

# Irregular Migration Routes to Europe and Factors Influencing Migrants' Destination Choices Management Summary

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## Introduction

Irregular migration to Europe has become a central issue for the 28 member states of the European Union (EU). The number of migrants crossing the Mediterranean with the intention to irregularly cross a European border reached a record high in 2014, when 267,344 people were detected at the EU borders. This is more than double the number of people that irregularly crossed a European border from the Mediterranean in 2013 (Frontex, 2015).

The purpose of this study is to provide a systematic review and literature analysis of the existing literature on two aspects of irregular migration: 1) a description of the different routes of irregular migrants to Europe, and specifically to the Netherlands, and; 2) an analysis of the factors that influence destination choice of irregular migrants, specifically the Netherlands. The review assesses existing evidence and identifies research gaps that require further research and exploration. The focus of this review is on people that enter the EU irregularly. Although it is widely acknowledged that the majority of entrants come by airplane, we specifically focus on irregular entry by land or sea.

## Research Design

The research design and approach has used Hagen-Zanker and Mallet's (2013) approach for undertaking a rigorous, evidence-focused literature review. The purpose of this review was to assess the research evidence. The first step, after defining the research questions, was to define inclusion and exclusion criteria. We have included studies that used quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method approaches from both the academic and grey literature. We covered both English and Dutch studies. Our exclusion criterion was that we did not include media articles, blogs, commentaries, or other non-research based studies. The one exception to this is where we have included statistics on irregular migrants from sources such as Frontex.

The next stage was to set our search strings and retrieve sources from google scholar, google, and web of science. From the sources retrieved we scanned titles and abstracts based on relevance. In total we have identified 94 relevant sources. These sources were assessed for quality based on: the rigor of the research design and methodology; the study reliability and validity; the number of informants in the study; the credentials of the author; and the creditability of the findings. All of the studies that were deemed relevant to the study met the quality standards. Sources were assessed and classified in three different categories:

- *Strong evidence*: Focus of the source is precisely on the topic;
- *Partial evidence*: Part of the paper relates/addresses the topic;
- *Little evidence*: Topic comes up within the paper, but is not the focus of any particular section.

This criterion is based on individual sources. The final stage of the evidence assessment was to assess the certainty of the findings. The findings of the review have been organized into the following three categories:

- *Strong agreement*: Represents findings that are confirmed by multiple sources;
- *Mixed agreement*: Clear conclusions about these findings cannot be drawn from the literature;
- *Research gaps*: Represents elements where there is virtually no evidence within the literature.

This criterion is based on key themes found in the literature, which contrasts the previous criterion that was based on individual sources.

## Results

### *1) What are the main irregular migration routes to Europe, especially to the Netherlands?*

The main irregular migration routes to the final destination in Europe can be distinguished in three stages. Relevant is that the majority of literature exists on the second stage of migrants crossing into the EU. Few sources are available on the first stage and on the third stage.

- 1) from the country of origin to the fringes of Europe;
- 2) crossing the EU borders;
- 3) from the country of entry in the EU to the country of destination in the EU.

There is strong agreement that the most frequently used irregular migration route to cross into the EU is the Central Mediterranean route. This route primarily refers to people crossing from Libya and Tunisia to Italy and to a lesser extent to Malta. Recently, Libya has become the central hub for people crossing the Mediterranean irregularly. The number of migrants using the Central Mediterranean route in 2014 is more than 3 times greater than the number of migrants using any other route.

There is strong agreement that the second most frequently used route to reach Europe is the Eastern Mediterranean route. This route departs in Turkey and mainly ends in Greece and to a lesser extent in Bulgaria and Cyprus. This route has changed over the past 3 years due to the increased surveillance on the Greek-Turkish border. People used to enter Greece by land, but due to increased land crossing apprehensions this changed to increased sea crossings. The final main route for irregular migrants to Europe is the Western Balkan route. Here we have identified a research gap. Another research gap relates to the second part of this question. Unfortunately, it is not possible to answer this question, because there is insufficient information in the literature available to assess the main irregular migration routes to the Netherlands.

There is strong agreement that at least four factors influenced the direction of migrants' routes. The first factor is conflict along the route. The case of Libya and Sudan illustrates that when there is conflict at a location along a route, the route will change. The second factor is weather. Typically, the number of crossings in the Mediterranean Sea decrease during the winter months. However, in 2014 this is the first time these flows did not decrease in the winter. It is unknown as to if this is because weather conditions were better in winter 2014. Third, border surveillance and patrolling and push back policies have led to clear changes in irregular migrants routes. This has been demonstrated in North Africa and on the Turkish- Greek border. Finally, countries visa regimes appear to influence irregular migrants' routes. For example, visa liberalization for African migrants in Turkey has led Africans to first fly directly to Turkey and to then try and migrate onwards from Turkey. On the other hand, there is mixed agreement that immigration policy in destination countries influence the direction of migration to destination states.

### *2) What factors influence the destination choices of irregular migrants, especially the choice of the Netherlands?*

Five overarching factors have been identified from the literature review as influencing the destination choice of irregular migrants. The first factor is what we call economic factors. Economic factors include not only the costs of the migration, but also migrants' perceptions of the economic environment in the country of destination. The costs of the migration journey can determine destination choice as migrants can only migrate as far as they can afford. A strong economy and job opportunities can act as a pull factor for migrants to a destination country.

The second factor is migrant smugglers. Migrant smugglers have been identified as playing a key role in influencing the destination choice of migrants in three ways: 1) the destinations that they offer services to, 2)

making the destination choice decision for the migrant; and 3) leaving the migrant at a different location than was agreed on.

Third, social networks and access to information arise as a key factor influencing irregular migrants' destination choice. This factor includes close and distant networks, as well as information through the media, internet and social media. There is mixed agreement on the role of networks in influencing migrants' destination choice as in some cases it can be a draw and in others a deterrent. Further, there is little information available on how irregular migrants use social media to decide where they want to migrate to.

The fourth factor identified is conditions and experiences in transit countries. The conditions in transit countries influence the irregular migrants' destination choice in three ways: 1) poor conditions can instigate onwards migration; 2) transit experiences can become settlement; and 3) access to new sources of information in transit countries can redirect migrants' destination choice. Again, the frequency with which each of these situations occurs is unknown.

The fifth factor that influences the irregular migrants' destination choice is migration policies. Migration policies are widely defined to include: border restrictions, police interventions, asylum policies, and return policies. The evidence on the role of migration policy is inconclusive. As an example, some studies find that migrants are attracted to countries due to favorable asylum policies, whereas others find that the majority of asylum seekers know very little about asylum procedures in the destination country prior to arrival. This is a key area for further investigation and in particular to understand how different policies have different impacts on destination choices.

Regrettably, it was also evident that there is not enough information in the literature to draw conclusions regarding why irregular migrants choose the Netherlands as their destination choice. Older studies indicate that networks are the main reason that migrants choose the Netherlands. The review brings forth that the Netherlands is often not the destination choice of migrants. The Netherlands was actually intended as of country of transit, but migrants were apprehended while being in transit.

## **Evidence Assessment**

As mentioned above, the findings of this systematic review have been organized into the following three categories: strong agreement, mixed agreement and research gaps. Due to the relatively small number of high relevant sources on some of the topics of the review it will be apparent in the following assessment that more research gaps have been identified than areas of stronger evidence.

### ***Strong agreement***

- The migration journey to Europe takes place in different stages (with the exception of individuals who fly directly and have been excluded from this review).
- Over the past decade, migration routes to Europe have changed in r. Nowadays Libya and Turkey became the central transit countries to the EU.
- Over the past decade the countries of origin of irregular migrants have changed. Prior to 2005 the main group of migrants crossing into Europe irregularly from Africa was North Africans. According to the literature reviewed this has changed to irregular migrants from sub-Saharan Africa.
- The largest numbers of irregular migrants crossing into Europe are using the Central Mediterranean Route. This is substantiated not only by the Frontex detections data, but is also suggested by other sources, as there are more sources on this route than any other route.
- Police patrols and surveillance and push-back policies impact the routes that the migrants take. It is evident that irregular migrants' routes change according to police patrols and surveillance and push-back policies. This is not to say that these interventions stop irregular migration flows, however, it is clear that they have an impact on the direction of the routes.

- Irregular migrants' routes change according to conditions in countries along the route, and specifically to avoid areas of conflict. This has been evidenced by both the case of Sudan and Libya.
- The resources of the migrant, which are largely dependent upon their class and socio-economic status, play a key role in determining their immediate destination.
- Smugglers play a role in influencing destination choice.
- Living for a while in a transit country is a common reality for many irregular migrants. Experiences in transit countries influence destination choices.

### **Mixed agreement**

- Migrants' routes react to changing environments, including security and policy interventions. Insecurity in transit countries can be viewed as an opportunity to migrate irregularly with less risk of apprehension. A key example is that Libya is now the central transit country to cross the Mediterranean.
- Weather impacts migration routes. In the past this would have been considered with greater certainty, but due to the increasing flows during the winter of 2014, this trend could be changing. However, the increased flows during winter 2014 may only be due to the higher than normal temperatures.
- Changes in countries visa policies can impact irregular migrants' routes. Increasing restrictions in visa policies for North Africans to Italy and Spain have been cited as one of the key reasons for rises in flows of irregular migrants in the 1990s to Europe (De Haas, 2007). More recently, it has been the case in Turkey wherein Schapendonk (2012) has reported that African migrants fly directly to Turkey to try and access Europe. Visa liberalization policies for African migrants in Turkey have made this an accessible option. Although this does appear to be a key factor influencing irregular migrants' routes, there are few sources and examples to triangulate this finding further.
- Migrants' agency in choosing destination country. Early research in this field suggested that migrants had limited agency in choosing their destinations. Yet more recent research and theoretical models account for the greater role that migrant agency plays in making decisions on destinations. At the same time, however, recent studies also find that large proportions of migrants have limited to no knowledge of their destination. This raises questions about the conditions under which migrants are able to exercise agency in their destination choices.
- Networks play a role in determining destination choice. There is contrasting evidence within the sources as to the role networks play in attracting or deterring migrants from certain destinations. The majority of sources suggest that when a migrant has a network tie (either strong or weak) in a destination country, the migrant will seek to migrate to that country. This decision is generally made prior to leaving the country of origin and is maintained through the migration trajectory. There is contrasting evidence, however, that the presence of networks sometimes deter a migrant from selecting the destination choice of the network tie (Collyer, 2007).
- Information access is critical in determining destination choice. Several studies have indicated that access to information through social networks, 'spontaneous' networks, or the internet and social media is a central factor in determining destination choice. Other studies suggest that migrants have no information prior to coming to a certain destination. This suggests that there is mixed agreement in the role of and access to information in determining migrants' destination choices.
- Some older research studies indicated that the Netherlands is frequently not the favoured destination choice of irregular migrants. In some cases, the Netherlands can in fact be characterized as a 'transit' country wherein migrants get 'stuck' when they are apprehended by the police while seeking to migrant onwards to Scandinavian countries or further afield to Canada or the United States. The frequency with which this occurs is unknown and is thus mixed evidence agreement that requires further research.

### **Research gaps**

- *We have established that routes of migrants from non-African countries requires further investigation.* The majority of research on routes to Europe focuses on African migrants, with some literature addressing

Afghan migrants. There is a gap in the literature in understanding the trajectories of migrants from countries such as Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Sri Lanka, and from regions such as far-east Asia and South America.

- *Transit migration, particularly in the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe:* More literature has addressed transit migration in North Africa, Turkey and Greece, but transit migration through the Western Balkans and Eastern European countries of the EU such as Poland, Croatia, and Romania has remained under studied.
- *Factors influencing decision making in transit:* Experiences in transit are highly complex, and several factors have been identified that influence migrants' experiences in transit. Understanding the relationships and hierarchies among or between decision-making factors is an area lacking evidence, however.
- *The role migrant smugglers relating to the destination choice:* Although there is an increasing body of research on the role of migrant smugglers, their role in determining destination choices of migrants, their relationships and treatment of migrants, and how they themselves make decisions regarding migrants' destinations and routes is not clear.
- *Migration trajectories within the EU:* There is a key gap in the evidence on understanding routes and factors that influence migrants' migration trajectories after they entered the EU.
- *The Dutch Case:* More research within the Netherlands on the specific Dutch context would be required to elicit understandings on the specific routes of migrants to the Netherlands and reasons for choosing the Netherlands, or other countries, as a destination.
- *The role of migration policy:* The evidence is inconclusive on the role of policy in influencing migrants' decisions regarding destination choice. Further research is required on how migrants perceive policies in influencing their decisions.
- *Influence and use of social media:* Research is emerging on the use and importance of social media in irregular migration (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014; McGregor & Siegel, 2013), but the evidence is insufficient to draw conclusions regarding the role and importance of social media in determining migrants' routes and destination choices.

### **Recommendations for future research**

There are several recommendations for future research that can be made based on the identified research gaps and overall findings of this review. We focus on three specific areas for further research:

- *Comparative mixed methods approaches:* Migrants are a highly heterogeneous group, and future research should aspire to: 1) be comparative across countries of origin; 2) be comparative across countries of destination, 3) comparative across migrants with different migration motivations and 4) have large enough sample sizes to draw out differences between groups. Comparative research, including both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, is essential to capture the nuances and differences between migrant groups in their migration trajectories
- *Understanding the Dutch Case:* There is a need for more research on this topic in the Netherlands. A key challenge with irregular migration is that flows are continually changing and research quickly becomes outdated. New research is needed on irregular migration to the Netherlands, as very little research has been conducted with irregular migrants who were rejected asylum in the Netherlands. Further, research needs to take into account the reasons why migrants choose the Netherlands as a destination or a transit country.
- *Understanding decision making factors in transit countries:* Experiences in transit play a pivotal role in migrants' migration trajectories and in particular in determining their decisions for settling in transit or for seeking onward migration. There are several factors that influence decision making in transit, including networks and access to information, policy interventions, smugglers, and conditions in the country of transit and intended destination countries. A key area for future research is understanding decision-making factors in transit and how these different factors are prioritized and reconciled.