Inside the 'efficacy gap': migration policy and the dynamics of encounter
[*accepted version*]

Jessica Hagen-Zanker[1] and **Richard Mallett**[2]

[1] Overseas Development Institute; Peace Research Institute Oslo

[2] London School of Economics; Overseas Development Institute

Abstract

In recent years, migration has become an important policy priority within and beyond the European Union. While the discourse that surrounds the contemporary migration policy agenda is one of technocratic migration management, this overarching narrative conceals an underlying goal of prevention. Preventive efforts are increasingly geared towards stopping migratory movements before they have even begun. The effectiveness of such an approach remains contested and unclear. This article builds on the theoretical work of Czaika and de Haas (2013) to explore the limits of prevention strategies designed to change minds, alter plans and redirect behaviours. It does so by drawing on insights from our own research into migration decision making, alongside wider literature on individual sense-making, and connecting these to ongoing debates around policy effectiveness. In so doing, we show how the nature of localised encounters between 'target' populations and implemented policies can create potential sources of policy failure.

INTRODUCTION

Migration is one of today's most visible policy agendas. Across Europe, increasingly hostile and polarised political environments have culminated in a marked and quite generalised shift towards a more restrictive regime of migration policy, at least with respect to refugees and other migrants coming from the global South. Particularly since the contentiously named 'migration crisis' of 2015, there has been a creeping institutionalisation of containment strategy in the way that migration to Europe is governed, further entrenching and normalising measures that seek to prevent specific populations from accessing the continent (Landau, 2019).

Take, for example, the European Commission's New Pact on Migration and Asylum. While this Pact features a 'pillar' on legal migration in order to attract 'skills and talent', there is in fact a far heavier focus on the need for robust management of Europe's external borders through greater restrictions on access and the creation of disincentives to travel. The relative weighting of these priorities is clearly visible in the allocation of bi- and multi-lateral funding. To date, more than three-quarters of the European Union's €4.5 billion Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) – a major initiative launched in 2015 to help address the 'root causes' of African migration to Europe (EU, 2019) – has been spent on forms of 'development cooperation' and 'migration governance'[i]. Meanwhile, less than 1.5% has been used to improve and expand regular migration pathways between Africa and Europe (Raty and Shilahv, 2020).

Though the discourse that surrounds many of these policies is one of technocratic migration management – using funds, initiatives and partnerships to create safer, better regulated and more orderly South-to-North migration practices – this overarching narrative obscures other goals that are often underlying such an approach. That is, to prevent irregular or unauthorised migration to Europe before it has even begun (Bakewell, 2008; Collyer, 2020). This move towards *ex ante* prevention is part of the broader externalisation of European migration control we have been witnessing over recent years, in which strategies to 'protect borders' are increasingly implemented beyond rather than within European space. Of particular note is a series of policy measures designed to deter and dissuade (potential) migrants from setting off in the first place (Carling and Hernandez-Carretero, 2011), for example through anti-migration information campaigns, pre-border patrols or employment creation and livelihood programming in 'countries of origin' – all of which attempt to steer people's decision making towards more sedentarist ends. These measures are in addition to the more 'traditional control-oriented' methods of bodily apprehension and repatriation (ibid.: 46), which nonetheless continue to feature strongly in today's hostile migration policy environments.

However, despite recent increases in both attention and investment, the effectiveness of such an approach to migration management remains unclear and contested. On the one hand, migration scholars have long talked of the 'control gap' that is understood to systematically separate the objectives of migration policy from its outcomes, suggesting that the effective regulation of migration processes simply lies beyond the capacity of nation states and supranational unions (Cornelius et al., 1994). A body of evidence supports this proposition, highlighting the marginal role of migration policy relative to more structural factors such as global South-North inequalities, labour market imbalances and opportunities, violent conflicts and historical ties (Castles, 2004; Lyberaki et al., 2008; Thielemann, 2014;

Wiklund, 2012), alongside the social processes that drive migration, including chain migration, networks and migrant agency (Castles, 2004). Some literature on this issue also points to both the 'substitution effects' that tend to accompany newly introduced restrictive measures, such as when new visa restrictions reduce circular and return migration (Czaika and de Haas, 2016), as well as the role of development policies and programming designed to tackle the 'root causes' of South-North migration flows, which can lead to an increase in migration flows instead of the intended decrease (OECD, 2017). On the whole, this body of evidence casts doubt on a potential causal relationship between migration policy and migration flows.

At the same time, there are some who argue that too much has been made of the control gap proposition (Bonjour, 2011). While it certainly appears that migration policies may not always steer people's decisions and movements in precisely the way intended, it is also not the case that they are incapable of producing desirable effects from a policy making perspective. There is mounting evidence, for example, that preventive migration policies serve a vital political function in liberal democratic states, responding more to domestic political priorities and populist pressures than anything else (Balfour et al., 2016; Boswell, 2011). When seen this way, effectiveness may be more about doing well politically at home through the construction of narratives and performative activity than having any meaningful or predictable effect on migration outcomes.

The work of Czaika and de Haas (2013) offers one productive way of navigating these murky waters of the control / effectiveness debate, suggesting that what is really needed is greater clarity about what constitutes effectiveness in the first place. Their starting point is that a given migration policy does not take a single and immutable form, but rather transforms as it moves through its lifecycle. What this means is that legislated policy can often look very different to the public policy discourse that led to its creation, and that implemented policy can bear even less resemblance. Clarity about the 'level' at which a particular policy is being evaluated – public discourse, legislation, implementation – is therefore essential.

In this article, we build on Czaika and de Haas' valuable work to offer additional insights into the 'control gap' debate and contemporary discussions about the effectiveness of migration policy. In particular, we connect their work to the expanding literature on migration decision making to explore what happens *after* migration policies have been implemented. Drawing on both our own recent research as well as empirical insights from the wider literature, we show how the highly individualised dynamics of encounter between policies and 'target' or 'end user' populations can further extend the distance between objectives and outcomes, in the process disrupting a potential causal link between migration policy and flows. This in turn suggests there are important 'downstream' factors in the policy process that must also be considered as part of ongoing debates around control gaps and policy effectiveness.

The central argument we make in this paper – that in order to better understand the limits and possibilities of certain migration policies, their downstream interactions with local populations must be taken into account – is developed over the following four sections. We first provide more theoretical background by fleshing out the specific contribution of Czaika and de Haas (2013) to the 'control gap' debate and showing how it can be usefully integrated with the literature on migration decision making. Next, we briefly introduce two of our own empirical studies into migration decision making, which together have directly shaped our

understanding of the limits and possibilities of migration policy. In the proceeding section we use empirical insights from those two studies, alongside selected contributions from the wider decision making literature, to work towards a more fine-grained understanding of migration policy in/effectiveness. We then provide some brief remarks about the dynamic nature of migration decision making, before concluding with a recap of our contribution to the literature.

APPROACHING MIGRATION POLICY IN/EFFECTIVENESS

Nearly a decade ago, Mathias Czaika and Hein de Haas (2013) set out to solve a paradox within migration studies at the time: how to 'explain the fact that even though [immigration] policies have significant effects on immigration, they are nonetheless often perceived as ineffective' (Czaika and de Haas, 2013: 488). To a large extent, they went on to argue, this paradox can be explained by inconsistency among researchers and analysts vis-à-vis the benchmarks of evaluation, with assessments of effectiveness potentially turning out very differently depending on whether a policy is judged against: the public discourse surrounding its formation; its explicit or implicit objectives as laid out on paper; or the actual implementation of that policy in practice. Because differences tend to exist between each of the aforementioned 'levels', the evaluative benchmark is essentially raised or lowered depending on the starting point taken.

To illustrate this, the authors elaborate a framework that can be used to help assess migration policy effectiveness (see Figure 1). It is based on a useful disaggregation of the policy process, highlighting the multiple routes through which publicly stated objectives filter down into concrete outcomes concerning the direction, volume, composition and timing of migration flows, in the process creating three types of policy gap. First is the 'discursive gap', which references the discrepancy between publicly stated policy rhetoric and policy as it is actually laid out on paper. While politicians may act tough in their public discourses and make sweeping statements about the need for stricter border controls, the resulting policies themselves are often much more nuanced, specific and varied (see also Castles, 2004). An 'implementation gap' then follows, which captures the disparity between a policy as it is laid out on paper and the concrete implementation of that policy. Factors such as limited financial and human resources, inadequate enforcement capacity, organisational constraints, interest and incentive structures within 'street level bureaucracies', and communication breakdowns help explain why policies may not always be (fully) implemented. Finally, there is the 'efficacy gap'. This sits between policy implementation and policy outcomes, and therefore captures the discrepancy, which may occur for a number of reasons, between intended effects on the one hand and observed or actual effects on the other.

Insert Figure 1 here

By disaggregating the policy lifecycle into a series of levels and gaps, Czaika and de Haas' framework provides a promising and useful starting point to think about the effects and effectiveness of migration policy. In addition to helping us better understand the paradox of why assessments of migration policy are so often contested, what these levels and gaps also capture are crucial transformations in the way that policies typically filter down to their intended 'target' or 'end user', mutating and reconfiguring in the process (Peck, 2011).

Understanding what these incremental mutations look like and how they occur is key to explaining why some policies do worse than others in practice. This is an important contribution of the framework, demonstrating, for example, how constraints on bureaucratic state capacity, especially at the sub-national and 'street' levels, may lead to a further watering down or reconfiguration in terms of what actually gets implemented (Massey, 1999, in Czaika and de Haas, 2013: 496). But it is in the most downstream parts of the framework, in the space between implementation and outcomes, that things start to become more opaque. Though the authors point out that policy failure can occur within this 'efficacy gap' as a result of either 'structural determinants in origin and destination countries' or 'internal dynamics of migration networks and systems' (Czaika and de Haas, 2013: 497), there is not much else to it. What we are essentially left with is a bit of a black box.

This is where wider literature on the social dynamics of migration comes in. In his seminal work on 'why migration policies fail', Castles (2004) encourages us to see migration as a fundamentally social process and stresses the importance of bringing migrant agency into analytical view. As he explains, 'migrants are not just isolated individuals who react to market stimuli and bureaucratic rules, but social beings who seek to achieve better outcomes for themselves, their families and their communities through actively shaping the migratory process' (Castles, 2004: 209). The central point here is that, in addition to states, structures and systems, migrants themselves are involved in co-determining migration outcomes, including the kinds of effects that migration policies may or may not generate.

By seeing migration as a social process, the fuzzy contents of the framework's black box start to reveal themselves more clearly: it is not just implementing agencies or abstract high-level forces that explain policy failure, but the plans, deliberations and actions of people on the ground (and on the move) hoping to achieve 'better outcomes' in life. Through its focus on the complex dynamics and interactions that occur when people encounter policies, research into migration decision making is well placed to enrich our understanding of these 'downstream' processes. Alongside other possible sources of failure already established within the framework, we suggest that by incorporating insights from this particular sub-field of the literature, it becomes possible to further unpack the efficacy gap – and to reach a more fine-grained understanding of why, how and when policy failure might occur.

EMPIRICAL DATA AND METHODS

Our analysis, critique and proposed reformulation of Czaika and de Haas' (2013) 'efficacy gap' is primarily based on two qualitative studies into migration decision making. In the first, we explored the nature of and motivations behind people's journeys to Europe at a time when talk of the 'migration crisis' was hitting the headlines, with a particular interest in probing the role that European policies may or may not have played in the decisions of recent arrivals to the continent (Hagen-Zanker and Mallett, 2016). In-depth semi-structured interviews were carried out by the two authors in the summer of 2015 in three countries (Germany, Spain and the UK) covering individuals from three different countries of origin: Eritrea, Senegal and Syria. These groups were initially selected in order to: i) capture some of the major flows reaching Europe at the time (Syrians constituted 50.2% of all irregular arrivals in 2015, whilst Eritreans constituted 4.2% [IOM 2016]) and; ii) sample different migration groups, ranging from asylum seekers and those fleeing violence, conflict and repression (Eritreans, Syrians)

to those who are considered to have mainly economic motivations for emigration (Senegalese).[ii] While many of those we interviewed were either undocumented or in the process of applying for asylum, this approach allowed us to analyse themes across a mixture of different trajectories and types of flow.

In each of the urban research sites – Berlin, London, Madrid and Manchester – interviews were conducted in safe locations, either in English or with interpreters. In addition to two focus group discussions with Syrian men and women, we conducted a total of 52 detailed interviews: 15 with Eritreans, 10 with Senegalese and 27 with Syrians. Within the sample were 18 women and 13 individuals who had travelled with children. Our discussions focused on different stages of the journeys people had made and the dynamics surrounding key decision points along the way. During interviews, we probed lightly in ways that might elicit comments about the role of policy, asking questions such as 'Why country X', 'What did you know about country X at this stage?', and 'How did country X compare to others?'. To minimise the potential for bias linked to leading questions, we avoided asking directly about specific policies.

In the second study, and partly in response to valuable feedback we received on the first, we sought to explore similar issues at an 'earlier' stage of the migration process, before people had yet to reach their intended – or at least, intended at one point in time – destination. To do this, the research team carried out semi-structured interviews in Ethiopia a year later in the summer of 2016, this time with Eritrean refugees in Adi Harush refugee camp as well as two out-of-camp urban locations (the capital Addis Ababa, and Shire in the country's northern Tigray region). The sampling strategy sought variation in terms of gender, age, education and duration of stay, comparing those who arrived relatively recently to those who had been residing in Ethiopia for more than five years. While we interviewed a fairly even mix of men (37) and women (26) of different backgrounds and ages, the general profile of respondents was young at an average age of 33 years, reflecting the relatively young profile of Eritreans living in Ethiopia (Mallett et al., 2017).

For this study, we designed interviews that attempted to explore people's plans for the future and to locate the possible role that policy interventions might be playing in shaping those plans. To this end, conversations focused on people's migration history, current livelihood strategies, access to livelihood programmes, resettlement schemes or other forms of support (and perceptions thereof), and aspirations and plans for the future.

INSIDE THE EFFICACY GAP

Looking at the ways in which people encounter and participate with policy in its actually-implemented form provides a starting point for making sense of what is going on 'inside the efficacy gap'. This involves shifting focus from the macro to the micro level in order to ask how the subjects or supposed 'end users' of migration policy actually engage with, and are affected by, it.

Of course, this is not to say that only one kind of migration policy exists or that all migration policies seek to generate effects through the same set of mechanisms. As strategies of containment have been increasingly institutionalised into systems of European migration

management (Landau, 2019), so the range of policy measures designed to control and deter migration from the global South has expanded (see Table 1).

Table 1. Policy measures to manage unauthorised migration

Traditional control-oriented approaches	Newer alternative approaches
Detection and apprehension of migrants	Awareness campaigns in countries of origin
Post-arrival processing	Prevention of illegal employment in Europe
Repatriation	Employment creation in countries of origin
Pre-border surveillance and control	Programmes for legal migration

Source: Carling and Hernandez-Carretero (2011)

From Carling and Hernandez-Carretero's (2011) basic breakdown of measures to manage unauthorised migration to Europe, it is clear that different causal pathways are at play. While measures in the left-hand column of the table primarily seek to restrict movements through 'direct control' (e.g. physically stopping people in their tracks or putting them on return flights), those on the right work more in the vein of 'incentives and decision making' (*ibid*.: 46). For these latter measures to produce their intended effect of preventing migration before it occurs, 'target populations' must at the most basic level be aware of their existence and understand what they are expected to do in relation to them. Measures must be communicated through channels and in languages that are relevant and comprehensible to the audience. They must also be met with acceptance by those whose intentions and behaviour they ultimately seek to alter.

Based on our research, we argue that this process is far less straightforward than often assumed. As individuals encounter policy measures designed to restrict their movement, particularly those directly geared towards shifting 'incentives and decision making' but not exclusively so – as Carling and Hernandez-Carretero (2011: 46-47) argue, the possibility of being apprehended or repatriated can also act indirectly as a deterrent to future migration, though 'this depends entirely on the probable consequences' of those measures in practice – we see that additional filtering of the original policy becomes possible. In effect, what happens in these spaces of direct and indirect encounter constitutes a kind of 'downstream policy transformation' process, further expanding the gap between high-level public policy discourses and concrete migration outcomes.

In order to capture this new dimension, we propose a further specification of the Czaika and de Haas (2013) framework that draws directly on insights from recent evidence to bring the dynamics of encounter more clearly into focus. There are three key issues in particular to consider, which together provide a more nuanced account of why implemented migration policies can often fail to steer 'end user' behaviours in exactly the way intended.

The first of these concerns the *sharing and retrieval of information*, which refers to both the communication of policy measures to target populations as well as the variable ways in which members of those populations seek out and access information about policy. Depending on how these processes play out, there is potential here for the acquisition of limited, partial, inaccurate or overwhelming information. Second is the *interpretation of information*, which concerns the variable ways in which people perceive and make sense of acquired information in light of personal circumstances, inbuilt preferences and the wider policy, legal and political characteristics of their current context. Interpretations may change over time for any number of reasons, leading to shifting plans that take people in new (literal and metaphorical)

7

directions. Finally, there is the issue of *action*. This refers to the variable ways in which people act on the basis of acquired and interpreted information, generating physical responses that may or may not resemble the ones intended by policy makers.

Figure 2 below illustrates the proposed elaboration of the framework.

Insert Figure 2 here

In the remainder of this section, we draw on insights from both our own qualitative work as well as the wider decision-making literature to illustrate how these dynamics of encounter play out in practice. In doing so, we hope to show how factors at the micro level – 'inside the efficacy gap'– may also generate further sources of policy failure.

Sharing and retrieval of information

Within the literature on migration decision making, research that looks specifically at the role of policy shows that information about proposed or implemented measures does not always filter down accurately to people either looking to migrate or already on the move (Crawley and Hagen-Zanker, 2018; Koomson-Yalley, 2021). This can happen for a number of reasons. Sometimes the relevant information is simply not available. Sometimes it may be communicated through languages, channels or formats that are unfamiliar to target populations. Sometimes key details get lost or distorted as information passes from one actor to another. Comments from one of our female respondents in Ethiopia's Adi Harush refugee camp, for example, illustrate how rumours moving through the camp can shape knowledge about particular places and procedures: 'If you make it to Europe, you will stay in a camp and eventually be granted asylum. I know this from my husband who is informed by the young men here'.

In our research with Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia in 2016, we were struck by an apparent contradiction between, on the one hand, the centrality of resettlement to many Eritrean's migration plans and, on the other, the lack of information they had about how the process actually worked (Mallett et al., 2017). Amongst those we spoke with who had already migrated to Ethiopia but had not immediately moved on, it was typically rare that they mentally prioritised further migration through irregular means over the existing formal alternatives – at least in the first instance. Alongside family reunification, resettlement offered an opportunity to migrate legally, with the significant advantage that it was both safe and virtually cost-free (from a financial perspective).

At the same time, however, we also found that people were extremely uncertain about the mechanics of resettlement programming, particularly in relation to timeframes and general likelihood of acceptance. The following comments of one female respondent in Adi Harush capture a sentiment heard time and again: 'I don't have much knowledge about resettlement. I've heard some refugees have been resettled. I don't understand why some are resettled and others aren't. Some are quick, others are not. You never know why people are selected for resettlement'. In some cases, this lack of uncertainty bled into perceptions of inequality in the administration of programming, with one male respondent in Shire, Tigray explaining: 'They are not fairly distributing the resettlement opportunities, so some refugees risk their lives by leaving the camp and going on secondary movement'. The important thing to note here is that this man's comments are not a statement of fact about how resettlement was officially being run at the time – though it is of course plausible that there may be elements of truth to them –

but rather an insight into the kind of knowledge that can emerge in such situations and which, as he indicated, has the potential to strongly influence future actions.

To take another example, migration information campaigns have gained popularity in recent years as a tool to dissuade people from migrating, either initially from their 'country of origin' or onwards from a 'transit site' with the assumption that migrants engage in risky migration because they lack knowledge. The literature suggests they tend to have only a limited effect on decision making (Fiedler, 2020; Hagen-Zanker and Mallett, 2016; Oeppen, 2016). Part of this relates to the way in which campaigns tend to be broadly targeted towards large groups of potential migrants, more concerned with highlighting the general risks of irregularity to a homogenised population than providing practical and tailored information about specific policies or pathways for regular migration. But so too does it also relate to questions around how individuals receiving this information work with it. In some cases, the acquisition of more knowledge about the risks of travel is simply not enough to dissuade migration; they are risks that people already know about and are willing to shoulder (Bakewell and Sturridge, 2021). In others, the knowledge transferred by these campaigns 'from above' may be undermined or contested by competing claims to knowledge sought and found elsewhere. Research shows that migrants' awareness of potential routes and destinations is often based, at least in part, on rumour and anecdotal information provided by family, friends, acquaintances and brokers – both before departure and whilst on the move (Crawley et al., 2018; Hagen-Zanker and Mallett, 2016; Koomson-Yalley, 2021; Lyberaki et al., 2008). Though the information provided through these means can be of varying quality and accuracy, as some of the above examples from Ethiopia show, it can nonetheless prove influential in guiding people's choices.

Interpretation of information

Rather than passively absorbing it at face value, evidence suggests that people engage actively with the information they have available to them, assessing it in relation to pre-existing migration plans and projects. Sometimes due to particular cognitive biases, only certain bits of information may be taken or acted upon seriously whilst others are discarded (Koikkalainen and Kyle, 2016; Lyberaki et al., 2008). As a result, individual-level perceptions of information about migration policy may result in a further widening of the gap between stated policy objectives and concrete migration outcomes.

In figuring out or 'knowing' which particular pieces of information to take seriously, we see that *who* shares the information appears to be critical. Our research suggests that people often lean towards information they consider to be relatively trustworthy when making migration decisions, which tends to be drawn from social networks and personal contacts rather than states and donor agencies (Hagen-Zanker and Mallett, 2016). One of our Senegalese respondents in Spain, for example, had known about the boats leaving West African shores for some time before his departure in 2006. He had long wanted to make the journey himself, but explained that he had been waiting on 'reliable information' about whether it was actually viable. In the end, that reliable information came through a friend, who rang once he had made it to Spain in order to talk him through the process. That became the 'tipping point' for his own departure. Meanwhile, for one of our Syrian respondents in Berlin, the core principle guiding his entire journey across Europe – 'whatever you do, don't give your fingerprints in Hungary' – came from his 'brother'.

Our findings from this study about the role that known social connections can play in enhancing the legitimacy of certain kinds of information – particularly when those are connections with whom the individual already shares a relationship of (at least some) trust, including friends, family members, travelling companions or even a smuggler who came recommended (Hagen-Zanker and Mallett, 2016) – are mirrored in wider analysis of the link between source of information and extent of trustworthiness. For example, one recent study into irregular migration from Ghana found that information about travelling to Europe via dangerous routes is often shared in the form of 'funny stories', strengthening the relationship between mediator and migrant and thus deepening the trustworthiness of the information shared (Koomson-Yalley, 2021).

A broader point emerging from the research is that subjective factors tend to play a major role in people's assessments of information about migration policies. In addition to the socially embedded nature of trustworthiness just discussed, in many cases we also see that migrants actively seek out information that confirms or justifies their assumptions and decisions whilst looking past information that does not (Czaika and Vothknecht, 2014). As one example, in their research from West Africa Hernández-Carretero and Carling (2012) find that prospective migrants relate to risk information in ways that tend to downplay the dangers of migration, both by maintaining 'tunnel vision' and discrediting untrusted sources of information. This kind of behaviour closely resembles what cognitive scientists would call 'confirmation bias', which is just one of a number of biases that may affect the decision making process.

Action

Once information has been acquired and processed, individuals then decide whether and how to physically act upon it. In our 2015 research with recent arrivals in Europe, we found that migration decision making appeared to be much more influenced by policies that made travel and access a little easier than those that sought to restrict movement, suggesting that people seemed more responsive to positive or constructive messaging and actions than they were to negative ones (Hagen-Zanker and Mallett, 2016). Many of our Syrian respondents in Germany, for example, explained that they had originally started their journey in Syria with a different destination in mind. However, after being fingerprinted once inside the EU they ended up redirecting themselves towards Germany, and Berlin in particular, as a direct result of the perception that in Berlin they 'cancel your fingerprints' taken in other Dublin countries. In these interviews, Berlin was often described as a place where the implementation of policies was more relaxed. As one male respondent explained: 'My friends instructed me to come to Berlin. I hadn't really thought much of that place beforehand. They said that it's too dangerous in Munich if my fingerprints had been taken in Hungary, that the application process is faster in Berlin and that they don't care about the fingerprints'.

Though these Syrians still had to (irregularly) cross many borders in order to reach their destination, including those with strong physical controls (such as Hungary's new border fence), it was primarily information about the welcoming nature of German migration policy, rather than the more hostile messaging coming from elsewhere, that appeared to largely drive their onward movements. Similar findings are reported in studies from the wider literature. Through quantitative analysis, Kuschminder and Koser (2017) find evidence that in some cases only *favourable* migration policies, such as asylum acceptance rates, seem to prove

influential in shaping destination preferences. They find no evidence of the corollary effect – i.e. that adverse policies deter migration – suggesting that people in certain circumstances may be more likely to act upon migration policies that converge or cohere with their pre-existing migration projects and plans, as opposed to those which contrast with or undermine them. Likewise, Lyberaki et al. (2008) note that migrants make strategic use of their knowledge of border and immigration regulations, taking advantage of those policies that fit their plans and consciously avoiding others. This is exemplified in a quote from one Eritrean interviewed in Ethiopia: 'I know Israel has closed its borders, so the only option is Europe, where Eritreans are granted asylum'.

Crucially, what we see from the research is that people's aspirations drastically shape their interpretation of policies, filtering out the types of interventions that may or may not play a significant role in their decision making and actions. Such aspirations explain why migration policies are often of relatively minor importance compared to broader public policies like employment, education and human rights (Hagen-Zanker and Mallett, 2016; OECD, 2017). For instance, a Syrian couple interviewed in Berlin moved from Lebanon to Germany because of the latter country's better security and educational opportunities for their children. The wife continued that 'moving to Germany allowed us to save our dignity. We preferred Germany because Holland is all about drugs and smoking and not good for kids. Sweden is cold and the asylum process takes a long time'.

Neither can the question of whether and / or how an individual responds to a particular piece of information be detached from the specific socio-cultural beliefs and values that matter to them. The Syrian couple just mentioned preferred Germany over Holland because they deemed its values more consistent with how they wanted to raise their children. It is thus rather about how information regarding certain places either connects to or jars with individual traits and characteristics, alongside personal beliefs and values. The nature of this interaction is an important part of how particular routes and destinations are decided upon, as well as whether certain kinds of risky behaviour, such as acts of irregular migration, are deemed appropriate and acceptable to particular individuals (Hagen-Zanker and Hennessey, 2021; Ryo, 2013; Schwartz et al., 2016).

ON THE DYNAMIC NATURE OF MIGRATION DECISION MAKING AND THE ROLE OF POLICY

What comes out clearly from recent research into migration decision making is a strong sense of individual agency (Belloni, 2016; Mainwaring, 2016; Triandafyllidou, 2018). This is of course not to suggest that decisions about where to go, when to go, and how to do it are made in a vacuum; as we have already seen, such decisions are socially embedded and informed by material conditions of possibility (or at least by a subjective interpretation of them). However, it is individuals who interpret and then respond to information about options and possibilities. Migrants are dynamic actors, constantly readjusting to any new developments, scoping out any opportunities that may arise, and making strategic use of the information that is available to them (if indeed it is deemed credible and relevant) (Lyberaki et al., 2008; Triandafyllidou, 2018;).

At its core, then, migration decision making is a dynamic process that is highly sensitive to specific contexts of time and place (Crawley and Jones, 2021). Some migrants may start their journeys with no specific destination in mind, only to form a clearer idea once on the move. Others may set off with a strong vision of where to head but substitute it whilst en route, for instance when confronted with restrictive migration policies (Hagen-Zanker and Mallett, 2016; Stock, 2019). Different information is available at different times and stages of the migration trajectory, constantly creating the potential for new and different outcomes. Recalling some of our earlier cases of Syrians travelling to and through Europe, it was not until many had heard about the latest policy developments in Berlin, albeit via indirect and filtered channels, that they shifted course and made their way to German borders. Moreover, information about these developments would for many have been received and interpreted in the context of what was also happening in Hungary around the same time, where authorities were systematically fingerprinting people upon arrival. In this particular context, it was the experience of having one's fingerprints taken that rendered the new information about German policies so influential for so many. Had those experiences never taken place, people's onward movements might have played out quite differently.

Yet it is not just newly received or retrieved information that influences people's decisions and actions. Depending on the nature of the migration experience, the same information about migration policies and possibilities can be interpreted and responded to in different ways at different points in time. Take for example the Eritreans in Ethiopia who, after many long years of waiting out the slim prospect of formal resettlement, began to find the risky option of travel through the Sahara somehow more tolerable. Respondents there remarked how it was common for people in their position to increasingly consider irregular migration as time went by, suggesting that a combination of limited options for formal passage and uncertainty over one's access to them can actually help displace people into irregularity, even when such an option may have been considered inconceivable to many at an earlier 'stage' of their migration experience. Again, we see here how it is not just information about migration policies that shapes decisions and plans, but people's tangible experiences with them too. Despite being explicitly designed to minimise unauthorised migration (Carling and Hernandez-Carretero, 2011), in this case the frustrating, confusing and drawn-out experiences that many people directly had with resettlement programming contributed towards their migration decision making process.

Any reassessments of pre-existing information about migration policies and possibilities are characterised by subjectivity and coloured by personality traits, emotions, beliefs and values (Hagen-Zanker and Hennessey, 2021). So too are they subject to the same kinds of confirmation biases described previously, where certain pieces of information are disregarded in favour of others that better align with an individual's evolving aspirations (see also Czaika and Vothknecht, 2014; Hernández-Carretero and Carling, 2012). It may even be the case that previously discredited pieces of information find renewed value and meaning within the decision making process as plans change over time.

Finally, it should be emphasised that migrants' encounters with migration policy, as well as processes of policy transformation more broadly, are not necessarily as linear as depicted in Figure 2. It is plausible, if not to be expected, that migrants may also hear about policy discourses even before those policies are properly designed and implemented, and subsequently act on the basis of what they hear in advance of anything concrete happening.

As some research has shown, it is sometimes the case that expectations, anticipations or even rumours about policy reform and enforcement can be more important in shaping migration decisions than any actual policy itself (Lyderaki et al., 2008). It is partly as a result of this non-linearity that people's responses to policies designed to deliver specific outcomes in specific places at specific times are hard to predict and control. Information not only moves in diverse and complicated ways, but means different things to different people at different points of their migration trajectories.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Despite the creeping institutionalisation of migration containment strategy in Europe and beyond, the evidence on whether such strategies work remains contested (Boswell, 2011; Castles, 2004; Clemens and Gough, 2018; Czaika and de Haas, 2016). We have used this article to argue that containment policies designed to prevent migration from occurring in the first place often fail to hit their mark because they are based on flawed assumptions about migration decision making processes. This results in a chasm between policy as it is laid out on paper and the aspects of policy that actually stand a realistic chance of influencing individual plans and behaviours.

Our argument builds on the work of Czaika and de Haas (2013), who have helpfully pointed out that much of the confusion found in debates about migration policy effectiveness can be attributed to inconsistency among researchers and analysts vis-à-vis the benchmarks of evaluation. In their 'migration policy effects and effectiveness' framework, Czaika and de Haas show that by disaggregating the policy lifecycle and highlighting the multiple routes through which publicly stated objectives filter down into concrete migration outcomes, it is possible to clarify and improve the terms of the policy effectiveness debate. At the same time, however, we find that the framework's 'efficacy gap' – that is, the extent to which implemented policies are actually able to affect concrete migration outcomes – operates as something of a black box. To that end, we propose an elaboration of the original framework alongside greater application of interpretative and qualitative research methods to enable richer analysis of what goes on 'inside the efficacy gap'.

For migration policy measures to influence decisions, (potential) migrants need to have access to information about the policy, understand it, interpret it 'correctly', and then respond in the intended way. These conditions are often not met. Policies undergo a 'transformation process', where at every stage the content of the policy evolves into something slightly different to what was originally envisioned or discussed. As policies move through multiple stages – from legislation to implementation, and then to encounter by the intended 'target' or 'end user' population – details can get lost, diluted, misinterpreted or simply not acted upon.

Drawing on examples from our own research alongside empirical studies from the wider decision-making literature, we have attempted to show that when local populations encounter implemented policies, outcomes cannot be taken for granted. In particular, there are three 'dynamics of encounter' linked to individuals' own sense-making processes that must be taken into consideration: i) the sharing and retrieval of information about migration policies; ii) the interpretation of acquired information; and iii) the specific nature of how people respond to information that has been both acquired and interpreted. Paying greater attention

to these three dynamics of the encounter between migration policies and local populations can help shed light not just upon the intricacies of migration decision making but also the possibilities and limits of migration policy.

The dynamics described here are highly localised in space and time. People interpret migration policies differently depending on their personal circumstances as well as the wider policy, legal and political landscape. Rather than representing the predictable outcome of a one-time decision, migration is a dynamic and constantly evolving process, closely intertwined with an individual's desire for change and aspiration for a better future. What this means is that encounters with policy are also malleable: at different stages, migrants may have more or less information and different aspiration and perceptions of policies, potentially leading to different decisions and outcomes.

Considerations of such dynamics are often absent from policy discussions. As Boswell (2011: 12) argues, it is almost as if the 'highly simplifying models' generated by the migration policy making process have a 'structural tendency to "short-circuit" the complexity of the migratory processes they are attempting to steer'. But it is precisely here that our contribution on the dynamics of policy encounter can perhaps make a practical contribution towards policy making, specifically by helping to gauge the limits and possibilities of migration policy. To that end, three final lessons emerge. First, identify what types of information people actually use to make decisions and from which source(s) they come from. Second, understand how and why certain kinds of information become trusted, internalised and then acted upon. And third, recognise perhaps above all else that migration policies – even in their actually-implemented form – rarely, if ever, produce homogenous or predictable outcomes.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

REFERENCES

Bakewell, O. (2008) '"Keeping them in their place": the ambivalent relationship between development and migration in Africa'. *Third World Quarterly* 29(7): 1341-58.

Bakewell, O. and Sturridge, C., 2021. Extreme Risk Makes the Journey Feasible: Decision-Making amongst Migrants in the Horn of Africa. *Social Inclusion*, *9*(1), pp.186-195.

Balfour, R., Emmanouilidis, J.A., Fieschi, C., Grabbe, H., Hill, C., Lochocki, T., Mendras, M., Mudde, C., Niemi, M.K., Schmidt, J. and Stratulat, C. (2016). *Europe's troublemakers: the populist challenge to foreign policy*. Brussels: European Policy Centre.

Belloni, M., 2016. 'My uncle cannot say "no" if I reach Libya': Unpacking the social dynamics of border-crossing among Eritreans heading to Europe. *Human Geography*, *9*(2), pp.47-56.

Bonjour, S. (2011). The power and morals of policy makers: Reassessing the control gap debate. *International Migration Review* 45(1): 89-122.

Boswell, C. (2011) 'Migration control and narrative of steering'. *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 13(1): 12-25.

Carling, J. and Hernandez-Carretero, M. (2011) 'Protecting Europe and protecting migrants? Strategies for managing unauthorised migration from Africa', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 13: 42-58.

Castles, S. (2004) 'Why migration policies fail', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 27(2): 205-227.

Clemens, J. and Gough, K. (2018). 'Can regular migration channels reduce irregular migration? Lessons for Europe from the United States'. Brief. Washington, DC: CGD.

Collyer, M. (2020) 'Border work: frames, barriers, and disingenuous development'. In Bastia, T. and Skeldon, R. (Eds.) *Routledge Handbook of Migration and Development*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Cornelius, W.A., Martin, P.L. and Hollifield, J.F. (1994). 'Introduction: The ambivalent quest for immigration control'. In Cornelius W.A., Martin, P.L. and Hollifield, J.F. (Eds.) *Controlling immigration: a global perspective*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University.

Crawley, H., Duvell, F., Jones, K., McMahonan, S. and Sigona, M. (2018). *Unravelling Europe's 'migration crisis': journeys over land and sea*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Crawley, H. and Hagen-Zanker, J. (2019) 'Deciding where to go: policies, people and perceptions shaping destination preferences'. *International Migration* 29(1): 20-35.

Crawley, H. and Jones, K. (2021) 'Beyond here and there: (re)conceptualising migrant journeys and the "in-between"'. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 47(14): 3226-42.

Czaika, M. and de Haas, H. (2013) 'The effectiveness of immigration policies'. *Population and Development Review* 39(3): 487-508.

Czaika, M. and de Haas, H. (2016) 'The effect of visas on migration processes'. *International Migration Review* 51(4): 893-926.

Czaika, M. and Vothknecht, M., 2014. Migration and aspirations–are migrants trapped on a hedonic treadmill?. *IZA Journal of migration*, *3*(1), pp.1-21.

EU (2019) 'EUTF for Africa'. Background note. Accessed January 2021: https://ec.europa.eu/trustfundforafrica/sites/euetfa/files/facsheet_eutf_long_online_publicatio n_05-09-2019.pdf

Fiedler, A. (2020) 'From being aware to going there: on the awareness and decision-making of (prospective) migrants'. *Mass Communication and Society* 23(3): 356-77.

Hagen-Zanker, J. and Hennessey, G. (2021) 'What do we know about the subjective and intangible factors that shape migrant decision-making?' Working Paper. Oslo: PRIO (Peace Research Institute).

Hagen-Zanker, J. and Mallett, R. (2016) 'Journeys to Europe: the role of policy in migrant decision-making'. Insights report. London: ODI.

Hernandez-Carretero, M. and Carling, J. (2012) 'Beyond "kamikaze migrants": risk taking in West African boat migration to Europe'. *Human Organization* 71(4): 407-16.

Koikkalainen, S. and Kyle, D. (2016) 'Imagining mobility: The prospective cognition question in migration research'. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 42(5): 759-76.

Koomson-Yalley, E., 2021. Information Sharing and Decision-Making: Attempts by Ghanaian Return Migrants to Enter through Libya. *Social Inclusion*, *9*(1), pp.226-234.

Kuschminder, K. and Koser, K. (2017) 'The role of migration-specific and migration-relevant policies in migrant decision-making in transit'. UNU-MERIT working paper 2017-022. Maastricht: Maastricht University.

Landau, L. (2019) 'A chronotope of containment development: Europe's migrant crisis and Africa's reterritorialization'. *Antipode* 51(1): 169-86.

Lyberaki, A., Triandafyllidou, A., Petronoti, M., & Gropas, R. (2008). Migrants' strategies and migration policies: towards a comparative picture. *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, *6*(3), 475-488.

Mainwaring, Ċ., 2016. Migrant agency: Negotiating borders and migration controls. *Migration Studies*, *4*(3), pp.289-308.

Mallett, R., Hagen-Zanker, J., Majidi, N. and Cummings, C. (2017) 'Journeys on hold: how policy influences the migration decisions of Eritreans in Ethiopia'. Report. London: ODI.

OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) (2017) *Interrelations between public policy, migration and development*. Boulogne-Billancourt: OECD Development Centre.

Oeppen, C. (2016) '"Leaving Afghanistan! Are you sure?" European efforts to deter potential migrants through information campaigns'. *Human Geography* 9(2): 57-68.

Peck, J. (2011) 'Geographies of policy: from transfer-diffusion to mobility-mutation'. *Progress in Human Geography* 35(6): 773-97.

Raty,T. and Shilhav, T. (2020). 'The EU Trust Fund for Africa: trapped between aid policy and migration politics'. Policy brief. Oxford: OXFAM.

Ryo, E., 2013. Deciding to cross: norms and economics of unauthorized migration. *American Sociological Review*, *78*(4), pp.574-603.

Schwartz, C., Simon, M., Hudson, D. and Johnson, S., 2016, June. Illegality is in the Eye of the Beholder: Experimental Evidence on Criminality and Risks of Irregular Migration. Institution for Social and Policy Studies, Yale University.

Stock, I., 2019. Time, migration and forced immobility: Sub-Saharan African migrants in Morocco. Bristol University Press.

Thielemann, E. (2004) 'Does policy matter? On governments' attempts to control unwanted migration'. CCIS Working Paper 112. San Diego, CA: University of California.

Triandafyllidou, A., 2019. The migration archipelago: Social navigation and migrant agency. *International migration*, *57*(1), pp.5-19.

Wiklund, E. (2012). 'Providing protection, discouraging applications: the influence of policy on asylum seekers' destination choice'. Paper 189. Syracuse University Honors Program Capstone Projects.
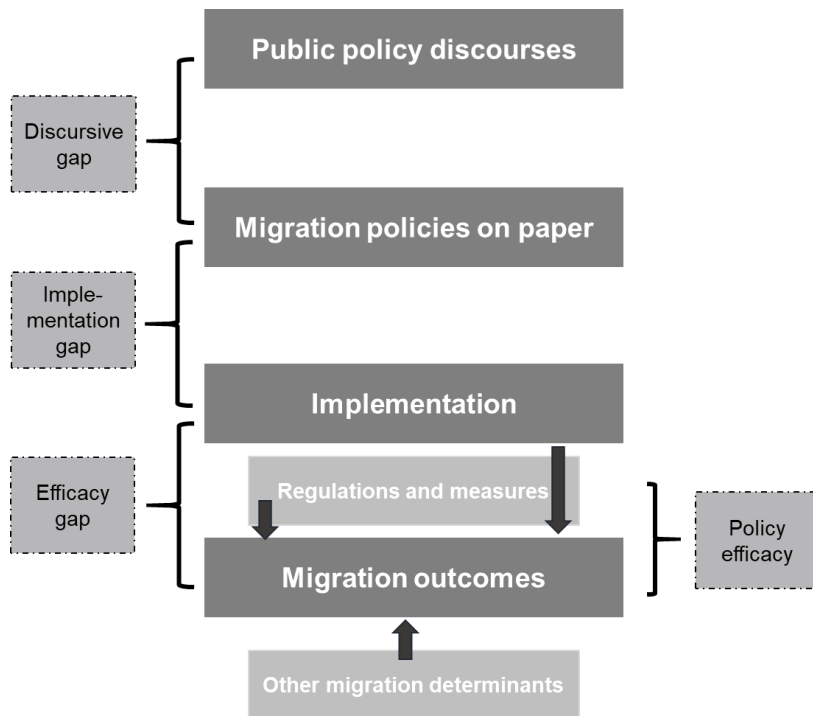
Figure 1. A simplified version of the 'migration policy effects and effectiveness' framework
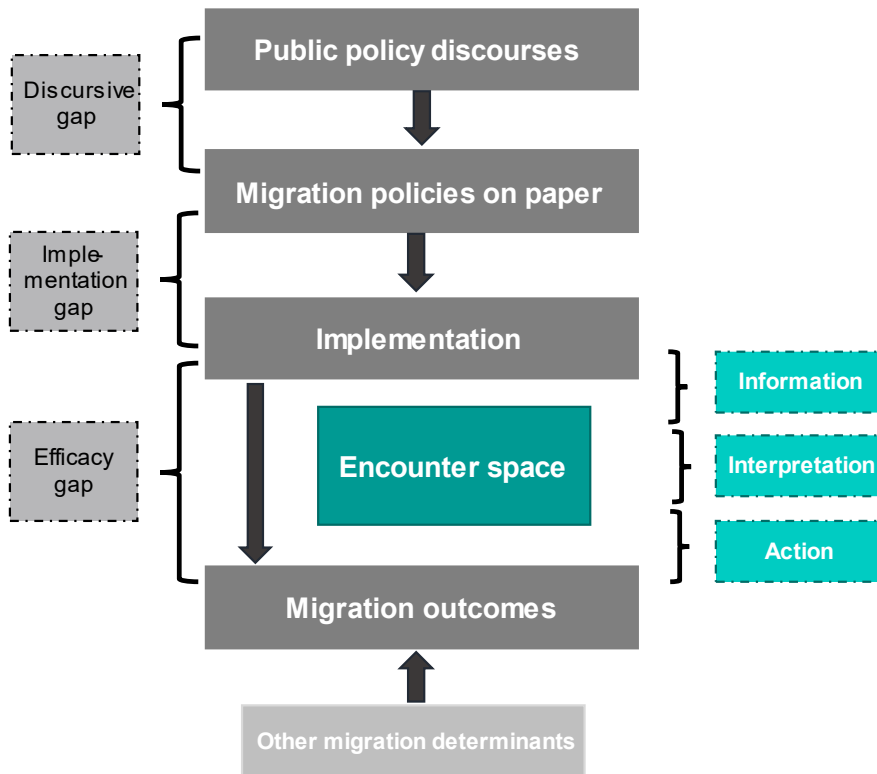
Source: Czaika and de Haas, 2013

Figure 2. A modified version of the 'migration policy effects and effectiveness' framework, featuring the dynamics of encounter

Source: Authors' modification of Czaika and de Haas (2013)

NOTES

---

[i] In the 'migration governance' category, less than 10% of expenditure was made on fostering legal migration, with more than three quarters spent on containment and control and returns and reintegration and another ten percent on awareness-raising (Raty and Shilahv, 2020).

[ii] We use this broad and basic distinction here for practical purposes concerning the paper's focus and length, and fully acknowledge the multifaceted characteristics of mixed migration flows.