

DRIVEN TO LEAVE: AID & MIGRATION

Assessing Evidence from Somalia & Afghanistan

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Introduction

In recent years, European countries have seen an increase of migrants from developing countries. This migration trend, often described as a “crisis,” has been characterized by the deaths of hundreds of thousands of migrants who take significant risks to reach their destination countries, as well as a significant concern regarding the lives of migrants in countries of destination. Despite the many benefits migration brings to both home and host communities, donor governments have sought to invest in programs in countries of origin that might reduce the flow of people to Europe.

Many such investments have been based on the assumption that more economic development in countries of origin will lead to more local jobs, fewer migrants, and therefore less economic and political turmoil in Europe. Yet this premise is increasingly contested by facts from the ground. For instance, some research suggests that economic development actually increases migration flows until a country reaches an upper-middle level of GDP.¹

This brief presents new evidence on this ongoing debate. Drawing from two countries of origin of many migrants to Europe – Afghanistan and Somalia – this paper tests assumptions about ‘root causes’ of and ‘solutions’ to migration.

Our research reveals that economic factors, such as employment, have a complicated relationship with migration intentions. As a result, programs that focus singularly on economic development initiatives are likely to be ineffective at addressing the root causes of migration. Evidence from this study suggests that underlying many young people’s decisions to migrate are concerns about security and exposure to violence, signaling the need for more efforts focused on creating stable, peaceful, and safe conditions for youth in their home countries.

Our findings point to the need to rethink the priorities for youth development in countries with large migrant populations. The priority question for policy makers and practitioners should not be ‘How can youth be deterred from migrating?’ but rather, “**How can aid investments optimize young people’s wellbeing and their contributions to society** wherever they choose to live, and address the pervasive insecurity that uproots them?” The study further details how these issues play out in youth’s lives in Somalia and Afghanistan, and offers important considerations for policies and programs to address them.

Methods

Drawing on 12,200 interviews from six surveys conducted by Mercy Corps and Samuel Hall in Afghanistan and Somalia between 2014 and 2017,² we analyzed the concept of rootedness. Alongside the qualitative

¹ Clemens, M. (2014) Does Development Reduce Migration? Center for Global Development.

² The secondary analysis was based on existing databases on Afghan and Somali youth ranging from 2014 to 2017: 1) Mercy Corps Somali Youth Leaders Initiative (2016 – Somaliland, 803 interviews); 2) Mercy Corps Somali Youth Leaders Initiative (2017 – South Central



data that informed these surveys, more than 40 qualitative interviews and discussions with youth and community members were led in Somalia, Afghanistan, Greece, and Italy to shape the analysis. We identified key factors that are tied to whether youth feel ‘rooted’ in their current location. This is defined by their intention to stay or a lack of intention to migrate in the near future. The factors explored were defined by variables found in the six datasets that reflect issues the academic literature³ suggests may be drivers of migration: 1) Employment; 2) Economic wellbeing and assets; 3) Family and household cohesion; 4) Community inclusion and cohesion; 5) Positive outlook; and 6) Perceived security.⁴

In addition, we measure the impact of skills development programs on youth’s intentions to migrate. This analysis relies on data collected from studies on two Mercy Corps programs: one that improved access to secondary education in Somalia (Somali Youth Learners Initiative – SYLI), and another that provided vocational training in Afghanistan (Introducing New Vocational Education and Skills Training – INVEST⁵).

Findings

Question 1: What influences youth migration decisions?

Our analysis of the six survey datasets revealed that youth were often rooted due to limited resources, making it difficult to migrate, rather than a willful desire to remain in their place of residence or origin. In other words, rooted people and families are often in situations of “involuntary immobility.”⁶ As their economic and social resources increase, at least within a certain range, their migration intentions and abilities may also rise.

To test this finding further, we examined what role having access to employment plays in young people’s migration intentions. Our results were a mix of negative and positive correlations and, at times, no correlation at all, as shown by these examples:

- Based on the data from the Urban Displaced Youth (UDY) study in Kabul, Afghanistan, being employed – either temporarily or full-time – was positively correlated with higher intentions to migrate. This suggests that greater levels of employment may decrease rootedness, at least among Kabul’s urban displaced youth.
- From the RCT focused on Mercy Corps’ employability program in Afghanistan, employment, including the perception of job security, was the strongest predictor of youth’s intention to

Somalia and Puntland, 1221 interviews); 3) Mercy Corps INVEST RCT (2015-2017 – Kandahar survey, 6367 interviews); 4) Samuel Hall Youth-Employment-Migration Nexus (2015 – Somaliland Puntland, 784 interviews); 5) Samuel Hall Urban Displaced Youth in Kabul (2014-2017 – Kabul, 2021 interviews); and 6) Samuel Hall Livelihood Programmes for Displaced People in Urban Afghanistan (2014 – Afghanistan, 1028 interviews).

³ Bakewell, O. (2008). ‘Keeping them in their place’: The ambivalent relationship between development and migration in Africa. *Third World Quarterly*, 29(7), 1341–1358. De Haas, H. (2010). Migration and development: A theoretical perspective. *International Migration Review*, 44(1), 227–264. Jazayery, L. (2002). The migration–development nexus: Afghanistan case study. *International Migration*, 40(5), 231–254. King, R. (2012). Geography and migration studies: Retrospect and prospect. *Population, Space and Place*, 18(2), 134–153.

⁴ We used questions regarding the following topics for each of these key variables: 1) Employment: Current job situation and perceptions regarding job prospects and job security; 2) Economic wellbeing and assets: Educational background, assets, and debt; 3) Family and household cohesion: Living alone or as part of a household; 4) Community inclusion and cohesion: Perception of community inclusion, discrimination and opportunities to participate in political decision making; 5) Positive outlook: General optimism or lack thereof; and 6) Perceived security: Past exposure to crime or violent attacks.

⁵ The study that analyzed the INVEST program impacts was a randomized control trial. The SYLI impact evaluation was a quasi-experimental, matched design. Neither of these programs were designed to affect youth migration intentions. The programs were used as case studies to explore the effects of employability and education interventions on migration decisions.

⁶ Carling, Jorgen. (2001). Migration in the Age of Involuntary Immobility: Theoretical Reflections and Cape Verdean Experiences. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 28(1), 5-42.

migrate. This further implies that among Afghan youth, higher employment opportunities may actually drive migration – at least up to a point.

- In the analysis of data from the IOM study in Puntland and Somaliland, intention to migrate was negatively correlated with the employment factor, meaning youth are more likely to be rooted.

As a whole, these findings point to **an inconsistent relationship between access to employment and intention to migrate**. The divergent findings between Afghanistan and Somalia also highlight how the same factor can influence the appeal of migration differently depending on context.

On the other hand, we found that **economic welfare and the possession of assets are more often linked to higher intentions to migrate**, and as shown in the following two studies:

- Based on the Urban Displaced Youth study in Kabul, our analysis indicates that individuals are more likely to intend to migrate if they are of greater means. Among this sample, economic status is an enabling factor that appears to help people’s migrations aspirations materialize.
- Among the results of the Livelihood Programmes for Displaced People in Urban Afghanistan (DUA) study, possession of assets indicating wealth, such as a VCR, computer, car, or stove, and greater disposable income is linked to higher migration intentions.

While these results do not demonstrate a causal link, other research supports the positive relationship between assets and migration. According to DFID, an increase in livelihood assets increases actual migration because “without the ability to fund a migration journey (financial capital) or information on how to undertake migration (social capital) actually migrating is difficult if not impossible.”⁷

Interviews with community members in Kabul highlight how employment and financial assets may collectively dictate youth’s ability to migrate:



“Fewer young men can leave today, as they do not have enough money to pay for the journey and smugglers. You need money, contacts, and also a job here to leave.”

— Afghan male, 50, Focus Group Discussion, Kabul

Looking beyond economic factors, we found that **perceptions of security can have a positive relationship with migration intentions as shown in two studies in Somalia and Afghanistan**. This was particularly the case in Somalia, with data from the SYLI study in Puntland and South Central Somalia showing that safety and security were by far the factors most strongly correlated with migration intentions. This included both direct experiences of violence as well as knowledge of insecurity within one’s community, including incidences of kidnapping, inter-clan fighting, terrorism, and gang violence, among others. Those who were more optimistic in regards to their physical security were less likely to intend to migrate.

Interviews with migrants in Europe further corroborated how formative experiences of insecurity were in their lives:

⁷ Fratzke, S. & Salant, B. (2018). Understanding the Impact of Livelihood Opportunities and Interventions on Migration Patterns. Department for International Development.



“The hardest event I have ever seen was when I was 13 and going from school to home. A girl of age 14 was with me walking on a little road when we encountered an armed group. They ordered us to stop and they started ordering the young girl to lay down on the ground and they raped her in front of me and then killed her. They ordered me to go quickly and not to tell anybody, and that if I told anyone I would be killed.”

— Somali male, 23, Case Study, Rome

Question 2: How do jobs and skills programs impact youth’s migration intentions?

Skills and knowledge building programs aimed at increasing employment prospects for youth are often central to many donors’ migration strategies. We tested how actual youth-focused development programs affected young people’s intentions to migrate through two Mercy Corps interventions.⁸ Our analysis shows that employability and education programs have mixed impacts on young people’s migration intentions.

The **effects of secondary education were inconclusive** based on the divergent results from the two Somalia studies:

- In Puntland and South Central Somalia, access to secondary education at the individual level had a significant depressing effect on youth’s willingness to migrate illegally.
- In Somaliland, access to secondary education alone had no statistically significant effect on illegal migration intentions.

Despite the different outcomes, the significant negative impact of secondary education found in South Central Somalia and Puntland is consistent with other research that indicates education can dampen migration intentions, yet this effect may only be temporary. A recent review by DFID on research related to livelihoods and migration found that some studies show that individuals with some secondary education appear more likely to migrate, while other studies show that enrolment in school can decrease migration in the short-term.⁹

In Afghanistan, **vocational training had no effect on participants’ migration intentions, despite its positive impacts on their economic opportunities**. Further, the addition of an unconditional cash transfer to vocational training had conflicting effects on migration outcomes¹⁰:

- Upon completing the program, young people who were not displaced who received vocational training and the cash transfer were 10 percentage points more likely to say that they are likely to migrate compared to those who did not receive cash. This effect, however, disappeared by six to nine months after the end of the program.

⁸ The SYLI program improved access to secondary education in Somalia while also providing opportunities for civic engagement for some youth. We evaluate the impact of this program separately in Somaliland and in Puntland and South Central Somalia. The second program, which was implemented in Kandahar, Afghanistan, called INVEST, provided vocational training for youth. As part of an independent randomized control trial, a random subset of participants within the INVEST program were additionally given a one-time unconditional cash transfer of \$75. This cash component was for research purposes only, and was not part of the INVEST program.

⁹ Fratzke, S. & Salant, B. (2018).

¹⁰ We chose to examine the impact of cash transfers in addition to and independent of vocational training as a way to test whether the economic effects of employability programs contribute to migration intentions.

- By six to nine months after the end of the program, youth who received vocational training and cash expressed a greater preference for continuing to live in Afghanistan (over moving to another country) compared to those who do not receive cash.

Despite these conflicting effects on migration outcomes, it is important to distinguish between its effects on desires to migrate abroad versus its effects on mobility, generally. While cash may have a negative effect on the former, it seems to increase the latter, at least in the short-term, indicating that by making mobility more possible, an increase in financial resources may allow individuals to pursue opportunities without seeking to go abroad. Though further research is needed to support this conclusion, the findings again point to the complex relationship between economic opportunities, assets, and migration. Further, these results, comparing non-displaced youth to youth overall, point to how the same intervention can have divergent outcomes for different groups.

Policy Reflections

Integrating vs. anchoring

Our research on the two Mercy Corps programs showed that these youth-focused interventions had limited effects on participants' migration intentions. This finding underscores the argument that it may be misguided to focus on impacting migration intentions through investments in economic and skills development, as these do not appear to represent clear pathways to exert substantial influence. However, past evaluations show that these and other youth-focused interventions can contribute to improving youth's economic status and social and political inclusion, among other important outcomes.^{11,12,13,14} For this reason alone, **development efforts should continue to fund such programs, which contribute to youth wellbeing and integration.** Integrating, however, should not be mistaken for anchoring or deterring migration. As was communicated in focus group discussions with Somali and Afghan youth in their home countries, as well as migrants transiting through Iran, Greece, and Italy, many complained about a lack of options that led to boredom and discontentedness. One young man in Somalia explained his thought process when considering migration:



“You ask me when and why I decided to leave but in fact I did not have any choice. I did not decide and no one else decided for me. I just had to leave Puntland because there was no other option.”

— Somali male, 24, Interview, Garowe

To help youth realize their agency and optimize their own capabilities – wherever they choose to live – policies and programs would benefit from adopting an alternative lens. The drivers of insecurity – including conflict and weak, corrupt legal and security institutions – may be more fundamental for accounting for massive migration. Addressing the root causes of conflict and poor governance should therefore be part of any agenda to address the drivers of migration.

¹¹ Samuel Hall / IOM. (2017). Setting standards for an integrated approach to reintegration, commissioned by IOM and funded by DFID.

¹² Tesfaye, B. (2016). Critical Choices: Assessing the Effects of Education and Civic Engagement on Somali Youths' Propensity Towards Violence. Mercy Corps.

¹³ Tesfaye, B., McDougal, T., Maclin, B., & Blum, A. (2018). If Youth Are Given The Chance: Effects of Education and Civic Engagement on Somali Youth Support of Political Violence. Mercy Corps.

¹⁴ Kurtz, J., Tesfaye, B., & Wolfe, R.J. (2018). Can economic interventions reduce violence? Impacts of vocational training and cash transfers on youth support for political violence in Afghanistan. Mercy Corps.

Considerations for policy-makers and practitioners

The core finding of this study is that youth who express a greater willingness to migrate are influenced to do so because they feel insecure and pessimistic about their future situations. Further, youth may be “rooted” not by the desire to remain, but by the lack of resources to move. This brief raises the question of whether influencing migration intentions is a productive and valid focus of programming and policy efforts. The chances of positive outcomes for youth and their communities, regardless of whether youth migrate or not, are improved if youth are making decisions from a place of stability and security rather than leaving out of desperation.

This research suggests that the political discourses, policy architectures, and practices towards managing migration intentions (e.g. with large-scale short-term employment schemes) or influencing individual decisions (e.g. through behavioral change campaigns) may not substantially reduce migration in the long-term. **While economic interventions may not straightforwardly reduce migration, they nevertheless can be successful at meeting other important policy goals.** Skills-building programs, for example, contribute in many ways to increasing youth’s integration and wellbeing from a social, economic, or psychosocial standpoint—important outcomes on their own. Donors should continue to fund youth-focused programs that meet development policy goals unrelated to migration. Policymakers should make addressing the root causes of conflict and poor governance a focus of addressing the push factors for migration. Our research strongly suggests that youth who feel less secure, have been exposed to violence and generally are less optimistic about the security situation are more likely to migrate. This points to a need to **channel greater investments to peacebuilding, violence reduction, and good governance interventions in conflict-affected countries experiencing major outmigration, like Somalia and Afghanistan.**

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