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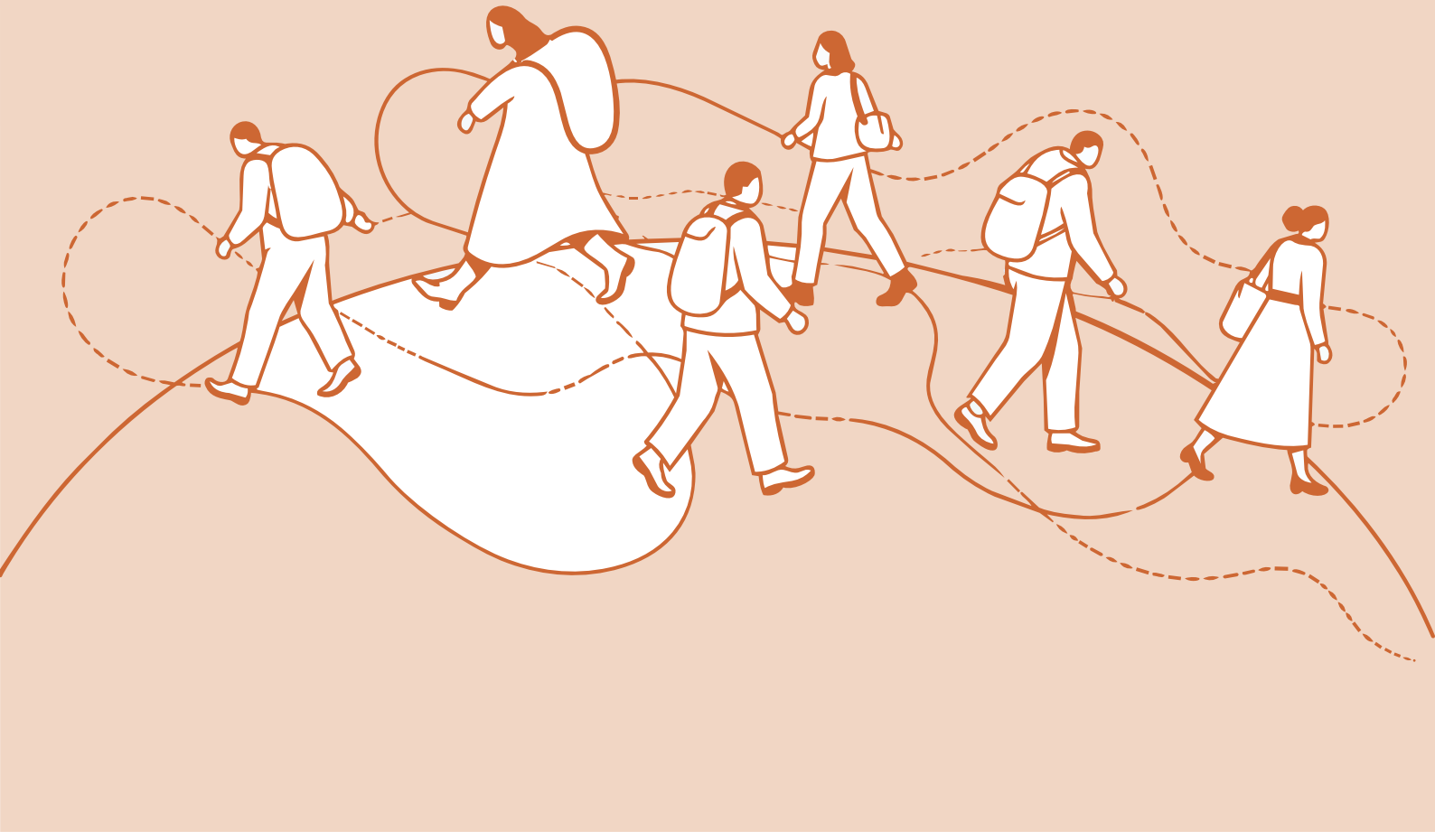
Synthesis Report

Addressing Root Causes and Drivers of Irregular Migration

June 2026

Working Paper 71

Social protection



3ie International Initiative for Impact Evaluation

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The International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie) develops evidence on how to effectively transform the lives of the poor in low- and middle-income countries. Established in 2008, we offer comprehensive support and a diversity of approaches to achieve development goals by producing, synthesizing and promoting the uptake of impact evaluation evidence. We work closely with governments, foundations, NGOs, development institutions and research organizations to address their decision-making needs. With offices in Washington DC, New Delhi and London and a global network of leading researchers, we offer deep expertise across our extensive menu of evaluation services.

About this report

This synthesis report integrates key findings from the "Addressing Root Causes and Drivers of Irregular Migration: Evidence Gap Map 2025 Update" and four accompanying evidence summaries. It therefore serves as a consolidated evidence base to inform prioritization of policies and research addressing irregular migration. 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).

The findings and conclusions presented in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Policy and Operations Evaluation Department, 3ie's donors or governing bodies. Please direct any comments or queries to the corresponding author, Sanghwa Lee, at slee@3ieimpact.org

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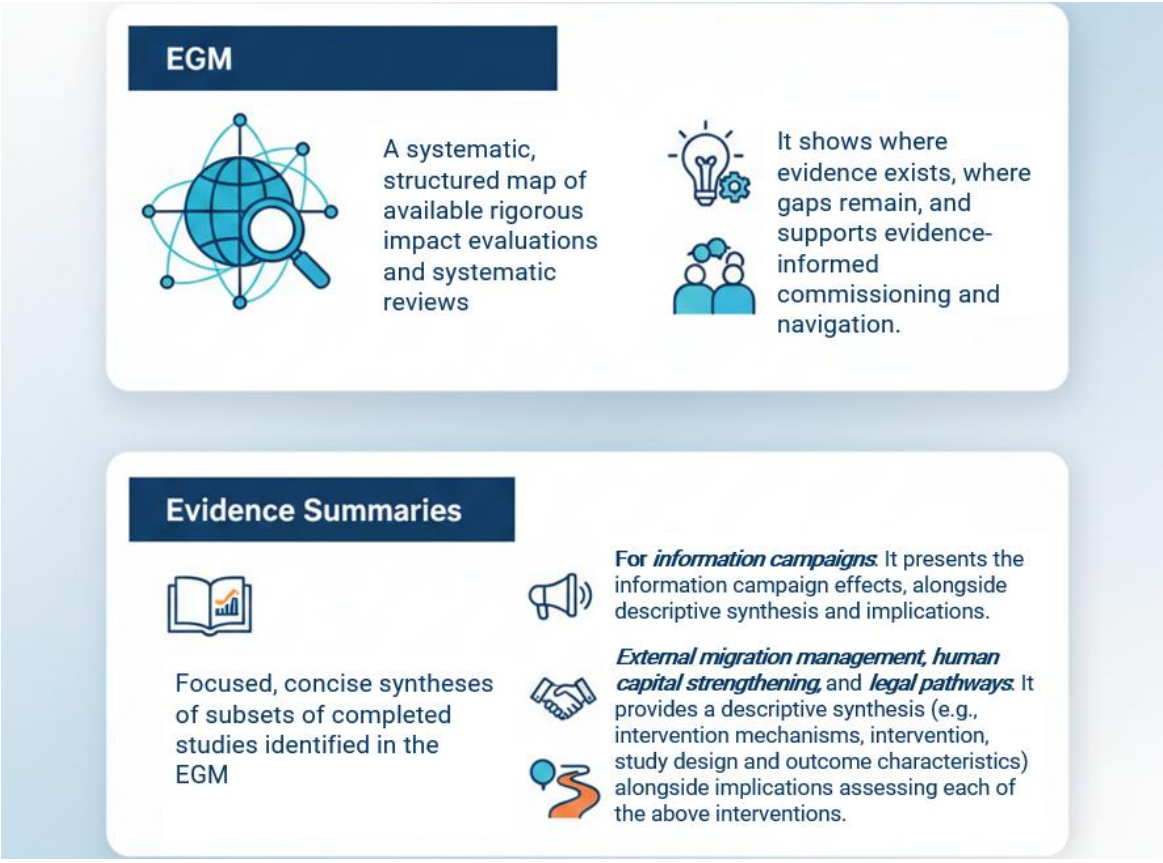
How to read this report

This report brings together findings from the 2025 Evidence Gap Map (EGM) and four accompanying evidence summaries. The EGM and the evidence summaries serve distinct but complementary purposes. Presented together, they allow readers to interpret the breadth of the evidence alongside more detailed findings for selected interventions (i.e., policies, programs and projects).

The EGM provides a high-level map of the available rigorous evidence base on interventions addressing the root causes and drivers of irregular migration. Throughout the report, "evidence" refers to impact evaluations and systematic reviews that meet our predefined study eligibility criteria (see here for the EGM study search and selection details). The EGM shows where evidence exists and where gaps remain across intervention types and outcomes, but it does not assess whether interventions are (cost-)effective or how large their impacts may be.

The evidence summaries build on the EGM by focusing on selected intervention areas in more detail to describe what is known about how these interventions operate and, where the evidence allows, to assess their effects. For *information campaigns*, the evidence base was sufficiently robust to support a meta-analysis of intervention effects, while the remaining three summaries present a descriptive synthesis.

Readers seeking a broad overview of the evidence landscape may begin with the EGM, while those interested in findings on specific intervention types may turn directly to the evidence summaries.



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Acronyms

ALMPs	Active labor market policies
DiD	Difference-in-differences
EU	European union
EGM	Evidence gap map
FE	Fixed effects
IE	Impact evaluation
IOM	International Organization for Migration
MoU	Memorandum of understanding
SR	Systematic review

1. Introduction

Migration is widely recognized as both a fundamental human right and a central policy concern with wide-ranging implications across regions and populations. Migration decisions reflect multi-dimensional economic, social, political, environmental, and geographic factors interacting with migration governance and infrastructure, thereby making it challenging to identify how drivers shape individual migration decision-making and final outcomes. (Bertoli and Moraga 2015; de Haas et al. 2019; Kuhnt 2019).

In the case of irregular migration, this complexity is amplified by information asymmetries, uncertainty about risks and returns, and the involvement of intermediaries. Despite sustained policy attention and investment (often framed around addressing the "root causes" of irregular migration), the evidence base remains fragmented, with uneven levels of coverage (Czaika and de Haas 2013; Bertoli and Moraga 2015; Czaika and Reinprecht 2022). Previous efforts—including 3ie's first evidence gap map (EGM) on the evidence base of interventions addressing root causes of irregular migration (Berretta et al. 2023) and its 2023 active labor market policies (ALMPs) systematic review (Anda León et al. 2023) (SR)—have begun to address this gap. However, due to current global developments and new research insights, consolidated and up-to-date evidence is lacking, thereby hindering informed policy decision-making.

Given the continued expansion of migration-related research, and the ongoing policy relevance of migration management, we systematically updated and synthesized the evidence base identified in the 2023 EGM (Berretta et al. 2023) to clarify what is currently known, where evidence gaps persist, and where future research is most needed. In the EGM update, we expanded its map to include *external migration management* interventions. We conceptualized *external migration management* as part of migration infrastructure, primarily affecting migrants' access to mobility, which provides a theoretical rationale for treating it separately from the *information campaigns* intervention category.

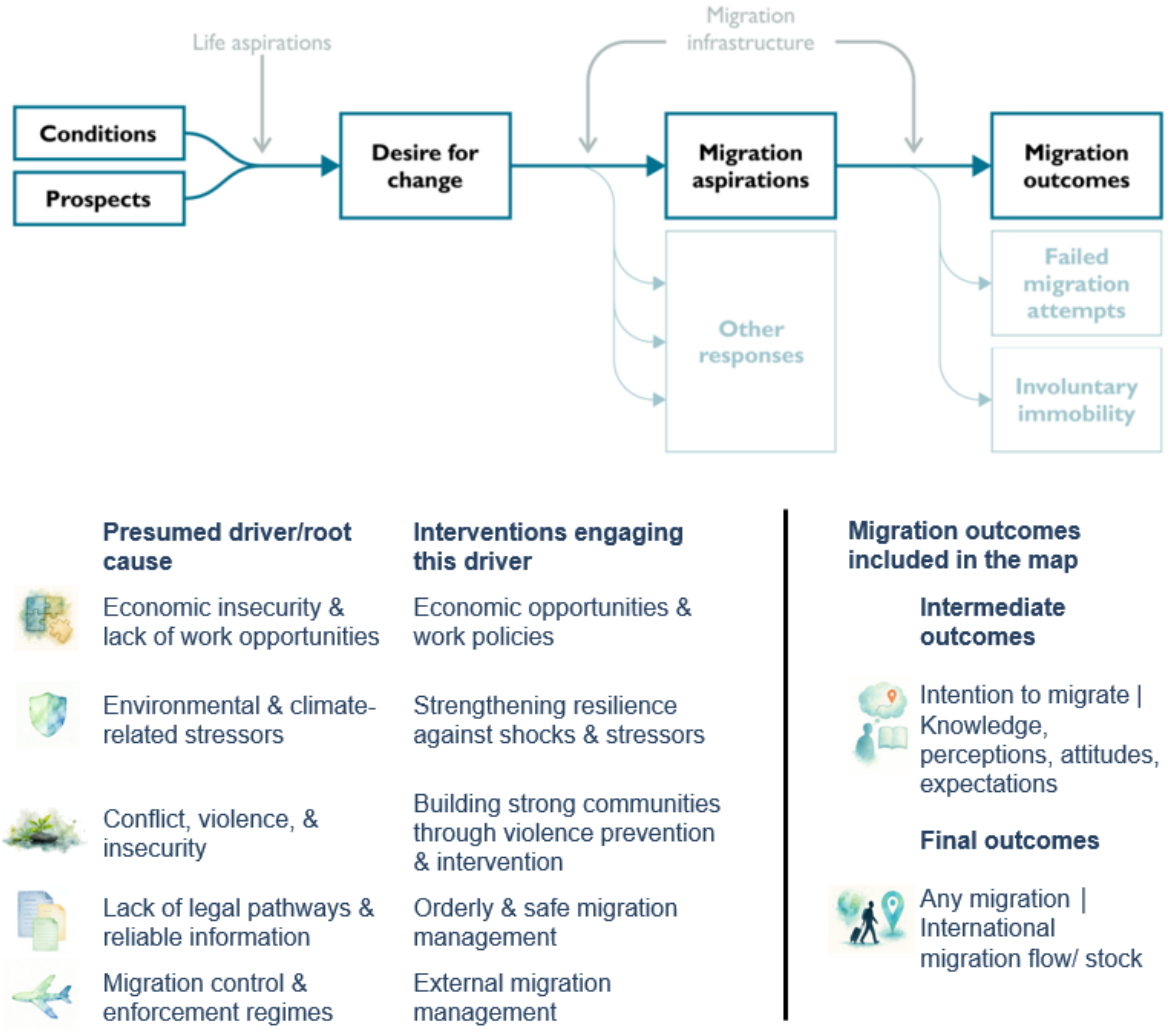
In consultation with an external Advisory Group and the Policy and Operations Evaluation Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, four intervention areas were then prioritized for evidence summaries based on the size of the evidence base and priorities of the Department: *information campaigns*, *human capital strengthening interventions*, *legal pathways*, and *external migration management*. Due to heterogeneity and small study sample sizes, only *information campaigns* could be examined through meta-analysis. The remaining three intervention areas could only support examination through narrative synthesis.

This synthesis report integrates findings from the updated EGM and the four evidence summaries to provide an overarching interpretation of the evidence base, findings, and implications for policy and future research.

This report addresses three research questions:

1. What is the scope and quality of the latest evidence on interventions aimed at reducing irregular migration, and in which areas do key evidence gaps persist?
2. What does existing research reveal about development cooperation interventions that address the root causes of irregular migration in low- and middle-income countries?
3. What does existing research reveal about how external migration management policies address irregular migration?

Figure 1: Conceptual framework and intervention-outcome framework used in the map



Note: The diagram above is adapted from Carling (2002) and Carling and Talleraas (2016). Carling and Schewel (2018) revisited this model by linking it to a capabilities approach and introducing the concept of acquiescent immobility (no aspiration and no ability), while retaining the distinction between voluntary and involuntary immobility. With respect to drivers or "root causes," the framework analytically clarifies how interventions engage with key migration drivers, while recognizing that these drivers do not operate in a simplified or deterministic manner.

While these categories are conceptually related and may overlap, the EGM applied clear, pragmatic classification boundaries for this synthesis and revisited them as needed during study screening.

The theory of change linking conditions in origin countries to migration behavior is grounded in an aspiration-capability framework of individual migration decision-making (Figure 1) (Carling 2002; Carling and Talleraas 2016; Carling and Schewel 2018). This framework conceptualizes migration behavior as a combination of individual preferences, perceptions of conditions and prospects, and access to migration infrastructure via capabilities. Individual aspirations and capabilities are shaped by broader structural and contextual conditions in origin countries.

These conditions may include economic insecurity (de Haas 2010), environmental and climate-related stressors (FAO 2021; Almulhim et al. 2024), conflict, violence, or state insecurity (Beine, Khoudour and Johannes 2021; Clemens 2021). Available migration

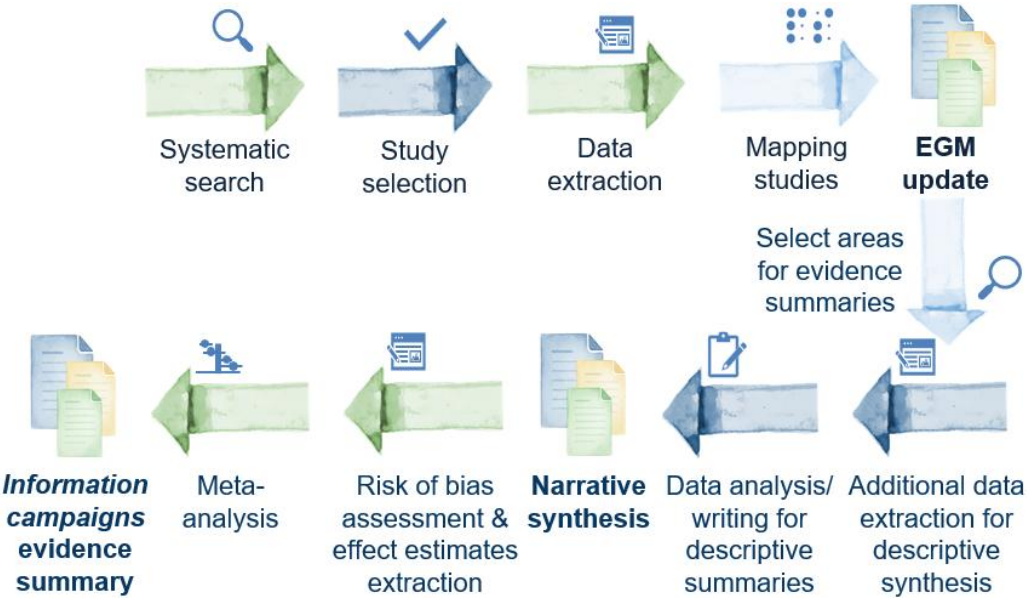
infrastructure (e.g., legal pathways, access to information, other countries' migration management policies) (Frelick, Kysel and Podkul 2016; IOM 2021; Xanthopoulou 2024) may influence whether migration occurs and how (i.e., regular or irregular). Interventions that affect local conditions or migration infrastructure may influence migration behavior by shaping aspirations (e.g., by altering perceived risks, returns, or desirability of migration) or by affecting capabilities through income, skills, networks, and access to migration opportunities (McKenzie 2017).

Changes in external factors may lead to unexpected pathways to migration, and interventions may simultaneously shape aspirations and capabilities, sometimes in distinct directions. For instance, economic and skills-based interventions may improve local conditions and reshape the need or desire to migrate. Alternatively, they may increase an individual's ability to migrate in contexts where legal pathways are limited (Clemens 2014; McKenzie 2017; Casentini, Hammond and Bakewell 2024), thus leading to migration through irregular pathways. Restrictive external migration management measures may redirect rather than reduce mobility unless accompanied by credible regular alternatives (de Haas 2007; Cummings et al. 2015). A more detailed discussion of the framework is provided in the EGM report.

1.1 Methods

The EGM used systematic methods to identify, screen, and extract data from eligible quantitative impact evaluations (IEs) and SRs identified in academic databases and grey literature sources (Figure 2). This study builds on the search strategies of the original EGM published in 2023 by incorporating additional sources and a new *external migration management* intervention group. We conducted screening and data extraction in accordance with predefined eligibility criteria and were supported by machine-learning tools and independent double screening.[1] For the evidence summaries, we extracted additional data to support narrative synthesis, and for *information campaigns*, we conducted a meta-analysis to synthesize the effectiveness of interventions.

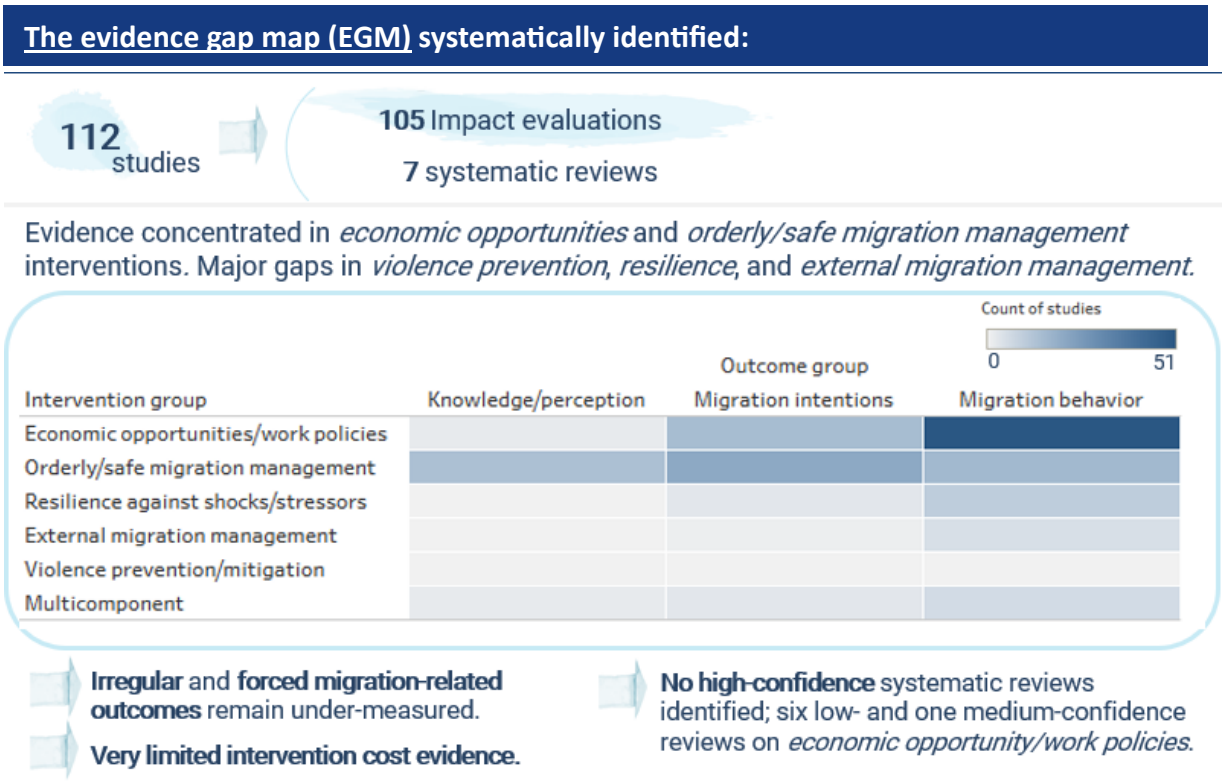
Figure 2: Simplified evidence synthesis workflow

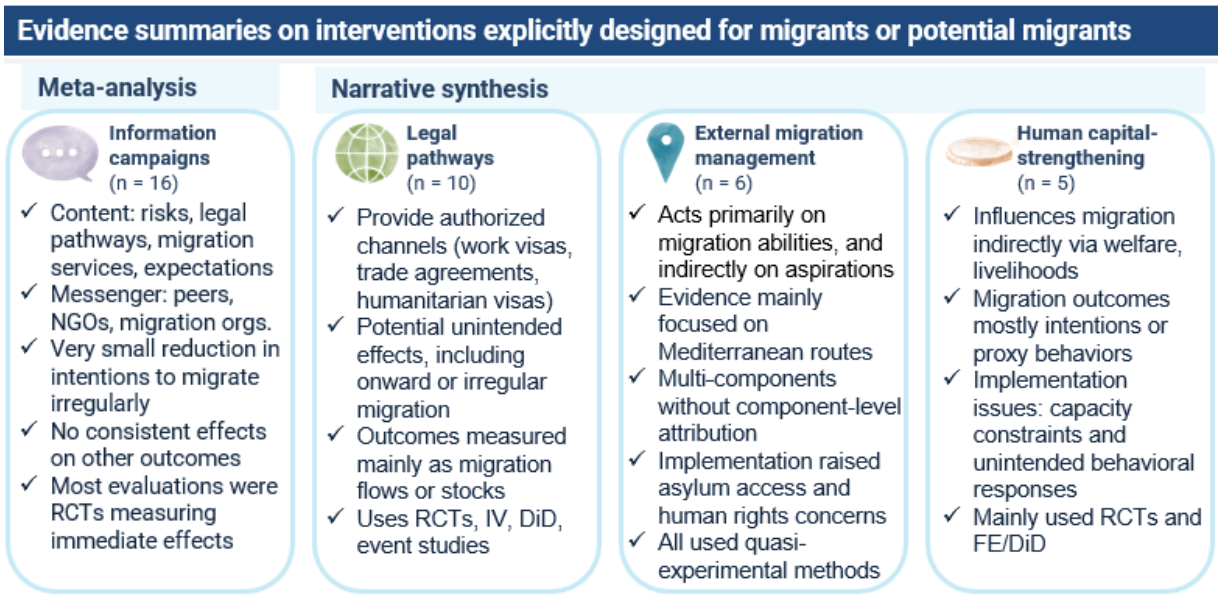


[1] For full details of the search, screening, and extraction processes, see Lee et al. (2026).

2. Findings

Figure 3: Summary of the findings and implications







Note: RCT = randomized controlled trial; DiD = difference in differences; FE = fixed effects; IV = instrumental variable. The EGM shows where evidence exists and where gaps remain, but it does not indicate whether interventions are (cost-)effective, the strength of their impacts and whether these are positive or negative, the reliability of the evidence, or how well interventions were implemented. Gaps reflect limited IEs and SRs. "Multicomponent" intervention groups refer to interventions that combine more than one group in our framework.

2.1 Section I: EGM findings

The evidence base has grown by 36 percent since the original map but remains uneven and limited in coverage and balance. Building on the original 2023 EGM which included 82 studies, this update adds 30 studies published between April 2024 and August 2025, bringing the total to 112. The updated evidence landscape showed an increase in publication volume after 2013, with a growing concentration of studies assessing interventions explicitly designed for migrants or potential migrants.

Migration-specific evaluations can provide direct evidence on mobility outcomes. While broader development evaluations offer insights into additional influencing patterns, they may not answer questions directly relevant to migration policy. Both forms of research focus provide important, policy-relevant understanding of indirect migration pathways (provided that migration is clearly theorized and appropriately measured).

There are more evidence clusters on *economic opportunities* and *information campaigns;* major gaps in *violence prevention, resilience,* and *external migration management evidence bases*; and limited evidence beyond interventions in Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America. Figure 3 shows that the evidence base is concentrated within a small number of intervention-outcome clusters. These clusters are prevalent in the *economic opportunities*/*work policies* group (which includes *human capital-strengthening* interventions and *ALMPs*) and the *orderly and safe migration management* group (which includes *information campaigns*).

Large gaps remain in *building safe communities through violence prevention and intervention*; *resilience to shocks and stressors*; and *externalization* and *remote-control* (which are not from partnerships/deals) intervention categories within the *external migration management* group. In terms of geographic coverage, studies are heavily concentrated in Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean. Few evaluations were conducted in the Middle East and North Africa or Europe and Central Asia, despite the salience of regional migration policy and the central role of the EU and other European countries as policy actors in both *external migration management* and *legal pathways* interventions.

Across the map's entire evidence base, outcome measurement remains limited in its ability to capture the diverse forms of migration. For instance, 94 out of 159 outcomes measured migration intentions or migration behavior (e.g., a binary indicator of whether any household member migrated) often without distinguishing between internal and international migration, or regular versus irregular pathways. Only seven studies explicitly reported estimates for irregular migration flows. Outcomes on knowledge, perceptions, attitudes, and expectations focused primarily on negative outcomes such as risk awareness related to irregular migration, with comparatively less measurement relating to legal options, labor rights, or regular migration pathways.

Intervention cost evidence is extremely limited. Over 80 percent of studies reported no intervention cost evidence (i.e., data on intervention budgets or actual delivery costs, intervention cost–benefit analyses, cost-effectiveness analyses, or return on investment). Where intervention cost data are available, they typically report basic budget or cost figures, rather than cost-effectiveness, cost–benefit, or return-on-investment analyses.

Existing SRs focus narrowly on economic interventions and are methodologically weak. Seven SRs included in the map focus on *economic opportunities and work policies*; six examined *human capital strengthening* interventions; and one assessed *ALMPs*. The SR evidence base had many methodological limitations that make it difficult to draw robust conclusions, with only one SR on ALMPs rated as medium confidence (Anda León et al. 2023). Anda León et al. (2023) conducted a quantitative meta-analysis of 10 studies and found no statistically significant effects of ALMPs on migration intentions, attempted migration, or migration behavior, with most included studies assessed as having a high risk of bias. The remaining six reviews, rated as low confidence, diverged from established best practices for conducting and reporting SRs of effectiveness (The Methods Group of the Campbell Collaboration 2019a, 2019b; Page et al. 2021; Higgins et al. 2024), thereby affecting the potential reliability and validity of conclusions.

2.2 Section II: Findings from the evidence summaries

2.2.1 Information campaigns

Sixteen completed IEs of *information campaigns* were included in the quantitative synthesis. These campaigns sought to provide information to potential migrants, such as messages about the risks of irregular migration (Obi 2018; Mesplé-Somps and Nilsson 2021; Tjaden and Dunsch 2021; Tjaden and Gninafon 2022; Bah et al. 2023; Dennison 2023; Hebie, Sessou, and Tjaden 2023; Battiston, Corno, and La Ferrara 2024; Morgenstern 2024; Florio 2025; Lafleur and Marfouk 2025; Wiig et al. 2025), the availability of legal pathways (Beam, McKenzie and Yang 2016; Obi 2018; Dennison 2023), expected benefits (Shrestha 2020; Battiston, Corno, and La Ferrara 2024), opportunities at home (Mesplé-Somps and Nilsson 2021; Wiig et al. 2025), or the performance of local migration intermediaries (Bazzi et al. 2022; Karell, Malik and Shah 2024). Within the aspirations–capabilities framework (Carling 2002; Carling and Talleraas 2016; Carling and Schewel 2018), these interventions are hypothesized to affect migration aspirations by influencing individual beliefs, while leaving migration capabilities and infrastructure unchanged.

The campaigns included in the analysis were geographically concentrated and the timing of implementation varied systematically by content. Ten *information campaigns* were implemented in Sub-Saharan Africa (Obi 2018; Mesplé-Somps and Nilsson 2021;

Tjaden and Dunsch 2021; Tjaden and Gninafon 2022; Bah et al. 2023; Battiston, Corno, and La Ferrara 2024; Hebie, Sessou, and Tjaden 2023; Morgenstern 2024; Lafleur and Marfouk 2025; Wiig et al. 2025), primarily in West and North Africa, and there is very limited evidence for campaigns in other regions. Twelve awareness campaigns focusing on the risks of irregular migration were implemented between 2018 and 2023 (Obi 2018; Mesplé-Somps and Nilsson 2021; Tjaden and Dunsch 2021; Tjaden and Gninafon 2022; Bah et al. 2023; Dennison 2023; Hebie, Sessou, and Tjaden 2023; Battiston, Corno, and La Ferrara 2024; Morgenstern 2024; Florio 2025; Lafleur and Marfouk 2025; Wiig et al. 2025), while the other four campaigns (addressing other topics) were implemented earlier—between 2010 and 2019 (Beam, McKenzie and Yang 2016; Shrestha 2020; Bazzi et al. 2022; Karell, Malik and Shah 2024). This pattern suggests a recent policy and research emphasis on risk-focused messaging.

The modalities for *information campaigns* vary substantially, but most evaluated interventions involve limited exposure. Most campaigns rely on single exposures, ranging from an online vignette (Lafleur and Marfouk 2025) or mobile phone text message (Karell, Malik and Shah 2024) to a community outreach event with screening and group discussion (Tjaden and Gninafon 2022). The most common delivery method is in-person group sessions, and the most frequently used channel is audiovisual material, often featuring peer or former migrant testimonials on journey risks and arrival challenges (Obi 2018; Mesplé-Somps and Nilsson 2021; Tjaden and Dunsch 2021; Tjaden and Gninafon 2022; Bah et al. 2023; Hebie, Sessou, and Tjaden 2023; Battiston, Corno, and La Ferrara 2024; Morgenstern 2024; Wiig et al. 2025).

Overall, *information campaigns* on the risks of irregular migration exhibit a very small negative effect on intentions to migrate through irregular channels (SMD = -0.04, p = .02), but studies rarely track whether changes in intentions translated into migration behavior.

There is no evidence that information campaigns affect outcomes beyond irregular migration intentions, such as steps taken to attempt migration, broader migration intentions (regular or irregular), expectations and knowledge outcomes, or perceptions of well-being. However, these findings should be viewed as exploratory due to the small number of studies included in the analyses (five or fewer, with the exception of outcomes relating to intentions and expectations).

All findings should be interpreted cautiously due to small sample sizes and potential social desirability bias in self-reported intentions. Respondents may feel inclined to report in socially acceptable ways, particularly on sensitive or illicit topics such as irregular migration. Therefore, findings on intentions to migrate through irregular channels should be interpreted as conservative.

Where sufficient studies are available, the results do not differ according to the targeted population or risk-of-bias assessment. However, the evidence base is too limited to assess how effects vary by:

- campaign pathway (e.g., risk awareness, substitution, updated beliefs),
- delivery modality (e.g., group versus individual interventions, audiovisuals versus printed material), or
- messenger or other design features.

Cost information was unavailable and qualitative evidence was infrequently used to triangulate findings. No studies reported cost or provided a cost-effectiveness analysis, thereby limiting conclusions regarding value for money. While two studies incorporated qualitative methods, they did not explicitly examine impact pathways, test underlying assumptions, or explore alternative explanations for the observed results (Obi 2018; Bazzi et al. 2022).

Finally, unintended effects are largely unexplored. One study discussed unexpected effects: an evaluation of the second phase of the IOM campaign, Migrants as Messengers (Hebie et al. 2023). Authors found an increase in intentions to migrate through irregular channels among participants in the campaign in Gambia who were exposed to activities such as testimonies and discussions with volunteers, theater, and an irregular migration movie screening, among other community-level activities.

2.2.2 External migration management

Six studies examined the effects of *external migration management* interventions on migration outcomes, including migration flows and intentions. These interventions refer to policies, programs, or projects through which destination countries work with origin or transit countries, often via bilateral or multilateral arrangements, to manage irregular migration before individuals reach their intended destination countries. Intervention types included *migration partnerships or deals* and *deterrence measures* aimed at discouraging irregular migration through intimidation and restriction of rights (de Haas et al. 2019).

***External migration management* aims to constrain mobility, and the included studies assume adaptive and heterogeneous responses.** Within the EGM framework, external migration management is understood as part of the migration infrastructure, acting primarily on migrants' ability to move (Carling 2002; Carling and Talleraas 2016; Carling and Schewel 2018). By constraining the feasibility of movement (through stricter exit controls and containment measures in third countries), these interventions are also assumed to increase the practical and perceived costs of migration and to influence risk calculations. Rather than reducing migration aspirations, the studies assumed that such interventions could instead reshape routes, channels, and timing of movement, as migrants and intermediaries adapt to restrictions (Rodríguez et al. 2023; Mesnard et al. 2024; Blair and Solodoch 2025; Tafani and Riccaboni 2025; Zambiasi and Albarosa 2025).

Short-term increases in migration attempts are also assumed to occur following policy announcements but before full enforcement (Blair and Solodoch 2025). Heterogeneous responses are likely across migrant groups. For instance, forced migrants are assumed to be less responsive to mobility constraints (Mesnard et al. 2024), while economic migrants and (non-forced) migrants from more distant origins exhibit greater flexibility through route diversion (Tafani and Riccaboni 2025), timing adjustments, or onward migration. Circular South–South migrants are theorized to be affected when interventions unintentionally undermine economic viability, labor-market access, or the feasibility of return or settlement in transit contexts (Czaika and de Haas 2017; Blair and Solodoch 2025; Zambiasi and Albarosa 2025).

Studies mainly focused on *migration partnerships/deals* that target the Central or Eastern Mediterranean routes, and assessed diversion effects toward other routes (Rodríguez et al. 2023; Mesnard et al. 2024; Blair and Solodoch 2025; Tafani and Riccaboni

2025; Zambiasi and Albarosa 2025), with limited component-level and cost evidence (Czaika and de Haas 2017; Rodríguez et al. 2023; Mesnard et al. 2024; Blair and Solodoch 2025; Tafani and Riccaboni 2025; Zambiasi and Albarosa 2025). Three studies directly measured diversion effects, including diversion from the Eastern to the Central Mediterranean (Mesnard et al. 2024; Tafani and Riccaboni 2025), and from the Central to the Western Mediterranean (Zambiasi and Albarosa 2025).

One study identified broader route and destination substitution toward alternative North-bound routes without consistently specifying individual corridors (Blair and Solodoch 2025). Other studies assessed intra-route effects in the Central Mediterranean only (Rodríguez et al. 2023), or migration inflow and outflow (Czaika and de Haas 2017). Most studies assessed multicomponent intervention packages, with limited evidence on costs or the effects of individual components (Rodríguez et al. 2023; Mesnard et al. 2024; Blair and Solodoch 2025; Tafani and Riccaboni 2025; Zambiasi and Albarosa 2025).

Most of the studies assessing *migration partnerships/deals* used route-based units observed over time and focused on short- to medium-term effects (i.e., 1–3 years) (Mesnard et al. 2024; Blair and Solodoch 2025; Tafani and Riccaboni 2025; Zambiasi and Albarosa 2025), whereas other *deterrence*-oriented interventions relied on country-dyad or aggregate time-series data and examined either short-term effects (one year, as in Operazione Mare Nostrum) (Rodríguez et al. 2023) or long-term dynamics (over decades, as in the case of visa restrictions) (Czaika and de Haas 2017).

Reported implementation practices include restricted asylum access and governance concerns. Where implementation practices were described, studies reported de facto restrictions on access to asylum under the EU–Turkey Statement (Mesnard et al. 2024), as well as weak governance and human rights violations, including abusive detention conditions, in the Italy–Libya Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) context (Blair and Solodoch 2025; Zambiasi and Albarosa 2025).

Studies used innovative quasi-experimental methods while facing persistent data and design constraints. With respect to research practices, studies employed innovative quasi-experimental methods, including matrix completion estimators (Tafani and Riccaboni 2025), spatial difference-in-differences (Zambiasi and Albarosa 2025), and synthetic control approaches (Blair and Solodoch 2025). However, they faced common design limitations, including reliance on detection-based data, such as Frontex (Mesnard et al. 2024; Zambiasi and Albarosa 2025), and limited linkages between changes in migration intentions and observed migration behavior (Blair and Solodoch 2025). These limitations may reflect structural, ethical, or political constraints inherent to evaluating real-world *external migration management* interventions, rather than gaps arising from study designs alone.

Studies of *migration partnerships/deals* consistently show route deflection rather than deterrence. The EU–Turkey Statement primarily blocked likely refugees while deflecting likely irregular migrants to alternative routes, primarily the Central Mediterranean (Mesnard et al. 2024), within the first post-intervention year. Another evaluation also documented short-term route diversions of irregular migrants following the Statement (Tafani and Riccaboni 2025). Similarly, the Italy–Libya MoU diverted irregular migration flows from the Central to the Western Mediterranean (Zambiasi and Albarosa 2025). One evaluation noted a short-term reduction in irregular migration flows in the Central Mediterranean within

the first one to two years post-implementation of the MoU, while cautioning against interpreting this as policy success given the severe human-rights costs and unaddressed structural drivers (Rodríguez et al. 2023). In a mixed population of labor and forced migrants in Libya, the MoU also increased intentions to move onward to Italy, with the strongest effects found among more vulnerable subgroups (Blair and Solodoch 2025).

Other *deterrence*-oriented interventions show mixed effects. The Operazione Mare Nostrum showed no evidence of an effect on irregular migration flows along the Central Mediterranean route (Rodríguez et al. 2023), while visa restrictions reduced both regular migration inflows and outflows, decreasing responsiveness to labor-market conditions over the medium-to-long term (Czaika and de Haas 2017).

2.2.3 Human capital strengthening

Of the 28 completed IEs that examine the effects of *human capital strengthening* interventions, we focused on five that explicitly target (potential) migrants to provide more direct insight into migration pathways (Aker 2013; Bechara Bitar 2019; Özler et al. 2021; Ahrens et al. 2024; Gamito 2025). This approach reflects a conclusion from the prior synthesis: studies that view migration as only a secondary outcome are often underpowered and weakly informative for migration policy decision-making. In this summary, *human capital strengthening* interventions refer to policies, programs, or projects aimed at improving individuals' human capital, well-being, or basic security needs (such as cash transfer and voucher interventions).

***Human capital strengthening* interventions are assumed to influence migration indirectly through aspirations and capabilities, with heterogeneous effects across migrant groups.** Within the framework used in the EGM (Carling 2002; Carling and Talleraas 2016; Carling and Schewel 2018), these interventions are theorized to affect migration primarily by shaping individuals' welfare, livelihood prospects, and security conditions, thereby influencing both migration aspirations and capabilities. By improving income security, skills, access to basic services, or protection, such interventions are theorized to affect migration indirectly, either by reshaping the desire for change, or by increasing individuals' capacity to act on pre-existing migration aspirations (Carling 2002; Carling and Talleraas 2016; Carling and Schewel 2018), both depending on the individual's reference point (see Migration Hump Theory; Martin and Taylor 1996).

Underlying assumptions of the interventions differed across migrant populations, reflecting distinct migration contexts and decision constraints. For crisis-affected and forcibly displaced populations, migration is assumed to be a distress-driven coping response, such that improvements in basic needs may reduce involuntary or premature mobility (Aker 2013; Özler et al. 2021; Ahrens et al. 2024). Among deported migrants, migration is conceptualized as a response to post-return insecurity, with social protection interventions assumed to lower incentives to re-migrate (Bechara Bitar 2019). For non-forced (potential) economic migrants, only one study is identified, and it did not specify a single directional assumption. Instead, it frames improvements in skills, income, or well-being as potentially either substituting for migration or expanding individuals' capabilities to migrate (Gamito 2025).

The studies were concentrated on forced and crisis-affected populations in Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America. Of the five analyzed studies, three focused on forced

or crisis-affected populations arising from nationwide conditions (e.g., national conflict/war), in which migration outcomes are measured as part of broader coping strategies (Aker 2013; Özler et al. 2021; Ahrens et al. 2024). The evaluated interventions employed robust causal designs: two studies used randomized controlled trials (one evaluating a cash or voucher transfer and one a voucher only); two used fixed effects/difference-in-differences or matching to evaluate cash transfers; and one used fixed effects/difference-in-differences to assess a health insurance intervention (Aker 2013; Bechara Bitar 2019; Özler et al. 2021; Ahrens et al. 2024; Gamito 2025).

Only one study used mixed methods to explore the mechanisms underlying quantitative findings (Aker 2013). Evidence on costs is very limited: only one study (assessing a voucher arm within a broader vocational training program) reported a program-level cost–benefit analysis. Despite large employment and income gains, the program's very high per-participant cost resulted in poor value for money (benefit-cost ratio = 0.4; return on investment = −59.9%) (Gamito 2025).

Migration outcomes are largely focused on intentions and proxy measures, with limited evidence on realized migration, and no distinction between regular and irregular migration intentions. The studies operationalized migration outcomes as intentions (e.g., intentions to emigrate or re-migrate) or as proxy behaviors embedded within coping-strategy indices. Although the studies employed robust causal designs, migration indicators were rarely disaggregated by destination or duration, limiting the interpretability of migration pathways. The studies generally did not provide evidence on longer-term outcomes and did not distinguish between regular and irregular migration (Aker 2013; Bechara Bitar 2019; Özler et al. 2021; Ahrens et al. 2024; Gamito 2025).

Individual study findings showed migration responses consistent with the interventions' intended objectives, but these were largely based on short-term measures. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, households receiving cash transfers were more likely than those receiving vouchers to report sending a member away as a short-term coping strategy (Aker 2013).

In Peru, cash transfers increased intentions to emigrate three months after receipt. This was interpreted as liquidity relief enabling longer-term migration plans (e.g., return to Venezuela or onward migration), given simultaneous improvements in economic, social, and navigational integration outcomes (Ahrens et al. 2024). In Türkiye, beneficiaries of the Emergency Social Safety Net were less likely to have members return to the country of origin (primarily Syria) (Özler et al. 2021), consistent with the program's stabilization objective.

In Mexico, deported migrants eligible for Seguro Popular health insurance were significantly less likely to report an intention to re-migrate in the short term; this was interpreted as a reduction in the need to re-migrate as a coping or survival strategy (Bechara Bitar 2019). The GOT program in Guinea-Bissau, which includes a vocational training voucher arm, significantly reduced young men's intention to emigrate within the next 12 months (Gamito 2025).

2.2.4 Legal pathways

This summary descriptively synthesizes ten completed IEs assessing the effects of *legal pathway* interventions on migration. The included interventions are classified into **three types**: temporary work visas (4 studies; Abarcar and Theoharides 2024; Gaikwad, Hanson and Tóth 2019; Mobarak et al. 2023; Naidu, Nyarko and Wang 2023), visa provisions as part of labor and trade agreements (4 studies; O'Steen 2021; Dincă 2023; Adhikari et al. 2024; Levelu, Mayda and Orefice 2025), and other legal pathways interventions (2 studies; Dalla Pellegrina, Saraceno and Suardi 2018; Freier and Holloway 2019).

All three types of intervention provide authorized migration pathways for migrants into a host country. *Legal pathways* are assumed to simultaneously affect migrants' aspirations and capabilities to migrate (Carling 2002; Carling and Talleraas 2016; Carling and Schewel 2018). Host countries implement *legal pathways* for a wide range of visas (temporary, seasonal, sector, work-based, long-term, or humanitarian). In the process, governments aim to attract migrants. Depending on the requirements attached to the visa, *legal pathways* interventions can rapidly generate a substantial inflow of migrants who meet the requirements established for the delivered visa or the offered incentives (ILO 2015). For example, the West German government issued work visas to Turkish workers in 1961, resulting in an influx of 650,000 people over 15 years (Mobarak et al. 2023).

***Legal pathways* are assumed to affect the types and flows of migration by removing many physical and financial constraints.** They are theorized to be a substitute for irregular migration pathways and to eliminate associated risks and costs (such as loss of life and reliance on smuggling networks) (Kar 2016). The costs of regular migration are likewise assumed to substantially decrease through improved access to migration opportunities (ILO 2015, 2016; Mobarak et al. 2023). In the absence of *legal pathways*, regular migration is conceptualized as requiring extensive documentation and intermediation services, which are often costly and difficult to access (ILO 2015, 2016).

Legal pathways are not assumed to eliminate the complexity of migration; rather, they are thought to simplify and formalize these processes to benefit migrants as well as destination countries. Although *legal pathways* are typically driven by national economic motives, such as addressing labor shortages or promoting greater economic activity, formalizing migration pathways and reducing the costs associated with regular migration are assumed to reshape irregular migration.

The drivers or "root causes" of migration are theorized to moderate the magnitude of the effects of *legal pathways* interventions on migration (Carling 2002; Carling and Talleraas 2016; Carling and Schewel 2018). For example, **work visas** granted by a high-income country to individuals in a low- or middle-income country are expected to result in far greater migration flows than visas issued in the opposite direction (Levelu, Mayda and Orefice 2025). Similarly, socioeconomic status, environmental and climate-related stressors, as well as conflict, violence, and insecurity are conceptualized as moderating factors shaping how *legal pathways* influence migration decisions. Awareness of and access to such pathways are also assumed to be critical determinants of their migration impacts (Gibson and McKenzie 2010; Clemens and Postel 2017; Gaikwad, Hanson and Tóth 2019).

All four temporary work visa interventions aim to facilitate South–North labor migration (specifically Asian labor migration) to high-income countries. Their analyses

focused on the individual level (Abarcar and Theoharides 2024; Gaikwad, Hanson and Tóth 2019; Mobarak et al. 2023; Naidu, Nyarko and Wang 2023). In contrast, the studies examining the four **visa provisions** as part of labor and trade agreements on migration assessed the effects at the regional level (the EU Schengen area) (Dincă 2023) and all regional trade agreements (Levelu, Mayda and Orefice 2025) or a global level (O'Steen 2021; Adhikari et al. 2024). The remaining two studies examined other *legal pathways* interventions, including universal visa freedom in Ecuador (Dalla Pellegrina, Saraceno and Suardi 2018) and emergency refugee support in Italy (Freier and Holloway 2019).

The length of interventions analyzed in the included studies varies considerably across types of *legal pathways* interventions. This difference arises from the nature of the interventions: temporary work visas are typically terminated after a few years; in contrast, labor and trade agreements are designed to create lasting labor connections between two countries and do not focus on specific sectors, allowing for a richer dataset when analyzing these agreements over time. As a result, the studies on temporary work visas are much shorter (fewer than five years on average) than those on labor and trade agreements (almost 28 years on average). The two studies on other *legal pathways* interventions focused on very short-term interventions: a 2018 report examined 11 months of Emergenza Nord Africa's emergency refugee support (spanning January 1–November 21, 2012) (Freier and Holloway 2019); and a 2019 study evaluated the effects of Ecuador's 90-day universal visa policy (the Open Doors intervention) from 2007 to 2010 (Dalla Pellegrina, Saraceno and Suardi 2018).

Across all ten IEs, migration outcomes are measured as either migration flows (six studies; Dalla Pellegrina, Saraceno and Suardi 2018; Freier and Holloway 2019; Abarcar and Theoharides 2024; Gaikwad, Hanson and Tóth 2019; Mobarak et al. 2023; Naidu, Nyarko and Wang 2023) **or migration stocks in host countries** (four studies; Dincă 2023; O'Steen 2021; Adhikari et al. 2024; Levelu, Mayda and Orefice 2025), **with outcome measures adapted to the specific policy and context.** Two studies on temporary work visas examined heterogeneity in effects, including differences in the share of skilled versus unskilled migration in host countries by origin country (Levelu, Mayda and Orefice 2025) and variation across countries' income groups (Adhikari et al. 2024).

All but one study examining temporary work visa interventions employed randomized controlled trials (four studies), with one study using an event-study design (Abarcar and Theoharides 2024). Studies assessing labor and trade agreements and other *legal pathways* interventions relied on quasi-experimental designs, most commonly difference-in-differences approaches (five studies) or event-study methods (Adhikari et al. 2024). Only two studies estimated migrants' costs and benefits following the *legal pathways* intervention (Gaikwad, Hanson and Tóth 2019; Naidu, Nyarko and Wang 2023).

The included studies provide informative context-specific effects of *legal pathways* interventions. For example, the American Competitiveness in the 21st Century Act of 2000 led to a substantial and statistically significant increase in the rate of migration to the US among Filipino nurses (Abarcar and Theoharides 2024). This temporary work visa successfully addressed the country's nursing shortages, and ended in 2007.

Similarly, the Government-to-Government Program sought to attract Bangladeshi migrants to Malaysia and meet demands for low-skilled manual work. An analysis found that access to this program increased the likelihood of workers migrating to Malaysia, and the effect was

statistically significant (Mobarak et al. 2023). The extension of the EU Schengen area to Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia (an example of a labor and trade agreement) facilitated cross-border movement of workers to Western Europe. Following this agreement, workers from these three countries were more likely to be living in a different country than citizens of countries that did not belong to the Schengen area (Romania and Bulgaria) (Dincă 2023). Finally, Ecuador's Open Doors policy eliminated entry requirements and allowed citizens of any nationality to enter the country without a pre-arranged visa for a period of 90 days. This resulted in a statistically significant and large increase in the number of entrants into Ecuador (Freier and Holloway 2019).

3. Implications

3.1 Implications for policymakers

- Invest in strengthening the migration data ecosystem, both in-house (e.g., improved data systems within governments) and through externally led fundamental and policy-relevant research. This can be achieved through long-term data collection, better linkages across administrative and survey data sources, and improved measurement of realized mobility. This can support more reliable evidence for policy decisions.
- Expect adaptive behavior, not simple deterrence. For instance, *external migration management* interventions tend to reshape routes, timing, and channels of movement by imposing additional constraints, often producing displacement, short-term surges, or heightened risks rather than uniform reductions in irregular migration.
- Avoid one-size-fits-all approaches across migrant groups and contexts. Migration responses are theorized to differ across migrant types and contexts, such as migrants from more distant origins, circular South–South migrants, and non-forced potential economic migrants.
- Embed data systems and evaluation planning at the policy design stage, especially for large-scale migration management and development policies; these can substantially improve the evidence available for future decisions.
- Future migration-related interventions should routinely collect and report basic cost and cost-effectiveness data to support evidence-informed decision-making. Cost information is largely missing from the evidence, but is essential for informing the effective use of constrained public resources.
- Safeguards, accountability mechanisms, and human rights monitoring should be embedded in the design and implementation of *external migration management* interventions, as observed effects may otherwise cause harm to migrants rather than delivering safe and sustainable solutions as intended.
- *Information campaigns* should be aligned with realistic expectations. They may have a minimal effect on intentions to migrate through irregular channels, but should not be expected to produce more distal outcomes, such as migration flows.

3.2 Implications for future research

- Design evaluations to explicitly test migration mechanisms. For instance, research on the effects of *human capital strengthening* interventions on migration outcomes can benefit from clearer migration pathways that distinguish between competing mechanisms (e.g., changes in aspirations versus increases in capability).

- Go beyond self-reported intentions to observe behavior. Future evaluations should track whether and when changes in intentions translate into real migration decisions.
- For *external migration management* interventions, future research should examine wider arrangements, such as the EU–Morocco mobility partnership, and the Spain–Senegal and Mauritania agreements.
- Assess impacts over longer time horizons. Migration decisions often unfold over extended periods, as aspirations evolve and capabilities accumulate. Short follow-up windows are therefore unlikely to capture whether and how interventions translate into realized migration behavior. Future evaluations should incorporate medium- and long-term follow-up, even when migration events are infrequent, to better understand delayed, cumulative, or indirect effects.
- Take advantage of policy changes outside the control of researchers to identify an adequate counterfactual group, as such changes can create natural experiment settings. Engaging with a local government at the start of the project can allow for random assignment of the migration intervention.
- Complement quantitative IEs with qualitative evidence. Beyond triangulating results, qualitative and mixed-methods research can help to explain why interventions do or do not work, validate assumptions that sustain the theory of change, and identify contextual factors that shape findings.

Limitations of the updated EGM and evidence summaries

The updated EGM includes studies on *external migration management* interventions only when the interventions were implemented in, or directly relevant to, countries in the Middle East and North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Türkiye. Studies outside this geographic scope were excluded only for this intervention domain. We also recognize the importance of other intervention areas not covered in this EGM due to time and resource constraints, including interventions addressing weak justice systems, corruption, political instability, and low trust in government—factors that can influence life aspirations and incentives for irregular migration. Their exclusion reflects scope limitations rather than a lack of relevance, and future updates could incorporate these domains as resources allow.

Although expert feedback informed the intervention–outcome framework, some conceptual overlap remains across categories (e.g., deterrence, externalization). To address this, studies were assigned to a single primary category using consistent coding rules; however, future updates may further refine these classifications.

The studies included in the *external migration management, human capital strengthening,* and *legal pathways* evidence summaries were unable to address questions related to the effects of interventions on irregular migration outcomes, due to data availability and heterogeneity. The summaries are also limited by the nature of data on irregular migration, which is difficult to capture. Finally, the studies included in the summaries often lack details about costs or value for money; therefore we could not analyze the cost effectiveness of these interventions.

Quantitative synthesis and heterogeneity analysis of the effects of *information campaigns* were constrained by limited statistical power. Results for outcomes with five or fewer studies should be considered exploratory in nature rather than conclusive, and interpreted with caution.

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