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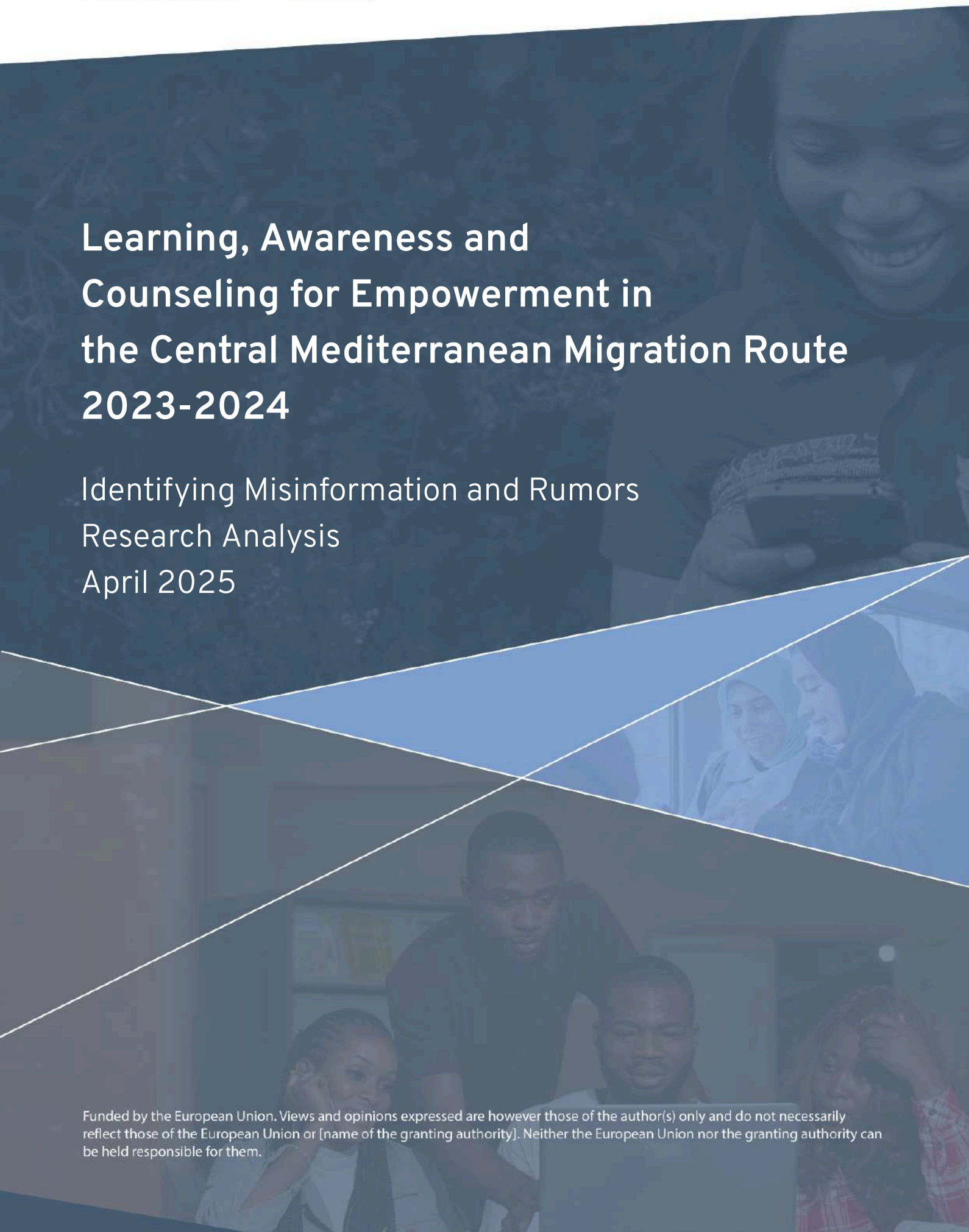
Learning, Awareness and Counseling for Empowerment in the Central Mediterranean Migration Route 2023-2024

Identifying Misinformation and Rumors Research Analysis

April 2025



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Acronyms

AMIF	Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund
CMR	Central Mediterranean Migration Route
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
KII	Key Informant Interviews
FGD	Focus Group Discussions
LACE	Learning, Awareness, and Counselling for Empowerment
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
WOM	Word of Mouth

Executive Summary

This research was conducted under the Learning, Awareness, and Counselling for Empowerment (LACE) between July and November 2024. The multi-country study (Niger, Nigeria and Tunisia) identified common rumours and misinformation surrounding irregular migration. It employed a mixed method approach combining Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), Focus Group Discussions, (FGDs), online quizzes, and a large-scale survey . In total, the research conducted 41 KIIs, 31 FGDs with 330 participants, collected 990 quiz responses, and surveyed 958 individuals.

The research explored how communities define and interpret irregular migration, what sources and channels they trust for migration information, and how false or misleading information is shared. The findings are intended to guide the design of more effective and contextually relevant strategies to address misinformation and promote migration choices along the Central Mediterranean Route.

Findings

Perceptions and Drivers of Irregular Migration

In Nigeria, Niger, and Tunisia, potential migrants saw irregular migration as a rational and culturally accepted response to economic hardship, rather than a last resort. Well-established, affordable and familiar routes make it accessible. Young people especially saw it as a pathway to dignity, financial success, and community respect. 45% of respondents believed irregular migration was "a risk worth taking,".

This perception is closely linked to the broader context of economic strain as economic hardship is the most commonly cited driver (49% cited income and 15% high cost of living). This pattern was consistent across Niger, Nigeria, and Tunisia, indicating a shared perception of limited economic opportunity as a major push factor. Participants with lower levels of formal education often cited basic needs and community pressure as key motivations, while those with higher education were more likely to emphasise frustration with legal migration obstacles. Structural barriers to legal migration included visa restrictions and lack of reliable information.

Primary Sources of Migration Messaging

Relatives and friends were the most trusted and influential migration messengers, especially among younger and irregular-bound migrants. While the strongest encouragement often came from relatives and friends abroad, families at home, particularly in rural areas, also played a significant role by viewing migration as a collective investment and sometimes applying pressure on members to pursue it.

Returnees were also seen as both role models and informal advisors, often providing first-hand guidance on migration routes, costs, and contacts, which can either reinforce or challenge community assumptions about migration. In addition, religious leaders and community elders were perceived to have a moderate but meaningful influence, particularly among individuals planning irregular

migration, suggesting untapped potential that could be strengthened through targeted engagement. By contrast, government agencies and NGOs were perceived as peripheral actors, lacking credibility, consistency, or proximity to the concerns of local communities.

Word-of-mouth communication remained one of the most trusted (25.7%) and employed channels (61.8%) for sharing migration information, particularly among less educated individuals. Young people relied on social media (Facebook, WhatsApp) for information about migration. Surveyed youth who consume social media were significantly more likely to encounter curated or glamorised portrayals of life abroad, often through peer-generated content or migrant-run groups that promote specific routes, contacts, and smugglers. In contrast, older people relied mostly on institutional sources.

Misconceptions and Rumours

False promises of employment and simplified portrayals of life in Europe were the most commonly cited misinformation themes. Stories of instant success, legal protection upon arrival, and easy access to jobs were widely shared. Social networks, returnees, and smugglers all contributed to exaggerating benefits while downplaying risks. These narratives align with local aspirations and are rarely countered by negative examples, creating an aspirational pull that can override known dangers. While these themes were common across countries, belief in guaranteed economic success appeared particularly strong in Tunisia, and among youth across contexts, whereas older and more educated respondents expressed more scepticism. As such, rumours were widely seen as a key driver of irregular migration, particularly among young people. Over half of respondents believed incorrect information was falsely inflating the expectations of young people and therefore increasing the likelihood of irregular migration.

Media literacy varied most by age and country context. Older and more educated individuals were more likely to identify false information and critically assess the credibility of different sources. In contrast, participants from Tunisia or less educated individuals, were more inclined to state that misinformation has little impact. These divergences reflect varying levels of media literacy and information access. Over half of respondents believed that misinformation increases the likelihood of irregular migration by creating unrealistic expectations and reinforcing aspirational narratives.

Most respondents said they tried to verify information, though this varied significantly between groups. Notably, information verification methods showed significant variations based on demographic factors, with a significant minority (17.9%) report using no verification method at all.

Government websites were the most commonly used verification source (40.5%), particularly among older individuals and those favouring legal migration. In contrast, younger people and those open to irregular migration rely more on social media, messaging apps, or peer networks to verify information. Qualitative findings reveal that when respondents did consult government websites, it was typically to confirm visa requirements, check documentation processes, or explore legal migration routes.

Respondents who consult NGOs or formal media tend to be more risk-averse and better informed, and more confident in their ability to recognise false information. This highlights the importance of locally embedded, accessible, and linguistically appropriate verification tools, including those operated by trusted local brands such as Seefar's TMP. Many current verification systems are centralised or external, and lack community feedback loops or presence in rural areas, limiting their impact.

Strategies to Countering Misinformation

A range of awareness strategies, such as informative sessions, community outreach, and media campaigns, were implemented across the three countries, though their reach and perceived effectiveness varied. While 44.7% of respondents reported attending such events, impact was uneven by country and demographic group. Sessions involving returnees or dramatised content were seen as more engaging, but many initiatives lacked follow-through or local adaptation.

Embedding migration awareness in educational settings through life-skills or civic education modules was shown to increase young people's confidence in identifying and countering misinformation. KIIs and FGDs highlighted the crucial role of schools in providing forums to discuss risks, aspirations, and misconceptions to help young people navigate social media influences. Quantitative findings indicated strong support for this approach, especially among youth and legal migration planners. Schools, as trusted community spaces, offer an effective entry point for early attitude shaping and long-term knowledge dissemination.

Evidence on the effectiveness of programmes was limited. Our research asked respondents what they found to be most influential on their attitudes towards irregular migration. Those who engaged with NGOs or formal sources were more likely to report they became more cautious about irregular migration or reconsidered their plans altogether. In contrast, reliance on word-of-mouth or family diminished the perceived effectiveness of these interventions. Respondents viewed mass media campaigns as less impactful unless they were accompanied by referral mechanisms, in-person events, or follow-up services. Their perceived value increased when they were linked to trusted messengers, sustained outreach, or opportunities to engage directly with trained facilitators.

While these efforts are necessary, their impact is constrained when not adapted to local languages, realities, and infrastructure gaps. Tools that do not integrate local user feedback or respond to community-specific misinformation patterns risk being underutilised. The most effective efforts were those that combined trusted messengers with sustained local engagement.

Recommendations

Based on Seefar's operational experience and insights from community members, civil society, and institutions in Nigeria, Niger, and Tunisia, the following recommendations address practical needs and priorities of those most affected by migration misinformation.

1. Enhance integration of migration education into school systems: Embedding migration awareness in educational settings through life-skills or civic education modules was shown to increase young people's confidence in identifying and countering misinformation. KIIs and FGDs highlighted the crucial role of schools in providing forums to discuss risks, aspirations, and misconceptions to help young people navigate social media influences. Quantitative findings indicated strong support for this approach, especially among youth and legal migration planners. Schools, as trusted community spaces, offer an effective entry point for early attitude shaping and long-term knowledge dissemination.

2. Expand the use of returnees and peer educators in community-based outreach: Returnees are uniquely positioned to provide credible, first-hand accounts of migration experiences. Both qualitative and quantitative data emphasised their role as trusted messengers. When economically supported

and trained, they can effectively humanise migration risks. Their involvement must, however, be context-sensitive and backed by psychosocial and logistical support to ensure sustained engagement. Peer educators were also seen as key to delivering accurate migration information due to their accessibility, local adaptation, and trustworthiness with target audiences.

3. Invest in trusted local figures to drive community messaging: Religious leaders, youth mentors, social media influencers, and neighbourhood influencers hold deep-rooted trust within communities. Alongside these local actors, relatives and friends abroad also emerged as powerful messengers whose real-life success and digital visibility shape migration decisions, especially among youth and irregular migrants. Despite lacking technical expertise, their involvement in communication campaigns significantly boosts message credibility. Survey data showed that trusted local leadership was positively associated with willingness to share accurate migration information, underscoring their potential in counter-misinformation strategies. Qualitative data stressed the importance of decentralised, grassroots outreach through respected community voices and culturally relevant storytelling techniques, especially among older or less literate populations.

4. Pair awareness-raising with economic alternatives to address root causes: Misinformation cannot be tackled in isolation from economic realities. Respondents broadly agreed that livelihood support, such as youth entrepreneurship and vocational training, would be more effective in reducing irregular migration than awareness campaigns alone. Addressing the structural drivers of migration enhances the credibility of counter-messaging and creates real alternatives for at-risk individuals. Awareness messaging should complement economic interventions, as pairing these strategies can boost trust, offer tangible alternatives, and foster more sustainable behavioural shifts.

5. Support hybrid information ecosystems that bridge online and offline sources: Information consumption patterns are fragmented along age, education, and migration intent. Younger audiences prefer social media, while older and more educated individuals rely on websites and traditional media. A hybrid communication model that blends digital platforms with offline reinforcement (radio, school programming, and in-person outreach) is necessary to ensure message reach and credibility across demographics.

6. Develop localised misinformation response mechanisms through trusted institutions: Verification behaviour is shaped by trust and access. A sizable portion of respondents either rely on informal networks or do not verify information at all. Building institutional verification pathways, such as helplines, community info centers, or NGO-led campaigns, can help address this gap. These efforts should be adaptive, feedback-driven, and integrated with local information practices to enhance uptake and trust. Locally recognised brands, such as Seefar's TMP (The Migrant Project), are particularly well-positioned to lead such initiatives due to their community embeddedness and cultural credibility.

7. Tailor messaging by migration intent, not just by geography or age: Audience segmentation by migration intent is essential. Individuals interested in irregular migration engage more with informal and peer networks, while those planning legal migration respond more to institutional and educational channels. Messaging should be aligned with these behavioural profiles to improve credibility and impact. Incorporating tools such as motivational profiling and, where possible, automated screening can support smarter content delivery across diverse audiences.

8. Implement AI-powered, community-centred monitoring systems for early warning and rapid response: Effectively countering misinformation requires systems that not only inform but also listen

and adapt in real time. Findings from this study underscore the importance of community-generated insight in shaping credible responses, particularly as information access and usage vary across countries and education levels. AI-powered tools such as chatbots, multilingual analysis, and predictive tracking can support the early identification of misinformation trends, while low-barrier feedback channels ensure participation from hard-to-reach communities. These systems can complement structured platforms like government websites, which were widely used by certain groups but showed unequal uptake, suggesting the need for more accessible and responsive channels. Embedding these systems within trusted local networks can increase responsiveness, accuracy, and long-term impact.

Introduction

The European Commission's Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) commissioned the Learning, Awareness, and Counselling for Empowerment (LACE) project, implemented between July 2023 and December 2024. The project's objective was to empower individuals along the Central Mediterranean Migration Route (CMR) by improving access to information, supporting informed migration decision-making, and reducing reliance on irregular migration pathways.

Between July and November 2024, the LACE project conducted a multi-country research to identify misinformation and rumours surrounding irregular migration. To capture these dynamics, the research employed a mixed-methods approach combining Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), online quizzes, and large-scale surveys.

Background

Migration, both regular and irregular, has been a significant focus of global policy and research due to its socio-economic implications and humanitarian concerns. The phenomenon of irregular migration[1] along the CMR is complex and multifaceted, involving various socio-economic, political, and environmental factors. The CMR remains one of the busiest[2] and most dangerous migration routes globally. High levels of abuse, human rights violations, and risky journeys characterise the region. Despite these challenges, the flow of migrants, particularly from West and North Africa towards Europe, persists due to factors such as socio-economic conditions, political instability, and the perception of better opportunities abroad.

The socio-economic and political realities in key countries of origin along the CMR further illustrate the structural drivers that sustain irregular migration flows.In Niger, one of the world's poorest countries, more than 40% of the population lives below the poverty line, with livelihoods concentrated in agriculture, an increasingly precarious sector due to climatic shocks and lack of diversification[3,4]. Youth unemployment is critically high, fostering a sense of hopelessness among young people[5,6]. Economic instability, inadequate infrastructure, and political uncertainty further undermine prospects for growth[7]. Nigeria faces similar challenges despite its oil wealth. Over 40% of Nigerians live below the national poverty line, and the economy's dependence on oil, combined with weak diversification,

[1] Migration that occurs outside the regulatory norms of the sending, transit, and receiving countries
[2] https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean
[3] World Bank. (2020). Poverty & Equity Brief: Niger. *The World Bank Group*. Retrieved from https://databank.worldbank.org/data/download/poverty/33EF03BB-9722-4AE2-ABC7-AA2972D68AFE/Archives-2020/Global_POVEQ_NER.pdf
[4] Flahaux, M.-L., & De Haas, H. (2016). African migration: Trends, patterns, drivers. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 4(1), 1.
[5] International Labour Organization (ILO). (2018). Global Employment Trends for Youth 2018. International Labour Office. Retrieved from https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_629733.pdf
[6] Hahonou, E. K. (2019). Mobility and migration in West Africa: Some sociocultural perspectives. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 45(2), 220-237.
[7] Ratha, D., Mohapatra, S., Özden, Ç., Plaza, S., Shaw, W., & Shimeles, A. (2011). Leveraging Migration for Africa: Remittances, Skills, and Investments. The World Bank. Retrieved from https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/2300

drives job insecurity and limits resilience to external shocks[8,9]. High youth unemployment, corruption, and infrastructural gaps fuel widespread frustration among the population[10]. Tunisia, though economically more diversified, suffers from significant youth unemployment and regional economic disparities, particularly in the interior. Economic stagnation, bureaucratic inefficiency, and perceptions of inequality drive many Tunisians to consider migration as a route to financial stability and personal advancement[11,12].

Economic stressors are closely intertwined with widely shared perceptions of Europe as a place of opportunity, safety, and dignity. Migrants often hold idealised views of Europe, shaped by various narratives, which may not align with the realities they encounter upon arrival[13]. In Niger, Europe is primarily perceived as a destination with accessible low-skilled jobs, superior education and healthcare, and generous welfare systems. This view indicates that Europe offers both economic growth and prospects for social progress and improvement status.[14,15]. Stories of successful migrants reinforce the belief that even low-paying jobs in Europe yield better incomes than those available locally, and that social support is accessible upon arrival[16]. Narratives also depict Europe as a safe haven where one can claim asylum and gain legal protection[17], despite such assumptions often being shaped by rumours[18].

In Nigeria, perceptions of Europe as a place of opportunity are equally potent. Europe is viewed as a land of economic promise, a place where hard work is rewarded[19]. Success stories are selectively shared and magnified, encouraging others to follow suit, while reinforcing beliefs in Europe's superior education, healthcare, and welfare services[20,21]. The prospect of asylum and legal regularisation is also seen as attainable, further intensifying the appeal[22].

Among Tunisians, Europe is similarly viewed as offering better job prospects. Social services, education, and healthcare systems are seen as vastly superior to those at home, and the perception of

[8] World Bank (2023). Poverty & Equity Brief: Nigeria. The World Bank Group. Retrieved from: https://databankfiles.worldbank.org/public/ddpext_download/poverty/987B9C90-CB9F-4D93-AE8C-750588BF00QA/current/Global_POVEQ_NGA.pdf
[9] Osaghae, E. E., & Suberu, R. T. (2005). A history of identities, violence, and stability in Nigeria. *Centre for Research on Inequality, Human Security and Ethnicity (CRISE)*.
[10] Adewuyi, A. O. (2018). Political Economy of Corruption and Underdevelopment in Nigeria. *African Journal of Governance and Development*, 7(2), 95-114.
[11] Ayadi, R., & El Mokhefi, M. (2016). The European Union and the Southern Mediterranean: Exploring the New EU Neighborhood Policy. *Journal of Euro-Mediterranean Studies*, 11(2), 7-23.
[12] Boubakri, H. (2013). Revolution and migration in Tunisia. Migration Policy Centre.
[13] European Union Intellectual Property Office (2020). European Citizens and Intellectual Property: Perception, Awareness, and Behaviour. https://euipo.europa.eu/tunnel-web/secure/webdav/guest/document_library/observatory/documents/Perception_study_2020/Perception_study_full_en.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com
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[15] de Haas, H. (2008). Irregular Migration from West Africa to the Maghreb and the European Union: An Overview of Recent Trends. International Organization for Migration.
[16] Flahaux, M.-L., & De Haas, H. (2016). African migration: Trends, patterns, drivers. Comparative Migration Studies, 4(1), 1.
[17] Carling, J., & Hernández-Carretero, M. (2011). Protecting Europe and protecting migrants? Strategies for managing unauthorised migration from Africa. The British Journal of Politics and International Relations, 13(1), 42-58.
[18] Sanchez, G. (2018). Five myths about human smuggling. Migration Policy Institute.
[19] Mberu, B. U., & Pongou, R. (2012). Nigeria: Multiple forms of mobility in Africa's demographic giant. Migration Policy Institute. Retrieved from https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/nigeria-multiple-forms-mobility-africas-demographic-giant
[20] Adepoju, A. (2008). Migration in sub-Saharan Africa. Nordic Africa Institute.
[21] Afolayan, A. A., Ikwuyatum, G. O., & Abejide, O. (2008). Dynamics of International Migration in Nigeria (A Review of Literature). Nigeria Immigration Service.
[22] Frouws, B., Phillips, M., Hassan, A., & Twigt, M. (2016). Getting to Europe the WhatsApp way: The use of ICT in contemporary mixed migration flows to Europe. Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat (RMMS).

Europe as a dignified destination with legal protections adds to its appeal[23,24,25]. Migration is often imagined not just as a path to economic relief but as a route to personal and familial transformation.

The convergence of economic hardship and deeply rooted perceptions of Europe as a land of opportunity help explain the continued reliance on irregular migration routes. The research findings underscore the importance of understanding how migration-related information is disseminated and perceived. Exploring the channels through which these perceptions are shared is crucial for developing effective communication strategies and policies that address the realities of migration.

Research Objectives

The overarching objective of the research was to understand the dissemination of misinformation within communities across Niger, Nigeria, and Tunisia. By employing quantitative and qualitative methodologies, the research gathered insights on the underlying factors contributing to the spread of rumours and misconceptions surrounding irregular migration. The study collected evidence to inform strategies and interventions aimed at countering misinformation and fostering informed decision-making among communities.

The following key questions guided the research:

1. What are the primary trusted sources and channels of migration messaging employed by communities across Niger, Nigeria, and Tunisia?
2. How do communities perceive and interpret misinformation and rumours about irregular migration, and what are the prevailing misconceptions?
3. What strategies are employed by stakeholders and community influencers to counter misinformation and rumours surrounding irregular migration?

Methods

Data Collection

Desk Review

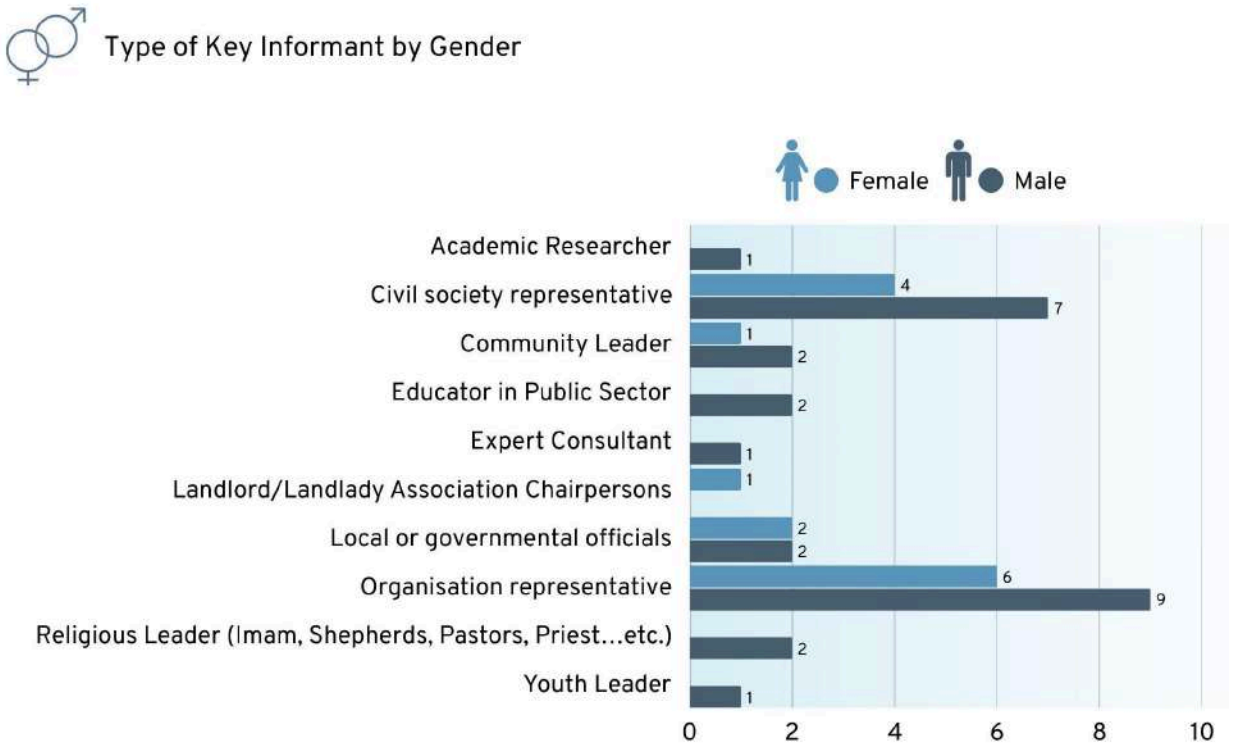
The research began with a rapid literature review aimed at shaping the design of subsequent research stages. The desk review was conducted iteratively throughout the project to ensure that other components remained focused on collecting original data. Insights provided context and supported the final analysis by linking findings to existing knowledge.

Key Informant Interviews

As part of the research process, 41 KIIs were conducted between August and October 2024. Researchers sampled stakeholders through desk reviews and field mapping to identify potential hubs for recruiting relevant participants. They worked to find local leaders and stakeholders at these hubs and invited them for KIIs. The KIIs, equally distributed among the eight researchers, explored key

[23] Ayadi, R., & El Mokhefi, M. (2016). The European Union and the Southern Mediterranean: Exploring the New EU Neighborhood Policy. Journal of Euro-Mediterranean Studies, 11(2), 7-23.
[24] Roman, H., & Gosar, A. (2017). Migration from the Maghreb and migration pressures: A case study of Tunisia. Journal of Geography, Politics and Society, 7(1), 37-45.
[25] Fargues, P. (2014). Europe must manage migration better. Carnegie Europe.

themes such as sources of migration messaging, perceptions of misinformation, and strategies for countering rumours. Interviews were held in Nigeria (16), Niger (15), and Tunisia (10).



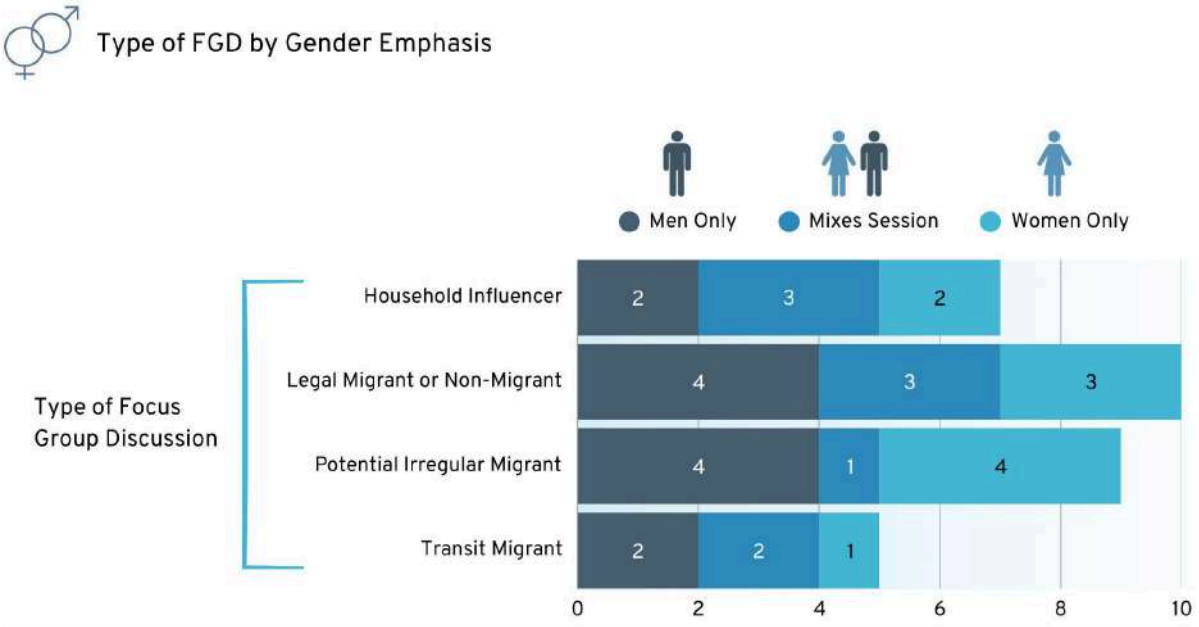
Focus Group Discussions

In the second phase of the research, semi-structured discussion guides, informed by KIIs, were developed to facilitate these discussions. These guides were tailored to facilitate meaningful discussions and ensure the exploration of key themes such as migration messaging, misinformation, and strategies for addressing rumours.

The team conducted 31 FGDs from mid-August to November 2024, engaging 330 participants across countries: 15 sessions in Niger, 15 in Nigeria, and 1 in Tunisia[26]. The FGDs were designed to reflect the diversity of the target demographic groups and were categorised into four primary types: Household Influencers[27], Legal Migrants or Non-Migrants[28], Potential Irregular Migrants, and Transit Migrants. Each type of FGD was further divided into three gender-specific groups: men-only, women-only, and mixed-gender sessions.

[26] FGDs in Tunisia faced significant obstacles during implementation. The prevailing political climate, specifically the lead-up to the 2024 presidential elections, fostered widespread hesitation and distrust towards organizations addressing migration. This subject was under close government scrutiny, with numerous policies restricting civic engagement. Consequently, despite considerable scheduling efforts, participant refusal and attrition rates were exceptionally high, ultimately forcing the cancellation of most planned sessions.
[27] Household Influencers refer to family members who could play a direct role in shaping decisions within their households. This includes parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, grandparents, and cousins.
[28] Non-Migrants refers to individuals who do not have the intention to migrate in the next 12 months and if they did, they would lean towards legal migration. This categorisation groups them with legal migrants due to their seemingly similar initial perspectives on migration.

The team employed various techniques to recruit participants, including dissemination of session details through Key Informants interviewed earlier in the project, collaboration with local leaders to spread the word, word-of-mouth among community members, visits to youth and cultural centres, and sharing invitations through personal connections. These strategies ensured diverse participation and representation across the identified demographic groups.



Although there was no specific emphasis on age distribution for the FGDs, the majority consisted of mixed-age groups. However, 6 sessions were exclusively held with participants aged 18 to 24 years, and another 6 sessions were reserved for individuals aged 25 to 34 years.

Online Quizzes

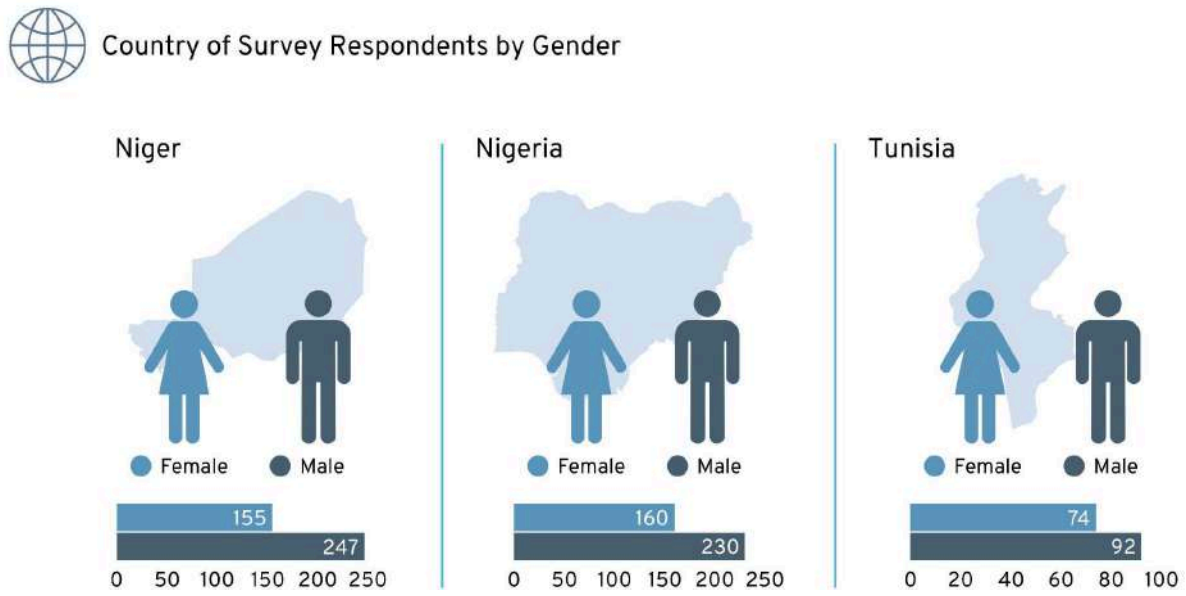
As part of the research process, online quizzes were conducted over a three-week period to capture misconceptions and rumours related to irregular migration. This activity involved posting one quiz per week on the project's Facebook pages for Niger, Nigeria, and Tunisia. Each quiz included three True or False or multiple-choice questions, and focused on recurrent themes and misconceptions identified in the earlier research phases. The quizzes collected a total of 990 responses, distributed as follows: 333 from Niger, 403 from Nigeria, and 332 from Tunisia.

Quantitative Surveys

In the fourth and final phase of the research, structured surveys were developed drawing on insights obtained during earlier stages. The team conducted a total of 958 surveys: 402 in Niger, 390 in Nigeria, and 166 in Tunisia[29]. Participants were selected based on predefined criteria to ensure diverse representation across demographics, socioeconomic backgrounds, and migration experiences.

[29]Securing participation in the quantitative data collection proved as challenging as organising the focus group discussions, demanding considerable effort. Individuals showed significant reluctance towards completing the survey forms. To address this, various recruitment methods were implemented, including distributing the form through different online channels, direct engagement in public and semi-public areas to encourage participation, and partnerships with local organisations to disseminate the form within their networks.

Recruitment strategies included leveraging the LACE consultation team, outreach in cafes, dissemination through WhatsApp groups, posting on The Migrant Project Facebook pages, word-of-mouth referrals, visits to youth centres, and collaborations with local stakeholders and university groups.



The survey participants represented a varied demographic. Female participants made up 40.6% of those surveyed. The largest age group (27.1%) was 18 to 21 years old, and over half of the participants (54.8%) were single. Concerning migration, 34.4% indicated potential for irregular migration, while 11.5% were in transit. The remaining 54% of respondents were either legal migrants or non-migrants.

Scripts and Survey Instruments

Appendix A provides a detailed overview of the tools utilised across each research phase. These include the KII interview script, the FGD script (adapted to suit different types of participant groups), a quantitative online quiz, and a survey instrument.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data from KIIs and FGDs were analysed using thematic coding. The team developed the initial set of codes following a preliminary review of KIIs to identify recurrent subjects and emerging patterns. The coding framework was expanded and refined with the integration of FGD responses. Each qualitative input was subsequently categorised to allow for structured comparison and thematic analysis.

Quantitative data was cleaned, and open-ended responses were categorised into standardised groupings for integration with closed-response data. The final dataset was structured and processed using SPSS[30]. Analysis methods included descriptive statistics to capture general trends, cross-tabulations to explore variation across demographic groups, and Pearson correlation analysis to

[30] SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), is a software application used for statistical analysis and data management

examine the strength and direction of associations between variables. All reported quantitative findings reflect statistically meaningful patterns.

Research results are coupled with findings from the Qualitative Analysis of TMP Comments and Messages (see Annex B), which draws on data collected through social media monitoring of TMP's Facebook pages in the three countries of implementation. This parallel analysis identified patterns and narratives within public commentary, including user reactions to project messaging, emergent rumours, and community perceptions of irregular migration and related services.

Limitations and Challenges

Several limitations affect the interpretation and generalisability of the findings:

- Recruitment challenges varied significantly across locations. In Tunisia, high dropout rates and last-minute cancellations[31] delayed data collection and limited the diversity of participant perspectives. In Niger, difficulties in recruiting potential irregular migrants constrained the representation of key target groups. These challenges impacted the comprehensiveness of the data collected..
- Sampling methods and participant recruitment strategies varied across countries. Some participants were recruited through in-person selection, while others were reached via social media or community leaders. These differences may have introduced biases, as each method reaches distinct socio-demographic groups, potentially reducing the comparability of data across locations.
- Coding of qualitative inputs was conducted by multiple individuals, which could have introduced personal biases into the thematic categorisation of data. Variations in individual interpretation may have resulted in thematic distributions that differ from the respondents' original intent, potentially affecting the consistency and reliability of qualitative findings.

Findings

Perceptions and Drivers of Irregular Migration

Communities frame migration as an aspirational and socially endorsed choice

In many regions across Nigeria, Niger, and Tunisia, migration is not merely seen as an individual decision. It is woven into the cultural fabric and widely perceived as a normative, even aspirational, pursuit. Within these communities, there is a deeply rooted belief that traveling abroad, whether through legal or irregular channels, is the key to personal advancement, financial stability, and social recognition. Particularly in southern Nigeria and parts of Tunisia, migration is regarded as a rite of passage and an expected trajectory for those seeking a better life. Families and communities often raise children with the expectation that success lies beyond national borders. In this context, migration

[31] As highlighted earlier, participant recruitment for both the focus group discussions (FGDs) and the quantitative survey presented certain difficulties..

is no longer limited to desperate individuals; rather, it is a collective aspiration supported and encouraged by family, peers, and community leaders.

The cultural normalisation of migration as an aspirational and collective goal was consistently reflected in both the KIIs and FGDs. Among the 41 key informants interviewed, 17 referenced cultural normalisation as a driver of migration, particularly noting how terms like "Japa" (Nigeria)[32] and "Harka" (Tunisia)[33] have entered everyday discourse to describe migration as a commonplace and even a celebrated life event. In Nigeria, key informants emphasised the role of success stories and remittances in reinforcing this trend, with one informant describing migration as "the only visible measure of success" in some communities. In Tunisia, irregular migration has become a community enterprise, rather than an individual decision, with 9 informants specifically noting that networks have commodified the process by selling boats, life jackets, and GPS systems. In some cases, families were reported to collectively fundraise to sponsor young people's journeys.

The focus group data corroborated the recurring themes that migration is seen as a culturally normal and aspirational endeavor, and a shared community objective. Across Nigeria and Tunisia, participants shared vivid accounts of how returnees are idolised for their material wealth and social standing. For instance, in FGDs conducted in Lagos and Kano, several participants stated that having a family member abroad increases one's status within the household and the wider community. The narrative of migration as both a personal obligation and social expectation is especially pronounced among young males, who frequently described migration as a means to reclaim their dignity, support their families, and escape the economic stagnation at home. At least 12 male FGD participants mentioned that irregular migration is considered a risk worth taking, a sentiment also echoed by several female participants, who emphasised how returning home with success, regardless of the path taken, overshadows the dangers.

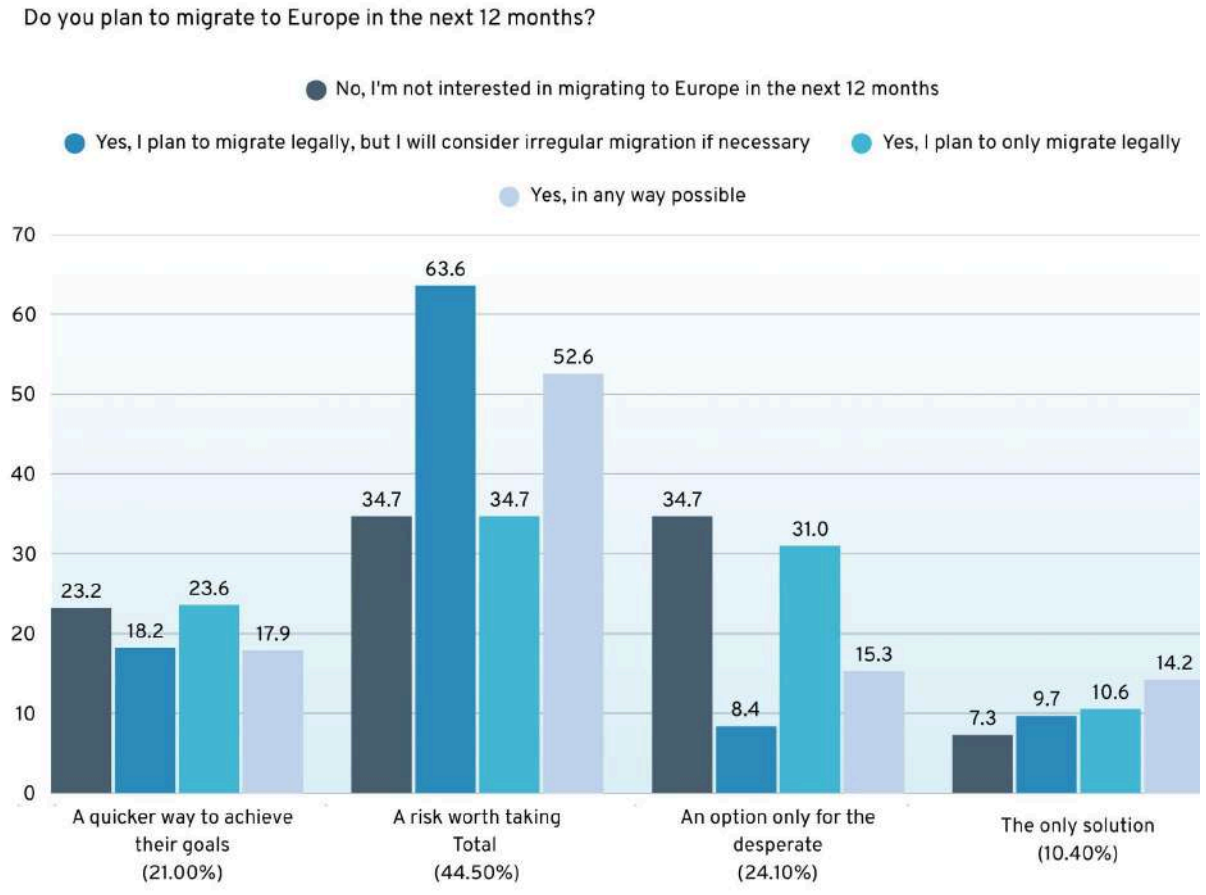
This collective mindset, where migration is idealised as a solution to structural hardship, is reinforced in the quantitative survey results. In response to the question "How much do you agree or disagree with the statement: 'Migration to Europe is the best solution to improve one's financial situation'" 42.6% (408 out of 958) rated the statement at 2 out of 5 and 24.6% (236 out of 958) rated it at 3 out of 5[34], indicating mild to moderate agreement. Notably, Nigeria had the highest average agreement score at 3.03, compared to 2.92 in Tunisia and 2.4 in Niger. This perception also strongly correlated with migration intentions: 39.8% (109 out of 274) of respondents who said they would migrate by any means necessary strongly agreed with the statement, compared to only 3.2% (10 out of 314) of those who do not intend to migrate at all. The data additionally suggests that the stronger one's agreement with the belief that migration improves financial circumstances, the more likely they are to consider or plan migration, particularly through irregular means if necessary[35].

[32] "Japa," according to the Oxford English Dictionary, describes the emigration of Nigerians to other countries (esp. those in Europe or North America) in search of further education, employment, or economic opportunity. This definition was extracted from the Oxford English Dictionary
[33] El Harka denotes emigration that involves the form of a clandestine or irregular crossing to Europe
[34] Responses on the 5-point Likert-type scale range from 1 to 5, with higher scores indicating greater levels of agreement with this indicator. The number showcases the average scoring of all responses received to this question. The same approach will be used to the reported averages in this section
[35] This difference is statistically supported by a medium positive correlation ($r = .380$, $p < .001$) between belief that migration to Europe is the best financial solution and the respondent's migration plans.

> *"You've got nothing left to lose, and you'd rather have a dangerous freedom than to live through this ordeal"*
>
> Commentator on TMP Niger Page, 2024

Community views on irregular migration revealed widespread acceptance of it as a viable, and at times necessary, pathway to achieving personal or economic goals. Nearly half of survey respondents (44.5%, 426 out of 958) believed that people in their communities see irregular migration as "a risk worth taking," while 21% (201 out of 958) stated it is viewed as "a quicker way to achieve one's goals," and 10.4% (100 out of 958) said it is "the only solution." The sentiment that irregular migration was a risk worth taking was significantly higher among those who would consider irregular migration if necessary, with 63.6% (98 out of 154) of respondents sharing this view. This figure was almost double the rate seen among respondents who were not planning to migrate (34.7%, 109 out of 314) or those only planning to migrate legally (34.7%, 75 out of 274).

Perception Towards Irregular Migration, by Migration Plan



The qualitative and quantitative data paint a consistent picture: migration, particularly irregular migration, is increasingly seen not as a desperate act, but as a rational, even celebrated, strategy for overcoming structural barriers. Despite widespread awareness of the risks, the promise of transformation, dignity, and upward mobility continues to outweigh the dangers for many.

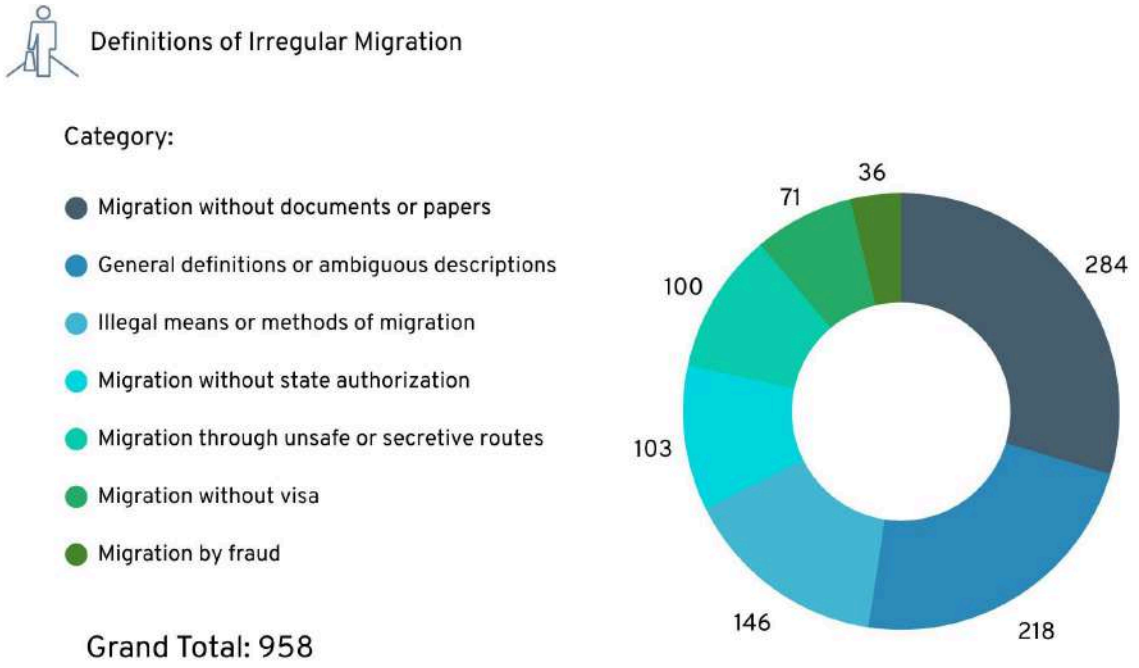
> *"There is a popular 'japa' syndrome, and it has become so normalised that people even use it jokingly when talking about their future plans."*
>
> Female Civil Society Representative, Lagos, Nigeria 2024

Irregular migration is commonly defined as the act of crossing borders without official documentation

A thematic analysis of 958 open-ended responses collected through the quantitative surveys revealed seven recurring definitions of irregular migration. The responses demonstrate that while a large proportion of participants associated irregular migration with the absence of documentation or visas, fewer incorporated a broader understanding of legal norms across countries or recognised the administrative and systemic components referenced in the official definition, which defines irregular migration as "movement that takes place outside the legal norms of the state of origin, transit and destination country."[36]

The most common understanding, cited by 29.6% (284 out of 958) of respondents, defined irregular migration as the absence of legal documents or papers. Participants frequently referred to "travel without papers," "without passport or ID," or "without documentation," suggesting that for many, irregular migration is viewed primarily as a bureaucratic deficiency. A related subset, representing 7.4% (71 out of 958), specifically referred to the absence of a visa. While these responses point to important legal markers, they tend to oversimplify irregularity, focusing on paperwork rather than broader procedural or systemic legality.

[36] International Organization for Migration (IOM). Key Migration Terms. https://www.iom.int/key-migration-terms [Accessed on September 4, 2024]



Another group of respondents (26%, 249 out of 958), combined definitions that described irregular migration as either taking place through illegal methods (15.2%, 146 out of 958) or without formal state permission (10.8%, 103 out of 958). These responses referenced movement "against the law," "without government approval," or "not through official means," indicating a stronger grasp of the legal implications and governance dimensions of migration. These definitions align more closely with the official framing, as they highlight the breach of legal norms rather than simply the absence of documentation.

A smaller but notable proportion of respondents (10.4%, 100 out of 958) emphasised the clandestine or unsafe nature of irregular migration. These individuals described it as "crossing borders secretly," "through the desert," or "in dangerous ways." This framing reflects how irregular migration is often understood through personal risk and method of travel.

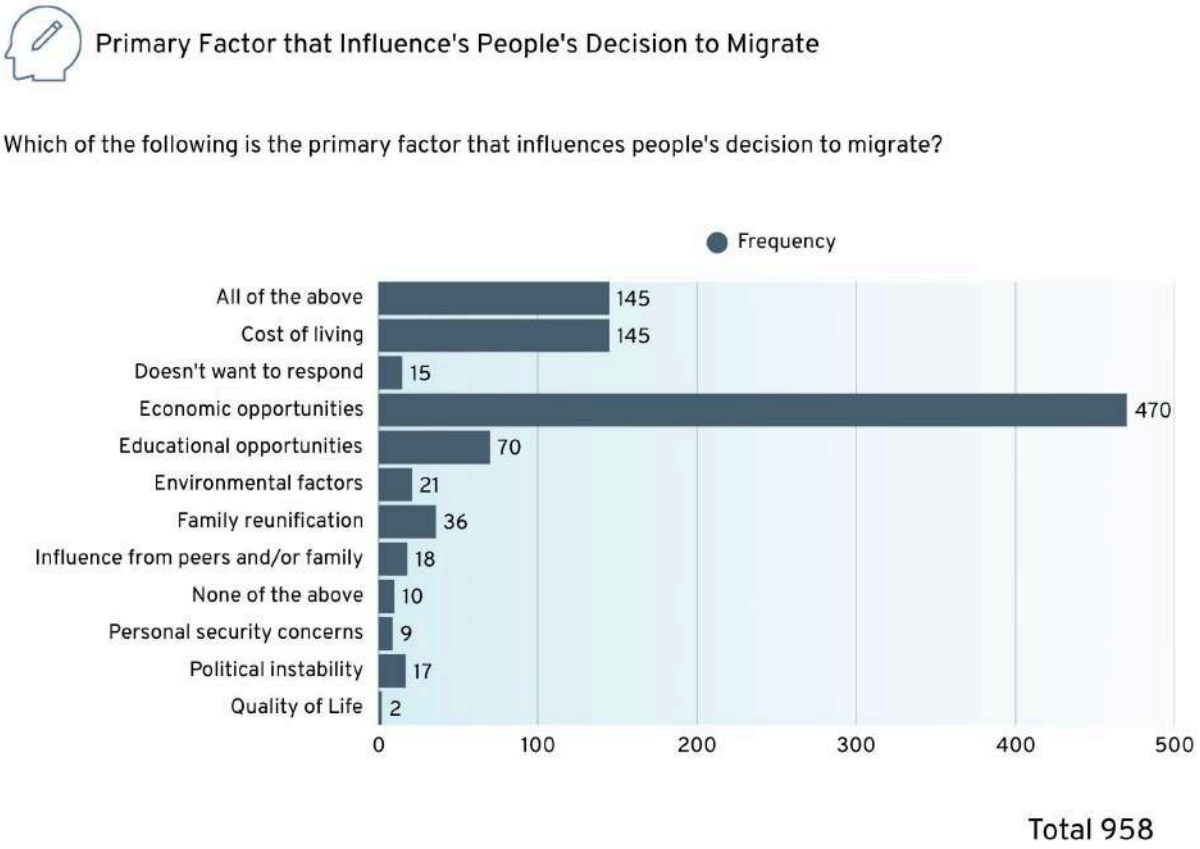
Another 3.8% (36 out of 958) of respondents defined irregular migration in terms of deception or fraud, such as using fake documents or impersonation. Though less common, these responses stand out for acknowledging manipulative practices used to circumvent migration laws, which reflect a deeper awareness of illegality beyond mere absence of permits.

Taken together, the findings show that while many participants recognise that irregular migration involves breaches of legality, most definitions focus narrowly on the absence of documents or visas. Only a smaller portion of responses reflect a more comprehensive understanding that includes legal authorisation, procedural norms, and the state's role in regulating movement.

Economic pressure and limited legal pathways drive migration decisions

Across the regions of Nigeria, Niger, and Tunisia, the decision to migrate is rarely rooted in a single cause. Instead, it emerges from a complex interplay of structural pressures, community expectations, perceived opportunities, and institutional barriers. Both qualitative and quantitative data underscore that economic instability is a primary catalyst, but not the only one. Migration aspirations are shaped

by a sense of limited opportunity, governance deficits, insecurity, education gaps, and systemic obstacles to accessing legal pathways.



Economic hardship is as a core driver of migration decisions

Both KII and FGD participants overwhelmingly cited poverty, unemployment, and high living costs as central motivations for migration. In many instances, this economic frustration is amplified by the sense that hard work and education no longer offer a reliable path to social mobility. Among key informants, particularly those from Nigeria and Niger, there was frequent mention of the disappearance of the middle class and the collapse of the local labour market. This was reflected in 49.1% (470 out of 958) of survey respondents who identified economic opportunity as the main driver of migration decisions. Another 15.1% (145 out of 958) specifically mentioned the high cost of living as a key factor. This frustration is echoed in online commentary, where individuals express disillusionment with the inability to meet basic needs, calling migration a 'necessary sacrifice'.

> *"Cool but honestly, there is nothing or little you guys can do, leaving this nonsense country is a priority. Basic amenities is zero, foods, accommodation is expensive. Surviving is a big issue."*
>
> Commentator on TMP Lagos Page, Nigeria 2024

Economic opportunity was the primary driver of migration among respondents in Niger. 54% (113 out of 210) of respondents in Niger cited economic opportunities as their main migration driver. This was higher than the percentage of respondents who cited economic opportunity as the main migration driver in Nigeria (46.5%, 73 out of 157) and Tunisia (42.6%, 26 out of 61). Likewise, the cost of living was most frequently flagged in Niger at 32.4% (68 out of 210), compared to 24.8% (39 out of 157) in Nigeria and just 13.1% (8 out of 61) in Tunisia.

Economic drivers were more prominent among younger participants, particularly those aged 22–34, where 48.7% (202 out of 415) selected economic opportunities. This aligns with the stage in life when individuals are actively entering the workforce or building livelihoods, often with limited success. Even among the 18–21 age group, 27.7% (98 out of 354) named cost of living as a principal reason for migration, revealing a growing sense of economic pressure from an early age.

> *"People continue to migrate in spite of everything, it's to be able to provide for themselves and their families... people are in good health and in poverty... there isn't enough work to allow everyone to find a job or other employment... You have to sacrifice sometimes, it's an obligation."*
>
> Commentator on TMP Niger Page, 2024

The convergence of these two categories (income opportunity and affordability) points to a broader perception that migration is the only realistic avenue for escaping economic precarity. Furthermore, 15.1% (145 out of 958) of survey participants chose the combined option "all of the above," suggesting that individuals do not view economic strain in isolation but in conjunction with other pressing challenges, such as insecurity and poor infrastructure.

Family reunification and educational aspirations also influence migration decisions

While economic opportunities were the most frequently cited driver of migration (49.1%, 470 out of 958) the qualitative data reveals that motivations to migrate are multifaceted and often deeply personal. Several additional drivers emerged from the KII and FGD data, including educational aspirations, environmental stressors, family dynamics, and insecurity.

In the qualitative interviews, access to better education was repeatedly cited as a long-term investment motivating migration, particularly among youth and parents of school-aged children. Participants from both Nigeria and Tunisia emphasised the importance of quality education abroad as a pathway to upward mobility. This sentiment aligns with the survey findings, where 7.3% (70 out of 958) identified educational opportunities as their primary driver of migration, making it the third most selected reason overall.

Family reunification and social networks were cited in both FGDs and KIIs as important facilitators of migration decisions. For many respondents, having a relative or close friend already abroad serves as an inspiration, and as a logistical and emotional support system. Survey data reinforces this finding: 3.8% (36 out of 958) selected family reunification and 1.9% (18 out of 958) cited influence from peers and/or family as their top migration motivator. Online discussions, and FGD participants in Nigeria and

Tunisia frequently mentioned that migration decisions were often taken collectively by families or were the result of social encouragement.

> *"Migration has become a tradition for us in Tunisia; moms are pushing their kids out of country now"*
>
> FGD participant, Tunisia 2024

Although personal security concerns (0.9%, 9 out of 958) and political instability (1.8%, 17 out of 958) were less prominent in the survey data, they featured more strongly in discussions from participants in regions affected by political unrest or violent extremism. In parts of Niger and northern Nigeria, migrants reported being driven by fears for their safety, particularly in contexts of ongoing conflict or state fragility.

> *"We've seen the videos preaching the apocalypse reserved for all adventurers on the motherland. But this is to misunderstand these young people, who live through the daily horrors of terrorism in environments with no prospect of employment or survival. Nothing but hopeless idleness. [...] It's a lost cause. As long as borders remain open, young Africans won't be discouraged by suffering, let alone death."*
>
> Commentator on TMP Niger Page, 2024

Lastly, environmental pressures were identified as a primary motivation for migration by only a small proportion of survey respondents, accounting for 2.2% (21 out of 958), while it did not emerge in the qualitative data.

Structural barriers discourage safe and regular migration

Significant barriers discourage many from pursuing legal migration. Participants across all countries identified high visa costs, long bureaucratic delays, and low approval rates as demotivating factors. Among survey respondents, only 38.2% (366 out of 958) demonstrated a clear understanding of the necessary steps to complete a legal migration process. Even more telling, the average difficulty rating for preparing legal migration was 3.76 out of 5[37], suggesting that most respondents view the process as complicated and inaccessible.

Individuals willing to migrate by any means necessary are more likely to perceive legal migration as particularly challenging: 33.9% (86 out of 274) of them rated the preparation process as "very difficult," compared to 26.6% among all other respondent groups. Additionally, gender appears to play a role in shaping these perceptions, with male respondents slightly more likely to report legal migration as difficult[38].

[37] Responses on the 5-point Likert-type scale range from 1 to 5, with higher scores indicating greater levels of difficulty with this indicator.
[38] This is supported by a small but statistically significant correlation ($r = .109$, $p < .001$).

> *"This wouldn't happen if safe and legal routes were available. Why don't they open up legal migration pathways? If visas were available, no one would migrate irregularly."*
>
> Commentator on TMP Tunisia Page, 2024

Perceived Difficulty of Preparing for Legal Migration, by Migration Plan

Legal migration is persistently perceived to be primarily accessible to the wealthy and well-educated. This narrative was echoed by numerous FGD and KII participants across Nigeria, Tunisia, and Niger. Respondents from Niger frequently described the legal migration process as exclusionary, citing the need for significant financial resources, high educational qualifications, and connections as barriers. Respondents emphasised that these hurdles foster the sense that legal migration is out of reach for average individuals, particularly those from low-income or rural backgrounds. For example, some key informants noted that young people without degrees or financial backing often do not consider regular pathways, seeing them as a system designed for elites. This sentiment aligns with comments expressing a general distrust in the accessibility of legal channels, where users voiced frustration at the lack of clear pathways and the systemic barriers preventing ordinary individuals from pursuing regular migration.

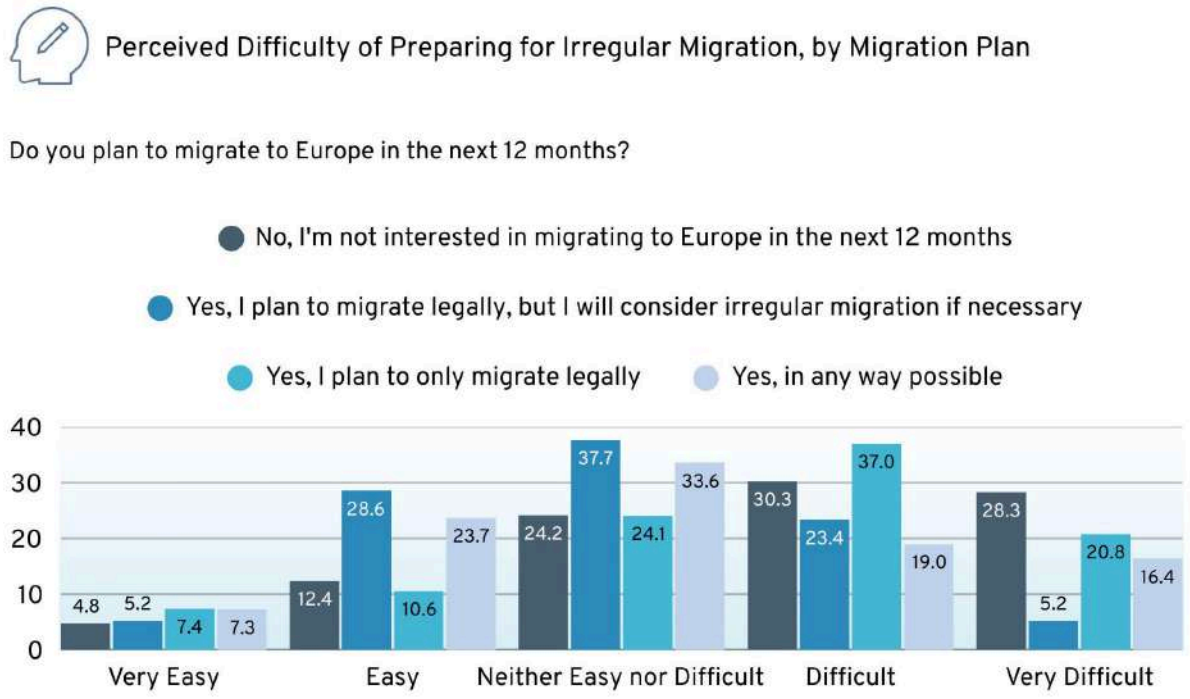
> *"Why are your visas difficult or impossible to find for Africans?"*
>
> Commentator on TMP Niger Page, 2024

Survey participants, on average, tended to slightly disagree with the statement that "Migrating legally is only for those who are well-educated or wealthy," with a mean score of 2.44 out of 5[39] . At face value, this suggests that the perception of legal migration as an elite-only opportunity is not universally held across the sample. However, this statistical average masks important variation based on migration intentions.

Specifically, individuals who plan to migrate through irregular means are more likely to agree that legal migration is reserved for the wealthy or educated, as demonstrated by a positive and statistically significant correlation between this belief and irregular migration intent ($r = .179$, $p < .001$). Further reinforcing this dynamic, there is also a significant correlation between belief in the exclusivity of legal migration and confidence in irregular migration preparation ($r = .240$, $p < .001$). In other words, the more someone perceives legal migration to only be accessible to the wealthy or educated, the more likely they feel capable of navigating irregular migration routes.

Irregular migration is viewed as a faster and more familiar option to success

Though irregular migration is considered dangerous, many respondents described it as more accessible and, in some cases, more predictable than legal migration. The perceived difficulty of irregular migration preparation was rated lower, with an average score of 3.36 out of 5[40] - compared to a 3.76 out of 5 perceived difficulty of legal migration preparation. Importantly, those inclined toward irregular migration rated it as easier than those who prefer legal migration or are not considering migration at all. This perception was also supported by a modest positive correlation ($r = .207$, $p < .001$) between the intention to migrate and belief that irregular migration preparation is manageable.



[39] Responses on the 5-point Likert-type scale range from 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree, with higher scores indicating greater levels of agreement with this indicator.
[40]Responses on the 5-point Likert-type scale range from 1 to 5, with higher scores indicating greater levels of difficulty with this indicator.

At the same time, only a minority of survey participants felt well-prepared for irregular migration. When asked whether they would know how to prepare for such a journey, the average response was just 2.38 out of 5[41], indicating more uncertainty than confidence.

Irregular migration is not purely a fallback strategy borne out of desperation; it is a rational, calculated choice shaped by socioeconomic realities and bureaucratic frustrations. Across numerous KIIs and FGDs, participants described irregular routes as not only more accessible but also more pragmatic, particularly for individuals who lack the financial resources, educational qualifications, or social capital required for legal migration.

> *"The cost of migration is alarming and people will rather evade paying such huge amounts on migration probably because they do not have it, or because they feel it is unnecessary"*
>
> FGD participant, Nigeria 2024

Many participants framed irregular migration as quicker and more autonomous, allowing individuals to circumvent long waiting periods, stringent documentation requirements, and the uncertainty of embassy processes.

> *"The road is faster because embassies may not even attend to your file for months, and you don't even know if you'll get approved."*
>
> Legal/Non-Migrant Male FGD participant, Nigeria 2024

Interestingly, survey respondents were divided in their opinion about whether easier legal migration would reduce irregular migration. The average score to the statement "If legal migration were easier, fewer people would choose irregular migration" was a neutral 3.14 out of 5[42]. This suggests that while accessibility matters, it may not be the sole factor; broader drivers such as peer influence, desperation, and community expectations continue to shape behaviour. Even so, there was a slight positive correlation between belief in legal migration difficulty and support for easier legal alternatives as a deterrent to irregular options ($r = .115$, $p < .001$).

Additionally, 38.3% (367 out of 958) of respondents reported that even with more awareness of the risks, people in their communities would still pursue irregular migration due to limited or inaccessible legal options, highlighting that structural constraints weigh heavily in migration decisions.

Decisions to stay are influenced by cultural obligations, emotional ties, and perceived risks

Though less frequent, oppositional sentiments to migration emerged in Nigeria and Tunisia. Some participants expressed deep attachment to family, cultural identity, or national pride, indicating that the emotional and social costs of migration were not always justifiable. Concerns included anxieties

[41] Responses on the 5-point Likert-type scale range from 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree, with higher scores indicating greater levels of agreement with this indicator.
[42] Responses on the 5-point Likert-type scale range from 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree, with higher scores indicating greater levels of agreement with this indicator.

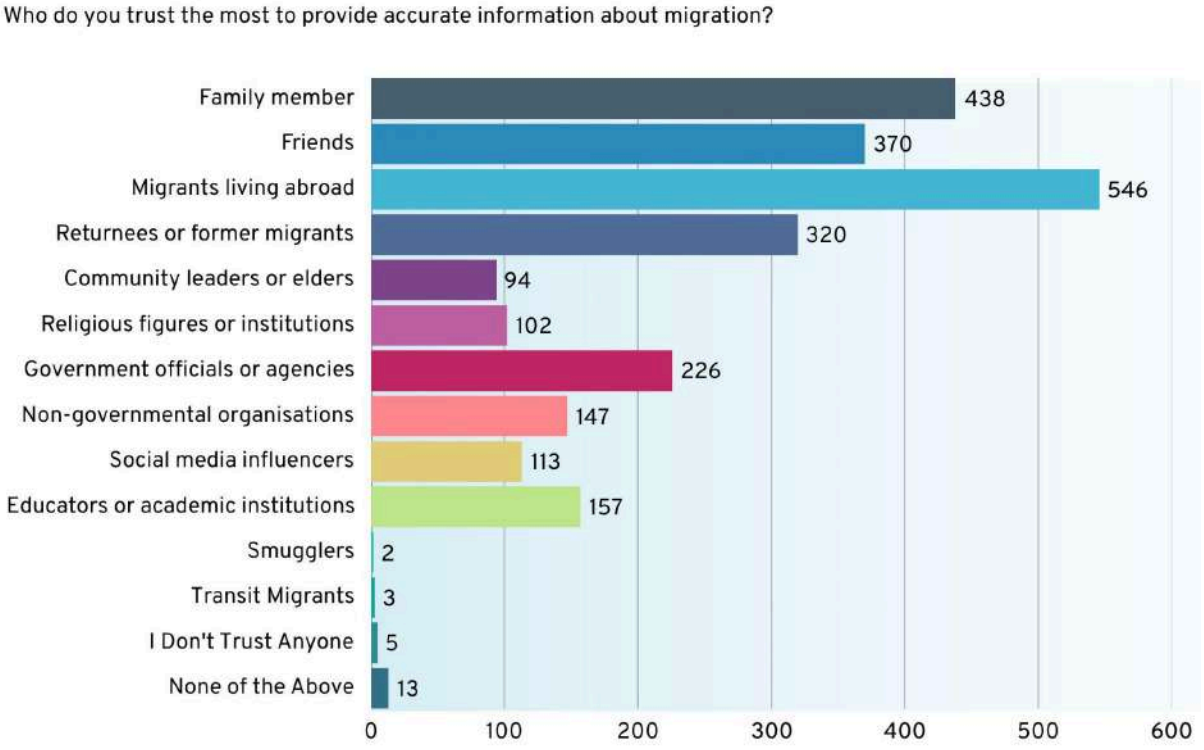
over moral decline and exposure to potentially harmful foreign influences. There were also concerns that migration promises were not always fulfilled, particularly when returnees had faced exploitation, disappointment, or failure abroad. Fear of uncertainty, such as challenges in securing employment abroad, legal vulnerabilities, or exposure to racism, also emerged, particularly in FGDs with non-migrant youth.

Participants also reflected on migration's mixed impact on their communities. While many acknowledged that migration had enabled financial remittances, housing construction, and entrepreneurial investments, others pointed to negative consequences such as family fragmentation, loss of social cohesion, and unrealistic expectations among youth. In several FGDs, the idealisation of life abroad was seen as contributing to disillusionment when faced with harsh realities. Some noted that the normalisation of irregular migration had shifted values among young people, reducing motivation to pursue local opportunities.

Primary Sources of Migration Messaging

Informal actors are the main influencers of migration decisions

Migration intentions are often preceded by informal discussions and social cues shaping individuals' outlooks on mobility. Influences include family members, social networks, returnees, religious leaders, community elders, smugglers, and, to a lesser degree, institutions such as NGOs or government authorities.



Members of the diaspora are the most influential migration messengers

Relatives and friends abroad, also referred to as diaspora, are the most influential source of encouragement. This group was the most frequently cited influencer in the FGDs (noted in over 23 FGD entries) and appeared across multiple KIIs, especially among community leaders and civil society respondents. Participants often described direct communication with migrants abroad as providing compelling, tangible proof that migration can improve one's life. Friends and family members who have migrated, particularly those who send money home or display signs of material success, are seen as aspirational figures. Their firsthand testimonies and visible achievements validate migration as an attainable goal and often shape not only the decision to migrate but also preferred destinations and perceived viable routes. This influence is further amplified by digital communication, with FGDs revealed that real-time visuals depicting day-to-day life in Europe and shared on Snapchat or WhatsApp create a powerful sense of relatability. For many participants, these individuals help normalise the migration journey and reinforce its desirability.

Quantitative data strongly reinforces these qualitative findings about the diaspora's role as migration influencers. . In the survey, relatives or friends living abroad received the highest influence rating among all identified groups, with a mean score of 3.58 out of 5. They were also ranked as the most trusted source of accurate migration information, with 56.9% (546 out of 958) respondents selecting them. This reinforces their dual role not only as emotional motivators but also as credible and practical sources of information for aspiring migrants.

Further analysis of the survey data reveals that diaspora influence is not uniformly distributed. Individuals who indicated an irregular migration intention were significantly more likely to rate relatives or friends abroad as highly influential[43] suggesting that these individuals may rely more heavily on social testimonies and migrant success stories to justify riskier migration strategies. Demographic disaggregation reveals age-based differences in perceived diaspora influence, with a particularly high rate of influence (41.9%, 109 out of 260) observed among those aged 18–21. This was proportionally higher than other age groups, with the second highest proportion being for the 35-44 age range (30.8%, 69 out of 221). This implies that younger respondents are more likely to believe in aspirational migration narratives, which may be due to their increased exposure to international communication through social media and messaging apps.

The diaspora was significantly associated with perceptions of community encouragement. Those who agreed with the statement "My community, including family and friends, encourage me to migrate" were more likely to also rank relatives and friends abroad as influential ($r = .348$, $p < .001$). Similarly, respondents who rated the diaspora as highly influential were more likely to indicate that community norms and cultural values shaped their migration decisions, supported by a positive correlation ($r = .381$, $p < .001$). The strength of this correlation illustrates the reinforcing feedback loop between personal networks abroad and broader communal attitudes toward migration. Together, these findings illustrate the reinforcing feedback loop between personal networks abroad and broader communal attitudes toward migration. Success stories are seen as proof of what is possible and help to establish migration as a communal aspiration.

[43] This association is supported by a small but significant positive correlation ($r = .143$, $p < .001$),

The trust placed in the diaspora further underscores their unique role as both aspirational figures and practical guides for migration decisions. Respondents who viewed relatives or friends abroad as influential were significantly more likely to consider them the most trusted source for migration-related information ($r = .321$, $p < .001$). This trust appears emotional and informational, providing reassurance and practical guidance.

Family members at home play a meaningful role as motivators and facilitators of migration decisions

Family members emerged as motivators and facilitators of migration decisions across the KII and FGD data. In Nigeria and Niger especially, participants framed migration as a collective endeavor rather than a solitary pursuit. In several FGD entries, migration was described as a "family project," in which families pool financial resources to support a single member's travel abroad. This sentiment was echoed by multiple civil society and community informants in KIIs, who noted that families, especially in rural or underserved areas, often see migration as an investment to improve their household's economic prospects. The support is not always financial; participants also referenced emotional pressure from parents and extended family members who expect youth to contribute to household income or elevate the family's status through successful migration.

Family influence is reflected in more than 15 distinct FGDs.. In many cases, families are not only seen as supporters but as initiators of the migration process, particularly in households with limited earning potential or where one child is identified as having the "best chance" to succeed abroad. Parents, siblings, and spouses may exert subtle and direct pressure to leave, reinforced by community expectations and social norms. This pressure is not perceived as coercion in most instances; instead, it is framed as a duty.

Survey data further validates the family influence. Family members within the country were rated 3.23 out of 5[44] in terms of influence over migration decisions, making them one of the top-rated influencing groups. Additionally, nearly half of the respondents (45.7%, 438 out of 958) selected family members as one of the most trusted sources of accurate information about migration.

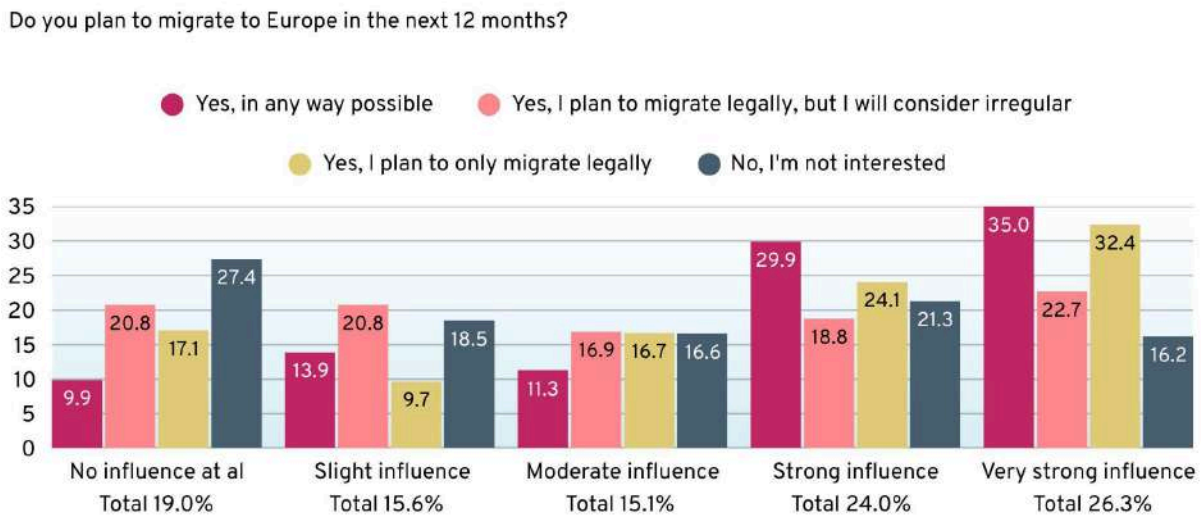
> *"We trust the stories from our families more than what we hear from the news or the government."*
>
> Female FGD participant, Niger 2024

Analysis by demographic group reveals and planned migration pathways important distinctions in perceptions of family influence. Those intending to migrate irregularly were more likely to report strong family influence. For example, 35% (96 out of 274) of this group rated family influence as "very strong" compared to 32.4% (70 out of 216) of those planning to migrate legally and 16.2% (51 out of 314) of those not planning to migrate at all. Non-migrants were more likely to describe family as "not influential at all" (27.4%, 86 out of 314) compared to just 9.9% (27 out of 274) among irregular migration planners. These findings suggest that family influence is particularly pronounced among

[44] Responses on the 5-point Likert-type scale range from 1 'No Influence' to 5 being 'Very Strong', with higher scores indicating greater levels of influence with this indicator.

those exploring higher-risk migration options, where encouragement may serve as emotional and moral justification.

Rating of Family Influence by Migration Plans



Results showed that 18-21 year olds were most likely to rate family influence as "very strong" (30.8%, 80 out of 260). Furthermore, those with a secondary school education were more likely to perceive family as highly influential than those who had a tertiary, undergraduate university education, with 35.3% (97 out of 275) of secondary school attendees rating family influence as "very strong" compared to 26.6% (73 out of 274) of those who had reached a tertiary, university undergraduate education level. This finding suggests that younger adults may be especially receptive to familial encouragement or pressure related to migration.. The difference may also indicate that lower educational attainment is associated with greater reliance on family guidance in making life decisions..

Exposure to positive migration narratives appears to reinforce the influence of family in shaping migration decisions. Respondents who rated family as highly influential were also more likely to report hearing success stories of migrants who returned home after achieving a better life abroad ($r = .219$, $p < .001$), as well as stories about migrants supporting their families or communities financially ($r = .365$, $p < .001$). These narratives may contribute to the normalisation of migration within families.

Returnees are perceived as credible sources and social proof of migration outcomes

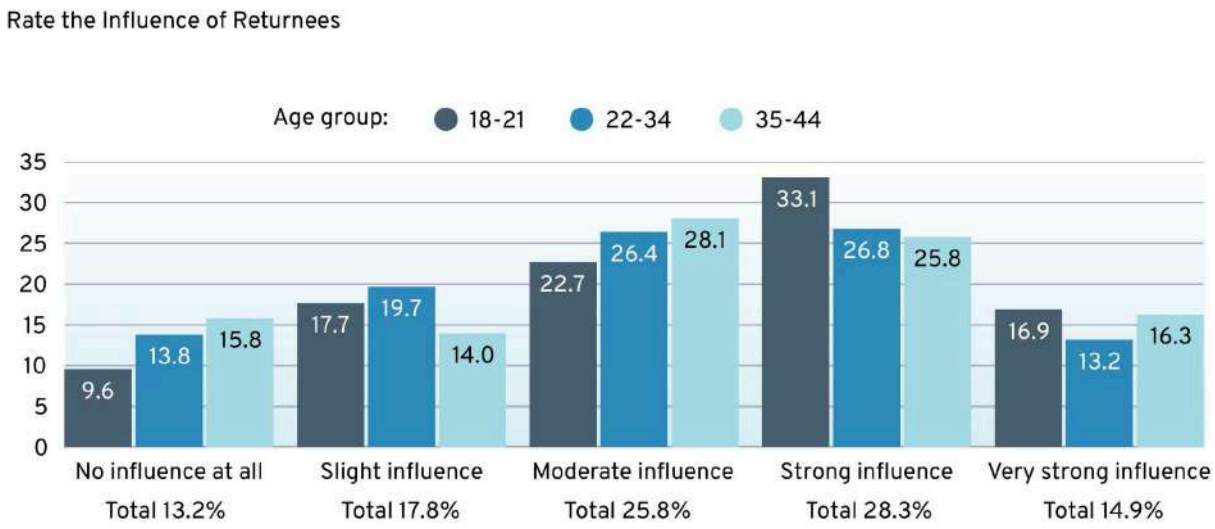
Returnees are frequently framed as success stories and, in some cases, even as local celebrities. Their lifestyles, material possessions, and narratives of overcoming hardship are powerful endorsements of migration. Young participants described how returnees shaped their ambitions, sometimes even detailing the specific routes or destinations recommended by returnees.

In FGDs, returnees were often associated with “authentic” migration knowledge and were believed to be more trustworthy than official sources. This was especially the case when returnees offered firsthand accounts of both the difficulties and rewards of migration, helping to demystify the process for others. Some community members described actively seeking out returnees for guidance or using

them as intermediaries to connect with smugglers. In a few cases, returnees were said to organise or facilitate migration journeys, becoming informal gatekeepers of opportunity.

Quantitative data further supports the role of returnees as influencers. Their average influence rating was moderately high at 3.34 out of 5[45], and positively associated with discussions about encouragement to migrate irregularly ($r = .161$, $p < .001$). Respondents who rated returnees as highly influential were also more likely to report hearing stories about community members receiving financial support from migrants abroad ($r = .229$, $p < .001$), and even more likely to have encountered success stories of migrants who reached their intended destinations ($r = .240$, $p < .001$). These patterns suggest that returnees do not merely inspire migration intentions, but also shape expectations of success and foster perceptions of migration as a social norm.

Rating of Returnees by Age



The perception of returnees' influence varied by age group. Respondents aged 18–21 were the most likely to rate returnees as having a strong or very strong influence on migration decisions. 50% (130 out of 260) of this age group gave returnees a "strong influence." or "very strong influence" rating. This is compared to 40% of respondents aged 22–34 (191 out of 477) and 42.1% of those aged 35–44 (93 out of 221). The 18–21 age group's greater sensitivity to returnee influence likely reflects their greater engagement with peer narratives and social aspiration.

The perception of returnees' influence gradually weakened with age. The percentage of respondents reporting "no influence" from returnees steadily increased from 9.6% (25 out of 260) among 18 to 21-year-olds to 15.8% among those aged 35 to 44 (35 out of 221).

[45] Responses on the 5-point Likert-type scale range from 1 'No Influence' to 5 being 'Very Strong', with higher scores indicating greater levels of influence with this indicator.

Success stories on social media make irregular migration appear normal and achievable

Social media emerged as a mirror and amplifier of migration desires. In over 15 FGD participants noted how platforms like Snapchat, Instagram, and Facebook offer daily visual windows into the lives of migrants abroad. Images of nightlife, jobs, fashion, and wealth were frequently cited as motivators. Some participants even described mapping their routes based on influencers or friends they follow online.

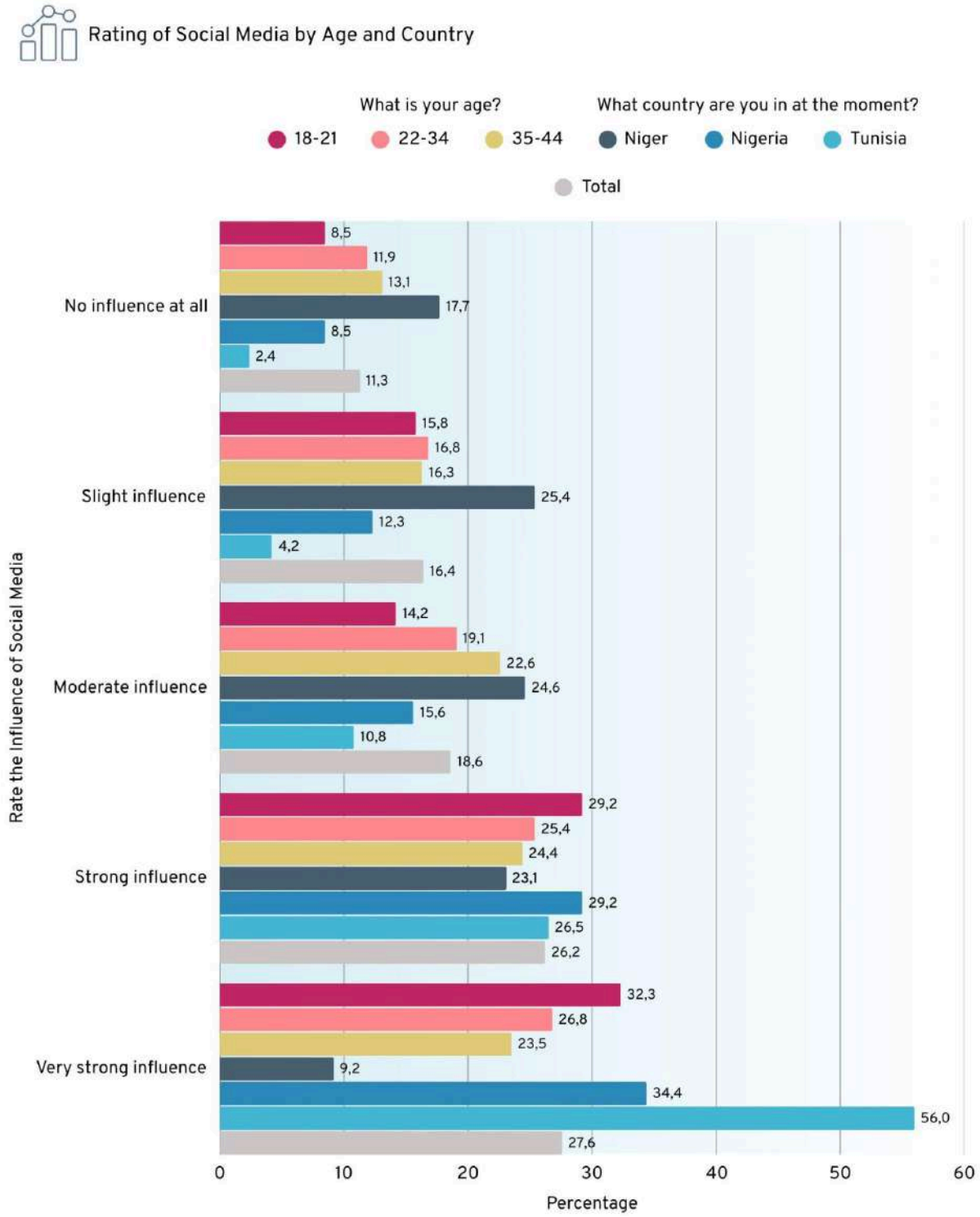
Social media influencers in Tunisia and Nigeria played a notable role in shaping migration discourse online. Influencer posts discussing migration risks, visa procedures, and scams generated substantial engagement and trust. In Tunisia, a collaboration with Louay Cherni[46] sparked high interaction, with one video reaching over 147,000 users. In Nigeria, curated posts from influencers such as Odogwu Kiwi and Taiwo Odumosu[47] consistently became top-performing content, prompting comments of appreciation and requests for more information.

Participants, on average, rated social media's influence relatively high average at 3.42 out of 5[48], making it the second most influential source after relatives and friends abroad (with an average 3.58). However, its influence does not significantly correlate with intentions to migrate irregularly, suggesting that while it inspires migration broadly, it may not drive decisions about specific pathways.

Social media's impact on migration varied significantly by country, with Tunisia showing the strongest influence. Tunisian respondents were more likely to rank social media's influence highly, as 56% (93 out of 166) rated social media as "very influential". In comparison, 34.4% (134 out of 390) of participants from Nigeria and 9.2% (37 out of 402) of respondents from Niger selected "very influential". This implies that online migration narratives may be more appealing to Tunisians, perhaps due to how they depict success, independence, and social standing. In Niger, lower connectivity may reduce both the reach and influence of social media content.

[46] Louay Cherni is a Tunisian civil society activist, journalist, content creator, and YouTuber renowned for his political and social commentary. Cherni's dedication to advocating for social justice and his engagement with current events have established him as a key figure in contemporary media and activism. Collaborating with him on a video promoting LACE's consultation services has been one of the campaign's highlights, proving his positive influence on the campaign brand image.
[47] Odogwu Kiwi and Taiwo Odumosu have specialised in migration/travel related content and gained influence by sharing information and tips to travel legally and avoid scams. They are Nigerian nationals who have emigrated and live in the West (Canada, New Zealand, UK). They enjoy a high level of trust from Nigerian netizens. Every time their videos were shared on the Nigeria pages, they quickly rose to top performing posts, generating high engagement, praise, gratefulness, and numerous requests for additional information.

[48] Responses on the 5-point Likert-type scale range from 1 'No Influence' to 5 being 'Very Strong', with higher scores indicating greater levels of influence with this indicator.



Younger participants consistently rated social media as influential. Among those aged 18–21, 32.3% (84 out of 260) reported social media to be "very influential", compared to 26.8% (128 out of 477) among those aged 22–34, and just 23.5% among participants aged 35–44 (52 out of 221). This trend suggests that younger individuals are not only more engaged with social media but also more susceptible to the migration narratives it presents.

Social media plays a key role in reinforcing popular migration narratives, particularly those centred on success, financial support, and the promise of a better life abroad. Respondents who rated social media as highly influential were more likely to report encountering stories about people who successfully reached their destination ($r = .266$, $p < .001$) and achieved a better life abroad ($r = .253$, $p < .001$). These respondents were also more likely to reference accounts of community members working abroad and sending money home ($r = .327$, $p < .001$), as well as statements expressing encouragement to pursue irregular migration ($r = .142$, $p < .001$). These correlations indicate that social media may reinforce dominant migration narratives in communities, particularly the glamorisation of life abroad.

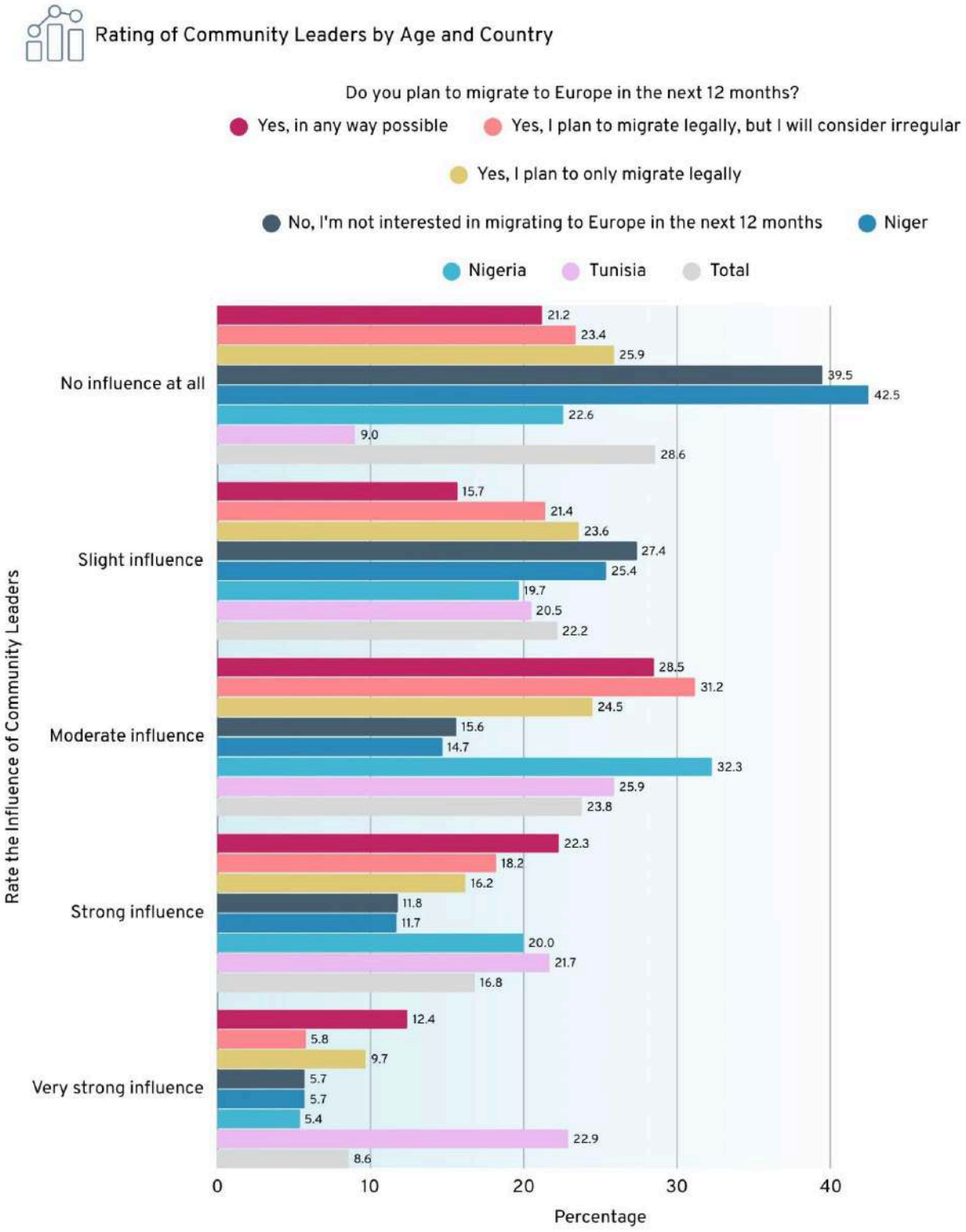
Religious and community leaders influence influence migration decisions but are rarely engaged systematically

Religious figures and community elders were among the less frequently mentioned influencers in the qualitative data, appearing in just six FGD entries. When referenced, their role depended highly on the cultural and social context. In some communities, these figures discouraged irregular migration, promoting patience, moral conduct, or alternative local opportunities. In other contexts, they were described as providing tacit approval or spiritual encouragement for migration, particularly if it was framed as a path toward family upliftment.

KIIs, especially those with local authorities or Civil Society Organisation (CSO) representatives, highlighted that some community leaders act as mediators, offering advice or contacts rather than direct encouragement. However, few participants viewed them as trusted sources of migration information. Survey results echo this trend: community leaders and religious figures were among the least trusted sources of migration information, with only 9.8% and 10.3% of respondents (94 and 102 out of 958) respectively naming them as such. With that said, high influence ratings for community leaders and religious figures were positively correlated with intentions to migrate irregularly ($r = .212$ and $r = .213$ respectively, both $p < .001$), suggesting that individuals drawn to irregular migration are slightly more likely to report being influenced by these local authority figures.

Community and religious leaders' influence ratings strongly correlate with the perceived impact of community norms and cultural values on migration decisions ($r = .359$ for community leaders, $r = .302$ for religious figures), and with each other ($r = .662$, $p < .001$). These associations point to tightly knit local influence ecosystems, particularly in traditional communities, where cultural, spiritual, and social norms converge to shape migration outcomes.

Country and migration intention appear to be the most significant factors influencing how community leaders are perceived. Respondents from Niger were the most likely to report that community leaders have no influence at all (42.5%, 171 out of 402), followed by Nigeria (23.4%, 91 out of 390), while only 9.0% (15 out of 166) in Tunisia reported the same. Conversely, very strong influence was most frequently reported in Tunisia (22.9%, 38 out of 166), compared to only 5.7% (23 out of 390) in Niger and 5.4% in Nigeria (21 out of 390). Migration plans also shaped perceptions. Among those planning to migrate in any way possible, 34 individuals (12.4%) reported very strong influence, compared to just 5.7% (18 out of 314) among non-migrants. These differences suggest that those already predisposed toward migration may be more attentive to or impacted by the messaging of community leaders.



For religious leaders, country and age were the most prominent predictors of influence. Respondents in Niger were most likely to report no influence from religious figures (44.0%, 177 out of 402), while only 15.7% (26 out of 166) of Tunisians selected the same. In contrast, Nigerians reported the highest level of very strong influence, at 13.6% (53 out of 390). Age was also a strong determinant. Only 10.4%

(27 out of 260) of youth aged 18–21 rated religious figures as very influential, compared to just 6.8% (15 out of 221) among those aged 35–44. Meanwhile, nearly a third (32.1%) of the oldest group reported no influence from religious leaders.

This variation suggests that the perceived authority of local leadership figures differs across national contexts, likely reflecting both the strength of local governance structures and the prominence of traditional leadership roles in public life. In Nigeria and Tunisia, where community leaders may have more visible roles in civic engagement or service provision, their migration-related influence appears more pronounced. Conversely, in Niger, these figures may play a more symbolic or limited role in shaping individual migration choices.

Many view smugglers and migration agents as informal advisors and information brokers

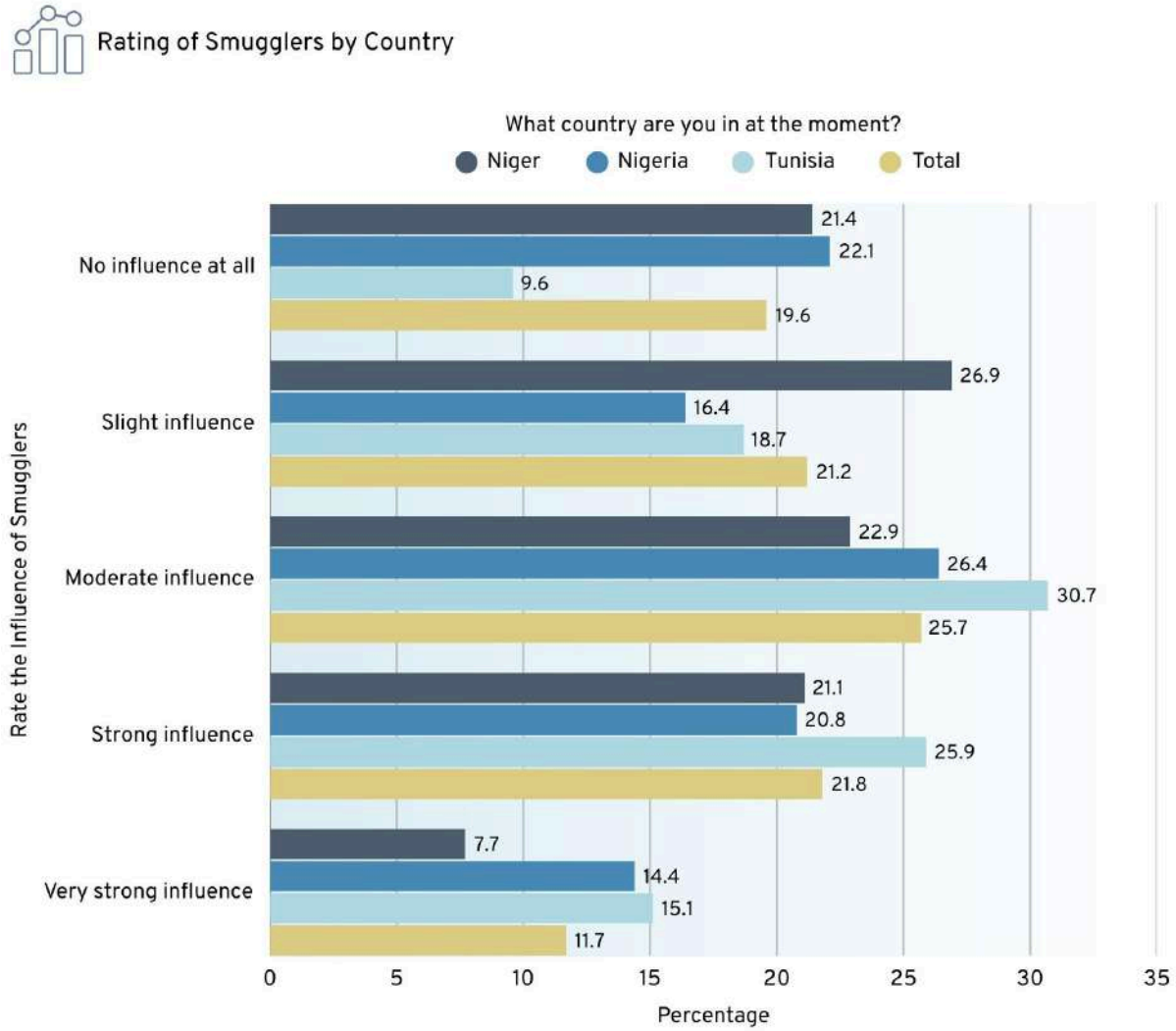
While not publicly celebrated, smugglers and informal migration agents were referenced in over eight KIIs and several FGDs. Participants typically acknowledged their centrality in irregular migration journeys, describing them as "the only available option" for those lacking resources, education, or documentation. Some returnees, especially in KIIs, admitted relying on smugglers to reach their destinations or connecting to them through acquaintances or community brokers.

Smugglers were rarely described as trustworthy and often seen as exploitative and indispensable. In many cases, they reportedly promise safe passage, but deliver uncertain and often dangerous routes. Despite this, their ability to "get things done" when legal migration feels inaccessible makes them influential, especially for youth desperate to leave.

Survey data provides additional insight into the perceived influence of smugglers. While not ranked among the most influential actors, smugglers received an average influence score of 2.64 out of 5[49] , indicating a moderate but not overwhelming perception of their impact. Their trustworthiness was notably low as only 2 respondents (0.2% out of 958) selected smugglers as their most trusted source of migration information, placing them among the least trusted actors.

Perceptions of smuggler influence varied significantly by country, with Tunisian participants the most likely to view smugglers as highly influential actors in migration decisions. Participants in Tunisia were most likely to rate smugglers as "very influential" (15.1%, 25 out of 166) compared to 14.4% (56 out of 390) in Nigeria and only 7.7% (31 out of 402) in Niger. This pattern may reflect greater visibility or normalisation of smuggling networks in certain Tunisian and Nigerian communities, where irregular migration is more openly discussed and facilitated. By contrast, the lower figures in Niger suggest either reduced exposure to smuggling intermediaries or a greater tendency to conceal reliance on such actors, possibly due to stigma or legal risks.

[49] Responses on the 5-point Likert-type scale range from 1 'No Influence' to 5 being 'Very Strong', with higher scores indicating greater levels of influence with this indicator.



The influence of smugglers on intentions to migrate irregularly is weak[50]. Individuals more inclined to consider irregular migration also tend to perceive smugglers as having some influence over migration decisions. Their influence may stem less from trust or inspiration and more from their functional role in facilitating movement. Qualitative data supports this interpretation, as smugglers were often considered necessary intermediaries. They were consulted for logistics, not guidance, particularly in areas where irregular networks are embedded in the local economy.

Institutional sources aren't highly influential but remain a critical touchpoint

Government agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) were among the least frequently cited influencers in both the FGDs and KIIs, and their impact was typically described as indirect or peripheral. Some participants acknowledged that NGOs and government actors occasionally organise awareness sessions or provide information about safe migration and reintegration; however, these interventions were often described as sporadic, inaccessible, or lacking credibility. Civil society members and local leaders expressed scepticism about the consistency and reach of institutional

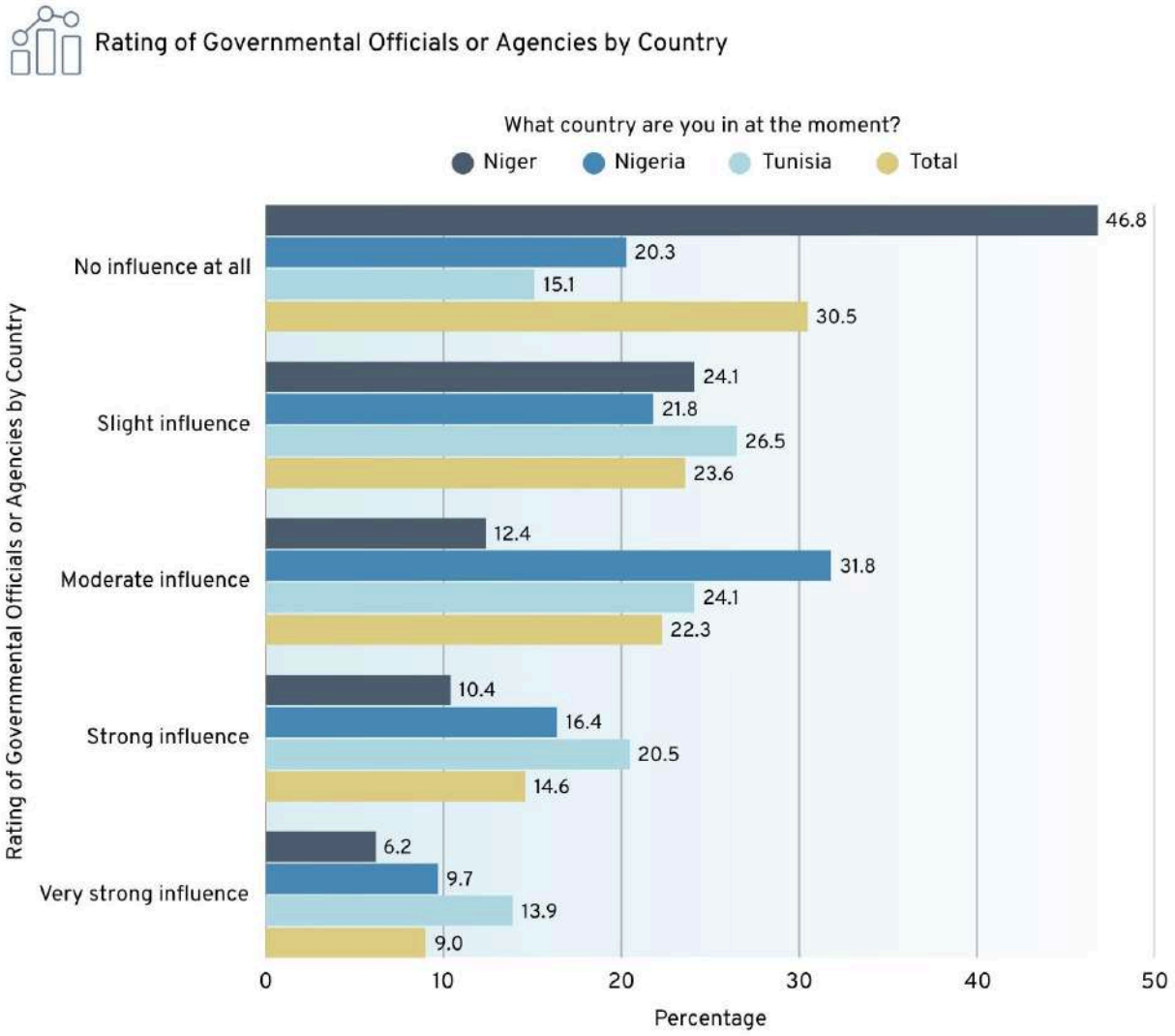
[50] This is demonstrated by a modest positive correlation ($r = 0.135$, $p < .001$).

efforts, especially in rural or marginalised areas. In some cases, government campaigns were perceived as disconnected from the lived experiences of potential migrants.

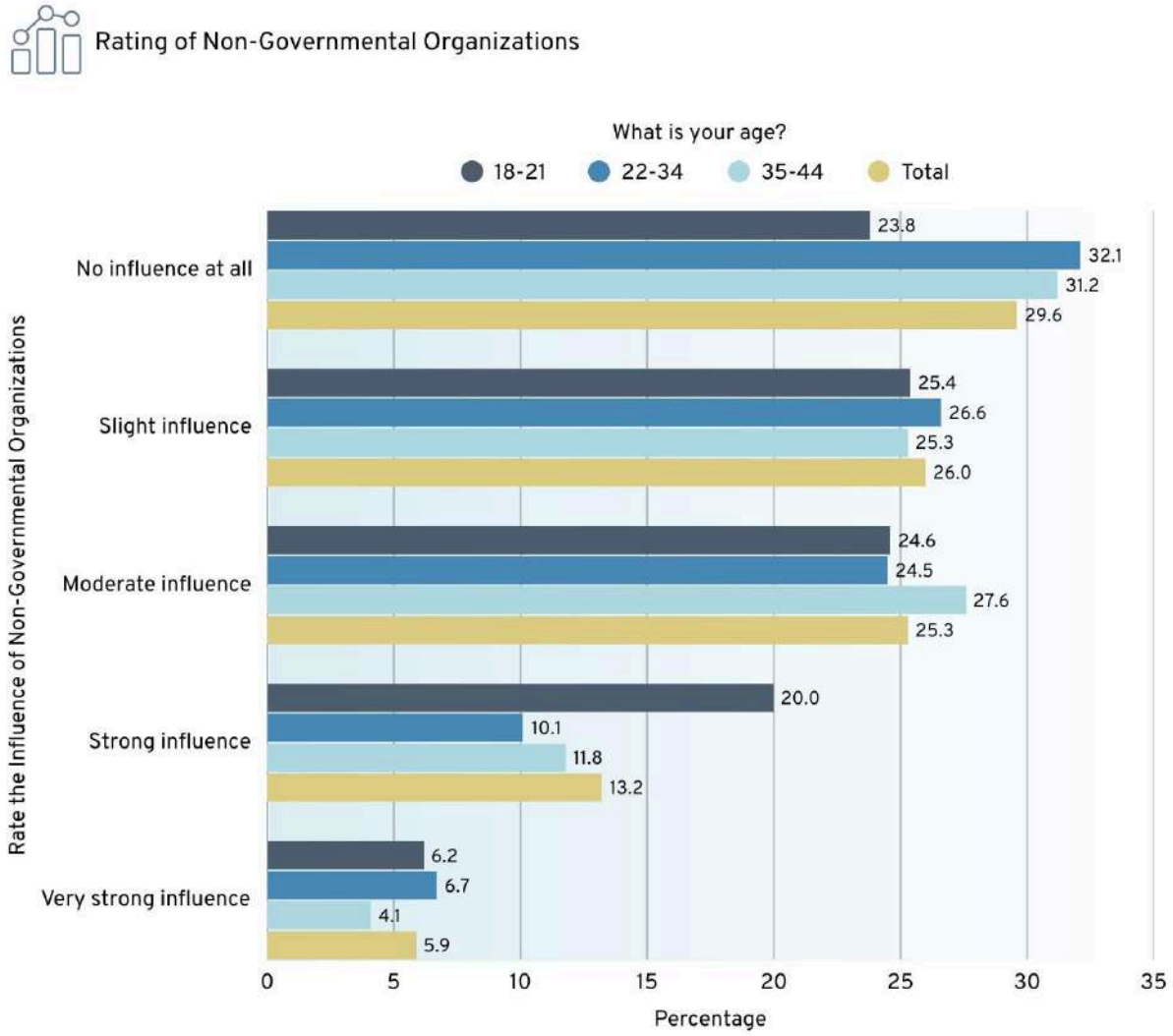
This limited influence of government and NGO actors is echoed in the quantitative findings. On a five-point scale measuring perceived influence, government officials or agencies received an average rating of 2.48[51], while NGOs scored even lower at 2.40, placing them at the bottom of the ranked influencers. When asked to identify the most trusted source of migration information, only 226 out of 958 (23.6%) respondents selected government actors, and just 147 out of 958 (15.3%) chose NGOs. While these figures are lower than those for family or returnees, they still reflect a moderate level of trust, suggesting that formal institutions maintain some credibility and relevance.

Tunisians were the most likely to view government actors as highly influential, while Nigerians attributed more influence to NGOs, highlighting distinct national engagement patterns with formal institutions. Specifically, 13.9% of Tunisian respondents (23 out of 166) rated government actors as "very influential," compared to 9.7% (38 out of 390) in Nigeria and 6.2% (24 out of 402) in Niger. For NGOs, Nigeria respondents showed the highest levels of strong influence attribution, with 19.2% (75 out of 390) rating them as "strong influential," compared to 7.7% (31 out of 402) in Niger and 12% (20 out of 166) in Tunisia. This may reflect greater public engagement with formal state actors in Tunisia, while the comparatively high attribution of influence to NGOs in Nigeria could suggest a more active or better-established civil society presence in the migration space[52].

[51] Responses on the 5-point Likert-type scale range from 1 'No Influence' to 5 being 'Very Strong', with higher scores indicating greater levels of influence with this indicator.
[52] Influence ratings for government and NGO actors were strongly correlated ($r = .612$, $p < .001$), and also positively correlated with religious figures ($r = .564$) and community leaders ($r = .512$). This suggests that participants may view these actors as part of a broader cluster of institutional or community authority.



Age-based variation in NGO influence was also notable. Younger participants aged 18–21 were more likely to view NGOs as influential, with 26.2% (68 out of 260) assigning either “strong” or “very strong” influence, compared to just 16.8% (80 out of 477) among those aged 22–34 and 15.9% (35 out of 221) among those aged 35–44. These results suggest that NGOs may be more successful in reaching younger audiences, possibly due to more youth-focused programming or better alignment with digital and social media engagement strategies.



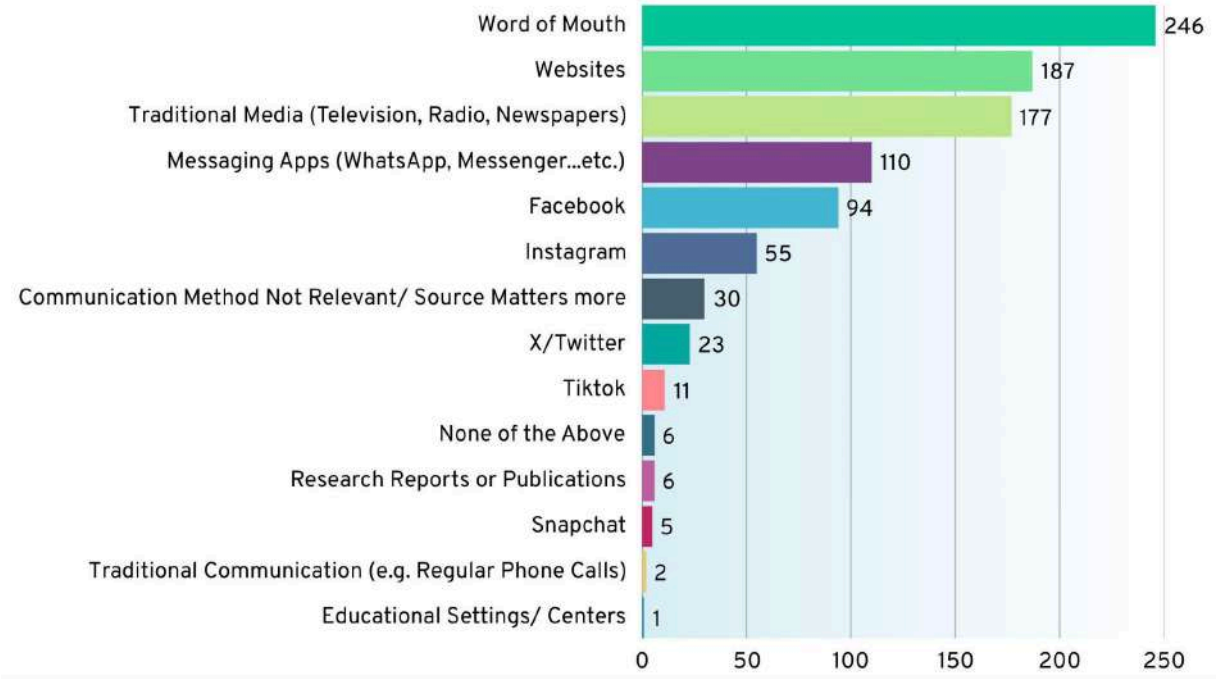
Qualitative entries, particularly from KIIs with NGO personnel, highlighted a growing awareness of the need to build trust within communities. These actors emphasised the importance of participatory outreach, locally grounded messaging, and long-term engagement to shift perceptions over time. However, such strategies remain underutilised and may require greater investment and alignment with community realities to effectively influence migration decisions.

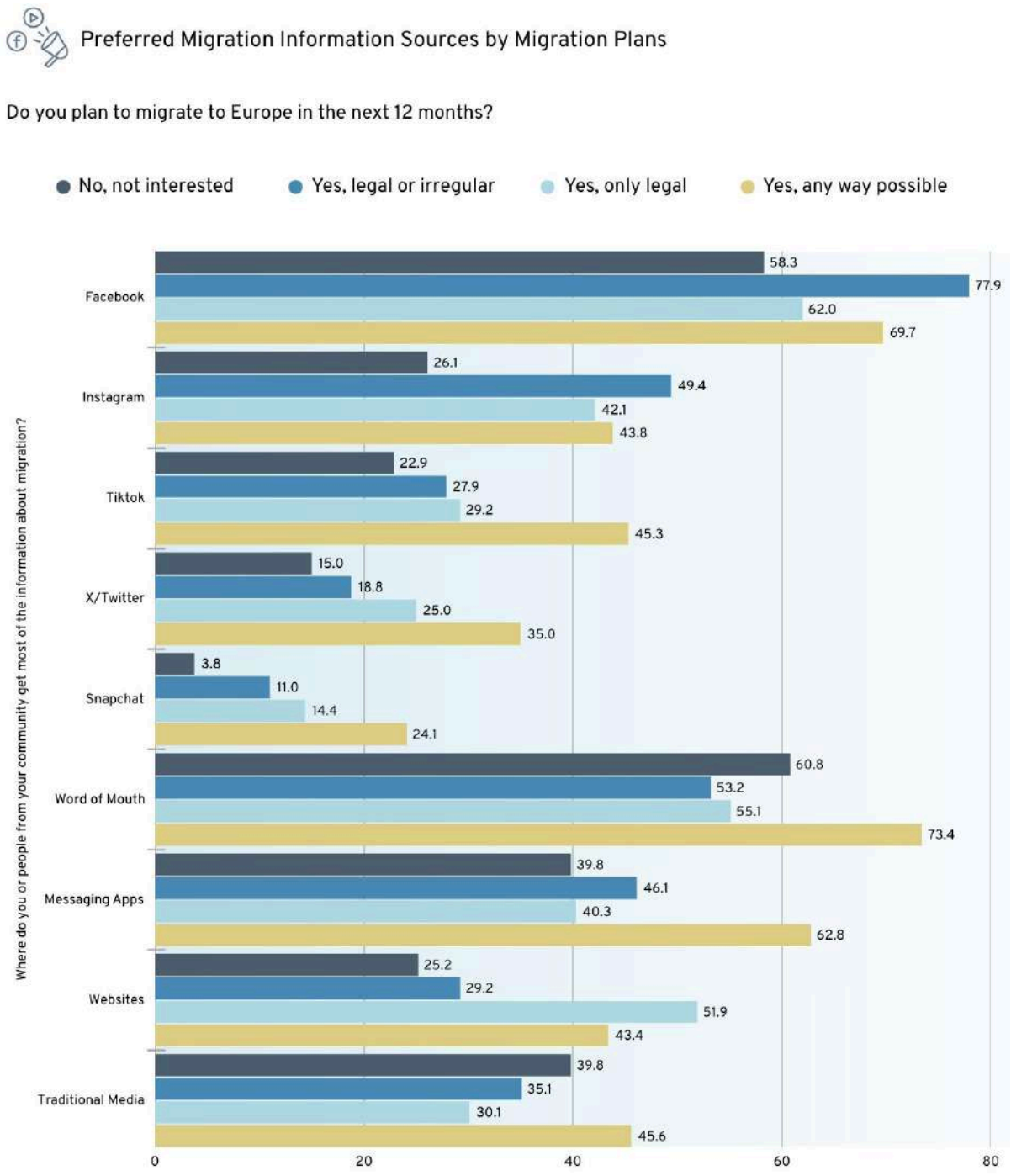
Migration information is shaped by a range of trusted and informal sources

Participants described a broad spectrum of channels through which they gather information about migration, ranging from interpersonal word-of-mouth to digital platforms. These sources shape community understanding of migration options, risks, and requirements, though their influence and credibility vary significantly. The term “sources” refers to the platforms or communication methods, such as messaging apps, websites, social media, traditional media, and word of mouth, through which participants receive migration-related information.

Most Trusted Sources to Provide Accurate Migration Information

Which source of information do you trust the most when it comes to migration?





Word-of-Mouth is the most frequently used and trusted channel

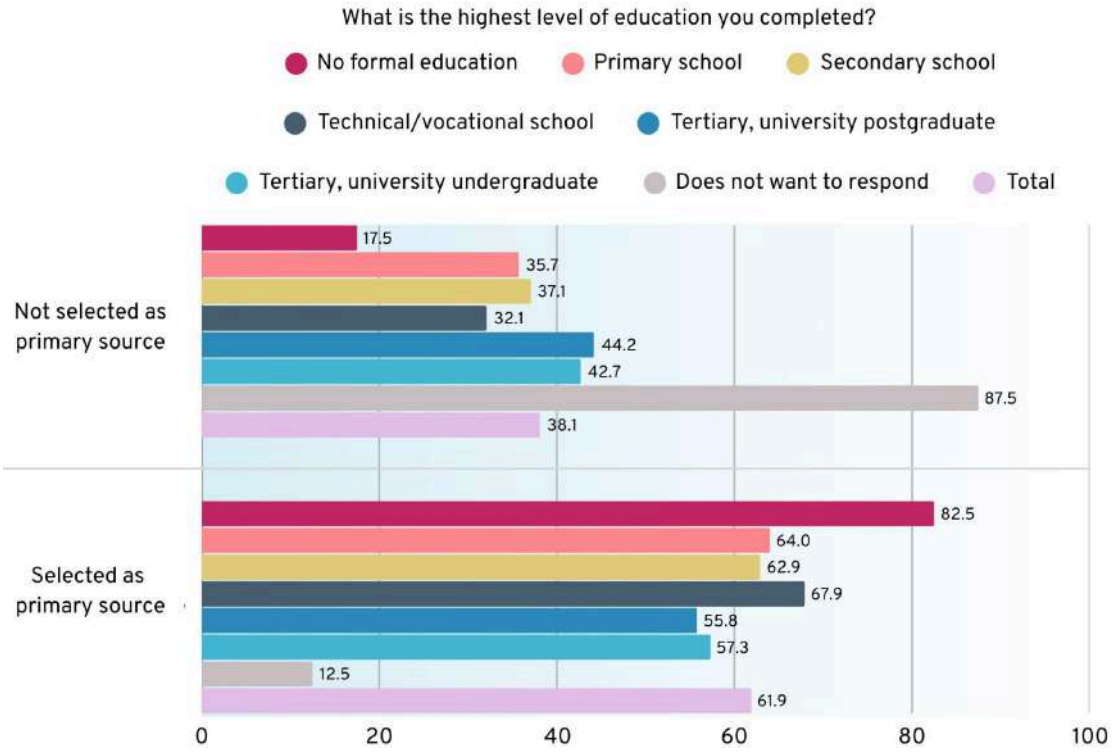
Word-of-mouth was the most frequently mentioned and trusted source of migration information across all FGDs and KIIs. In over 25 FGD entries, participants referenced conversations with peers, family members, or acquaintances as central to shaping migration decisions. Many noted that such information is perceived as authentic because it is drawn from lived experiences. In KIIs, particularly those with youth workers and community leaders, word-of-mouth was often described as the "first point of contact" for migration-related knowledge, especially in areas where digital access is limited.

Key informants from CSOs and local leaders emphasised that, in rural or underserved areas, interpersonal communication fills the gap left by absent or inaccessible official information. In some cases, migration knowledge is even institutionalised within communities, with specific individuals (often returnees) becoming go-to sources for others planning their journeys. These "local migration experts" provide advice on travel routes, contacts abroad, and cost expectations, creating a decentralised but highly active informal knowledge network.

Quantitative findings confirm word-of-mouth as both a widely used and highly trusted channel of migration information. Word-of-mouth was the second most frequently cited source of information after Facebook, selected by nearly two-thirds (61.8%, 593 out of 958) of respondents. It was also rated the most trusted source overall (25.7%, 246 out of 958). Trust in word-of-mouth was positively correlated with the degree to which respondents reported being influenced by family influence ($r = .308$, $p < .001$) and influence of relatives or friends living abroad ($r = .232$, $p < .001$).

Differences in demographic patterns suggest further nuance in how this channel operates. Patterns of use varied most by education level, with less formally educated individuals more reliant on informal communication channels. Participants with no formal education were the most likely to report using word-of-mouth (82.5%, 66 out of 80) followed by those with a Technical/vocational education (67.9%, 55 out of 81), suggesting that informal knowledge-sharing is more dominant among less formally educated populations.

Word of Mouth as Primary Sources of Migration Information by Education Level



Word-of-mouth was more commonly selected as influential among individuals who do not intend to migrate (60.8%, 191 out of 314), indicating that this channel is used widely regardless of migration

intent. Finally, word-of-mouth showed a moderate positive correlation with agreement to the statement "My community, including family and friends, encourage me to migrate" ($r = .153$, $p < .001$), further cementing its role in validating migration as a socially endorsed choice.

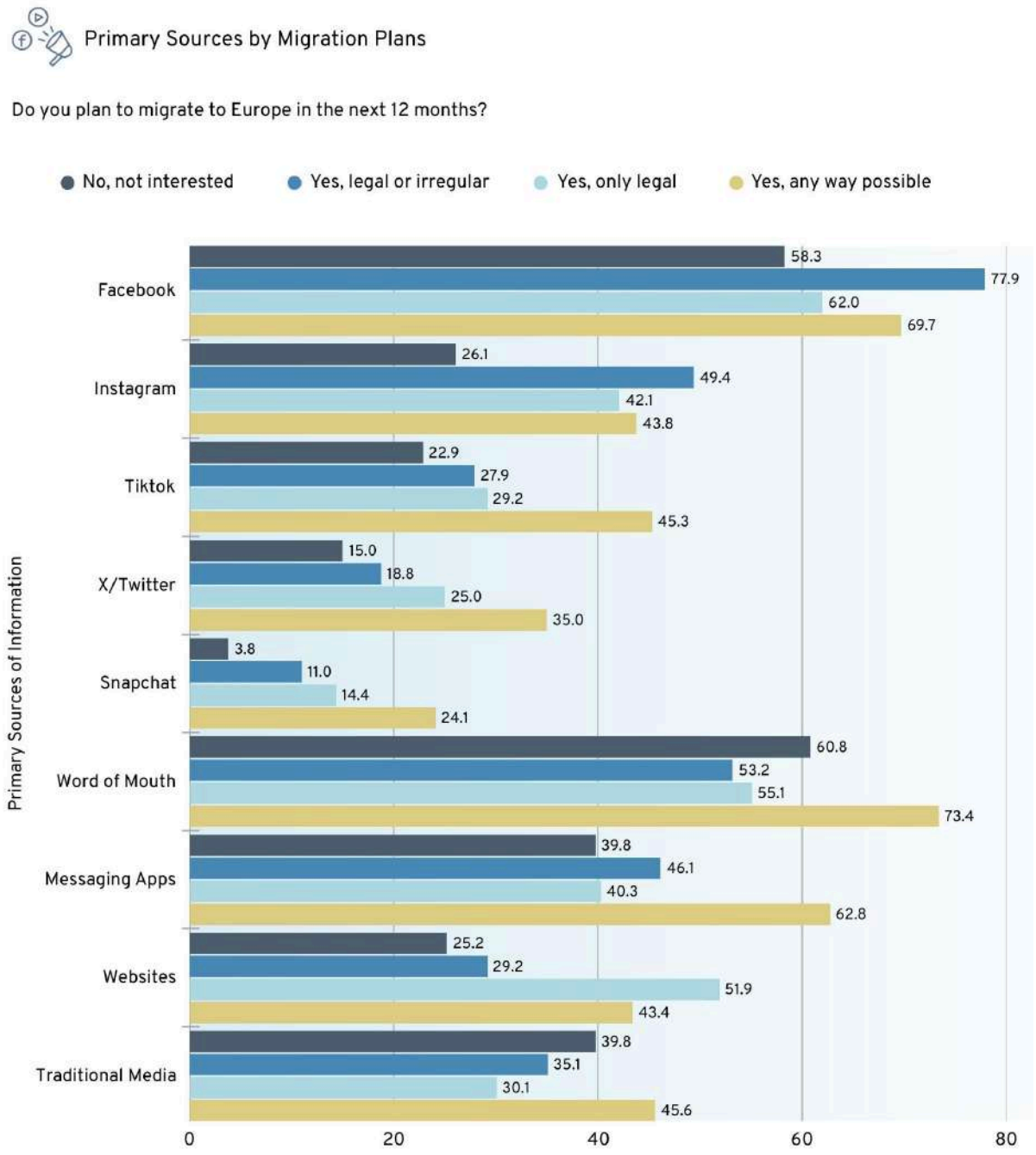
Social media platforms amplify aspirational content and misinformation

Social media was widely portrayed in the FGDs and KIIs as a visual gateway into the lives of migrants abroad. Particularly among youth, platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat were described as fueling migration desires by showcasing curated glimpses of success overseas. Participants noted that social media, more than any other channel, blurs the line between aspiration and reality, offering daily proof of better lifestyles, financial independence, and modernity. In over a dozen FGDs, respondents explained that seeing friends or influencers post photos in European cities or with luxury goods made migration appear not only desirable but attainable.

Returnees were frequently cited as influential content creators.. Several participants mentioned that migrants returning home continue to post success-themed content even after facing hardship.. This pattern was confirmed in KIIs with community and youth leaders, who expressed concern about the misleading nature of social media portrayals. Though some KIIs pointed to isolated counter-narratives, such as returnees sharing struggles, the majority noted that social media overwhelmingly glorifies migration.

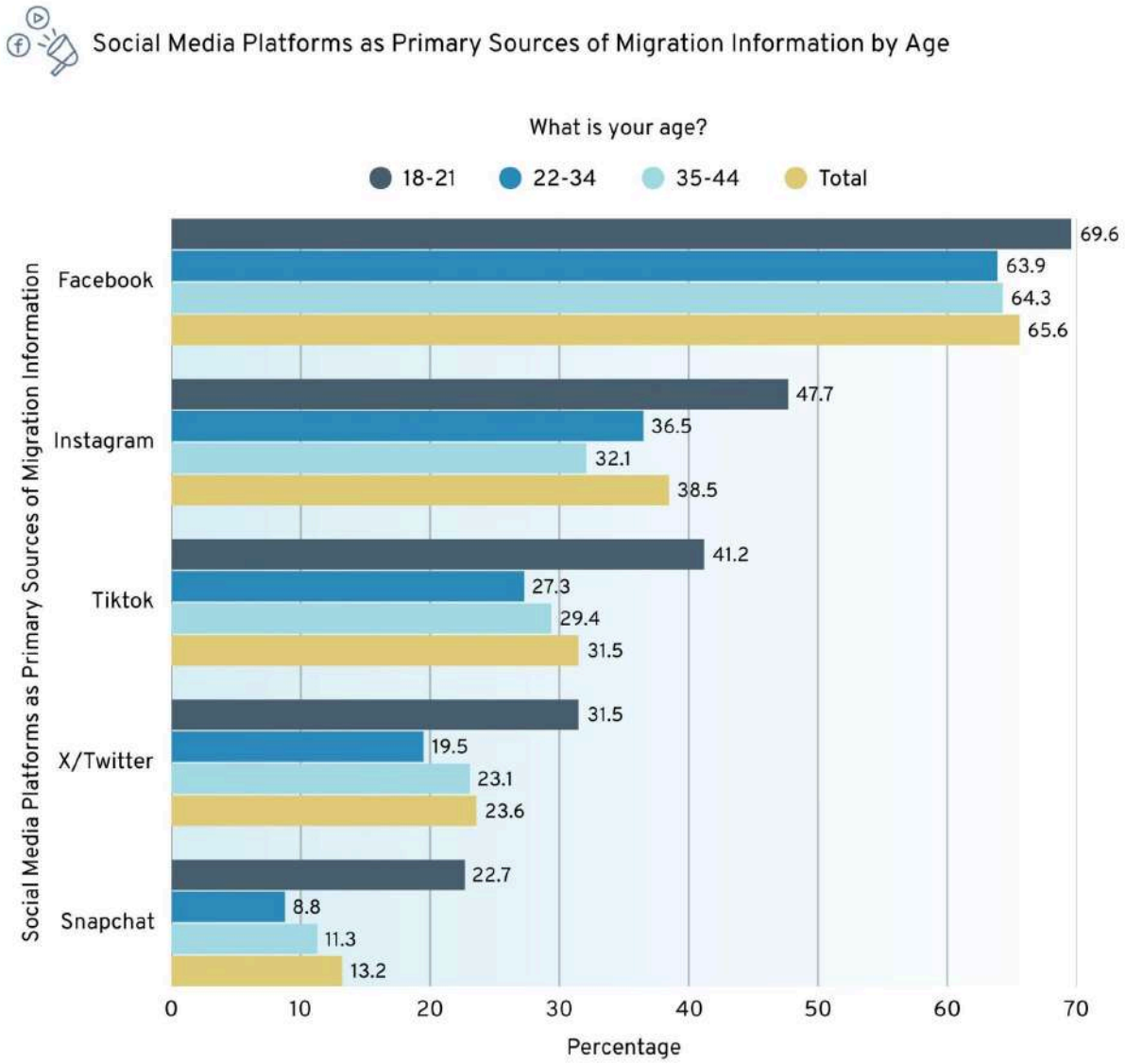
Facebook is the most influential social media platform for migrants, but trust is limited. In the survey, Facebook was the most frequently selected source of information (65.6%, 628 out of 958), followed by Instagram (38.5%, 369 out of 958), TikTok (31.5%, 302 out of 958), X/Twitter (23.6%, 226 out of 958), and Snapchat (13.2%, 126 out of 958). Yet, despite their popularity, these platforms were not among the most trusted sources. For example, only 9.8% (94 out of 958) elected Facebook as the most trusted source, and even fewer selected Instagram (5.7%, 55 out of 958). TikTok, X/Twitter, and Snapchat collectively received only 4.1% (39 out of 958) of votes.

Facebook was especially popular among those who intend to migrate, particularly individuals who plan to migrate legally but are open to irregular means if necessary (77.9%, 120 out of 154). Instagram use was also highest among this group (49.4%, 76 out of 154). Conversely, those who plan to migrate legally only were most likely to rely on websites (51.9%, 112 out of 216), while those intending to migrate by any means most frequently used messaging apps (62.8%, 172 out of 274) and word-of-mouth (73.4%, 201 out of 274).



While Facebook use appears relatively stable across age groups, with 69.6% (181 out of 260) of respondents aged 18–21, 63.9% (305 out of 477) of those aged 22–34, and 64.3% (142 out of 221) of those aged 35–44, other platforms show more pronounced age-based disparities. Instagram, for instance, was used by 47.7% (124 out of 260) of youth aged 18–21, compared to 36.5% (174 out of 477) of those aged 22–34 and 32.1% (71 out of 221) of those aged 35–44. A similar pattern was observed for TikTok, used by 41.2% (107 out of 260) of respondents aged 18–21, compared to 27.3% (130 out of 477) of those aged 22–34 and 29.4% (65 out of 221) of those aged 35–44. X/Twitter followed suit, with 31.5% (82 out of 260) of 18–21-year-olds reporting usage, versus 19.5% (93 out of 477) and 23.1% (51 out of 221) in the older groups, respectively. These figures suggest that while Facebook

retains widespread appeal across generations, platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and X/Twitter are far more concentrated among younger users.



Specific platforms showed thematic correlation patterns: the influence rating of returnees was correlated with the use of TikTok ($r = .192$, $p < .001$), suggesting this platform may be where returnee success stories circulate. Similarly, influence ratings of smugglers were also correlated with TikTok ($r = .167$, $p < .001$), indicating its potential use for more informal or underground forms of communication.. Instagram usage was positively correlated with researching visa or asylum procedures ($r = .200$, $p < .001$) and opportunities in Europe ($r = .211$, $p < .001$). Snapchat, though less widely used, was positively correlated with searching for legal consequences of irregular migration ($r = .182$, $p < .001$), suggesting its use for both inspiration and cautionary storytelling.

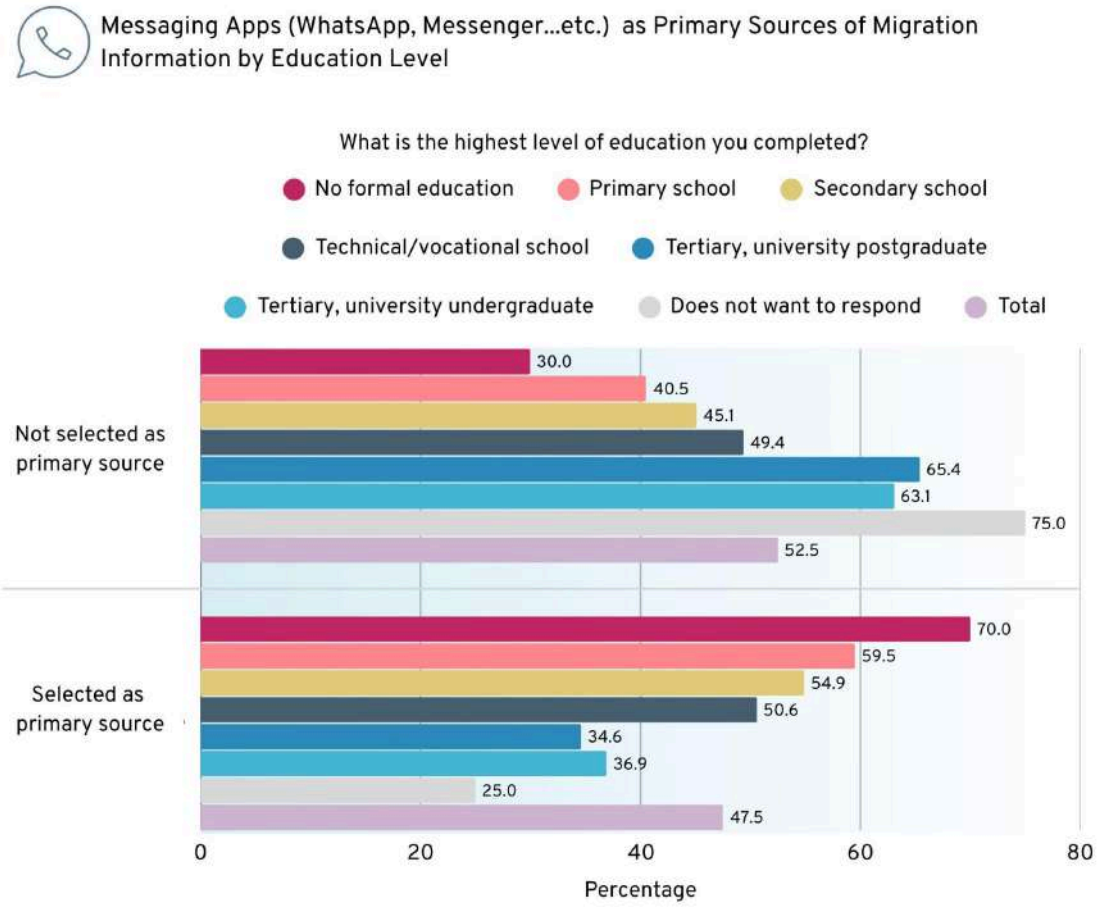
Messaging platforms provide accessible and peer-endorsed information

Unlike social media platforms, messaging applications such as WhatsApp and Messenger were described in FGDs and KIIs as intimate and direct communication channels. In more than 10 FGDs, participants noted that migration information shared through these apps came from close contacts, often trusted relatives or friends abroad. This meant that the information exchanged was perceived as credible, private, and context-specific. Participants explained that unlike social media posts, which might exaggerate or glamorise migration, messages sent through WhatsApp or Messenger were often more realistic and detailed, sometimes including logistical advice, documents, or photos from the journey. KIIs reinforced this perspective. Civil society representatives and returnees described WhatsApp groups as key hubs for coordinating migration plans, exchanging contacts for agents or smugglers, or staying in touch throughout a journey.

> *"The main sources of information on migration within the community are diverse, primarily including social media platforms, particularly WhatsApp. WhatsApp is seen as an ideal platform for exchange and communication, where prospective migrants gather necessary information about living and working conditions in their destination countries."*
>
> KII participant, Educator in Public Sector, Niger 2024

Quantitatively, messaging platforms were selected as a migration information source by 47.5% (455 out of 958) respondents, making them one of the top sources after Facebook and word-of-mouth. Their use was especially prominent among respondents planning to migrate in any way possible, with 62.8% (172 out of 274) from this group selecting messaging platforms. This contrasts with 40.3% (87 out of 216) of those planning to migrate legally, 43.5% (71 out of 154) of those who would consider irregular migration if necessary, and only 39.8% (125 out of 314) of respondents not interested in migration. This suggests those more open to irregular or hybrid pathways lean heavily on these direct, peer-to-peer communication tools.

A distinct age-related trend appeared in how messaging platforms are used for migration information. Younger respondents aged 18–21 were the most likely to rely on messaging apps such as WhatsApp and Messenger, with 55% (143 out of 260) selecting them as a primary source. This usage declined to 45.7% (218 out of 477) among 22–34-year-olds and dropped further to 42.5% (94 out of 221) among those aged 35–44. This pattern suggests that younger cohorts place greater trust in peer-to-peer communication, while older groups may lean toward more traditional or structured sources.



Education level is strongly associated with reliance on messaging platforms for migration information. Individuals with no formal education were the most likely to depend on this source, with 70% (56 out of 84) selecting messaging apps. In contrast, usage was significantly lower among those with higher education: 36.9% (101 out of 274) among respondents with a university undergraduate degree and 34.6% (54 out of 156) among those with postgraduate education. Furthermore, age interacts with education level in shaping the use of messaging apps, particularly among those with school-level or vocational education. Among respondents with secondary education, reliance was highest among youth aged 18–21 (47.3%, 123 out of 260), compared to 22.4% (107 out of 477) of those aged 22–34 and just 20.4% (45 out of 221) among those aged 35–44. Conversely, among university undergraduates, reliance increased with age: 32.1% (71 out of 221) of those aged 35–44 reported using messaging apps, compared to only 17.7% (46 out of 260) of those aged 18–21. This pattern suggests that reliance on messaging apps is shaped not only by educational attainment but also by age-related preferences and digital habits. Among less formally educated individuals, younger respondents appear more inclined to use messaging apps, likely reflecting greater digital familiarity and social media exposure. In contrast, among university-educated individuals, older respondents showed higher usage of messaging apps, which may reflect a preference for direct, private communication over more public or institutional sources.

Despite their widespread use, messaging platforms did not rank highly as trusted sources in. In reality, only 11.5% (110 out of 958) respondents selected them as their most trusted source. This gap may

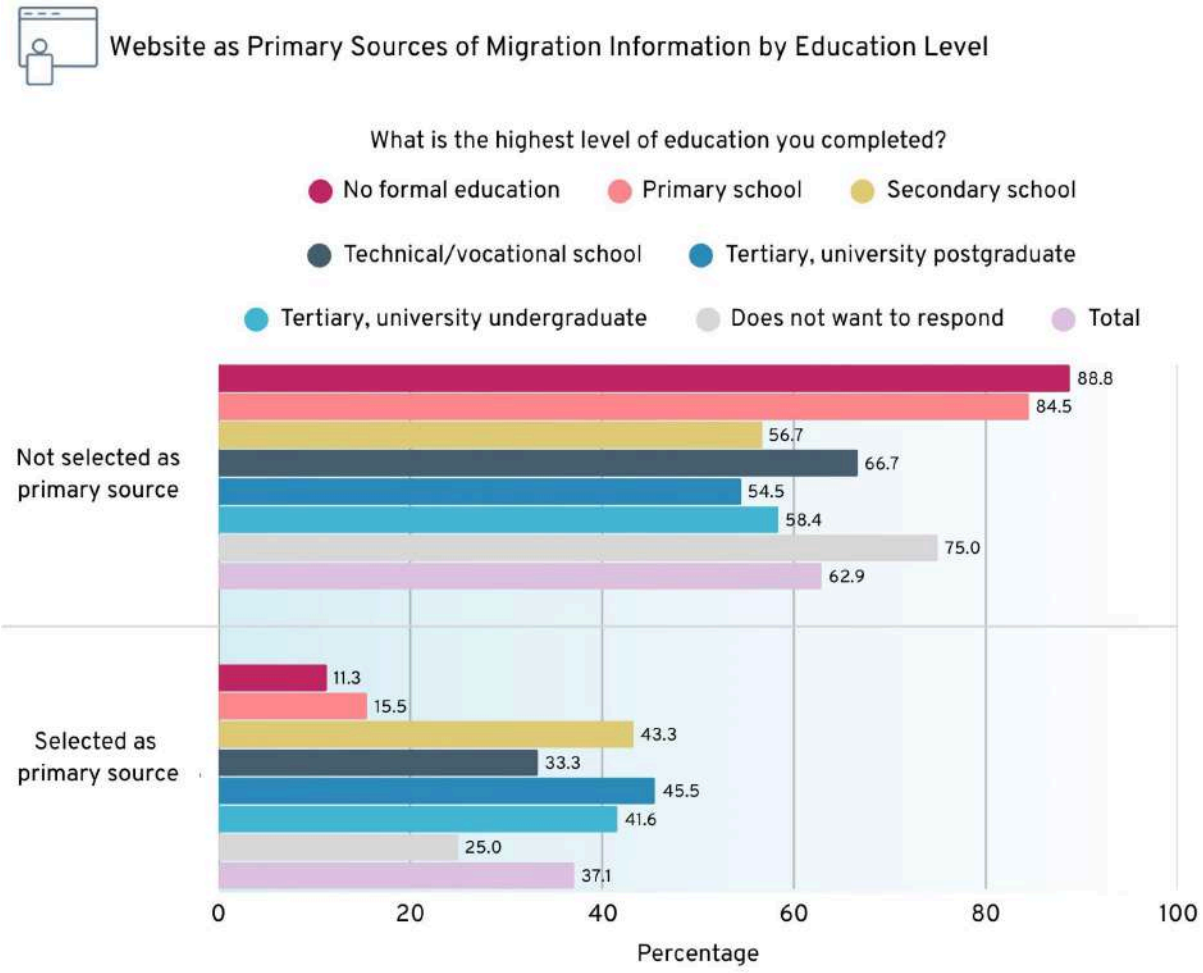
reflect their informal nature: while they are widely used for immediate, personalised information, they may not be seen as authoritative in the same way that websites or official sources are.

Websites and traditional media are trusted by some, but reach is limited

Though less frequently cited in discussions, websites and traditional media (including television, radio, and newspapers) were still recognised as meaningful sources of migration information, particularly among more educated participants or civil society actors. Similarly, returnees and NGO staff referenced the use of international websites, such as embassy portals or information campaigns, as points of access for those seeking legal pathways. These sources were generally associated with a higher level of trust and a preference for structured and official information.

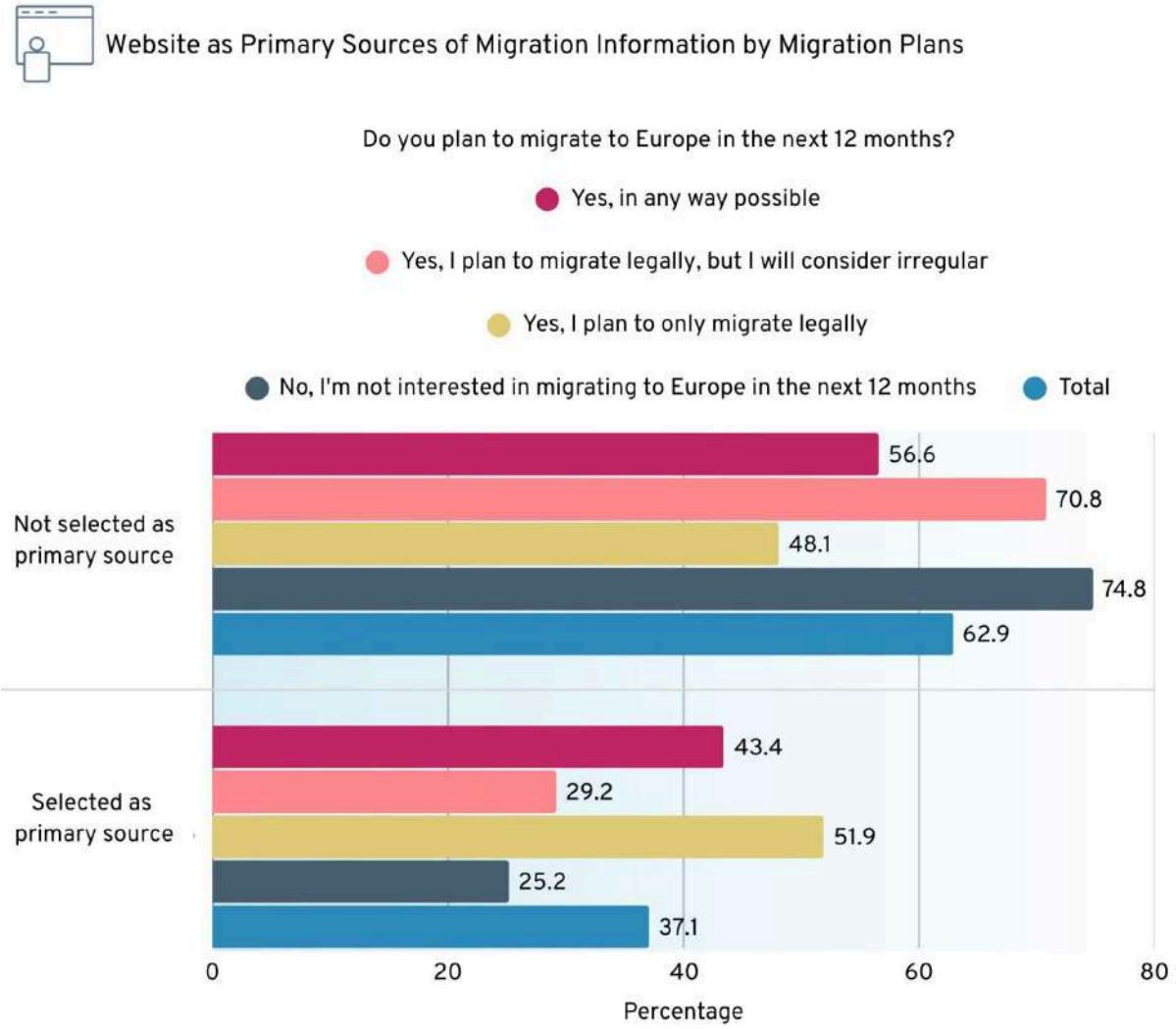
In FGDs, references to websites and traditional media were found in eight entries, especially among Nigerian and Tunisian groups. Traditional media was occasionally seen as a legacy source, used more often by older community members or in areas with limited internet access. Some youth participants described hearing migration stories or risk awareness messages broadcasted through community radio programs or national news. While these channels were not the primary method for learning about migration, they played a supplementary role by reinforcing or validating information gathered from more informal means.

Websites and traditional media were among the most commonly used and trusted sources of migration information, reflecting their continued relevance alongside informal and digital channels. A total of 37.1% (355 out of 958) respondents reported using websites as a source of migration information, while 38.5% (369 out of 958) cited traditional media. Websites emerged as the second most trusted source for migration information, slightly behind word of mouth (25.7%, 246 out of 958), with 19.5% (187 out of 958) of respondents selecting them. Traditional media followed closely, with 18.5% (177 out of 958) respondents identifying it as a trusted source.



Differences in the use of websites for migration information were strongly associated with education level and country, with educated individuals more likely to use them and usage in Niger over 30% lower than in other countries. Website use was considerably higher among individuals with tertiary education: 45.5% (71 out of 156) of those with a postgraduate university degree and 41.6% (114 out of 274) of those with an undergraduate degree reported using websites to access migration information. In contrast, only 11.3% (9 out of 80) of respondents with no formal education and 15.5% (13 out of 84) of primary school attendees did the same. Country-level differences were also notable, with just 16.7% (67 out of 402) of respondents in Niger reporting website use, compared to 57.8% (96 out of 166) in Tunisia and 49.2% (192 out of 390) in Nigeria.

Migration plans further shaped patterns of website usage. Individuals intending to migrate only through legal means were the most likely to rely on websites (51.9%, 112 out of 216), followed by those planning to migrate in any way possible (43.4%, 119 out of 274), and those with no interest in migrating (25.2%, 79 out of 314). These patterns suggest that educational attainment and regional infrastructure play central roles in access to digital migration resources, while migration intentions may reflect differences in the type or formality of information sought.



Individuals who use websites for migration information tend to seek structured, legal, and support-related information, often alongside other formal channels. For example, those who used websites were significantly more likely to research how to apply for visas or asylum ($r = .245$, $p < .001$), opportunities in Europe or other countries ($r = .276$, $p < .001$), and support services available for migrants ($r = .215$, $p < .001$). This pattern indicates that websites are frequently used by individuals seeking structured, practical, and legally relevant information. Moreover, use of websites was also positively correlated with the use of other digital information channels, such as X/Twitter ($r = .393$, $p < .001$), suggesting that these information-seeking behaviours often cluster together among individuals who approach migration planning more deliberately or methodically.

Individuals who relied on traditional media were more likely to seek information on how to apply for visas or asylum ($r = .191$, $p < .001$), and support services available for migrants ($r = .176$, $p < .001$). The medium also showed a notable correlation with hearing community discussions around migration topics, including warnings about the risks of irregular migration ($r = .164$, $p < .001$) and encouragement to migrate legally ($r = .171$, $p < .001$). These patterns suggest that traditional media

continues to serve as a credible and informative channel, particularly for structured awareness and risk communication.

Misconceptions and Rumours

Widespread rumours reflect misunderstandings of legal procedures and migration realities

Misconceptions about migration were strong in qualitative interviews and survey results. The persistence of specific myths, despite evidence or personal experiences to the contrary, suggests that false or misleading narratives remain deeply embedded in how migration is understood. These beliefs often reflect a mix of optimism, social reinforcement, and limited access to verified information.

Irregular migration is widely perceived as easier and less risky than it is

Among the most enduring and widespread misconceptions is the belief that irregular migration offers an attainable and often manageable pathway to success. In KIIs, participants described how smugglers often promised "VIP" migration packages, giving the impression that travel to Europe could be safe, fast, and even comfortable.

> *"People are now in groups on social media uploading Lives on facebook and Tiktok as they cross on the boat, this influences people, they promote a "VIP" experiences with life jackets, advanced GPS and trusted boats, they provide feedback on which smugglers to go with and which ones to not to, all of this information is being spread around social media and influencing even more people to go through with this extremely dangerous plan."*
>
> KII participant, Organisation representative, Tunisia 2024

In at least six FGDs with returnees, individuals recounted how they were sold misleading narratives portraying irregular migration as safe, structured, and ultimately successful, only to be later exposed to exploitation, detention, or physical danger. The belief in manageable risk was further echoed where irregular migration was framed as a "rite of passage" or a "gamble worth taking." Respondents emphasised that hardship and danger were anticipated but ultimately tolerable if there was any chance of eventual success. Stories of community members who "made it" often eclipsed the far more numerous cases of those who returned empty-handed or traumatised, or those who did not return.

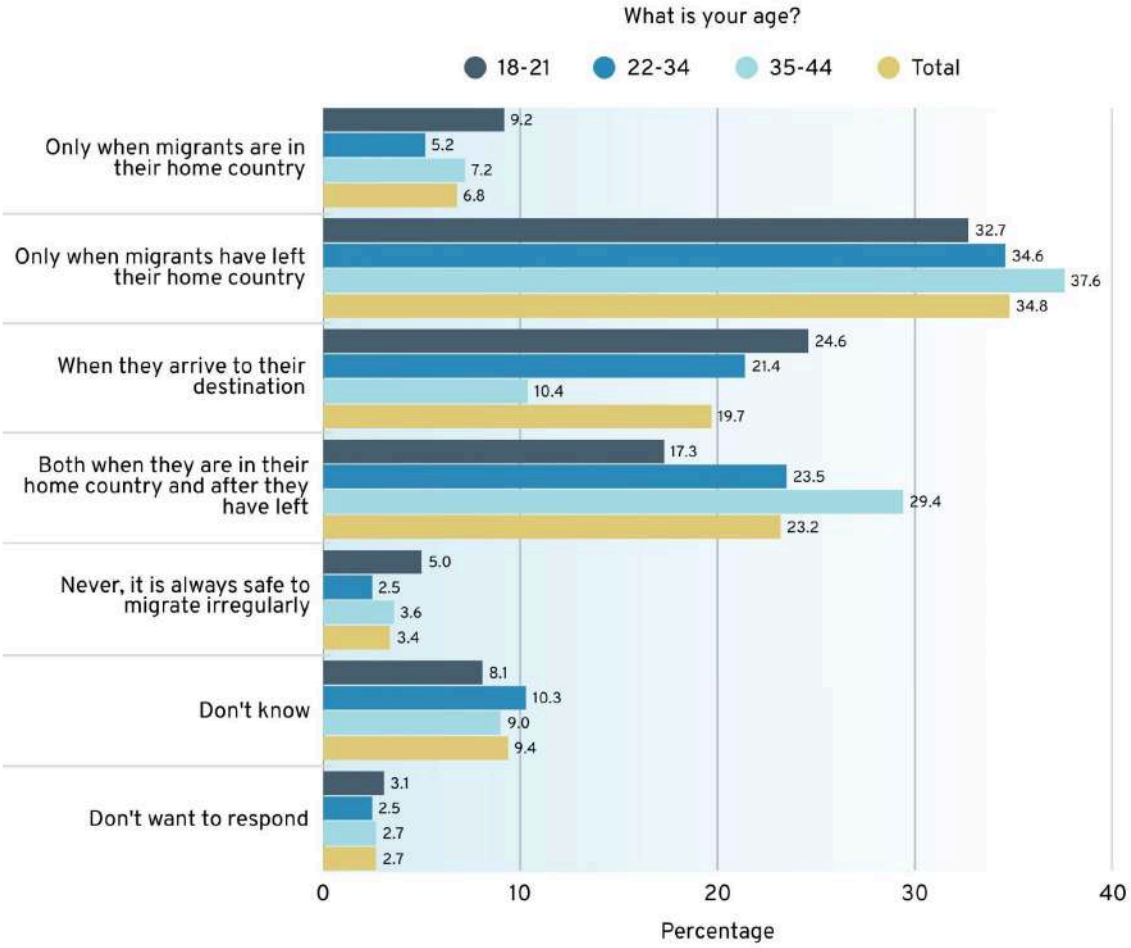
> *"People still don't care what the consequences are, they consider themselves dead in Tunisia and have all their hopes set on the moment they arrive. [...] Last year, three Tunisian migrants died from sleeping outside in the severe cold. People hear about this, they know they are basically attempting suicide, but still carry through."*
>
> KII participant, Organisation representative, Tunisia 2024

In both KIIs and FGDs, informal knowledge networks were found to reinforce beliefs of attainable migration journeys. Messaging groups and peer networks in Agadez and other transit hubs were often

described as sources of real-time information, offering route maps and updates about checkpoints or dangers. Some focus group participants even referred to specific routes as “safe corridors”. This normalisation of irregular migration is further amplified by selective storytelling and a culture of silence around failures and risks.

Survey responses revealed substantial gaps in understanding about the timing and nature of risks associated with irregular migration. When asked when migrants face the greatest risk, the most frequently selected response, chosen by 34.8% (333 out of 958), was the incorrect belief that risks begin only after leaving the home country. In contrast, only 23.2% (222 out of 958) correctly identified that danger is present before and after departure.

Perceptions of Irregular Migration Risks by Age



Perceptions of when migrants face the greatest risk vary across age and nationality, with awareness strongest among older individuals and Nigerians.Among respondents aged 35–44, 29.4% (65 out of 221) selected this correct option, compared to 23.5% (112 out of 477) of those aged 22–34 and 17.3% (45 out of 260) of those aged 18–21. Similarly, Nigerian respondents were the most likely to answer

correctly, with 33.3% (130 out of 390) selecting this option, followed by 24.7% (41 out of 166) in Tunisia, and just 12.7% (51 out of 402) in Niger.

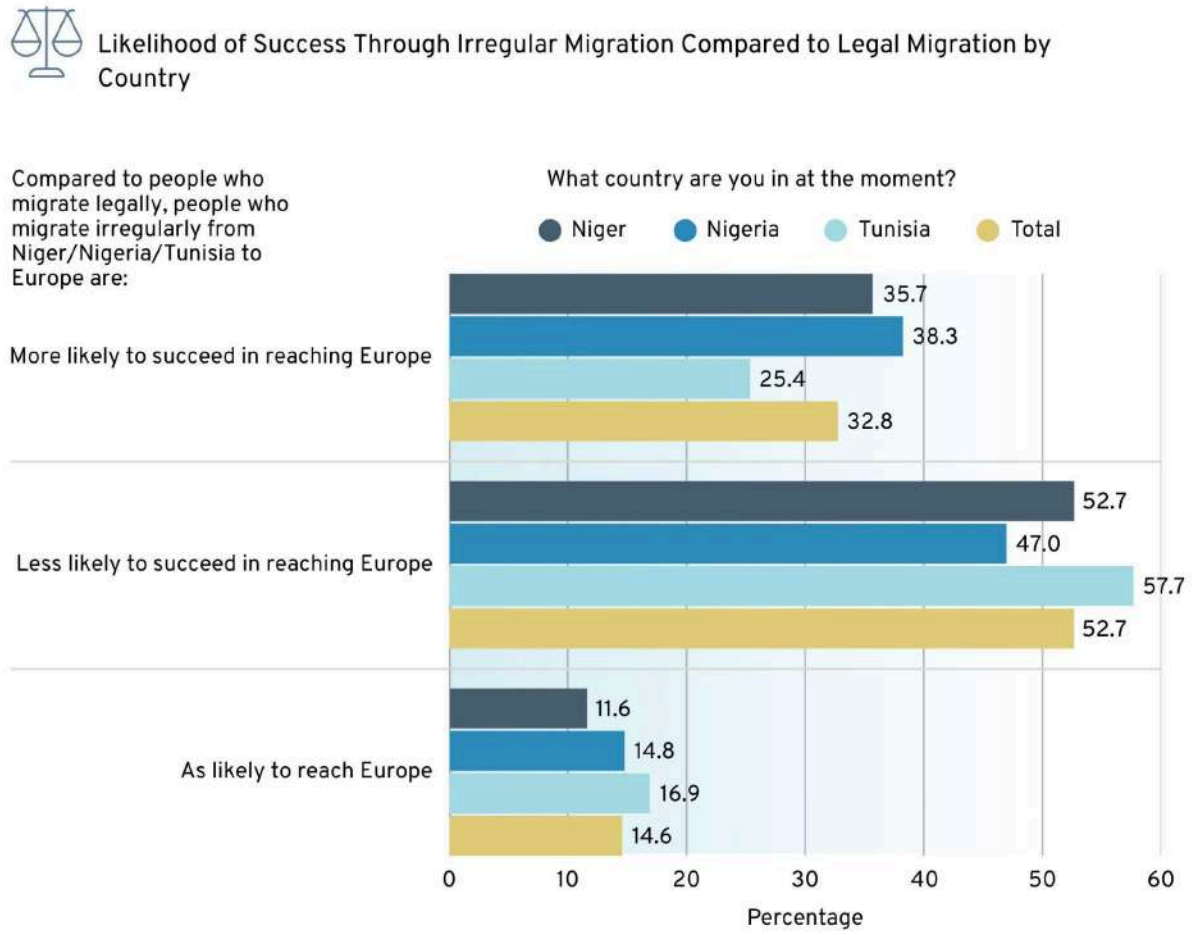
Most participants identified key dangers linked to smuggling, but a small number continue to underestimate or dismiss the risks involved. Respondents were presented with a multiple-choice question asking which risks are associated with migrating alongside a smuggler[53]. The majority of participants (45.6%, 437 out of 958)recognised the full range of risks associated with travelling with smugglers by selecting "all of the above". However, a notable portion of respondents opted for partial answers, with 19.0% (182 out of 958) identifying deception about destination outcomes, 17.8% (171 out of 958) citing physical abuse, and 13.0% (125 out of 958) noting extortion. Most concerning, though, was the 4.5% (43 out of 958) of respondents who indicated that it is safe to travel with a smuggler, suggesting that for a small but significant minority, either misinformation or normalisation of irregular migration has eroded risk perception.

Older participants and women tend to have stronger awareness of smuggling-related risks, while those considering irregular migration are more likely to underestimate them. Respondents aged 35-44 were more likely to recognise the full range of risks involved in travelling with smugglers, with 57% (126 out of 221) selecting all listed dangers, compared to 37.3% (97 out of 260) among those aged 18–21. While there was no significant difference in the ability to correctly identify the risks associated with travelling with smugglers, results suggest that women may be more aware of the gendered risks of irregular migration journeys, particularly those involving physical harm. This is evidenced by the fact that women were more likely (20.1%, 78 of 389) to identify physical abuse as a risk compared to men (16.3%, 93 of 569). Notably, respondents considering irregular migration were the most likely to select that it is safe to travel with a smuggler (7.8%, 12 out of 154), suggesting they may underestimate the dangers involved.

On average, survey participants tended to disagree with the idea that irregular migrants are more likely to reach Europe than those who use legal channels. This was reflected in a low mean score of 2.14 out of 5 [54] for the statement, indicating that respondents, on the whole, did not view irregular routes as more successful. Supporting this, a separate online survey asked respondents to directly compare the likelihood of success for regular and irregular migrants. Here, 52.7% (188 out of 357) selected "Less likely to succeed in reaching Europe" for irregular migrants, reinforcing the general skepticism toward the reliability of irregular pathways. Nevertheless, a substantial proportion of respondents remained confident in the viability of irregular migration: 32.8% (117 out of 357) believed that irregular migrants are "More likely to succeed," and an additional 14.6% (52 out of 357) believed they are "As likely to reach Europe" as those using legal routes.

[53] Participants were asked: What risks are associated with migrating with a smuggler? Their options were: (a) Being lied to about results in destination countries (b) Be subjected to extortion (c) Being subjected to physical abuse (d) All of the above, and (e) None, it is safe to travel with a smuggler

[54] Responses on the 5-point Likert-type scale range from 1 'Strongly disagree' to 5 being 'Strongly agree', with higher scores indicating greater levels of agreement with this indicator.



Belief in the success of irregular migration is highest among young people and varies by country, with Nigeriens showing the most scepticism. Youth aged 18–21 were notably more optimistic, with only 13.5% (35 out of 260) strongly disagreeing with the statement that "people who migrate irregularly are more likely to succeed than those who use legal channels," compared to 24.3% (116 out of 477) among 22–34 year-olds and 27.6% (61 out of 221) among the 35–44 group. Furthermore, while no respondents selected "agree," the combined share of those who chose "neither agree nor disagree" or "strongly agree" was highest among 18–21-year-olds (33.4%, 87 out of 260), compared to 29.1% (139 out of 477) among those aged 22–34 and 24.0% (53 out of 221) among the 35–44 group.

Country-level differences also emerged, with respondents in Niger being more skeptical of irregular migration's success as 28.9% (116 out of 402) strongly disagreed, compared to only 17.4% (68 out of 390) in Nigeria and 16.9% (28 out of 166) in Tunisia.

The data reveal a positive correlation between belief in the superior success rate of irregular migration and intent to migrate irregularly ($r = .281$, $p < .001$). In other words, individuals who believe irregular migrants are more likely to succeed are also more likely to express willingness to use irregular methods themselves. A similar pattern is seen with perceptions of difficulty. Those who perceive irregular migration planning as less difficult were more likely to intend to migrate irregularly ($r = .207$, $p < .001$). While these correlations are moderate in size, they provide meaningful evidence that

perceptions of feasibility and reward play an important role in shaping risk-tolerant migration decisions.

People frequently misunderstand legal eligibility and documentation pathways

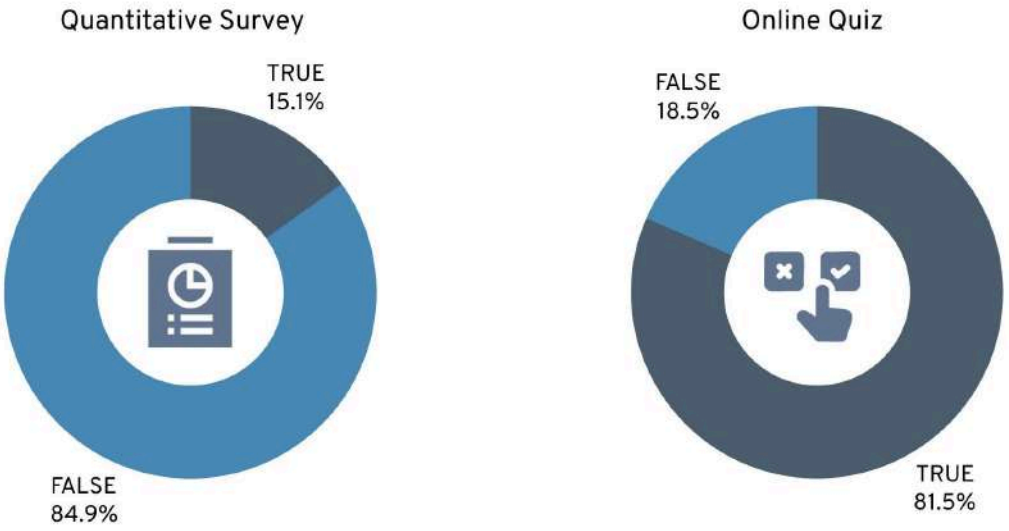
Across focus groups and key informant interviews, participants repeatedly highlighted a fragmented and often inaccurate understanding of the legal frameworks surrounding migration. Widespread assumptions exist around marriage, visa expiration, asylum, and residency pathways, which are often shaped by secondhand information, social narratives, or misleading success stories. For example, some FGD participants believed that "marrying a European citizen leads to automatic citizenship". In contrast, others noted that overstaying a visa is commonly thought to be a valid basis for applying for asylum.

> *"There is a rumour that old women abroad are readily available for marriage, which supposedly makes the migration process easier"*
>
> Male FGD participant, planning to irregularly migrate to Europe, Nigeria 2024

Misconceptions about marriage as a legal migration shortcut were common among survey respondents, with few respondents recognising the complexities of citizenship procedures. When presented with the statement, "Marriage to someone with European nationality guarantees an easier and faster path to citizenship," only 15.1% of respondents in the main survey (145 out of 958) identified this claim as incorrect, suggesting a widespread belief that marriage can automatically streamline the process toward legal status. This pattern was reinforced in a separate online survey where just 18.5% (56 out of 303) responded with the correct understanding. These results point to a common misconception that significantly underestimates the legal, bureaucratic, and procedural barriers that remain even after marriage to a European national.

Belief that Marriage as a Guarranteed Path to Citizenship

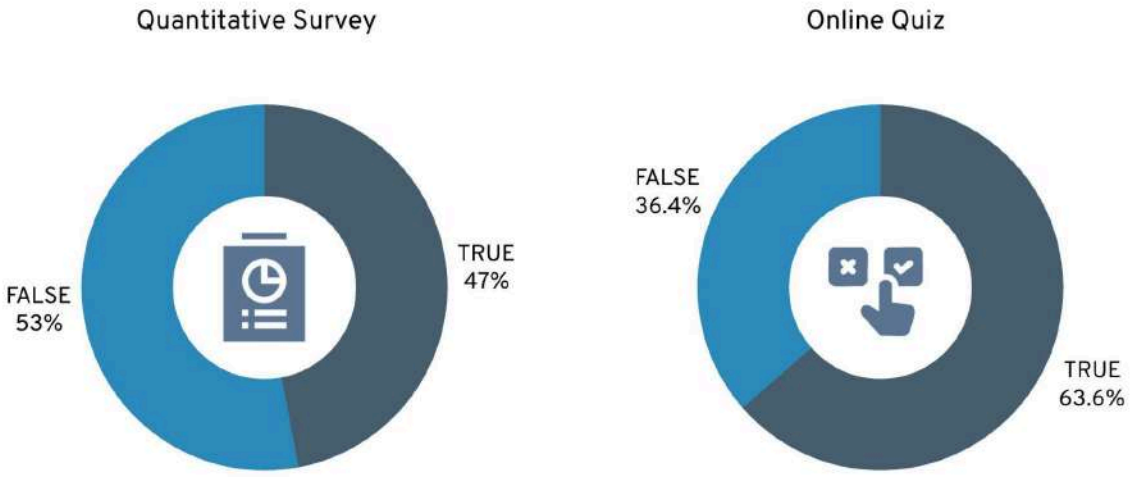
Marriage to someone with European nationality guarantees an easier and faster path to citizenship.



Misunderstandings about the rights of unaccompanied minors are widespread, with most respondents incorrectly assuming they are automatically granted residency. In the main quantitative survey, 47% of respondents (450 out of 958) correctly recognised that minors arriving alone do not automatically receive residency permits. More than half of respondents either held inaccurate beliefs or were unsure about the specific legal protections afforded to unaccompanied minors in destination countries. Results from the online quiz reinforced this finding, with an even lower proportion, 36.5% (124 out of 340), responding correctly. There were stark national differences: respondents from Nigeria demonstrated a higher level of awareness, with 50.8% (62 out of 122) answering correctly, while only 17.3% (19 out of 120) of Tunisian participants recognised that such automatic residency provisions do not exist.

Belief that Automatic Residency for Minors

Unaccompanied minors will automatically receive a European residence permit upon arrival in Europe.



Older age and caregiving experience are linked to a better understanding of migration policies affecting unaccompanied minors. For example, younger respondents were more susceptible to this misconception. Only 30.8% (80 out of 260) of 18–21 year-olds correctly disagreed with the statement, while 49.5% (236 out of 477) of 22–34 year-olds and 60.6% (134 out of 221) of those aged 35–44 answered accurately. In contrast, individuals with dependent children demonstrated better awareness: just 41.7% (282 out of 677) of those without children answered correctly, compared to 60.4% (64 out of 106) of those with one child and 65.9% (29 out of 44) of those with three children. These patterns suggest that both maturity and caregiving responsibilities may enhance understanding of migration policy.

There's widespread misconception that visa expiration grants asylum eligibility, especially in Niger. 46.5% of respondents to the main questionnaire (445 out of 958) and 55.9% of the online quiz respondents (190 out of 340) demonstrated a misunderstanding that the expiration of a legal visa, by itself, confers eligibility to apply for asylum. This misunderstanding suggests that a significant portion of the population may conflate visa expiration with eligibility for protection, potentially leading to misguided expectations or strategies when considering legal migration. Respondents from Niger were significantly more likely to select the incorrect option, as three-quarters (75%, 81 out of 108) believed that asylum could be sought after overstaying a visa. In contrast, only 52.7% (58 out of 110) participants for Tunisia and 41.8% (51 out of 122) from Nigeria shared that belief.

Older individuals and those planning to migrate legally are more likely to understand that overstaying a visa does not make someone eligible for asylum. Among individuals aged 35–44, 66.5% (147 out of 221) selected the correct answer, compared to 53.0% (253 out of 477) of those aged 22–34 and only

43.5% (113 out of 260) of the 18–21 cohort. Differences were also observed based on migration plans. Those who intended to migrate only through legal means were the most likely to answer correctly, with 63.4% (137 out of 216) doing so. In contrast, only 50.6% (78 out of 154) of those open to irregular migration and 43.4% (119 out of 274) of those willing to migrate by any means selected the correct answer. These patterns suggest that awareness of VISA regulations is higher among those with more cautious or structured migration intentions.

Many respondents hold unrealistic expectations about the consequences of irregular migration, with nearly half unaware of the possibility of deportation. In response to the question, "When caught by the immigration authorities, all irregular migrants are…" just 51.5% (156 out of 303) correctly selected "Subjected to deportation depending on the host country's legal framework." Others held alternative assumptions with 15.2% (46 out of 303) believed irregular migrants are automatically deported, while 26.7% (81 out of 303) assumed that they are given the opportunity to apply for asylum before deportation. This implies that nearly half of the respondents either did not know the correct outcome or held assumptions that detention or eventual legalisation is the norm, further reflecting unrealistic expectations of the consequences of irregular migration.

Those with more determined migration plans (e.g., those willing to migrate through any means) are slightly more likely to hold misconceptions about irregular migration. For example, belief in marriage as a guaranteed path to citizenship was positively correlated with the intention to migrate irregularly ($r = .122$, $p < .001$), indicating a tendency to accept oversimplified legal pathways when one is determined to leave. Correlations between migration plans and marriage as a guaranteed path to citizenship and with expectations around residency for unaccompanied minors proved to be even stronger ($r = .168$ & $r = .259$, $p < .001$, respectively).

Europe is viewed as a land of guaranteed jobs and financial success

Among the most pervasive misconceptions is the belief that economic transformation is virtually guaranteed upon arrival in Europe. This "dream of Europe" narrative surfaced repeatedly in FGDs and KIIs, particularly among youth and returnees. Many participants described how remittances, social media images, or tales of success exaggerated the realities of life abroad, often downplaying the struggle and precarity faced by irregular migrants.

> *"I have heard rumors that if you get to Europe, everything is settled. There is house, work, accommodation, feeding, and practically everything you need is settled"*
>
> KII participant, Legal/Non-Migrant, Nigeria 2024

Migration narratives often emphasise success while downplaying failure, deportation, or hardship, creating an overly optimistic and selective image. In multiple FGDs, respondents shared that people are more likely to celebrate success stories than speak about those who failed, were deported, or remained undocumented in poor conditions. KII respondents from civil society and community organisations often noted that migrants returning with wealth or gifts become symbolic proof of migration's potential, even when such gains may have been accumulated through considerable

hardship or risk. Some participants acknowledged that the image of success is sometimes "staged" for social media, creating an illusion that reinforces the desirability of migration.

Respondents showed neutral to slightly optimistic views about employment opportunities for irregular migrants, often linking success to language skills or connections. In the main survey, the average score for the statement "It's easy for irregular migrants to find work in Europe, provided they have the right qualifications" was 2.88 out of 5[55] , suggesting a neutral to slightly sceptical stance, though not an outright rejection. Meanwhile, in a separate online quiz, 38.9% (118 out of 303) agreed with this statement. In comparison, others expressed more conditional beliefs: 15.2% (46 out of 303) believed employment depends on knowing the local language, and 13.5% (41 out of 303) cited connections with business owners as critical. This spread of responses suggests that while optimism exists, it is accompanied by fragmented or conditional understanding of the employment landscape in Europe.

> *"No matter what you call cheap labour, we can't compare the job opportunities in Europe to Nigeria. Whether you enter through the back door or by airplane, just know your way, you will get your papers with time."*
>
> Commentator on TMP Page, Nigeria 2024

Optimism about irregular migrants finding jobs is stronger among youth and those in Tunisia, while scepticism grows with education and age. Agreement with this statement was highest among respondents aged 18–21, with 45% (117 out of 260) selecting "Agree," compared to only 24.9% (55 out of 221) among those aged 35–44. Tunisians were also more likely to agree (40.4%, 67 out of 166), indicating that this belief may be particularly widespread in that national context[56]. Education level was associated with diverging opinions: individuals with secondary or vocational education were more likely to agree, whereas university graduates were more likely to express scepticism, with 29.6% (81 out of 274) of undergraduates and 41.7% (65 out of 156) of postgraduates selecting "Disagree." Employment status also shaped responses. Agreement was highest among those employed part-time (38.6%, 44 out of 114) and self-employed (40.2%, 94 out of 234), compared to 26.5% (39 out of 147) of full-time employees and only 20.1% (47 out of 234) of unemployed respondents. These differences suggest that generational, geographic, educational, and economic factors shape perceptions of economic opportunity for irregular migrants.

Misunderstandings about asylum-related financial support remain common, with a significant portion of respondents holding incorrect assumptions. In the main survey, a slight majority (56.8%, 544 out of 958) correctly rejected the idea that all asylum seekers automatically receive financial assistance of €500 upon arrival. However, the remaining 43.2% either believed the claim or were unsure, indicating persistent misconceptions about entitlements.

Beliefs about the ease of finding work as an irregular migrant are closely linked to migration intentions and the influence of personal networks abroad. Belief in the ease of employment for irregular migrants is positively associated with the intention to migrate irregularly ($r = .280$, $p < .001$), as well as with

[55] Responses on the 5-point Likert-type scale range from 1 'Strongly disagree' to 5 being 'Strongly agree', with higher scores indicating greater levels of agreement with this indicator.
[56] In contrast, 30.5% (1119 out of 390) of respondents from Nigeria and 25.6% (103 out of 402) from Tunisia agreed to that statement

higher influence ratings granted to relatives or friends living abroad ($r = .172$, $p < .001$). This underscores the impact of close personal networks in reinforcing optimistic beliefs about economic prospects in Europe and validating irregular migration as a viable pathway. Furthermore, belief in guaranteed financial support for asylum seekers also shows a positive correlation with migration intent ($r = .270$, $p < .001$).

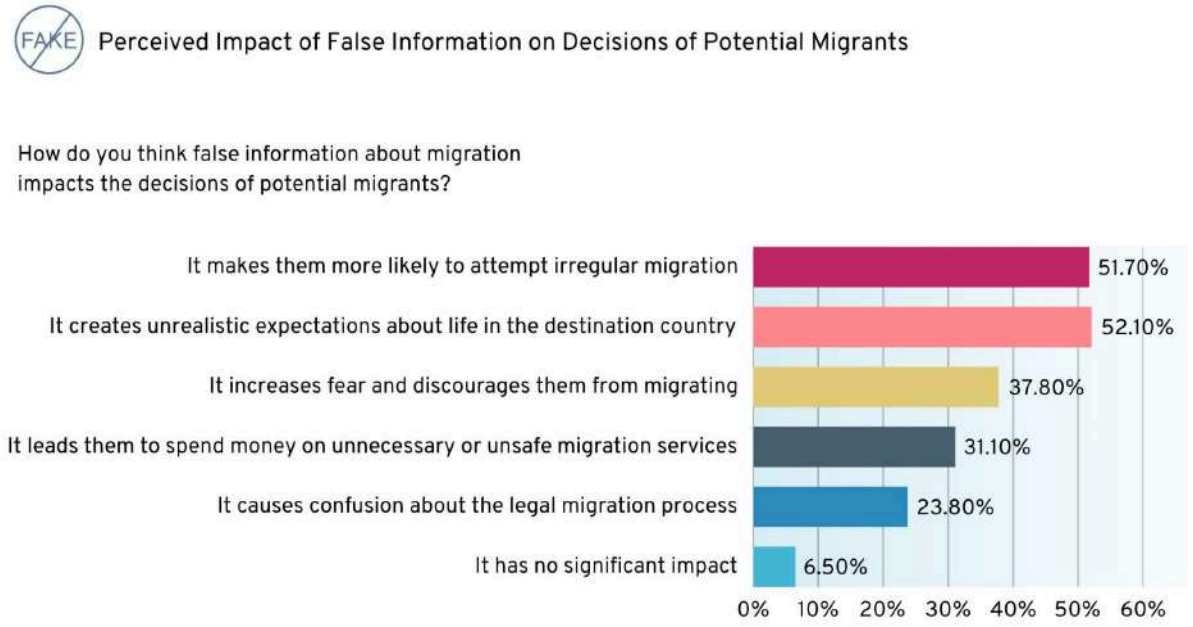
Snapchat use is positively associated with the belief that irregular migrants can easily find work, reflecting the platform's role in shaping perceptions. Respondents who used Snapchat as a source of migration information were significantly more likely to believe that finding employment in Europe is easy for irregular migrants ($r = .203$, $p < .001$). This aligns with FGD accounts that cited Snapchat and similar platforms as amplifiers of idealised lifestyles and distorted portrayals of life abroad.

Rumours reinforce aspirations and drive risky migration choices

Qualitative accounts from KIIs and FGDs reveal that rumours and exaggerated narratives, often shared by returnees, peers, or family members, play a decisive role in shaping migration behaviour. In many cases, the persistence of misinformation is not due to ignorance, but rather to how narratives are socially constructed and emotionally resonant. Several returnees reported that even after experiencing hardship, they refrained from discouraging others, fearing they would be perceived as failures.

The most frequently cited types of misinformation reflect migrants' hopes for quick economic success and easy access to Europe. When participants were asked what types of false information were most prevalent in their communities, the two most frequently identified categories were false promises of employment (66.8%, 640 out of 958) and false promises of easy migration (59.9%, 574 out of 958). These rumours are especially influential because they align with the aspirations of many migrants for quick entry and economic advancement.

Over half of survey respondents said misinformation drives unrealistic hopes and increases the likelihood of irregular migration attempts. 52.1% (499 out of 958) of them believed that false information creates unrealistic expectations about life abroad, and a nearly identical share (51.7%, 495 out of 958) said it makes people more likely to attempt irregular migration. These results demonstrate that misinformation reshapes perceived feasibility, desirability, and urgency around migration decisions.



While many respondents linked misinformation to increased enthusiasm for irregular migration, others highlighted consequences that move in the opposite direction. These included increased fear and discouragement from migrating (37.8%, 362 out of 958), spending money on unnecessary or unsafe services (31.1%, 298 out of 958), and confusion about legal processes (23.8%, 228 out of 958). Only a small portion (6.5%, 62 out of 958) believed that misinformation had no significant impact, underscoring the general consensus around its influence.

Individuals already planning to migrate are more likely to see misinformation as a driver of irregular migration, reinforcing existing intentions. This is supported by quantitative analysis, which shows a small but statistically significant positive correlation between the intention to migrate irregularly and the perception that misinformation makes people more likely to attempt irregular migration ($r = .128$, $p < .001$). While the strength of the correlation is modest, it underscores the subtle but meaningful role that misinformation plays in reinforcing pre-existing intentions and shaping migration trajectories. Alternatively, it is also possible that some individuals develop the intention to migrate as a result of exposure to these encouraging narratives, suggesting that misinformation may serve as both a reinforcing and initiating influence.

Country of residence shaped perceptions of misinformation's impact in notable ways. Tunisians were the most likely to report that misinformation creates unrealistic expectations about life abroad (78.9%, 131 out of 166), leads to unnecessary or unsafe spending (51.8%, 86 out of 166), and causes confusion about legal migration processes (30.7%, 51 out of 166). Nigerians were most likely to say misinformation increases the likelihood of irregular migration (60.8%, 237 out of 390), while Nigeriens more frequently cited fear and discouragement from migrating (44.8%, 180 out of 402). Notably, Tunisian respondents were the least likely to say misinformation has no significant impact (3.6%, 6 out of 166), suggesting a broader recognition of its influence in that context.

Respondents with higher education were more likely to view misinformation as causing unrealistic hopes and legal confusion, while less educated individuals often associated it with fear or saw little impact. Respondents with a postgraduate university education were among the most likely to believe that misinformation creates unrealistic expectations about life abroad (67.9%, 106 out of 156),

compared to only 42.5% (34 out of 80) of those with no formal education. They were also more likely to say it causes confusion about legal processes (28.8%, 45 out of 156), in contrast to 7.5% (6 out of 80) among the least formally educated. On the other hand, those with no formal schooling were more likely to say that misinformation leads to fear and discourages migration (50%, 40 out of 80), or that it has no significant impact at all (11.3%, 9 out of 80), a rate higher than that of university undergraduates (8.0%, 22 out of 274) and substantially higher than those with postgraduate education (6.4%, 10 out of 156).

Migration intentions shaped perceptions of misinformation's impact. Those planning to migrate "in any way possible" were most likely to believe it encourages irregular migration (65.0%, 178 out of 274), while those with legal migration plans or no intentions were more likely to highlight other effects. For instance, legal migration planners most often cited unrealistic expectations (60.6%, 131 out of 216) and legal confusion (28.2%, 61 out of 216), while non-migrants emphasised fear and discouragement (40.4%, 127 out of 314).

In sum, perceptions of misinformation's impact are shaped by distinct demographic and attitudinal factors. More educated individuals were more inclined to see misinformation as creating unrealistic expectations and encouraging irregular migration, while less formally educated respondents often associated it with fear or saw it as inconsequential. Tunisians consistently showed heightened sensitivity to misinformation's effects, and those planning irregular migration were the most likely to perceive it as reinforcing their choices. These patterns suggest that life experience and migration outlook significantly mediate how misinformation is interpreted and internalised.

Information is verified through informal and inconsistent channels

In FGDs across Nigeria and Niger, participants frequently referenced the challenge of discerning truth from misinformation, particularly in communities with limited access to formal sources. Many shared that when in doubt about migration-related information, people rely on what is circulating locally, whether through WhatsApp, Facebook, or community conversations. Returnees described how unverified claims often originate from individuals with no firsthand migration experience, yet these claims can quickly gain traction due to repetition and emotional appeal. Key informants from CSOs echoed these concerns, stating that many community members do not consult official channels, either because they are unaware of them or perceive them as inaccessible or untrustworthy.

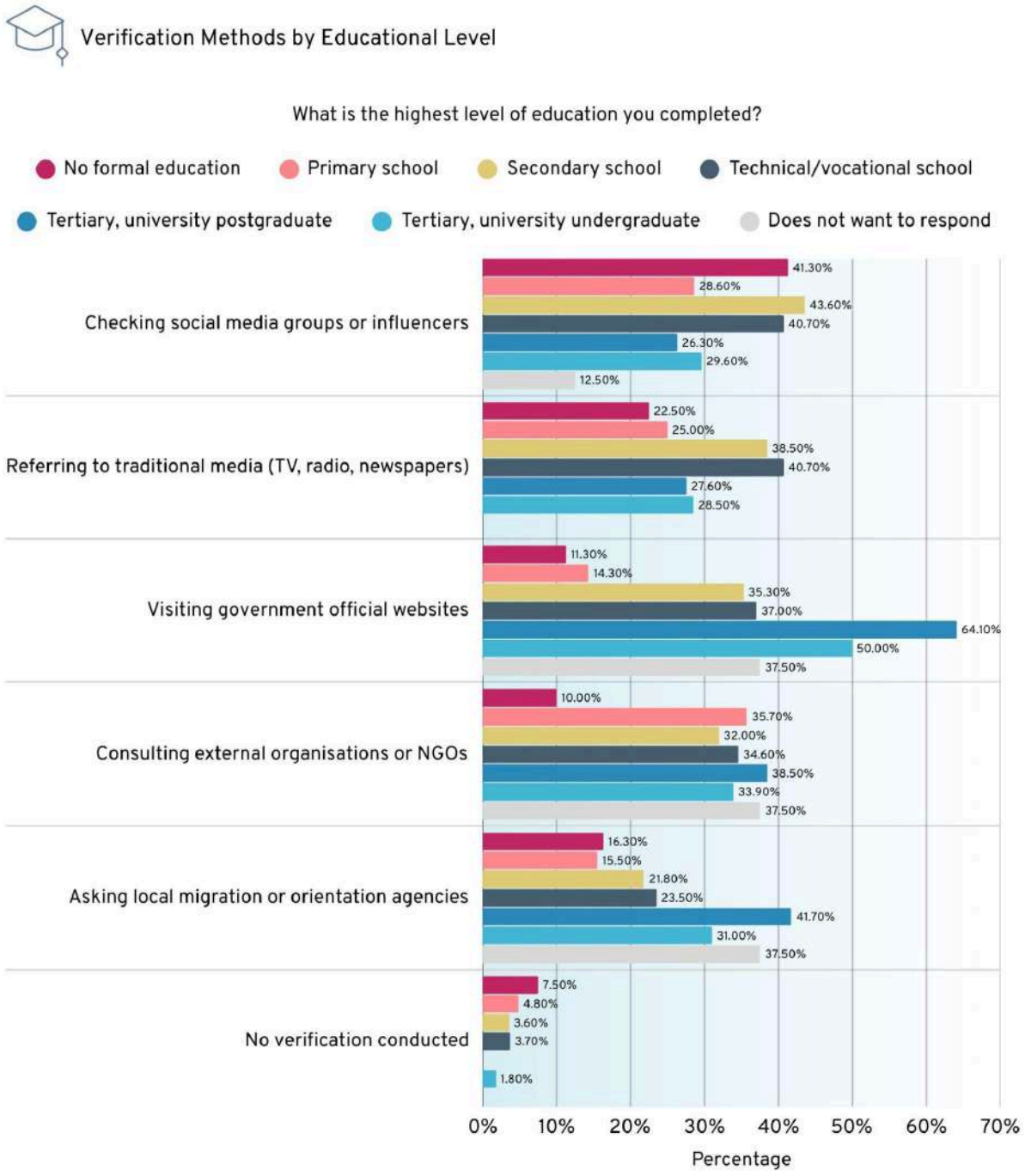
The survey findings reflect a similarly complex picture, with respondents relying on a range of formal and informal sources to assess the accuracy of migration information. Respondents reported moderate confidence in their ability to identify and avoid false information, with an average self-assessed score of 3.34 out of 5 [57]. However, the sources they turn to for verification are highly varied, blending formal institutions with informal peer networks.

The most common reason for distrusting information is that the source is not credible (59.7%, 572 out of 958), followed by perceptions that the information was exaggerated (45.5%, 436 out of 958), or contradicted other sources (38%, 364 out of 958). This shows that while many people are aware of misinformation dynamics, their means of verifying it may not always be rigorous.

While many respondents seek out official sources, a significant share also turn to social media or do not verify information at all. When asked how they verify migration information they are uncertain

[57] Responses on the 5-point Likert-type scale range from 1 'Not confident at all' to 5 being 'Very confident', with higher scores indicating greater levels of confidence with this indicator.

about, most (40.5%, 388 out of 958) said they visit official government websites. Other notable strategies include checking social media groups or influencers (34.8%, 333), consulting external organisations or NGOs (32.4%, 310), and referring to traditional media such as TV, radio, or newspapers (31.2%, 299). However, 17.9% (171) of participants reported using no verification mechanism.



Patterns of verification reflect broader demographic divides, with younger people turning to social media and more educated individuals relying on NGOs and official sources. Younger respondents (18–21) were the most likely to check social media (50.8%, 132 out of 260), while older participants

aged 35–44 leaned more on traditional media (38.9%, 86 out of 221) and NGOs (38.5%, 85). Women were slightly more likely to use official government websites (42.2%, 164 out of 389) than men (39.4%, 224 out of 569), while men were more likely to report using no verification method at all (19.2%, 109 out of 569). Education also played a role: respondents with a tertiary education were the most likely to consult NGOs (43.1%, 118 out of 274) and official websites (48.5%, 133), whereas those with no formal education were among the least likely to use any verification strategy, with 32.5% (26 out of 80) reporting no method at all.

Those planning to migrate are more likely to use social media and informal networks to verify information, while non-migrants prefer official websites and NGOs. Among those planning to migrate by any means, the most commonly cited method was checking social media groups or influencers (58.0%, 159 out of 274), followed by word-of-mouth with friends and family (38.5%, 106), and traditional media (35.7%, 98). Conversely, non-migrants were more likely to consult government websites (42.0%, 132 out of 314) and NGOs (34.8%, 109), and were significantly less likely to use social media for verification (17.7%, 56). This suggests that migration plans shape not only the type of information people seek but also the sources they trust.

Use of social media for verifying migration information is closely linked to migration intentions.. The use of social media for verification is strongly and positively correlated with migration intention, particularly among those planning to migrate by any means ($r = .324$, $p < .001$). In contrast, reliance on official websites or NGOs for verification is more common among individuals with more restrictive or legal-only migration intentions. This divergence implies that the type of source people use to verify information may be shaped by their existing migration plans, risk taking behaviour, and trust in institutional actors.

Strategies for Countering Misinformation

A variety of programmes have been deployed across the Niger, Nigeria and Tunisia to combat migration-related misinformation, including public awareness campaigns, community education programs, and outreach efforts. These initiatives, frequently led by local authorities, civil society, and international organisations, strive to decrease dependence on irregular migration pathways by informing communities and managing expectations. Almost half of the survey participants (44.7%, 428 out of 958) reported having heard of or attended events related to migration. Niger had the highest exposure at 52.2% (210 out of 402), followed by Nigeria at 40.3% (157 out of 390) and Tunisia with 36.7% (61 out of 166).

Community-based awareness activities are useful but inconsistently implemented

Awareness-raising campaigns emerged as one of the most commonly implemented and widely recognised strategies to counter misinformation about migration. In both the FGDs and KIIs, respondents across Nigeria, Niger, and Tunisia referenced initiatives conducted by international organisations, national agencies, and local actors. These campaigns often took the form of community outreach sessions, radio broadcasts, informational posters, and performances in public spaces. They were particularly effective when grounded in local realities and delivered through formats that engaged community members directly. For instance, dramatised street plays and school-based awareness sessions were cited for their ability to capture attention and deliver emotionally resonant

messages. In Niger and parts of Nigeria, returnees featured prominently in some of these campaigns, with their testimonies described as having strong persuasive power, especially when paired with visual elements or personal stories.

Campaigns led by NGOs and international organisations were widely recognized, but participants noted gaps in sustainability and resonance with young audiences. Awareness campaigns were referenced in over 20 KII responses and 13 FGD group discussions, making them the most frequently cited type of intervention. These programs were viewed as central in clarifying migration risks and promoting informed decisions. With that said, several KII respondents expressed concern that some initiatives lacked follow-through or failed to connect with young people's aspirations, rendering them less impactful over time. In a few cases, participants criticised the one-off nature of campaigns and the absence of practical alternatives being presented alongside the risk messaging.

> *"Our strategies sometimes are not targeted at the grassroot people, those who are oftentimes exploited. Most of the grassroot communities do not have electricity to watch programmes on TV, so we must empower local organisations that can reach out to persons of concerns. Community of concerns, more people will know the right thing."*
>
> KII participant, Civil society representative, Nigeria 2024

Nonetheless, community-based interventions, led by trusted local figures or civil society, were frequently recommended to counter misinformation. Participants valued decentralised, sustained grassroots engagement to reach marginalised communities, as highlighted in Nigeria and Niger. Suggestions included intensifying local campaigns using respected figures like town criers and adapting messaging through storytelling for older or less literate populations. Returnees should be involved in outreach as co-designers, not just as cautionary figures.

Survey findings confirm these campaigns are visible but unevenly distributed across populations and geographies. Overall, 43.5% (186 out of 428) of respondents reported attending informative sessions about migration. Exposure to such sessions varied significantly by country: Tunisia reported the highest rate at 65.6%, followed by Niger at 44.3% and Nigeria at 33.8%, highlighting regional variation in program delivery and reach. Migration intention also shaped exposure: those who plan to only migrate legally were the most likely to have attended informative sessions (46.4%, 51 out of 110), followed by those planning legal migration but willing to consider irregular routes (38.8%, 33 out of 85), and finally by those intending to migrate in any possible way (41.4%, 48 out of 116). These patterns suggest that informative sessions are more frequently accessed by individuals leaning toward legal migration pathways.

Despite varied reach, community awareness sessions are widely seen as capable of shifting public attitudes toward migration. Among those who had attended community awareness sessions, 73.1% (353 out of 483) agreed that they had personally seen a change in people's attitudes as a result. Regional differences were also notable: respondents from Niger were the most likely to report perceived attitude shifts (51.2%, 206 out of 402), followed by Nigeria (34.4%, 134 out of 390). In stark contrast, only 7.8% of respondents in Tunisia (13 out of 166) reported any shift

The perception of impact was also influenced by migration intention. The group most likely to report witnessing these changes were those planning to migrate legally but open to irregular migration

(48.1%, 74 out of 154). The remaining groups reported this less frequently: those planning legal-only migration (36.1%, 78 out of 216), those open to any form of migration (35.8%, 98 out of 274), and those uninterested in migrating (32.8%, 103 out of 314).

Perceptions of effectiveness were positively associated with exposure to other communication strategies. There was a positive correlation between participants who had heard of or attended media campaigns and those who affirmed changes in attitudes ($r = .196$, $p < .001$). Similarly, people who reported consulting external organisations or NGOs to verify migration information were more likely to affirm the campaigns' effectiveness ($r = .193$, $p < .001$), as were individuals who rated such organisations as influential ($r = .114$, $p < .001$). In contrast, those who relied primarily on family members ($r = - .180$, $p < .001$) or word-of-mouth ($r = - .153$, $p < .001$) for migration information were less likely to perceive these campaigns as effective.These findings collectively reinforce the importance of community-based engagement, particularly when implemented through credible local actors and supplemented by structured NGO involvement.

Schools are trusted forums for clarifying migration realities

Several respondents mentioned educational programs and school-based efforts, such as workshops on migration risks, legal pathways, and vocational alternatives. These programs were described as sporadic but appreciated, especially when they involved peer-led discussions or skill-building components. KIIs with educators and NGO staff emphasised that schools could serve as trusted, structured environments for unpacking misinformation. Respondents highlighted the need to integrate migration literacy into school curricula and ensure accurate information reaches younger audiences early on. While respondents valued school-based efforts, they were largely concentrated in Nigeria, with limited mention elsewhere, pointing to gaps in coverage. Younger participants in FGDs expressed a desire for more structured information within schools, particularly regarding application processes for legal migration or scholarship opportunities abroad. Despite being cited less frequently than community awareness campaigns, school-based activities were praised for their clarity and ability to spark sustained engagement.

School-based activities were praised for their clarity and ability to spark sustained engagement. These efforts were most commonly reported in Nigeria, particularly in FGDs and KIIs, whereas survey data suggest that broader informative sessions, including those delivered outside formal education settings, were more prominent in Tunisia. Informative sessions were the most commonly heard campaign type across the three countries, with 43.5% (186 out of 428) of survey respondents reporting having attended such events. This was especially prominent in Tunisia, where 65.6% (40 out of 61) reported having participated in an informative session, compared to 44.3% (93 out of 210) in Niger and 33.8% (53 out of 157) in Nigeria. Respondents who only plan to migrate legally were most likely to have attended such sessions (46.4%, 51 out of 110), suggesting that these interventions may particularly resonate with individuals seeking formal pathways.

In both the KIIs and FGDs, participants described schools as underutilised yet strategically positioned institutions for shaping migration perceptions. Existing efforts were praised for opening dialogue about the risks and realities of migration while also introducing practical alternatives such as scholarship opportunities, vocational training, and local employment prospects. School-based initiatives were commonly described as lacking consistent funding, curriculum integration, and

organised structure. Despite this, there was a widespread belief that these school-based efforts should be further leveraged to combat misinformation.

Quantitative findings show broad agreement on the importance of school-based migration education, particularly among those preferring legal pathways. When asked to rate the importance of schools teaching students about the realities of migration, survey respondents gave an average score of 3.87 out of 5[58], suggesting strong overall agreement. Migration intention additionally influenced perceptions. Respondents who intended to migrate only through legal channels expressed the strongest support, assigning an average score of 4.2 out of 5. Those open to irregular pathways or uninterested in migration rated this importance slightly lower (3.6 & 3.9, respectively), hinting that belief in the educational value of such interventions may be shaped by an individual's own migration plans.

Nigerian respondents reported the strongest support, likely influenced by more visible or frequent educational campaigns. Participants from Nigeria were the most supportive of school-based interventions (average score of 4.2), followed by Tunisia (4.0) and Niger (3.5). These discrepancies may reflect both the frequency and visibility of existing school-based efforts in each country.

Support for school-based migration education correlates strongly with openness to sharing accurate information within communities. Belief in the importance of school-based migration education strongly correlated with the self-reported likelihood of sharing accurate migration information if received from a trusted local leader ($r = .415$, $p < .001$). This belief was also positively associated with confidence in one's ability to recognise and avoid false information about migration ($r = .345$, $p < .001$).

Trust in official channels, educators and academic institutions was positively linked to the perceived value of school-based efforts. Respondents who viewed school-based education as important were more likely to use formal and verifiable sources, most notably websites ($r = .260$, $p < .001$). Trust in educators and academic institutions as sources of information was also positively correlated with belief in this strategy's value ($r = .204$, $p < .001$), and so were ratings of various influencers, especially relatives or friends abroad ($r = .239$, $p < .001$) and religious figures ($r = .229$, $p < .001$).

Respondents who prioritise structured education may be less responsive to mass media campaigns or short-term outreach efforts. An inverse relationship was observed between valuing school-based education and having heard of media campaigns ($r = -.155$, $p < .001$), suggesting that individuals who prioritise formal education may be less responsive to mass outreach or one-off awareness efforts. On the other hand, a positive correlation was found between the importance placed on school-based migration education and exposure to events organised by international or foreign organisations ($r = .196$, $p < .001$). This suggests that participants who view formal education as an important tool in countering misinformation may also recognise the value of structured, internationally supported interventions that emphasise accurate and practical migration information.

[58] Responses on the 5-point Likert-type scale range from 1 'Not important' to 5 being 'Very important', with higher scores indicating greater levels of importance with this indicator. The same indicator will be used for the remainder of this section.

Media and entertainment formats attract attention but require reinforcement through trusted channels

Community media, particularly radio shows, drama performances, and call-in programs, are impactful tools in reaching populations with limited digital literacy or access. In Niger, multiple KIIs referred to local radio programs that featured roundtable discussions with experts and returnees, while FGDs in rural Nigeria described street performances and dramatic skits as memorable and emotionally charged.

Participants also identified media and performance-based approaches as valuable tools, but their effectiveness was perceived to be limited when not accompanied by broader support structures or follow-up. Several participants across Nigeria and Niger stressed the need for closer collaboration between NGOs and government orientation agencies, as fragmented initiatives often diluted impact. Media literacy campaigns were also emphasised in at least five KIIs and three FGDs, particularly in urban Nigeria and Tunisia, where youth engagement with digital platforms is high. Nevertheless, there were concerns about the lack of regulation and the difficulty of controlling online content, especially in private channels or encrypted messaging groups.

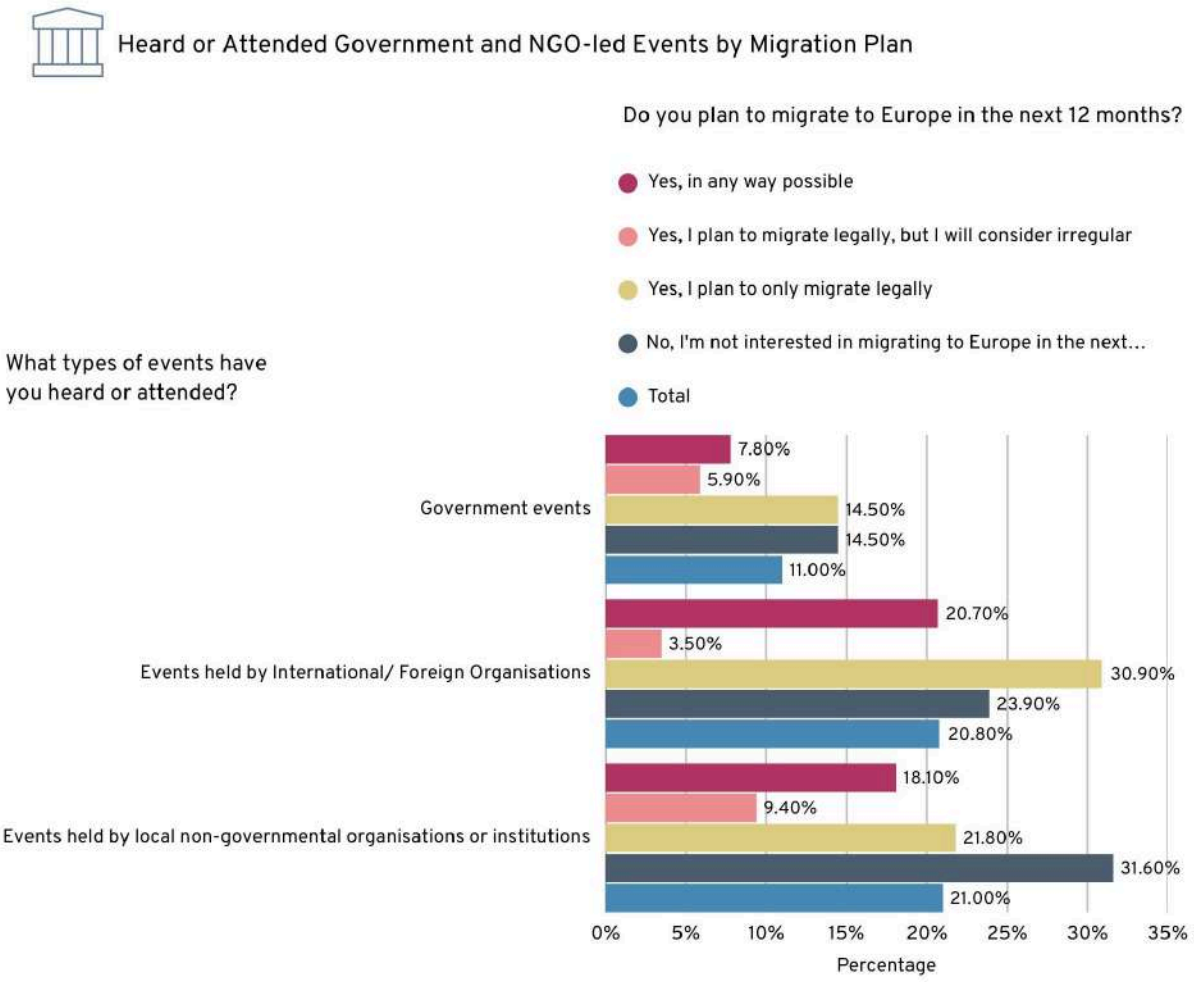
Survey data further highlight how participation in media-based campaigns varies across demographic groups and migration intentions. Awareness of media campaigns had a small but significant negative correlation with age ($r = -0.142$, $p < .001$), indicating younger participants were more likely to report exposure. It was also negatively correlated with having dependent children ($r = -0.159$, $p < .001$), pointing to reduced exposure among those with caregiving responsibilities. Country-wise, respondents from Niger (48.6%, 102 out of 210) were far more likely to report having encountered media-based awareness events compared to Nigerian or Tunisian counterparts (26.8% and 16.4%, respectively).

Governmental and NGO events reach select audiences but struggle with relevance and scale

Government and NGO-organised events featured prominently in the qualitative data, though their impact was perceived as uneven across contexts. Government-led events were often described as formal, top-down initiatives that lacked grassroots penetration. Respondents sometimes expressed scepticism about their sustainability and relevance, citing that official events were poorly advertised or delivered without local engagement. Similarly, events organised by international NGOs or development partners were frequently acknowledged in the FGDs, especially in Tunisia and Nigeria. However, their visibility and perceived influence varied. Participants in Niger, for example, highlighted that such events were often clustered in major towns, leaving rural populations underserved. In contrast, some Nigerian respondents recognised NGOs for their adaptability and closer connection to community dynamics, particularly when they partnered with local influencers or returned migrants.

The survey confirms that exposure to events is modest and shaped by country context and the type of organising body. 4.9% (47 out of 958) of survey respondents reported having heard of governmental events, while 9.4% (90 out of 958) had attended events organised by NGOs or local institutions and 9.3% (89 out of 958) had attended events held by International/ Foreign Organisations. There were country-specific variations: Tunisia reported the highest level of exposure to NGO-led events (37.7%, 23 out of 61), compared to Nigeria (26.8%, 42 out of 157) and Niger (11.9%, 25 out of 210). A similar

pattern was observed in relation to events held by International/ Foreign Organisations as Tunisia reported the highest level of awareness (32.8%, 20 out of 61), followed by Nigeria (25.5%, 40 out of 157) and Niger (13.8%, 29 out of 210).



Differences in event participation also emerged based on migration intentions, with higher attendance among those less inclined to migrate or committed to legal pathways. Among those who do not intend to migrate, 31.6% (37 out of 117) had attended NGO or local institution events, the highest proportion within any group, followed by those planning to only migrate legally (21.8%, 24 out of 110). Similarly, 14.5% of non-migrants (17 out of 117) and of legal migrants (16 out of 110) reported attending government events, compared to 7.8% (9 out of 116) of those who planned to migrate by any means necessary. While these figures may suggest that institutional efforts more frequently reach risk-averse populations or those less inclined toward irregular migration, it is also possible that participation in such events contributed to shifting migration intentions. Some individuals who currently do not plan to migrate may have previously considered it and changed course after being exposed to information provided through these sessions. This highlights the potential role of institutional messaging not only in informing safer decisions, but also in shaping or redirecting migration aspirations over time.

Survey correlations show that institutional outreach tends to reach older participants and those with caregiving responsibilities, rather than younger or more mobile audiences. Exposure to NGO events showed a small but significant positive correlation with age ($r = .116$, $p < .001$). Likewise, exposure to

government-led events. Interestingly, having dependent children was associated with increased likelihood of encountering government events ($r = .146$, $p < .001$). On the other hand, awareness of events held by International/ Foreign Organisations was positively and significantly correlated with multiple factors, including age, sex, and having dependent children ($r = .220$, $r = .133$, both at $p < .001$, and $r = .116$, at $p < .05$). These patterns reinforce the notion that institutional messaging may be better positioned to reach older, settled individuals, while missing younger and more mobile audiences, who are often at higher risk of engaging in irregular migration.

Trusted local leaders play a central role in shaping migration perceptions

Another key theme was the importance of mobilising trusted community leaders to share accurate migration information. Both FGDs and KIIs referenced religious figures, youth mentors, and neighbourhood heads as well-positioned actors to counter false narratives. Participants frequently emphasised that these individuals possess embedded social capital and credibility, making them more effective communicators than external or institutional agents. Their authority, participants noted, stemmed not only from formal roles but also from their ongoing relationships with community members, particularly youth and women, who often rely on informal networks for guidance.

KIIs with civil society representatives and local authorities in Nigeria and Niger emphasised that traditional and religious leaders were often among the first to hear migration-related questions from the public. In Tunisia, youth group leaders and local NGO coordinators were described as influential voices whose endorsements could shape perceptions of both risks and opportunities. This form of peer-to-peer and leader-to-community communication was seen not only as a corrective to misinformation but also as a mechanism to restore trust in environments where formal channels were often viewed with skepticism.

> *"It's important to involve religious leaders, the government and elders in awareness-raising activities, because they are listened to more"*
>
> FGD participant, Niger 2024

Survey data shows that people are moderately willing to share accurate migration information when it comes from a trusted local leader. Respondents demonstrated a moderate willingness to disseminate accurate migration information if it was received from a trusted local leader, with an average rating of 3.61 out of 5[59]. Country-level variations showed the highest average in Nigeria (3.9), followed by Tunisia (3.8) and Niger (3.2).. Migration intention also showed subtle differences in willingness to share information received from local leaders: those who planned to migrate legally reported the highest average score (3.9), followed by those open to irregular migration (3.6), and finally those not interested in migrating (3.4).

Willingness to share information provided by trusted local leaders was positively and significantly correlated with confidence in one's ability to recognise and avoid false information about migration ($r = .303$, $p < .001$). It was also linked to the use of more formal and digital information sources, such as

[59] Responses on the 5-point Likert-type scale range from 1 'Very unlikely' to 5 being 'Very likely', with higher scores indicating greater levels of likelihood with this indicator. The same indicator will be used for the remainder of this section.

websites (r = .284, p < .001), X/Twitter (r = .186, p < .001), and government platforms (r = .233). Moreover, individuals who placed the most trust in migrants living abroad (r = .252, p < .001), NGOs (r = .193, p < .001), or academic institutions (r = .190, p < .001) also showed a greater inclination to share information they considered reliable. Lastly, exposure to local NGO events (r = .187, p < .001) and public announcements (r = .178, p < .001) was similarly associated with higher willingness to share trusted information, whereas exposure to media campaigns was negatively correlated (r = - .197, p < .001).

These findings suggest that trust in formal, credible sources, whether institutional, digital or community based, is positively associated with a greater willingness to share accurate migration information. Individuals who actively engage with official platforms or participate in local events appear more likely to contribute to information dissemination within their communities. In contrast, the negative correlation with media campaigns supports previous findings that mass media, while wide in reach, may lack the credibility or personal connection needed to encourage meaningful behavioural change. This highlights the greater effectiveness of localised and interpersonal approaches in building trust and promoting the community-level sharing of accurate information.

Returnees are credible messengers when supported and reintegrated

Returnee testimonies were consistently seen as persuasive tools for shifting perceptions around migration, particularly irregular routes. Their lived experiences, often marked by hardship, disappointment, or exploitation, were described as credible and emotionally resonant, especially among youth audiences. This form of storytelling was considered particularly effective in rural areas, where word of mouth remains a dominant communication channel and migration narratives often lack nuance.

However, several informants stressed that the impact of returnee testimonies is highly dependent on the speaker's perceived credibility. KII participants, especially those affiliated with local NGOs or reintegration programs, warned that when returnees lacked visible signs of success or adequate post-return support, their stories could lose persuasive value or even be dismissed. In some communities, returnees who failed to bring back tangible wealth were viewed as "unlucky" rather than cautionary examples, diluting the intended message. Others described scenarios in which returnees were stigmatised or disbelieved, particularly if their accounts contradicted dominant community expectations about migration as a path to success.

Despite these challenges, FGDs revealed promising insights into alternative formats. Many participants supported the idea of peer learning, informal gatherings or community discussions led by returnees where the focus was less on formal testimonies and more on interactive dialogue. This model was seen as more participatory and better suited to community dynamics. Youth respondents, in particular, favored formats that allowed for direct questions, storytelling, and collective reflection. In both Nigeria and Niger, several returnees were reportedly already acting in this capacity, sometimes as NGO-affiliated peer educators or unofficial mentors within their villages.

Quantitative findings provide moderate support for the perceived influence of returnee storytelling. When asked whether stories of failed migration attempts change how people assess the risks of migrating, the average rating was 2.78 out of 5[60], suggesting modest agreement. Though this figure

[60] Responses on the 5-point Likert-type scale range from 1 'Not at all' to 5 being 'Absolutely', with higher scores indicating greater levels of likelihood with this indicator.

reflects a somewhat cautious endorsement, it is reinforced by several significant correlations that offer further insight into the dynamics at play. For example, the belief in the effectiveness of returnee stories and the perception that community awareness events can shift public attitudes are positively correlated ($r = .187$, $p < .001$). This suggests that returnee messaging is often interpreted within broader community-based education efforts. Similarly, those who viewed school-based migration education as important were more likely to agree that returnee stories influence risk perception ($r = .193$, $p < .001$), pointing to a synergy between formal and experiential learning approaches.

The belief in the value of returnee stories was also positively associated with the willingness to share accurate migration information if received from a trusted local leader ($r = .274$, $p < .001$). This suggests that returnees themselves may be regarded as trusted figures within their communities, and that their narratives, when delivered through familiar and credible channels, can enhance the likelihood of community-level information sharing.

Perceptions of returnee stories as effective communication tools are strongly influenced by the broader information ecosystem and trusted sources. People who rated governmental officials ($r = .161$, $p < .001$) and NGOs ($r = .134$, $p < .001$) as influential were more likely to endorse the impact of returnee stories, suggesting that institutional messaging and personal narratives may be mutually reinforcing. Additionally, respondents who relied on social media platforms such as Instagram ($r = .120$, $p < .001$), TikTok ($r = .123$, $p < .001$), and X/Twitter ($r = .128$, $p < .001$) to access migration information were more likely to view returnee stories as impactful.

The belief in the effectiveness of these stories was positively correlated with confidence in one's ability to recognise and avoid misinformation ($r = .193$, $p < .001$), and with trust in migrants living abroad as credible sources ($r = .115$, $p < .001$). This demonstrates that when integrated thoughtfully into community strategies and supported by credible platforms, returnee messaging can serve as a valuable tool in shifting migration attitudes and combating misinformation.

Livelihood interventions are essential to address root causes

One of the most consistent and emphatic themes across both KIIs and FGDs was the belief that awareness-raising efforts must be complemented by tangible economic opportunities. This view, especially prevalent among civil society actors, community leaders, and returnees, pointed to a deep skepticism about the long-term effectiveness of awareness campaigns in contexts marked by chronic unemployment and limited livelihood prospects. As several KII respondents noted, young people may listen to risk messaging but will ultimately pursue migration if they see no viable path to economic stability at home. Similarly, participants often spoke of a deep sense of economic abandonment by the state. Some even questioned the ethics of dissuading migration without first addressing the root causes that drive people to leave, particularly poverty, underemployment, and lack of infrastructure.

Qualitative findings further emphasised the need for livelihood interventions to be tailored to local contexts. KIIs underscored the value of grounding programmes in community realities, such as agriculture in Niger or informal services in Nigeria, and supporting the existing skills and entrepreneurial ambitions of youth. These insights reinforce the call for economic alternatives that are both practical and locally driven.

This perspective was strongly echoed in the survey findings. When asked to complete the sentence, "Investing donor money in local businesses and alternatives would…", the majority of respondents (61.4%, 588 out of 958) selected the response "be more effective at reducing irregular migration." This

substantial endorsement far outweighed the alternatives, with only 26.1% (250 out of 958) believing it would have little impact on irregular migration, 7.5% (72 out of 958) thinking it would not affect migration patterns at all, and just 5% (48 out of 958) considering it a waste of resources.

Importantly, this strong preference for economic alternatives was remarkably consistent across different countries and migration intention groups. There were no statistically significant variations based on country of residence or migration plan, suggesting broad-based support for livelihood-centered strategies regardless of one's background or personal migration goals. This finding highlights a rare point of consensus in an otherwise fragmented landscape of migration attitudes.

Conclusion

This study aimed to examine how migration-related decisions are shaped by local perceptions, trusted sources of information, and responses to misinformation across Niger, Nigeria and Tunisia. While aspirations for economic and social advancement remain strong, the findings reveal that these aspirations are often shaped and intensified by misleading or incomplete information. Rather than viewing migration as an act of desperation, many participants described it as a rational and expected path toward success. This perception is frequently reinforced by stories shared through informal networks, particularly from the diaspora. Misinformation about the ease, safety and legality of irregular migration circulates widely, especially via social media, peer conversations, and returnee testimonies. These false narratives present Europe as readily accessible, downplay the associated risks, and promote false expectations of success. In this context, migration aspirations are not only socially and culturally reinforced but also shaped by the persistent exposure to misleading content that exaggerates opportunity and obscures danger.

This study sought to understand what sources and channels communities in Niger, Nigeria, and Tunisia primarily trust for migration information. The findings demonstrate that informal and socially embedded actors carry the greatest influence, often through interpersonal networks and unverified digital platforms. Relatives and friends abroad, particularly those who send remittances or display material success, were consistently identified as aspirational figures. Similarly, word-of-mouth communication and advice from local leaders were prominent across qualitative and quantitative findings. Survey data confirmed that these informal channels are not only the most influential but also the most trusted, particularly among young people and those planning to migrate. Trust in these sources was significantly associated with stronger perceptions of community encouragement and a greater likelihood of sharing accurate information when it comes from familiar or respected figures.

Alongside interpersonal networks, digital platforms play a critical role in shaping migration perceptions. Social media applications such as WhatsApp, Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram were frequently cited by participants as key spaces for receiving migration-related content. These platforms are often used to share both accurate and misleading narratives, including testimonies from migrants, promotional content from smugglers, and discussions within peer groups. Messaging apps were particularly popular among younger and less formally educated respondents, who viewed them as accessible and immediate sources of information. In contrast, more formally educated individuals

tended to rely on websites or traditional media, which were also linked to higher levels of trust and interest in legal migration.

These findings underscore the importance of working through, rather than around, informal communication networks and digital environments. Campaigns should prioritise partnerships with trusted community intermediaries such as religious leaders, returnees, and youth mentors, while also engaging strategically with the digital platforms where migration conversations are already taking place. These actors and spaces should be equipped with accurate content, sustained support, and interactive tools that foster credibility and ongoing dialogue.

In examining how communities perceive and interpret misinformation and rumours about irregular migration, the study found that distorted narratives are widespread and deeply embedded in social discourse. Respondents frequently referred to stories that framed irregular migration as relatively safe, quick, or more successful than legal alternatives. These accounts were often amplified through social media platforms or passed between peers and returnees. Survey responses confirmed that misinformation is widely perceived to increase unrealistic expectations and the likelihood of attempting irregular migration. Even individuals already planning to migrate irregularly were more likely to believe and act on such messages. Qualitative data further suggested that returnees who had experienced hardship were sometimes reluctant to dissuade others, fearing stigma or disbelief. These patterns indicate that misinformation is not only a product of ignorance but also a reflection of collective hope, social pressure, and selective storytelling. Communications campaigns must therefore address the emotional and aspirational dimensions of migration narratives. Factual corrections alone are unlikely to shift behaviours unless they are coupled with messages that resonate with lived experience and peer influence.

Finally, the research also sought to understand the strategies currently employed by stakeholders and community influencers to counter misinformation. Community-based awareness sessions and school-based education emerged as the most trusted and potentially impactful interventions. Respondents described these as effective when delivered by familiar figures and tailored to local realities, especially in rural or underserved areas. Quantitative analysis supported these views. Individuals who had attended awareness sessions or trusted local leaders were more likely to report changes in community attitudes and express confidence in recognising misinformation. In contrast, exposure to mass media campaigns showed weaker associations with perceived credibility or behavioural impact. These findings suggest that while mass media can raise awareness, its effectiveness is significantly enhanced when paired with well-resourced initiatives and referral pathways that enable individuals to act on the information they receive. Future campaigns should invest in community-led initiatives that incorporate interactive learning, local storytelling, and long-term dialogue, rather than relying solely on broad, one-off media messages.

Recommendations

Bring migration education into schools

Schools can help young people identify and resist misinformation by embedding migration awareness into everyday learning.

Engage returnees and peer educators

Returnees and peer educators are credible messengers who can deliver relatable, accurate migration information.

Work with trusted local figures

Community leaders, diaspora, and influencers are key to spreading trusted messages through familiar and respected channels.

Link awareness with livelihood support

Awareness campaigns are more effective when paired with tangible economic alternatives like training or job opportunities.

Use hybrid online and offline channels

Combining digital platforms with in-person outreach ensures migration messages reach people across age, education, and access levels.

Build local misinformation response systems

Locally trusted institutions and community brands can help strengthen verification habits by embedding culturally relevant and tools to counter misinformation.

Tailor messaging by migration intent

Communication efforts are more impactful when adapted to people's migration motivations and preferred sources of information.

Use AI to track and respond to misinformation

AI-powered systems can monitor, detect, and counter false migration narratives quickly and at scale through trusted networks.

The following recommendations are informed by Seefar's operational expertise and draw directly from the expressed needs and insights of community members, civil society actors, and institutional stakeholders across Nigeria, Niger, and Tunisia. These perspectives, shared through qualitative and quantitative data, reflect lived experiences and provide both a critique of current interventions and a call for more responsive, locally grounded strategies. Together, they form the basis for more effective programming to counter migration-related misinformation.

Recommendation 1

Enhance integration of migration education into school systems. There is clear support for equipping schools to serve not just as academic spaces but also as trusted forums for critical conversations about migration. Numerous KIIs and FGDs emphasised the importance of integrating migration education into school curricula, as they should be safe forums for youth to discuss aspirations, risks, and misconceptions. This strategy is perceived as vital in equipping young people with the critical thinking skills necessary to navigate the influence of social media, where distorted or idealised narratives about migration are common. By embedding migration-related content into life-skills curricula or civic education modules, education ministries and international agencies can harness schools as platforms for long-term attitude shaping.

Recommendation 2

Expand the use of returnees and peer educators in community-based outreach. Returnees occupy a uniquely credible space in migration discourse. Across all countries, they were cited as trusted sources of migration information and were frequently referenced in both qualitative and quantitative data as powerful storytellers. KIIs also pointed to the need for returnees to be more involved in outreach campaigns, not just as cautionary tales but also as co-designers of messaging. When adequately supported and economically reintegrated, their testimonials provide a grounded, humanising perspective on the risks and realities of irregular migration. Survey findings further supported their relevance, showing a positive correlation between exposure to returnee stories and shifts in community attitudes.

Peer educators, including youth mentors, community organisers, and local facilitators, were also described as important actors, particularly for reaching younger audiences. They were perceived as trusted influencers capable of delivering accurate and credible information about migration.Their close ties to target communities allow them to deliver migration messaging in accessible and locally relevant ways. Programmes should formalise the role of returnees and peer educators in awareness campaigns, offering them facilitation training, psychosocial support, and sustainable incentives. Their involvement should be context-sensitive, pairing personal stories with clear guidance and structured support services to maximise impact.

Recommendation 3

Invest in trusted local figures to drive community messaging. Community members across all three countries emphasised that religious leaders, youth mentors, and neighbourhood figures play an important but underutilised role in migration communication. These individuals may not be the most technically informed, but they are often the most trusted. Participants across KIIs and FGDs

highlighted the value of sustained grassroots engagement led by trusted local figures or civil society organisations. Many called for decentralised outreach models that reach marginalised or remote communities more effectively than large-scale, centrally managed efforts. Survey data shows that people are more likely to share accurate migration information when it comes from a trusted local leader. Participants also recommended intensifying local campaigns using locally respected figures such as town criers[61], community elders, and informal educators. Messaging adapted through storytelling or folklore was seen as especially relevant for older or less literate populations.

Diaspora members, namely relatives and friends abroad, should also be recognised as highly influential messengers. Their personal testimonies, visible success, and digital communication with families back home shape migration decisions and normalise the journey, particularly among youth. Communication efforts should consider involving diaspora voices, for example through testimonials, remote engagements, or co-created content, to strengthen credibility and relatability.

Social media influencers should also be considered for engagement, as they have demonstrated high reach and credibility. Building capacity among local influencers through training on misinformation recognition, migration procedures, and ethical communication, could significantly extend the reach and credibility of counter-migration narratives. These actors should not be approached merely as communication intermediaries, but as long-term partners in shaping informed, community-based migration ecosystems.

Recommendation 4

Pair awareness-raising with economic alternatives to address root causes. Migration narratives are rarely formed in an information vacuum. Migration, particularly irregular migration, appears unavoidable due to underlying economic realities. In this study, 61.4% of respondents stated that investing in local businesses and alternatives would be more effective than other interventions in reducing irregular migration. Awareness campaigns were described as having limited reach unless paired with tangible economic incentives. Respondents frequently proposed a shift in strategy from reactive messaging to proactive investment in community resilience. Job creation schemes, vocational training centers, microcredit programs, and small business grants were among the most commonly mentioned interventions. These were not merely suggested as economic supports but also as tools for restoring hope and offering meaningful alternatives to migration.

A number of KIIs also emphasised that economic support should not be generic or symbolic but grounded in local realities and designed with participatory input. For example, tailoring programs to the agricultural economy in Niger or the informal services sector in Nigeria was cited as essential for ensuring that such interventions generate both uptake and impact.yes Others noted that many community members, particularly youth, already possessed informal skills or entrepreneurial ambitions that simply lacked institutional support. These insights reflect a strong demand for livelihood interventions that are not only economically viable but also community-driven and contextually informed.

As such, donor funding and national programming must go beyond messaging to include vocational training, seed funding for youth initiatives, and rural entrepreneurship development. This should complement, not replace, communications programming by framing awareness efforts as part of a

[61] A person whose job is to make official announcements in a town or village by calling them out in public

broader livelihood strategy. While communication campaigns remain valuable for raising awareness and shaping perceptions, their impact is significantly enhanced when paired with tangible economic interventions. Providing practical alternatives alongside messaging not only strengthens campaign credibility but also increases the likelihood of informed, sustained behavioural change within communities.

Recommendation 5

Support hybrid information ecosystems that reflect age-specific online and offline preferences. Different groups rely on different sources of information, with younger cohorts heavily engaging with messaging apps and social media, while older and more educated respondents often prefer websites and traditional media. The research also showed that websites are associated with higher trust and with interest in legal migration, while social media is a conduit for aspirational narratives, both realistic and misleading. This fragmentation calls for a hybrid strategy that leverages the strengths of each medium. Governments and NGOs should consider investing in digital content tailored for youth while ensuring parallel reinforcement through radio, school sessions, and community meetings. These channels should be interactive and feedback-driven to support two-way learning and ensure credibility across age and literacy levels.

Recommendation 6

Develop localised misinformation response mechanisms through trusted institutions and locally owned brands. Verification behaviour differed sharply by migration intention and access. Nearly 3% of respondents reported not verifying migration information at all, while others leaned heavily on informal channels such as social media or family networks. However, government websites, NGOs, and traditional media remain important for certain audiences. Ensure that community-based initiatives, such as hotlines, WhatsApp bots, or fact-check corners in schools and community centers, are culturally and linguistically accessible. Institutions should collaborate with communities to develop these local verification mechanisms. Building verification habits should be a core goal of anti-misinformation efforts, with training and outreach embedded within larger community development initiatives. Locally trusted brands, such as Seefar's TMP (The Migrant Project), are especially well-positioned to lead these efforts given their existing credibility, cultural relevance, and established community presence.

Recommendation 7

Tailor messaging by migration intent, not just by geography or age. Findings across all sections show that migration intention significantly shapes perceptions of risk, trust, and exposure to misinformation. Individuals open to irregular migration were more likely to engage with risky or informal channels, less likely to perceive misinformation as harmful, and more likely to trust peer networks. In contrast, those interested in legal migration or uninterested in migrating responded more positively to institutional actors and formal education efforts. Future communication strategies must go beyond demographic targeting and incorporate behavioural segmentation. Campaigns should adapt messaging and delivery strategies based on motivational profiles by addressing the aspirations, doubts, and social pressures unique to each intent group.

Recommendation 8

Implement AI-powered, community-centered monitoring systems for early warning and rapid response. Effectively countering misinformation requires more than accurate messaging, it demands systems that listen, learn, and respond in real time. This study underscores that local communities are not only passive recipients of information but active interpreters, shapers, and verifiers. The willingness of participants to report on trusted sources, perceived risks, and behavioural impacts highlights the untapped potential of community-centered data. National governments, local actors, and international organisations should co-develop AI-powered and automated systems that detect, track, and respond to misinformation early. These systems should use natural language processing, multilingual sentiment analysis, and predictive modeling to identify emerging rumor trends and disinformation narratives across platforms and geographies. Low-barrier feedback tools (e.g., chatbots, voice-to-text channels, and SMS-based reporting) can help capture real-time community insight. Embedding these systems within trusted community networks will ensure sustained engagement, faster response times, and more targeted, credible interventions to counter disinformation and build information resilience.

Annexes

Annex A- Research Tools

KII Script

24. LACE Misinformation Research- KII Script.pdf

FGD Script

24. LACE Misinformation Research- FGD Script.pdf

Social Media Survey Question

24. LACE Online Quizzes.pdf

Quantitative Survey Questions

24. LACE Misinformation Research- Quantitative Survey.pdf

Annex B- Qualitative Analysis of TMP Comments and Messages

Qualitative analysis of chats and comments - LACE Research summary.pdf

Annex C- Demographic Information of Quantitative Data

Quantitative survey

Age Group	Niger	Nigeria	Tunisia	Total
18-21	111	95	54	260
	27.6%	24.4%	32.5%	27.1%
22-34	203	190	94	477
	50.5%	48.7%	50.6%	49.8%
35-44	88	105	28	221
	21.9%	26.9%	16.9%	23.1%
Sex	**Niger**	**Nigeria**	**Tunisia**	**Total**
Female	155	160	74	389
	38.6%	41%	44.6%	40.6%
Male	247	230	92	569
	61.4%	59%	55.4%	59.4%
Marital Status	**Niger**	**Nigeria**	**Tunisia**	**Total**
Single	240	209	76	525
	59.7%	53.6%	45.8%	54.8%
In a relationship, but not married	22	69	54	145
	5.5%	17.7%	32.5%	15.1%
Married	102	91	28	221
	25.4%	23.3%	16.9%	23.1%
Separated	4	11	2	17
	1%	2.8%	1.2%	1.8%
Divorced	27	3	6	36
	6.7%	0.8%	3.6%	3.8%
Widowed	4	1	0	5
	1%	0.3%	0%	0.5%
Does not want to respond	3	6	0	9
	0.7%	1.5%	0%	0.9%

Dependent Children	Niger	Nigeria	Tunisia	Total
No	272	266	139	677
	68.2%	68.6%	83.7%	71.0%
Yes - 1 child	40	53	13	106
	10.0%	13.7%	7.8%	11.1%
Yes - 2 children	44	34	12	90
	11.0%	8.8%	7.2%	9.4%
Yes - 3 children	15	27	2	44
	3.8%	7.0%	1.2%	4.6%
Yes - 4 children or more	28	8	0	36
	7.0%	2.1%	0%	3.8%
Education Level	**Niger**	**Nigeria**	**Tunisia**	**Total**
No formal education	71	9	0	80
	17.7%	2.3%	0%	8.4%
Primary school	76	6	2	84
	18.9%	1.5%	1.2%	8.8%
Secondary school	94	128	53	275
	23.4%	32.8%	31.9%	28.7%
Technical/vocational school	41	23	17	81
	10.2%	5.9%	10.2%	8.5%
Tertiary, university postgraduate	44	64	48	156
	10.9%	16.4%	28.9%	16.3%
Tertiary, university undergraduate	72	156	46	274
	17.9%	40.0%	27.7%	28.6%
Does not want to respond	4	4	0	8
	1.0%	1.0%	0%	0.8%
Employment Status	**Niger**	**Nigeria**	**Tunisia**	**Total**
Employed, full time	26	69	52	147
	6.5%	17.7%	31.3%	15.3%
Employed, part time	36	64	14	114
	9.0%	16.4%	8.4%	11.9%
Self-employed	87	120	27	234
	21.6%	30.8%	16.3%	24.4%

Unemployed	186	90	48	324
	46.3%	23.1%	28.9%	33.8%
Work without a formal contract (Odd Jobs)	54	42	21	117
	13.4%	10.8%	12.7%	12.2%
Does not want to respond	13	5	4	22
	3.2%	1.3%	2.4%	2.3%
Ethnicity	Niger	Nigeria	Tunisia	Total
Arab	3	0	115	118
	0.7%	0.0%	69.3%	12.3%
Edo	1	103	0	104
	0.2%	26.4%	0.0%	10.9%
Hausa	172	7	1	180
	42.8%	1.8%	0.6%	18.8%
Songhai	55	0	0	55
	13.7%	0.0%	0.0%	5.7%
Tuareg	59	0	0	59
	14.7%	0.0%	0.0%	6.2%
Yoruba	5	193	0	198
	1.2%	49.5%	0.0%	20.7%
Migration Plans	Niger	Nigeria	Tunisia	Total
Yes, in any way possible	119	128	27	274
	29.6%	32.8%	16.3%	28.6%
Yes, I plan to migrate legally, but I will consider irregular	84	41	29	154
	20.9%	10.5%	17.5%	16.1%
Yes, I plan to only migrate legally	36	119	61	216
	9.0%	30.5%	36.7%	22.5%
No, I'm not interested in migrating to Europe in the next 12 months	163	102	49	314
	40.5%	26.2%	29.5%	32.8%
Total	Niger	Nigeria	Tunisia	Total
Total	402	390	166	958
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Online survey

Ethnicity	Niger	Nigeria	Tunisia	Total
Quiz 1	108	122	110	340
Quiz 2	113	182	130	425
Quiz 3	112	99	92	303
Total	333	403	332	990

Annex C- Research Tools

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