Voices of Return: Leveraging the Influence of Returnees in Migration Information Campaigns

PARIM-II

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List of acronyms

AMIF	Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund
AVRR	Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration
BEOE	Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
ERRIN	European Return and Reintegration Network
EU	European Union
EURA	EU Pakistan Readmission Agreement
EURCAP	EURA Capacity building fund
FIA	Federal Investigation Agency
FRC	Facilitation and Reintegration Centre for Pakistani Migrant Workers
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (German development agency)
ICMPD	International Centre for Migration Policy Development
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
IRARA	International Return and Reintegration Assistance
I-SAPS	Institute of Social and Policy Sciences
MaM	Migrants as Messengers
MOPHRD	Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis and Human Resource Development
MRC	Migrant Resource Centre
NADRA	National Database and Registration Authority
NAVTTC	National Vocational and Technical Training Commission
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
OPF	Overseas Pakistanis Foundation
PARIM	Awareness Raising and Information Campaigns on the Risks of Irregular Migration in Pakistan
PKR	Pakistani rupee
RCMS	Returnee Case Management System
SMEDA	Small and Medium Enterprise Development Authority
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UK	United Kingdom
UNHCR	United Nations Refugees Agency
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
USA	United States of America
USD	United States Dollar
WELDO	Women Empowerment, Literacy and Development Organisation

Executive summary

As part of the *Awareness Raising and Information Campaigns on the Risks of Irregular Migration in Pakistan – II (PARIM-II)* project, this report explores the role of returnees in migration decision-making processes and investigates their potential engagement in the design and implementation of migration information and awareness raising campaigns.

Whether forcibly or voluntarily returned, returnees are living testimonials of both the challenges and opportunities associated with migration, and their experiences can significantly influence their community members' perceptions of migration. In this sense, not only can they affect potential migrants' migration intentions and behaviours, but they can also play an important and direct role in the implementation of migration information campaigns. This report explores these pathways of influence on migration decision-making and builds on those conclusions to discuss the potential role of returnees in migration information campaigns. It also takes into account challenges and ethical considerations for engaging returnees in campaigns.

Role of returnees in the migration decision-making process

The mechanisms through which returnees may influence migration decision-making aligns with frameworks that discuss how social networks influence migration decision-making. However, based on our fieldwork, there are some differences between returnees and the rest of social networks in terms of the kind of information and support that the former can provide.

- Social networks play a pivotal role in shaping migration decisions and plans, influencing potential migrants during all stages of migration. However, social networks are really variegated, and the role played by family and friends, the local community, contacts abroad, agents, and returnees is different. Our research reveals that while personal contacts abroad may have a stronger influence on the decision-making phase, instilling the idea of migration on the individual, **returnees in the community can play a more important role during the following phase of migration planning**, to strengthen migration decisions or gather more information on the journey.
- Returnees are generally identified as valuable sources of information, sharing both positive and negative experiences that impact the decision-making process. Probably by virtue of their negative migration experiences and the risks they faced during the journey, **forced returnees from our sample do not seem keen to advice other people on pursuing irregular migration** – and in fact they are not even willing to re-migrate or, if they are, only through legal means. Whether failed attempts at migration and high rates of return migration discourage potential migrants from attempting migration, however, is not clear from our research.
- As part of a broad and variegated social network, **returnees can only influence certain aspects of the decision-making process and the migration plan of potential migrants**. The choice of destination, for example, may be influenced more efficiently by friends and family abroad, rather than by returnees. Similarly, family and friends can provide potential migrants with financial support, while none of the respondents from our sample mentioned receiving any money from returnees at the time of their migration, nor giving any to others contemplating migration. However, returnees might be helpful to provide information on the routes to take and on the ways to enter Europe. Based on our sample, it appears therefore that the support that returnees can provide does not go beyond information and guidance.

- Just like in all social networks, **the degree of influence of returnees' advice may depend not only on the type of information that returnees share with potential migrants, but also on the strength of their relationship**. As potential migrants are exposed to mixed messages and information, they tend to be more influenced from 'positive' stories rather than from warnings and failures, and to follow what they want to hear. Due to the limitations of our sample, it is not possible to demonstrate whether returnees actually dissuaded potential migrants from embarking on irregular journeys. Yet, the strength of the relationship between the returnee and the potential migrant might influence the decision-making process of the latter.

Role of returnees in migration information campaigns

As emerged from our findings, the information that respondents had gathered before starting their migration process was often incomplete, biased, and unreliable. As a result, **their migration journey was longer, riskier, and more expensive than expected, while their overall migration experience was negative, leading to an early return or to a sense of shame and failure when they came back in their community of origin.** The interviews show the need for more and better information on the actual risks and costs of irregular migration, including information on health challenges, risks of kidnapping, duration of the journey, modes of conveyance often used in clandestine journeys, the actual cost of migration, challenges experienced at the destination, the unreliability of agents, and the emotional toll associated with the risky and expensive journey. Given their first-hand migration experience, returnees can indeed provide more reliable and trustworthy information on the whole migration process and add a more direct and impactful emotional connection with the audience. However, it is important to take into consideration some methodological and ethical aspects when engaging returnees in information campaigns:

- **Possibility of engaging with returnees**: While it is relatively easy to find returnees, it is not straightforward that they want to engage in the implementation of migration information campaigns, as they might not feel comfortable in sharing their experiences. Even when returnees accept to participate in the campaign, it is important that their experience is not perceived as a failure, in order not to increase their sense of shame.

- **Level of engagement of returnees**: Campaign participants are generally volunteers that do not receiving any financial contribution, as a testament of their genuine engagement in the campaign and their selfless relationship with their community. However, it is important to reflect on the often-stark economic differences between returnees and campaign organisers.

- **Relationship between returnees and participants**: In order for the campaign to be effective and sustainable, it is important that returnees and participants share the same ethnic, demographic, and religious backgrounds, especially in highly diversified countries like Pakistan. The stronger the relationship, the higher the expected influence on migration decision.

- **Message of the campaign**: Messages should always have the best interest of the target group at their heart. Campaign messages, therefore, should concentrate not only on the negative experiences of returnees but also on more positive stories, and provide correct and reliable information on migration journeys, the rights of migrants in the countries of transit and destination, and legal alternatives to irregular migration.

1. Introduction

In June 2023, a horrific shipwreck in the Mediterranean waters off the coast of Greece made headlines across the globe. The boat, enroute from Libya to Italy, carried more than 750 people on a voyage to reach Europe irregularly, among which 300 people were from Pakistan alone. Only 104 people survived, and the rest, including more than 100 Pakistanis lost their lives at sea.[1]

This event throws light on a pressing matter of the popular trend of irregular migration among Pakistani youth, especially towards countries in the European Union. Pakistan has repeatedly ranked among the top 10 countries of origin for irregular border crossings into EU, according to Frontex statistics with 3.9% of the total irregular border crossings (331,400) into EU originating from Pakistan in 2022.[2] These irregular movements are explained in part by the ripe culture of migration in certain parts of the country, but also the ever-restricting visa regimes in destination countries, which make legal mobility inaccessible for many, economic and political volatility, and individual aspirations and circumstances.[3] Regardless of the reasons of irregular migration, there is no denying the risks and dangers these migrants often experience in attempting to reach Europe irregularly in efforts to avoid stringent border control measures, as is evident from the tragic incident in 2023. As became apparent through talks with the survivors and families of those who lost their lives in the subsequent media stories, and studies conducted with potential Pakistani migrants, many young migrants embark on these journeys with limited information about the challenges enroute and their rights as migrants, as well as the legality of their journey since resort to using migrant smugglers/agents for their journeys.[4]

In efforts to curb irregular migration attempts and promote safer migration, there has been an increased interest and investment in migration information campaigns in the last two decades by the development sector and donor community, largely sponsored by the governments of the receiving countries. This increased interest has also caught the attention of migration scholars to explore and better understand the need, mechanisms, impacts, outcomes, and ethics of migration information campaigns focusing on potential or in-transit migrants, including critique on the underlying objectives of such interventions. Much of the scholarly work on the topic draws on literature related to migration decision-making to understand how decisions of irregular migrants are made and the role information plays in those decisions, as well as literature on behavioural change through communication that focuses on how to make campaigns impactful to achieve desired outcomes through the intervention.[5]

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[1] Christina Goldbaum and Salman Masood, "Pakistan Declares Day of Mourning for Migrant Ship Disaster Off Greece," *The New York Times*, June 19, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/19/world/asia/pakistan-mourning-greece-migrant-ship.html.

[2] FRONTEX, "Irregular EU Border Crossings by Nationality in 2022," 2022, https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/promoting-our-european-way-life/statistics-migration-europe_en#irregular-border-crossings.
Frontex's figures include people who cross borders several times and so are counted several times.

[3] Ayesha Qaisrani, Samar Rashid, and Yunas Samad, "Migration-Relevant Policies in Pakistan," MIGNEX Background Paper, 2022, https://www.mignex.org/pak.

[4] Shah Meer Baloch, "Greek Shipwreck Does Little to Dissuade Pakistanis Leaving for Europe," *The Guardian*, July 3, 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/jul/03/greek-shipwreck-does-little-to-dissuade-pakistanis-leaving-for-europe; Ayesha Qaisrani, Katharina Hahn-Schaur, and Maegan Hendow, "Irregular Migration Dynamics from Pakistan and the Role of Information Campaigns: PARIM Final Report" (Vienna: International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), 2021).

[5] Ceri Oeppen, "'Leaving Afghanistan! Are You Sure?' European Efforts to Deter Potential Migrants through Information Campaigns," *Human Geography* 9, no. 2 (2016): 57–68, https://doi.org/10.1177/194277861600900206; Jasper Tjaden and Felipe Alexander Dunsch, "The Effect of Peer-

The combination of these two fields of study also allows an in-depth understanding of how information provision can be made effective in order to contribute to well-informed migration decision-making.

In this field, one theme that is increasingly attracting the interest of scholars, donors, and campaign implementers is the role of the 'messenger' in migration information campaigns, in addition to focusing on the content and framing of the message, and channels of communication used. Evidence suggests that potential migrants pay more heed to information received through trusted sources, usually friends and family, either in the diaspora or returnees within their communities.[6] This is backed by numerous studies that show the importance of social networks in influencing migration decision-making and facilitating the process.[7] In an attempt to tap on this link, there is an increased focus in campaign designs to engage with returnees and diaspora members as messengers in migration information campaigns, however other than a few recent publications on the topic, there is limited literature exploring this particular link.[8] The expectation is that potential migrants would give more weightage to messages received from those who have experienced the process of migration.

Based on the importance of the choice of messengers used in a campaign, this report contributes to the project *Awareness Raising and Information Campaigns on the Risks of Irregular Migration in Pakistan – II (PARIM-II)*. PARIM-II builds on the findings and experiences of its predecessor project (titled PARIM-I) that focused on developing a balanced migration information campaign targeted towards potential irregular migrants in Pakistan. As part of PARIM-I, the role of diaspora members as messengers was explored.[9] While diaspora members can be effective sources of information in campaigns, survey conducted under PARIM-I showed that among potential migrants in Pakistan, reliance on returnees was much higher than on diaspora members for migration related information. As many as 76% of the sample size mentioned acquiring migration-related information from returnees in their community. Drawing on this key finding, deeper exploration on understanding the role of returnees in migration decision-making is envisaged under PARIM-II.

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to-Peer Risk Information on Potential Migrants – Evidence from a Randomized Controlled Trial in Senegal," *World Development* 145 (September 2021): 105488, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2021.105488; Sandra Morgenstern, "Theoretical Models and Empirical Results Supporting Migration Information Campaigns. Background Note for the PARIM Project." (Vienna: ICMPD, 2021).

[6] Jasper Tjaden, "Assessing the Impact of Awareness- Raising Campaigns on Potential Migrants – What We Have Learned so Far," in *Migration in West and North Africa and across the Mediterranean*, ed. F. Fargues and M. Rango (Geneva: IOM, 2020), 426–34; Optimity Advisors and Seefar, *How West African Migrants Engage with Migration Information En-Route to Europe* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2017); Seefar, "3E Impact. Ethical, Engaged & Effective. Running Communications on Irregular Migration from Kos to Kandahar" (SEEFAR, 2018).

[7] Yordanos Seifu Estifanos, *Social Networks, Dreams and Risks: Ethiopian Irregular Migrants into South Africa* (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa and Social Development Policy Division, 2017); Tjaden and Dunsch, "The Effect of Peer-to-Peer Risk Information on Potential Migrants – Evidence from a Randomized Controlled Trial in Senegal"; Jacob Townsend and Christel Oomen, "Before the Boat: Understanding the Migrant Journey," 2015, 1–26; IOM, "Comprehensive Profile of Pakistani Returnees 2016," 2016; Kara Somerville, *Strategic Migrant Network Building and Information Sharing: Understanding Migrant Pioneers in Canada* (IOM, 2011).

[8] Felipe Alexander Dunsch, Jasper Tjaden, and William Quiviger, "Migrants as Messengers: The Impact of Peer-to-Peer Communication on Potential Migrants in Senegal" (Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2019); Tjaden and Dunsch, "The Effect of Peer-to-Peer Risk Information on Potential Migrants – Evidence from a Randomized Controlled Trial in Senegal"; Seefar, "3E Impact. Ethical, Engaged & Effective. Running Communications on Irregular Migration from Kos to Kandahar."

[9] Ayesha Qaisrani and Jelena Jokic, "Engaging Diasporas in Information Campaigns on Migration" (Vienna, 2021).

The main motivation of this report is to identify not only the role of returnees in migration decision-making, but also understanding the best engagement mechanisms for returnees in migration information campaigns in an ethical manner. Through desk research and interviews with returnees, this report develops the theoretical and empirical justification of whether engaging returnees in information campaigns is worthwhile. Findings of this report will contribute to the development of the campaign and will guide how best to engage returnees in the PARIM migration information campaign in Pakistan.

The report is structured as follows: Chapter 2 gives a summary of trends and patterns of return migration in Pakistan, including general characteristics of returnees. The chapter also presents an overview of the institutional and policy landscape in Pakistan in relation to return and reintegration. Chapter 3 describes the methodology adopted for developing this research report. In Chapter 4, the linkage between returnees and migration decision-making is explored, both conceptually and through evidence from the field. Chapter 5 then links these findings to how returnees can be effectively engaged in migration information campaigns. Finally, Chapter 6 draws conclusions based on the above discussion, and offers practical recommendations for ethically and effectively engaging returnees in migration information campaigns.

2. Contextual overview: Return patterns of Pakistani migrants

2.1. Introduction

This chapter aims at providing a brief overview of the return and reintegration situation in Pakistan. Drawing from the data available, the first section will discuss the main patterns and trends of return migration to Pakistan, exploring in particular the characteristics of returnees, their main motivations to return their country, and the nature of return. The next section will look more in depth at the reintegration system in Pakistan, investigating the main institutional structures and services available for returnees and analysing the effectiveness of support measures available. Drawing from literature and field data, the chapter will conclude by discussing the main reintegration challenges that returnees in Pakistan face.

2.2. Return patterns and trends

As noted by Erdal, trends and patterns of return of Pakistani migrants are diverse, ranging from temporary visits to long-term or permanent return, from voluntary to forced return, depending on the personal circumstances and legal status of the individual.[10] In absence of a national registry of returnees, it is challenging to draw conclusions on the number of returnees every year, along with information on the area of return, returnees' socioeconomic, skill and qualification background, as well as the overall rate of return. Information on returnees is drawn from small scale studies, which may only offer a glimpse into the broader trends.

In response to large-scale returns experienced with the onset of COVID-19, the Government of Pakistan launched an online self-registration portal for collecting data on return migrants housed under the Overseas Employment Corporation of the Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis and Human Resource Development (MOPHRD). As of October 2021, the portal had a total of 94,000 registrations. An ICMPD study conducted in 2021 showed that the average age of returnees registered on this database was 36 years.[11] Moreover, records for return during COVID-19 show that most returnees were from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, including UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar. Most of these registered returnees hailed from the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, followed by Punjab.

While there is a lack of robust data on the total number of return migrants, some insight can be drawn from numbers based on those returning through assisted return programmes from various countries, and those forcibly returned (deported). According to Government of Pakistan's data of 2022, some 34,786 Pakistani migrants were forcibly returned in the year 2022.[12] However, long-term annual figures on forcibly returned Pakistanis are not publicly available from Pakistani sources. EU's database shows that between 2013-2022, about 171,665 Pakistanis have been ordered to leave the EU territory, with the highest number in 2022 (25,445).[13] High rejection rates for Pakistanis' asylum applications in the EU are one of the main reasons for removal orders. Between 2016-2022, rejection rates for Pakistanis

[10] Marta Bivand Erdal, "Pakistan as a Return Migration Destination," Policy Briefs (PRIO, 2015), https://cdn.cloud.prio.org/files/fb1e6d49-f74e-41fb-b621-3b6b0922602d/Erdal%20-%20Pakistan%20as%20a%20Return%20Migration%20Destination%20PRIO%20Policy%20Brief%2013-2015.pdf?inline=true.

[11] ICMPD, "New Trends on Return and Remigration in the COVID Era? Evidence from Bangladesh and Pakistan," 2022.

[12] Express Tribune, "'34,786 Illegal' Pakistani Migrants Deported in 2022," August 3, 2023, https://tribune.com.pk/story/2429066/34786-illegal-pakistani-migrants-deported-in-2022.

[13] Eurostat, "Third Country Nationals Ordered to Leave - Annual Data (Rounded)" (Eurostat Data Browser, 2022), https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/migr_eiord__custom_7822327/default/table?lang=en.

ranged from 79% to 92% according to the European Union Agency for Asylum.[14] Despite the removal orders, Eurostat also reports that in 2022, only 1,995 returned following the order to leave.[15] However, aggregate data for the EU-27 is not segregated for forced and voluntary returns. Similarly, in 2022 Pakistan ranked among the top five countries of origin with about 1,920 Pakistani returned to Pakistan through IOM's Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) programme.[16]

The high returns may also likely be resulting from Pakistan's inclusion as one of the countries in the Pilot Project within the Fast-Track Border Procedures framed by the 2015 EU Turkey Deal. The fast-track procedure was designed to expedite the processing of applicants with low recognition probabilities for international protection, such as Pakistan. This involves restricting them from mainland EU access and accelerating the procedure in hotspots for refugees and migrants from countries with low recognition rates. The pilot project aimed at issuing first-instance decisions within 25 days, leading to quick processing, interviews, rejections, and deportations. Applicants who got rejected had only five days to appeal or choose voluntary return with IOM assistance. Those who appealed the decision did not receive any assistance from IOM and were returned to Türkiye, from where they were eventually deported back to Pakistan.[17]

With large data gaps on return migration,[18] drawing on characteristics and specificities of return migrants is not straightforward. One of the only surveys on Pakistani returnees conducted by IOM offers a snapshot of those who returned from the EU. According to the Returnee Longitudinal Survey (2021) based on a sample of 417 returnees from Greece, Germany and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the profile of Pakistani returnees matches the profile of migrants – they are mostly young men from Punjab province. The majority fall within the age group of 25-34 years, with most having up to secondary school education.[19] While most surveys of potential migrants and Pakistani migrants show that the ratio of married and unmarried migrants are close to 50%,[20] the percentage of married individuals is higher in the profile of returnees (65%).

Despite being part of the AVRR programme which supports returnees reintegration process, the majority of returnees in the sample reported insufficient income as a major personal challenge. Income status shows that the majority (38%) were earning between USD 65-130 per month when interviewed, with about 19% earning between USD 131-195 per month. This is also validated by the fact that at the time of the interview, 21% were unemployed and looking for jobs. About 57% reported to be self-

[14] EUAA, "Latest Asylum Trends - Annual Overview 2022," 2023, https://euaa.europa.eu/latest-asylum-trends-annual-overview-2022#:$\sim$:text=The%20EU%2B. The recognition rate for Afghans in Europe was 54% in 2022.

[15] Eurostat, "Third Country Nationals Returned Following an Order to Leave - Annual Data (Rounded)," 2022, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/migr_eirtn__custom_7822431/default/table?lang=en.

[16] IOM, "Return and Reintegration: Key Highlights 2022," 2022, https://publications.iom.int/books/return-and-reintegration-key-highlights-2022.

[17] Saima Hassan, Interview: Asylum procedure based on nationality rather than on merit – the situation of Pakistani asylum applicants under the EU Turkey Deal, Print, December 8, 2017, https://ecre.org/interview-asylum-procedure-based-on-nationality-rather-than-on-merit-the-situation-of-pakistani-asylum-applicants-under-the-eu-turkey-deal/.

[18] See Abdur Rehman Cheema, Nihan Rafique, and Faisal Abbas, "Migration Governance in Pakistan: Institutional Challenges and Data Gaps," *International Migration Review*, October 16, 2023, https://doi.org/10.1177/01979183231204013.

[19] IOM, "Snapshot Report: Pakistani Returnees from Greece, Germany and Bosnia and Herzegovina," 2021.

[20] Ayesha Qaisrani, Katharina Hahn-Schaur, and Maegan Hendow, "Irregular Migration Dynamics from Pakistan and the Role of Information Campaigns: PARIM Final Report" (Vienna, 2021); IOM, "Comprehensive Profile of Pakistani Potential Migrants 2016," 2016; IOM, "Snapshot of 2018 Arrivals in Europe from Pakistan," 2018.

employed or in business. Most of the respondents were engaged in the agriculture sector on return (42%), followed by wholesale/retail trade.[21]

Considering that these economic issues coincide with their main drivers of migration in the first place (reported as unemployment, dissatisfaction over income, and lack of hope in a future in Pakistan), 21% of the returnees in the sample reported intentions of re-migrating.[22] This trend is also confirmed by the FIA representative that we interviewed (I4, male), who stated that the political and economic conditions in Pakistan seem to have stimulated a renewed interest in migration, with a notable surge in people attempting to migrate again through both regular and irregular means. The main factors contributing to the decision of re-migration are also the perceived higher income levels in intended destination countries and a lack of security.

Although quantitatively small, the data collected by Migrant Resource Centres (MRCs) through their airport reception centre in Islamabad (as part of a pilot project supported by the European Union Delegation in Pakistan) can provide relevant insights.[23] Information was collected for 87 forced returnees at the Islamabad International Airport who were provided with reception support in 2023 after they expressed their desire to speak with the MRC staff. Returnees were predominantly male (except one female), and in the age bracket of 18-35 years. Greece (n=38) and Germany (n=20) were the top countries where they were returning from, but other countries such as Cyprus, Spain, Austria, and Italy were also noted. A considerable majority (n=55) hailed from Punjab, mostly from the districts of Gujranwala, Sialkot, Mandi Bahauddin, and Gujrat, while the rest were from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, including the districts of Mardan, Swabi, and Peshawar. Almost all individuals cited economic factors as the reason for their migration (n=78), while the remaining cited a mix of security-related and social factors.

Moreover, insights from interviews with stakeholders for this research also present some indications of the characteristics of returnees. Stakeholders identify that most of the returnees originally belong to migration hotspot districts in Punjab, such as Gujranwala, Gujrat, Mandi Bahauddin, Jhelum, and Lahore. High returns have also been noted for individuals from Azad Kashmir such as Mirpur, and from tribal areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Based on the information of those who were returned through the IRARA programme (approx. 1000 since the start of the programme), the stakeholder shared that most returnees tend to be young, between the ages of 18 and 25, with up to secondary level education. Some of them may be skilled, but they often lack professional certifications to show their qualifications. Another stakeholder shared that, in some cases, returnees are younger than 18 years of age; however, they are often not the target group for reintegration services until they are 18 (I2, male). Moreover, stakeholders also noted that returns from the Gulf and the Middle East are usually at the end of their job contracts, even if after short-term (2-3 years), while returnees from Europe and the UK as well as those intercepted along the route in Iran or Türkiye are mostly forcibly repatriated.

2.3. Policy and institutional framework on return and reintegration in Pakistan

Policy mechanism related to return and reintegration of migrant workers in Pakistan is in the process of being streamlined but has been quite fragmented up until now. While the importance of devising a comprehensive return and reintegration strategy can be sensed in the recent policy rhetoric, on-ground impact so far has been limited in the absence of a harmonised approach to reintegration of returned migrants. In absence of a formal national migration policy, matters related to return are dealt

[21] IOM, "Snapshot Report: Pakistani Returnees from Greece, Germany and Bosnia and Herzegovina," 2021.
[22] IOM.
[23] Data is not publicly available but was provided by MRC Islamabad for this research.

with in a piecemeal way. **Policy narratives and discourse on return migration varies, not only on the basis of the nature of return (permanent vs. temporary) but also on the legal status of the return migrants in the countries they are returning or returned from**.[24] Efforts in this direction have picked up pace primarily because of the change in policies in Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries in the late 2010s pushing their labour market towards nationalisation, hence putting pressure on jobs available for migrant workers.[25] The onset of COVID-19 put the existing system for managing return and reintegration to test. Thousands of Pakistanis witnessed their contracts being terminated and had to return. This prompted the government to seriously consider a return and reintegration programme to manage the influx of returning migrants.

Pakistan does not have an official policy on migration but has a rich institutional infrastructure guiding the promotion of labour migration and has legal stipulations to prevent human trafficking and migrant smuggling. A draft policy titled 'National Emigration and Welfare Policy for Overseas Pakistanis' was developed in 2018 with technical support and expertise from ICMPD; however, its ratification experienced some delays in the previous government. The matter has again been taken up by the current interim government, and it is likely that the policy may be approved in the upcoming months. According to a policy brief, the national policy draft included return and reintegration as important pillars.[26] In the context of labour migration, the policy brief highlighted that, in **view of the weak reintegration support available to returning migrants, improving, and expanding reintegration mechanisms was a key priority**. The draft policy emphasises three main considerations for effective management and reintegration of returning migrants: i) data collection; ii) referral pathways for returning migrants for special services, and iii) devising dedicated services in collaboration with financial institutions and enterprise development authorities to leverage on the entrepreneurial skills and savings of returnees.

For data collection, the policy stipulates the responsibility on the Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis and Human Resource Development (MOPHRD) to liaise with all other relevant government bodies (such as Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Interior, National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA), Federal Investigation Agency (FIA), and Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment (BEOE). For devising a referral pathway for services, Overseas Pakistanis Foundation (OPF) is appointed the prime coordinating body. MOPHRD is also tasked to explore partnerships with Small and Medium Enterprise Development Authority (SMEDA), private employers, industries, and financial institutions to create economic opportunities for returnees. **Despite the delays in approval of the policy, these stakeholders are active in strengthening return and reintegration services in Pakistan**, as depicted by various mechanisms discussed below. In addition, several other policy documents also include references to the need for reintegration of returnees in the Pakistani economy, such as the Labour Policy 2010 and the Punjab Labour Policy.[27]

In response to an increased trend of irregular migration from Pakistan especially in the last two decades, the high rejection rate of Pakistani asylum applications, and the consequent pattern of

[24] Marta Bivand Erdal, "Pakistan as a Return Migration Destination," Policy Briefs, 2015.
[25] Rafia Zakaria, "The New Kingdom," *Dawn*, July 7, 2021.
[26] Silk Routes Facility, "National Emigration and Welfare Policy for Overseas Pakistanis: Processes, Challenges, and Responses for Action," 2020.
[27] Beelisha Weeraratne, Harini Weerasekera, and Bandara, Thilini, "Comprehensive Mapping and Assessment of Reintegration Measures in South Asian Colombo Process Member States" (International Labour Organization, 2022), Comprehensive Mapping and Assessment of Reintegration Measures in South Asian Colombo Process Member States.

voluntary and forced return of the irregular migrants, **there has also been a growing interest by destination regions and countries to encourage and support readmission, return and reintegration mechanisms in Pakistan**.[28] The national stakeholders mentioned above have been coordinating with international actors including the EU and its Member States, the Australian government, as well as international organisations such as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), United Nations Refugees Agency (UNHCR), and International Organisation for Migration (IOM) to deal with return migration and introduce reintegration measures.

In general, policy narrative in Pakistan often encourages the (often temporary) return of high skilled Pakistani diaspora to come back and contribute to the socioeconomic development of the home country.[29] This is particularly evident in the education, health, and IT sector. In that sense, a brain circulation model is often promoted through various schemes and initiatives that call on the qualified diaspora to return temporarily to invest in human capital and developmental initiatives by offering them lucrative financial incentives or high-profile advisory positions in the government.[30]

On the other hand, return of low skilled labour migrants, as well as **those returning through voluntary and enforced repatriation programmes due to issues in legality of stay are only recently gaining policy attention.** For the forcibly returned Pakistanis, a verification of their documents is conducted by the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) on arrival in Pakistan. If they are found to be in possession of forged or fraudulent paperwork, they face criminal charges. At the Taftan border with Iran, Pakistan has also established a victim reception centre in collaboration with UNODC. Victims of trafficking who are deported are provided with shelter and assistance to return to their respective districts, and they are engaged in attempts to identify smugglers and traffickers.[31]

Return mechanisms are shaped by Pakistan's agreements with other countries/regions on readmissions, and support and facilitation of international organisations and development agencies, which also determines the reintegration support that these return migrants are offered. Pakistan is part of IOM's Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) programme. For over a decade, the AVRR programme has been offering return assistance to Pakistanis willing to migrate back to Pakistan, and provides reintegration support.[32] Between 2015 and 2021, IOM has supported 4,618 migrants through the AVRR facility for migrants, majority of whom returned from Greece, the UK, Switzerland, Thailand, and Libya.[33] In 2022, Pakistan ranked at number ten with about 1,920 returnees who received AVRR support to return to Pakistan.[34] Through this IOM programme, Pakistan is also involved in receiving reintegration assistance for returnees, and it is also receiving international support by the EU and IOM to improve its reception facilities.

For reintegration, a more 'welfare' approach is applied for returnees by offering them psychosocial and economic reintegration support on their return to Pakistan. **The main governmental institution responsible for providing referrals to reintegration services is the OPF** which partners with entities

[28] Ayesha Qaisrani and Jelena Jokic, "Engaging Diasporas in Information Campaigns on Migration" (Vienna, 2021).
[29] Ayesha A Qaisrani, "Reaching out, Inviting in: Pakistan's Approach to Diaspora Engagement," *Migration and Development*, August 12, 2020, 1–20, https://doi.org/10.1080/21632324.2020.1797457.
[30] Silk Routes Facility, "National Emigration and Welfare Policy for Overseas Pakistanis: Processes, Challenges, and Responses for Action."
[31] Nasra Shah et al., "Pakistan Migration Report," 2020, https://www.gids.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Migration-Report-2020-Complete-Grayscale-1.pdf.
[32] IOM Pakistan, "Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration," n.d.
[33] IOM, "Snapshot Report: Pakistani Returnees from Greece, Germany and Bosnia and Herzegovina," 2021.
[34] IOM, "Return and Reintegration Key Highlights 2022" (Geneva, 2023).

such as the Small and Medium Enterprise Development Authority (SMEDA) and National Vocational and Technical Training Commission (NAVTTC), as well as international development agencies such as the German development agency GIZ to offer support to returnees for their economic engagement back in the country.[35] As part of its mandate, OPF is responsible for providing housing, education, and medical assistance to migrants as well as returnees. OPF operates special schools that offer preferential quota for children of migrants and returnees, and a number of housing schemes in areas with high trends of out-migration, allocate a quota for property investments for migrants and returnees. Moreover, all migrants going through regular channels are registered with life insurance and are generally eligible for the national old age pension scheme if they contribute towards it.[36]

In 2018, a pilot project titled '**Facilitation and Reintegration Centre for Pakistani Migrant Workers' (FRCs)** was initiated within the auspices of the OPF[37] with the technical expertise of GIZ. The FRC project proposal referred to return migrants as those who: i) come back voluntarily to Pakistan on the completion of their tenure; ii) return due to personal or family reasons; iii) face crisis-like situation; iv) return due to job market shrinkage; and v) are repatriated or deported.[38] Currently, there are two operational FRCs: one in Lahore and one in Islamabad. The idea for the FRC is to serve as a 'one-stop-shop' to address all the needs of returning migrants for their economic and to some degree, social reintegration, into the community. The FRC is tasked with collecting data on return migrants, carry out market trend analysis, disseminate relevant information and signpost returnees to services related to gainful employment (in Pakistan and abroad) and entrepreneurship.

With the onset of COVID-19, as a significant number of Pakistani labour migrants got stuck or returned to Pakistan, repatriation and reintegration of returnees took centre-stage in policy discussions. MOPHRD also initiated the documentation and registration of returnees to create a database, determining their profiles and skills in order to provide relevant services for their reintegration. This task was delegated to the Overseas Employment Corporation under the MOPHRD which developed an online portal for registration of returnees.

According to an ICMPD study conducted in late 2021, the database held information for 94,000 returnees at that time.[39] However, as noted in the report, this number was not a representation of the actual number of the returnees, as it only included information of those who self-registered themselves. According to one stakeholder, the database was designed to serve as a basis for a national referral mechanism for reintegration support. It was developed with support from IOM and ILO and had relevant organisations as key partners such as FIA, social welfare, child and women protection agencies, and shelter homes (I1, male). While not covered under the emergency COVID-19 social protection scheme,[40] a number of programmes were introduced at the time for the economic and, to a smaller extent, social reintegration of returnees. These included an effort to guide and counsel returnees about employment prospects and jobs in Pakistan and abroad, investment in skilling and re-

[35] Overseas Pakistanis Foundation (OPF), "Pilot Project: Establishment of Facilitation and Reintegration Centre for Pakistani Migrant Workers," 2019.
[36] Weeraratne, Weerasekera, and Bandara, Thilini, "Comprehensive Mapping and Assessment of Reintegration Measures in South Asian Colombo Process Member States."
[37] OPF has the responsibility to provide legal assistance to returned migrants, particularly in relation to violation of financial commitment on the employers' end.
[38] Overseas Pakistanis Foundation (OPF), "Pilot Project: Establishment of Facilitation and Reintegration Centre for Pakistani Migrant Workers," 2019.
[39] ICMPD, "New Trends on Return and Remigration in the COVID Era? Evidence from Bangladesh and Pakistan."
[40] Criteria for eligibility to Emergency Cash Grant excluded people with a biometric National ID card, and a passport – both conditions making migrant workers ineligible for the scheme.

skilling of migrants through the joint venture between OPF and GIZ's Pakistan-Germany Facilitation and Reintegration Centre (PGFRC), and integration of returnees into the national entrepreneurship scheme called Kamyaab Jawaan Programme, which offered seed loans for initiating small business ventures. Specific training programmes focusing on upskilling or entrepreneurship for both forced and voluntary returnees have also been created and implemented by technical and vocational training institutes in collaboration with the NAVTCC and the Ministry of Federal Education. According to a representative of one such institute, the Hazza Institute, their programmes have provided training and certificates to about 1800 returnees, while other 40-50,000 people are expected to be trained under the Recognition of Prior Learning scheme in Saudi Arabia, as a response to this country's decision to only accept skilled individuals as of January 1st, 2025 (I5, male).

In addition, **FIA checkpoints at border entries also deal with returning migrants, with specific mechanisms for deportees**. Depending on the status of the returnee, the FIA refers them to relevant government bodies. For instance, those who are intercepted at borders or international checkpoints or deported based on expiration of valid visas are sent home and offered financial, psychological, or medical support (I4, male), while those are deported based on forged documents are sent to Anti-Human Trafficking Centres for further inquiry.[41] More recently, FIA has entered into an agreement with two civil society organisations (CSOs), Akhuwat Foundation and the Allahwala Trust, to facilitate services for the forcibly returned such as provision of food and shelter, as well as programmes for psychological and economic rehabilitation.[42]

Besides government departments and development agencies, **the non-profit sector in Pakistan is also an integral partner in providing reception and reintegration support to returning migrants.** Often, they work directly as partners with international agencies as their implementing arms. Pakistan has been a beneficiary of programmes supported by the European Return and Reintegration Network (ERRIN) under the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF). ERRIN is a consortium of 15 European countries[43] which facilitates the return and reintegration of migrants who return from Europe. ERRIN operates in Pakistan through its local service provider called Women Empowerment, Literacy and Development Organisation (WELDO), which is a non-profit in Pakistan. Eligibility criteria for ERRIN support include the requirement that the returnee must have returned from one of the 15 partner countries and a verification from the respective authority. The programme was open to voluntary and non-voluntary returnees, including asylum seekers, refused asylum seekers, regular and irregular migrants, unaccompanied minors, and other vulnerable persons. The services available to them included social, legal and medical support, housing support, schooling and language assistance, job placement support, technical and vocational training, business start-up assistance, sign posting, and customised support to vulnerable groups as per their needs.[44]

WELDO is also working in collaboration with FRONTEX under its Joint Reintegration Services programme, which also aims at providing returning Pakistani migrants from EU member states with reception and reintegration assistance or up to 12 months after arriving back in Pakistan. With the UK Government, WELDO implements several projects which include services and facilities similar to the

[41] UNODC and FIA, "Inspector Irfan Abdul Nabi, Incharge Immigration and Anti Human Smuggling at FIA Taftan Border," 2020, https://www.unodc.org/pakistan/en/stories/fia---inspector-irfan-abdul-nabi--incharge-immigration-and-anti-human-smuggling-at-fia-taftan-border.html.
[42] Dawn, "FIA Liaises with NGOs to Help Deportees," December 19, 2020.
[43] Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom.
[44] WELDO, "ERRIN Reintegration Programme for Returnee Migrants," n.d.

ERRIN programme but only limited to migrants returning voluntarily.[45] Additionally, the UK government also implements the International Return and Reintegration Assistance (IRARA) programme in Pakistan that facilitates the return and reintegration of those unauthorised to stay in the UK and includes non-voluntary returnees too.[46] According to the IRARA representative interviewed for this research, the programme used to include returnees from Europe, but now focuses on returnees from the UK. The stakeholder further elaborated that as part of the IRARA programme, 180 Pakistanis were returned in 2023 since the launch of the new phase, but forecasted estimates suggest 1000 annual returns going forward. Services offered by IRARA include financial support for skill development, job placement, financial support for business start-up, support services for medical assistance, financial support for educational pursuits within Pakistan, mentorship programmes etc (I1, male). A number of other civil society organisations are also active in this field, often through international support. A prominent example is Youth Employability Network (YEN) Pakistan, which implements return and reintegration programmes through international support, including in collaboration with the Swedish migration agency, ILO, IOM, GIZ, Care International, etc. Services offered under these programmes are similar to the others discussed above, such as business development training, skills development training, cash-grants, and psycho-social support etc. (I2, male).

2.3.1. Return and readmission agreements

For the EU, Pakistan is a key migration partner in the region due to its position as a source as well as a transit country for many migrants making their way to the EU irregularly. Returns from the EU to Pakistan are governed under **the EU-Pakistan Readmission Agreement (EURA),** initially signed in 2009 and entered into force in 2010, after a long negotiation process that started in the early 2000s.[47] This agreement sets the foundation for the 'principle of systematic return of Pakistani nationals residing without authorisation in the Member State and vice versa'.[48] To implement this Agreement, a Joint Readmission Committee was created with representation from both Pakistani state and EU. The Agreement included an undertaking by the Pakistani government to also accept third country nationals and stateless persons if they had a valid visa for Pakistan or entered the EU borders unlawfully directly from Pakistan (not applicable if only transited through an airport in Pakistan). However, this return of Third Country Nationals clause was a point of contention for Pakistan, especially in relation to the return of Afghan nationals to Pakistan who were unlawfully residing in the EU. This even led to the suspension of the Agreement briefly in 2016, after which a new agreement was signed.[49] Some analysts have stated that EURA does not offer any favourable outcome or benefit to Pakistan as the EU has not offered any visa liberalisation incentives as offered in readmission agreements with other countries.[50]

As part of the EURA and its capacity building facility (EURCAP), the EU and its member states have been supporting the development and implementation of a digital Readmission Case Management System in Pakistan since 2016 to facilitate the flow of information for managing return flows. It was

[45] WELDO, "Our Projects," accessed October 4, 2023, https://weldo.org/our-project/.
[46] UK Government, "IRARA," accessed October 4, 2023, https://www.irara.org/wp-content/uploads/errin-leaflet-pakistan-english.pdf.
[47] Orlane Janvier, "Negotiations in Times of Crisis: The EU-Turkey and EU-Pakistan Readmission Agreements and 'Reversed Conditionality'" (Brugge, 2023).
[48] European Commission, "Agreement with Pakistan on Readmission," EUR-Lex, 2010, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/summary/agreement-with-pakistan-on-readmission.html#:~:text=Pakistan.
[49] Amir Wasim, "Understanding on Deportation Issue Reached with EU," *Dawn*, February 8, 2016.
[50] Kim Gillade, "Readmission Agreements Concluded by the EU" (Gent, 2011); Janvier, "Negotiations in Times of Crisis: The EU-Turkey and EU-Pakistan Readmission Agreements and 'Reversed Conditionality.'"

launched in 2018 through the support of the Danish government, technical facilitation by the IOM in close partnership with NADRA and diplomatic missions in EU member states.[51]

More recently, there have been discussions between the EU and Pakistan to strengthen collaboration on migration matters at a regional level through the launch of a **Comprehensive Dialogue on Migration and Mobility**, in which return, readmissions and reintegration feature as key components.[52] In addition, Pakistan also has signed a number of bilateral readmission agreements. Pakistan and Norway signed a readmissions agreement in 2017,[53] and in 2021, Pakistan and the UK entered into a readmissions agreement for Pakistanis staying unlawfully in the UK.[54]

Pakistan is also a member of the Budapest Process, an interregional dialogue on migration governance spanning countries in Europe, including the Western Balkans, to Central and West Asia. Since 2017, return and reintegration have found centre-stage in the Budapest Process dialogues and developments. In 2019, the topic was included in its political declaration and action plan to strengthen member states' capacities for developing and implementing measures for dignified return and sustainable reintegration, which led to the development of a roadmap for action. The roadmap covers three major thematic areas. These include: i) effective returns management; ii) post-arrival assistance and referral mechanisms; and iii) sustainable reintegration, and it serves as a guiding document 'to achieve inclusive, rights-based, and sustainable returns and reintegration'.[55]

2.4. Challenges and opportunities in governance of return migration

While the above-mentioned measures and initiatives reflect a sincere effort in the right direction, there is currently **a dearth of data** reflecting the size of the returnee population and the percentage of those receiving reintegration support. Even more challenging to determine is the impact of these initiatives at the moment, not only because of the limited time since the inception of these targeted reintegration efforts, but again also because of lack of data to measure effectiveness.

Data gathering is an important step to understand the profile of returnees in order to devise targeted mechanisms for their reintegration. **More policy deliberation is required to encourage registration of returnees and updating of data, for instance by incentivising access to certain training or welfare services.** The current data collection mechanism depends on online voluntary self-registration of returnees. For this, wider awareness of the registration process is required, as well as introducing other mechanisms for those who do not have access to internet facilities.[56] Moreover, the success of job placements and other benefits awarded to those who have registered should also be mainstreamed so that other returnees are encouraged to register themselves. To ensure awareness of government schemes that support return and reintegration, pre-departure information sessions for migrants

[51] IOM Pakistan, "Readmission Case Management for Pakistan," 2022, https://eea.iom.int/pakistan.
[52] Schengen Visa Info, "EU-Pakistan Agree to Launch Comprehensive Dialogue on Migration & Mobility," November 15, 2022.
[53] LOVDATA, "Agreement between the Government of the Kingdom of Norway and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan on the Readmission of Persons Residing without Authorization," 2017, https://lovdata.no/dokument/TRAKTATEN/traktat/2017-01-25-1/KAPITTEL_1-2#KAPITTEL_1-2.
[54] British High Commission Islamabad, "UK and Pakistan Finalise Negotiations on Bilateral Readmissions Agreement," World News Story, 2021, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-and-pakistan-finalise-negotiations-on-bilateral-readmissions-agreement.
[55] Budapest Process, "Return and Reintegration Roadmap," 2023, https://www.budapestprocess.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/BP_Roadmap_Return_Reintegration.pdf.
[56] Weeraratne, Weerasekera, and Bandara, Thilini, "Comprehensive Mapping and Assessment of Reintegration Measures in South Asian Colombo Process Member States."

should include dedicated sections on support that they would be eligible for on their return to Pakistan. One stakeholder interviewed for this research highlighted that returnees who return after extended stay abroad also experience documentation challenges on return such as acquiring a national identity card, driving licenses etc. which may hamper immediate economic reintegration on return (I1, male).

Most of the reintegration initiatives in Pakistan are introduced in partnership with international donor agencies through specified programmes. **Donor-funded programmes, unless accompanied by dedicated budget heads within the national budget, tend to be narrowly focused and time-bound.** There are also challenges in assessing their full impact due to limitations in access, outreach, and scope. Some of them limit their services for returnees from specific countries (I2, male). For instance, GIZ's reintegration support in Pakistan was initially targeting only returnees from Germany and other areas in Europe. During COVID-19, however, these services were extended to returnees from other destinations as well. IRARA's services focus on returnees from the UK. Moreover, such facilities often tend to focus on voluntary returnees and excluded those that are forcibly returned.

Another area requiring policy focus is the improvement and scaling up of the national referral mechanism for reintegration services. While the infrastructure is now established, as discussed in the previous section, there are challenges in its implementation, and uncertainty on the side of returnees of the services they are entitled to. As evident from the MRC data based on airport receptions, returnees are most often not aware of any specialised services for their reintegration. As shared by one stakeholder, there is also an issue of trust deficit, as returnees often fear that registration in reintegration programmes may compromise their identity and future travel opportunities (I2, male).

Gauging from a study conducted by ICMPD, **the success and sustainability of such programmes also depend on the returnees' own aspirations for the future.** [57] As depicted in the discussion in section 2.1., many returnees aspire to re-migrate rather than finding a permanent economic activity in their countries of origin, hence, the uptake of government-initiated schemes may be limited. As highlighted by a stakeholder, some returnees may be reluctant to engage in reintegration programmes if they have aspirations to re-migrate (I1, male). On the other hand, other returnees might demand training programmes to develop their skills and obtain specific certifications in case of re-emigration, in order to get a chance to improve their salaries and contribute to an improved perception of Pakistani workers at the international level (I5, male). Thus, it is imperative to first assess the aspirations of the returnees to introduce tailor-made programmes that are aligned with their plans.

Budapest Process's Return and Reintegration Roadmap highlights specific areas where Pakistan's return and reintegration mechanism needs improvement.[58] According to the analysis, in terms of effective returns management, Pakistan's Returnee Case Management System (RCMS) requires improvement to reflect return data from a wide scope of countries, and the airport reception facilities should be strengthened. On matters of post-arrival assistance and referral mechanisms, the roadmap emphasises the need for a dedicated policy focused on reintegration which signposts for referral mechanisms and services for returnees. More specifically for immediate actions, it recommends conducting a mapping of the available services in Pakistan for returnees, enhancing capacities of service providers, and expanding outreach activities for awareness raising on resources for receiving psychosocial and socioeconomic reintegration support. The roadmap also recommends engaging with

[57] ICMPD (2022). "New Trends on Return and Remigration in the COVID Era: Evidence from Pakistan and Bangladesh." Vienna: ICMPD.
[58] Budapest Process, "Return and Reintegration Roadmap."

the private sector to increase avenues for reintegration of returnees, and stronger stakeholder coordination for establishing standard practices in matters related to return and reintegration.

3. Methodology

3.1. Introduction

This report draws on primary and secondary data to inform its conclusions. Extensive desk research was carried out to develop a conceptual understanding of how returnees may play a role in influencing decision-making among potential migrants. Literature was drawn, not just in the context of Pakistan and the region, rather from global perspectives to identify specificities of how returnees directly or indirectly influence migration decision-making, and to understand the parts of the decision-making process that are most sensitive to information or support received from returnees.

Additionally, this report draws on qualitative data collected through in-depth interviews with Pakistani returnees and expert interviews with stakeholders in Pakistan working on issues related to return migrants. Fieldwork was carried out by an externally contracted company, Institute of Social and Policy Sciences (I-SAPS). **Purposive sampling** was used to conduct fifteen in-depth interviews with Pakistani returnees that returned either voluntarily or involuntarily from European countries. Geographical focus for these interviews was Punjab province as the province has the highest rate of irregular migration towards Europe from Pakistan. Three districts in Punjab were targeted, namely: Gujrat, Jhelum, and Mandi Bahauddin, with five interviews conducted in each district with returnees from Europe. It is also relevant to note that these three districts were also part of the research sites during the preparatory analysis conducted for PARIM-I.

Thematic areas touched upon during these interviews included returnees' own migration decision-making process, their journey and experiences when abroad, the circumstances in which they returned and their reintegration in the Pakistani society, as well as whether and how potential migrants in their communities seek information or any other support from them to form their own migration decisions, and what kind of support are the returnees usually able to provide. The purpose is to understand how returnees' own experiences shape the way they support or influence potential migrants. Fieldwork was carried out in November 2023.

Secondly, the report also taps on insight received from five **institutional stakeholders** that work in relation to Pakistani returnees. The aim was to understand the services that are available to these returnees to reintegrate back into the society and the challenges they experience. Perspectives from these stakeholders are important to understand the overall returnee reintegration framework in Pakistan. These interviews are also important sources of information on how effective and influential these stakeholders consider returnees as messengers in migration information campaigns. The five stakeholders interviewed include representatives of the Overseas Pakistanis Foundation, IRARA, Youth Employability Network (YEN), the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA), and MD Hazza Institute (a technical and vocational education centre). Although a number of other stakeholders were approached with interview requests, their availability either did not fall within the timescale of the fieldwork, or they did not respond to the requests.

Ethical considerations were a priority in not only identifying and conducting interviews, but also with storage and analysis of data. The research company sub-contracted to conduct fieldwork in Pakistan, I-SAPS, was hired following a rigorous and competitive evaluation process. They have over 20 years of field experience in Pakistan, including with vulnerable groups, and have conducted several high-quality research projects with ICMPD in the past, including PARIM-I. With extensive experience in the research districts through local teams, I-SAPS enjoy high trust factor in communities. These local connections also helped in identifying the sample.

Considering the high vulnerability of the target population, including forcibly returned individuals, the main priority was to ensure the principle of do no harm. Following the selection criteria, the purpose of the interview, and project background were explained to the individuals, and how their participation would contribute to the study was also made clear to them to acquire their informed consent. The field team also explained to them how their data would be used and stored, assuring principles of anonymity and confidentiality. No audio/video recordings of fieldwork were made in order to ensure trust between the researcher and the respondent; rather, detailed notes were taken by the enumerators. These anonymised notes were saved on secure servers, following GDPR regulations. Moreover, in terms of conducting the interviews, care was taken to ensure that questions were framed in an open-ended way to avoid any leading or trigger questions. This allowed the respondents to share as much or as little of their migration experiences as they wanted. Respondents were also free to withdraw from the interview at any point during the interview if they did not feel comfortable. However, all respondents completed the interview, which on average lasted between 60 and 90 minutes.

3.2. Sample description

3.2.1. Profile of returnees

As mentioned, a total of 15 returnees from Europe were interviewed for this report, five each from the three districts of Gujrat, Jhelum, and Mandi Bahauddin. These returnees were purposefully approached due to their history of migrating irregularly and returning from Europe. All of the respondents were male, with an **age** range of minimum 21 years and maximum 45 years at the time of interviews. Age range at the time of migration varied between 19 and 35 years. Respondents had varied **occupational activities**, with four involved in small business, three in the transport sector as drivers, four skilled labours (painter, carpenter, and two bakers), one unskilled labour, two involved in the agriculture sector as farmers, and one unemployed at the time of interview. Almost all of the respondents had completed at least secondary **education** (up to grade 8) with three having completed high schools. Only two respondents had up to primary education. The profile of these returnees aligns with the profile of returnees reflected in IOM's Returnee Longitudinal Survey (2021),[59] as well as descriptions shared by the stakeholders based on their experience with returnees.

3.2.2. Drivers of migration

While the main focus of this report is on the role of returnees in migration decision-making and their potential involvement in migration information campaigns, it is also relevant to throw some light on drivers of migration for these respondents to better contextualise their experiences. In terms of the main drivers of migration, a mix of socioeconomic, as well as emotional factors emerged through the responses, which highlighted the intricacies of the decision-making process. For all the respondents, migration decisions were mainly driven by economic motivations, and in some cases, respondents cited more than one reason contributing to their decision. The ultimate hope was to be able to earn a good living for themselves and their families back home.

Nine respondents cited economic push factors such as **difficulties in finding employment and lack of suitable income sources** in Pakistan as their main motivation to consider migration through irregular channels. They often mentioned their own lack of education and skills as major hindrances for finding suitable employment within Pakistan, and cited the state of the economy and rising inflation as factors

[59] IOM, "Snapshot Report: Pakistani Returnees from Greece, Germany and Bosnia and Herzegovina," 2021, https://www.migrationdataportal.org/resource/snapshot-report-pakistani-returnees-greece-germany-and-bosnia-and-herzegovina.

that further complicated making ends meet. Interviews with institutional stakeholders also validated that the rise in economic problems in Pakistan have led to an increase in trends of irregular migration.

These economic issues were especially compounded for those who had family obligations, for instance responsibility as the main breadwinner of the family, taking on new financial responsibilities after marriage or retirement of former breadwinner, or obligations to financially support their siblings' wedding, etc. These factors with roots in lack of resources, unemployment and responsibility of families show that migration decisions are often embedded in family relations and obligations.[60]

All the financial responsibilities of my elderly parents and sister came on my shoulders when my elder brother left the house after getting married. The minimal income from the salesman job was not enough to fulfil basic needs. That worry used to occupy my thoughts all the time.

(Respondent MB5, 26 years old, Mandi Bahauddin, paraphrased from Urdu).

Interestingly, five respondents solely cited **'lifestyle change'** as the main motivation for migrating towards Europe irregularly, and another four also highlighted this aspiration as one of the factors that influenced their decision, in addition to economic hardships. Most of these respondents were inspired by the 'luxurious lifestyle' enjoyed by those among their community members who had migrated earlier. This created an aspiration among them to also try their luck in a desire for improving their standard of living. This finding is also validated by previous literature as well as our findings in PARIM-I, where migration in itself was seen as an aspiration among youth due to the 'status' change in the lifestyle of migrants.[61] One institutional stakeholder interviewed for this research also elaborated that in rural settings, young men seek to break the cycle of labour of working on agriculture and are inspired by the lifestyle change of those who migrate. For these respondents, instead of the lack of economic opportunities at home, it was the pull factor of improved earnings abroad, combined with a desire for new experiences that played a stronger role in their decision to migrate.

Whenever my friends visited Pakistan, they spent most of the time with me. Their lifestyle and peaceful life inspired me to make this decision. I assumed that living in Greece would make my life easy.

(Respondent MB5, 26 years old, Mandi Bahauddin, paraphrased from Urdu).

Responses from returnees also shed light on **emotional elements and sentiments** that are embedded in the migration decision-making process. For instance, for four respondents, the prospect of living abroad inculcated a sense of adventure and a means to escape the routine among them, as mentioned by a 29-year-old respondent from Jhelum:

I was focused on my studies and cognizant of the eventual responsibility of managing my father's crockery shop once I completed my education. Given the routine nature of taking over the family business, I found myself intrigued by the idea of exploring life beyond familiar boundaries.

(Respondent J2, 29 years old, Jhelum – paraphrased from Urdu).

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[60] Nauja Kleist, "Disrupted Migration Projects: The Moral Economy of Involuntary Return to Ghana from Libya," *Africa* 87, no. 2 (2017): 322–42.

[61] Ali Nobil Ahmad, *Masculinity, Sexuality and Illegal Migration. Human Smuggling from Pakistan to Europe* (London: Routledge, 2011), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315594200; Qaisrani, Hahn-Schaur, and Hendow, "Irregular Migration Dynamics from Pakistan and the Role of Information Campaigns: PARIM Final Report," 2021.

For others, feelings of jealousy and sentiments of dissatisfaction with their lives served as the main motivations for considering migration.

> *I (also) developed an inferiority complex and began yearning for a decent home, a car, and a luxurious life. Given my young age at that time, these desires became compelling forces.*
>
> (Respondent G2, 21 years, Gujrat – paraphrased from Urdu).

The emotional aspect, particularly the experience of an 'inferiority complex' linked to an individual's economic prosperity, sheds light on the potential disparities in social status based on one's economic position in society. Migration could be a significant factor influencing these inequalities. This ties in closely with the **'culture of migration'** that exists in the districts under study.[62] Many households in these districts, both in urban and rural areas, have some family members (nuclear or extended) who live abroad, thus making migration a part and parcel of lifestyle in this area. In PARIM-I research, we found that due to the high rate of emigration from these districts, young people often find themselves comparing their living standards to those who have family members abroad.[63] The change in lifestyle pre and post migration is often calculated through not only material upgrades such as building new or better housing, owning car or other vehicle, but also the rise in social status once the migrant visits the community. Such material and social upgrades often inspire young potential migrants to also consider the option of migrating and turning their life around. Secondly, the whole culture of migration phenomenon is also facilitated by the widespread of availability of agents[64] who convince gullible youth to opt for the irregular channel. Two respondents cited the general 'culture of migration' in their area that motivated them to also consider migrating to Europe.

> *The decision to go to Greece was due to the prevailing trend in the community, where many individuals were using Greece as a gateway to reach Europe.*
>
> (Respondent G1, 22 years, Gujrat – paraphrased from Urdu).

This discussion portrays that for the sample, migration decisions were motivated by an inherent desire to improve their socioeconomic status given their circumstances and influenced by a deep culture of migration towards Europe.

3.2.3. Destinations, length of stay, and mode of return

As per the design of the sample, all respondents in the sample had returned from their journeys to Europe, with a few that were returned before they even reached the European soil. For about 10 respondents, **Greece was the intended destination**, followed by those that intended to reach Italy (n=4), often via Greece. Only one respondent cited France as the intended destination. However, at least five respondents could not reach their intended destinations, and were intercepted in transit. In general, the migration journeys were very recent, as about half of the respondents migrated in the past 5 years. However, even those that migrated earlier did not always have a successful journey: three respondents, migrated between 2002 and 2017, spent between two days and six months abroad

[62] Ali Nobil Ahmad, "The Romantic Appeal of Illegal Migration: Gender, Masculinity and Human Smuggling from Pakistan," in *Illegal Migration and Gender in a Global and Historical Perspective*, ed. Marlou Schrover et al. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008), https://doi.org/10.5117/9789089640475; Qaisrani, Rashid, and Samad, "Migration-Relevant Policies in Pakistan."

[63] Qaisrani, Hahn-Schaur, and Hendow, "Irregular Migration Dynamics from Pakistan and the Role of Information Campaigns: PARIM Final Report," 2021.

[64] Agents can be registered recruiters or migration consultants, but often also migrant smugglers who are either unregistered or facilitate irregular migration to destinations that have limited legal pathways.

before returning – or, in one case, being forcibly deported – to Pakistan. Overall, the longest stay in Europe recorded among the respondents was eight years, with most returning after staying in Europe for 2 years. Those that were intercepted along the route had as short of a stay as a couple of days to under two months. Among the 15 respondents, only two returned voluntarily through legal channels, while the rest were forcibly returned (deported). There were also at least four cases where the respondents voluntarily decided to get deported to return to Pakistan. None of the respondents mentioned returning through voluntary return and reintegration mechanisms in place.

3.3. Limitations and challenges of the study

Despite providing much food for thought, the study has several limitations, with the **small sample size** being a primary concern that affects the validity of the findings. A total of 15 interviews across three districts, with respondents varying in socioeconomic and demographic backgrounds, do not offer representative findings, and neither does this study claim to provide generalisable conclusions. Discussion is purely based on inferences drawn from the data, and caution must be exercised in assuming these findings represent the experiences of a larger population of returnees.

Furthermore, even among the 15 respondents, there is **widespread variability in terms of the timing of their migration and return, migration experiences, outcomes of migration, and even mode of return.** The last aspect also introduces a notable divergence, as the experiences of those returning voluntarily differ significantly from those forced to return. This distinction holds potential implications for the kind of 'message' that returnees would convey to others in the community, or if engaged in campaigns. Since our sample is disproportionately composed of individuals that experienced forced return, their experiences might highlight more negative messages, although this may not be the case for returnees in general.

A notable gap in empirical evidence arises also from **the exclusive focus on returnees, neglecting those who did not migrate despite (or because of) potential influence from returnees, social networks, or campaigns**. The varying range of exposure within the sample, including those who returned to Pakistan (or were forced to do so) within short time, adds a significant flaw to the study design. Besides, the absence of a solid database to determine the number of returnees in a given area and to compare this with the number of emigrants further complicates the interpretation of findings. Consequently, it remains unclear which phenomenon – returnee influence or other factors – is stronger in shaping migration decisions.

The positionality of interviewers also poses a potential limitation. The influence of the interviewers' perspectives, biases, and backgrounds on the respondents' narratives may impact the reliability and neutrality of the data collected. The risk of social desirability bias is also noted, especially since respondents may decide to give certain answers based on what they perceive the interviewers want to listen to. Recognition of this aspect is crucial in interpreting the findings with an awareness of the potential influence of the interviewers' positionality.

4. Understanding the role of returnees in migration decision-making of potential migrants

4.1. Introduction

Drawing on literature review as well as on field data, this chapter looks at the role of returnees in influencing the migration decision-making processes of potential migrants. The chapter starts by providing a conceptual exploration of the ways in which returnees potentially impact the decision-making processes of potential migrants. Drawing on literature on migration and social network theory, we navigate the theoretical underpinnings and examine the different aspects that might influence the decision on migration. Turning our focus to the Pakistani context, the following sub-section indeed explores the grounded experiences of returnees and their influence exerted on potential migrants. By analysing the role of returnees in migration decision-making processes, we aim to contribute to the design and implementation of effective migration information campaigns that align with the complex dynamics of the Pakistani context. The theoretical discussion and the observations from the field on the role of returnees will provide not only a solid basis for the analysis of the role of returnees in migration information campaigns – which will be explored more in depth in the following chapter – but also an important source for policymakers, practitioners, and institutions involved in shaping such campaigns.

4.2. Conceptualising the role of returnees in migration decision-making

Several studies have shown how the decision to migrate is influenced by a myriad of factors. Drawing from neoclassical economics, early migration theories often emphasise the role of economic factors in driving migration movements. When looking at the micro-level, for example, these theories examine the individual's need to maximise their own interests, while at the macro-level they consider the role of wage differentials or labour market imbalances between different countries.[65] The push-pull theory takes into consideration a combination of drivers – from socio-economic opportunities to political problems and environmental issues – both in the country of origin and in the country of destination, which either prompt people to leave their country and reach other ones.[66] As also emerged from the research findings, economic and financial reasons indeed constitute important determinants that influence the decision to migrate.

These theories, however, have been often criticised not only for not taking in due consideration the personal aspirations, needs, and capabilities of potential migrants[67] and their 'psychological, cognitive, emotional, and behavioural factors, as well as individuals' personal and normative belief and value systems',[68] but also for overlooking the importance of social networks in which potential migrants are embedded. By considering the migration project not merely an individual plan to maximise one's own benefits but a household decision, the New Economics of Labour Migration starts to investigate the

[65] For an overview, see Jessica Hagen-Zanker, "Why Do People Migrate? A Review of the Theoretical Literature" (Maastricht: Maastricht University, January 2008).
[66] Richard Black et al., "The Effect of Environmental Change on Human Migration," *Global Environmental Change* 21 (December 2011): S3–11, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2011.10.001.
[67] See Jørgen Carling, "Measuring Migration Aspirations and Related Concepts" (Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), 2019), www.mignex.org/d023.
[68] Jessica Hagen-Zanker and Gemma Hennessey, "What Do We Know about the Subjective and Intangible Factors That Shape Migration Decision-Making? A Review of the Literature from Low and Middle Income Countries" (Oslo: Peace Research Institute Oslo, 2021), 7.

role of 'other people'[69] in migration decisions. It is with the emergence of **social network theory** and in particular with the 'transnational turn' in migration studies that migration theories started to look at the importance of social networks in migration.[70]

While sociological approaches look at how **social networks would increase the likelihood of migration** intentions and behaviour due to the combined effects of the expansion of migration chain links and the parallel reduction of migration risks and costs,[71] transnational approaches examine the role of social networks more in depth, investigating their role in changing migration intentions and behaviours.[72] Haug, for example, finds that social networks can represent both push and pull factors according to their specific location: While social capital in the place of destination increases migration intentions and, in turn, the possibility of migration itself, since potential migrants get more acquainted with the socio-economic situation in the country of origin, the presence of strong ties in the place of origin – and therefore the existence of powerful links with relatives and the community – might reduce the tendency to migrate.[73]

As also discussed in previous ICMPD research,[74] **social networks play a pivotal role in turning potential migrants' aspirations into migration decisions**. Whether they are relatives, close friends, or simply acquaintances, and whether they are located in the same country or in countries of transit or destination, social networks can provide potential migrants with relevant information about the bureaucratic procedures, the journey, the situation in the country of destination, as well as with financial support.[75] While Garip and Asad find that potential migrants tend to rely on strong ties (family and close friends) especially in high-risk situations,[76] Giulietti et al.[77] show that even weak ties (neighbours and acquaintances) can share relevant information on the migration process, often complementing the information provided by strong ties. According to Lee and Lee, in certain urban

[69] Gil S. Epstein and Ira N. Gang, "The Influence of Others on Migration Plans" (Bonn: Institute for the Study of Labor, 2004).

[70] Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch, and Cristina Blanc-Szanton, "Transnationalism: A New Analytic Framework for Understanding Migration.," *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 645 (July 1992): 1–24, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-6632.1992.tb33484.x.

[71] Douglas S. Massey, "Social Structure, Household Strategies, and the Cumulative Causation of Migration," *Population Index* 56, no. 1 (1990): 3-26; Douglas S. Massey et al., "Theories of International Migration: A Review and Appraisal," *Population and Development Review* 19, no. 3 (September 1993): 431–66; see also Epstein and Gang, "The Influence of Others on Migration Plans," 2004.

[72] Charles Tilly, "Trust Networks in Transnational Migration," *Sociological Forum* 22, no. 1 (March 2007): 3–24.

[73] Sonja Haug, "Migration Networks and Migration Decision-Making," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 34, no. 4 (March 20, 2008): 585–605.

[74] Katharina Hahn-Schaur, "Awareness Raising and Information Campaigns on the Risks of Irregular Migration from Pakistan: Background Report" (Vienna: ICMPD, 2021); Qaisrani and Jokic, "Engaging Diasporas in Information Campaigns on Migration," 2021.

[75] Sarah Dolfin and Garance Genicot, "What Do Networks Do? The Role of Networks on Migration and 'Coyote' Use," *Review of Development Economics* 14, no. 2 (May 2010): 343–59.

[76] Filiz Garip and Asad L Asad, "Migrant Networks," in *Emerging Trends in the Social and Behavioral Sciences: An Interdisciplinary, Searchable, and Linkable Resource*, ed. Robert A. Scott and Marlis C. Buchmann (Hoboken, John Wiley & Sons, 2015).

[77] Corrado Giulietti, Jackline Wahba, and Yves Zenou, "Strong versus Weak Ties in Migration," *European Economic Review* 104 (2018): 111–37.

areas the role of local social networks can be more important than the socio-economic status of potential migrants when intending to migrate.[78]

The **rise of information and communication technology** has certainly increased the amount of information available and improved its availability and circulation. Besides, it constitutes a powerful way to maintain social connections with relatives and friends abroad, as well as to create new contacts. Dekker and Engbersen argue that social media do not just constitute a new means of communication in migration networks, but they also transform the nature of these networks by maintaining strong ties, reinforcing weak ties, and providing a rich source of insider knowledge, thereby facilitating migration movements.[79] Bakewell and Jolivet highlight the importance not only of personal network feedback, defined as the direct and personal communication between potential migrants and their contacts with migration experience, but also of narrowcast feedback, i.e., the impersonal information provided by direct contacts through online platforms, as well as of broadcast feedback, that is, the general information provided through mass media and available for the general public.[80]

As discussed in previous ICMPD research,[81] potential migrants tend to trust the information provided by family and friends, while communication from governmental or institutional sources is usually perceived as biased and unreliable. However, research has shown how the first kind of information is often far from being objective and trustworthy, not only because the legal and socio-economic conditions in the countries of transit and destination might change, thus affecting the migration experience of future migrants, but also because the information itself might be biased, highlighting particularly positive, or in some cases, particularly negative experiences.[82] Certainly, information – especially online – is highly variegated and can encourage[83] or simply support[84] migration plans and strategies. Social media posts on success stories and high-quality lifestyle – whether they represent or exaggerate reality – tend to have a positive effect on migration decisions.[85] Countering cumulative causation assumptions that social networks and information provision support migration, Dekker et al. find that information can discourage migration plans and intentions.[86] Fiedler, on the other hand,

[78] Yeon Kyeong Lee and Seung Jong Lee, "Analysis of the Influence of Social Relations on Migration Intention: Focusing on Local Social Capital and Subjective Socioeconomic Status," *International Journal of Community Well-Being* 2, no. 3-4 (December 2019): 193–211.

[79] Rianne Dekker and Godfried Engbersen, "How Social Media Transform Migrant Networks and Facilitate Migration," *Global Networks* 14 (October 2014): 401–18.

[80] Oliver Bakewell and Dominique Jolivet, "Broadcasting Migration Outcomes," in Beyond networks: feedback in international migration, ed. Oliver Bakewell et al. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 183–204.

[81] Hahn-Schaur, "Awareness Raising and Information Campaigns on the Risks of Irregular Migration from Pakistan: Background Report," 2021; see also Ida Marie Savio Vammen et al., "Does Information Save Migrants' Lives? Knowledge and Needs of West African Migrants En Route to Europe" (Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies, 2021).

[82] REACH, "Iraqi Migration to Europe in 2016: Profiles, Drivers and Return" (Geneva: REACH Initiative, June 2017).

[83] Bertil Vilhelmson and Eva Thulin, "Does the Internet Encourage People to Move? Investigating Swedish Young Adults' Internal Migration Experiences and Plans," *Geoforum* 47 (June 2013): 209–16.

[84] Eva Thulin and Bertil Vilhelmson, "Virtual Practices and Migration Plans: A Qualitative Study of Urban Young Adults," *Population, Space and Place* 20, no. 5 (July 2014): 389–401.

[85] Oliver Bakewell and Dominique Jolivet, "Broadcasting Migration Outcomes," 2016.

[86] Rianne Dekker, Godfried Engbersen, and Marije Faber, "Online Feedback in Migration Networks," in Beyond Networks: Feedback in International Migration, ed. Oliver Bakewell et al. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 69–89.

shows how migrants who are exposed to negative sources of information disproving their own beliefs tend to reduce cognitive dissonance by questioning the credibility of those sources.[87]

Social networks and information are important aspects in the formation of migration intentions and plans. The role of returnees as source of information among potential migrants has emerged in recent studies on their knowledge, attitudes, and intentions.[88] The literature on social networks, however, has generally focused on the relevance of either strong or weak ties, overlooking the role of specific agents, i.e., returnees, in influencing migration intentions and behaviours. By the same token, the literature on return migration has focused, among other things, on the role of returnees in the political, social, and economic development of their countries of origin,[89] without exploring the micro-level impact of return on the migration intentions of potential migrants.

Recent research, which will be examined more in depth in chapter 5, has explored the impact of migration information and awareness raising campaigns involving return migrants on the decision-making process of potential migrants. **However, only few studies have investigated the role of returnees on migration intentions and behaviours**. Among these, Togunde and Osagie examine the role of Nigerian returnees in influencing young adults' intentions to migrate to the USA. The study shows how 'fascination with style of dressing, fluency of spoken English language, polished behavior and decent display of mannerisms are associated with increased likelihood of wanting to visit the United States', while, on the other hand, negative perceptions regarding the social, cultural, or economic characteristics in the country of destination significantly reduces the desire to migrate there.[90] The study, however, also demonstrates that the image that returnees convey of the country of destination is highly subjective and dependent on their own personal experience: For some returnees, the USA is a country with a stable and flourishing economy and rich of socio-economic opportunities, while others see them as land rampant with crime where it is difficult to become successful.

Not only are there few studies available on this specific topic, but the results are also contradictory. Two empirical studies on the role of migrant networks in labour migration in China, for example, found opposite results. One study found that higher rates of return migration may discourage first-time migration from communities of origin,[91] while the other concluded that the number of returnees in a community may actually encourage migration by reducing migration costs, although the results were insignificant for the sample.[92] The latter, however, also found that , while current migrants can provide reliable and updated information on the labour situation at destination, thus representing an

[87] Anke Fiedler, "From Being Aware to Going There: On the Awareness and Decision-Making of (Prospective) Migrants," *Mass Communication and Society* 23, no. 3 (September 19, 2019): 356–77.
[88] Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat, "Blinded by Hope: Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices of Ethiopian Migrants" (Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat, 2014); IRFAD, "A Descriptive Study of the Influence of Information Campaigns and Counselling on the Knowledge, Attitudes and Intentions (KAIs) of Potential Migrants in Iraq" (Baghdad: IRFAD Foundation for Development Research, July 2022).
[89] Savina Ammassari, "From Nation-Building to Entrepreneurship: The Impact of Élite Return Migrants in Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana," *Population, Space and Place* 10 (March 2004): 133–54; Franzisca Zanker and Judith Altrogge, "The Political Influence of Return: From Diaspora to Libyan Transit Returnees," *International Migration* 57, no. 4 (August 2019): 167–80, https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12578.
[90] Dimeji R. Togunde and Sylvester O. Osagie, "Icons of Progress: Returnees' Effects on Decisions by Nigerians to Migrate to the Us," *International Review of Modern Sociology* 35, no. 1 (2009): 115–35.
[91] Corrado Giulietti, Jackline Wahba, and Yves Zenou, "Strong versus Weak Ties in Migration," 2018.
[92] Yaohui Zhao, "The Role of Migrant Networks in Labor Migration: The Case of China," *Information, Mobile Communication, and Referral Effects, American Economic Review* 21, no. 4 (2003): 500–511.

important pull factor for village labourers in places of origin, returnees do not have such promotion effect, as they are not perceived as being up to date with socio-economic conditions.

Using geospatial analysis, census data, and in-person interviews with potential migrants in the Senegambia region, Auer and Schaub show how even the presence of returnees within a specific community might reduce the migration intentions of potential migrants, as the latter become more aware of the risks associated to migration and of the stigma attached to failed migration plans.[93] This result, however, is observed only among returnees from Europe, whereas returnees from other African countries do not alter migration plans. According to the authors, the presence of returnees from Europe might make potential migrants more aware of the risks of irregular migration, as well as more inclined to perceive the migration process as a failure, thus turning returnees into negative role models.

Although theoretically conceived as weak social ties, **returnees can significantly affect – positively and negatively – migration intentions and behaviours among potential migrants**. By virtue of their firsthand experiences, returnees carry a unique perspective on migration, becoming living testimonials of both the challenges and opportunities associated with migration. Their impressions and stories can significantly influence their community members' perceptions of migration, confirming or discarding the expectations that potential migrants might have regarding the everyday life in their desired countries of destination. Still, despite the growing interest in and research on return migration, little attention is dedicated to this specific topic. Drawing from field data, the following section looks at the potential role of returnees in influencing migration intentions.

4.3. Role of returnees in migration decision-making in Pakistan: Insights from the field

4.3.1. Introduction

As we have seen in the previous section, literature on how returnees specifically influence migration dynamics in communities of origin is relatively scarce and offers mixed evidence, highlighting the strong role played by varying social and political contexts.

In this section, without presuming to be exhaustive or to complement the existing research, we explore the role played by returnees in migration decision-making as evident through our sample through two main dimensions: i) nature of influence; and ii) degree of influence.

4.3.2. Nature of influence

A basic point of departure for this discussion is to understand whether returnees encourage or deter potential irregular migrants. The presence of returnees, especially those returning pre-maturely from their journeys, may lead to two pathways through which potential irregular migration may be shaped: on the one hand, higher number of forcibly returned migrants may give a signal on the restrictive border policies and unfruitful outcomes in the countries of destination, thereby raising the perceptions of expected risks encountered in irregular migration. Literature demonstrates that restrictive border policies, leading to higher number of apprehensions, and consequently higher number of forced returnees, may not necessarily reduce irregular migration, but rather push potential migrants to attempt migration via new, more risky routes.[94] However, the scope of our data does not allow us to

[93] Daniel Auer and Max Schaub, "Returning from Greener Pastures? How Exposure to Returnees Affects Migration Plans," *World Development* 169 (September 1, 2023): 106291–91.

[94] Linguère Mously Mbaye, "'Barcelona or Die': Understanding Illegal Migration from Senegal," *IZA Journal of Migration* 3, no. 21 (2014), https://izajodm.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s40176-014-0021-8.

offer a discussion on the change in number of returnees in our study areas over a given time, and how it reflects on the policies of destination countries.

The second pathway of how returnees may influence decision-making depends on the information they actually share through their narratives, stories, and impressions they give off in the community upon return, which is better suited to the design of our research. This depends heavily on returnees' overall migration experience and may vary across individual returnees based not only on the mode of their migration, experiences in the destination, but also on the reason and mode of return. As one institutional stakeholder put it, returnees are likely to convey messages based on their own migration experiences and the challenges they encountered during their migration journeys (I4, male). A returnee's migration experience and how it is deemed back in the community may shape the currency of influence they may have in that community.

Returnees' migration experience: Based on respondents' own experiences and general trend in their communities, there are not many 'successful' returnees to draw inspiration from in the PARIM-II sample. Most respondents, whether they returned voluntarily or by force, were unable to run the course of their migration endeavour (regularise their status in Europe or attain economic success as they had aspired to). The majority of respondents in our sample had returned involuntarily (n=9), among which seven were forcibly returned (deported) from European countries, and two returned from Iran, where they were transiting through to reach Europe. Six respondents had returned voluntarily, among which half (n=3) returned due to familial reasons (longing for family or demise of family members at home), while the rest returned due to the challenges experienced in finding employment and deteriorating health conditions (often because of inability to access proper healthcare due to their irregular status). Only one of the voluntary returnees was able to regularise his status and return through legal channels. This broad overview of the reasons of return portrays that in general, returnees in our sample did not have overly positive experiences and migration outcomes, and hence in most cases, they would not be considered a 'success story' back in their communities.

The stage of migration from which a migrant returns inherently shapes the overall worth and the outcome of the migration endeavour. As evident through the data, while all experienced difficult conditions during their journey and on arrival, most were not able to reap the benefits of migration even after arrival in Europe. Challenges in finding employment, wage theft, and inaccessibility to healthcare due to irregular status were widely reported as factors leading to return decisions in cases respondents returned voluntarily. In such cases, respondents often returned without even having enough money to make up the cost of migration, which not only led to tensions once back home, but also shame of wasting the money their family, friends and relatives arranged for their migration endeavour.

It was a huge embarrassment for me. As I could not do anything substantial in Greece. My father had sold our land to pay for my journey and that was something which haunted me for quite some time.

(Respondent MB3, 29 years old, Mandi Bahauddin, Paraphrased from Urdu)

Another respondent, who was forcibly repatriated after two years in Greece, shared:

The family's reaction was harsh, as my wrong decision had wasted 26 lacs rupees, with no apparent means to repay the borrowed sum. My father was really agitated.

(Respondent G1, 22 years old, Gujrat, Paraphrased from Urdu)

It could also be drawn from the responses that those who returned (whether voluntarily or involuntarily) without making enough money are stigmatised and deemed as failures in the wider community as well.

As one respondent shared,

Other than immediate family, others were reacting differently. Some were mocking and others were happy that I failed.

(Respondent MB1, 24 years old, Mandi Bahauddin, Paraphrased from Urdu)

In societies where migration through irregular means is common, cases of those who returned without experiencing the benefits of migration, are often a victim of shame and ridicule.[95] This finding was also evident in PARIM-I results which showed that forcibly returned individuals were considered a subject of shame by 64% of the potential migrants. Institutional stakeholders also shed light on this issue. One shared that deportees are often hesitant in disclosing to their families and social circles that they have been forcibly returned, and they often claim that they are back on an extended holiday or due to closure of the company they were employed in to save their dignity (I1, male). They often find themselves being the subject of disapproval by peers in their communities, although the degree of stigmatisation may vary based on their social context. For instance, those that are able to find suitable employment, cover the costs of their migration, and remit money back home until they got intercepted and forcibly returned may not experience the same degree of shame as those who struggled to even make up for the costs of migration and repay the loans.

On the other hand, some studies find that if the overall frequency of forced return from a certain destination is high, so much so that deportation is normalised, the stigma surrounding return in such cases is low as it is considered part of 'occupational hazard'.[96] This perspective also came up in one of the stakeholder interviews that in some communities in Pakistan, migration and return are a common feature in lives of young men, and hence return does not lead to an overwhelming sense of shame (I4, male).

Nevertheless, stigmatisation could be high depending on the duration spent abroad and the associated costs of migration. In other words, those returning soon after setting on the journey due to encountering authorities along the route or on arrival in Europe may experience a greater degree of criticism once back than those that reached their destinations and strived to make a living.[97] It is worth mentioning that in our sample, five respondents returned in less than six months since their departure after having been intercepted during their journey.

Some literature shows that such failed attempts and high rates of return migration may in fact discourage first-time migration from communities of origin, as they reflect impressions of difficulties

[95] Jørgen Carling and María Hernández-Carretero, "Kamikaze Migrants? Understanding and Tackling High-Risk Migration from Africa" (Narratives of Migration Management and Cooperation with Countries of Origin and Transit, PRIO, 2008).

[96] Liza Schuster and Nassim Majidi, "Deportation Stigma and Re-Migration," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 41, no. 4 (2015): 635–52; Heike Drotbohm and Ines Hasselberg, "Deportation, Anxiety, Justice: New Ethnographic Perspectives," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Deportation, Anxiety, Justice: New Ethnographic Perspectives, 41, no. 4, accessed December 13, 2023, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1369183X.2014.957171.

[97] Schuster and Majidi, "Deportation Stigma and Re-Migration."

associated with the migration process.[98] Due to the nature of this sample, PARIM-I survey, and available statistics on migration trends from these regions under study, it cannot be conclusively deduced whether a rise in number of forcibly returned migrants decreases trends of irregular migration from these areas. Respondents' own decision-making processes shows that despite warnings of risks by concerned relatives and returnees, they decided to leave to try their luck. Moreover, recent reports following the Greek shipwreck tragedy that drowned more than 124 Pakistani irregular migrants, show that despite knowledge of such horrific incidents, that claimed lives of multiple individuals from the same communities, potential migrants from those communities are not dissuaded and continue to embark on treacherous journeys.[99]

Similarly, evidence also supports that deportation and forced return may do little to deter migration, and may even lead to high probability of re-migration as it may be considered a temporary set-back to the bigger plan.[100] This observation was confirmed by a government stakeholder interviewed for this study noting that re-migration through irregular means is significant for those who have been deported (I4, male). However, whether forced return leads to plans of re-migration is not fully evident in our sample. The intention to re-migrate was found to be mixed, and a clear link cannot be drawn with the mode of return (forced or voluntary). Six respondents mentioned having no plans at all to re-migrate, seven shared that they currently had no concrete plans but if they do decide on re-migrating, it would only be through legal channels, and only one mentioned having a concrete plan to go the Middle East with a work visa and a driver's licence. This trend also seems to be confirmed by one of the stakeholders interviewed, according to whom returnees, if they decide to re-migrate, typically opt for regular and legal means, especially after acquiring the necessary certificates (I5, male). Moreover, amongst those who mentioned being open to considering re-migration at a distant future, all mentioned the Middle East as their preferred destination, and one mentioned applying to Greece for a work permit.

Furthermore, literature also shows that not just the act of returning, but reintegration once back in the community also influences migration aspirations in the community of origin. Interestingly, an institutional stakeholder shared that those who have intentions of re-migration often avoid being engaged in reintegration activities as they consider these would delay their next attempt of migration. However, this notion did not emerge from our sample. As Auer and Schaub discuss, if socioeconomic reintegration of returnees appears to be difficult on return, it is likely to discourage first-time migrants from migrating irregularly.[101] Within our sample, respondents shared accounts of finding it difficult to mingle with people in the initial time after returning. Most respondents mentioned that it took them six to seven months to readjust back in the community on return. Guilt, embarrassment, and shame were the main emotions that emerged as challenges to fully reintegrate socially in the community on return. One contributing factor to these sentiments could also be the criminalisation of returnees at the hands of the state on returning.[102] Almost all respondents that were deported faced arrest and detention not only in the countries where they were returning from but also upon reaching Pakistan.

[98] Giulietti, Wahba, and Zenou, "Strong versus Weak Ties in Migration," 2018; Dimeji R Togunde and Sylvester O Osagie, "Icons of Progress,"2009; Daniel Auer and Max Schaub, "Returning from Greener Pastures?," 2023.
[99] Baloch, "Greek Shipwreck Does Little to Dissuade Pakistanis Leaving for Europe."
[100] Schuster and Majidi, "Deportation Stigma and Re-Migration."
[101] Auer and Schaub, "Returning from Greener Pastures?"
[102] Jacqueline Maria Hagan and Joshua Thomas Wassink, "Return Migration Around the World: An Integrated Agenda for Future Research," *Annual Reviews Sociology* 46 (2020): 533–52.

Further, the embarrassment of facing peers once back in the community also added to the struggle. One respondent mentioned,

I was reluctant to face people and didn't go out for many months.

(Respondent G1, 22 years old, Gujrat, Paraphrased from Urdu)

However, some respondents also found being back in a familiar setting as reassuring and had positive experiences with other community members. For instance,

The people in the community took turns visiting and empathizing with me, and for many days, I shared the painful details of my experience.

(Respondent J3, 45 years old, Jhelum, Paraphrased from Urdu)

Economically, all, except one, respondent had a livelihood source at the time of the interview, with four owning a small business, four skilled labours (painter, carpenter, and two bakers), three working as drivers, two as farmers, and one unskilled labour. Of course, being economically active at the time of the interview does not show the full extent of economic reintegration in terms of satisfaction with income and the struggle they had to go through to secure livelihood upon returning, but it portrays that these returnees were eventually able to find a source of income on return. However, data shows that most of them are engaged in the vulnerable informal sector, making them highly susceptible to economic shocks.

Depending on how the community perceives their reintegration process, in terms of challenging or easy, and whether they fare better or worse off compared to pre-migration status, migration aspirations may be affected for potential migrants. While Pakistan, in partnership with donor organisations and bilateral agreements with destination countries, has introduced some reintegration programmes as mentioned in section 2, those are mostly restricted to those returning through voluntary return programmes, rather than those forcibly deported. Our data reflects that none of the respondents received any institutional reintegration support, and the responsibility of reintegrating back in the communities was on the migrants themselves and their families.

Inspiration vs. preparation: To understand the nature of influence that returnees had on respondents' migration decision-making, it is important to take note of other factors and influences that factored into the decision-making process. The sample reflects a strong influence of the respondents' social network on the overall migration decision, particularly those with migration experience whether still abroad or returned. This finding validates findings of numerous other international and Pakistan-focused studies that emphasise the strong role played by social networks of potential migrants in their migration decision.[103]

Almost all respondents had friends, relatives, or acquaintances abroad (n=13), some had their own personal experience of working abroad (in the Middle East, n=2), and even those who did not currently have any personal connection abroad at the time of their migration decision quoted the general trend of emigration towards Europe in their communities that influenced their decision (n=2). While the

[103] IOM, "Pakistan Migration Snapshot" (Bangkok: IOM, 2019); Estifanos, *Social Networks, Dreams and Risks: Ethiopian Irregular Migrants into South Africa*; E Nathalie Williams et al., "When Does Social Capital Matter for Migration? A Study of Networks, Brokers, and Migrants in Nepal," *International Migration Review* 54, no. 4 (2020): 964–91; Qaisrani, Hahn-Schaur, and Hendow, "Irregular Migration Dynamics from Pakistan and the Role of Information Campaigns: PARIM Final Report," 2021.

involvement of returnees during decision-making phase is mentioned categorically in some cases (n=5), it was somewhat overshadowed by the strong role played by friends, relatives and acquaintances who were still abroad at the time of the respondents' decision to migrate. At first instance, this finding may appear to be contradictory to PARIM-I's survey findings that returnees are the most important sources of information for migration-related processes (76% reported returnees as their source of migration-related information and risks associated with the process),[104] it reveals a deeper understanding of the decision-making process because of the qualitative nature of the data.

Responses from the sample revealed that conception of the idea to migrate may be more strongly influenced by personal connections abroad, rather than returnees in the community. However, returnees were approached by the individual to supplement or strengthen his information and knowledge of the migration process once the idea of (irregular) migration has taken root in the mind of that individual. Responses by some returnees show that they approached returnees in their area to learn more about opportunities, and to be aware of the expected risks and challenges, however such statements were not commonly observed across the sample. As explained by a 21-year-old respondent from Mandi Bahauddin,

The main and initial source of information about migration has been my cousin from Italy. He convinced me to start thinking about migration. Once my interest was generated, I started to look for different sources of information. As mentioned earlier, my geographic location is considered a hotspot for irregular migration, so we have enough people living abroad. I used to visit the people who had recently returned from Greece and discuss the potential opportunities with them. I used to gather information from the people who had visited Greece legally or through irregular means. I was informed that Greece is the first country where you need to spend some time before entering Europe.

(Respondent MB2, 21 years old, Mandi Bahauddin, Paraphrased from Urdu)

In other words, it appears that friends and relatives abroad may act as the 'inspiration' for migration, however, returnees' knowledge and experiences may be sought to make more concrete plans for the process, and to understand the journey, including challenges and opportunities along the route and in destination country, once a loose decision to migrate has been made. This observation was also confirmed when the sample was asked if potential migrants from their communities approach them for migration-related information, all of them confirmed that their relatives and acquaintances reach out to them to acquire specific information about migration.

This reveals a slight difference in the timing of influence of personal connections abroad and returnees on the process: **contacts abroad may play a more dominant role in decision-making phase, while returnees' engagement may be sought during the planning phase to gather more information to solidify the decision and prepare for the journey**. In only one case in the current sample, a respondent categorically mentioned a returned uncle from Greece who was the main source of inspiration for his migration decision, and who not only provided information, but also connected the respondent to the agent through whom he had migrated abroad.

During my matriculation years, my uncle embarked on a journey to Greece by boat. Upon his return when I was 25 years old, he became my source of inspiration for my own venture to Greece. It was through him that I got connected with a Dunki[105] Agent to facilitate my journey. My uncle shared with

[104] Qaisrani, Hahn-Schaur, and Hendow, "Irregular Migration Dynamics from Pakistan and the Role of Information Campaigns: PARIM Final Report," 2021.
[105] Colloquial Punjabi term used commonly in some areas in Pakistan to refer to irregular migration.

me that in Greece, agriculture farming was lucrative, and people earned good money, unlike the limited benefits of farming in our local area. He emphasised the abundance of opportunities and enjoyment in Greece, recounting his own positive experiences. According to him, he had made the journey through a friend who served as a Dunki Agent. Encouraged by his success, he suggested that I contact the same agent.

(Respondent J3, 45 years old, Jhelum, paraphrased from Urdu)

Observations from the sample, also evident in the above two examples, highlight another interesting dimension – returnees may not just share negative experiences (with the intention to discourage potential migrants), but also positive information (such as potential opportunities) that may facilitate the migration process for the potential migrant. When asked about the role of returnees in their own decision-making process, respondents recounted receiving information about risks as well as opportunities from returnees. However, the impression received from the interviews was that information received from the returnees factored into their decision-making process once the initial idea of the migration plans was already formulated or discussed with others.

In the same vein, when asked what kind of advice respondents themselves give to potential migrants after their return, they all said they advocate against irregular migration to people who approach them because of the risks they personally experienced. Of course, one cannot rule out the possibility that this response may be a result of social desirability bias at the time of the interview, however, based on their accounts, it appears that respondents were more likely to advice against migration due to their own negative experiences.

A study by Seefar and ECORYS also concluded that while the migration experience of the returnee (and a diaspora member) is important to enable potential migrants to relate to them, whether information shared by the returnee influences the migration decision also depends on the nature of the message that is shared. If the returnee shares information to dissuade the potential migrant from migrating, it may not be effective.[106] From this, one can conclude that returnees may not necessarily be able to discourage against potential migration plans if they advise against migration. However, potential migrants may approach them to learn about their experiences to prepare better on how to avoid risks, and how to make use of opportunities. Hence as stated in the Seefar/Ecorys report, more important than being a returnee was being a returnee with relevant experiences that potential migrants could learn from during their preparation phase.

Choice of destination: As part of the decision-making process, the choice of destination is another important matter that may be influenced by a potential migrant's social network, including returnees and friends and family abroad. Field data shows that often the ultimate desired destination is where they have personal contacts who appear to be successful to them. However, they may draw on information from returnees with recent migration experience to understand which routes to take and how to enter Europe. For instance, for the majority of our respondents, Greece was the desired destination not only because of personal connections there, but also because they learned from returnees that Greece was the gateway into Europe even if they wanted to reach Italy or France as their desired destinations. Hence, the role of returnees is notable in influencing the initial destination choice for potential migrants, even if it is meant as a temporary destination before embarking further on their journeys.

[106] Seefar and ECORYS, "Study on Best Practices in Irregular Migration Awareness Campaigns" (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2021).

Financial support: Based on our sample, it appears that returnees do not offer much tangible support for migration other than information and guidance. None of the respondents mentioned receiving any monetary support from returnees at the time of their migration, and neither did they cite giving any financial support to others contemplating migration after their return. In all cases, they mention offering advice to others against migration through irregular means. One of the reasons could also be the limited financial capability of these returnees to offer such support to others, as highlighted by a stakeholder who works with returnees (I3, male). Respondents had relied on loans to fund their own journeys, and since most returned without having covered the cost of migration, they may not have been in a position to finance other people's journeys. Financial support was observed to be highest from immediate family, including parents, siblings, and spouse, followed by friends in abroad and in Pakistan. Almost all respondents mentioned fulfilling the financial needs through a mix of loans and assistance received from family and friends. This finding validates the results of PARIM-I survey which also found family and friends in Pakistan and aboard to be the most important supporters in migration preparations. Moreover, 'instalment plans' offered by agents were considered a major facilitation at the time. In other words, the agent sold them the package of paying half the amount upfront before setting on the journey, while the remaining was to be paid once the respondents reach a particular location along the journey and on arrival at the final destination.

Introduction to networks: The role of returnees in introducing potential migrants to social networks and agents was not observed to be very strong in our sample. Only in one case, the respondent cited a returnee relative introducing him to a credible agent. In other cases, respondents mentioned getting to know the agent through their connections in the community or friends abroad. The role of agents came out quite prominently in our sample in strengthening the decision to migrate. All respondents migrated irregularly with the help of agents. Agents served as the main source of practical information for these respondents in their planning phase. This is because agents mostly sell positive stories of success and fake promises of the ease and straightforwardness of the journey to those curious about the migration process. These agents are also trusted because often times they are recommended by friends and family who have already used their services to go abroad and have had positive experiences. In short, in areas where reliance on agents is high for achieving migration aspirations, the credibility of agents does not depend on the 'legality' of their practices, but rather on their success rates in getting people to reach their desired destinations through whatever means. Since returnees, especially those forcibly returned, may not be considered a 'success story', potential migrants may prefer to rely on those who know agents with higher success rates.

4.3.3. Degree of influence

In this section, we explore the evidence emerging from our sample regarding the strength of influence that returnees may exert on migration decision-making. Our data shows that the degree of influence may depend on the type of information that returnees share with potential migrants, as well as the strength of relationship of the returnee with the potential migrant.

As briefly discussed in section 4.3.2., an important inference drawn from the data is that potential migrants may be more influenced from 'positive' stories than warnings and information that may reflect failure. In all but two cases, respondents had experienced some resistance from their families who were concerned about the dangers of the journey often based on stories heard from returnees in their communities. However, the respondent eventually ended up convincing them with promises and hopes of potential success, and in some cases even decided on leaving for the journey without informing those who resisted the idea (often parents and siblings).

Reflecting on my past, I acknowledge that my story could have shone differently had I heeded the advice of others. However, at that time, I was not receptive to counsel.

(Respondent J4, 43 years old, Jhelum, Paraphrased from Urdu)

This finding also emerged from the discussion when respondents were asked whether potential migrants in their area adhere to their advice when they share their negative experiences, and **a common response was that people listen to the advice but often disregard it with hopes of having a different experience and being successful in their endeavour**. One respondent also highlighted the deteriorating economic conditions that force people to migrate even if they learn about the risks through returnees (Respondent G5, 34 years, Gujrat), highlighting the relevance of stronger driving forces besides awareness of risks.

This finding appears to be in contrast to the other literature which shows that the impressions that returnees give off in the community of return may significantly influence aspiring migrants' decision to migrate. For instance, a study in Nigeria showed that positive impressions of the destination country (America in the case of this study) reflected by returnees in their mannerisms and narratives are likely to encourage the likelihood of migration by as much as 4.45%, however, negative impressions that show that America is a difficult country to reach and get rich in may discourage migration.[107] Aeur and Schaub in a recent study found similar results. Based on a sample of 5000 respondents in Senegal and the Gambia, they found that returnees from African countries do not affect migration intentions in communities of origin, however, they found a stark negative relationship between returnees from Europe and aspirations to migrate to Europe.[108] More precisely, they found that for every additional returnee in the area, the likelihood of sharing migration aspirations in the next 12 months decrease by 1 percentage point approximately. PARIM-I also found that 27% of the respondents perceived returnees as a source of discouragement for potential migrants.

One possible explanation for our results could be that in areas which are considered the hotspots for irregular migration due to a strong culture of migration**,** it is extremely difficult to single out the influence of one actor on the ultimate migration decision – as also stated by an institutional stakeholder (I4, male). As Giulietti et al. find from their study of rural-to-urban migration decisions in China, the potential to migrate may be higher in cases when the individual contemplating migration has at least one person from amongst his strong ties that has migrated, and there is a general culture of emigration from the area.[109] Migration decision-making takes place in a space involving multiple information transmission channels and both current and return migrants influence migration aspirations and intentions in the communities of origin.[110] Considering that in the space where returnees may be sharing their experiences (sometimes negative as in the current sample), potential migrants are also exposed to numerous sources of positive influences, not least by the 'lavish lifestyles' they observe of their community members who have 'made it' in Europe, or promises and visions of success portrayed by agents.

In such a scenario, where potential migrants are exposed to mixed messages and evidence, including both success stories and failures, there may be a cognitive bias towards one or the other type of information, depending on what the potential migrant wants to listen to. As Czaika et al. stipulate,

[107] Togunde and Osagie, "Icons of Progress."
[108] Auer and Schaub, "Returning from Greener Pastures?"
[109] Giulietti, Wahba, and Zenou, "Strong versus Weak Ties in Migration."
[110] Auer and Schaub, "Returning from Greener Pastures?"

potential migrants evaluate the different types of information they receive with the potential outcomes and compare those outcomes relative to their status quo to reach a decision to migrate or stay.[111] However, in addition to their own status quo, it appears that they also compare the relative outcomes for those in their close social circle from the migration. When there is a reference point or a role model for an irregular journey leading to success in their proximal social network, an individual may be more likely to believe that than the counter-narrative that shows negative outcomes for a distant contact in the social network. Furthermore, this belief does not just depend on what information is deliberately shared, but also on what impressions are received by the potential migrant.[112] For example, in our sample, a respondent had a cousin in Greece who is reported to have influenced the respondent's decision to migrate, even though the cousin had tried to discourage him to migrate and was reluctant to share information on the migration process.

A desire to prove to my cousin that I could also go to Greece persuaded me.

(Respondent G2, 21 years old, Gujrat, Paraphrased from Urdu)

In this case, it is evident that whether the dissuasion and advice against migration comes from returnee or personal contact abroad, an individual may be willing to ignore that if there is information or perception about potential success that may be associated with migration. Due to the nature of our data, it is not possible to draw conclusions on the extent to which impressions and information shared by returnees actually dissuaded some potential migrants from embarking on irregular journeys. Respondents' own accounts of their decision-making process shows that they did not give much weightage to the negative experiences of returnees when given warnings and caution. One may deduce from this information that among potential migrants, those who are risk averse may actually be more inclined to be dissuaded for their migration plans when returnees share their experiences, while those who have firmer plans to migrate may only contact returnees to draw relevant information to prepare themselves for the journey, rather than being open to forego their plans.[113]

Another explanation for our results could be the strength of the relationship with the potential migrant on decision-making. For instance, almost all respondents had a close personal contact abroad who served as an inspiration, and none of the respondents except one mentioned having a close personal contact who was a returnee; even that one returnee relative proved to be an encouraging influence to consider migration (Respondent J3, Jhelum). The respondent shared that this relative did not mention to him the potential risks of the journey when he convinced him to try his luck. Returnees may have greater influence over close networks and with those they have strong ties than distant networks and weaker ties. Such cases highlight the importance of the intersection of nature of information shared with the strength of the relationship of the potential migrant with the person providing that information**.** This was also observed when respondents were asked if their advice is taken up by others in their communities:

My close relatives take my advice seriously; however, others still prefer agent's lucrative information.

(Respondent G3, 28 years old, Gujrat, Paraphrased from Urdu)

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[111] Mathias Czaika, Jakub Bijak, and Toby Prike, "Migration Decision-Making and Its Key Dimensions," no. 870299 (2021).

[112] Mbaye, "'Barcelona or Die': Understanding Illegal Migration from Senegal."

[113] Jessica Hagen-Zanker and Gemma Hennessey, "What Do We Know about the Subjective and Intangible Factors That Shape Migration Decision-Making?," 2021).

4.4. Summary

From the above discussion, it is evident that **the mechanisms through which returnees may influence migration decision-making aligns with frameworks that discuss how social networks influence migration decision-making**. Whether returnees contribute more towards inspiration or deterrence of migration plans depends on their own migration experiences and outcomes, which shape their own attitudes towards migration as being worth the risk or not, and hence the impressions they give in the community. From our data, it appears that migration decision-makers approach returnees for information once an initial aspiration towards migration has already been formed. Hence, their role is more prominent in the planning phase rather than the initial aspiration-formation phase. Based on our sample, **returnees are more likely to contribute with information about the journey, and destination choices (based on risks and opportunities)**, rather than direct financial support and introduction to networks. Moreover, whether potential migrants heed to their advice depends on the strength of their relationship with the returnee, as well as the range of success stories and failed outcomes of migration in their close social circle and the community.

5. Role of returnees in information campaigns

5.1. Introduction

After having discussed the role of returnees in shaping the decision-making process on migration of potential migrants, this chapter will delve more in depth into the potential involvement of returnees in the implementation of migration information campaigns. It will do so by, first, examining previous information and awareness raising campaigns that have involved returnees, analysing their rationales and impact. Drawing from fieldwork insights, second, it will explore the information needs highlighted by the returnees, with particular attention to the information gaps and misconceptions that they experienced during their migration plans and journeys, as well as to the most potentially effective channels that, to the best of their knowledge, would reach potential migrants. Finally, the chapter will conclude by discussing some ethical and methodological consideration when engaging with returnees in the implementation of migration information campaigns.

5.2. Global overview

As seen in the previous sections, many studies have shown that potential migrants often tend to rely more on family and friends for the provision of information regarding the migration journey or the situation in the country of destination, even though the information provided tends to be inaccurate or unreliable.[114] On the other hand, the actors implementing the campaigns – whether they be national governments, international organisations, NGOs or civil society organisations – have employed a whole variety of techniques to share more accurate information on the risks of irregular migration. The use of different messengers constitutes one such expedient, although the message conveyed might be perceived as biased and the whole campaign might have mixed results.[115]

The 2014 Australian government's No Way campaign, targeting potential asylum seekers coming by boat to Australia, showed Lieutenant General Angus Campbell, an officer in the Australian army, making clear that boats intercepted in Australian waters will not be welcomed into Australian territory and that the people arriving by boat without documents will not be settled in the country.[116] As also discussed in the PARIM-II background report, despite the relatively simple yet strongly deterrent message, the campaign blatantly failed not only to prevent migrants from trying to reach the Australian territory, but also to communicate its meaning, which in some cases reached the target group in a distorted or overturned way.[117] Whatever the impact, it must be added that, in the design of migration information campaigns, research has shown how official institutions and government officials are generally not perceived as objective sources of information and therefore are not trusted by potential migrants.[118]

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[114] Jessica Hagen-Zanker and Richard Mallett, "Journeys to Europe: The Role of Policy in Migrant Decision-Making" (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2016); Katharina Hahn-Schaur, "Awareness Raising and Information Campaigns on the Risks of Irregular Migration from Pakistan: Background Report," 2021).

[115] Ida Marie Savio Vammen et al., "Does Information Save Migrants' Lives?".

[116] Djamila Schans and Caitlin Optekamp, "Raising Awareness, Changing Behavior?" (Amsterdam: Ministerie von Veiligheid en Justitie, 2016).

[117] See Seefar, "3E Impact. Ethical, Engaged & Effective. Running Communications on Irregular Migration from Kos to Kandahar" (Seefar, 2018).

[118] Jasper Tjaden, Sandra Morgenstern, and Frank Laczko, "Evaluating the Impact of Information Campaigns in the Field of Migration: A Systematic Review of the Evidence, and Practical Guidance" (International Organization for Migration, 2018).

In order to overcome this issue, other campaigns have instead employed local celebrities to deliver their message and increase their impact. The most famous campaign in this respect was launched in 2007 by the Spanish government in collaboration with the IOM and depicted the Senegalese singer Youssou N'Dour imploring young migrants – described as the 'future of Africa' – not to leave their country.[119] The employment of celebrities might have positive repercussions, especially when attempting to reach broader audiences – in fact the campaign was designed as a television spot and broadcasted at the national level. Despite the sensitive and thoughtful message, however, the emotional distance between the messenger and the target group raises doubts on the effective impact of the campaign.

The employment of celebrities might also run the risk of negatively affecting the design of migration information campaigns, as it conveys the idea that the messenger has somehow 'made it' (either in their own country or abroad) while convincing others not to try at all. This is also an issue for those campaigns that, for example, use diaspora members abroad to deliver messages to potential migrants in their countries of destination. The employment of members of the diaspora – especially when sharing the same ethnic, linguistic, and cultural background – might seem logical to increase the trustworthiness of the messenger and reapproach the emotional distance with the target group. However, not only is it often difficult to find diaspora members willing to discourage potential migrants, but, even when this happens, **the messenger might not be perceived as credible or reliable**, especially if not personally known to potential migrants, thus having a counterproductive effect on the objective of the campaign.[120] Even if the conditions of the journey or the situation in the intended country of destination actually deteriorate, diaspora members might still be considered a successful example of migration, and 'if the medium is the message, then this message is: migrate'.[121]

For this reason, some campaigns have resorted to the **employment of local organisations and community leaders** to deliver more credible information on migration paths and risks. The partnership with local organisations and community leaders has proved to be more effective, as it removed the physical and sometimes socio-cultural distance between diaspora members and potential migrants in the country of origin. Not only are local organisations and community leaders more familiar with the local context in which migration takes place as well as socially and culturally closer to potential migrants, but they also have the necessary knowledge of and presence within the local community, which allows them to leverage their social links to understand the needs of people and help them make more informed decisions.[122]

A similar strategy is employed in the **employment of returnees as messengers** in migration information campaigns. Drawing on McCroskey and Teven's study on goodwill, the final report of the PARIM project has shown how the use of returnees as messengers can increase the credibility of the

[119] Kira Kosnick, "Mediating Migration: New Roles for (Mass) Media," *InMedia* 5 (September 2014), http://journals.openedition.org/inmedia/761; Julia Van Dessel and Antoine Pécoud, "A NGO's Dilemma: Rescuing Migrants at Sea or Keeping Them in Their Place?," *Border Criminologies* (blog), April 27, 2020, https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/research-subject-groups/centre-criminology/centreborder-criminologies/blog/2020/04/ngos-dilemma; Juliette Howard, "Beyond the Humanitarian Rhetoric of Migrant Information Campaigns," *E-International Relations*, 2021, https://www.e-ir.info/2021/06/14/beyond-the-humanitarian-rhetoric-of-migrant-information-campaigns/.

[120] Qaisrani and Jokic, "Engaging Diasporas in Information Campaigns on Migration," 2021.

[121] Seefar, "3E Impact. Ethical, Engaged & Effective", 20.

[122] Seefar and ECORYS, "Study on Best Practices in Irregular Migration Awareness Campaigns," 2021.

message and subsequently the potential impact of migration information campaigns.[123] It can do so by **leveraging the expertise of the messenger, their trustworthiness and motivation, as well as their goodwill in sharing accurate information**. In other words, returnees can be seen as trusted sources of information as they can provide first-hand knowledge and experience on (irregular) migration and establish a closer emotional connection with potential migrants, provided that they are willing to share such information with complete goodwill.

In recent years, many migration information and awareness raising campaigns have employed returnees as messengers in the belief that returnees could share first-hand experiences of their migration journeys with their peers, providing a reliable and trustworthy source of information.[124] These campaigns represent a relatively novel approach, as they do not rely on top-down information provided by national governments, international organisations, or local NGOs, but on trained returnees who voluntarily provide information to their peers or participate in lively discussions with them.[125]

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) has been particularly active in implementing this approach, conducting peer-to-peer awareness raising campaigns called 'Migrants as Messengers' (MaM). As seen before, in Senegal and in Guinea the campaign generally envisages the screening of a movie with video testimonies from migrants and returnees, sometimes preceded by theatrical or artistic performances and always followed by interactive question and answer sessions with returnees. Only in Guinea, the CinemArena campaign, consisting in the screening of a documentary related to the risks of irregular migration (called Migrant, Retour de l'Enfer – Migrants, return from hell) with testimonies from migrants and returnees, reached about 16,000 people during its implementation in 32 towns and villages between January and February 2019.[126]

While recent studies have examined the effectiveness of these campaigns through quantitative means and randomised controlled trials, thus providing more reliable results, the empirical evidence of the impact of such campaigns on potential migrants' aspirations and intentions to migrate remains nevertheless scarce. Besides, these studies provide evidence to support the assumption that increasing risk awareness might have a relevant impact on potential migrants' decision-making process; yet, establishing the link between higher risk perception and reduced migration flows is still a difficult task.[127]

Dunsch, Tjaden, and Quiviger have followed the implementation of the MaM campaign in eight neighbourhoods of Dakar. Their study surveyed 924 potential migrants over the course of five months, collecting information about their previous knowledge of migration, their reaction to the movie, and its impact after some time. The analysis of the campaign's impact has demonstrated that potential migrants who participated in the treatment group (n=472) were **19% more well-informed about the**

[123] Qaisrani, Hahn-Schaur, and Hendow, "Irregular Migration Dynamics from Pakistan and the Role of Information Campaigns: PARIM Final Report," 2021.
[124] Tjaden, "Assessing the Impact of Awareness-Raising Campaigns on Potential Migrants – What We Have Learned so Far," 2020, 426–34.
[125] Dunsch, Tjaden, and Quiviger, "Migrants as Messengers: The Impact of Peer-To-Peer Communication on Potential Migrants in Senegal," 2019.
[126] Marie-Luce Bia-Zafinikamia, Jasper Tjaden, and Horace Gninafon, "The Impact of Mobile Cinema Events on Potential Migrants in Guinea - Impact Evaluation Report" (Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2020).
[127] But see Jasper Tjaden, "Risky Journeys – Risk and Decision-Making among Potential Irregular Migrants in Senegal and Guinea," *International Migration* 61 (March 31, 2022), https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.13003.

risks and opportunities associated with migration, 25% more aware of the multiple risks associated with irregular migration, and 20% less likely to migrate irregularly within the next two years compared to the control group (n=452). The study also reported small but positive effects on potential migrants' social perception of returnees in their communities. However, limited effects were registered regarding the factual knowledge on the legal context, the length and costs of the journey, the perception of the chances to successfully arrive to Europe and to remain there in case of arrival as well as of the potential earnings at destination.[128] This, however, is not surprising especially considering that the campaign itself did not aim at increasing potential migrants' factual knowledge on such aspects of migration.[129]

The campaign implemented in Guinea was evaluated through a similar approach. Even in this case, the treatment group, consisting of 1,494 potential migrants between the ages of 15 and 39, was interviewed before and three months after the screening, while the control group, consisting of 1,040 individuals with the same profile, underwent the same interviewing procedure but on a different movie unrelated to migration. The study estimated that the CinemArena – as the campaign in Guinea was called – **increased the awareness of the dangers of irregular migration by 10%, increased the percentage of people with knowledge of financial costs related to irregular migration by 23%, reduced the intentions to migrate to Europe irregularly by 10%, and increased positive perceptions of future economic opportunities in their own country by 19%**.[130]

Given the success of the Phase 1 of the campaign in terms of reach and impact, the IOM has expanded its implementation in other four West African countries, namely The Gambia, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Côte d'Ivoire, as well as in Bangladesh and Panama. The activities implemented in these countries within the framework of the MaM campaign are variegated, spanning from concerts to sport tournaments, school advocacy, theatre plays, radio programs, film screenings, video production, and social media engagement. According to the IOM website,[131] only in West Africa the campaigns have reached more than one million people online and 200,000 people on the ground.

Even in the second phase of the MaM campaign, an impact evaluation has been carried out in the Gambia, Guinea, Nigeria, and Senegal.[132] The study surveyed 13,968 individuals between 17 and 30 years old in 333 areas across the four countries, assessing their knowledge, attitudes, intentions, and perceptions regarding migration issues. The results showed significant differences (and even some peculiarities) from country to country. In Guinea, MaM activities generally increased the knowledge and perceptions related to the risks of irregular migration, reducing the intention to migrate irregularly by 64%. Similarly, in Senegal the intervention significantly increased the knowledge and perceptions related to the risks of irregular migration as well as those associated with the socio-economic possibilities in the country; however, the intention to migrate irregularly decreased only slightly. The intervention in the Gambia seemed effective in improving perceptions of risks associated with irregular

[128] Dunsch, Tjaden, and Quiviger, "Migrants as Messengers," 2019.
[129] Ida Marie Savio Vammen, "'When Migrants Become Messengers': Affective Borderwork and Aspiration Management in Senegal," *Geopolitics* 27, no. 5 (April 14, 2021): 1–20.
[130] Bia-Zafinikamia, Tjaden, and Gninafon, "The Impact of Mobile Cinema Events on Potential Migrants in Guinea," 2020; see also Jasper Tjaden and Horace Gninafon, "Raising Awareness about the Risk of Irregular Migration: Quasi-Experimental Evidence from Guinea," *Population and Development Review* 48 (2022): 745–66.
[131] https://www.migrantsasmessengers.org/.
[132] Oumarou Hebie, Mawugnon F.E Sessou, and Jasper Tjaden, "Irregular Migration from West Africa: Robust Evaluation of Peer-To-Peer Awareness-Raising Activities in Four Countries" (International Organization for Migration, 2023).

migration; however, it also had reversed effects were noted on knowledge related to opportunities in the country. Interestingly, the intentions to migrate irregularly among the surveyed population increased by 11%. The impact assessment in Nigeria, instead, failed due to the very low attendance to the campaign.

Despite the increasing use of migration campaigns, only few of them have been evaluated through randomised controlled trials, with some people (constituting the treatment group) watching a short documentary on migration issues and participating in the following debate with returnees, while others from the control group watching instead a 'placebo' film screening not related to migration and not followed by any discussion. The lack of rigorous assessment makes it difficult to establish the connection between the intervention and the result, thus compromising the outcomes of these campaigns. Belgium, for instance, claimed that the two migration information campaigns targeting potential migrants and returnees in Armenia and Georgia, implemented in 2013-2014 and 2016 respectively, reduced the number of potential migrants from both countries; however, neither of the campaigns have been evaluated.[133] When a clear and rigorous evaluation process is missing, it is difficult to correctly pinpoint the factor that makes potential migrants choose not to leave their country and, therefore, to understand the aspect of the campaign that 'worked'.[134] Besides, as Jinkang et al. notice, the message itself can be received differently by different people, and 'the intermediation of the actors – including journalists – in charge of disseminating campaigns' messages and materials can transform or even subvert these messages'.[135]

Besides, although they do not usually have a wide reach, information and awareness raising campaigns employing returnees might have a **much more powerful impact on potential migrants** than conventional television or social media campaigns. The direct connection between returnees and the audience can indeed add 'an element of direct social exchange which has the potential to create more resilient trust and credibility'.[136] In this respect, a **combination of facts and emotions** has often been employed in the design of the campaign message. Communicating facts is certainly important, especially considering that potential migrants often rely on unreliable or deceptive sources that provide misleading information to lure them (as in the case of smugglers) or to save their own face (as in the case of returnees and diaspora members).[137] Facts alone, however, 'do not change hearts and minds'.[138] Despite providing concrete information on migration, MaM campaigns have limited effects on factual knowledge such as the costs and duration of the journey or the legal procedures to arrive in the countries of destination. In some cases, facts can also be counterproductive. Shrestha, for example, has noticed that potential migrants sometimes overestimate their mortality risks during the journey and therefore, when presented with correct information, might be more encouraged to leave

[133] Audun Beyer, Jan-Paul Brekke, and Kjersti Thorbjørnsrud, "Communicating Borders. Informing Migrants and Potential Asylum Seekers through Social Media" (Oslo: Institute for Social Research, 2017).
[134] Tjaden, Morgenstern, and Laczko. "Evaluating the Impact of Information Campaigns in the Field of Migration," 2018.
[135] Alagie Jinkang, Valentina Cappi, and Pierluigi Musarò, "'Back Way' Migration to Europe: The Role of Journalists in Disseminating Information Campaigns in the Gambia," *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 38, no. 6 (November 2023): 901–18, 6.
[136] Jasper Tjaden and Felipe Alexander Dunsch, "The Effect of Peer-To-Peer Risk Information on Potential Migrants – Evidence from a Randomized Controlled Trial in Senegal," *World Development* 145 (2021), 2.
[137] Qaisrani, Hahn-Schaur, and Hendow, "Irregular Migration Dynamics from Pakistan and the Role of Information Campaigns: PARIM Final Report," 2021.
[138] Jasper Tjaden, "Assessing the Impact of Awareness-Raising Campaigns on Potential Migrants", 430.

their country.[139] Social and behavioural psychology tell us that messages get through if they have an emotional component, if they are personal – in other words, if they manage to establish a close connection between the messenger and the target group.

A study conducted by Seefar and Ecorys has shown how the employment of returnees and diaspora as messengers can provide a **stronger sense of familiarity among the audience**, increasing the emotional connection between the latter and the messengers.[140] The inclusion of personal stories and experiences into the discussion, the study highlights, makes returnees and diaspora members more knowledgeable and reliable than any other actor in the field, potentially influencing migration decisions and aspirations. According to the study, however, the employment of returnees can backfire if the latter are perceived as having failed at their migration intention or even stigmatised after their return, or even if the campaign itself advocates for not migrating at all, without considering other possibilities. Besides, the study shows that the effectiveness of the employment of returnees and diaspora members in migration information and awareness raising campaigns is not straightforward, but rather dependent on the motivation of the messengers, their community influence, the relevance of their experiences, and their communication skills.[141] Still, well-designed information campaigns with clear objectives, impactful messages, and trustworthy messengers, can increase awareness of the risks of irregular migration among potential migrants and reduce their intention to migrate irregularly.[142] As shared by one of the institutional stakeholders interviewed for this study, returnees from influential families in the community may have a deeper impact.

5.3. Insights from the field: information needs highlighted by returnees

5.3.1. Introduction

In this section, we draw on the sample to identify the main information gaps as highlighted by returnees from their experience. Retrospective accounts of returnees allow an understanding of the mismatch between the information respondents had before embarking on the journey and discrepancies they experienced on the way and on arrival. We also present specific recommendations for the PARIM-II for engaging returnees in the migration information campaign, highlighting information gaps that could help frame campaign messages, channels of communication, as well as choice of returnees as messengers while recognising the ethical considerations that should be upheld in engagement of returnees in such campaigns.

5.3.2. Information gaps, misconceptions, and migration experiences

Self-reported retrospective accounts of returnees' own migration experiences show that their journeys were made amidst misinformation, disinformation, and wide information gaps. We structure this discussion in three themes: pre-migration awareness levels and misconceptions; migration experiences and realisation of information gaps; and post-return advice on information needs. These information gaps as highlighted through returnees own experiences offer guidance on topics and areas that information campaigns could target through their messaging.

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[139] Maheshwor Shrestha, "Get Rich or Die Tryin' Perceived Earnings, Perceived Mortality Rate and the Value of a Statistical Life of Potential Work-Migrants from Nepal" (Washington: World Bank, 2017), see also Tijan Bah and Catia Batista, "Understanding Willingness to Migrate Illegally: Evidence from a Lab in the Field Experiment" (Carcavelos: Novafrica, 2020).

[140] Seefar and ECORYS, "Study on Best Practices in Irregular Migration Awareness Campaigns," 2021.

[141] Seefar and ECORYS.

[142] Tjaden and Dunsch, "The Effect of Peer-To-Peer Risk Information on Potential Migrants," 2021.

Pre-migration awareness levels and misconceptions

Drawing on their personal migration decision-making processes, it seems that the kind of information they sought before setting off on the journey was quite general. The source of information for different types of information varied. Agents' role in providing information was found to be quite pivotal for all types of information, and they are found to be wielding considerable influence on migration decision-making of the sample. Based on the respondents' narratives, agents were seen as trustworthy actors facilitating their migration process and providing them guidance, especially before setting off on the journey. The second most common source for validating information received from agents was friends and relatives who were already abroad. In fact, friends and relatives with migration experiences were often the ones who introduced respondents to their trusted agents.

Based on interviews, respondents collected information on the following main themes:

i. Reliable agents

In the initial phases of migration decision, the first and foremost aspect on which respondents sought information was 'credible' agents, i.e. those with higher rates of success in getting their clients to the desired destinations (often regardless of the legality of the migration channel). As most of the respondents were inspired to migrate because of positive migration experiences of relatives and friends, as well as the general popular culture of migrating through irregular means in the communities, the starting point for them was to be introduced to agents who could provide them with more information and facilitate their process. Agents who showed a portfolio of transporting more people to Europe were considered as credible agents. At this stage, personal references were given high weightage, especially from friends and family abroad who had personally used specific agents' services. There were also a few cases who sought this information from returnees, and as witnessed from respondents' accounts on return, aspiring migrants sometimes ask them about their recommendations for credible agents.

ii. Financial cost of migration

The cost of irregular migration was a major decisive factor for respondents and one of the prime areas of concern for which they actively sought information was on the cost of migration. There was a general understanding that migration is expensive, with legal migration considered more expensive and inaccessible than irregular migration. Hence, the cost of irregular migration seemed cost-effective to some as the initial price were considered to be lower than legal migration channels.

The role of agents was observed to be prominent in not only providing information on costs, but also offering lucrative payment plans to respondents to make irregular migration more attractive. The offered breakdown of payment in several steps tied to reaching each transit location throughout the journey, with the final payment to be made on reaching the desired destination in Europe. Furthermore, hiring services of an agent also meant that they did not have to plan or make any other arrangements for the journey themselves.

Average costs varied for respondents, ranging from PKR 800,000 to PKR 2.2 million (approximately EUR 2700 to 7500) often distributed across different legs of the journey. However, it should be noted that these costs may not be a true representative of the current rates of irregular migration as the respondents made their journeys in different times, and with different modalities.

Statements by respondents show that while they found the financial burden to be heavy, hopes of covering the cost with the higher wages earned abroad convinced them to go ahead with the plan. In addition to utilising meagre savings, almost all respondents reported getting loans from personal connections (family, relatives, and friends) to cover for the cost, along with selling some valuable items they possessed (e.g., motorbike, tractor, plot of land, wife's or mother's jewellery, etc.). One even resorted to drastic measures such as stealing money from his family to pay the agents with hopes of earning high enough to repay them later.

iii. Complexity and risks of the journey

For details on the journey, including the dangers and risks of the journey, in general respondents reported seeking this information from agents, followed by their friends and/or family abroad, returnees, and other community members whose relatives had gone abroad through irregular means. While some respondents were previously aware of the potential challenges encountered to reach Europe, agents played an important role in dispelling those fears by promises of good facilitation through their networks throughout the journey. They also convinced potential migrants by sharing 'success stories' of others in the community who used their services to reach European destinations.

There was a general consensus among respondents that agents portrayed the journey to be quite straightforward and easy, with no detail on the potential risks to be encountered along the way, and the various modes of conveyance they would need to reach the destinations. Even those agents who shared some broad information on potential risks that could be encountered along the route made it seem that the likelihood was low, and only 'unlucky' migrants would face those circumstances. Hence, disinformation spread by agents is common, leading to numerous irregular journeys made on false pretences of a smooth and easy entry into the desired destinations.

As shared by one respondent,

Since the agent was only concerned about his financial motives and had no good intentions toward me, he told me everything in a lucrative way: that he would facilitate me in the best way, it was an easy route, and I wouldn't have any problems regarding employment.

(Respondent G2, 21 years old, Gujrat, Paraphrased from Urdu)

iv. Most efficient routes and points of entry into Europe

In terms of selection of migration routes, respondents generally had varied trajectories, sometimes a combination of regular and irregular phases during the journey. Some respondents reported seeking more information about routes and entry points in Europe before embarking on their journeys from their social contacts already in Europe, as well as from returnees in their communities, and others whose family members had migrated irregularly to Europe. However, once on the journey, they were mostly reliant on the agents for directions and next phases of the journey and had limited choice to change the course of their journey. Prior to setting off on the journey, it seemed that migrants were not aware of the actual route they would be taking, when they would reach the different transit points in the journey, and how long it would take for them to reach their destination.

v. Opportunities available in the destination country

For opportunities related to the destination, there were two main trends: some respondents were lured by agents who sold them promises of expansive wealth and success through migration, while most respondents also actively sought this information from their friends and family abroad, followed by returnees in the community. A general understanding was that there were ample economic opportunities in the destination countries waiting for them. Only in two cases, respondents mentioned acquiring information about specific economic sectors and job types available (e.g., agriculture farming, skilled labour in factories). There was also limited factoring of the time it might take them to find employment once at their destinations.

Table below shows the source of information for the type of information as sought by respondents:

Type of information	**Source of information (in order of importance)**
Selecting agents	Friends and family abroad Returnees
Financial costs	Agents Friends and family abroad
Complexity and risks of journey	Agents Friends and family abroad Returnees Community members
Routes and entry points	Agents Friends and family abroad Returnees
Opportunities available in destination country	Friends and family abroad Returnees

Respondents' expectation vs. actual experiences: Realisation of information gaps

Respondents' experiences during the journey and on arrival at specific locations shed light on the information gaps, misinformation, and disinformation they faced while making their migration decisions.

i. Underestimation of challenges of the journey

Respondents shared that while they did have some information about the journey being difficult, and the likelihood of being intercepted by authorities, specific challenges and their intensities were not clearly known to them. Among the many unexpected risks, health challenges emerged to be quite prominent. Many of the respondents shared that they got sick while on the journey, often because of the dire situations faced during that time and no access to proper healthcare. It also appeared that while respondents were generally aware of the clandestine nature of their journey and the risk of being apprehended by authorities in the European country of destination, they neither had any information on the risks of kidnapping along the journey, nor any anticipation of being intercepted by authorities of countries they were transiting through. There was a heightened sense of disappointment and regret especially among those who were intercepted along the way and forcibly returned to Pakistan.

Among the challenges encountered along the route, hunger, thirst, and lack of proper accommodation were cited most frequently. In some cases, it was also clear that while facing these challenges, some respondents continued their journeys merely because of the financial investment they had already

made by paying agents, even though they wanted to return. For instance, according to 22-year-old respondent,

The agent informed me that if I really wished to proceed, I needed to tolerate the challenges or return. Since I had already given 5 lakhs (PKR 500,000 [about EUR 1,600]) to the agent, I felt compelled to continue despite the difficulties.

(Respondent G1, 22 years old, Gujrat, Paraphrased from Urdu)

Another shock for many was physical violence and torture at the hands of bandits and sometimes even authorities. Additionally, witnessing death of their companions, and sometimes even close friends, along the journey had a huge mental and emotional impact on respondents. As shared by a respondent,

Our bodies were weakened from prolonged hunger, thirst, and physical torture. During that torture in jail, my friend fell severely ill and, unfortunately, passed away. Two other boys also couldn't bear the torture and passed away in front of me. The pain of loss of my friend still exists in my heart.

(Respondent J1, 44 years old, Jhelum, Paraphrased from Urdu).

While recounting their migration experiences, it was repeatedly mentioned by respondents that if they knew about the extent of the risks and difficulties encountered in the journey, they would have never decided to migrate irregularly. Some even shared their disappointment in friends and family who misguided them, even though they were trusted as the most credible sources of information at the time of making the migration decision.

ii. Duration of the journey

Another commonly reported issue on which respondents did not have sufficient prior information was the duration it might take for them to reach their destinations. Most respondents did not anticipate the journey to be more than a few days. In reality, some even had to endure living in transit locations for months on end, without any idea of how long before they could be signalled by the agent to travel again. The transit time was marked by difficult conditions including hunger and thirst, lack of proper accommodation, harsh weather, as well as the need to keep low to avoid getting caught.

A respondent shared details of his journey in the following way:

Forced to drink water from sumps, we had been walking for the past 43 hours with no certainty about what lay ahead. Thoughts of our families and the life we left behind weighed heavily on my heart.

(Respondent J2, 29 years old, Jhelum, Paraphrased from Urdu)

The lengths of the journey varied across the sample. While some had been intercepted along the route, cutting their journey short, none of those that reached Europe managed to get there in less than 15 days, enduring treacherous journeys, and for some, the journey even last months.

iii. Modes of conveyance and accommodation

Respondents also had limited information about the means of transport they would be using during the journey. Three respondents initially started their journey legally with valid visas for countries along the route, e.g., Iran, Dubai, Egypt, or Libya, and entered either by flights or by road (for Iran). These visas were also facilitated by their agents. For continuing the rest of their journeys, more clandestine methods were used, which most of the respondents were not prepared for. Common methods used

were shipping containers, trucks, boats, and trunks of cars, as well as long arduous periods of walking over treacherous terrains. Respondents complained about crammed spaces and difficulties in breathing while being surrounded by lots of people.

Respondents who entered Greece or Italy by boat mentioned that the boat dropped them off a good distance from the shore which required them to swim across the water to reach safety. At least two respondents did not know how to swim and struggled to make it to the shore. There was also a case where a respondent experienced an extreme situation of a boat capsize:

After 36 hours at sea, during a turbulent night with high tides, the boat capsized. Chaos ensued as everyone, including children, struggled in the water. The desperate situation continued for hours until the next morning when speed boats, seemingly a beacon of hope, approached. Unfortunately, apparently, these boats were manned by the army, and we were arrested.

(Respondent J4, 43 years old, Jhelum, Paraphrased from Urdu)

Lack of proper accommodation along the journey was also an aspect that respondents had limited information on prior to migrating. They reported staying in uncomfortable, small, cold, and cramped up spaces such as warehouses, small rooms, tents, etc.

We were staying 20-25 individuals in one room and were provided food only once a day.

(Respondent G5, 34 years old, Gujrat, Paraphrased from Urdu)

iv. Misinformation about opportunities for irregular migrants

Another area on which respondents did not reflect much prior knowledge on, but realised after arriving in Europe were the challenges faced in acquiring good jobs. This burst their expectations that Europe had ample opportunities for anyone who arrived. Among those respondents who ended up reaching Europe, most did not find meaningful employment. About four respondents were successful in finding jobs that paid them enough to start remitting and covering the cost of migration, two out of which were apprehended by authorities and deported. For the majority who ended up reaching European destinations, finding employment that offered adequate compensation was not an easy endeavour. Their irregular status became a hurdle towards acquiring a well-paying job, and the complaint of wage theft at the behest of employers was common. They reported that since the employers knew of their desperate situation as irregular migrants, they were given less than minimum wage, and even endured months without receiving their salaries. It was a common occurrence that on demanding their due salaries, they were dismissed from their jobs. Because of their irregular status, they also could not access any social security or complain against the employers' exploitation to any authorities. Some respondents could not even cover the costs of their migration through their earnings over a span of multiple years. Moreover, interviews also showed that respondents had not collected sufficient information on what kind of opportunities are available in their desired destinations, and what skills they would require for those.

v. Emotional toll: regret, familial longing, disappointment, guilt, and shame

Another important theme emerging from the respondents' personal accounts was the emotional toll experienced by respondents. Especially for those that returned without achieving their migration goals, there was a sense of guilt and shame for wasting their family's meagre resources on a fruitless effort, and ridicule faced on return. Those who left without their family's consent or in disagreement with some family members shared how they failed at proving to them the worth of the effort and felt

ashamed of their actions that led to considerable emotional turmoil and financial loss for their families, especially for those who had taken loans to finance their migration journeys.

Those who experienced periods of unemployment, underemployment or wage theft also relied on their families back home to support them financially while they were abroad. This created additional burden on their families besides supporting the migration cost. The fact that they had to rely on financial transfers from back home while living abroad led to considerable embarrassment for the respondents, according to their statements.

Besides the emotions experienced in case of negative migration outcomes, a general sense of homesickness and longing for family members could also be sensed from the interviews. It was especially prominent for those who had lost their family members (usually parents) while they were abroad. In their statements, there was a clear sense of regret of not being there in difficult times of their family and not having the chance of being close to other family. When asked about advice for potential migrants, these respondents emphasised more on the value of being close to family members to avoid regret of not being around when they need you, rather than going through a risky process of earning a living abroad.

Post-return advice on migration awareness for potential migrants

i. Reliability of agents

A major theme emerging in the post-return assessments of respondents' own migration decisions is the regret over trusting agents and finding out that the idea sold to them regarding the ease and straightforwardness of the journey was not true. The hardships they endured along the journey, with some not even able to make it to their desired destination because of arrests and kidnapping, enlightened them on all the challenges that the agents had not prepared them for. Most respondents shared that it was evident even during the journey that for the agents, it was merely a matter of business, and their safety was never a concern for them. Deception faced at the hands of agents also came to the forefront when some respondents shared incidents of being sold by their hired agents to other agents, and even being kidnapped in attacks orchestrated by agents in collaboration with other agents:
For instance,

A shocking revelation surfaced during my time in Turkey that our own agent had betrayed us and was involved in the attack on my friends. Those captured in the attack were sold, leaving my friends in a state of uncertainty.

(Respondent J2, 29 years old, Jhelum, Paraphrased from Urdu)

Amidst this sense of betrayal, a feeling of self-blame could also be sensed in their statements as they admitted that they believed what was told to them by the agents and did not even know the right questions to ask to verify the agents' claims before hiring their services.

ii. Legal channels of migration

Respondents perceived legal migration to be a more expensive and much slower process. They also reported lacking information and capacities to fulfil the visa requirements for regular channels of migration. Most available legal channels are to the Middle East, which the respondents also shared some knowledge of, but it can be drawn from their statements that the Middle East was not the first preference for them when they were deciding on migration.

In fact, two respondents had previously returned from the Middle East on completion of their employment contracts, whereas several respondents had relatives who were in Middle East. However, as explained by one of the respondents, earnings in the Middle East were modest (Respondent MB1, 24 years, Mandi Bahauddin).

All respondents emphasised that more information on legal avenues of migration should be shared in their communities, where culture of irregular migration is rampant, and awareness of legal migration opportunities is limited. Moreover, it was also stressed that there should be awareness on verified information sources that potential migrants can approach to validate their information and seek advice from. This underscores scope for MRC activities in these districts to spread awareness about legal migration options. Moreover, institutional stakeholders interviewed for this research also agreed that returnees may be impactful messengers for offering guidance on legal and safer pathways for the desired destination.

iii. Actual cost of migration vs. investment in a business in Pakistan

Discussions with returnees show that they all experienced higher actual costs of migration than anticipated. For most, it was a huge setback to experience that the price discussed with the agent before setting off on the journey was not sufficient. They experienced many occasions not only along the journey, but also on arrival in the desired destination, and even on return, when exorbitant sums of money were extorted from them. For instance, one respondent experienced kidnapping along the way for which they had to pay ransoms to be freed from. During their stay in Europe, those who could not find employment experienced further financial setbacks to cover their costs of living, often resorting to family back home to send them money, putting additional financial strain on them. Even on return to Pakistan, those that came through forced removal mechanisms reported paying bribes and fees to law enforcement authorities to be released.

Based on these added costs that were not initially taken into account when making the decision to migrate, a sense of regret could be felt in their statements, especially among those who returned without being able to earn a decent living while abroad. Reflecting on the financial implications of their decisions, respondents believed that better financial planning could have led to more successful outcomes. Some of them even concluded that the total sum they spent on the whole process was much more than what they would have needed to start a small business in Pakistan.

It would have been better if I used that money to do business here in Pakistan, in fact, less money is required to establish a decent business.

(Respondent G1, 22 years old, Gujrat, Paraphrased from Urdu)

iv. Risks and challenges of irregular journeys

There was a unanimous agreement on the need for more information on the actual risks of irregular migration. While respondents admitted that they knew that the journey would be risky, but the intensity and extent of the risks and challenges were not clear to them until they experienced those personally. There was also an acknowledgment that when there are economic problems at home, and success stories of migration in their communities, negative stories of risks have limited impact. Yet, they stressed the need for there to be more knowledge on risks as some people might still change their decisions if they have sufficient awareness. Among their social circles, they all said they shared their negative experiences and

many close friends and family had heeded to their advice. On asking if they would be willing to participate in campaign activities to share their experiences, they all showed a strong commitment to contribute to the cause.

5.3.3. Most effective channels

Returnees and stakeholders were also asked for their recommendations on what channels could be most effective and appropriate in their communities for spreading awareness on migration. The choice of tools and techniques should be adapted to the specific locality and cultural context, recognising the diversity in communication preferences and accessibility across different regions. In order of preference, based on the number of mentions, the following channels for information dissemination were highlighted:

i. **Door to door campaigns**

Due to the popularity of irregular migration among youth and a general culture rampant in the communities, several respondents suggested that door-to-door campaigns would be very effective in ensuring that relevant information about migration opportunities, risks of irregular migration, and credibility of agents reaches the relevant audience.

Door-to-door campaigns would also be effective in making other family members aware of the situation. From the data, it is evident that immediate family plays a crucial role in migration decision-making. Their role is prominent not only as enablers through their support in covering the cost of migration, but often times also as critical voices opposing the decision to migrate. It could be gathered from the interviews that some family members, often parents or siblings showed resistance to the idea of irregularly migrating based on the stories they had heard from others. Through door-to-door campaigns, these family members could be informed about balanced information which may empower them to play a more active role in the migration decision.

ii. **One-on-one counselling**

Respondents expressed that they share their migration stories and experiences with people in their communities, and those who then personally pay heed to their advice and dismiss considerations of migrating irregularly. This method has potential to be effective, as evidence discussed in this report suggests that potential migrants give more weightage to their personal connections in migration decision-making. Hence, migration information campaigns could encourage such interactions in which returnees could share their experiences and advice within their social groups and offer more up to date information about legal migration opportunities, job prospects, and visa processes etc. through the support of MRCs. As highlighted by stakeholders, returnees engaged in such programmes should be offered more accurate and comprehensive information from legal experts to ensure that they are sharing credible information.

iii. **Community meetings**

Another channel, commonly suggested by both returnees and stakeholders, was community events and seminars among youth at district offices and union councils. These meetings could provide relevant and up-to-date information to people considering migrating about both legal migration opportunities, visa processes, work opportunities and skill demands in destination countries, as well as about risks of irregular migration, and challenges in destination countries. Interestingly, one stakeholder pointed out that college events may not be as beneficial since

many migrants are typically individuals who have dropped out of formal education; therefore, it is essential to choose those channels that resonate with the target audience and have a meaningful impact (I4, male). Returnee respondents agreed that returnees such as themselves could play an active role in such gatherings by sharing their experiences.

iv. Online sources

Based on the popularity of irregular migration among youth in their area, respondents suggested that online channels such as social media would also be effective in reaching out to relevant population groups.

v. Posters

Similarly, respondents also suggested putting up posters with relevant information to encourage potential migrants to contact official sources for more information. Posters put up in common places frequented by youth can be beneficial in spreading awareness. From PARIM-I experience, a good location for putting up posters was public transport, especially rickshaws which were particularly impactful for increasing outreach to MRCs. Other locations such as snooker and gaming clubs, malls and community centres were also found to be useful.

5.4. Summary and ethical considerations for engaging returnees

As emerged from the findings, there are several possibilities to design migration information campaigns for potential migrants and engage returnees in their implementation. However, there are some other ethical considerations that might affect both the legitimacy and the implementation of migration information campaigns. While general ethical considerations regarding the design and implementation of migration information campaigns have been discussed in the PARIM-II background report, here we will focus on more specific reflections concerning the participation of returnees in such campaigns. The first issue is precisely related to the **possibility of engaging with returnees**. Optimity Advisors and Seefar, for example, have noted the difficulties not only in identifying returnees in certain contexts, but also in persuading them to engage with the campaign.[143] Considering the often-traumatic experiences that returnees might have faced during their journey, it is understandable that some of them do not feel comfortable in sharing their story and their feelings in public.

Even when returnees accept to participate in the campaign, as seems the case from our findings, **their engagement should be carefully assessed according to their experiences and modalities of return**. Research and our findings have shown that returnees who have returned to their country of origin after few months, without financial resources, or through force might face stigma and discrimination in their communities.[144] Besides, the process of re-integration of returnees should be accounted for when contemplating their engagement in migration information campaigns. Even when returnees have returned voluntarily and with enough financial resources, they might still face social or psychological challenges in re-integrating in their communities, especially after many years abroad. The mere fact of being a returnee, therefore, is not sufficient to engage with the campaign, since the particularly negative experience of migration or return might affect the credibility of the messenger and exacerbate their re-integration in the local community. One stakeholder suggested that if

[143] Optimity Advisors and Seefar, "How West African Migrants Engage with Migration Information En-Route to Europe" (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2017).
[144] Seefar and ECORYS, "Study on Best Practices in Irregular Migration Awareness Campaigns," 2021.

returnees are considered for engagement in information campaigns, they should also be provided psychosocial support as per their need (I2, male).

Similarly, it is important to **consider the level of engagement of returnees**. Participants in campaigns are generally volunteers that receive a dedicated training and contribute to the public discussion by providing their story and answering questions from the audience. While the voluntary aspect of their work should reflect their genuine engagement in the campaign and their selfless relationship with their community, some authors have criticised the class and racial divide between returnees and the representatives of international organisations.[145] While the former are often asked to dedicate great amount of time for their participation in the campaigns without financial incentives, the latter enjoy instead generous compensation for their work abroad. We believe, therefore, that the design and implementation of the campaign should reflect on the financial contribution for those involved in the campaign.

Another aspect to consider is the **relationship between returnees and participants**. In highly diversified countries, it is imperative that returnees and participants share the same ethnic and religious backgrounds for the campaign to be effective and sustainable.[146] Besides, while campaigns generally tend to engage with more educated and relatively better off messengers, some have instead highlighted the importance for returnees and participants to share the same socio-economic background, in order not to create further gaps with the audience.[147] Having the same ethnic, religious, and socio-economic background would allow to achieve a three-fold purpose: first, to better respond to the needs of a specific community through targeted messages; second, to establish a stronger connection between the messenger and the target group; third, to implement the campaign in a smoother and more efficient way. That said, as highlighted by a stakeholder, some individuals may exert stronger influential power over target audience by virtue of their status or position in society (I1, male). In an example shared by the individual, returnees from more influential families or those hailing from the capital city of Islamabad were observed to have more impact on potential migrants as effective messengers, as compared to their peers.

Finally, a brief consideration on the **message of the campaign**. Whether having a deterrent, persuasive, or emotional character, such campaigns have been criticised by scholars from different background, who contested their subtle role in governing migration, in particular by reproducing real or imaginary boundaries in the mind of participants. [148] While the specific framing of the message has been briefly examined before, it is here important to mention that messages should have the best interest of the target group at their heart. According to one stakeholder, returnees, particularly those with comprehensive experiences and a nuanced understanding of the migration process, are likely to share

[145] Anissa Maâ, Julia Van Dessel, and Ida Marie Savio Vammen, "Can Migrants Do the (Border)Work? Conflicting Dynamics and Effects of 'Peer-To-Peer' Intermediation in North and West Africa," Journal of Borderlands Studies 38, no. 6 (August 7, 2022): 1–19.
[146] Seefar, "3E Impact. Ethical, Engaged & Effective," 2018.
[147] Seefar and ECORYS, "Study on Best Practices in Irregular Migration Awareness Campaigns," 2021.
[148] Jinkang, Cappi, and Musarò, "'Back Way' Migration to Europe: The Role of Journalists in Disseminating Information Campaigns in the Gambia," 2023; Antoine Pécoud, "Migration Control as Communication? Voluntary Returns, Information Campaigns and the Justification of Contested Migration/Border Governance," Journal of Borderlands Studies 38 (November 2023): 957–73; Ida Marie Savio Vammen, "'When Migrants Become Messengers': Affective Borderwork and Aspiration Management in Senegal," 2021; Jill Williams and Kate Coddington, "Deterring Transnational Migration: Public Information Campaigns, Affective Governmentality, and the Family," International Feminist Journal of Politics 25 (March 2023): 201–22, https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2022.2134046.

messages that not only identify and address the challenges encountered during their own migration journeys, but also emphasise the importance of preparedness, planning, and adherence to legal channels, thus providing potential migrants with a realistic view of the migration process and enabling them to make informed decisions and mitigate potential vulnerabilities (I5, male). In this respect, although sharing the negative experiences of returnees might have an important impact among the target group, campaigns should also spread positive stories as well as correct and reliable information on migration journeys, the rights of migrants in the countries of transit and destination, and legal alternatives to irregular migration.

6. Conclusions and lessons for migration information campaigns

This deep dive offers valuable insight that can inform the design of an effective migration information campaign, targeted at potential irregular migrants from Pakistan. First, it expands on the work of PARIM-I findings and elaborates on how migration decision-making is shaped by narratives, perceptions, messages, and influences of returnees in their communities, and develops a more in-depth understanding of how returnees may influence migration trajectories of others in the community, specifically in Punjab. Secondly, by drawing on the valuable primary data via interviews with a small returnee sample, this research taps on returnees' experiences and stories to identify knowledge gaps, effective communication channels, and areas where PARIM information campaign could contribute meaningfully by engaging returnees. This dataset provides us the unique opportunity to triangulate migration decision-making pre-migration (through survey conducted in PARIM-I with potential migrants), with a snapshot of post-return reflections (through qualitative interviews with returnees).

Based on this research, the following conclusions and lessons can be drawn for the PARIM migration information campaign. Of course, these conclusions should be interpreted with caution, considering that this research is based on a very small data. Nevertheless, these findings also have wider implications for involving returnees in migration information campaigns, adding to the body of literature in this area.

In terms of 'how' returnees may influence migration decision-making, we draw the following conclusions:

- How returnees contribute to decision-making processes of potential migrants depends on their own migration experiences and outcomes. **The journey, experiences abroad, as well as their reason and mode of return shape their conclusions on whether migration was worth it or not, which in turn influences the impressions they share unconsciously or unconsciously in their communities.** In our sample, most respondents had negative migration experiences, either because of difficulties along the journey, or challenges once reaching their destinations, including apprehension by law enforcement agencies and subsequent deportation. For these returnee respondents, migration through irregular channels was not worth the risk they encountered. Once can draw from this that such returnees would share more negative impressions and narratives about migration in the community.
  In a decision-making space where a potential migrant is exposed to both success stories and stories of failure, particularly in a setting where the culture of migration is rampant, the type of information which may have a greater influence depends on the individuals' own cognitive bias, regardless of the messenger. **In other words, a potential migrant inspired by the success of migration may dismiss negative stories discouraging him/her from migrating.**
- In what appears to be contrary to PARIM-I survey findings, the role of friends and family abroad appears to be stronger in as source of migration information based on the narratives of our sample. A deeper analysis reveals that while friends, family and personally known social contacts, and the general culture of migration inspired the initial decision to migrate irregularly among our respondents, some respondents reached out to returnees in their communities to acquire more information about opportunities, risks, and challenges. Hence, **we cautiously conclude that returnees may have a strong role to play in the planning and preparing phase, rather than during the initial inception of the idea of migration**.

- The sample shows that while the choice of desired destinations is shaped by the presence of personal contacts who appear to be successful to potential migrants, **returnees in the community may guide potential migrants about the best routes to get there and how to enter Europe.** Other than information and guidance, our data shows that returnees may offer limited support otherwise such as financial support or introduction to networks.
- Validating the findings from PARIM-I diaspora report, we again find that the degree of influence a particular 'messenger' has on potential migrants depends on the strength of the relationship. **If the messenger, whether returnee or diaspora member, is personally known to the potential migrant, their influence would be stronger on the decision than distant community members or people personally unknown to them**. Respondents in our sample also shared that their advice on migration is taken more seriously by their relatives, while others often listen attentively but may still decide on migrating irregularly.
- An important methodological point to note is that our sample comprised of returnees (whether voluntary or forced), i.e., individuals that decided to migrate in spite of warnings shared by those around them (including stories' of returnees in some cases). The data does not show decision-making processes of those who ended up foregoing their plans for irregular migration based on awareness of risks. **Hence, more comprehensive future research could potentially benefit this literature by highlighting the decision-making processes of those who changed their plans of irregular migration (either by not migrating or by migrating through regular channels). However, on a practical note, we acknowledge that identifying such individuals and including them as participants in this type of research would be a considerable challenge.**
- Prior to migration, the topics on which individuals draw information are varied, and they rely on different actors for different kinds of information.
    - For **identifying credible agents**, they relied on friends and family who had personally used the services of specific agents.
    - For understanding the **cost of migration**, reliance was observed higher on agents, as they are responsible for also offering lucrative financial packages to them for reaching different destinations.
    - For **complexity and risks of migration**, they sought guidance from agents, followed by their friends and/or family abroad, returnees, and other community members whose relatives had gone abroad through irregular means.
    - For **routes and entry points into Europe**, they drew information from social contacts already in Europe, as well as from returnees in their communities, and others whose family members had migrated irregularly to Europe. However, once on the route, their dependence was purely on migration agents.
    - For **opportunities available in the country of destination**, there were two main trends: some respondents were lured by agents who sold them promises of expansive wealth and success through migration, while most respondents also actively sought this information from their friends and family abroad, followed by returnees in the community.
- The degree of information gaps with which the respondents' set on the journey can be determined by the differences in their expectations vs. actual experiences.
    - Among the many unexpected risks, **health challenges** emerged to be quite prominent, as many respondents experienced sickness and health concerns along the journey without proper access to medical support.

- While respondents were generally aware of the clandestine nature of their journey and the risk of being apprehended by authorities in the European country of destination, they neither had any information on the **risks of kidnapping along the journey**, nor any anticipation of being **intercepted by authorities of countries they were transiting through,** giving them a major shock on experiencing these instances**.** Another shock for many was **physical violence and torture** at the hands of bandits and sometimes even authorities.
- Respondents did not have sufficient prior information on the **duration it might take for them to reach their destinations.**
- Most respondents were also not prepared for the different **modes of conveyance** they ended up using for various phases of the journey, including uncomfortable situations such as walking for hours on treacherous terrains, inside the trunks of cars, shipping containers, and small boats.
- Respondents lacked sufficient information **about challenges faced after reaching the destination**. Among those respondents who ended up reaching Europe, most did not find meaningful employment.
- The **emotional toll** experienced by respondents, including feelings of regret, familial longing, disappointment, guilt, and shame came out quite strongly. There was a sense of guilt and shame for wasting their family's meagre resources on a fruitless effort, and ridicule faced on return, as well as regret among those who lost their family members back home while they were abroad.

Based on these conclusions, as well as insights and recommendations shared by the sample, the following practical lessons can be drawn for the PARIM migration information campaign:

- The role of returnees in influencing migration decision-making can be effective, especially if they are personally known to the target audience. **The stronger the personal connection, higher the influence may be**. Hence, PARIM-II campaign should aim to engage returnees within the same communities that comprise the target audience.
- What message or information a returnee may share with potential migrants depends on their **own experience of the journey, stay and return**. To keep the flow of information unbiased, the campaign should let returnees share their own testimonies without asking them to highlight any particular aspect over the other. However, their interventions should be complemented with discussions led my migration experts or those who have first-hand knowledge of navigating legal channels of migration as well.
- As drawn from our data, potential migrants may engage returnees for specific types of information related more to the choice of route and challenges and opportunities at the destination. From analysis of information gaps as well, we find that, before embarking on irregular migration, potential migrants have less detailed information on modes of conveyance, duration of journey, and opportunities available at the destination. Therefore, PARIM campaign could focus on **engaging returnees for providing specific information** on these topics, i.e., highlighting not just the challenges of irregular journeys, but alternative legal channels and routes that are available, types of skills needed in countries of destination, and how to secure employment through legal migration.
- In terms of specific details of the journey, **returnees can share first-hand experiences highlighting the risks that are commonly experienced, but not commonly known to migrants before setting off on the journey.**

- Another area where information is lacking and should be provided by migration information campaigns is the **reliability of agents**. This emerged as a topic of high relevance. Returnees may be able to share their experiences as well as lessons learned from their interactions with different agents in their communities. They may also be helpful in identifying fraudulent agents who operate within their communities and reporting them to law enforcement agencies.
- **Returnees' experiences can also throw light on the actual cost of migration**, taking into account the various risks and hardships that migrants may encounter to give a more factual estimate of costs required to cover migration. Project team may complement this information by offering cost estimates of legal ways of migrating to specific destinations for comparison, as they already do through the efforts of the MRCs.
- In terms of effective channels, **door-to-door campaigns were highlighted as the most effective means to reach not just the target audience (potential migrants), but also secondary audience (family members and community members).** Other useful means to share general information also included community meetings, online sources, and posters. However, for a deeper discussion, one-on-one counselling may be most useful (as also highlighted in PARIM-I findings).
- **Returnees' engagement could prove to be useful in community meetings**, where they could share their experiences and discuss options for legal migration, highlight skills in demand, and employment prospects. Moreover, the most effective channels for their engagement would be one-on-one counselling, or within small groups of individuals from their social groups, offering up to date information about legal migration opportunities, job prospects, visa processes, fraudulent agents etc. through the support of MRCs.
- On a practical basis, it is worth noting not only that the identification and engagement of returnees might be difficult to achieve, but also that their experiences might not be heard or believed by potential migrants or the members of the community. This constitutes an important challenge that campaign developers should take into consideration. A thorough discussion on the ethical and methodological issues among the latter is, therefore, paramount for the successful implementation of the campaign.

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