



Alternatives to irregular migration in Afghanistan

How aid affects choices in migration source communities

This pilot study examined the impact of two development programs in Afghanistan on beneficiaries' migration intentions



Summary

Seefar conducted a pilot study in Afghanistan to explore the effects of development programs on Afghan migration intentions. A widespread belief exists that foreign development aid reduces the desire and needs of populations to migrate. This short study tests this assumption.

Few studies explicitly of this nature have been conducted. Exceptions to this have shown that development projects probably do impact migration in some way, but the results are not compelling.¹ Moreover, there is little evidence of evaluations explicitly articulating the impact of a program on migration outcomes. Most recent research has instead focused on the impact of migration on development, rather than the other way around.

As part of the study we conducted primary research in six Afghan provinces with beneficiaries of two development programs – the National Horticultural Livelihoods Program (NHLP) and the Comprehensive Agricultural and Rural Development (CARD-F).²

Most respondents to the study reported that they had little intention to migrate before the project. The predisposition to migrate was already weak even within regions such as Kabul, where other surveys have found the desire to emigrate high overall.³ One possible explanation of this is that development organizations and potential migrants judge the investment worth of a particular location according to similar criteria. For example, where security and economic prospects are poor, both actors may perceive that resources are better spent elsewhere.

While NHLP and CARD-F had no migration-related objectives, this does raise the question whether development efforts targeting migration in other contexts adequately define the migration-related change they wish to see. The dispersal of funds under the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, for example, is regularly touted by EU politicians as tackling the ‘root causes’ of migration but usually does not require implementing organizations to demonstrate any change in migration outcome.

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¹ An evaluation of the Afghan National Solidarity Program (NSP) found that “there is evidence that NSP reduces... net migration of households from villages, although both results lose statistical significance if migration patterns at baseline are controlled for. In addition, there is no evidence at endline that NSP induces any changes in net within-household migration.” <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13533312.2015.1059287>

² NHLP (2013-present) and CARD-F (2009-present) are agriculture-based development programs funded and run by the Government of Afghanistan and international donors, including the World Bank, DFID and DANIDA. The projects broadly intend to increase licit jobs and income through infrastructure development and the adoption of technology, and do not contain a migration component. More detail can be found at <http://www.projects.worldbank.org/P143841/afghanistan-national-horticulture-livestock-productivity-project?lang=en> and <http://www.cardf.gov.af/>.

³ Most recently, The Asia Foundation’s *Survey of the Afghan People* demonstrated the wide variance in people’s desire to leave the country. In 2015 it found 48% of people in the Kabul/ central region answered ‘yes’ to the question ‘If given the opportunity, would you leave Afghanistan and live somewhere else?’ In 2016, the figure had dropped to 36%.

Moreover, development programs aimed at reducing irregular migration are more likely to work when they take into account the individual perspectives of migrants. This means the processes by which potential migrants weigh the costs and benefits of irregular migration. Such analyses could be integrated relatively cheaply into development program monitoring and evaluation frameworks.

Key Findings

The study found that:

- The positive impact of projects was linked to a lower desire to migrate irregularly. Around two thirds (65%) reported a greater desire to stay in Afghanistan following project participation. Meanwhile, 14% of respondents knew somebody who actually cancelled their plans to emigrate, most of whom (70%) were reported to have done so due to benefits brought by the project [figure 1].



Figure 1

- Most respondents (96%) had not previously intended to migrate. In the past, 3 respondents had cancelled plans to migrate, 2 because their financial situation improved.
- Respondents linked positive gains from the project to their resolve to remain in Afghanistan. They also linked it to the perceived lack of desire among peers to emigrate – 97% thought that in five years' time they would be living in the same place they are now.

The findings have implications for how we think about development and irregular migration:

- In at least some cases, development gains seem to reduce people's desire to migrate irregularly.⁴
- Decisions on where to target development programming are not based on precise targeting of populations at risk of irregular migration. Countries and regions with a high propensity to migrate still contain large populations with little inclination to depart. This means that many programs addressing irregular migration are targeted at the wrong areas.
- There is a need to be explicit about which projects intend to influence migration outcomes and those with broader development aims. One way to do this is to group beneficiary populations according to irregular migration risk. Differentiating between *low, medium, and high* risk groups would allow practitioners to more meaningfully distinguish conventional from migration-linked aid.

⁴ The results here are suggestive, rather than definitive, inviting further research at a larger scale. The study was carried out retroactively, preventing the establishment of a baseline. Moreover, respondents were selected randomly from project beneficiary lists – purposive sampling of those with an intention to migrate irregularly would allow us to see a more direct, causative link between project participation and migration outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

Background

Western governments are investing significantly in reducing the volume of people embarking on irregular migration. International development actors are seen as strong potential allies in creating conditions in origin countries that encourage people to remain. Many policymakers see parallels between the target issues of the international development industry – poverty, instability and unemployment – and the drivers of irregular migration. The nexus has strengthened during the European migration crisis, where European governments now want aid to be more explicitly linked to migration management. But so far policymakers have little guidance that tells them what programs actually work to reduce irregular migration, in which locations, and with which people.

This raises the question: can development programs be designed to spread prosperity and reduce migration?

Methodology

Seefar conducted a pilot exploration of this question in Afghanistan. We evaluated two agricultural development projects – the National Horticultural Livelihoods Program (NHLP) and the Comprehensive Agricultural and Rural Development (CARD-F). The research comprised structured surveys (n=72) and in-depth qualitative interviews (n=14) with beneficiaries of the projects. It was carried out in provinces known for high emigration such as Nangarhar, Kabul and Herat, and three other provinces: Laghman, Kunduz, and Kunar [figure 2].

A baseline was unavailable as our research began while the projects were underway. Instead, we asked respondents to recall whether or not they had plans to migrate in the past. We asked them to compare these with their current attitudes towards migration, and reflect on the role of the project in shaping any changes.

The two programs did not state any aim to reduce migration. However, it is apparent that the upsurge in spending on migration and development issues has not seen a radical rethinking of development program design. The aim, therefore, was to explore what effect development programmes *in their existing form* have on migration outcomes.

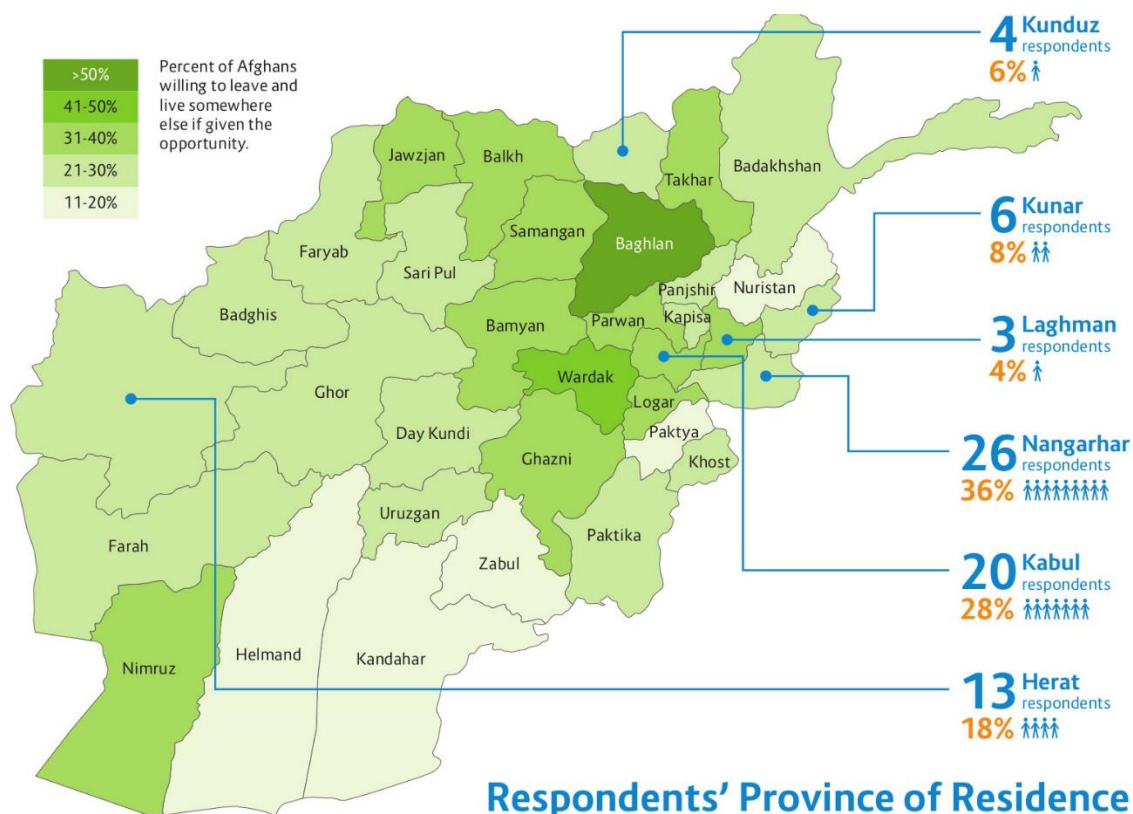


Figure 2⁵

⁵ Data overlayed on map based on research by The Asia Foundation "Desire to leave Afghanistan, by province", http://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/2016_Survey-of-the-Afghan-People_full-survey.Apr2017.pdf, 173.

ANALYSIS

Two Assumptions in Migration and Development

The study aimed to examine two underlying assumptions about leveraging development policy for irregular migration:

1. Traditional beneficiaries of aid in source countries are the most likely to migrate irregularly;
2. Development and humanitarian organisations are best placed to implement programs aiming to influence irregular migration.

‘At risk’ populations

First, it is assumed that directing development aid towards major countries of origin automatically includes those likely to migrate irregularly. However, aid is often targeted towards major source countries of irregular migration for intervention without narrowing focus to the most at-risk populations. CARD-F and NHLP engaged a group with a strong inclination to stay, even though half lived in regions with high levels of emigration. It is insufficient that programs are implemented in territories known for emigration – they must be designed with specific groups in mind.

The results of the pilot study indicate that the beneficiaries of NHLP and CARD-F would likely not be the appropriate groups to target. Respondents reported that most had not harboured a desire to emigrate before project implementation, despite ‘record low’⁶ levels of optimism with regard to national outlook on employment and security nationally. Respondents to the study had either not judged these issues of sufficient personal concern to make drastic changes in their lives, or not calculated emigration to be the best response. Some respondents felt the benefits from having participated in the NHLP or CARD-F programs had vindicated their decision not to join the flows, although recognised that some people had reached the opposite conclusion:

“Those who left are regretting their decision... people have more opportunities in our locality [now].” Pashtun male, beneficiary of NHLP, 35-44, Behsood (Nangarhar)

⁶ Afghanistan in 2016: A Survey of the Afghan People, found that “The national mood in Afghanistan is at a record low, and Afghans are pessimistic because of insecurity, corruption, and rising unemployment and slow job growth.” <http://asiafoundation.org/where-we-work/afghanistan/survey/>

Internal migration trends can serve as a proxy for understanding divergent trends on inter- and intra-regional levels. Migration from rural areas to major Afghan cities reflects greater economic opportunity in places like Kabul and Herat.⁷ Meanwhile, internally displaced persons (IDPs) often find relative safety and security within the same region from which they are initially displaced⁸ - six of the top ten provinces of origin of Afghan IDPs, including Nangarhar, are also in the top ten provinces of destination. These subnational and subregional migration dynamics are often subsumed into the national narrative of mass exodus from Afghanistan. Yet, changes at the local level can create a sense of attachment and investment, and run counter to the dominant trends or mood. The quote below from a respondent in Herat, a region known for high levels of emigration, is illustrative of these differences:

The challenge for projects targeting potential irregular migrants is to 1) identify possible drivers of migration at a community, rather than regional or national level; and 2) understand who within those communities are likely to respond to these drivers with irregular migration, rather than another strategy.

“...people are becoming more and more hopeful to stay and live here... the area is attracting people from neighbouring districts.” Tajik male, indirect beneficiary of NHLP, 35-44, Herat

Implementing partners

The second assumption this study examined is that development actors are automatically best placed to deliver programming to at-risk populations. While development programming targets some of the broad drivers of migration, organisations assessing where and how to implement projects tend to prioritize two things: 1) the prospects for successful development outcomes; and 2) the ability of staff to safely operate. However, potential migrants are likely to judge the worthiness of a certain area by similar criteria. Development actors' assessment of where their services are most appropriate may therefore lead them away from populations at higher risk of emigration.⁹ In other words, agencies are likely to be drawn to certain areas for the same reasons as Afghans decide not to leave them.

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There were other indications that the NHLP and CARD-F programs benefitted low risk groups too. Regarding age, one respondents surmised that

“emigration is the young man's concern” Tajik male beneficiary of NHLP, 35-44, Herat

⁷ <http://samuelhall.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/IOM-Afghanistan-Migration-Profile.pdf>, 129.

⁸ <http://samuelhall.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/2015-SH-DACAAR-Full-Report-Final.pdf>, 16.

⁹ An OECD evaluation of Danish development support to Afghanistan reflected too, that “DACAAR [development] assistance [made] outmigration less likely in villages with DACAAR assistance... however... the DACAAR observation may be biased by the need for agencies to work in relatively peaceful areas.” <https://www.oecd.org/countries/afghanistan/Afghanistan--Final-WEB.pdf>, 78.

In our random sample of beneficiaries, 68% were 35 years or over. In 2016, 89% of Afghan first time asylum applications in the EU came from individuals under 35 [figure 3].¹⁰

Regarding socioeconomic status, one respondent mentioned that programs disproportionately benefit economically and politically dominant groups within a community, another commended the NHLP program for breaking with the perceived trend in Afghanistan where local elites benefit disproportionately from assistance. As a question on corruption was not included in the quantitative questionnaire, this is difficult to verify.

Only one respondent to the survey had migrated internationally, and three were internal migrants. If previous migratory experience heightens the risk of irregular migration, then the projects were not targeting the appropriate populations. Projects may also simply arrive too late, in communities where most of those with the means have departed already. Two respondents indicated that those who were able to leave had already done so.

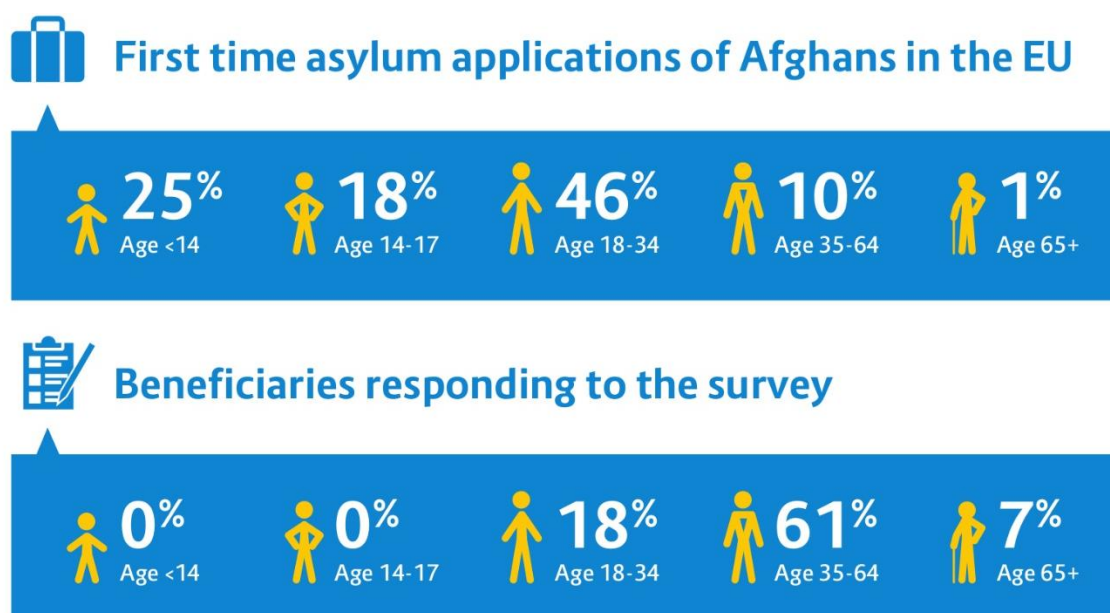


Figure 3

This suggests that both value for money and migration outcomes would be better achieved through better targeting of programming towards those at medium and high risk of irregular migration. Similarly, differentiating low, medium and high-risk populations should also be done in the monitoring and evaluation of development programs.

¹⁰ <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database>

Programs targeting low risk populations should be de-prioritised for programs with migration outcomes. Medium risk interventions would likely still carry value as preventative against future migration, however interventions with high risk populations should attract the majority of migration-oriented funding. CARD-F and NHLP, though evidently successful in achieving many of their stated development intentions, would likely categorise their beneficiaries as low risk.

Reported effects of project outcomes on potential drivers of migration

The study revealed beneficiaries' own views on the outcomes of the project and the factors informing attitudes towards migration. Beneficiaries were overwhelmingly positive about the effects of the project on individual and community wellbeing. They linked these outcomes with the lower propensity to emigrate, with 65% reporting a greater desire to stay in Afghanistan following participation in the project.

Income and livelihood opportunities

Income and livelihood opportunities were cited by respondents as important factors in reducing emigration, followed by reduced levels of crime. They reported that projects had a strong positive effect on the labour market, personal security, and trust in authorities, with 90% reporting lower crime. All respondents reported improved employment in their area.

While respondents were clear that the programs were effective in improving these factors, more interesting is that they linked this to their resolve to remain in Afghanistan. They also linked it to the perceived lack of desire among peers to emigrate.

While criticism of a development-led approach to addressing migration holds that increased wealth initially increases emigration,¹¹ here there appears to be a clear link between development outcomes and resolve to remain in Afghanistan. In some circumstances, it stands to reason that improving incomes will give those who intend to migrate the means to do so. In the case of Afghanistan, however, a strong rootedness to the country seems to predispose people to remain, if they feel remaining is feasible.

"With the project our financial situation has improved, this improvement has resulted in many other desirable changes, people are happier, busier and wealthier." Tajik male beneficiary of NHLP, 45-54, Injil (Herat).

¹¹ "Through a function of people's [increased] capabilities and aspirations to move" http://compasanthology.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/deHaas_COMPASMigrationAnthology.pdf

Migration Dynamics in Implementation Areas

There is little research into reasons why people do not migrate, with thinking instead driven by the assumption that remaining is the norm. The decision to remain in a place after four decades of war is more extraordinary than the decision to leave.

Moreover, understanding why some people are positive about their future locally – and are willing to invest in it – is as important as knowledge of why people become disaffected and choose to leave.

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The migration dynamics observed among NHLP and CARD-F beneficiaries bear this out.

Respondents are planning on staying in Afghanistan

Nearly all respondents (99%) were not planning to leave Afghanistan within 12 months of the survey.¹² Only one respondent had plans to leave the country and that was temporarily to Saudi Arabia. 97% of respondents thought that in five years' time they would be living in the same place as they are now. Only 2 respondents (from Nangarhar) wanted to live elsewhere – within Afghanistan.

This contrasts with national trends. According to a survey by the Asia Foundation, around 3.5 in every ten Afghans in the Central/Kabul region and the North East region would leave given the opportunity.

Respondents have not noticed others leaving project implementation areas

85% of respondents – mostly men living in Nangarhar, Herat and Kabul – did not think that anybody from their village had left Afghanistan in the previous six months. A handful knew others who were planning to emigrate, including three respondents of Tajiki ethnicity living in Nangarhar province.

Respondents have noted that areas with project sites are experiencing immigration

28% of respondents were aware of people who arrived in the local area in the past six months and stayed. The greatest concentration of respondents who reported this live in Kabul (60%) and Herat (25%). Several respondents in Nangarhar (10%) and Kunduz (5%) also noted this. The highest reason for this was cited as the events in Iran and Pakistan (39%). The geographical convenience of Herat and Nangarhar influence destinations for returnees, while the prospects of livelihood opportunities (11%) and, in more general terms, benefits brought by the project (28%) likely also played a role in determining destination provinces.

¹² http://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/2016_Survey-of-the-Afghan-People_full-survey.Jan2017.pdf, 184.

Other reasons for not migrating

Cultural alienation and underemployment at destination, the risks of the journey, high prices, and obligations to parents are all cited as reasons why people are not departing implementation areas.

“Two reasons why people don’t emigrate: one, people can’t afford to spend such a huge amount of money to fund the journey of their children; two, they won’t let their children drown in the Mediterranean Sea.” Pashtun male beneficiary of NHLP, 45-54, Khak-e-Jabar (Kabul).

“One guy I know was a medical student and now he is a waiter in Europe.. Why don’t they stay and get an education?” Pashtun male beneficiary of NHLP, 25-34, Sarobi (Kabul).

“People don’t want to leave because our area is secure, everyone can earn a living during summer months due to high numbers of people visiting the beautiful Paghman valley, we have more than 3000 businesses in this small valley during summer months.” Pashtun male beneficiary of NHLP, 35-44, Paghman (Kabul).

Relationship between Projects and Migration

The projects contributed to some migrants cancelling their plans to migrate

A total of 10 (14%) of the respondents surveyed mentioned that they knew somebody who had cancelled plans to emigrate. Seven of these respondents (70%) cited benefits brought by the project among reasons for doing so. This was accompanied by 60% who cited improved financial prospects as the principle reason people stayed.



In two cases, respondents directly attributed the decision not to leave to the benefits brought by the project. Extrapolation to the wider population would likely yield more responses of this nature. This would allow more systematic analysis of whose migration perceptions are most likely to be influenced by development programming.

“If it wasn’t for my greenhouse, I’d have left too. I know where they [people who are migrating] are coming from and I can relate to them.” Pashtun male beneficiary of CARD-F, 35-44, Surkhrood (Nangarhar).

“My nephews wanted to leave. They had no job and no future in this small town. But now things have changed... The younger one always says that he couldn’t have earned more if he was in the West... They have their own vineyard now where they can build their future plus their parents now know more about the risks of sending their boys abroad on an illegal journey where nothing is for certain.” Tajik male beneficiary of NHLP, 45-54, Injil (Herat).

Immediate benefits not enough

Migration outcomes depend on more than tangible and immediate benefits brought by development. For example, the prospect of future gains, often expressed in terms of hope for the future, can be as important as actual material gains.

“If you had asked me this very question [about “life in your town”] prior to this project I would’ve been very disheartened and upset about life, now I have something to be hopeful about so I’m positive. The project has not only helped me financially but also mentally and spiritually.” Pashtun male beneficiary of CARD-F, 35-44, Surkhrood (Nangarhar).

CONCLUSION

The small scale of the research and suggestive nature of results warrants a more thorough and wide-ranging study on the topic. More systematic evaluation of development projects for their migration outcomes would help illuminate where development and migration objectives coincide, and where they might otherwise contradict each other.

The pilot provides lessons that should inform the design of further studies into migration preferences:

- **Baseline** – a preliminary study should be carried out to enable comparison between migration attitudes and practices before and after interventions. This would allow more robust links to be drawn between interventions and outcomes.
- **Sample** – larger, purposive sampling targeting those who are already intending to migrate prior to the project would allow stronger conclusions on which development interventions influence those most likely to migrate.
- **Locations** – comparisons between villages and towns with varying levels of historical emigration, conflict, crime, foreign influence and economic prosperity would allow studies to measure the impact while controlling for other migration drivers.
- **Type of impact** – developmental benefits felt at an individual level (e.g. income) appear to be more relevant to potential migrants than those felt at a communal level (e.g. infrastructure). Future studies that compare these impacts would aid understanding of which types of project have what influence on migration.

Policy tends to assume that successful development outcomes will reduce migration. The study shows that the benefits of certain development initiatives can reinforce the commitment of certain populations within Afghanistan to remain close to home. All but two respondents envisaged remaining in their places of residence for at least five years, while 14% of respondents observed that others had even cancelled their plans to migrate.

These findings exist at a time where the inclination to emigrate remains high in many of the regions of the study, and nationally. Interventions affect migration outcomes differently depending on context. The study showed that improved jobs and incomes increased the desire of respondents to stay in Afghanistan. The opposite can be true for different people in the same place.

Better evidence of how communities make important life decisions will enable the tailoring of development interventions in such a way that they increase the viability of legal and safe options. The creation of appropriate opportunities and support to migrants to learn and pursue them can quickly reduce the appeal of irregular channels relative to legal or local options.