West African context, both travel agents and smugglers facilitate the movement of people across borders, albeit through different means with varying, sometimes evolving, degrees of legality. The differentiation between the two can be ambiguous in the perceptions of the individuals who use their services.

Figure 3. What were your sources of information? Before and during the journey. Top 9 responses⁹



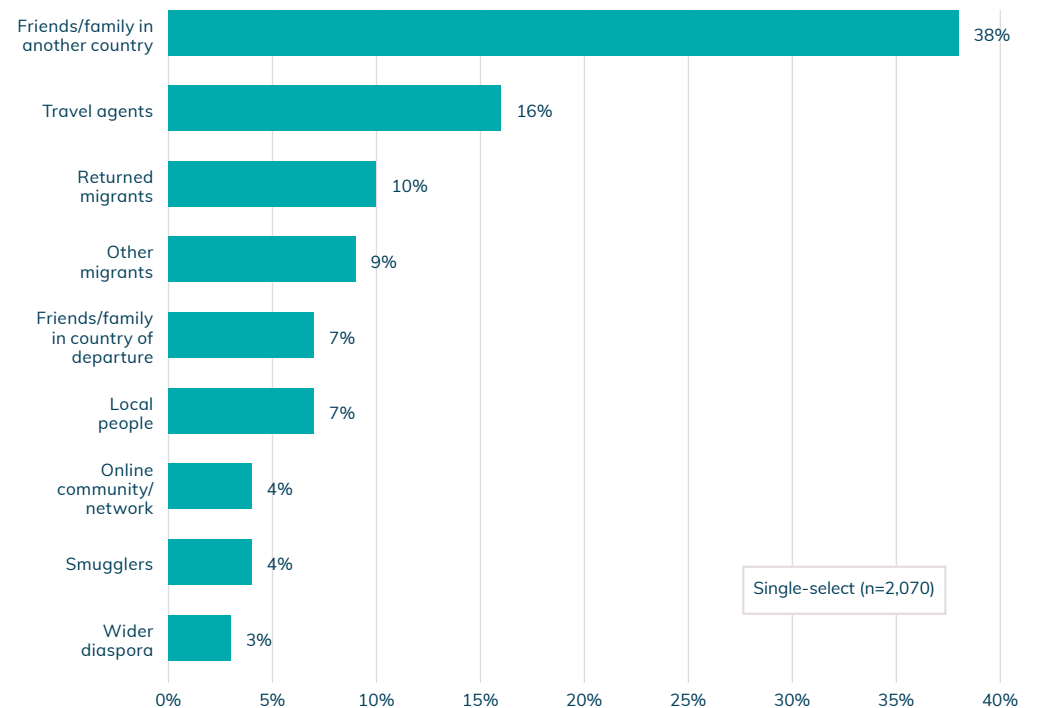
9 Both for before and during the journey, other response options included national government/authorities (2% and 5% respectively), private employment agency (2% ; 1%), NGOs/UN (1% ; 4%), Foreign embassies/consulates (1% ; less than 1%), other (1% ; less than 1%).

Individuals with prior experience abroad are the most reliable sources of information

As sources of information shift along the journey, friends and family in another country consistently stand out as the most reliable. Many of those may include people with prior experience of migration, such as family members and friends in another country (38%), returned migrants (10%), other migrants (9%), and the broader diaspora (3%).

The second most frequently mentioned reliable source of information was travel agents, such as immigration agencies or transport companies, cited by 16%. Smugglers were cited by 4% only but slightly more by those who actually had used the services of one or more smugglers during their journey (12%).

Figure 4. Of all the sources, which was the most reliable overall? Top 9 responses¹⁰



10 Other response options included national government/authorities (less than 1%), private employment agency (less than 1%), NGOs/UN (less than 1%), Foreign embassies/consulates (less than 1%), none (less than 1%), other (1%).

Sources of information and trust networks differ by nationalities

Compared to other nationalities,¹¹ **respondents originally from Benin** more frequently **reported using online platforms** to connect with their community/network and access information at the pre-departure stage (53/189; 28%).¹² This suggests that surveyed migrants from Benin might have better access to online networks and/or be more familiar with using online platforms for information-sharing. **Reliable sources of information were also more diverse among respondents from Benin**, with lower trust in friends and family in another country (55/194; 28%) than for the overall sample, and smaller variation with the next three trusted sources: returned migrants (35/194; 18%), travel agents (32/194; 16%), and other migrants (24/194; 12%).

During the journey, **Nigerians cited smugglers (115/247; 47%) as their third source of information**, after friends and relatives in another country (158/247; 64%) and other migrants (126/247; 51%). This is the highest score across all nationalities.¹³ This pattern is associated with the fact that Nigerians overall reported a higher propensity (53%) to use smugglers during their journey compared to other nationalities.¹⁴ **However, only 8% of Nigerians¹⁵ cited smugglers as their most reliable source of information.**

As surveyed migrants from Côte d'Ivoire advance on their journey, there is a noticeable rise in the use of smugglers to access information. Amongst Ivoirian nationals who accessed information prior to commencing their journey (n=214), merely 7% obtained it from a smuggler. This proportion rises to 22% among Ivoirians who accessed information during their journey (n=182).

11 Compared to Nigerians (39/256; 15%), Burkinabe (27/174; 16%), Ivoirians (35/214; 16%) and Togolese (54/263; 21%).

12 They cited online community and network as their fourth most frequent source of information after family and friends in another country (129/189; 68%), in their country of departure (75/189; 40%) and returned migrants (75/189; 40%).

13 Nigerians more frequently relied on smugglers to obtain information compared to other nationalities such as, for instance, Burkinabe (20/151; 13%) and Togolese (32/235; 14%).

14 Compared to, for instance, Burkinabe (26%) and Togolese (24%) overall.

15 Among Nigerians who access information either before departure or during their journey (n=268).

Interpersonal and digital means of obtaining information dominate

Respondents relied more on direct and interpersonal means of obtaining information.

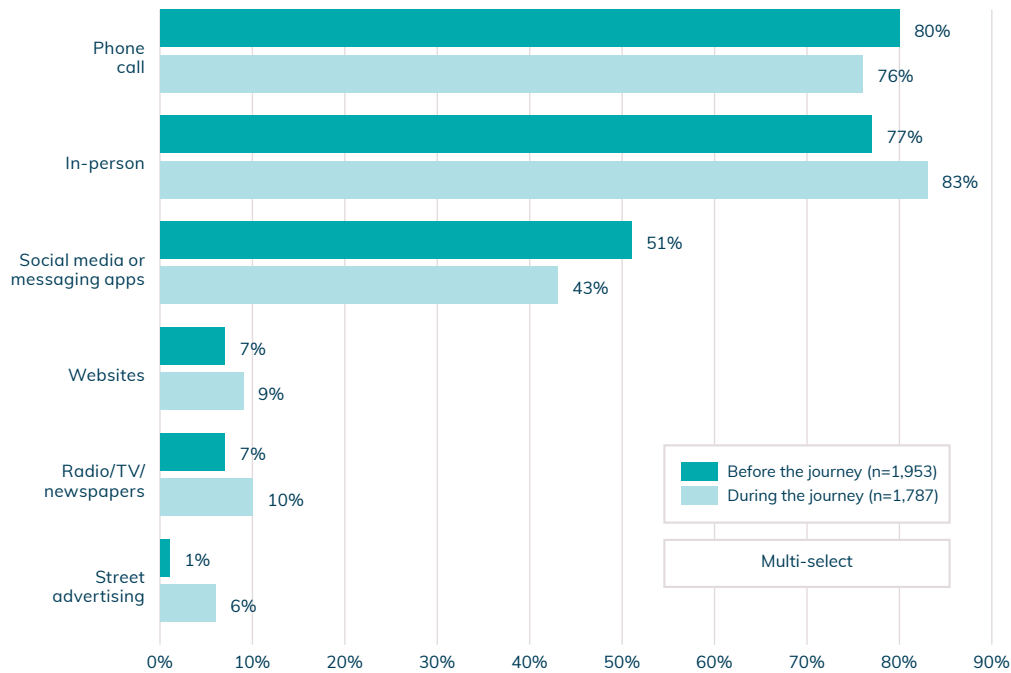
The most frequently used means of accessing information both before and during the journey were through phone calls (80% and 76% respectively) and in-person (77% and 83% respectively). On the other hand, the use of traditional media, websites, and street adverts was relatively limited both at the pre-departure stage (7%, 7%, and 1% respectively) and during the journey (10%, 9%, and 6% respectively). Notably, these are among the main channels used for information campaigns on irregular migration financed by foreign donors.

The use of social media and messaging apps slightly decreases between the pre-departure stage (51%) and during the journey (43%), which could suggest irregular access to internet across the journey (see Figure 5). The highest proportions of respondents who used them at the pre-departure stage were recorded among surveyed migrants from **Benin** (126/189; 67%) and **Togo** (146/263; 56%),¹⁶ but these ratios drop during the journey to 46% (73/158) for Beninese and 41% (97/235) among Togolese.¹⁷

16 The proportions of respondents who used social media and messaging apps before their journey among Burkinabe (n=174), Ivoirians (n=214) and Nigerians (n=256) reached 36%; 46% and 41% respectively.

17 The proportions of respondents who used social media and messaging apps during their journey among Burkinabe (n=151), Ivoirians and Nigerians (n=247) reached 30%; 46% and 33% respectively.

Figure 5. What means did you use to obtain information? Before and during the journey



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 migrants on the move. 4Mi field enumerators are currently collecting data through direct interviews with migrants in Eastern and Southern Africa, North Africa, West Africa, Europe, Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean.

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