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Addressing Root Causes and Drivers of Irregular Migration

Evidence Gap Map 2025 Update

February 2026

Evidence
Gap Map
Report 36

Social Protection



International
Initiative for
Impact Evaluation

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About this EGM update report

The EGM update report maps the latest available evidence base and assesses the quality of existing systematic reviews on the effectiveness of interventions addressing the root causes and drivers of irregular migration. It also identifies key evidence clusters, as well as evidence gaps where further research is needed. This work was developed by 3ie with funding from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, through the Policy and Operations Evaluation Department (IOB).

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Evidence Gap Map Report 36

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Summary

Addressing root causes and drivers of irregular migration: Evidence landscape



Our evidence gap map covers **112** studies

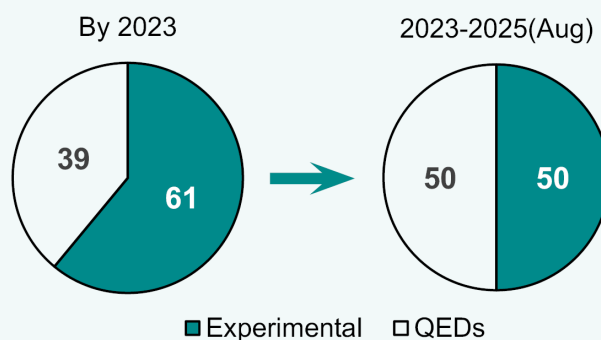


[Map link](#)

Evidence is concentrated in **Sub-Saharan Africa** and **Latin America and the Caribbean**.

Region	No. of studies
Sub-Saharan Africa	46
Latin America and Caribbean	28
South Asia	17
East Asia and Pacific	14
Middle East and North Africa	13
Other	17

Shift in evaluation methods: From experimental to quasi-experimental designs (QEDs)



Evidence clusters and gaps

Interventions

Economic opportunities/work policies	51
Orderly/safe migration management	16
Resilience against shocks/stressors	10
External migration management	5
Violence prevention/mitigation	0

Outcomes

Migration behavior

Economic opportunities/work policies	51
Orderly/safe migration management	16
Resilience against shocks/stressors	10
External migration management	5
Violence prevention/mitigation	0

Migration intentions

Economic opportunities/work policies	15
Orderly/safe migration management	21
Resilience against shocks/stressors	3
External migration management	1
Violence prevention/mitigation	0

Knowledge/perception

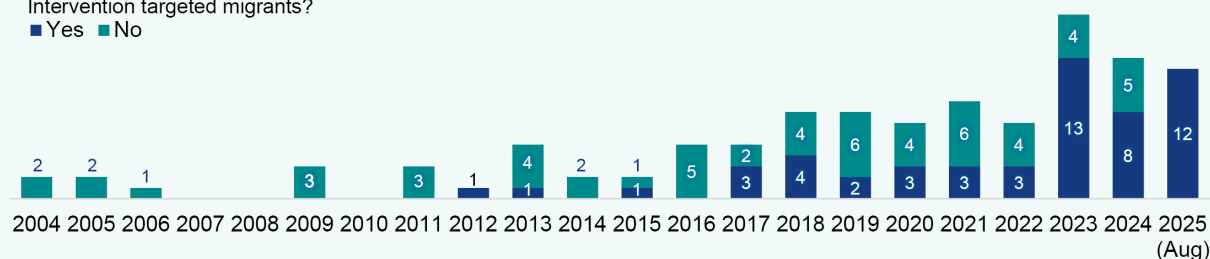
Economic opportunities/work policies	2
Orderly/safe migration management	14
Resilience against shocks/stressors	0
External migration management	0
Violence prevention/mitigation	0

➔ Irregular and forced migration remain under-measured.

➔ No high-confidence systematic reviews identified; six low- and one medium-confidence reviews focus on economic opportunity /work policies.

In recent years, an increasing number of evaluated interventions have directly targeted migrants or potential migrants.

Intervention targeted migrants?
 ■ Yes ■ No



Potential areas for further synthesis of interventions focused on migrants:



Information campaigns – 21 studies, reporting



Legal pathways – 10 studies, reporting

➔ Migration intentions

➔ Knowledge, perceptions, attitudes, and expectations

➔ Migration behavior

Note: Migration behavior refers to migration events (e.g., whether an individual or household member migrated, international migration flow or stock, etc.).

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Acronyms

ALMP	Active labor market policy
EGM	Evidence gap map
IE	Impact evaluation
LAC	Latin America and the Caribbean
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
SR	Systematic review
SSA	Sub-Saharan Africa

1. Background

1.1 An ongoing need to systematically map rigorous evidence in migration and development

Migration is a long-standing and universal aspect of human societies (de Haas 2023) and is guided by a rights-based approach, which upholds every individual's right to make their own decisions about whether to migrate (UN 2018). Migration management forms an integral part of sustainable development by coordinating the governance of migration through policies and institutions, ensuring that migration benefits both migrants and the societies to which they contribute (UNSD 2022).

The dynamics of migration arise from complex, multi-dimensional interactions that make linear explanations insufficient (de Haas et al. 2019; Kuhnt 2019; Czaika and Reinprecht 2022), and irregular migration¹ reflects this complexity. Although the “root causes” framework is widely referenced in migration management, it has been criticized for oversimplifying the drivers of mobility and for justifying restrictive policy responses (Yayboke and Gallego 2019; Czaika and Reinprecht 2022; de Haas 2023).

Globally, numerous migration policies and funding initiatives intersect with development and security objectives, yet they often remain politically delicate and contested (de Haas 2023). Despite substantial investments and policy attention, evidence on the effectiveness of these interventions is fragmented and uneven (Czaika and de Haas 2013; Czaika and Reinprecht 2022; Anda León et al. 2023).

The evidence base is limited and inconsistent across contexts, policy instruments, and populations. This reflects a scarcity of cross-context evaluations, as well as inconsistencies in definitions and outcome measures for policy effectiveness (Czaika and de Haas 2013; Czaika and Reinprecht 2022). Anda León et al. (2023) noted that evidence of active labor market policy (ALMP) impacts on migration-related outcomes remains limited, and called for more research across a broader range of geographies relevant to migration programming.

Earlier initiatives—including the original evidence gap map (EGM) (Berretta et al. 2023) and the systematic review (SR) by Anda León et al. (2023)—aimed to fill the gap in systematic mapping and synthesis research on the effectiveness of interventions addressing root causes and drivers of irregular migration. To our knowledge, the original EGM was the first in the migration and development sector to apply systematic methods to assess the state of available evidence. ³ie researchers identified the absence of rigorous primary and secondary evidence as a key challenge to producing fit-for-policy implications (Anda León et al. 2023; Berretta et al. 2023).

Other recent syntheses have examined migration drivers such as climate change and environmental stressors, but have not explored the question of what works to address these drivers (e.g., Mukherjee and Fransen 2024; Gupta et al. 2025; Larotta Silva 2025).

To understand the current state of the evidence base, ³ie, with support from the Policy and Operations Evaluation Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of the

¹ Defined by the IOM (2019) as movement occurring outside legal or regulatory frameworks, involving unauthorized entry, transit, or residence, which places individuals at heightened risk of exploitation, violence, and death.

Netherlands, updated and expanded the original EGM, which focused on interventions addressing the root causes and other drivers of irregular migration. The full research protocol is outlined in the inception report by Lee et al. (2025). Given the steady increase in publications each year and the salience of migration policies worldwide, this update is both necessary and timely.

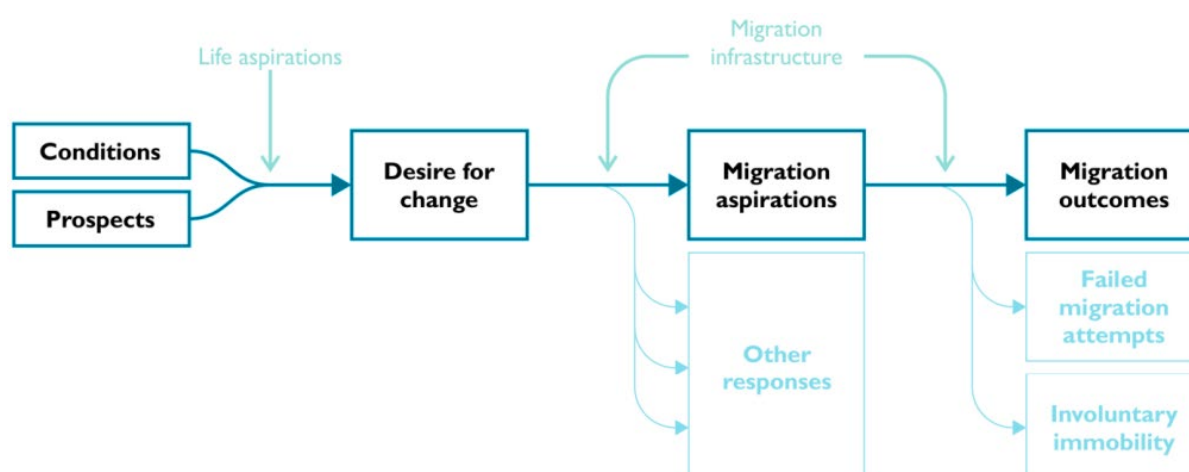
This EGM update supports the Policy and Operations Evaluation Department's broader evaluation of Dutch migration cooperation and partnerships by ensuring that the underlying evidence base remains current and comprehensive. The central research question guiding this EGM is: **What is the scope of the latest available evidence, the quality of SRs, and the evidence gaps warranting further research on the effectiveness of interventions aimed at reducing irregular migration?**

The map presents findings from systematic searches of academic publications and grey literature to identify interventions for which clusters of impact evaluations (IEs) and high-confidence SRs exist. This enables the most rigorous syntheses possible, given the available evidence. The EGM is also made available as a global public good for policymakers, researchers, and practitioners to use and leverage in order to guide investments more effectively.

This EGM builds on the model introduced by Carling and Talleraas (2016) and revisited by Carling and Schewel (2018), which describes the causal chains leading to migration outcomes, and conceptualizes migration as a process of wanting and being able to move (Figure 1). The model presents aspirations and abilities as analytically distinct yet interacting stages that explain why people migrate or stay. It links social, economic, and political contexts to individual decisions, illustrating how these can influence aspirations and abilities.

The updated map also expands coverage to include *external migration management* interventions, which encompass the logistical and organizational systems through which states and other actors govern mobility beyond their borders, and form a component of the migration infrastructure. With this conceptual model, this EGM also recognizes that "migration outcomes" manifest in diverse forms. These include unfacilitated regular migration (occurring without formal support), facilitated or assisted regular migration (through government or partner schemes), irregular migration, international displacement, and mixed forms of mobility.

Figure 1: Migration decision pathways model



Note: Adapted from Carling and Talleraas (2016). Carling and Schewel (2018) revisited the model, linking it to a capabilities approach and adding “acquiescent immobility” (no aspiration and no ability) while retaining in/voluntary immobility.

2. Methods

This report presents the results of **the update and expansion** of the original EGM of interventions addressing root causes and other drivers of irregular migration. As outlined in our protocol (Lee et al. 2025), we used systematic processes to identify, select, and code eligible studies. These included searches in 12 academic databases and 39 grey literature sources, as well as the websites of relevant organizations ([Online appendix A](#)). We adapted the search strategy from the original EGM, while adding [the 3ie Development Evidence Portal](#) to the list of databases searched. We developed search strings for the new intervention group on *external migration management*. We also conducted backward and forward citation tracking of the studies included at full text.

We identified 30,767 records after removing duplicates. We used machine-learning classifiers and a generative large language model in EPPI-Reviewer® software to prioritize screening of titles and abstracts. Two human reviewers independently screened the prioritized records until they achieved an 85% consistency rate.² For the 1,328 records included at the title and abstract stage, we also utilized the software’s large language model feature to de-prioritize studies that did not evaluate an intervention or did not report results for any outcomes listed in our framework. Two reviewers then independently screened the full texts of the remaining studies using our eligibility criteria (Table 1), with a third reviewer assisting in reconciling disagreements.

² Consistency rate refers to the inter-reviewer agreement on inclusion and exclusion decisions during screening, used as a reliability benchmark before single screening of remaining records.

Table 1: Eligibility criteria

Category	Criteria
Population	Migrants or potential migrants from low- and middle-income countries*
Interventions	Economic opportunities & work policies: ALMPs Large credit markets Work policies Microcredit & microinsurance Human capital-strengthening Strengthening resilience against shocks & stressors: Disaster risk financing & index insurance Early warning Natural resource management Tech-based assistance Infrastructure In-kind assistance Food & nutrition Employment assistance Local coordination Service communication Building strong communities through violence prevention & intervention: Diversion to probation Psychosocial support Support for ex-offenders Victim services Protection for legal actors Society-led crime prevention Behavior change communication Orderly & safe migration management: Information campaigns Legal pathways External migration management: Partnerships/deals Externalization Deterrence Remote control
Comparator	Any comparison condition, such as business as usual, alternative intervention, or placebo.
Outcomes	Final migration outcomes measuring changes in migration behavior or patterns. These include migration flow, migration stock, and any migration. Intermediate migration outcomes assessing changes in attitudes, knowledge, or intentions that may precede migration decisions. These include intention to migrate, and knowledge and perceptions about migration.
Study design	Quantitative IEs based on experimental and quasi-experimental designs Effectiveness SRs Qualitative IEs (for <i>external migration management</i> intervention group only)
Other criteria	Publication year: 2015 or later for the new external migration management intervention group; 2023 or later for the rest of the intervention groups. Language: no language restriction ³

*Note: *Interventions from high-income countries are also eligible when they pertain to the legal pathways and external migration management intervention groups. For the external migration management group, the low- and middle-income country scope is limited to only Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and North Africa, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Türkiye, to align the Operations Evaluation Department's evaluation project needs. See [Online appendix B](#) for more details on our eligibility criteria.*

3. What we found

We included 26 IEs, 3 ongoing evaluations, and 1 SR in this update, covering the period between April 2023 and August 2025. In total, the online EGM now displays 95 IEs, 10 ongoing evaluations, and 7 SRs, representing a 36 percent increase in the number of included studies compared to the original map (see [Online appendix C](#) for the PRISMA flow diagram). We describe the trends and characteristics of this evidence base in the following section. [The online EGM is available here.](#)

³ We used English-language terms for academic database searches, and English and French search terms for grey literature searches.

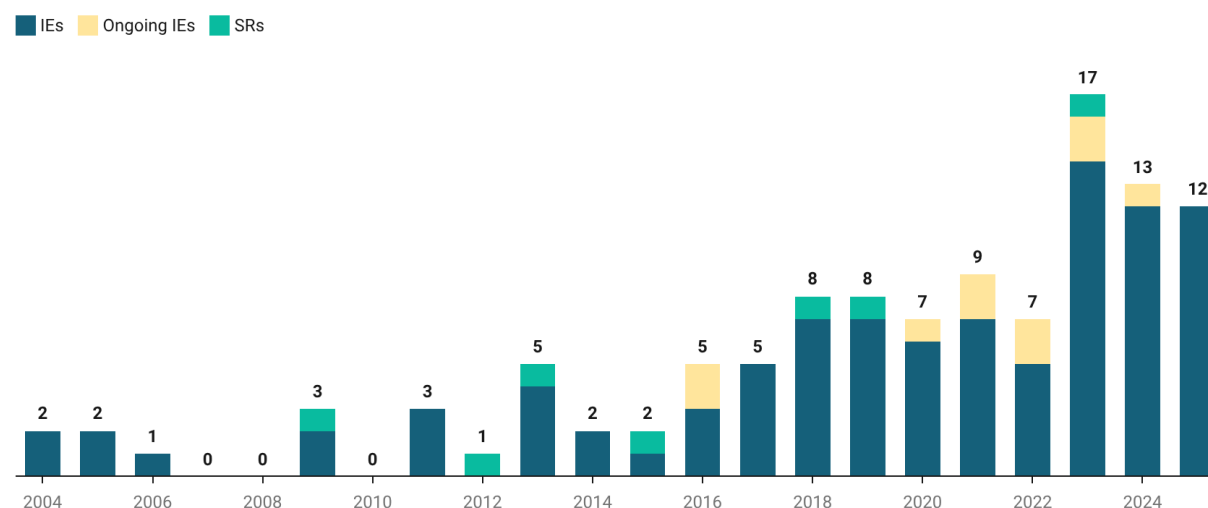
3.1 Migration has become a primary focus, but rigorous evidence remains limited

The evidence base is relatively new. Over one third of the 112 studies in the EGM ($n = 42$) were published during the update period (between April 2023 and September 2025). While the original EGM covered literature published since 1990, eligible studies did not appear until 2004. It was not until 2013 that studies evaluating interventions targeting (potential) migrants began to emerge.

Earlier studies, primarily in the *economic opportunities and work policies* group, did not examine interventions targeting (potential) migrants. Since then, the body of evidence assessing migration-targeted⁴ interventions has expanded. By August 2025, all eligible publications evaluated interventions explicitly targeting (potential) migrants to influence migration aspirations and behaviors (Figure 2). This trend suggests that (potential) migration has evolved from a secondary consideration to a central target of evaluated interventions.

Given the cross-cutting nature of migration dynamics, we acknowledge that both migration-specific and broader development evaluations can remain conceptually coherent while being situated within the wider social, economic, and policy context. Migration-specific evaluations can generate targeted findings while accounting for the broader social and economic systems that shape mobility. Conversely, non-migration-specific evaluations can provide important evidence on indirect pathways influencing migration, as long as their conceptual framing and outcome measures capture migration dynamics.

Figure 2: Publication trends by study type and publication year



Note: The list of included studies is provided in [Online appendix D](#).

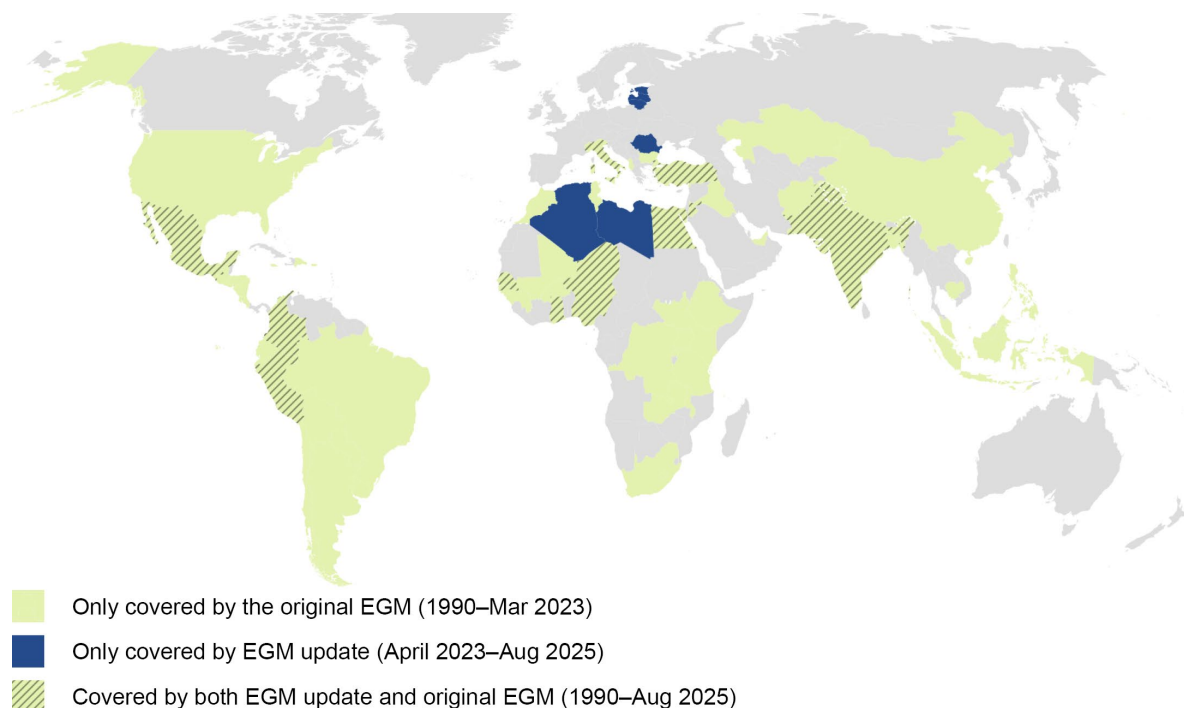
3.2 Global coverage is expanding but regional imbalances persist

During the update period, the EGM's 30 newly included studies expanded the evidence base across multiple regions, particularly Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), and Europe and Central Asia (Figure 3). The map now covers 67 countries, with new studies adding evidence from 8

⁴ Interventions that targeted (potential) migrants, aiming to influence migration aspirations and behaviors.

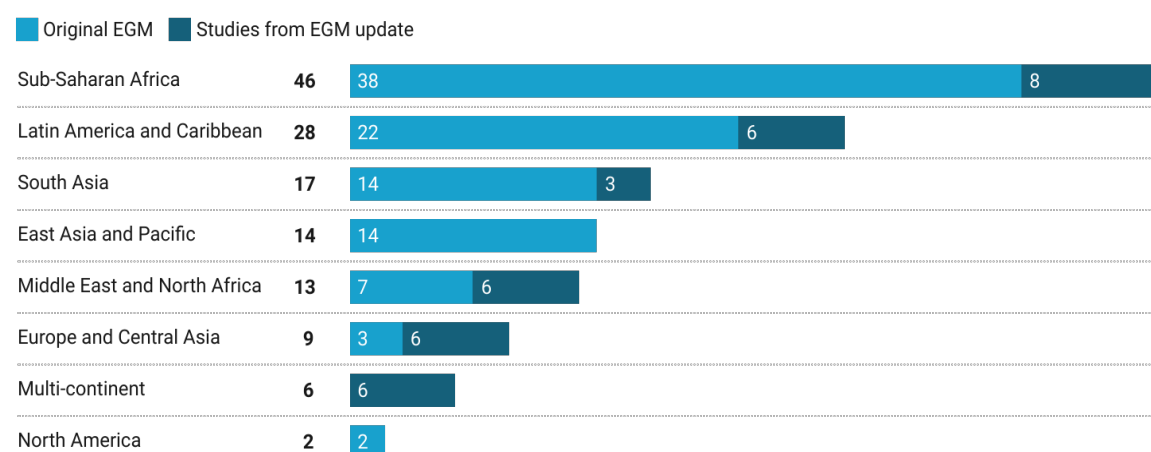
countries not previously represented.⁵ See [Online appendix E](#) for full geographic data.

Figure 3: Geographic coverage of the map



Despite this expansion, the evidence remains unevenly distributed across regions. As in the original version of the EGM, most IEs focus on LAC and SSA, while fewer studies cover MENA and Europe and Central Asia (Figure 4). The emergence of six new studies with a multi-country⁶ focus (five quasi-experimental IEs and one SR) indicates a growing use of global datasets to measure migration outcomes.

Figure 4: Geographic distribution of studies by region



In LAC and SSA, many studies assessed interventions that expanded *economic*

⁵ Studies covering multiple countries were included in the above figure only if they involved 15 countries or fewer. Six new studies identified in this update have a *multi-country* focus, each covering more than 15 countries; they are not represented in the figure.

⁶ When a study covers more than 15 countries across different regions, it is coded as having a multi-country focus.

opportunities and work policies, such as cash transfers and ALMPs. In LAC, these interventions accounted for roughly three quarters of all studies in the region, while in SSA, they represented about half. Around one third of SSA studies also analyzed *information campaigns* that aim to raise awareness about workers' rights, the risks of irregular migration, and legal alternatives.

The increase in studies from Europe and Central Asia and MENA largely reflected the inclusion of the new intervention group, *external migration management*. Studies measuring *migration partnerships or deals*, as well as *deterrence*-related interventions, originated from these two regions.

Other regions included at least one study that assessed the effects of creating or expanding *legal pathways* (e.g., work or humanitarian visas). However, we found no such studies within the SSA evidence base, despite the presence of active intra-regional mobility initiatives and national reforms that facilitated cross-border movement (e.g., ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol 1979).

Gaps in the evidence base may not have reflected a lack of relevance or impact of certain interventions, but rather a lack of political or financial incentives to evaluate them. However, the current data do not allow us to determine these drivers with certainty.

3.3 There is evidence growth in migration management and economic opportunities, but key gaps persist

During the EGM update between 2023 and August 2025, we added new studies to all intervention groups except *building safe communities through violence prevention and intervention*. This group remained an absolute gap in the evidence base.

We identified six IEs and zero SRs for the new intervention group on *external migration management*. This finding indicated that, while emerging primary evidence existed, it remained too limited for an SR. Five of these IEs evaluated *migration partnerships and deals*, including the Italy–Libya MOU and the European Union–Turkey statement. In one of these studies, the Italy–Libya MOU and a related state-led deterrence activity were assessed as separate intervention groups. The sixth study fell under the *deterrence* category, which evaluated the global adoption of visa restrictions on migration flow. No studies specifically assessed *remote control* or *externalization* measures as distinct intervention components.

The largest proportion of studies added during the update belonged to the *orderly and safe migration management* group. We added eight new IEs on the effects of *information campaigns* and three on *legal pathways*, which together accounted for almost one third of all studies found in this group (Figure 5). However, the synthesis gap remained, as we did not find any SRs in the original EGM nor in this update, despite the cluster of studies assessing the effects of *information campaigns* on intentions to migrate, and other related outcomes.

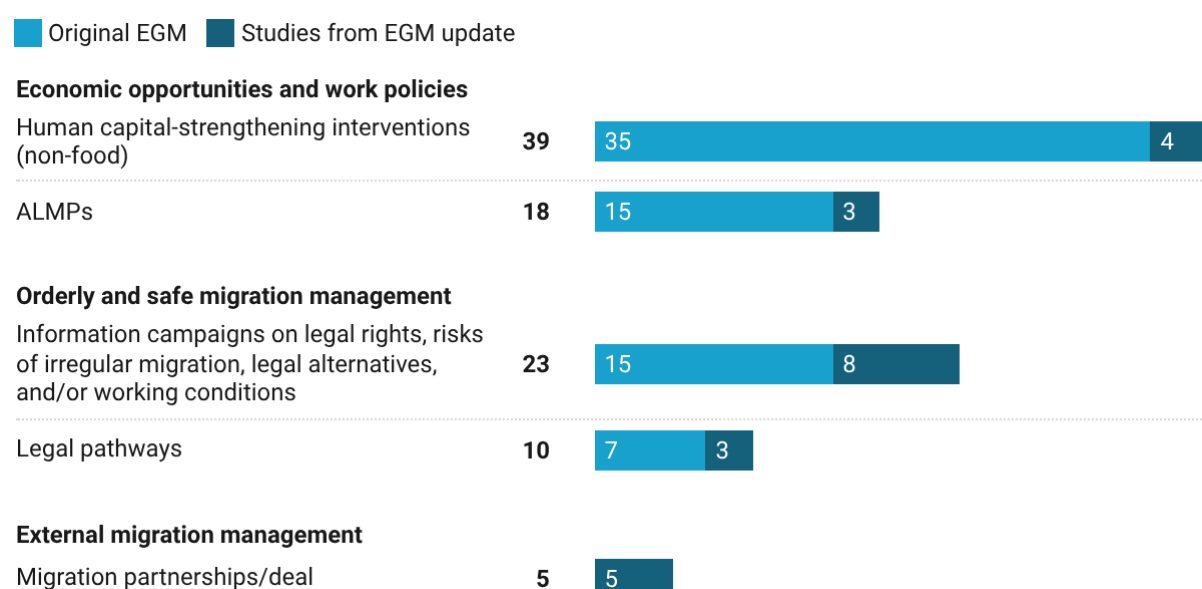
Although the evidence base did not grow as much as literature on *information campaigns*, the *economic opportunities and work policies* group continued to represent the largest cluster, accounting for half of all included studies in the EGM. During the update, we identified seven new IEs and one additional SR, which represent 13 percent of the studies in this group. The studies in this group are highly concentrated in two intervention categories:

human capital-strengthening (65%) and *ALMPs* (31%).

We also included two studies for the *strengthening resilience against shocks and stressors* group. One of these evaluated the effects of *early warning systems*, an intervention category with no studies in the original EGM. However, this group remained under-evaluated, with 11 IEs and no SR examining the effects of *strengthening resilience* interventions on migration.

Finally, we added five IEs on *multi-component*⁷ interventions that combined categories from more than one group in our framework. Three of these examined interventions that combined *human capital* and *resilience-strengthening* components, while two IEs assessed *human capital-strengthening* interventions combined with *information campaigns*. These were added to two *multi-component* intervention studies from the original EGM, one looking at *information campaigns* plus *ALMPs*, and the other combining *information campaigns* with components from the *strengthening resilience* group.

Figure 5: Top five interventions from the EGM update and the original EGM

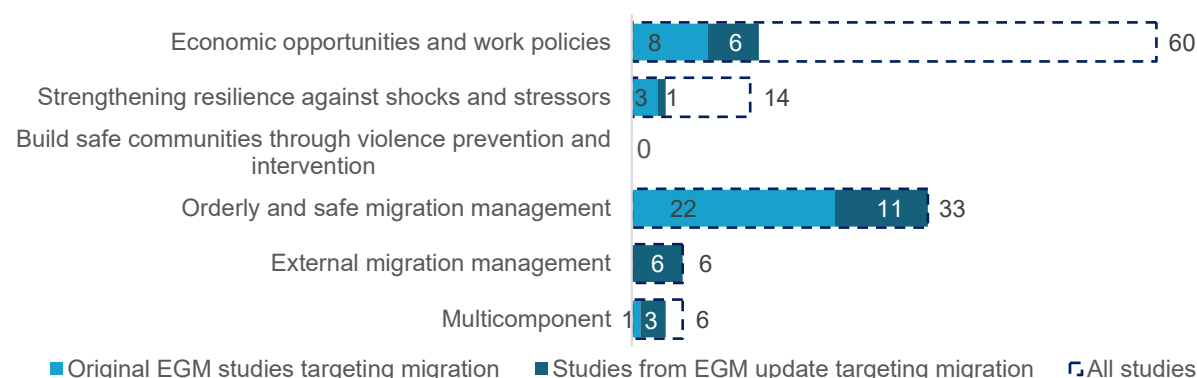


Note: The total of the values displayed will be larger than the number of studies identified, reflecting studies that may evaluate multiple interventions separately. See [Online appendix G](#) for a figure presenting the distribution across all intervention types.

Half of the EGM's evaluated interventions did not explicitly target (potential) migrants. Most examined *economic opportunities and work policies*, and *resilience to shocks and stressors*, where migration-related outcomes were measured among broader livelihood or welfare outcomes. Unsurprisingly, studies that explicitly targeted (potential) migrants were largely concentrated in the *orderly and safe migration management* and *external migration management* groups (Figure 6).

⁷ Multi-component interventions (single arms combining multiple intervention activities) were grouped separately to avoid double-counting, and coded by their combined components (e.g., information campaigns and ALMPs).

Figure 6: Distribution of studies evaluating interventions that target migrants, by intervention group



3.4 There are gaps in recognizing diverse forms of migration

Of the 159 outcome measures identified in the map, most of the studies measured *any migration* or *migration intentions* without specifying whether the movement or intentions were international, internal, or through regular or irregular channels. These findings were consistent with those from the original EGM (Figure 7; see [Online appendix B](#) for more details on the outcome framework).

The update identified new evidence for *international migration stock (unspecified whether through [ir]regular channels)* and *perception or psychosocial condition of current situation* outcomes,⁸ which had not been evaluated in any of the studies included in the original map. However, no studies examined *forced displacement or irregular international migration stock*.

Intention-to-migrate can serve as a proximal indicator of migration behavior when tracking actual movement is less feasible, although the intention outcomes do not necessarily reflect realized migration behaviors. In most *international migration* and *intention-to-migrate* outcomes, regular and irregular migration were aggregated. This aggregation constrains interpretation, as any estimated effects cannot be attributed to specific (ir)regular pathways. The limited disaggregation likely reflects the challenges and unreliability of collecting data on migration irregularity, which is often underreported due to its clandestine nature. We found that only eight studies explicitly measured *irregular migration behavior*⁹ (see [Online appendix F](#) for more details on how these outcomes were measured).

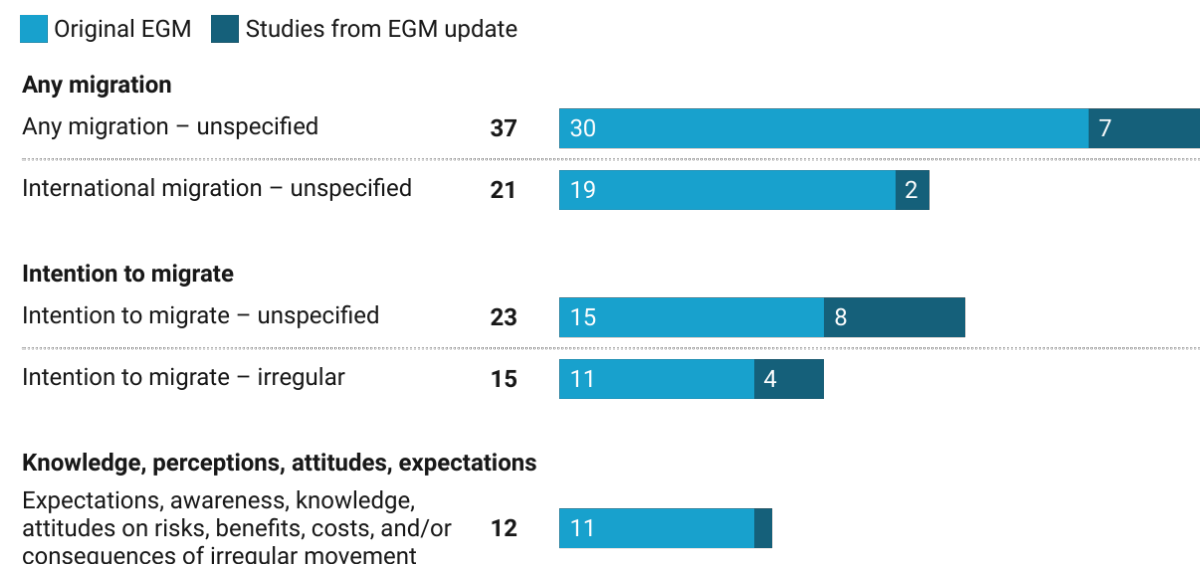
Several studies employed quasi-experimental methods using indicators such as international migration stocks or flows, illustrating how these measures can be operationalized despite inherent data and design limitations. For example, Chort and de la Rupelle (2022) evaluated the effects of an agricultural cash transfer program and a disaster fund on migration flows between Mexico and the US, using *Encuesta sobre Migración en la Frontera Norte de México* border flow survey data. Adhikari et al. (2024) and Levelu, Mayda, and Orefice (2025) studied the effects of international labor and trade agreements on bilateral migration stocks, using World Bank and United Nations Population Division Migrant Stock data, respectively.

⁸ The outcome category *perception/ psychosocial condition of current situation* refers to the desire for change, feelings of inescapable stagnation, and challenges due to conditions that cannot be addressed.

⁹ This refers to observable actions or events related to irregular migration, such as actual irregular movement.

Evidence on *knowledge and perception* outcomes expanded modestly but remained fragmented. Most studies focused on *risk awareness, knowledge, and expectations on irregular movement*, rather than on *legal options* or *labor rights*, which are also essential for promoting regular migration channels.

Figure 7: Top five outcomes from the EGM update and the original EGM



Note: See [Online appendix G](#) for the full figure showing outcome distributions.

3.5 Few studies reported unintended consequences

The updated EGM added 9 new studies reporting unintended consequences, bringing the total to 23 studies (when combined with the 14 identified in the original map).¹⁰ The reported unintended consequences included:

- *Migration partnerships and deals* may shift irregular migration routes toward more dangerous and fatal pathways, rather than reducing irregular migration flows (Rodríguez Sánchez et al. 2023; Mesnard et al. 2024; Blair and Solodoch 2025; Tafani and Riccaboni 2025; Zambiasi and Albarosa 2025).
- *Information campaigns* on legal migration options may lead to higher irregular migration intentions among ineligible participants, reflecting aspiration-frustration effects¹¹ (Hebie et al. 2023; Beber et al. 2025).

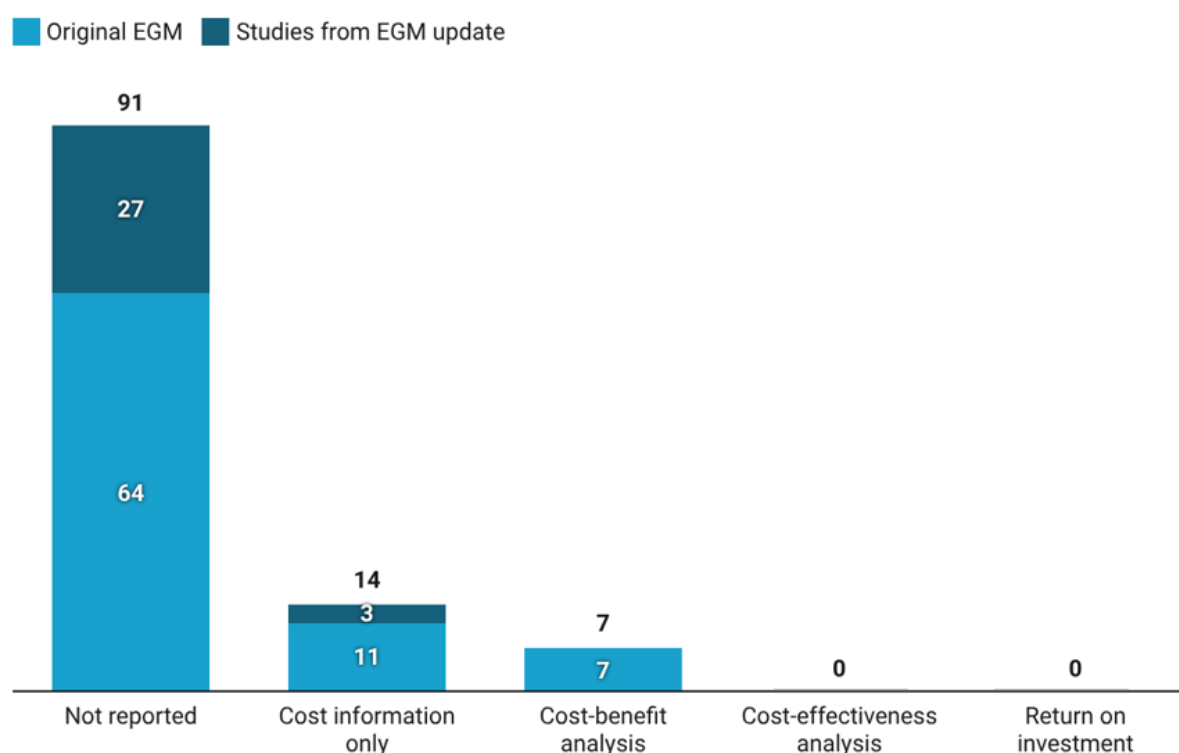
3.6 Cost-benefit and cost-effectiveness of interventions remain underexplored

Cost evidence remains sparse (Figure 8). Where cost evidence is available, it typically includes intervention budget or cost information rather than cost-effectiveness, cost-benefit, or return-on-investment analysis.

¹⁰ These findings should be interpreted with caution, as the quality of evidence on unintended consequences was not appraised.

¹¹ Aspiration-frustration effects refer to situations in which people's aspirations (desire or motivation to migrate) increase because they learn about opportunities, but their actual ability or eligibility to migrate legally does not improve.

Figure 8: Cost evidence reported in the EGM



Note: The Cost information only item refers to the actual budget or cost of an intervention as reported.

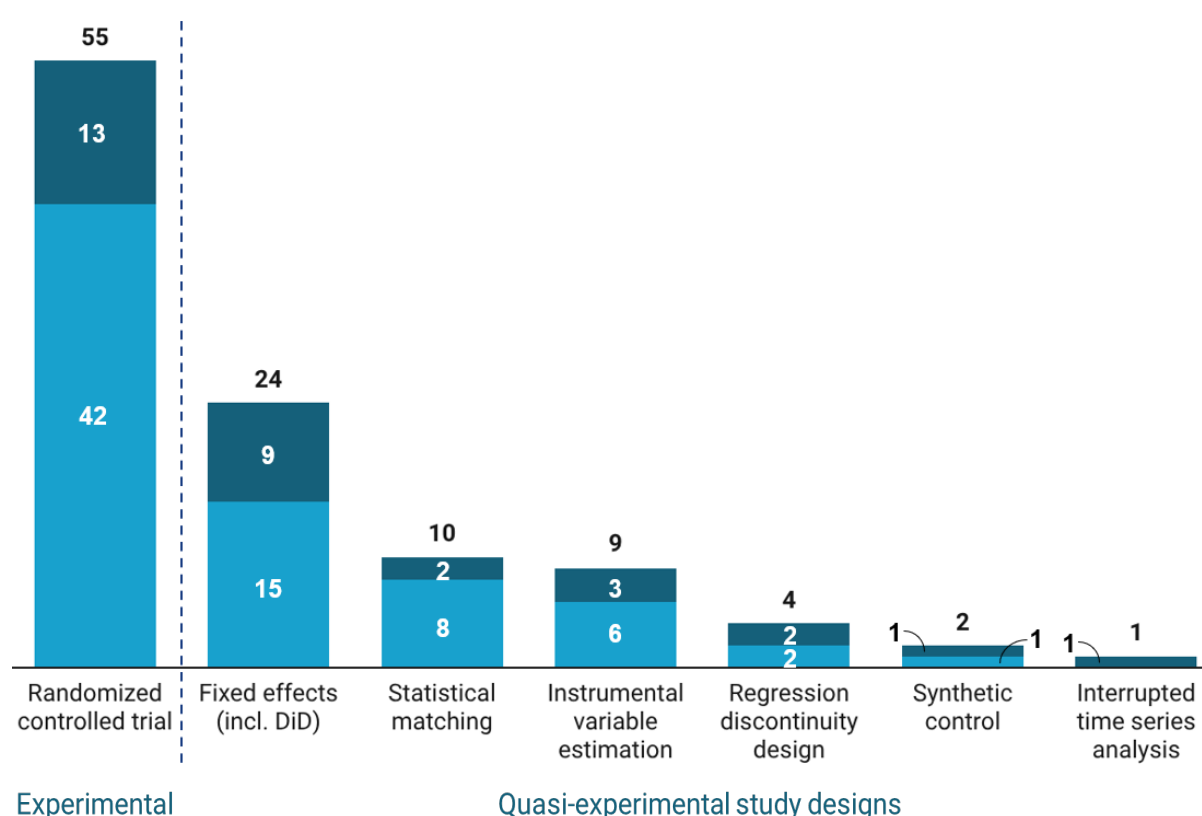
3.7 There is a shift in evaluation methods: From experimental to quasi-experimental design

Of the 95 completed IEs, 55 used experimental designs. The remaining studies employed quasi-experimental methods, most-commonly fixed effects ($n = 24$) and statistical matching ($n = 10$) (Figure 9). Compared to the original EGM, in which 39 percent of IEs used quasi-experimental methods, these methods accounted for a larger share (50%) in the update between 2023 and 2025. This modest shift toward quasi-experimental approaches may partly reflect the addition of a new group of studies focused on external migration management—a type of intervention typically not amenable to assessment through experimental designs.

We searched for qualitative IEs in the new group of *external migration management* interventions but did not identify any studies that met the EGM's eligibility criteria. The absence of such studies limits our understanding of the mechanisms through which these interventions work (or do not work), and the role of contextual factors in their effectiveness, especially given the complex political and social dimensions of this domain.

Moreover, across the full set of studies included in the EGM ($n = 113$), 17 percent of the 95 completed IEs used mixed methods, which incorporated some qualitative analysis of the implementation and effects of interventions ($n = 14$ from the original EGM and $n = 2$ added during the update). These all pertained to *economic opportunities and work policies*, highlighting a methodological gap in other intervention domains that could improve our capacity to better understand the complexities of human mobility.

Figure 9: Completed IEs by study design and evaluation method



3.8 What we know—and don't know—from SRs

Seven SRs synthesized evidence on economic opportunities and work policies. Six reviews examined human capital-strengthening interventions, and one focused on ALMPs. This narrow evidence base had important methodological and thematic limitations.

Six reviews were rated as having low confidence, and one (Anda-León et al. 2023) was rated as having medium confidence (the critical appraisal template is available in [Online appendix H](#)).¹² The reviews rated as having low confidence did not follow best practices for conducting and reporting SRs of effectiveness in international development (Page et al. 2021; The Methods Group of the Campbell Collaboration 2019a, 2019b; Higgins et al. 2024), meaning that their conclusions may not have been valid or reliable. Low-confidence SRs exhibited key limitations and gaps, including:

- **Incomplete search strategies:** All low-confidence SRs lacked a comprehensive search strategy, increasing the likelihood of missing relevant studies. For example, Sherr et al. (2009) and Hagen-Zanker and Himmelstine (2013) did not report checking the reference lists of included studies. Adhikari and Gentilini (2018) limited their search to published studies, which is likely to introduce publication bias.
- **Screening and extraction procedures that did not adhere to best practices:** Most low-confidence SRs did not have independent and duplicate screening and data extraction processes for full-text papers (Sherr et al. 2009; Kabeer and

¹² Anda-León et al. (2023) was authored by a member of the present report team; however, this team did not conduct the confidence appraisal of that SR. The appraisal was performed independently by other reviewers to avoid potential conflicts of interest.

Waddington 2015; Adhikari and Gentilini 2018; Hagen-Zanker and Himmelstine 2013).¹³ Both are critical for ensuring methodological rigor (Higgins et al. 2024).

- **Absence of risk-of-bias assessments:** None of the SRs assessed the risk of bias for estimates reported in included studies; this limits the potential reliability of the SR conclusions and implications for policy and research.
- **Synthesis methods may have limited the robustness or nuance of the findings:** Several of these SRs employed synthesis methods that may not have been fully appropriate for the available data. For example, the SR by Bastagli et al. (2019) relied on vote-counting based on the direction and statistical significance of included effects, and reported ranges for significant effects, to derive their conclusions. Hagen-Zanker and Himmelstine (2013) synthesized results narratively, when both SRs could have implemented quantitative meta-analysis to pool effect sizes together, report the magnitude, direction and significance of an average effect, and explore heterogeneity quantitatively.

3ie produced one medium-confidence SR (Anda León et al. 2023) in response to a synthesis gap identified in the original EGM (Berretta et al. 2023). This review synthesized and appraised evidence on ALMPs in low- and middle-income countries. The included interventions aimed to improve employability and income opportunities, which can mitigate economic pressures that shape irregular migration dynamics. The key findings were:

- **Evidence base:** This SR included 10 relevant randomized IEs and seven qualitative studies from SSA, LAC, and Asia.
- **Quantitative analysis:** Nine included studies were rated as having a high risk of bias, indicating that the reported results may not accurately represent the actual effects of ALMPs. Meta-analyses on three migration outcomes (migration intentions, attempted migration, and actual migration behavior) showed no statistically significant effects of ALMPs.
- **Qualitative analysis:** Contextual tailoring of training, predictable certification, logistical and financial support for participants, and strong local partnerships were associated with program uptake and effectiveness.
- **Cost evidence:** None of the included studies assessed the cost-effectiveness of migration outcomes.
- **Overall findings:** The evidence base does not permit a reliable answer as to whether ALMPs affected migration decisions. The SR recommended more rigorous IEs that explicitly target (potential) migrants and have detailed cost-effectiveness data.

Current synthesis evidence does not provide clear implications on which interventions effectively address drivers of irregular migration. As a result, policymakers have limited evidence to guide decisions and improve policy and practice.

¹³ Bastagli et al. (2019) performed duplicate independent screening, but not data extraction.

3.9 Synthesis gaps

To strengthen the evidence base, we should consider synthesizing rigorous primary evidence, where sufficient clusters of IEs exist. Synthesis gaps remained in areas where intervention-outcome pairings have relatively larger numbers of IEs and no high- or medium-confidence SRs. Table 2 outlines potential areas for synthesis identified through our EGM. Synthesizing these areas can support effective and evidence-informed decision-making. However, areas with fewer than 10 studies would be exploratory in nature. Here, we only present numbers of completed IEs.

Table 2: Areas for future synthesis

Interventions	Outcomes	No. of studies
Information campaigns on legal rights, risks of irregular migration, legal alternatives, and/or working conditions	Intention to migrate	19
	Knowledge, perceptions, attitudes, and expectations	12
	Migration behavior:	6
	- Any unspecified migration outcome (4) - International migration flow (2)	
Legal pathways	Migration behavior:	10
	- Any unspecified migration outcome (4) - International migration stock (4) - International migration flow (2)	
External migration management	Migration behavior:	6
	International migration flow (6)	

Note: A single study may be counted under multiple intervention–outcome intersections. For instance, the “information campaign” category has 21 completed IEs targeting migrants, but many of these measured migration intentions as well as knowledge, perceptions, attitudes, and expectations. The “any unspecified” migration outcome refers to outcomes that do not indicate whether migration is international or internal, nor whether it is regular or irregular. “Migration behavior” refers to observable actions or events related to irregular migration, such as actual irregular movement.

Evidence on economic opportunity and work policy interventions explicitly targeting migration remained limited. Although all 28 *human capital-strengthening* and 15 *ALMP* completed IEs included in the EGM measured migration-related outcomes, most evaluated interventions were not designed to address (potential) migrants as a central target. Only five *human capital-strengthening* and four *ALMP* completed IEs assessed migration-targeted interventions.

While interventions not directly targeting (potential) migrants can offer valuable implications for broader contexts in influencing mobility, studies of non-migration-targeted interventions can often be underpowered to detect effects on migration behavior and/or intentions. A descriptive synthesis that maps intervention types and study characteristics is therefore needed before undertaking deeper analysis. Such a synthesis could help to assess the extent to which existing findings are informative for migration policy.

For instance, Anda León et al. (2023) synthesized 10 *ALMP* evaluations that measured migration-related outcomes. These evaluations, however, primarily aimed to improve employment and earnings through skills-building interventions, and had limited discussions and conclusions regarding migration-related pathways. Only two of the reviewed studies, which measured interventions explicitly targeting migrants, provided more informative findings on migration mechanisms. This indicates the importance of evaluations examining

migration pathways while situating interventions of interest within broader social, economic, and structural systems.

4. Policy implications

Migration is a fundamental expression of human development and of robust economies, reflecting the rights of every individual to pursue choices that maximize their well-being while balancing complex global dynamics. However, facilitating safe, equitable, and sustainable migration pathways has become increasingly challenging for policy and decision-makers worldwide due to the cross-cutting nature of local and global drivers and the absence of systemic solutions.

This study was commissioned to identify existing evidence and areas in which additional evidence is needed to design effective solutions to address drivers of irregular migration. We find that, while the evidence base continues to grow, it remains limited, leading decision-makers to make best-guess policies with potentially unreliable or context-insensitive solutions.¹⁴

Evidence-informed policy is urgently needed, yet actionable and rigorous research remains limited and requires concerted effort to build a stronger evidence pipeline. Coordinated action among funders, implementers, and researchers is essential to expand and strengthen the knowledge base. Priority actions include:

Interpreting and applying existing evidence cautiously and contextually

- **Interpret evidence on migration intentions with caution**, as these do not necessarily translate into actual migration behavior. Policies should prioritize evidence based on observed migration behavior and use intention data only as complementary insight into motivations or perceptions.
- **Anticipate unintended consequences (e.g., exclusion of vulnerable groups)** when designing large-scale programs or policies, recognizing that results in one context may not apply across all contexts and populations. Additionally, while more research is needed to understand what factors influence migration decision-making, program implementers should keep in mind that interventions seeking to alleviate irregular migration may unintentionally incentivize it.

Ensuring migration policies and programs are evaluable, prospective, and embedded within implementation

- **Design evaluable policies and programs by involving IE researchers at the program design and planning stage** to align implementation and data collection strategies with policy and learning needs. This facilitates prospective IE designs and credible counterfactual identification.
- **Embed evaluation within existing migration policies and programs**, especially salient and under-evaluated interventions. This includes migration management, return and reintegration programming, as well as formative research to better understand what influences migration aspirations and actual behavior.
- **Commission the synthesis of rigorous primary evidence where sufficient evidence clusters exist, and support new, credible IEs for policy-salient but under-evaluated interventions** (e.g., external migration management). Attrition may

¹⁴ If decision-makers consult low-confidence reviews as assessed by our criteria, they should do so with caution, as the conclusions may not be valid or reliable.

limit the validity of findings, particularly in highly mobile communities. Migration impacts may also take longer to materialize, thus highlighting the importance of appropriate funding for longer study observation periods.

Creating an enabling environment for sustained evidence-informed decision-making

- **Foster an evidence culture** by translating the need for responsive and evidence-informed policy among decision-makers and stakeholders, and by identifying ways to support evidence generation within organizational learning agendas and investments.
- **Invest in a stronger migration evidence ecosystem** to improve data availability, interoperability, and consistency across sources. A more integrated evidence base can also foster richer learning about the interplay of relevant domains (e.g., trade and economic integration, climate change, and environmental policies) to enhance policy coherence and systems-level understanding.

5. Research implications

Rigorous research in the sector is still sparse, and primary studies are urgently needed to fill evidence gaps. To strengthen the evidence base, we suggest that future research agendas aim to address the following:

Research priorities and conceptual clarity

- **Prioritize primary research gaps**, including interventions for *building safe communities*, and *strengthening resilience against shocks and stressors*.
- **Expand the evidence base by evaluating underexamined outcomes**, such as knowledge about legal options or awareness of legal rights.
- Short-term solutions entail the inclusion of **migration-targeted modules or migration-related outcome measures in broader development evaluations** to fast-track evidence generation on the topic. However, there is a need for IEs and rigorous systems-level evaluations on migration-specific programming and policy to understand how these programs affect intended outcomes.
- **Differentiate migration measures and outcomes** to strengthen evidence interpretation and support future synthesis efforts (e.g., internal versus international, unfacilitated versus facilitated regular migration, irregular migration, international displacement, and mixed mobility patterns).

Methodological rigor, cost-effectiveness and mixed-method designs

- **Improve the quality of future primary studies** by ensuring adequate statistical power, accounting for high levels of attrition, controlling for confounding factors, collecting baseline and endline data, and using credible counterfactual designs (either experimental, quasi-experimental, or qualitative).
- **Incorporate cost-effectiveness/benefit analyses in all IEs**, which may be particularly useful for decision-making in resource-constrained settings.
- **Identify and report unintended consequences** of programs or policies.
- **Integrate qualitative evidence exploring implementation experiences, mechanisms of change, or contextual factors** to inform policymakers about how and why interventions to address root causes and drivers of irregular migration may or may not work.

Strengthening of evidence synthesis and updating knowledge

- **Prioritize synthesis where there are evidence clusters** (e.g., *information campaigns*) and undertake descriptive syntheses in emerging but policy-relevant

areas (e.g., *legal pathways* and *external migration management*) to document implementation approaches and measurement practices.

- **Develop and maintain living synthesis projects** to keep the evidence base current and ensure that decision-makers have timely access to updated evidence.

Contributing to a stronger migration evidence ecosystem

- **Advocate for and contribute to the development of a stronger migration data ecosystem** through transparent reporting, data sharing, and methodological innovation.
- **Draw from evaluation approaches in other cross-cutting domains** (e.g., trade and economic integration, climate change, and environmental policies) to better capture indirect, multi-level, and interdependent effects in migration research and synthesis.

6. Limitations and deviations from the inception report (protocol)

6.1 Study limitations

The updated EGM includes studies on *external migration management* interventions only where the interventions were implemented in, or directly relevant to, countries in MENA, SSA, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Türkiye. Studies examining external migration management arrangements outside this geographic scope were therefore excluded from this update.

We acknowledge the importance of additional intervention areas not included in this EGM due to time and resource constraints, such as those addressing weak justice systems, corruption, political instability, and low trust in government, which can change life aspirations and incentivize irregular migration (Beine, Khoudour, and Tarvainen 2021). Their exclusion reflects pragmatic scope limitations rather than a lack of recognition. The intervention framework used in this EGM builds on extensive discussions and collaborative efforts during the project's inception phase, which thoughtfully guided the prioritization of domains to ensure policy relevance and analytical coherence. Future updates could incorporate these domains when funding allows.

Although we reflected sectoral experts' feedback on the current intervention-outcome framework, we acknowledge existing conceptual overlaps among some categories (e.g., *deterrence* and *externalization*, or *deterrence* and *information campaigns*). To address this, we applied consistent coding rules to assign studies to the most relevant primary category. Follow-up synthesis efforts and future updates of this EGM could further disaggregate or refine these categories to enhance analytical balance.

6.2 Deviations from the protocol

While the EGM update followed the registered protocol (Lee et al. 2025), several practical deviations occurred during implementation. Some study coding from the original map was reviewed. The records were cross-checked manually against the intervention-outcome framework and the coding instructions on thematic filters (e.g., specific age or gender of the target population). Where discrepancies or ambiguities were identified, we revised or removed them to ensure consistency with the updated framework and eligibility criteria. These adjustments reflect improvements in classification and quality assurance.

7. What is an EGM

3ie's EGMs are thematic collections of information about IEs and SRs that measure the effects of international development policies and programs. They provide a visual overview of existing and ongoing studies or reviews in a sector or subsector, detailing the types of programs evaluated and the outcomes measured. The evidence is mapped onto a framework of interventions and outcomes, graphically highlighting the gaps where few or no IEs or SRs exist, and where there is a concentration of IEs but no high-confidence SRs.

EGMs are useful tools for development decision-makers seeking to identify existing evidence that informs policies and programs. For funders and researchers, these maps show where greater investment is needed or where they can avoid duplicating existing research. EGMs do not provide recommendations for policy and programming or guidelines for practice. They provide links to resources that can inform policy or program development.

For a conceptual introduction to 3ie EGMs, please view our [3ie Working Paper](#), for a more detailed discussion, please view [Snijlsteit et al. \(2016\)](#).

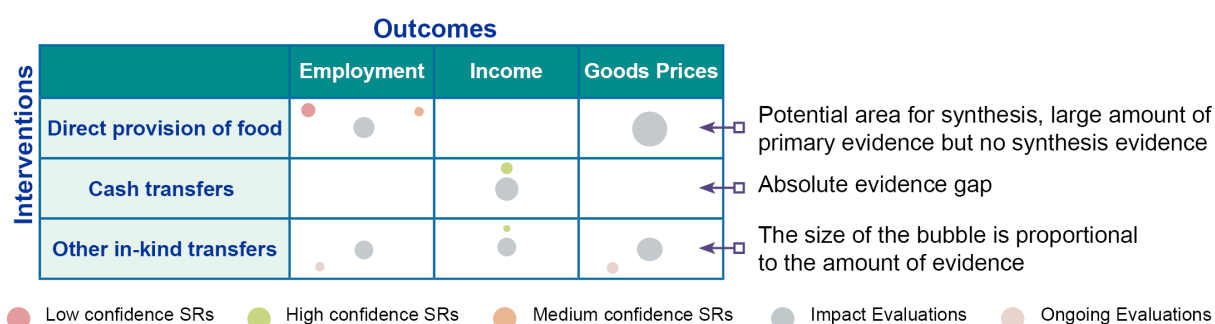
7.1 How to use an EGM

Inform research/ learning agendas	Identify key topical areas where evidence is missing, so that resources for future research can be strategically allocated. This can include specific interventions, outcomes, regions, or settings.
Inform activity and project design	Provide illustrative examples of theories of change used in IEs and SRs of similar interventions.
Identify relevant indicators to measure	Explore the specific outcomes and indicators used within the EGM's studies to measure various steps along different theories of change.
Identify relevant evaluation designs	Identify examples of evaluation designs and methods that have been conducted to evaluate similar interventions.
Inform programing investment	Quickly identify which interventions are effective (or not) by looking at the EGM report's high- and medium-confidence SR summary section.

7.2 Tasks EGMs can support

Reviewing applications for awards	EGMs can help to identify whether applications are addressing research needs or are focused on areas where interventions are seemingly more effective.
Writing proposals	EGMs identify gaps that could be filled with future research. Proposals can lean on EGMs to highlight why work is needed.

7.3 How to read an EGM



Notes: This is an illustrative example of how to interpret an EGM; it does not reflect the EGM's evidence base on interventions addressing root causes and drivers of irregular migration.

Online appendixes

Online appendix A: Search strategy

<https://3ieimpact.org/sites/default/files/2025-12/Irregular-migration-EGM-Online-appendix-A-Search-strategy.pdf>

Online appendix B: Eligibility criteria

<https://3ieimpact.org/sites/default/files/2025-12/Irregular-migration-EGM-Online-appendix-B-Eligibility-criteria.pdf>

Online appendix C: PRISMA flow diagram

<https://3ieimpact.org/sites/default/files/2025-12/Irregular-migration-EGM-Online-appendix-C-PRISMA-2020-flow-diagram.pdf>

Online appendix D: Studies included in the EGM

<https://3ieimpact.org/sites/default/files/2025-12/Irregular-migration-EGM-Online-appendix-D-Studies-included-in-the-EGM.pdf>

Online appendix E: Geographic data of studies included in the EGM

<https://3ieimpact.org/sites/default/files/2025-12/Irregular-migration-EGM-Online-appendix-E-Geographic-data-of-studies-included-in-the-EGM.pdf>

Online appendix F: Irregular migration outcomes measured

<https://3ieimpact.org/sites/default/files/2025-12/Irregular-migration-EGM-Online-appendix-F-Irregular-migration-outcomes-measured.pdf>

Online appendix G: Distribution of studies by all intervention and outcome categories in the framework

<https://3ieimpact.org/sites/default/files/2025-12/Irregular-migration-EGM-Online-appendix-G-Distribution-of-studies.pdf>

Online appendix H: SR critical appraisal template

<https://3ieimpact.org/sites/default/files/2025-12/Irregular-migration-EGM-Online-appendix%20H-SR-Critical-appraisal-criteria.pdf>

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