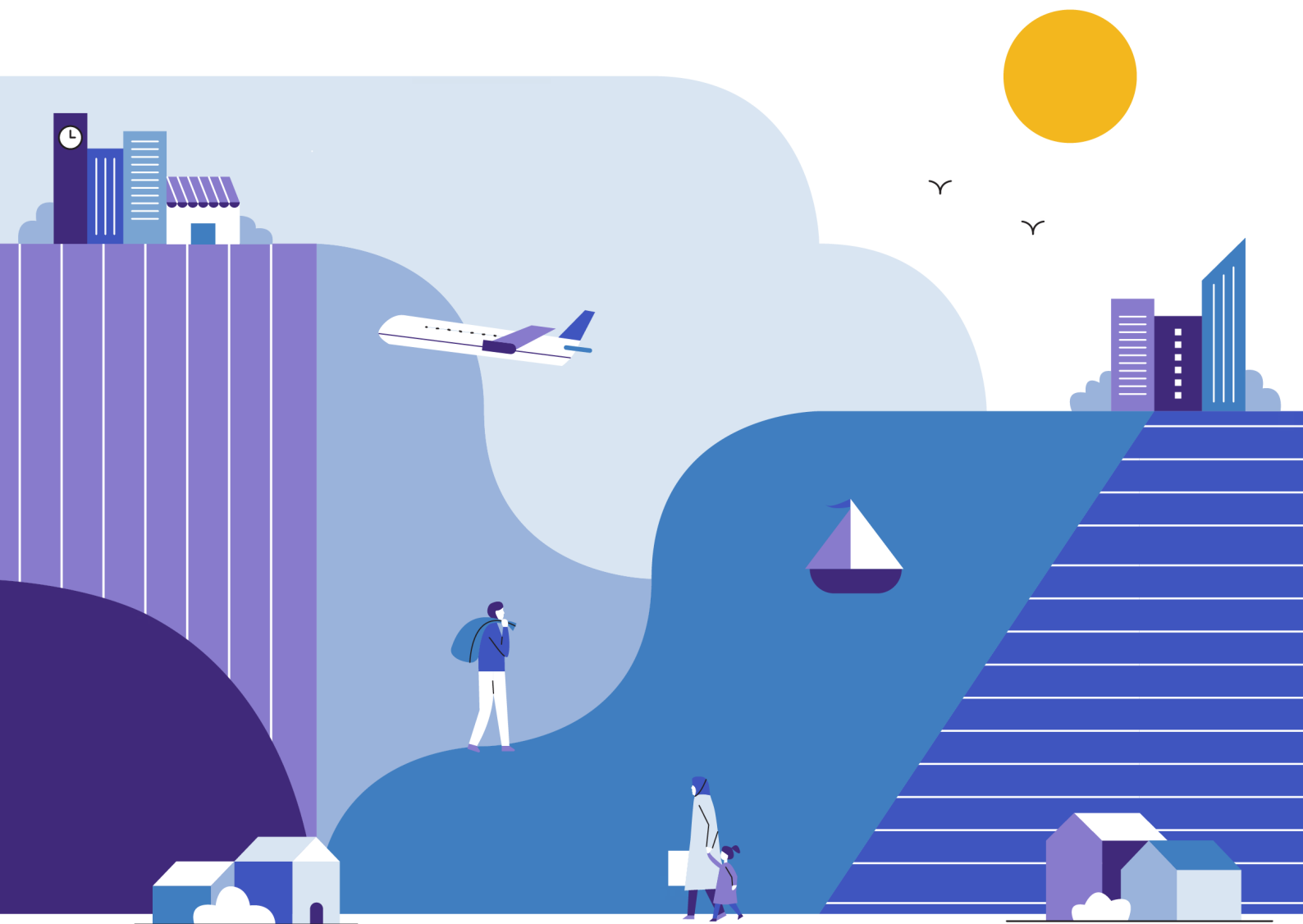# Community Perceptions and Information Needs of Persons at Risk of Irregular Migration in Bali Process Member States:

Evidence from Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand

REGIONAL SUPPORT OFFICE
THE BALI PROCESS

Mixed Migration Centre

Community Perceptions and Information Needs of Persons at Risk of Irregular Migration in Bali Process Member States:

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Foreword

For most people around the world, cross-border migration provides an opportunity to enhance their lives and achieve their goals. However, the way in which an individual migrates influences their overall migration experience. Regardless of the dangers of irregular migration, irregular cross-border movements have been a persisting challenge within the Bali Process region owing to historical, socio-cultural, economic, and geopolitical factors. In acknowledgement of the continued efforts needed to address irregular migration and related transnational crime, the 2023 Adelaide Strategy for Cooperation calls for continued efforts to build preparedness of Bali Process Member States to respond to irregular migration. In order to mitigate the risks associated with irregular migration, and support safer, regular, and more sustainable migration practices, understanding shifting perceptions within prospective migrant communities and their social networks is crucial. A key preventative measure that could build on this understanding is enhancing availability and access to timely, reliable, and accurate information.

To this end, the Regional Support Office of the Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime (RSO) and the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) are pleased to publish this assessment of community perceptions and information needs of persons at risk of irregular migration. The assessment aims to provide insights into the way in which persons at risk of irregular migration and their communities perceive irregular migration, as well as their information needs to identify nuances about irregular migration, which could help to design effective, targeted information campaigns to trigger positive behaviour changes.

We have identified key countries of origin, transit, and destination most-affected by irregular air, land and maritime movements that take place along selected migration routes in the South and Southeast Asia region. Specifically, the assessment looks at the Bangladesh-Malaysia migrant and refugee smuggling route; Indonesia as an origin country of migrant workers and a transit country for migrants to Malaysia and Australia; Malaysia as a country of destination for migrants originating particularly from Bangladesh and Indonesia; and Thailand as a country of destination for migrant workers originating from neighbouring Southeast Asian countries. In this assessment, we have incorporated the lived experiences of over 600 individuals, who are in irregular situations at present. While the findings of this assessment primarily target the aforementioned countries, the general recommendations can also be applied in other countries.

We sincerely appreciate the governments of Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand for sharing their knowledge and experiences at various stages of this assessment. We hope that policymakers and practitioners will find this report useful when designing policy and advocacy responses to address irregular migration.

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RSO Co-Manager (Australia) Regional Support Office of the Bali Process	RSO Co-Manager (Indonesia) Regional Support Office of the Bali Process	Director Mixed Migration Centre	Regional Manager for Asia and the Pacific Mixed Migration Centre
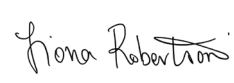
Introduction
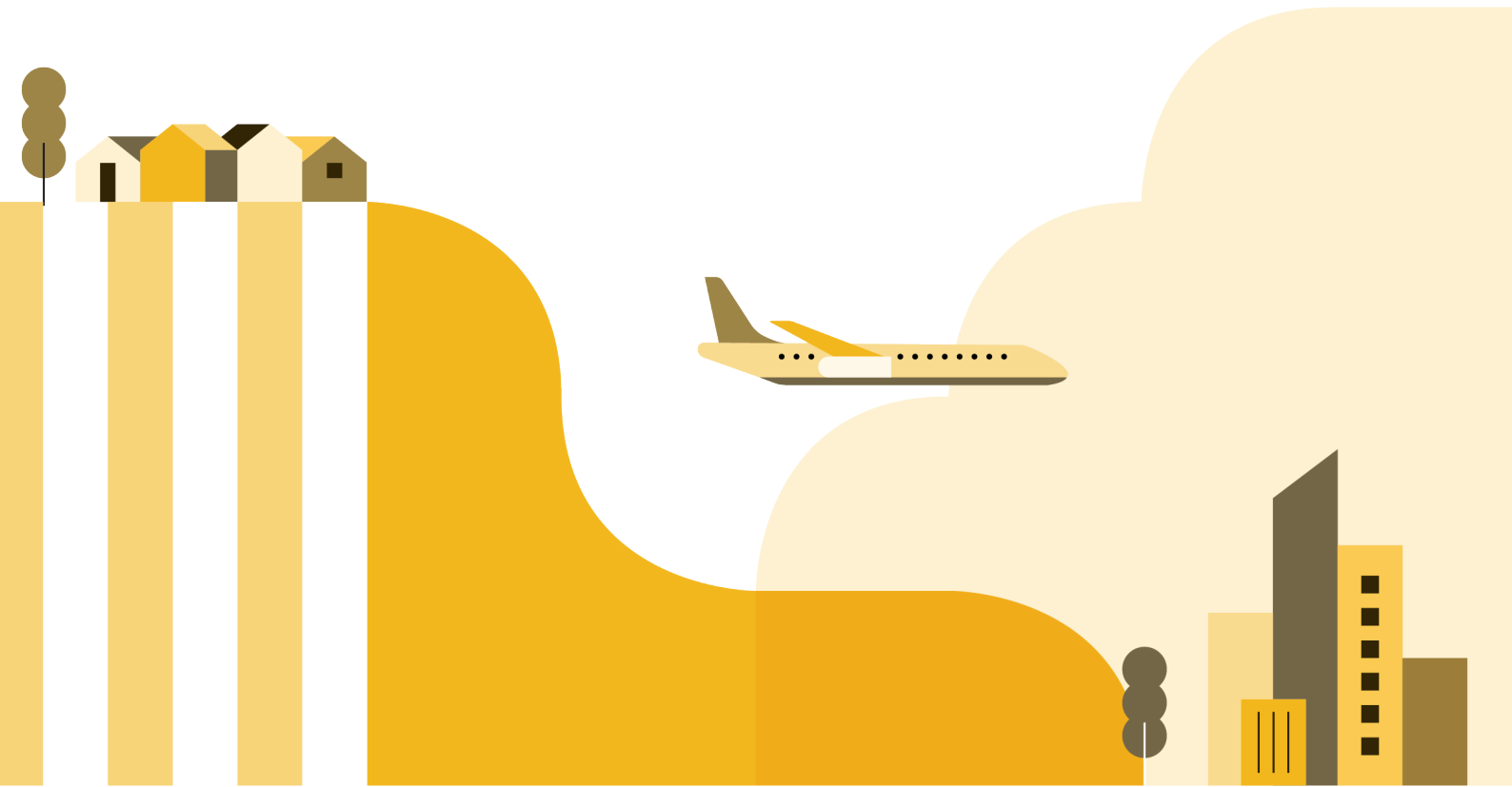
Migration within and towards Southeast Asia is a dynamic, mixed and enduring phenomenon influenced by historical, socio-cultural, economic, and geopolitical factors. From the Mekong region to movements between Indonesia and Malaysia, these migration practices are rooted in the region's history and continue to evolve today.[1] Significant events such as the large-scale displacement during the 1950s–70s Vietnam War, persistent systemic persecution of Rohingya, and the recent conflicts in Myanmar have accentuated the complexity of mixed migration in the region. Uneven economic development across Southeast Asia has further fuelled migration, attracting workers from lower-income countries to larger economies that offer greater opportunities. Additionally, climate change and environmental disasters have increasingly influenced migration patterns in the region.[2] Combined, these factors contribute to both regular and irregular migration patterns, with porous borders and limited access to regular pathways exacerbating the prevalence of irregular migration.

1   Kaur, A. (2004) Mobility, labour mobilisation and border controls: Indonesian labour migration to Malaysia since 1900, accessible at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/242440457_Mobility_labor_migration_and_border_controls_Indonesian_labor_migration_to_Malaysia_since_1900; Hatsukano, N. (2019), Overview of Migration in the Mekong Subregion', in Hatsukano, N. (ed.), Rethinking Migration Governance in the Mekong Region: From the Perspective of the Migrant Workers and Their Employers, accessible at: https://www.eria.org/uploads/media/4.RPR_FY2017_19_Chapter_1.pdf

2   IOM (2024) Policy and Data Insights in the Lower Mekong Subregion: Acting on Human Mobility in a Changing Climate, accessible at: https://reliefweb.int/report/viet-nam/policy-and-data-insights-lower-mekong-subregion-acting-human-mobility-changing-climate; MMC (2024) Impact of Climate Change on the Migration and Displacement Dynamics of Rohingya Refugees, accessible at: https://mixedmigration.org/resource/climate-change-rohingya/

Bangladesh, one of world's largest migrant sending countries, accounting for 7.4 million migrants living abroad as of 2020[3] and host to 989,585 Rohingya refugees as of July 2024,[4] faces economic pressures and protracted displacement that drive many individuals towards irregular migration. The route from Bangladesh to Malaysia, particularly via boat across the Bay of Bengal, is a prominent irregular migration pathway. Similarly, Indonesia is a major migrant-sending country, especially of migrant workers, with 4.6 million migrants globally as of 2020.[5] The Indonesia-Malaysia migration corridor, which 55 per cent of Indonesian migrants travelled in 2017, is characterised by a high degree of irregularity, with nearly half lacking legal status.[6]

Malaysia and Thailand, known for their relative economic and political stability, comparatively well-developed economies and established diaspora communities, are key destination countries in Southeast Asia. However, they face distinct challenges related to irregular migration. Economic opportunities, especially in low-skilled sectors, attract migrants from neighbouring countries across porous borders, making both countries host to large populations of migrants in irregular situations. As of 2017, the World Bank estimated that Malaysia hosts approximately 1.23–1.46 million migrant workers who are in irregular situations, predominantly from Bangladesh and Indonesia.[7] Malaysia also hosts 190,370 registered refugees and asylum seekers, 88 percent of whom are from Myanmar.[8] Thailand, which hosts 4.9 million migrants, serves as a primary destination for migrant workers from neighbouring Southeast Asian countries and a transit and destination point for asylum seekers and refugees.[9] As of 2018, Thailand hosted approximately 811,437 migrant workers in irregular situations from Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), Myanmar, and Viet Nam,[10] in addition to 86,539 refugees, including about 5,500 urban refugees, as of November 2024.[11] Both Malaysia and Thailand are central to understanding the dynamics of irregular migration and the effectiveness of policies aimed at promoting safe and regular migration pathways.

However, while there are estimates of the number of migrants in irregular situations across Southeast Asia, the often-covert nature of irregular migration makes accurate and timely estimations of its scale challenging. Despite their significant presence and contributions to the labour force and host societies, migrants in irregular situations face precarious conditions, including the constant threat of arrests, detention, and deportation due to their irregular status, as well as lack of access to education, healthcare, formal livelihoods, and sustainable housing. Additionally, those taking irregular pathways often encounter various protection risks along their journeys, including extortion, sexual and physical abuse, and trafficking in persons. Addressing the issue of irregular migration requires a multifaceted approach that recognises the diverse backgrounds and experiences of people on the move and addressing the motivations and drivers that compel individuals to undertake irregular journeys.

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3   UN (2024) International Migrant Stock 2020, accessible at: https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.un.org%2Fdevelopment%2Fdesa%2Fpd%2Fsites%2Fwww.un.org.development.desa.pd%2Ffiles%2Fundesa_pd_2020_ims_stock_by_sex_and_origin.xlsx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK; IOM (2021) World grows with 281 million migrants; Bangladesh is the 6th largest migrant sending country, accessible at: https://bangladesh.iom.int/news/world-grows-281-million-migrants-bangladesh-6th-largest-migrant-sending-country

4   UNHCR (2024) Country - Bangladesh, accessible at: https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/bgd

5   UN (2024) International Migrant Stock 2020. The figures presented are estimates and may vary due to gaps in the availability and quality of data. For example, Hasbiyalloh, B. et. al. (2024) in their study, Political economy analysis of Indonesian migrant workers' vulnerabilities to exploitation in Malaysia's palm oil sector estimate that there are nine million Indonesian migrant workers, accessible at: https://odi.org/en/publications/political-economy-analysis-of-indonesian-migrant-workers-vulnerabilities-to-exploitation-in-malaysias-palm-oil-sector/

6   World Bank (2017) Indonesia's Global Workers: Juggling Opportunities and Risks, accessible at: https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/357131511778676366-0070022017/original/IndonesiasGlobalWorkersJugglingOpportunitiesRisks.pdf

7   World Bank (2020), Who is Keeping Score? Estimating the Number of Foreign Workers in Malaysia, accessible at: https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/892721588859396364/pdf/Who-is-Keeping-Score-Estimating-the-Number-of-Foreign-Workers-in-Malaysia.pdf

8   UNHCR (2024) Figures at a glance in Malaysia | UNHCR Malaysia, accessible at: https://www.unhcr.org/my/what-we-do/figures-glance-malaysia

9   The data is as of 2018, drawn from the latest migration report, Harkins, B. (2019) Thailand Migration Report 2019, accessible at: https://thailand.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/Thailand-Migration-Report-2019.pdf

10   Ibid.

11   UNHCR (2024) UNHCR Thailand, accessible at: https://www.unhcr.org/th/en

A common narrative suggests that the lack of information about regular and safe migration pathways is a significant driver of irregular migration.[12] This information gap, coupled with the lack of awareness of the risks associated with irregular journeys and limited accessible regular pathways, often compel many individuals to opt for irregular routes.[13] In response, policy and programming initiatives have increasingly turned to information-dissemination and awareness-raising campaigns to mitigate irregular migration, as well as people smuggling and trafficking in persons. For example, between 2015 and 2019, European Union (EU) member states invested more than 23 million euros in 104 information and awareness-raising campaigns with the aim of reducing irregular migration towards Europe.[14] In Bangladesh, the EU contributed 15.9 million euros to the five-year Prottasha project and a further 20 million euros in 2023 to Prottasha II[15] which aims to promote sustainable reintegration and safe migration. The project includes awareness-raising about safe migration and the risks of migrating through irregular channels as a key component.[16] In 2023, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the EU launched a series of audio-visual products as part of the ASEAN Safe and Fair Migration Campaign, aimed at better protection of migrant workers in Southeast Asia.[17] In fact, the focus on information dissemination is not new; it was highlighted as one of the key strategies in a 2012 United Nations (UN) background paper on good practices in preventing people smuggling.[18] However, despite the increase in policies and programming surrounding information dissemination on migration, there remains a challenge in assessing their effectiveness in preventing and reducing the risks associated with irregular migration.

Under the mandate of the Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime (Bali Process), the 2023 Adelaide Strategy for Cooperation (the Strategy) recognises 'Irregular Migration' and 'Public Information Campaigns' as two key cooperation areas across the Bali Process structure. The Strategy welcomes initiatives that build the preparedness of Bali Process Member States to respond to irregular migration and calls for support to 'members to develop and implement effective public information campaigns, raise public awareness and promote digital literacy, including among youth, to reduce irregular migration and promote safe and legal migration'.[19] As key origin, transit, and destination points across the Bali Process region, the four selected Bali Process Member States—Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand—provide valuable contextual insights for the purpose of this assessment.

Against this background, this assessment aims to provide evidence-based insights and actionable policy recommendations on the information needs and perceptions surrounding irregular migration in key Bali Process Member States in South and Southeast Asia. It will identify the nuanced information needs of people on the move, assess their perceptions and motivations, and evaluate the role of information in migration decision-making, facilitating the design of information campaigns targeted at changing behaviours of persons at risk of irregular migration. Additionally, the assessment will examine interventions designed to bridge information gaps behind irregular migration.

12 UN (n.d.) Irregular migration and regular pathways, including decent work, labour mobility, recognition, accessible at: https://refugeesmigrants. un.org/sites/default/files/ts6_issues_brief_0.pdf; IOM (2023) New Research Reveals Insights and Challenges of Information Campaigns on Irregular Migration, accessible at: https://gmdac.iom.int/news/new-research-reveals-insights-and-challenges-information-campaigns-irregular-migration; Beretta, M., et al. (2023) Addressing root causes and drivers of irregular migration: An evidence gap map, accessible at: https://reliefweb.int/report/world/addressing-root-causes-and-drivers-irregular-migration-evidence-gap-map-december-2023

13 EU (2021) Study on best practices in irregular migration awareness-raising campaigns, accessible at: https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/e282eddd-f985-11eb-b520-01aa75ed71a1/language-en

14 Diplomatic Academy of Vienna (2019) Migration and Communication: Information and awareness-raising campaigns in countries of origin and transit, accessible at: https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/emn_conference.pdf, Austrian National EMN Conference 2019 - Briefing paper.

15 The Daily Star (2023) EU commits 20 million euros for migration, reintegration management in Bangladesh, accessible at: https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/eu-commits-20-million-euros-migration-reintegration-management-bangladesh-3381896; BRAC (n.d.) Prottasha II, accessible at: https://www.brac.net/program/migration/prottasha-ii/

16 EEAS (2020) Sustainable Reintegration and Improved Migration Governance, accessible at: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/bangladesh/sustainable-reintegration-and-improved-migration-governance_und_nb

17 EU (2023) ASEAN and EU join hands for better protection of migrant workers in Southeast Asia, accessible at: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/2023/07072023%20Press%20Release%20Safe%20and%20Fair%20EN.pdf

18 UN (2012) Challenges and good practices in the prevention of the smuggling of migrants, accessible at: https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/730792?ln=en

19 2023 Adelaide Strategy for Cooperation, accessible at: https://www.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl486/files/iscm/materials/adelaidestrategyforcooperation.pdf

Assessment objectives

Against this background, this assessment aims to explore the information needs and community perceptions surrounding irregular migration, focusing on the following key objectives:

1. Gain insights into the way in which persons at risk of irregular migration and different stakeholders perceive irregular migration;

2. Enhance understanding of the information needs of persons at risk of irregular migration;

3. Assess the effectiveness of interventions carried out by different stakeholders in the four selected Bali Process Member States: Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand, targeted towards addressing the information needs of persons at risk of irregular migration, with the intention of promoting dialogue among relevant stakeholders to encourage collaboration;

4. Provide actionable recommendations to Bali Process Members and Observers to promote and ensure safe and regular migration pathways through effective public information campaigns.

Assessment methodology
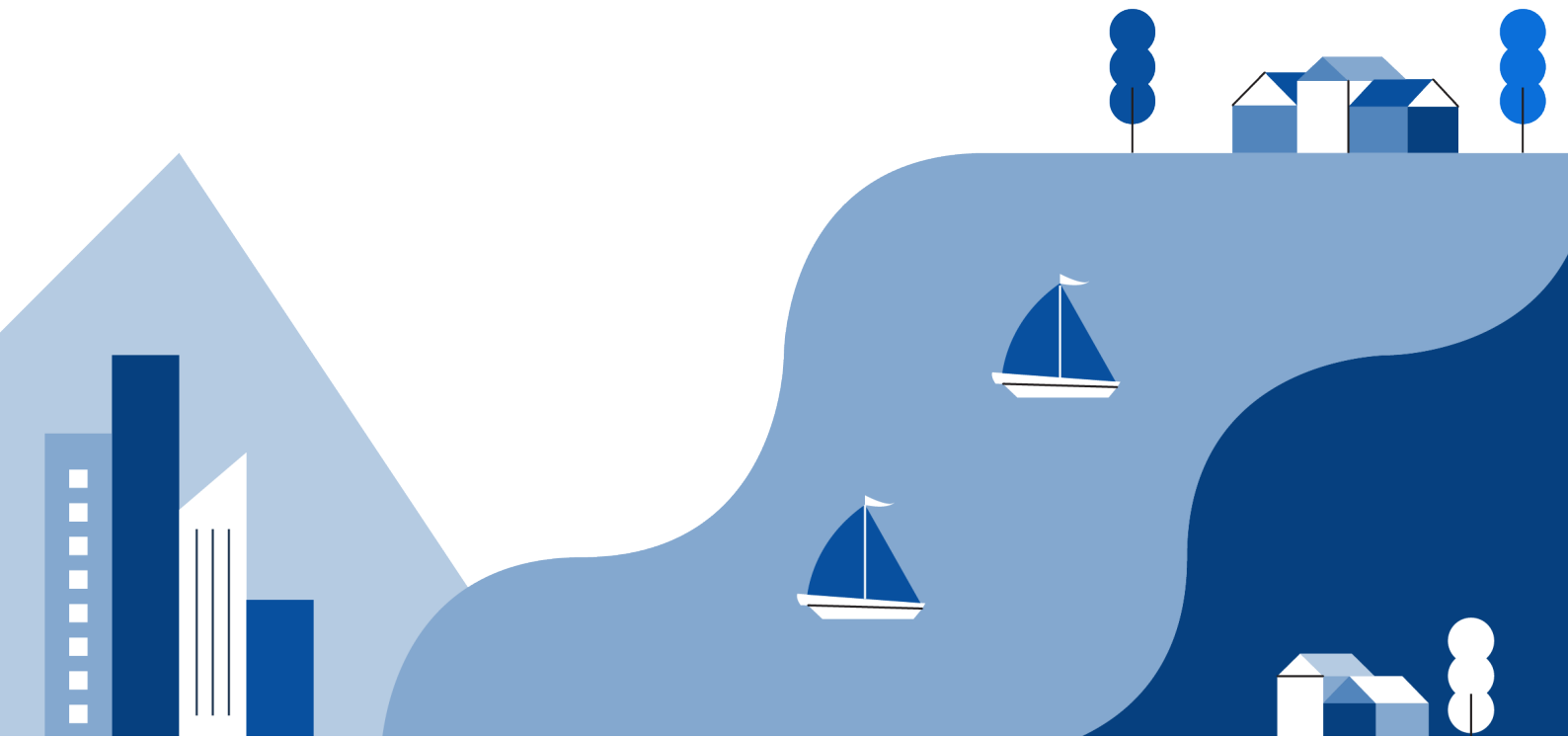
The assessment is structured into three parts to address the key objectives outlined above. Part 1 focuses on the drivers and community perceptions of irregular migration. It explores how migrants and different stakeholders—including government, academics, civil society, and employers—perceive irregular migration. Part 2 seeks to understand the information needs of migrants, including types of information needed, sources of information, and means of obtaining information. This section also reviews the existing interventions (if any) to identify gaps in policy and programming.

The findings from Part 1 and Part 2 inform the programming and policy recommendations in Part 3 in order to address the information needs of persons at risk of irregular migration, in the context of promoting and ensuring safe and regular migration pathways.

The assessment employed a mixed-method methodology comprised of 612 surveys with refugees and migrants in an irregular situation in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand, who provided a valuable retrospective perspective on their migration experience and the role information plays in the decision-making process to migrate. Forty-one key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted with relevant government and non-government stakeholders, civil society, and the private sector in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand. The primary data collected is complemented by a desk review of publicly available literature on migration issues in the region and information programming, including academic publications and grey literature.[20]

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20   This refers to publications which are not formally published in academic journals or books, including reports, policy briefs and working papers produced by research institutions, civil society organisations and the government and inter-governmental agencies.

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)

KIIs contributed to the primary qualitative data for the assessment. Forty-one KIIs were conducted with key stakeholders between June and September 2024, focusing on the perception of irregular migration, policies and programming addressing the information needs of people on the move. A purposive sampling approach was utilised to identify relevant key informants by focusing on stakeholders with expertise in migration policy and programming, and labour protection in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand. These key informants were selected, in consultation with the Regional Support Office of the Bali Process (RSO) and focal points of these four Bali Process Member States, for their understanding of migration dynamics in the region and their direct involvement in shaping or implementing programmes and policies relating to information dissemination that impact migrant populations, making their insights particularly valuable for this assessment.

Table 1: Participants of key informant interviews

	Bangladesh	Indonesia	Malaysia	Thailand	Total
Academia/research/expert	3	0	1	2	6
Government	1	3	2	3	9
Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO)	4	7	3	6	20
UN agencies	1	2	2	0	5
Private employer	0	0	1	0	1
Total	9	12	9	11	41

Quantitative surveys

Surveys were conducted with 612 refugees and migrants across Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand between June and August 2024 (see Table 2). Figure 1 illustrates the migration routes taken by respondents from Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, and Myanmar to these countries. Utilising a mix of purposive and snowball sampling methods,[21] the surveys targeted respondents who had already migrated or were in transit in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand within five years from the date of interview, using **irregular pathways.**[22] This approach provides a retrospective perspective, offering insights into the information gaps experienced during their migration process. Surveys were not conducted in Bangladesh as data was collected only from people who had already pursued irregular journeys and were at a country of destination or in transit.

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21 The surveys first start with purposive sampling by selecting specific individuals that match the target group and follow it with snowball sampling, where initial respondents refer others who also meet the criteria, expanding the sample.

22 These refer to individuals engaged in movements taking place outside the laws, regulations or international agreements governing the entry into or exit from the State of origin, transit or destination, as well as individuals who entered a host country regularly but ended up in irregular situations due to other factors such as overstaying the permit or visa.

Figure 1. Migration routes to Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand
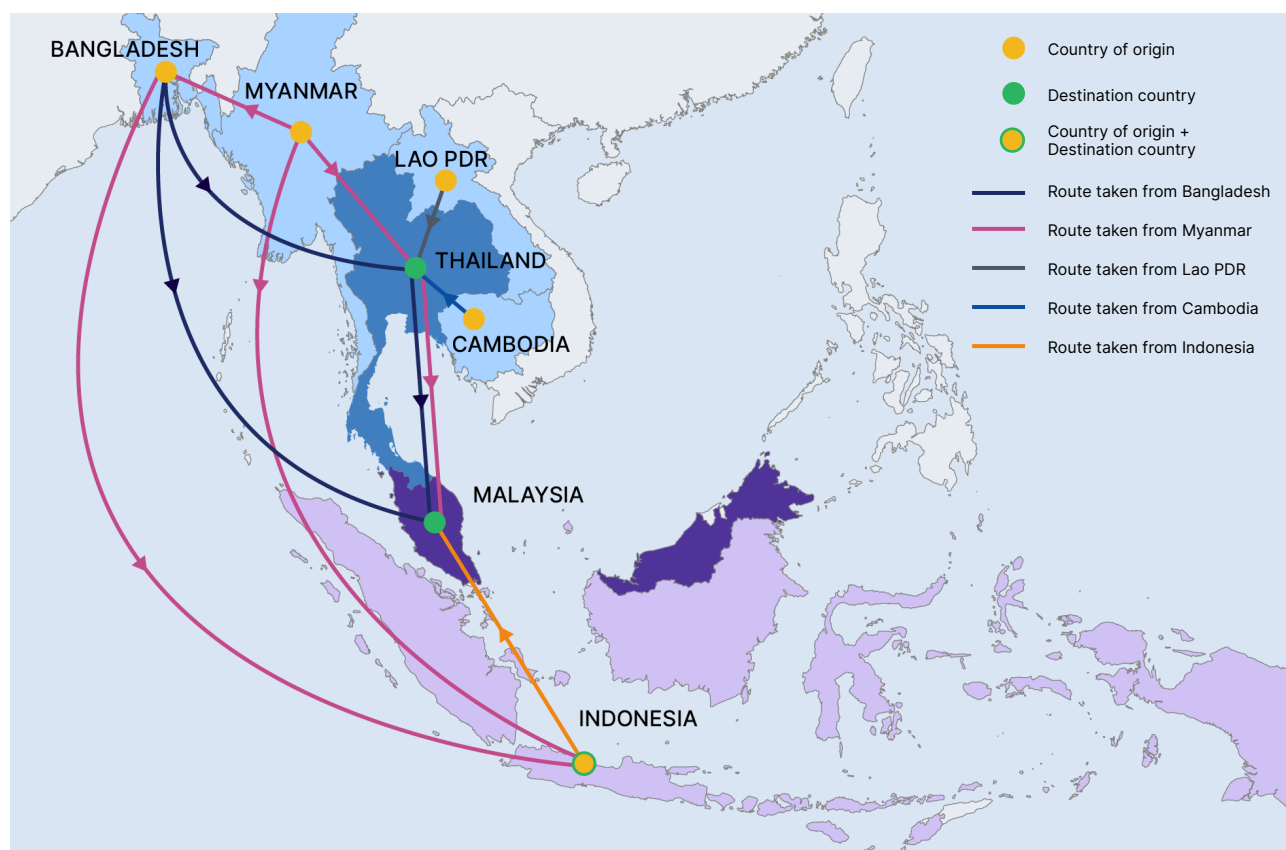
Table 2. Surveys in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand

Country of data collection	Country of origin	Number of surveys
Indonesia (n=147)	Myanmar (Rohingya)	147
Malaysia (n=237)	Bangladesh	75
	Indonesia	82
	Myanmar (Rohingya)	40
	Myanmar (other ethnic groups)	40
	Malaysia total	237
Thailand (n=228)	Cambodia	75
	Lao PDR	76
	Myanmar (Rohingya)	38
	Myanmar (other ethnic groups)	39
	Thailand total	228
	Total	612

Respondents' profiles

Indonesia

In Indonesia, **147 surveys** were conducted with Rohingya refugees who arrived in Indonesia in the past five years. **76 percent** of the respondents were men and **88 percent** were between the ages of 18 and 35.[23] **54 percent** did not complete any schooling and were illiterate.

Profile of survey respondents in Indonesia

Country of origin: Myanmar (n=147)

Gender

24% Women

76% Men

Age group

18–25	50%
26–35	38%
36–45	10%
46–55	1%
55+	1%

Area of origin

73% Rural

27% Urban

Education level

No schooling completed	54%
Primary school	28%
Secondary or high school	18%
Vocational training	0%
University degree	0%

Migration status

Refugee	40%
Asylum seeker	60%
Irregular/undocumented	0%
Applied for permit/visa	0%
Permit is no longer valid/ expired	0%
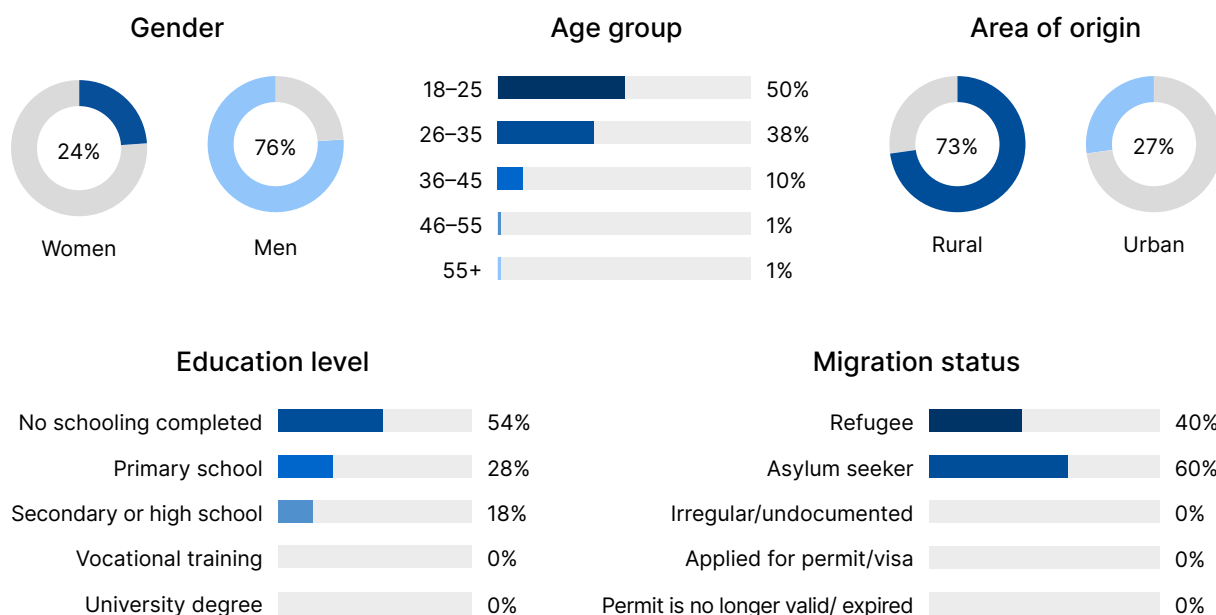
Malaysia

In Malaysia, **237 surveys** were conducted with respondents from Bangladesh (32%), Indonesia (35%), and Myanmar (34%).[24] Men accounted for **93 percent** of the Bangladeshi and **72 percent** of the Indonesian respondents.[25] **59 percent** of the respondents from Myanmar were women. Age distribution varied, with **96 percent** of Bangladeshi and all Myanmar respondents falling within the 18–35 age range, while 66 percent of Indonesian respondents were concentrated in the 36–55 age range. Educational attainment also differed across these groups. **46 percent** of the overall respondents had completed primary school, and **3 percent** reported holding a university degree. Notably, **46 percent** of the respondents from Myanmar had not completed any schooling, a trend particularly pronounced among Rohingya respondents, where 35 out of 40 had no formal education and were illiterate. **97 percent** of respondents self-reported as having an irregular migration status, while **3 percent** identified as refugees or asylum seekers. All respondents from Myanmar originated from rural areas, while those from Bangladesh were more evenly distributed between rural and urban areas.

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23   Due to challenges in accessing Rohingya women, men are overrepresented in this sample compared to the broader refugee population from Myanmar in Indonesia. As of 2023, there were 2,063 refugees and asylum seekers from Myanmar, with 48% women and 52% men. Of this population, 53% were aged between 18 and 59 years old. See UNHCR (n.d.) Refugee Data Finder, accessible at https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/download/?url=83lsK3

24   The aggregate adds up to 101% due to rounding.

25   The majority of Bangladeshi migrant populations in Malaysia are men, which explains the gender distribution of the survey sample where only 7% are women. For Indonesian migrants, while there is a large female population in Malaysia, most of them are engaged in domestic work, including as live-in domestic help, making access to this group challenging and resulting in a larger male distribution in the sample.

Profile of survey respondents in Malaysia[26]

Country of origin: Bangladesh (n=75)

Gender

7% Women

93% Men

Age group

18–25	39%
26–35	57%
36–45	4%
46–55	0%
55+	0%

Area of origin

Rural	57%
Urban	43%
Refused	0%

Education level

No schooling completed	1%
Primary school	24%
Secondary or high school	35%
Vocational training	32%
University degree	5%
Other	3%
Refused	0%

Migration status

Refugee	0%
Asylum seeker	0%
Irregular/undocumented	81%
Applied for permit/visa	0%
Permit is no longer valid/ expired	19%

Country of origin: Indonesia (n=82)

Gender

28% Women

72% Men

Age group

18–25	5%
26–35	26%
36–45	34%
46–55	32%
55+	4%

Area of origin

Rural	90%
Urban	2%
Refused	7%

Education level

No schooling completed	2%
Primary school	59%
Secondary or high school	32%
Vocational training	2%
University degree	2%
Other	0%
Refused	2%

Migration status

Refugee	0%
Asylum seeker	0%
Irregular/undocumented	76%
Applied for permit/visa	0%
Permit is no longer valid/ expired	24%

---

26 Some aggregates do not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Country of origin: Myanmar[27] (n=80)

Gender

59% Women
41% Men

Age group

18–25	78%
26–35	23%
36–45	0%
46–55	0%
55+	0%

Area of origin

Rural	100%
Urban	0%
Refused	0%

Education level

No schooling completed	46%
Primary school	53%
Secondary or high school	1%
Vocational training	0%
University degree	0%
Other	0%
Refused	0%

Migration status

Refugee	4%
Asylum seeker	4%
Irregular/undocumented	93%
Applied for permit/visa	0%
Permit is no longer valid/ expired	0%

Country of origin: Overall (n=237)

Gender

32% Women
68% Men

Age group

18–25	40%
26–35	35%
36–45	13%
46–55	11%
55+	1%

Area of origin

Rural	83%
Urban	14%
Refused	3%

Education level

No schooling completed	17%
Primary school	46%
Secondary or high school	22%
Vocational training	11%
University degree	3%
Other	1%
Refused	1%

Migration status

Refugee	1%
Asylum seeker	1%
Irregular/undocumented	83%
Applied for permit/visa	0%
Permit is no longer valid/ expired	14%

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27   This includes respondents from different ethnic groups including Chin, Mon, Kayin, Myanmar Muslim, and Rohingya.

Thailand

In Thailand, **228 surveys** were conducted with respondents from Cambodia (33%), Lao PDR (33%), and Myanmar (34%). The gender distribution among respondents was fairly balanced, with **54 percent** men and **46 percent** women, although there were variations across groups (see below). Most respondents were aged between 18 and 35 years, with Cambodians showing a higher concentration in the 26–45 age range. **69 percent** of respondents had completed only primary school education or less. Further, all respondents who did not complete any schooling also reported being illiterate. Migration status varied significantly among the groups: all respondents from Lao PDR had an irregular migration status. Respondents from Cambodia and Myanmar included a higher proportion of refugees and asylum seekers. Most respondents came from rural areas, particularly among those from Lao PDR (99%).

Profile of survey respondents in Thailand[28]

Country of origin: Cambodia (n=75)

Gender

Women 61%
Men 39%

Age group

18–25	16%
26–35	32%
36–45	35%
46–55	15%
55+	3%

Area of origin

Rural 87%
Urban 13%

Education level

No schooling completed	21%
Primary school	31%
Secondary or high school	36%
Vocational training	0%
University degree	12%

Migration status

Refugee	28%
Asylum seeker	17%
Irregular/undocumented	28%
Applied for permit/visa	19%
Permit is no longer valid/ expired	4%
Other	4%

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28   Some totals do not aggregate to 100% due to rounding.

Country of origin: Lao PDR (n=76)

Gender

34% Women	66% Men

Age group

18–25	95%
26–35	5%
36–45	0%
46–55	0%
55+	0%

Area of origin

99% Rural	1% Urban

Education level

No schooling completed	25%
Primary school	75%
Secondary or high school	0%
Vocational training	0%
University degree	0%

Migration status

Refugee	0%
Asylum seeker	0%
Irregular/undocumented	100%
Applied for permit/visa	0%
Permit is no longer valid/ expired	0%

Country of origin: Myanmar[29] (n=77)

Gender

44% Women	56% Men

Age group

18–25	43%
26–35	36%
36–45	17%
46–55	3%
55+	1%

Area of origin

71% Rural	29% Urban

Education level

No schooling completed	32%
Primary school	22%
Secondary or high school	38%
Vocational training	0%
University degree	8%

Migration status

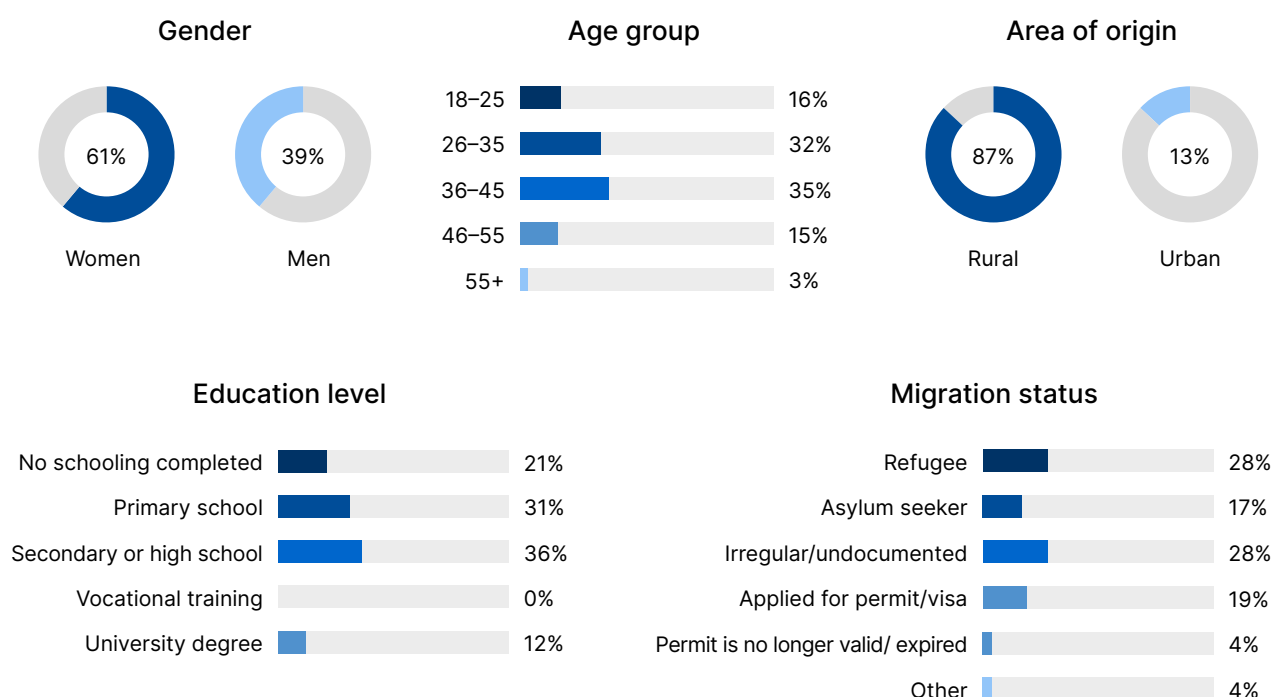|	
Refugee	3%
Asylum seeker	18%
Irregular/undocumented	79%
Applied for permit/visa	0%
Permit is no longer valid/ expired	0%

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29   This includes respondents from different ethnic groups including Chin, Mon, Kayin, Myanmar Muslim, and Rohingya.

Country of origin: Overall (n=228)

Gender

46% Women

54% Men

Age group

18–25	51%
26–35	25%
36–45	17%
46–55	6%
55+	1%

Area of origin

86% Rural

14% Urban

Education level

No schooling completed	26%
Primary school	43%
Secondary or high school	25%
Vocational training	0%
University degree	7%

Migration status

Refugee	10%
Asylum seeker	12%
Irregular/undocumented	69%
Applied for permit/visa	6%
Permit is no longer valid/ expired	1%
Other	1%

Limitations

The assessment methodology primarily targets refugees and migrants in an irregular situation who are currently in transit or residing in the destination countries. While the objective is to assess the information needs of persons at risk of irregular migration, focusing on people on the move provides valuable retrospective insights into firsthand experiences and information needs. These insights may also inform the identification of information gaps and profiles of individuals at risk of irregular migration, offering important lessons for prospective migrants who have not yet begun their journey. However, this approach may introduce certain limitations. Specifically, relying on the experiences of individuals who have already completed their migration journeys may result in reporting bias. Migrants might have difficulty recalling specific details of their journey or accurately assessing their prior inform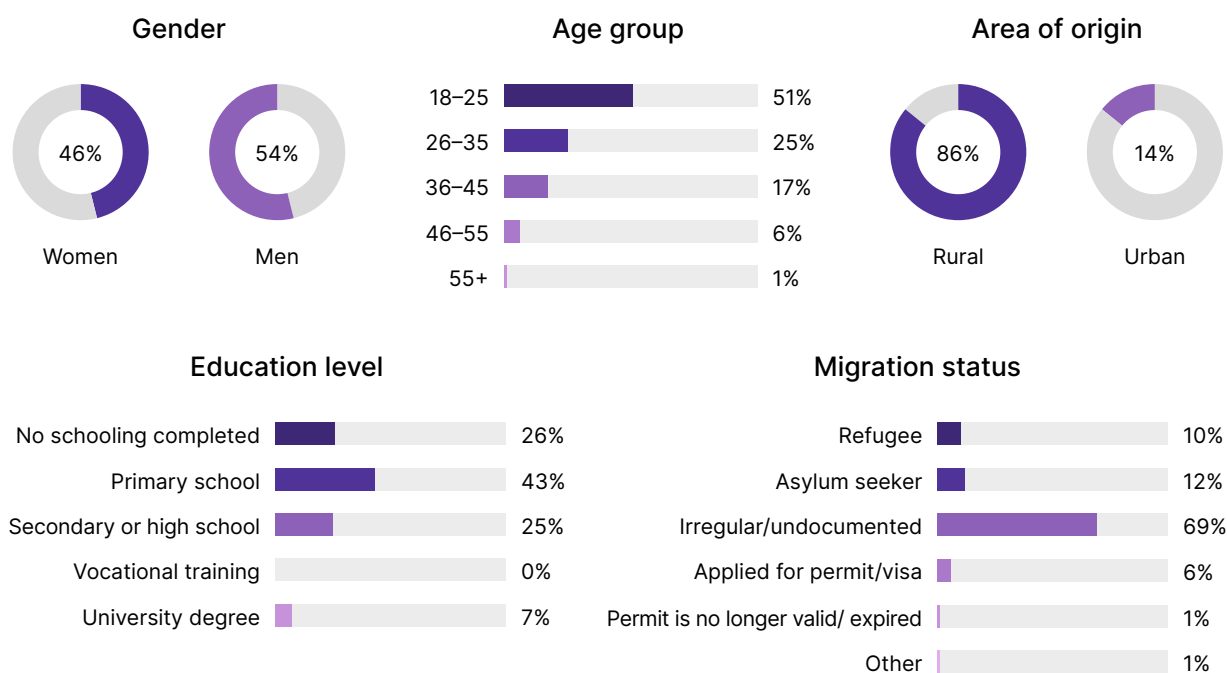ation needs. Memories can be distorted over time, and respondents might downplay or exaggerate certain aspects of their journey. Additionally, some respondents may feel a sense of shame or trauma associated with their experiences and may be reluctant to fully share their needs or the challenges they faced during their migration.

While the purposive sampling approach has been employed to mitigate selection bias—through careful selection of survey locations and the utilisation of the age, gender, and diversity (AGD) approach[30]—the sample is non-random. This means that the survey findings, while rich in insights, do not represent the whole population. Additionally, the gender imbalance in the data can be attributed to several factors. Refugees and migrants in an irregular situation often maintain a low-profile or are hard to reach due to fears of detection or legal repercussions. For women in these groups, additional barriers such as restrictive gender norms, cultural expectations, and safety concerns make them even less likely to participate in data collection efforts. These challenges result in an underrepresentation of women, contributing to a gender imbalance in some samples.

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30 Recognising that migration experiences are shaped by the interaction of age, gender and other characteristics and attributes such as religion, ethnicity, language and education, the assessment utilised purposive sampling to ensure a diverse sample.

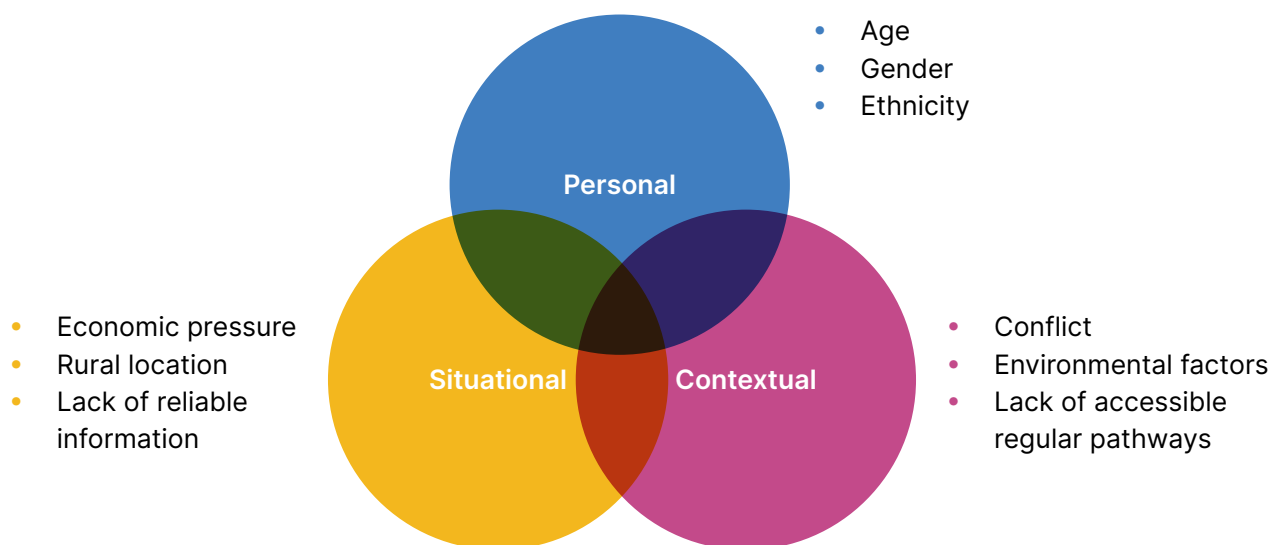# Vulnerability within irregular migration dynamics

The assessment findings reveal the multifaceted nature of migration, characterised by an intersection of economic, political, and social factors which collectively influence migration decisions across different groups. Economic motivations, such as the search for better livelihoods and job opportunities, are prominent but are often mixed with other factors, including historical and cultural practices of migration in the region. Insecurity, conflict, and persecution also play significant roles, and in some instances exacerbate existing economic hardships. This convergence of factors demonstrates that migration is rarely influenced by a single factor but rather results from multiple, intersecting drivers.

Drawing on the conceptual framework of vulnerability by the Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking of Persons (ICAT),[31] the assessment illustrates how the intersection of vulnerability factors at personal, situational, and contextual levels influences irregular migration dynamics from Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, and Myanmar to Southeast Asia (see Figure 2).

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31 ICAT is a policy forum mandated by the UN General Assembly to improve coordination among UN agencies and other relevant international organisations to facilitate a holistic and comprehensive approach to preventing and combating trafficking in persons, including protection and support for victims of trafficking; ICAT (2022) Addressing vulnerability to trafficking in persons. Issue brief 12, accessible at https://icat.un.org/sites/g/files/tmzbdl461/files/publications/icat_issue_brief_12_vulnerability_to_tip.pdf

Figure 2. Intersection of vulnerability factors

- Age
- Gender
- Ethnicity

- Economic pressure
- Rural location
- Lack of reliable information

- Conflict
- Environmental factors
- Lack of accessible regular pathways

Personal

Personal vulnerability factors refer to "the traits that are inherent to each individual."[32] Key informant interviews highlight groups who are more likely to migrate, especially through irregular pathways. These include **youth** and **Rohingya**. Gender also influences individuals' experience of vulnerability across the migration journey. However, it is crucial to note that these personal characteristics alone do not make an individual inherently vulnerable. Rather, they may intersect with other vulnerability factors including broader structural and systemic issues, which can amplify the likelihood of engaging in irregular migration.

Age

A common theme emerging from the key informant interviews is the increasing vulnerability of the youth[33] to irregular migration. This vulnerability is driven by several factors, including a high demand for young migrant workers in labour-intensive sectors like **agriculture, manufacturing, and fishing**. In the context of Myanmar, the military conscription law implemented in February 2024, provides further impetus for Myanmar youth to flee irregularly.

> *"Cambodian young people come because of the demand from the Thai side. Youth and people not more than the age of 30 are in demand because they can do hard labour in factories, poultry farms and fishing boats. In addition, young Burmese are also at risk because of the Military Conscription law in Myanmar which require both male and female Burmese of a certain age to join the army." (Key informant interview, labour rights expert, Thailand, TH6)*

> *"Myanmar, for example, announced a new Conscription Law which requires young adults, both male and female to be enlisted in the army. This has been the biggest push factor for the younger generation to leave Myanmar and seek employment or shelter in Thailand" (Key informant interview, labour rights expert, Thailand, TH7)*

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32   Ibid.

33   For the purpose of this assessment, youth are considered as those persons between the ages of 15 and 24, in line with the definition used by the United Nations.

The lack of economic opportunities, particularly for youth, further exacerbates this vulnerability. Struggling to secure stable employment, many young people are pushed to view cross-border migration, whether regularly or irregularly, as their best option for economic empowerment and quick financial gain. However, their lack of information about safe migration can lead to increased risks, including risks of exploitation and trafficking. As key informants noted:

> *"I think the employment situation in Bangladesh has challenges, in particular in ensuring employment for the youth. If we can provide employment, we think irregular migration will be less. So, having less income opportunities is a significant push factor." (Key informant interview, NGO, Bangladesh, BD4)*

> *"Our young people, due to their level of education or need for jobs and security, they want to go abroad. When they don't have enough information about safe migration, they are at risk of trafficking." (Key informant interview, NGO, Bangladesh, BD5)*

Ethnicity

The Rohingya, a stateless ethnic minority in Myanmar, have long endured systemic persecution, including violence, discrimination, and denial of basic rights, such as citizenship and access to employment and education. This systemic discrimination, excluding them from the legal and social protections afforded to other groups within Myanmar, is based on their ethnicity. The denial of citizenship and access to basic services and legal recognition within Myanmar also renders them stateless. As a result, many Rohingya are forced to flee Myanmar in search of safety.

However, their lack of formal identity associated with their statelessness prevents them from accessing regular migration pathways, and they are increasingly driven towards irregular migration, where they face significant risks, including exploitation, trafficking in persons, and further violence.

In the survey, **92 percent** of Rohingya (n=225) respondents—the highest among all respondents—reported that they did not consider regular migration pathways. This overwhelming percentage underscores the profound challenges the Rohingya encounter in pursuing regular migration, as their ethnic identity and lack of citizenship effectively bar them from these pathways, leaving them exposed to significant risks.
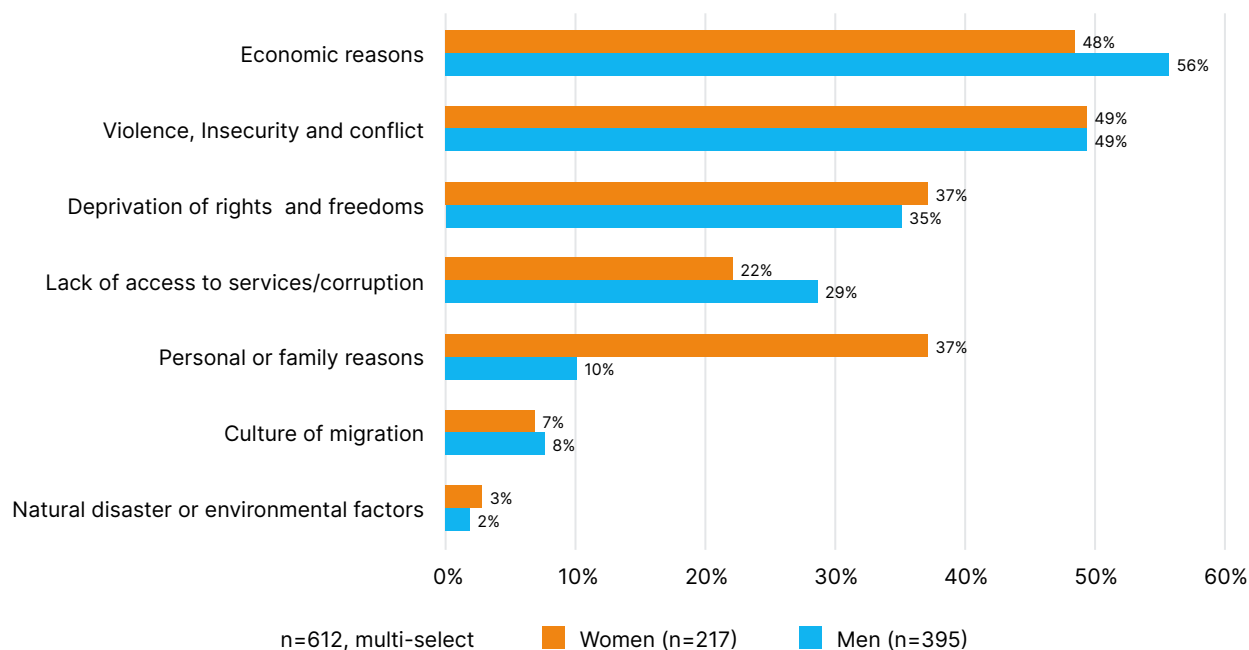
Gender

The role of gender influences migration dynamics, as evidenced by the survey findings. The reasons for leaving were consistent across male and female respondents, with economic factors, violence, insecurity, and conflict, and deprivation of rights and freedoms being the top three most frequently reported reasons (see Figure 3). However, personal or family issues were also a significant factor for women (n=217), with **37 percent** citing these reasons—more than three times the proportion among men (10%). More specifically, **63 percent** of these female respondents indicated that marriage abroad was a key personal or family reason for leaving, aligning with broader patterns observed in both key informant interviews and secondary data.[34] These sources consistently highlight the role of male family members or parents in influencing women's migration decisions. Women who migrate primarily due to family obligations, such as marriage, may face heightened risks in unfamiliar environments, including social isolation, limited access to resources, and potential exploitation. As one key informant noted,

> *"Most of the decisions are taken by the male family members so they don't have options." (Key informant interview, research institute, Bangladesh, BD6)*

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34 Kojima, Y. (2015) Rohingya Women in Migration: Lost Voices, accessible at https://ourworld.unu.edu/en/rohingya-women-in-migration-lost-voices; Beech, H. (2020) For Young Rohingya Brides, Marriage Means a Perilous, Deadly Crossing, accessible at https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/17/world/asia/rohingya-child-brides.html; Saikia, P. (2021) Rohingya Brides Thought They Were Fleeing Violence. Then They Met Their Grooms, accessible at https://www.vice.com/en/article/rohingya-brides-thought-they-were-fleeing-violence-then-they-met-their-grooms/

Figure 3. For what reasons did you leave your country of origin? (by gender)

Reason	Women (n=217)	Men (n=395)
Economic reasons	48%	56%
Violence, Insecurity and conflict	49%	49%
Deprivation of rights and freedoms	37%	35%
Lack of access to services/corruption	22%	29%
Personal or family reasons	37%	10%
Culture of migration	7%	8%
Natural disaster or environmental factors	3%	2%

n=612, multi-select ■ Women (n=217) ■ Men (n=395)

Additionally, gender-based discrimination also drives migration, particularly for women. Many of these individuals may face systemic exclusion and gender-based discriminatory practices, compelling them to flee in search of safety, acceptance, and opportunity. Women experiencing domestic violence or facing challenges related to divorce or widowhood, especially in contexts where legal protections or societal support systems are weak, may be compelled to migrate for safety and autonomy.[35] Such pressures, combined with limited regular migration options—whether due to legal, economic, or cultural barriers—can increase the likelihood that women will pursue irregular migration routes.

> *"Women in some countries for example, have to obtain the written approval of their husbands to migrate, so, they prefer using the irregular route to migrate. Some leave due to domestic violence or other things so, documents are forged to enable them to come to Malaysia." (Key informant interview, NGO, Malaysia, MY8)*
>
> *"It is divorced women, separated from her husband or also have a lack of social status in their rural areas. These people are vulnerable to choosing those irregular route or human smuggling [due to familial and economic pressures]." (Key informant interview, academia, Bangladesh, BD7)*
>
> *"I'm generalising, they [women] don't normally leave their home by choice, but because the husband has died, left home or not earning enough. They've decided to take on the man's role and make money, leaving behind their families." (Key informant interview, academia, Malaysia, MY4)*

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35   Key informant interviews (academia, Bangladesh, BD7), (academia, Malaysia, MY4), (NGO, Malaysia, MY8); Pradipta, Lengga. 2022. Reclaiming Dignity, Reasserting Agency: Female Labour Migration in Indonesia.

Situational

Situational vulnerability factors are "temporary challenges that negatively affect the situation of a person in a specific period and in a specific context."[36]

Economic pressures

Individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds, particularly those facing unemployment or underemployment, are more likely to consider migration as a means to improve their economic prospects. Economic motivations are often one of the primary drivers of migration, with many individuals seeking job opportunities abroad due to a lack of employment prospects or the prevalence of low wages in their home countries. This is especially true in rural areas, where unemployment rates are high, and job opportunities are scarce.

For many respondents interviewed from Bangladesh **(91%, 68 out of 75)**, Cambodia **(53%, 40 out of 75)**, Indonesia **(99%, 81 out of 82)**, and Lao PDR **(100%, 76 out of 76)** (see Figure 4), the pursuit of economic opportunities aligns with broader trends observed in Malaysia and Thailand, where economic opportunities are a primary draw. Limited job prospects, low wages, and high unemployment in countries of origin, especially in rural areas, drive the search for better livelihoods abroad. However, this economic drive is frequently intertwined with other considerations, such as personal and family reasons, as well as with cultural patterns of migration. The entrenched migration culture along corridors between Malaysia and Indonesia or Thailand and neighbouring countries such as Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar reinforces the perception that overseas opportunities are inherently more promising than local options.

As several key informants noted below, this migration culture, driven by the hope for a better life, positions migration as an aspirational goal—a belief that economic success and opportunity lie abroad. This aspirational view can be a powerful motivator, but it also exacerbates the vulnerability of those who may not have access to safe, regular migration channels, pushing them toward riskier, irregular pathways.

> *"Although the government seems to have brought a lot of development in terms of infrastructure development in the country, many of the population remain unemployed and also haven't benefited from it. They are also unable to participate in the political processes, political systems. So they would rather go and look for something outside the country. That also increased the tendency to go overseas in whatever routes." (Key informant interview, academia, Bangladesh, BD7)*

> *"They [migrants] call it 'traditional migration'. It's like cultural migration, when migrants have families abroad [in Malaysia]. This is common in the east of Indonesia. They are asked to move abroad because they have communities there." (Key informant interview, International Organisation, Indonesia, ID3)*

> *"They should also work on cultural perceptions, challenge the idea that going abroad is better than being in Bangladesh. There are also some migrants who feel they can do better by going overseas, instead of staying in Bangladesh. In this sense, migration is also aspirational, and they want to go by any means." (Key informant interview, NGO, Bangladesh, BD4)*

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36   ICAT (2022) Addressing vulnerability to trafficking in persons. Issue brief 12, accessible at https://icat.un.org/sites/g/files/tmzbdl461/files/publications/icat_issue_brief_12_vulnerability_to_tip.pdf

Rural location

Populations in rural areas are particularly at risk of irregular migration due to their isolation from formal information channels and services. As a result, these communities often rely on informal networks, which may provide misleading or incomplete advice about migration. Information-seeking behaviour among prospective migrants, particularly in rural communities is shaped by their perception of the potential benefits of migration. Many individuals perceive migration as a pathway to economic improvement and are often willing to trust informal networks and agents who promise opportunities abroad.

> *"It's usually the poorest and most rural populations that are vulnerable to irregular migration. Those specifically from West Nusa Tenggara who go to Malaysia through Batam, and those from East Nusa Tenggara who go to Malaysia through Nunukan and then to Sulawesi. (Key informant interview, NGO, Indonesia, ID7)*

> *"People who want to go abroad think of it as an opportunity. They trust people who offer them opportunities, it's ok for them. 50–60 per cent of Bangladeshis who are leaving come from rural areas; they don't have the knowledge of what irregular migration is. They don't know that they are going through illegal procedures, and they just want to go abroad and earn some money." (Key informant interview, NGO, Bangladesh, BD5)*

The lack of access to reliable information exacerbates this dependence on word-of-mouth information and local agents, creating opportunities for exploitation by fraudulent groups. These entities capitalise on the information gaps in rural areas, offering services for a fee that may ultimately lead to irregular migration and situations of exploitation and debt bondage. This misplaced trust heightens the vulnerabilities of migrants, especially in contexts where formal information channels are limited or ineffective.

> *"I think the risk increases based on how rural the area the migrant is coming from. It depends on how deep or rural the recruitment agent goes to recruit—because for these migrants they have no awareness, no access to information, they have no way to verify. For them, a job opportunity is God sent." (Key informant interview, International Organisation, Malaysia, MY3*

> *"60–70 per cent of prospective migrant workers are women living in rural areas. Geographically, they are remote. We found that because of that, there is some dependency on the brokers to process their documentation and other things that relate to the documentation requirements for migration. It also happens because there is no valid information from the government on safe migration and on the process for migration at the village level, close to their house or the community. So, all the information is from the brokers" (Key informant interview, International Organisation, Indonesia, ID3).*

Lack of reliable Information

Compounding these vulnerability factors is a lack of reliable information about safe and regular migration processes and risks of irregular migration.[37] Overall, **51 percent** of respondents reported having unmet information needs prior to their journey. Among those respondents (n=208), the primary barrier to accessing information was its availability—**27 percent** indicated that no information was available, or that the information they received was unclear or insufficient.

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37   Key informant interviews (NGO, Bangladesh, BD1); (Migrant-led organisation, Bangladesh, BD3); (NGO, Bangladesh, BD5); (Migrant-led organisation, Indonesia, ID1); (International organisation, Indonesia, ID2); (International organisation, Indonesia, ID3); (Migrant-led organisation, Indonesia, ID5); (International organisation, Malaysia, MY5); (NGO, Thailand, TH2); (Labour right expert, Thailand, TH6).

In rural areas, where outreach from government and non-government entities is minimal, this information gap is particularly pronounced. This social isolation compounds the vulnerabilities faced by prospective migrants, as they may not have the support networks or resources needed to verify the information they receive or to seek alternative options. In such cases, the decision to migrate irregularly is often made not out of choice but out of necessity, driven by a combination of economic pressure, violence and insecurity, lack of opportunities, and misinformation. Individuals with low socio-economic status and education levels may face limited livelihood opportunities in their home countries, a situation even more pronounced for women who may face additional barriers, leading to a stronger inclination to pursue migration for better prospects.

In many cases, recruitment agents and brokers take advantage of the desperation and lack of knowledge among prospective migrants.[38] They may promise jobs, legal documentation, or safe passage, only to later deceive or abandon the migrants once payment has been made. This dependency on brokers, in the absence of accessible regular pathways and reliable information, coupled with a lack of formal education and economic opportunities, creates a situation where irregular migration becomes not just an option, but often the only perceived avenue to achieve their migration goals. This issue is particularly prominent among migrants from Bangladesh and Indonesia. Women facing intersecting vulnerabilities are also an easy target, highlighting how various vulnerability factors intersect and influence irregular migration dynamics (see Figure 2). Key informants from Bangladesh and Indonesia emphasised this point:

> *"For women, it is divorced women, separated from her husband or also have a lack of social status in their rural areas. These people are vulnerable to choosing those irregular routes or human smuggling. Because the traffickers or human smugglers or unscrupulous intermediaries try to target these vulnerable populations for sending them overseas through irregular routes"* (Key informant interview, academia, Bangladesh, BD7)

> *"In some communities, people are not aware about the safe migration process. There are some countries where women migrant workers are received with expenses covered. But, fraudulent groups use this as an opportunity because of the ignorance of migrants, and offer their services and charge them for it."* (Key informant interview, International Organisation, Bangladesh, BD2)

Contextual

Contextual vulnerability factors stem from the broader structural and policy-related issues that shape migration decisions. These factors, when combined with intersecting personal and situational vulnerability factors discussed above, create highly challenging environments that leave certain individuals more susceptible to irregular migration.

Conflict, insecurity, and persecution

Ongoing conflict and persecution, particularly after the 2021 military takeover in Myanmar, add layers of complexity to migration decisions. Among respondents from Myanmar, these factors are one of the key reasons for leaving, with **88 percent** of Rohingya **(198 out of 225)** and **78 percent** of respondents from other ethnic groups **(62 out of 79)** citing them as factors for leaving (see Figure 4). The recent conscriptions imposed since February 2024 have further exacerbated the situation.

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38   Key informant interviews (NGO, Bangladesh, BD1); (International organisation, Bangladesh, BD2); (academia, Bangladesh, BD7); (International organisation, Indonesia, ID2); (International organisation, Indonesia, ID3); (International organisation, Malaysia, MY3); (Government, Malaysia, MY6); (NGO, Malaysia, MY8).

> *"After the Myanmar coup, and especially in 2024, things escalated in Myanmar and now we see hundreds of thousands of Myanmarese leaving Myanmar for survival. This is especially so with the younger generation because they are forced to join the military. Many flee the country to avoid being enlisted in the military and they move to Thailand. There are 3 to 4 border points where people can cross daily from Myanmar to come into Thailand. Many use brokers [for irregular migration]."* (Key informant interview, NGO, Thailand, TH4)

For many, the decision to migrate is also intertwined with economic pressures, creating a complex dynamic where individuals are pushed to seek refuge abroad, especially within the context of the longstanding labour migration patterns from Myanmar to Thailand. The combination of political instability, violent repression, and economic hardship often compels individuals to turn to irregular channels, as formal migration pathways are either inaccessible or perceived as ineffective. Similarly, deteriorating conditions in Cox's Bazar, where many Rohingya have sought refuge following their displacement from Myanmar, have contributed to the growing trend of onward migration. Insecurity, lack of access to basic services, and the harsh living conditions in refugee camps have driven many Rohingya to seek new destinations, including Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand. Given their statelessness, which is one of the key personal vulnerability factors discussed above, many Rohingya are left with no option but to undertake irregular migration routes in search of safety and better prospects.

> *"When we worked with the refugee camps and also with the host communities in Cox's Bazar, my observation is that in terms of freedoms, access to employment, and education is limited to refugees."* (Key informant interview, NGO, Bangladesh, BD1)

Environmental and climate factors

Environmental and climate factors are increasingly recognised as a driver of migration, with **11 percent** of Cambodian respondents (n=75) identifying natural disaster(s) or environmental factors as one of the reasons for leaving Cambodia—the highest rate observed across all groups studied (see Figure 4). More often, however, the impacts of climate change and environmental stressors act as underlying drivers of cross-border migration rather than direct triggers and may therefore be underestimated.[39] This highlights the growing influence of climate and environmental factors on migration dynamics, although further research is necessary to fully understand their long-term impact on migration patterns.

In Bangladesh, environmental factors have also emerged as a migration driver. Bangladesh ranked 7th among the countries most affected by extreme weather events between 2000 and 2019,[40] making climate-related stressors a prominent concern. While current climate-induced migration is primarily internal—such as movement from rural areas to urban centres—there is a growing recognition of the potential for international migration driven by environmental change. As environmental stressors increasingly play a direct and indirect role in decision-making, many individuals may have little choice but to pursue irregular migration routes in search of safety and better economic opportunities. This is particularly true when regular migration pathways are inaccessible due to legal, financial, or political barriers.

While climate-related factors are generally not the primary drivers of cross-border migration, they function as a vulnerability multiplier, intensifying pre-existing vulnerabilities. For instance, among Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar, climate-related and environment stressors further deteriorate economic livelihoods and living conditions within the camps, compounding the existing drivers of irregular migration.[41] Similarly, in Pakistan, while the 2022 floods initially resulted in large-scale internal

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39   MMC (2022) Climate change, environmental stressors, and mixed migration, accessible at https://mixedmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/254_Climate-Change_Key-Messages.pdf; MMC (2024) Impact of Climate Change on the Migration and Displacement Dynamics of Rohingya Refugees, accessible at https://mixedmigration.org/resource/climate-change-rohingya/

40   Germanwatch (2021) Global Climate Risk Index 2021, accessible at https://www.germanwatch.org/en/19777

41   MMC (2023) Impact of Climate Change on the Migration and Displacement Dynamics of Rohingya Refugees, accessible at https://mixedmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/334_Research-Report-Climate-Change-Rohingya.pdf
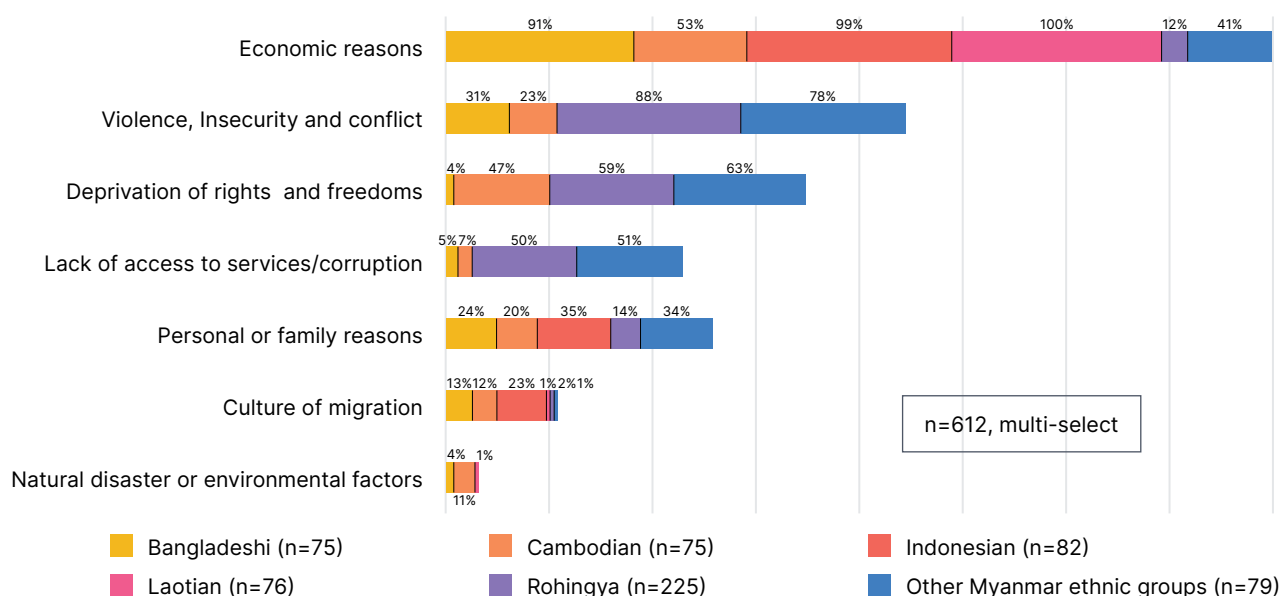
displacement, the subsequent economic repercussions on an already fragile economy, constrained by the inaccessibility of regular migration pathways, played a critical role in driving the surge in irregular migration to Europe in the months that followed.[42]

> *"Climate migration is also becoming an issue. This will also be a driver for people going abroad. This is being talked about very little. This is a big issue, but there's not much capacity for this among government officials. Some CSOs are working on creating awareness, right now. The conversation is still on the impact of climate change on internal migration but eventually people will have to go abroad." (Key informant interview, NGO, Bangladesh, BD5)*
>
> *"There is climate change, so those who live in the coastal regions will be vulnerable to irregular migration." (Key informant interview, trade union, Indonesia, ID4)*

Figure 4. For what reasons did you leave your country of origin? (by country of origin)

n=612, multi-select

Bangladeshi (n=75) Cambodian (n=75) Indonesian (n=82)
Laotian (n=76) Rohingya (n=225) Other Myanmar ethnic groups (n=79)

Inaccessible regular pathways

One of the primary reasons migrants turn to irregular migration is the inaccessibility of regular migration pathways. Among all survey respondents, **85 percent** indicated they did not consider regular migration pathways (see Figure 5).[43] This trend is most pronounced among Rohingya respondents (n=225), with **92 percent** indicating they did not consider regular pathways, and in particular relates to their statelessness status as discussed above. Among those who did not consider regular migration (n=521), the perception that irregular migration is the only viable route is strong, with **37 percent** of those who did not consider regular pathways viewing irregular migration as their only option. This sentiment is especially evident among **Rohingya (61%, 126 out of 206)** and **Cambodian (60%, 37 out of 62)** respondents.

> *"People understand that some countries will not give them access, and that is why they pay smugglers to facilitate entry to other countries" (Key informant interview, International Organisation, Bangladesh, BD2)*

42   Huang, L. (2023) Climate Migration 101: An Explainer, accessible at https://mixedmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/334_Research-Report-Climate-Change-Rohingya.pdf

43   This pattern is consistent across gender – 84% women and 86% men did not consider regular migration pathways.

The inaccessibility of regular migration channels is compounded by a variety of factors, which intersect with broader vulnerabilities discussed above such as economic pressures, conflict, lack of reliable information, and statelessness. For instance, among **Bangladeshi** respondents, **50 out of the 55 respondents** who did not consider regular pathways reported that agents, smugglers, or facilitators were the ones who chose irregular routes, indicating a reliance on intermediaries to navigate migration options. Similarly, **34 out of 64 Laotian** respondents followed the advice of friends or family to pursue irregular pathways, further illustrating how informal networks often guide individuals towards irregular routes.

In Indonesia, the appeal of irregular migration is linked to the perceived affordability and speed of these routes. **46 out of 68 Indonesian** respondents cited irregular pathways as being cheaper and faster than regular migration options. This highlights a key reason why irregular migration can become the preferred option for those facing limited financial resources. However, as noted by one of the key informants below, while irregular migration is often perceived as less costly than regular pathways and is, therefore, a preferred option for prospective migrants, this is not always the case. For example, a study by ILO reveals that the average recruitment cost for a regular Indonesian migrant working in Malaysia's plantation industry ranges between USD 401 and USD 500. This is actually lower than the average smuggling fee of USD 720 paid by Indonesian migrants who entered Malaysia irregularly, as highlighted in a study by UNODC.[44] Similarly, for Bangladeshi and Rohingya migrants, reported smuggling fees were significantly higher than the costs that would be incurred if regular travel via direct flights was possible.[45] This challenges the assumption that irregular migration is inherently cheaper. Further research is needed to critically assess and compare the costs of regular and irregular migration pathways in different contexts.

> *"If you break the contract [through regular labour migration], you forfeit everything you paid and you get into the debt. Some people want flexibility in being able to choose employers. So, the formal regular channels are cumbersome, expensive and take a long time. (Key informant interview, NGO, Thailand, TH5)*

> *"Formal channels take time, there are processes. Irregular pathways provide shortcuts. It has somehow become a quick solution for people who want to leave their countries. It is not always cost that is the factor because some irregular channels can also be more costly than regular channels. It is the time it takes to migrate. (Key informant interview, International Organisation, Malaysia, MY5)*

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44   ILO (2022) Cost of recruitment in the Indonesia–Malaysia migration corridor, accessible at https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/@asia/@ro-bangkok/documents/publication/wcms_840109.pdf; UNODC (2024) Migrant Smuggling in Southeast Asia - Research Findings on Migrant Smuggling in Southeast Asia, accessible at https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glosom/Observatory/2024/ObservatorySOM_SEA_ResearchBrief.pdf

45   MMC (2024) Following the money: Understanding the economics of human smuggling in Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, accessible at https://mixedmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/331_Following-the-money-Smuggling.pdf

Figure 5. Have you ever considered regular migration pathways?
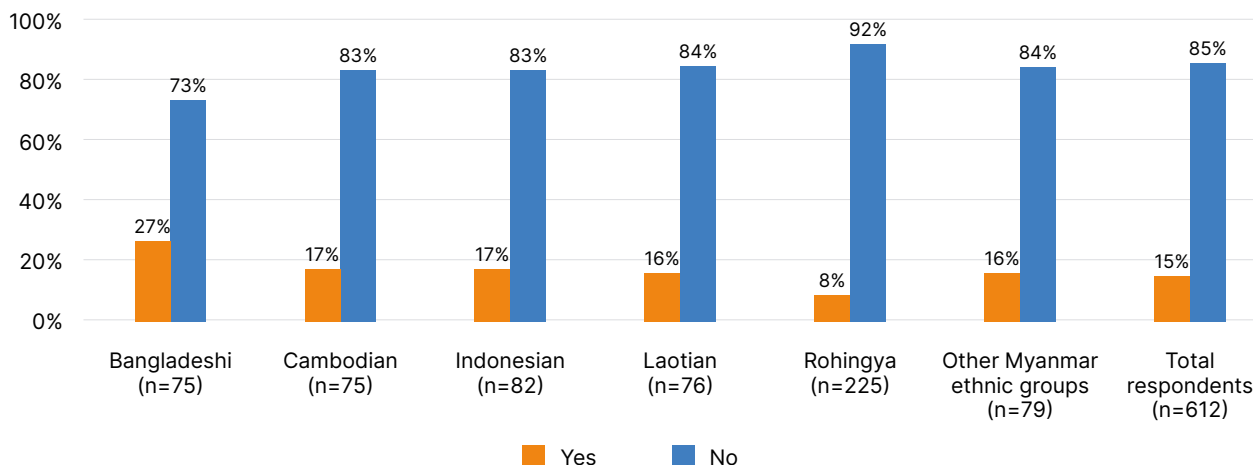
Among the **15 percent** (n=91) who did consider regular migration pathways, significant barriers prevented them from pursuing these options. Key obstacles included a lack of legal documentation **(49%)** and unaffordable costs **(36%)**. Even where regular migration channels exist, they are often too costly,[46] bureaucratically complex, or come with stringent requirements—such as health conditions and age limits—that many prospective migrants cannot meet (see quotes below). Additionally, public offices related to migration matters are often concentrated in urban areas, making them inaccessible to those from rural regions. Some migrants turn to irregular routes precisely because regular migration pathways are often inflexible, tying them to specific employers or destinations, which may not align with their needs or aspirations. These structural barriers, coupled with the economic, political, and social pressures many migrants face, push individuals towards irregular migration routes. Viewed as the only practical option, these pathways, while offering immediate escape, often expose migrants to greater risks, including exploitation, trafficking in persons, and dangerous travel conditions.

> *"Age is also a factor. In some sectors of work, like domestic work, there is an age limit for formal migration. So, migrants who have experience but have exceeded the age limit can't migrate formally. (Key informant interview, trade union, Indonesia, ID4)*
>
> *"Many migrants migrate irregularly because they don't have birth certificates or other official documents that are needed to make their passports. So, they have no choice but to go through the irregular methods to come into Malaysia. (Key informant interview, NGO, Malaysia, MY8)*
>
> *"From labour migrant context, many of them also tried to go through regular route but because some of them have health issues and due to that health issues, they are not eligible to go through regular route. So then they try to use the irregular route because of the health issues. (Key informant interview, academia, Bangladesh, BD7)*

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46 Note that this is not necessarily always the case, as demonstrated in MMC (2024) Following the money: Understanding the economics of human smuggling in Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, accessible at https://mixedmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/331_Following-the-money-Smuggling.pdf, where the findings challenge the assumption that irregular migration is inherently less costly than regular pathways and therefore always a preferred option, particularly among Bangladeshi and Rohingya respondents.

Diverging perceptions of irregular migration across stakeholders

Exploring varying perspectives provides a comprehensive understanding of the migration landscape and highlights areas where policy and public discourse may need to be aligned with the realities faced by refugees and migrants. The assessment highlights varied perceptions of irregular migration across different stakeholders.

Perceptions among refugees and migrants

Views on irregular migration varied significantly across different respondent groups, reflecting their unique experiences and circumstances. Negative views of irregular migration were particularly prominent among Rohingya respondents (n=225), with **65 percent** perceiving it negatively or very negatively. Similarly, **48 percent** of respondents from Bangladesh **(36 out of 75)** and **45 percent** from Indonesia **(37 out of 82)** held negative views about irregular migration (see Figure 6). Among other Myanmar ethnic groups, **18 percent (14 out of 79)** expressed negative perceptions. Despite originating from the same country, the difference in perception between Rohingya and other Myanmar ethnic groups is likely linked to their experiences of protection incidents such as detention and physical violence during

migration. **91 percent** of Rohingya respondents **(204 out of 225)** reported encountering protection incidents, compared to **47 percent** of other Myanmar ethnic groups **(37 out of 79)**. In comparison, **81 percent** of respondents from Cambodia **(61 out of 75)** and **71 percent** of respondents from Laos **(54 out of 76)** held positive or neutral views on irregular migration. The more favourable perceptions among Cambodian and Laotian respondents may be due to the lower costs associated with irregular migration pathways,[47] the relative ease of crossing porous borders, and the economic opportunities available in neighbouring Thailand. These factors likely address their primary drivers for migration, as previously discussed, and potentially outweigh the negative experiences of abuse during the journey.

> *"They [Cambodian] prefer not to come through regular channels because it is expensive, and they want the freedom to move from one job to another easily. They also want the freedom to go home and pay visits to their families when they choose." (Key informant interview, labour rights expert, Thailand, TH6)*
>
> *"I took a leap of faith, not knowing what awaited me, but I'm grateful for the opportunity to start a new life here" (Survey respondent from Myanmar, 19 years old, female)*

Figure 6. How do you perceive irregular migration in general?
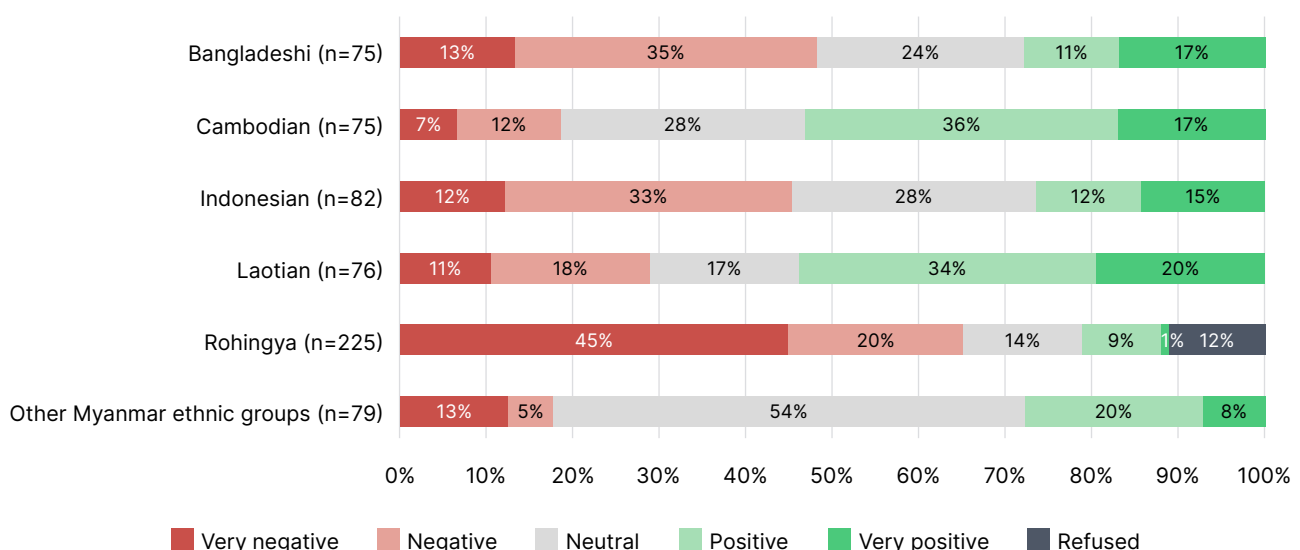
Perceptions of irregular migration correlate with individuals' reflections on whether they would have chosen the same path in hindsight. Those with neutral or positive views of irregular migration were more likely to reaffirm their decision to migrate irregularly. This was particularly evident among Laotian **(83%, 63 out of 76)**, Cambodian **(64%, 48 out of 75)**, and respondents from other Myanmar ethnic groups **(62%, 49 out of 79)**, where the majority would still have chosen the same migration route (see Figure 7).

In contrast, those with negative perceptions of irregular migration were more likely to regret their decision to migrate irregularly. This was notably the case for Rohingya and Bangladeshi respondents—**57 percent** of Rohingya **(129 out of 225)** and **49 percent** of Bangladeshis **(37 out of 75)** reported that, in hindsight, they would not have irregularly migrated knowing what they now know. These findings highlight the potential role of information in shaping migration decisions in some contexts. For both Bangladeshi and Rohingya respondents, enhancing information availability about the realities of irregular

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47   A report by MMC (2024) Following the money: Understanding the economics of human smuggling in Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, accessible at https://mixedmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/331_Following-the-money-Smuggling.pdf, revealed that the average smuggling costs for Cambodian and Laotian to reach Thailand were about USD 158 and USD 19, respectively.

migration and regular migration alternatives, where available, could play a role in reducing irregular migration. However, it is crucial to recognise that, for the Rohingya, the impact of information alone is stymied by the broader systemic challenges they face, including—notably—their lack of citizenship and legal status, which severely restrict their options for regular migration. Therefore, while information dissemination is important, addressing the structural barriers to regular migration is also essential to providing viable alternatives. In this regard, information dissemination regarding irregular migration and regular migration alternatives would promote more informed decision-making across all groups.

A similar pattern emerged in the gender comparison—**41 percent**[48] of men **(161 out of 395)** reported that, in hindsight, they would not have taken an irregular migration pathway, nearly twice the proportion of women **(23%, 49 out of 215)**.[49] This difference appears to correspond with their perceptions of irregular migration: **52 percent** of men **(205 out of 395)** viewed it negatively or very negatively, compared to **29 percent** of women **(64 out of 217)**.

Figure 7. **In retrospect, would you have taken an irregular pathway knowing what you know now?**
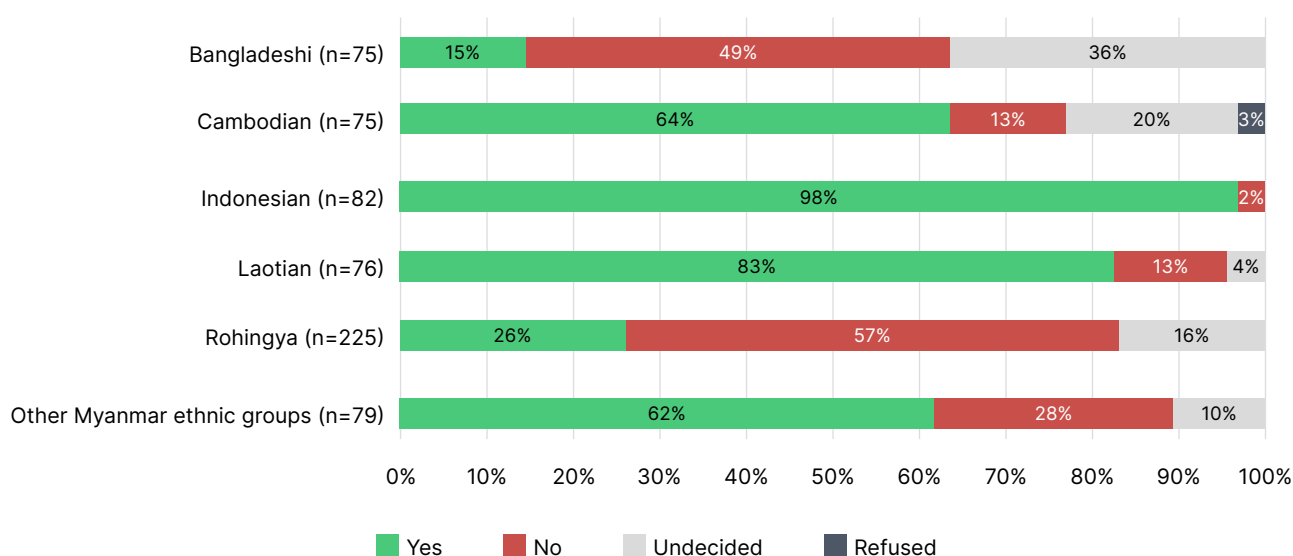
Indonesian respondents (n=82), however, present a unique case, suggesting that perception alone may not be a decisive factor in shaping migration choices. While **45 percent** of Indonesian respondents perceived irregular migration negatively, **98 percent** would still have chosen the same pathway, knowing what they now know. This challenges the common assumption that individuals would reconsider their decision to pursue irregular migration if better informed. As a survey respondent noted below, the need to leave for better prospects often outweighs the challenges of being in an irregular status, including the exploitation they may face. A key informant from Indonesia also highlighted that irregular migration could be perceived as a way to bypass recruitment agencies,[50] offering a win-win solution for both migrants and employers.

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48   46% of men reported yes and 14% were undecided.

49   60% of women reported yes and 17% were undecided.

50   This is particularly relevant for employment of domestic workers, where Indonesians made up about 80 per cent of Malaysia's foreign domestic workforce, accessible at https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/nearly-third-domestic-workers-malaysia-forced-labour-conditions-un-agency-2023-06-16/#:~:text=Indonesians%20make%20up%20about%2080,improve%20protections%20for%20domestic%20workers. Under the 2022 MoU on the Employment and Protection of Indonesian Domestic Migrant Workers in Malaysia, employment must be facilitated through registered recruitment agencies in both Malaysia and Indonesia. This process can be costly for the employers, with expenses potentially reaching up to RM15,000 (USD 3,458 based on the exchange rate as of September 13). For migrants, despite the exemption of placement costs under Law on the Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers (No. 18/2017), they still incur expenses like transportations for mandatory health check-ups and passport applications, averaging IDR 30 million (USD 1,947), accessible at https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2024-02/ins-final_feasibility_study_report_empowering_migrant_final.pdf. This is enabled by relatively low smuggling costs to enter Malaysia, averaging USD 720. See Malaysian Immigration Department (n.d.) Foreign Domestic Helper, accessible at https://www.imi.gov.my/index.php/en/main-services/foreign-domestic-helper-fdh/; MMC (2024) Following the money: Understanding the economics of human smuggling in Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, accessible at https://mixedmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/331_Following-the-money-Smuggling.pdf; UNDP (2024) Empowering Migrants Workers: Feasibility Study of Innovative Financing Mechanism on Labour Migration, accessible at https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2024-02/ins-final_feasibility_study_report_empowering_migrant_final.pdf.

> *"All of us doing this hard works is because of our children and families because they need us. Otherwise, I would not migrate and tolerate this humiliation."* (Survey respondent from Indonesia, 34 years old, male, Malaysia)

> *"Migrants tell me that irregular migration benefits everyone. Employer doesn't need to pay the agency. Employees also don't need to pay the agency."* (Key informant interview, migrant-led organisation Indonesia, ID5)

> *"I don't like the migration. If I can make my life at home, I would go back right now."* (Survey respondent from Indonesia, 23 years old, male, Malaysia)

Perceptions among host populations in Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand[51]

Perceptions of irregular migration vary significantly between host communities and communities in the countries of origin. In host countries, refugees and migrants, particularly those in irregular situations, are increasingly stigmatised within local communities. A key factor contributing to this is the approach to migration management, which often frames these groups through the lens of national security concerns and xenophobia. This perception is further amplified by media narratives and hate campaigns on social media, reinforcing negative stereotypes. The stigma is driven by several factors, including perceived socio-economic burdens, security concerns, and cultural tensions. Host communities frequently view migrants as a strain on local resources and public services. The mass arrivals of refugees and migrants are sometimes associated with increased competition for jobs and heightened security risks, which further exacerbates negative attitudes. These sentiments are also reflected in survey findings, where a high proportion of respondents (ranging from 44% to 67% across all groups) reported encountering negative perceptions from host communities (see Figure 8).

Xenophobic sentiments can escalate during times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. In Malaysia, negative discourse about the Rohingya population surfaced on social media, with some attributing the spread of the virus to them.[52] Economic challenges, such as those caused by the pandemic, can also influence local perceptions, with cases of migrants sometimes being unfairly blamed amidst heightened anxiety and insecurity during the lockdown period. This contrasts with Malaysia's heavy reliance on migrant workers for essential, yet often highly stigmatised roles such as dangerous, dirty, and difficult (3D) jobs.[53] During this period, policies aimed at preventing irregular migration, including pushback measures, created challenges for refugees and undocumented migrants, as both groups were categorised similarly under the Immigration Act 1963.[54]

> *"I think negative opinions escalated during COVID. I think that in the past, without social media there was more limited communication and so the negative perceptions are not amplified. People may not be aware of the scale of irregular migration, or they have lack of information, or cannot react immediately. I think the negative perception towards irregular migrants may have been there already, but there was no opportunity to express it. COVID gave them space."* (Key informant interview, International Organisation, Malaysia, MY5)

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51   Note that this finding is based on migrants' experiences and observations of key informant interviews, rather than direct feedback from the host populations.

52   Fortify Rights (2020) Malaysia: End Violent Threats and Anti-Rohingya Campaign, accessible at https://www.fortifyrights.org/mly-inv-2020-05-11/

53   Kumar, K. (2022) Malaysians shun '3D' jobs because of social stigma, not low wages, employers say, accessible at https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2016/02/17/malaysians-shun-3d-jobs-because-of-social-stigma-not-low-wages-employers-sa/1062173; Kumar, A. (2023) Social stigma fuels reliance on foreign workers in 3D jobs, accessible at https://www.sinardaily.my/article/213625/focus/national/social-stigma-fuels-reliance-on-foreign-workers-in-3d-jobs---analyst

54   Human Rights Watch (2020) Malaysia: Allow Rohingya Refugees Ashore - Covid-19 No Basis for Pushing Back Boats, accessible at https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/18/malaysia-allow-rohingya-refugees-ashore; Human Rights Watch (2020) Malaysia/Thailand: Allow Rohingya Refugees Ashore - End Pushbacks, Grant Access to Aid and Asylum, accessible at https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/06/12/malaysia/thailand-allow-rohingya-refugees-ashore
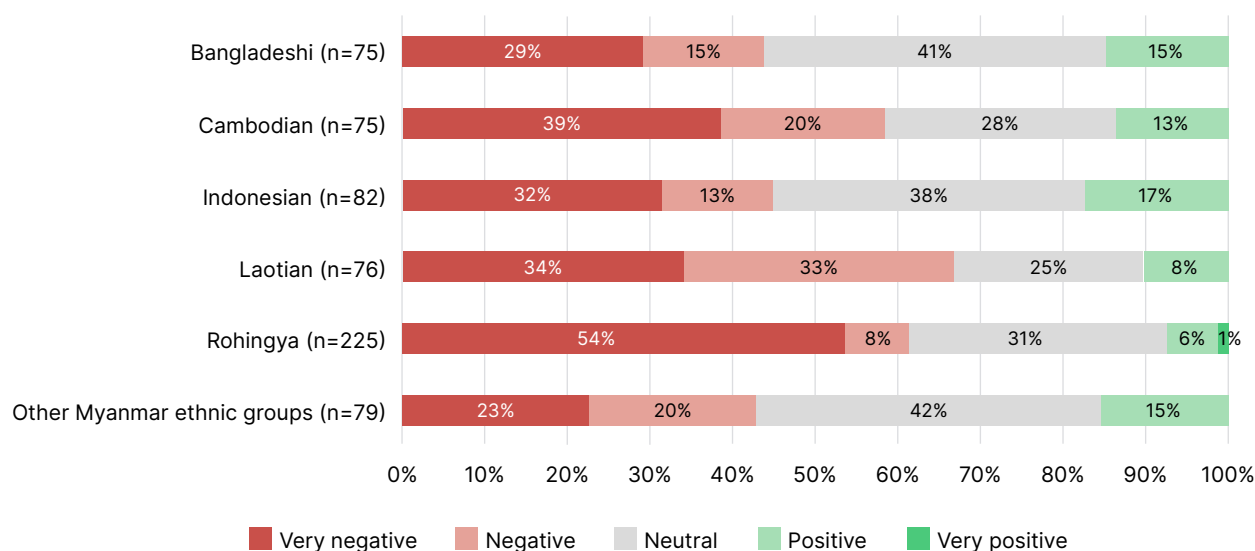
> *"Political parties were trying to unite the people of the Muslim faith, they called the refugees brothers and welcomed them. When economic conditions are worse, and locals are affected by the pandemic, losing jobs, they blame the migrants for it." (Key informant interview, NGO, Malaysia, MY7)*

Similarly, in Indonesia, the months leading up to the 2024 presidential election, against the backdrop of the largest surge in boat arrivals since 2014, saw a systematic hate campaign against the Rohingya on social media. The rhetoric painted them as a strain on local resources and a threat to community safety, a narrative that drastically shifted public sentiment in Aceh—a state that had previously received Rohingya refugees.[55] In Thailand, the recent mass arrival of refugees and migrants, driven largely by ongoing conflicts in Myanmar, has influenced host population sentiments. This mass arrival has generated both increased anxiety and heightened sympathy among the Thai population, reflecting a mixed response to the migrant populations. However, this perception contrasts with the findings of a recent study conducted among host communities in Bangkok, Mae Sot, and Chanthaburi, which reported generally positive attitudes towards refugees and migrants, particularly in terms of recognising their contribution to the labour market and their willingness to welcome and assist migrants.[56]

> *"With the conflict in Myanmar, there has been a slight perception shift, where people feel some sympathy for people coming to Thailand, but still people from Myanmar are seen as stealing jobs." (Key informant interview, NGO, Thailand, TH3)*

> *"It is changing a little now. We can see that change because of the influx of irregular migrants from Myanmar. When we follow social media, we see that there are people discriminating against them. For example, we see advertisements on apartment rentals saying, 'no Burmese allowed.' Some post on social media saying that Burmese are problematic. There is some social tension, and people are asking why the Thai government is not doing anything about the influx of Burmese migrants." (Key informant interview, labour rights expert, Thailand, TH6)*

Figure 8. What does the host community perceive of your status as an irregular migrant?

	Very negative	Negative	Neutral	Positive	Very positive
Bangladeshi (n=75)	29%	15%	41%	15%	
Cambodian (n=75)	39%	20%	28%	13%	
Indonesian (n=82)	32%	13%	38%	17%	
Laotian (n=76)	34%	33%	25%	8%	
Rohingya (n=225)	54%	8%	31%	6%	1%
Other Myanmar ethnic groups (n=79)	23%	20%	42%	15%	

55 Ratcliffe, R. & Syakriah, A. (2024) The online hate campaign turning Indonesians against Rohingya refugees, accessible at https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/jan/18/the-online-hate-campaign-turning-indonesians-against-rohingya-refugees; AFP (2024) Fake news, online hate swell Indonesia anti-Rohingya sentiment, accessible at https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20240203-fake-news-online-hate-swell-indonesia-anti-rohingya-sentiment.

56 IOM (2023) Shaping the migration narrative: Assessment of the public perception of migrants in Thailand, accessible at https://thailand.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl1371/files/documents/2024-03/public-perception-survey-findings_en.pdf. More specifically, 59% of respondents agreed to welcoming migrants, 78% agreed that migrant workers fill existing gaps in the Thai labour market, and 70% willing to assist migrants facing language barriers.

Perceptions among communities and prospective migrants in countries of origin[57]

In stark contrast, the perceptions within the countries of origin, as reported by migrants and key informants, exhibit a more nuanced picture. According to survey respondents from all groups, the majority indicated that their communities in the country of origin held a neutral or positive view of irregular migration (ranging from **75% to 89%** across all groups) (see Figure 9). In **Bangladesh**, irregular migration is widely seen as an opportunity for better economic prospects.[58]

> *"People don't look at it too much negatively. There is poverty, unemployment. For survival, they look for opportunities to improve their situation. Socially, they don't look at it as an illegality." (Key informant interview, NGO, Bangladesh, BD4)*

Even among those who were aware of the potential risks involved with irregular migration, the promise of better living conditions and financial gains often outweighed concerns about safety. This optimism is bolstered by societal expectations, where financial remittances from abroad are viewed as pathways to social respect and communal support. Families often rally around aspiring migrants, willing to provide loans with the belief that their loved ones will secure lucrative jobs abroad. Moreover, irregular migration is sometimes perceived as a necessary, albeit risky, survival strategy in the face of poverty and unemployment, leading many to rationalise their decisions. While some migrants may have a vague understanding of the legality of their actions, they are often swayed by the narratives of success and resilience, viewing setbacks as mere misfortune rather than failures of the system. This mindset creates a cycle of aspiration and risk, wherein the allure of potential success outweighs the very real dangers of the journey.

> *"The journey, the expenses are huge. Smuggling costs are huge but most of the time, they don't become successful. They may have borrowed money or sold property and lose everything. Irregular migration is more expensive. But the expectation is that if you're successful, you make it back." (Key informant interview, International Organisation, Bangladesh, BD2)*
>
> *"To some extent, it is also to gain social respect. So, they give money to agents, willing to take loans of 5 to 6 lakh BDT. The family thinks that if they go abroad, they can support everyone. So, family members are willing to provide loans, they think that migrants can get big salaries." (Key informant interview, research institute, Bangladesh, BD6)*

In **Indonesia**, while there is a generally negative perception of irregular migration according to key informants,[59] the strong culture of migration and reliance on informal social networks lead many prospective migrants to be influenced by the positive narratives perpetuated by friends and family. The presence of these networks may downplay the associated risks and legal consequences.[60]

> *"The national perspective of irregular migration, people don't approve of it." (Key informant interview, migrant-led organisation, Indonesia, ID1)*

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57 Note that this finding is based on migrants' experiences and observations of key informant interviews, rather than direct feedback from the broader community itself.

58 Key informant interviews (migrant-led organisation, Bangladesh, BD3); (NGO, Bangladesh, BD4); (NGO, Bangladesh, BD5); (Research institute, Bangladesh, BD6); and (academia, Bangladesh, BD7).

59 Key informant interviews (migrant-led organisation, Indonesia, ID1), (International organisation, Indonesia, ID2); (International organisation, Indonesia, ID3); and (NGO, Indonesia, ID7).

60 Key informant interviews (International organisation, Indonesia, ID2) and (NGO, Indonesia, ID7).

> *"The general public do not agree with smuggling and irregular migration because many understand how dangerous the journey is." (Key informant interview, International Organisation, Indonesia, ID2)*

> *"I think for irregular migration, the perception has already become negative, especially for those who passed away. The media is often informing that bodies are returned to Indonesia. A lot of people don't survive irregular migration... the perception is already negative towards irregular migration. People see it as not something that is good." (Key informant interview, International Organisation, Indonesia, ID3)*

> *"The public generally frowns upon irregular migration because there is more awareness now of its dangers, but the vulnerable migrants themselves have less information on the dangers of it." (Key informant interview, NGO, Indonesia, ID7)*

> *"They see many from their village who migrated irregularly and have come back successful, so they are not deterred by popular sentiment on the dangers of irregular migration, if they know or hear about it." (Key informant interview, NGO, Indonesia, ID7)*

In **Myanmar**, while those who have migrated irregularly may express more negative views based on personal experiences, survey respondents also reported that the broader community generally held a neutral-to-positive view of irregular migration, with many seeing it as a viable alternative to the ongoing insecurity and economic challenges in the country.[61]

In contrast to host populations, irregular migration is often viewed through a lens of necessity in countries of origin. Communities may see migration as a crucial means for individuals to seek better opportunities, reflecting a more empathetic and understanding perspective. Cultural norms can also play a role in shaping the perception. Migration, including irregular migration, is often normalised within communities, and reinforced by established social networks that facilitate the process. These networks, as seen in Sulawesi, Indonesia, can provide logistical support but also perpetuate a cycle of irregular migration which may result in increased risks.

> *"Those in Sulawesi are also vulnerable to irregular migration as Sulawesi is very close to Malaysia and irregular migration networks are very well established there" (Key informant interview, NGO, Indonesia, ID7).*

> *"If you look at Indonesia and Malaysia, anthropologically, it was necessary to travel as a rite of passage, they call it 'merantau'. Otherwise, you're not considered a man... But, in the modern period, women are also doing it... for some countries, like Indonesia, migration patterns and choices are more historical. People have always crossed borders and so nation state boundaries can be artificial." (Key informant interview, academia, Malaysia, MY4)*

61   Key Informant Interviews (NGO, Indonesia, ID6); (Government, Malaysia, MY6); (NGO, Thailand, TH1); (NGO, Thailand, TH3); (NGO, Thailand, TH4); and (labour right expert, Thailand, TH7).

Prospective migrants may feel pressured to follow in the footsteps of friends or relatives who have migrated irregularly, believing that their connections will protect them from the risks. This sense of security, however, can lead to an underestimation of the dangers involved, compounding the risks they face. As key informants from Bangladesh and Indonesia pointed out:

> *"Some people don't care about regularity because they have friends and relatives in the destination country. They don't really consider the risk of the journey. They think that all they have to do, by hook or by crook, is to arrive at the destination" (Key informant interview, NGO, Bangladesh, BD1)*

> *"Many Indonesian migrants that are employed in Malaysia try to bring their family members through backdoor channels. Having a family member in Malaysia makes these groups of migrants more determined to migrate. Some within this group comprise children who have gone through dangerous journeys to Malaysia" (Key informant interview, International Organisation, Indonesia, ID2)*

Cultural norms that position migration as a primary pathway to economic success may also play a role in influencing perceptions. When regular migration avenues are perceived as too slow, costly, or inaccessible, individuals may feel compelled to consider irregular migration. The entrenched practice of migration within certain communities can create a sense of inevitability, where irregular migration becomes seen as a necessary step towards securing a better future, despite the potential hazards involved.

> *"The rest of the public thinks that as long you earn money, the question of regularity is not there. If he earns more, then it is ok. The views can be mixed. Some think it is risky and it is not good. But, if you have to go for work, and you have not many options, people understand." (Key informant interview, migrant-led organisation, Bangladesh, BD3)*
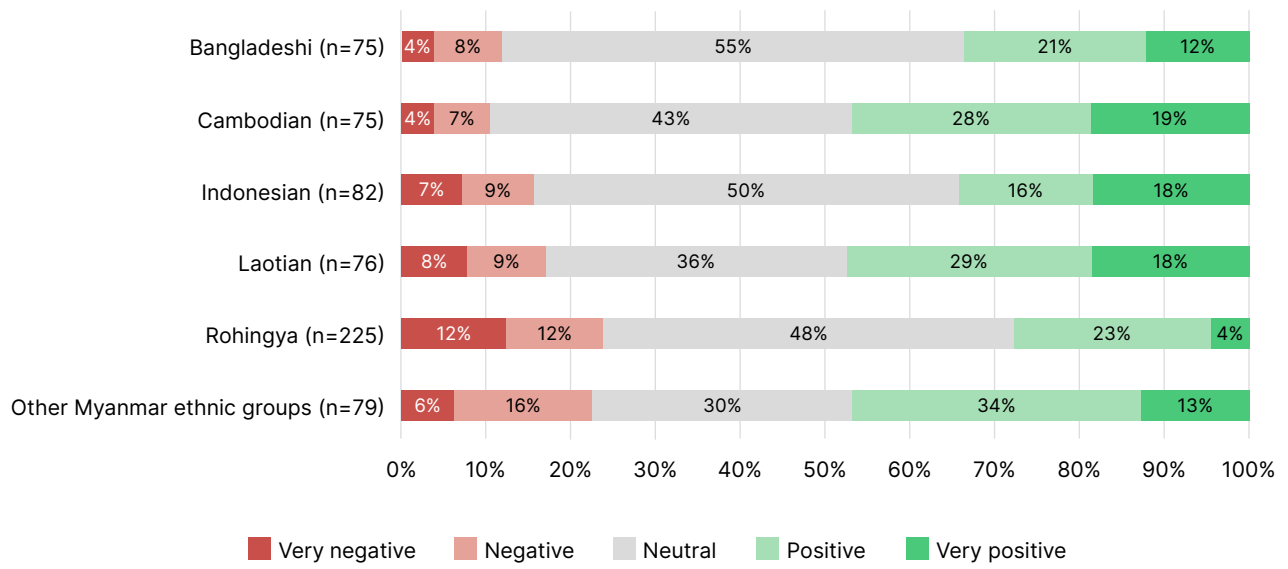
In Bangladesh and Indonesia, while key informants have noted improvements in terms of awareness about the dangers of irregular migration and protection, factors such as deeply ingrained migration practices and the norms outlined above as well as the lack of accessible regular pathways may have impeded significant changes in behaviour and actions.

> *"Of course, now there is more information that is available now, more organisations that work on migration issues. There are a lot of these actors that talk about protection of migrant workers. In the past, there was no such thing. But, since I returned as a migrant worker in 2017, there is always talk about protection. But the same issues persist." (Key informant interview, migrant-led organisation, Indonesia, ID5)*

> *"I think now the perception has changed. People usually prefer regular migration. There are safe migration campaigns. People are more worried about risks of irregular migration, but some still choose irregular migration because somehow, they are trapped in a particular situation." (Key informant interview, NGO, Bangladesh, BD1)*

This comparative analysis underscores the need for tailored approaches in addressing the concerns of both host communities and migrants' countries of origin. Policies aimed at host communities could benefit from initiatives that foster integration. Meanwhile, support for countries of origin should focus on providing better information and safe migration alternatives.

Figure 9. What does the community in your country of origin perceive of your status as an irregular migrant?

	Very negative	Negative	Neutral	Positive	Very positive
Bangladeshi (n=75)	4%	8%	55%	21%	12%
Cambodian (n=75)	4%	7%	43%	28%	19%
Indonesian (n=82)	7%	9%	50%	16%	18%
Laotian (n=76)	8%	9%	36%	29%	18%
Rohingya (n=225)	12%	12%	48%	23%	4%
Other Myanmar ethnic groups (n=79)	6%	16%	30%	34%	13%

Information needs of persons at risk of irregular migration
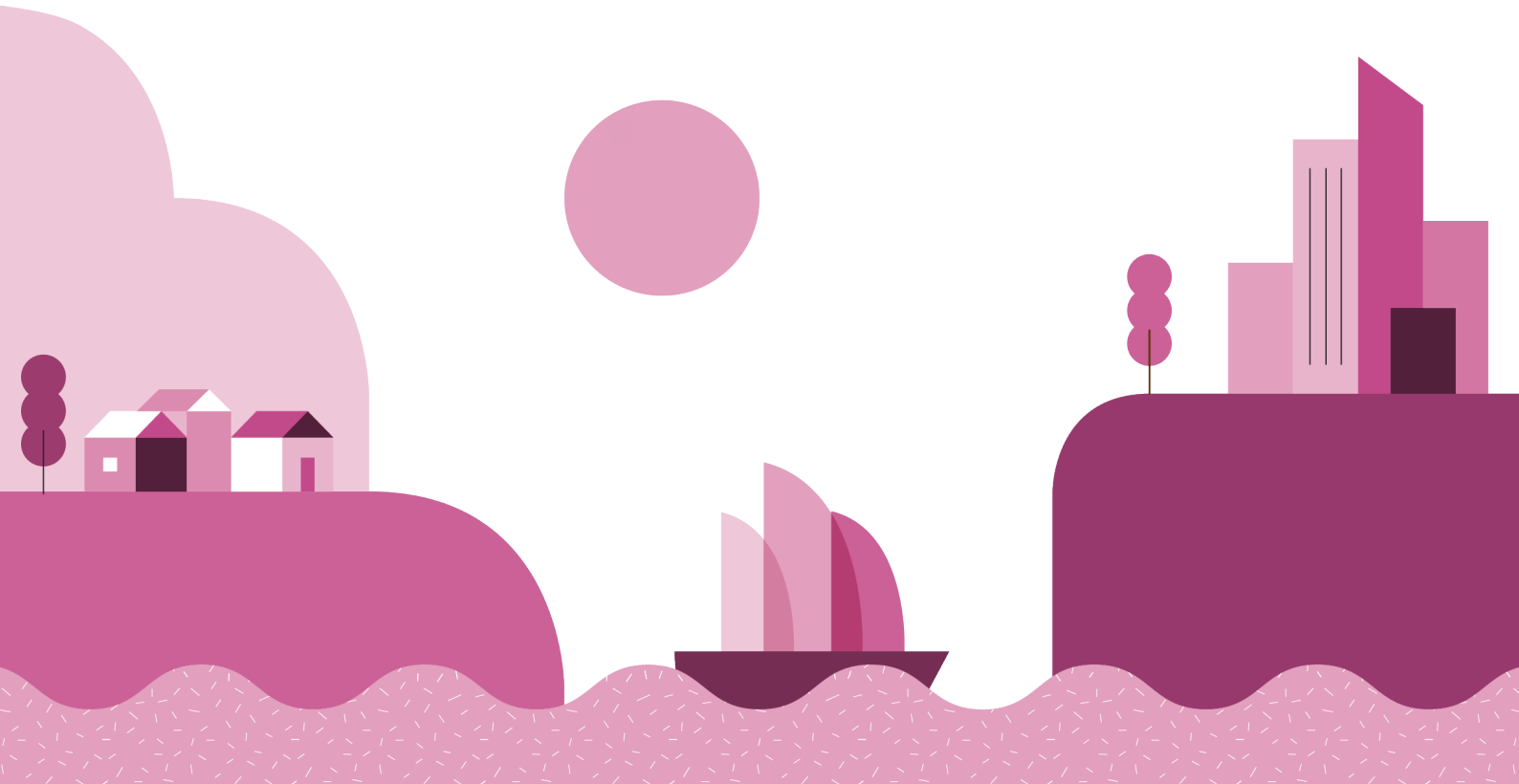
Information-seeking behaviours

The findings reveal significant insights into the information-seeking behaviours of refugees and migrants, where many respondents reported gaps in their pre-migration information-seeking behaviour. A notable portion of respondents, particularly from **Cambodia (37%, n=75)** and Myanmar **(36% Rohingya (n=225) and 39% from other Myanmar ethnic groups (n=79)** (see Figure 10), indicated that they did not actively seek information before migrating. This lack of information seeking may be due to other priorities, such as economic pressure and safety taking precedence over the need for information gathering, especially in contexts where issues such as political instability and conflict compel individuals to leave in haste, as seen in Myanmar's volatile environment. Furthermore, the aspiration to migrate, combined with a reliance on recruitment brokers or agents, often diminishes the perceived need for independent information gathering. The reliance on these intermediaries, particularly seen amongst Bangladeshi and Indonesian migrants, may lead migrants to feel that additional information is unnecessary, as the brokers or agents are expected to navigate the complexities of the migration process on their behalf.

> *"People who want to go abroad think of it as an opportunity. They trust people who offer them opportunities, it's ok for them. 50–60 per cent of Bangladeshis who are leaving come from rural areas; they don't have the knowledge of what irregular migration is. They don't know that they are going through illegal procedures, and they just want to go abroad and earn some money." (Key informant interview, NGO, Bangladesh, BD5)*

> *"Those who migrate from Bangladesh/Myanmar like the Rohingya and other communities from Myanmar who are probably pressured to leave their homeland for whatever reason, experienced threat to their lives." (Key informant interview, Government, Malaysia, MY6)*

Information-seeking behaviours also differed by gender. A higher proportion of women **(41%)** reported not actively seeking any information before migration, compared to men **(29%)**. This disparity may be due to traditional gender norms, where women's migration decision-making is often influenced by men, as discussed in Section 3, leaving women with less opportunity to seek out information prior to migration. This highlights a potential gap that could be addressed through targeted interventions aimed at empowering women to make more informed migration decisions (see Figure 11).

Even among those who sought information, misinformation and disinformation have been a challenge. Despite the improved accessibility of information, especially with the rise of social media as a viable outlet, social media can have a perverse effect by being used to perpetuate rather than alleviate misconceptions. Platforms such as Facebook provide easy access to narratives of successful migration but also serve as conduits for traffickers who promise lucrative job opportunities in foreign countries. As noted by several informants, prospective migrants may encounter cautionary tales about the dangers of irregular migration—such as drownings during perilous sea crossings—but the allure of success often overshadows these risks. Moreover, the presence of social media allows for the dissemination of both aspirational stories and misleading information, complicating the decision-making process for individuals who may struggle to ascertain the validity of the information they receive. The calculated risks taken by these individuals are driven by the hope of improving their living conditions, highlighting a significant gap in accurate, trustworthy information regarding safe migration practices.

> *"Sometimes, they have information about their migration, but when they arrive, they find the reality different from what was promised." (Key informant interview, NGO, Bangladesh, BD5)*

> *"I think people now have access to social media, newspaper stories, about those who went through Libya to Italy and get drowned. But even though knowing those things, people take those calculated risk or people are willing to take the risk because there is a 50–50 chance. If I made it successfully, I can build my life. So they feel motivated to take the risk even though they know there is mortality, there is risk of getting into indebted situation, but some of them are desperate." (Key informant interview, academia, Bangladesh, BD7)*

Figure 10. What information did you seek before migration? (by country of origin)
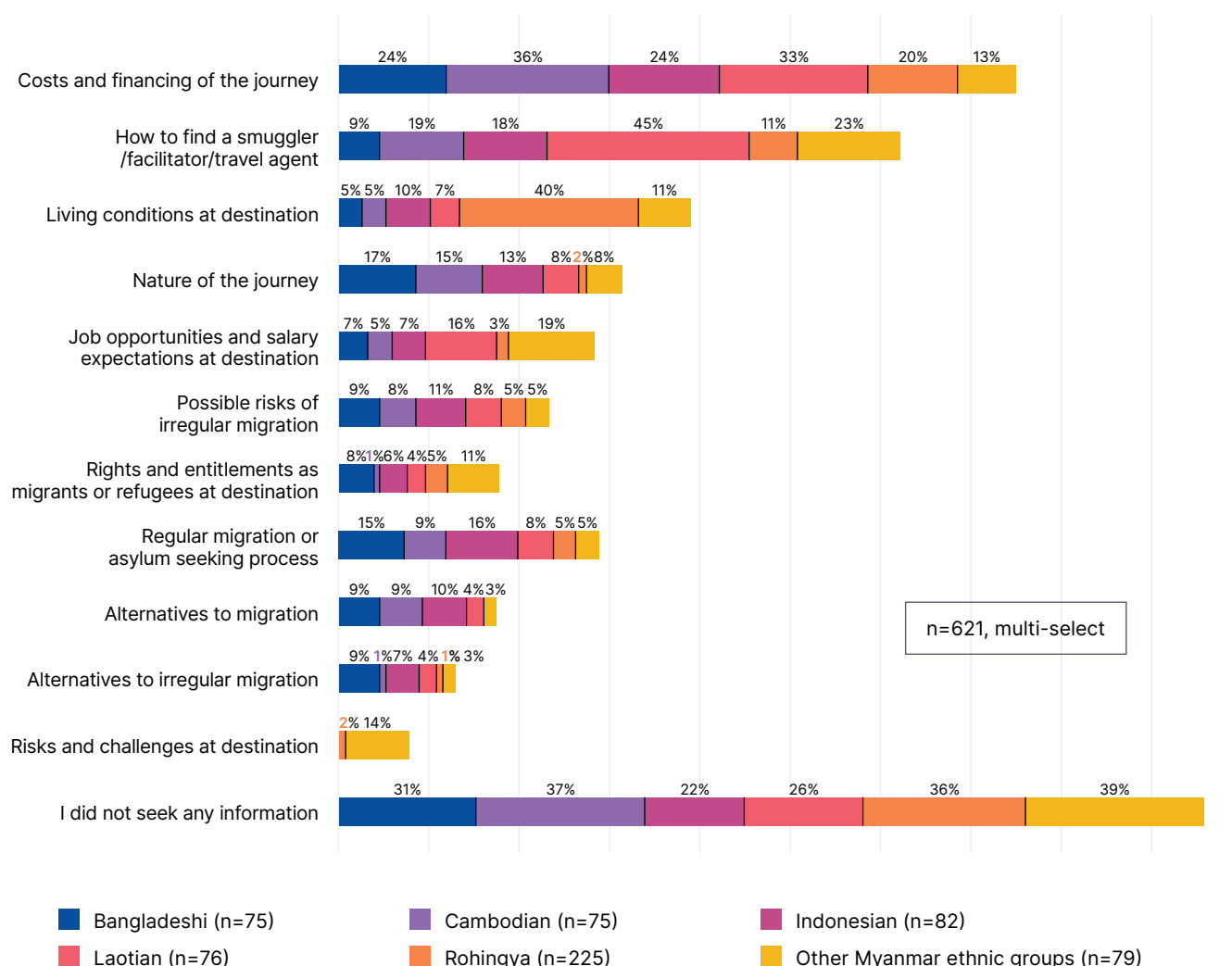
Information needs: The assessment spotlights how information needs varied across groups, underscoring the importance of tailoring information programmes to the specific needs of each group and context. Among those who sought information, the type of information sought for preparing their journey varied widely. Respondents from **Bangladesh (24%, n=75)**, **Cambodia (36%)**, and **Indonesia (24%, n=82)** prioritised information related to journey costs and financing. In contrast, most **Rohingya (40%)** sought information about living conditions at their destination. **Laotian (45%, n=76)** and **other Myanmar ethnic groups (23%)** were more focused on how to find a smuggler, travel facilitator, or agent for their journey (see Figure 10). Additionally, the types of information sought differed by gender: women were most concerned with the costs and financing of the journey **(22%)**, while **25 percent** of men focused on living conditions at the destination (see Figure 11).

Figure 11. What information did you seek before migration? (by gender)

Costs and financing of the journey — Women 22%, Men 25%
How to find a smuggler/facilitator/travel agent — Women 18%, Men 19%
Nature of the journey — Women 10%, Men 8%
Living conditions at destination — Women 9%, Men 25%
Regular migration or asylum seeking process — Women 8%, Men 9%
Job opportunities and salary expectations at destination — Women 8%, Men 8%
Possible risks of irregular migration — Women 7%, Men 7%
Rights and entitlements as migrants or refugees at destination — Women 3%, Men 7%
Alternatives to migration — Women 4%, Men 5%
Alternatives to irregular migration — Women 3%, Men 4%
Risks and challenges at destination — Women 2%, Men 3%
I did not seek any information — Women 41%, Men 29%

n=612, multi-select   ■ Women (n=217)   ■ Men (n=395)

Information sources: For those who sought information, friends and family, and smugglers or travel facilitators were the predominant and most reliable sources, with very few respondents accessing information from formal entities such as NGOs, UN agencies, or governments (see Figure 12). Among these, friends and family in another country were deemed the most reliable by most respondents from **Bangladesh (19%)**, **Indonesia (83%)**, and Myanmar **(73% of Rohingya and 58% of other Myanmar ethnic groups)**. This pattern held true across genders, with **42 percent** of women and **52 percent** of men identifying friends and family abroad as their most reliable source of information. **Cambodian** respondents, on the other hand, most frequently considered friends or family in Cambodia **(28%, n=13)** as the most reliable source, while **Laotian** respondents leaned more towards smugglers, facilitators, or travel agents **(70%, n=39)**, who also served as their primary information source. This reliance on such intermediaries may reflect the typical process for Laotian migrant workers, where travel arrangements are often made after securing employment in Thailand through facilitators, family, or friends.[62] Furthermore, the positive experiences of obtaining jobs through these intermediaries likely reinforce their perception of them as trustworthy and reliable sources. Notably, online communities and networks also emerged as the second most cited reliable information source among respondents from other Myanmar ethnic groups **(46%)**. Among Rohingya respondents, returned migrants **(38%)**, most likely those repatriated, also played a role in providing information and were deemed reliable.

62   Xayamoungkhoun, S. & Harkins, B. (2023) Precarious pathways: Migration patterns and service needs of Lao migrant workers, accessible at https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/@asia/@ro-bangkok/@sro-bangkok/documents/publication/wcms_891143. pdf; MMC (2023) Use of smugglers on the journey to Thailand, accessible at https://mixedmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/304_ snapshot_smugglers_Thailand.pdf

Findings from key informant interviews highlight the role of informal migration agents as a source of information for many individuals in Bangladesh. While they may provide essential services, some may operate outside legal frameworks, leading to potential exploitation and misinformation about the migration process.

> *"I always tell a migrant to go through the government channel, check your visa, and make sure that the offer is real and legitimate. 80 per cent of migrant workers don't know how to migrate through formal channels, they only know the middleman. When you ask them who is your recruitment agency, they will tell you they don't know, they just have a middleman. But the middleman is not registered." (Key informant interview, migrant-led organisation, Bangladesh, BD3)*
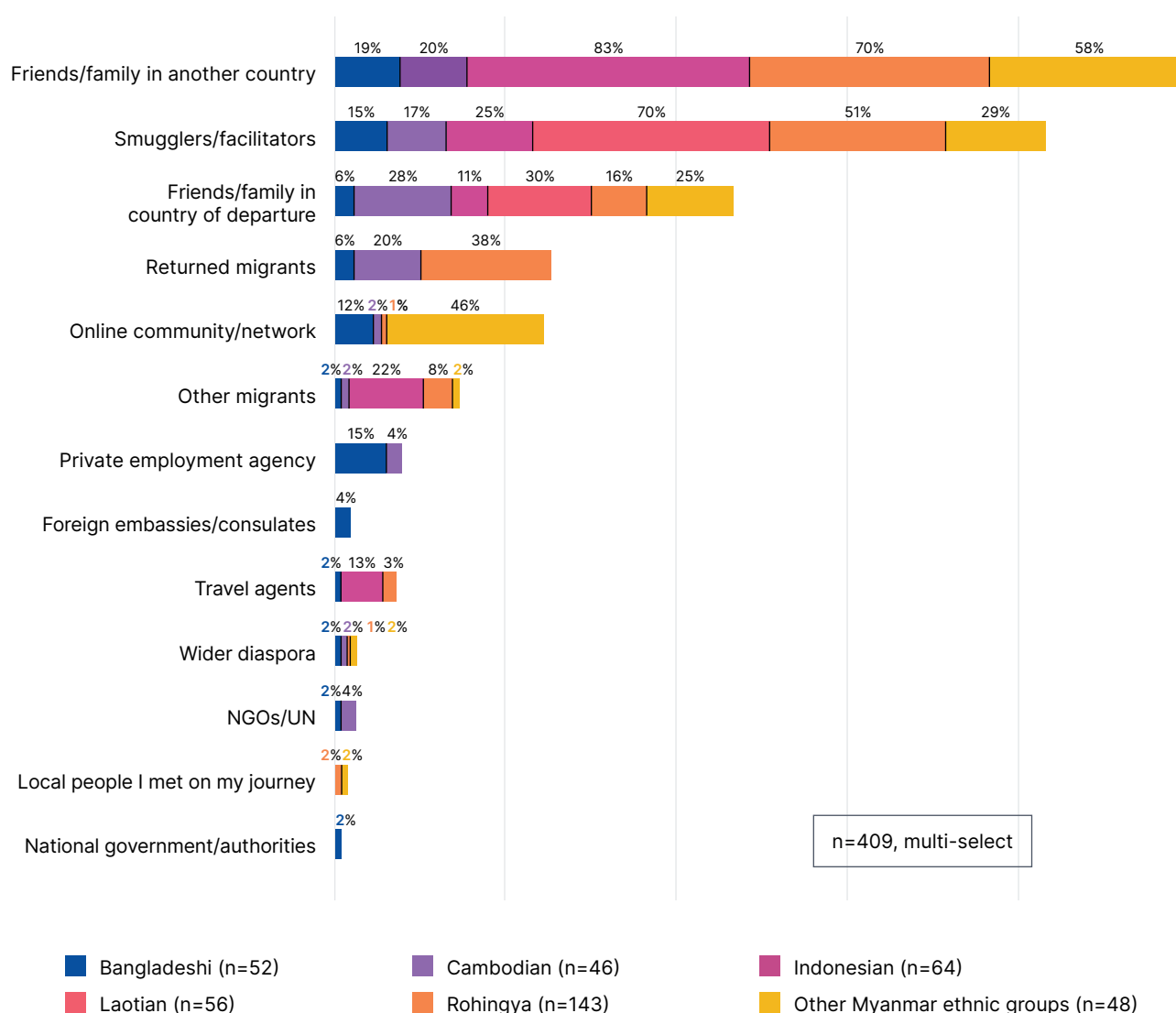
> *"Most migrant workers rely on recruitment agencies, fraudulent groups. Sometimes, these companies don't exist, but migrants are shown false paperwork that shows who their employers are. But when they arrive, no one receives them." (Key informant interview, International Organisation, Bangladesh, BD2)*

Much of the information sought by migrants comes from informal networks, including family, friends, and community members. These sources provide firsthand accounts of migration experiences, often emphasising the perceived benefits and opportunities available abroad. However, this information can be biased or incomplete, leading to misconceptions about the migration process. In contrast, formal sources such as government agencies, NGOs, and international organisations offer critical information regarding safe migration practices, legal requirements, and potential risks. Unfortunately, many individuals in rural areas may not be aware of or have access to these resources, limiting their ability to make informed decisions.

This reliance on informal social networks—particularly friends and family abroad—underscores the need to engage with actors that prospective migrants trust. This includes collaborating with diaspora communities through education and outreach programmes, to reach different members within prospective migrants' social networks.

> *"The Bangladesh government has pre-departure orientation, but many people don't attend. They prefer getting information from their communities, and they trust them or would prefer to take the risk and rely on this information." (Key informant interview, International Organisation, Bangladesh, BD2)*

Figure 12. **Of the sources you accessed, what were the top three most reliable sources?**

	Bangladeshi (n=52)	Cambodian (n=46)	Indonesian (n=64)
Laotian (n=56)	Rohingya (n=143)	Other Myanmar ethnic groups (n=48)	

n=409, multi-select

Means of obtaining information: While, overall, phone calls were the most commonly used means of obtaining information, distinct preferences emerged across different groups, highlighting the importance of considering these variations in programming and policy. **Cambodian** respondents favoured social media or messaging applications **(61%)**, while phone calls were preferred by **Bangladeshi (79%)** and **Laotian** respondents **(77%)**. In contrast, in-person meetings were the preferred choice for respondents from **Indonesia (75%)** and Myanmar, with **82 percent of Rohingya** and **48 percent** of **other Myanmar ethnic groups** opting for this method (see Figure 13). The reliance on traditional means—in-person interactions **(82%)** and phone calls **(59%)**—among Rohingya is likely due to the high illiteracy among the respondents, which may limit their ability to utilise digital platforms or other channels for accessing information. In addition, Bangladeshi respondents reported drawing on a wider range of information sources, including websites and traditional media such as TV, radio, and newspapers, which were less commonly used by other groups. When examining preferences by gender, women were more likely to choose in-person interactions **(54%)**, while men showed a stronger preference for phone calls **(65%)**.

Figure 13. Of the means you used to obtain information, what were your most preferred means?
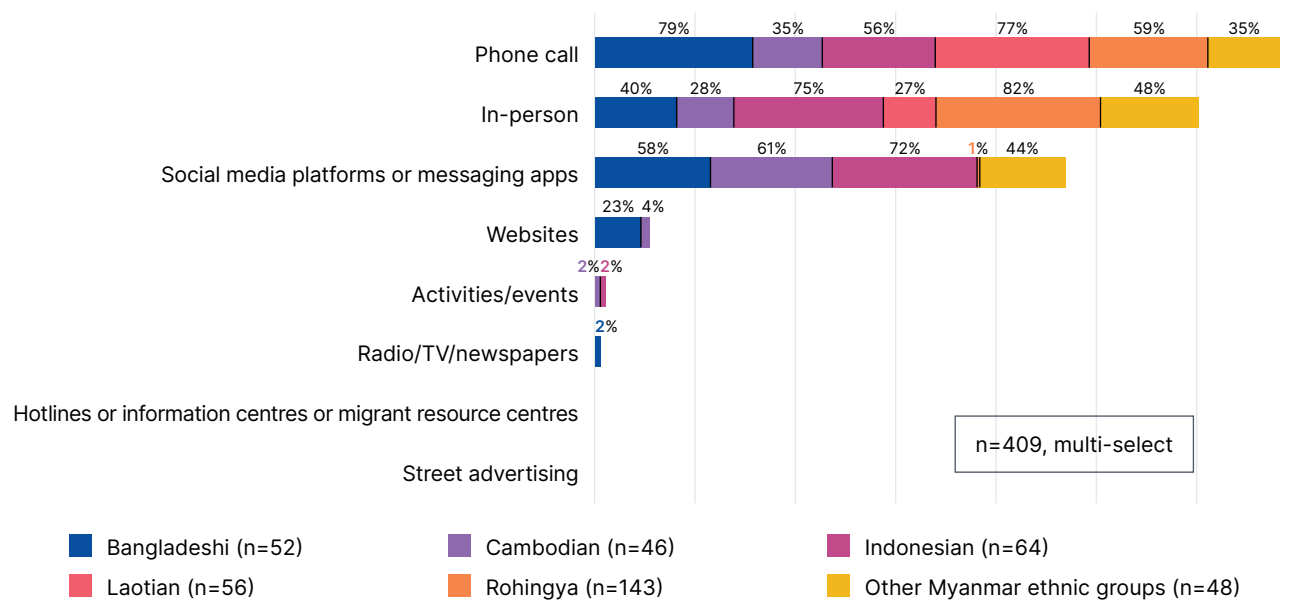
The widespread use of informal communication methods, including phone calls and social media, further underscores the central role these platforms play in the migration process and should be considered in information-dissemination programming.

> *"In my opinion, social media works best especially Facebook. If you want to send them information via WhatsApp, do not send posters because it takes up data and migrants will not download it. Send them text messages in words." (Key informant interview, NGO, Malaysia, MY8)*

> *"Facebook and social media are available to all. If they don't have much understanding, these platforms offer them the opportunities to go abroad, lucrative opportunities to work in India or the Middle East. This is a trap of traffickers; they are just using social media to get more clients." (Key informant interview, NGO, Bangladesh, BD5)*
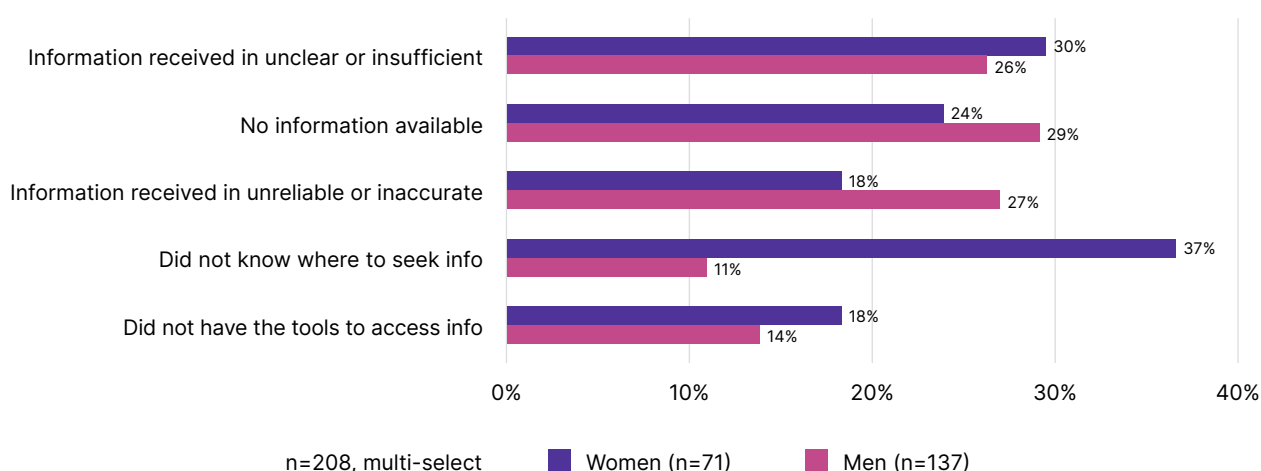
Information gaps: Among those **409 individuals** who sought information, **51 percent** reported that their information needs remained unmet before their journey. Respondents across all countries of origin (n=208) attributed this to three key reasons: information is not available **(27%)**, information received is unclear or insufficient **(27%)**, and information received is unreliable or inaccurate **(24%)**. When asked about specific unmet information needs, **Bangladeshi respondents** required information on living conditions, job opportunities and salary expectations at the destination, and the nature of the journey (duration, routes). **Indonesian respondents** needed details on irregular migration risks, the nature of the journey (duration, routes), and regular migration processes. Respondents from **Cambodia and Lao PDR** mentioned gaps in information on irregular migration risks, regular migration processes, and job opportunities and salary expectations at the destination. **Rohingya respondents** highlighted gaps in information related to living conditions, risks and challenges at the destination, and risks of irregular migration; **respondents from other Myanmar ethnic groups** reported gaps in information on job opportunities and salary expectations at the destination, risks of irregular migration, and living conditions, risks and challenges at the destination.

> *"They should know the process—the type of visa they should have. Many of them are not skilled, not properly educated and so don't have proper understanding of the process. Some recruitment agents hold their passports. They don't know that's not right." (Key informant interview, NGO, Bangladesh, BD4)*
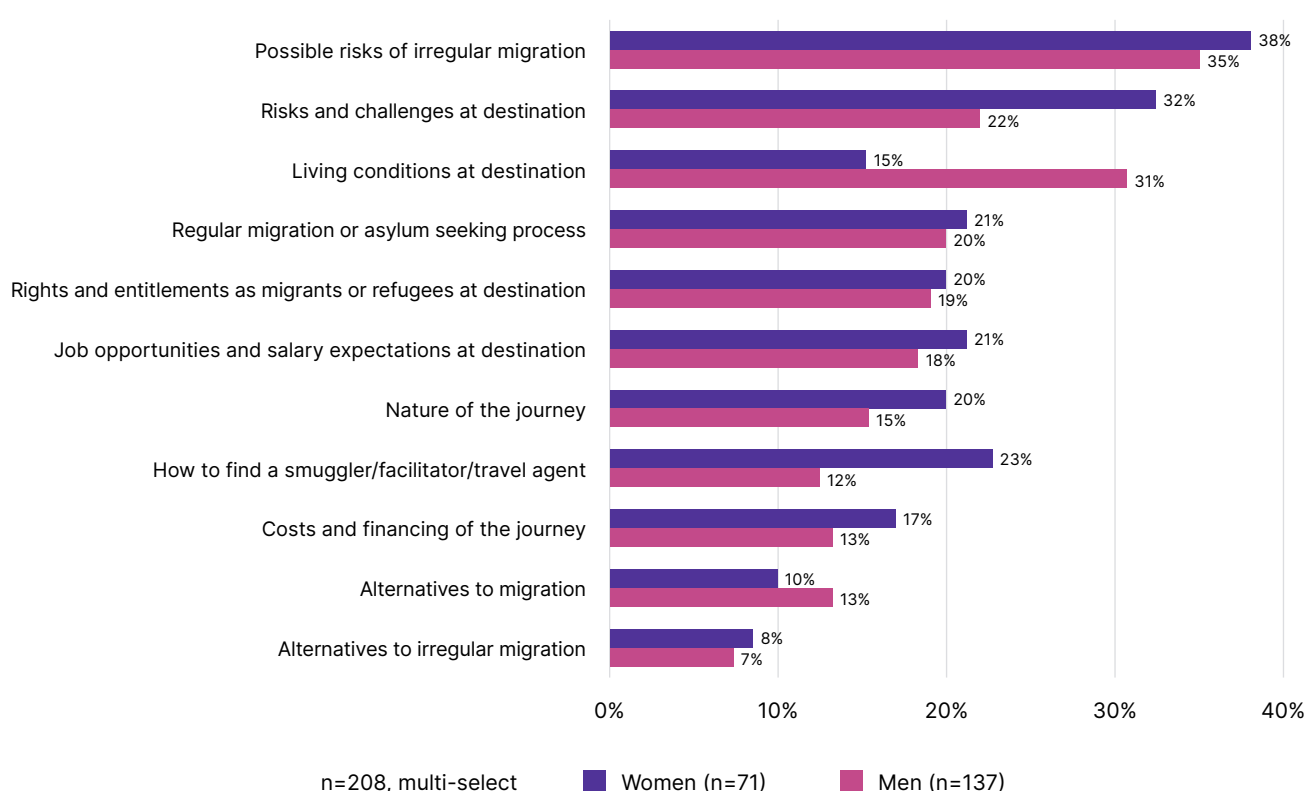
A gender comparison reveals distinct information gaps faced by women and men. Among female respondents who sought information, **55 percent (n=71)** reported still having unmet information needs prior to their journey, with many citing a lack of knowledge about where to seek information **(37%)** as the key barrier. Similarly, **49 percent (n=137)** of male respondents who sought information also reported unmet information needs, primarily due to the unavailability of information **(29%)** (see Figure 14).

In addition to information on the risks of irregular migration **(cited by 38% of women and 35% of men)** and risks and challenges at the destination **(cited by 32% of women and 22% of men)**, which were reported by both genders, women also identified gaps in information about contacting a smuggler, facilitator, or travel agent **(23%)**. Meanwhile, men expressed a need for more information on living conditions at the destination **(31%)** (see Figure 15).

Figure 14. **What challenges did you face in accessing the information you need? (by gender)**

Figure 14 bar chart. n=208, multi-select. Women (n=71), Men (n=137)

- Information received in unclear or insufficient: Women 30%, Men 26%
- No information available: Women 24%, Men 29%
- Information received in unreliable or inaccurate: Women 18%, Men 27%
- Did not know where to seek info: Women 37%, Men 11%
- Did not have the tools to access info: Women 18%, Men 14%

Figure 15. **What information would have been most useful that you did not receive? (by gender)**

Figure 15 bar chart. n=208, multi-select. Women (n=71), Men (n=137)

- Possible risks of irregular migration: Women 38%, Men 35%
- Risks and challenges at destination: Women 32%, Men 22%
- Living conditions at destination: Women 15%, Men 31%
- Regular migration or asylum seeking process: Women 21%, Men 20%
- Rights and entitlements as migrants or refugees at destination: Women 20%, Men 19%
- Job opportunities and salary expectations at destination: Women 21%, Men 18%
- Nature of the journey: Women 20%, Men 15%
- How to find a smuggler/facilitator/travel agent: Women 23%, Men 12%
- Costs and financing of the journey: Women 17%, Men 13%
- Alternatives to migration: Women 10%, Men 13%
- Alternatives to irregular migration: Women 8%, Men 7%

Figure 16. Summary on the information seeking behaviours and information gaps by countries of origin

	Information gaps	Trusted sources	Preferred means
Bangladeshi	• living conditions at the destination • job opportunities and salary expectations at the destination • nature of the journey	• friends and family in another country • travel agents or facilitators • employment agency	• phone calls • social media, particularly Facebook
Cambodian	• irregular migration risks • regular migration processes • job opportunities and salary expectations at the destination	• friends and family in Cambodia • friends and family in another country • returned migrants	• social media or messaging apps
Indonesian	• risks of irregular migration • nature of the journey • regular migration processes	• friends and family in another country	• in-person interactions • social media and messaging apps, particularly TikTok and Facebook
Laotian	• risks of irregular migration • regular migration processes • job opportunities and salary expectations at the destination	• travel facilitators or agents	• phone calls
Rohingya	• living conditions at the destination • risks and challenges at the destination • risks of irregular migration	• friends and family in another country • travel facilitators or agents	• in-person interactions • phone calls
Other Myanmar ethnic groups	• job opportunities and salary expectations at the destination • risks of irregular migration • living conditions, risks and challenges at the destination	• friends and family in another country • online community or network	• in-person interactions • social media or messaging apps—particularly Facebook and WhatsApp

Existing information programmes: gaps and challenges

An analysis of existing policies and programmes related to awareness and information dissemination about safe and regular migration and the risks associated with irregular migration highlights that a range of initiatives exists—particularly in origin countries. However, feedback from key informant interviews and survey responses suggests that the intended impacts of these programmes may be misaligned with the needs and experiences of the target populations.[63]

In **Bangladesh**, a wide range of initiatives aims to equip prospective migrants with the knowledge needed for safe migration. At the community level, pre-decision counselling is offered by NGOs to help individuals assess the viability of migration. These sessions cover critical aspects such as physical fitness and appropriate age limits for migration, cost-benefit analyses, the social impact on family members, and cultural adaptation, including climate and dietary considerations. Migrants who subsequently decide to migrate through regular channels are legally required to attend pre-departure orientations of varying lengths, depending on their destination and employment type. These orientations, organised by the government in collaboration with NGOs, are a prerequisite for migrant workers to obtain clearance from the Bureau of Manpower, Employment, and Training (BMET).[64]

In addition to these, various prevention and awareness programmes focusing on promoting safe migration and combating trafficking in persons are also implemented on a more ad-hoc or project basis.[65] Information is disseminated to the general public by the government and NGOs through a variety of channels, including videos, theatre, posters, and leaflets, with mediums such as community radio, courtyard meetings, community events, and awareness campaigns at bazaars, and educational and religious institutions.

Indonesia has a similar approach, with mandatory pre-departure briefings for migrants taking regular pathways, covering essential topics such as rights and obligations of migrants and their employers, remittance channels, awareness about trafficking in persons, and return and reintegration. Prevention and awareness programmes by NGOs and UN agencies, including IOM, also play a key role in preparing prospective migrants for regular migration.[66] In addition to targeting individual migrants, these project-based programmes also focus on reaching wider audiences by training community leaders such as teachers, village heads, and religious leaders to foster community-based efforts to promote safe migration.[67] These initiatives employ various methods, including in-person community engagements, social events, traditional media (TV and radio), and, increasingly, social media platforms such as TikTok and Facebook.

In **host countries**, programming largely focuses on the protection of migrants, with outreach programmes and service provision being central components of these efforts. For instance, Malaysia's Ministry of Human Resources (MoHR) has introduced an app, Working for Workers,[68] which allows all workers, including migrants, to anonymously file complaints related to labour rights violations. This grievance mechanism aims to improve the protection and empowerment of migrants in host countries.

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63   While this feedback provides valuable insights into the perceived gaps, it does not constitute a comprehensive assessment of the effectiveness of these programmes.

64   Based on input from Key Informant Interviews (NGO, Bangladesh, BD1) and (NGO, Bangladesh, BD2); IOM (2019) Background Report on Pre-Departure Orientation in Abu Dhabi Dialogue Countries, accessible at https://www.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl486/files/documents/PDO%20 Background%20Report%5B35%5D.pdf

65   Ministry of Home Affairs (2019) Bangladesh Country Report 2018: Combating Human Trafficking, accessible at https://mhapsd.portal.gov. bd/sites/default/files/files/mhapsd.portal.gov.bd/annual_reports/0cc28f8e_1dcf_4b4e_9a38_264aaa42510c/Final%20_%20Country%20 Report%202018%20_%2018.12.19%20(2).pdf

66   IOM (2022) IOM and BP2MI Piloted a Pre-Departure Orientation Training for Instructors in West Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia, accessible at https://indonesia.iom.int/news/iom-and-bp2mi-piloted-pre-departure-orientation-training-instructors-west-nusa-tenggara-indonesia; The Consumer Goods Forum (2024) Successful Training for Trainers on Pre-Departure Orientation for Indonesian Migrant Workers, accessible at https://www.theconsumergoodsforum.com/news_updates/successful-training-for-trainers-on-pre-departure-orientation-for-indonesian-migrant-workers/

67   Key informant interviews (Trade union, Indonesia, ID4); (migrant-led organisation, Indonesia, ID5); (NGO, Indonesia, ID7); (NGO, Indonesia, ID8); and (Government, Indonesia, ID9).

68   Key informant interviews (NGO, Malaysia, MY8) and (Government, Malaysia, MY9). See Working For Workers, accessible at https://www. workforworkers.com.my/sapn-portal/index

Additionally, the Labour Department in Peninsular Malaysia also provides multilingual videos in Bengali, English, Nepali, and Tamil[69] to inform prospective migrants about their rights and how to identify trafficking in persons risks. Further, the Anti-Trafficking in Persons and Anti-Smuggling of Migrants Council (MAPO) collaborates with airlines to train aviation crews on identifying signs of trafficking in persons and to broadcast anti-trafficking messages on incoming flights.[70] In Thailand, the Immigration Bureau runs a similar initiative with airlines, where anti-trafficking information is broadcast on flights. This is in addition to the multilingual posters already deployed at border points and airports to raise awareness about trafficking in persons.[71]

In addition to these country-specific efforts, the development of mobile applications or online platforms facilitates cross-border programming to improve access to information and support. Notable examples include Just Good Work,[72] Golden Dreams,[73] and SafeStep.[74] These platforms provide crucial information about job opportunities, migration procedures, and integrated complaint mechanisms, offering valuable resources for prospective migrants and migrant workers seeking help and guidance.

Gaps and challenges

While these programmes represent substantial efforts to promote safe migration and protect refugees and migrants in both sending, transit, and host countries, challenges remain.

Reach and accessibility of existing programmes: Despite the variety of programmes in place, survey data reveals that only **4 percent** of respondents **(11 Bangladeshi, seven Indonesian, and four Cambodian)** reported having attended programmes related to migration before leaving, suggesting significant gaps in their accessibility and reach.[75] Many programmes, such as pre-departure orientations, also primarily target prospective migrants using regular migration pathways, often overlooking those at risk of irregular migration. In Bangladesh, although pre-departure orientations are mandatory for all prospective regular migrants, many prefer community-based information sources over these formal sessions. This misalignment suggests a disconnect between formal initiatives and the actual needs and preferences of the target population.

> *"The Bangladesh government has pre-departure orientation, but many people don't attend. They prefer getting information from their communities, and they trust them or would prefer to take the risk and rely on this information." (Key informant interview, International Organisation, Bangladesh, BD2)*
>
> *"They [the government] encourage migrant workers to follow regular migration channels and there are a lot of awareness raising programmes spearheaded by the government on the dangers of irregular migration. But irregular migration benefits many and the messaging by the Government of Indonesia does not reach the whole population. We after all are a big country with one of the largest populations in the world…" (Key informant interview, NGO, Indonesia, ID7)*

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69 Key informant interview, Government, Malaysia, MY9; see Jabatan Tenaga Kerja Semenanjung Malaysia, accessible at https://jtksm.mohr.gov.my/en/media/video

70 Perimbanayagam, K. (2017) MAS and Malindo staff to be trained to detect human trafficking victims, accessible at https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2017/11/307447/mas-and-malindo-staff-be-trained-detect-human-trafficking-victims

71 Key informant interview, Government, Thailand, TH9.

72 Just Good Work, accessible at https://justgood.work/, focuses on prospective migrants and migrants from Bangladesh, Myanmar, Nepal, Vietnam, and Indonesia heading to Malaysia, and others heading to Gulf countries and the UK.

73 Issara Institute in Thailand.

74 SafeStep Project - Winrock International, accessible at https://winrock.org/projects/using-mobile-tech-to-enable-safe-migration-journeys/ – a three-year project targeting Bangladeshi prospective migrants to Gulf countries and Malaysia.

75 A caveat to consider is that this survey exclusively targets migrants in an irregular situation. Consequently, it is possible that the programmes were effective for those who attended, leading to regular migration that is not reflected in this survey.

> *"I spoke to the officials not too long ago and they were frustrated because they have done so much dissemination of information on safe migration amongst Indonesian university students, but they do not really see an impact."* *(Key informant interview, International Organisation, Indonesia, ID2)*

A core issue contributing to the shortfall of existing programmes is the disconnect between information-dissemination methods used by formal institutions and the informal networks in which refugees and migrants typically seek advice. While the information from informal sources often lacks the rigorous verification processes found in formal channels, making them susceptible to inaccuracies, survey findings indicate that migrants often place more trust in information obtained from friends, family, or other community members who have already migrated, or from smugglers and recruitment intermediaries, rather than formal channels such as the government and NGOs. This preference for informal networks diminishes the impact of government or NGO-led programmes.

> *"They [government] disseminate information in formal channels using formal methodology, but migrant workers do not care for information obtained this way. They obtain information from friends and family who are already abroad."* *(Key informant interview, International Organisation, Indonesia, ID2)*

> *"There is dissemination of information by local governments to tell them about risks of irregular migration. 75 percent of these information campaigns are not effective. 25 percent maybe effective. Those who are going through irregular channels, they don't talk about it. The syndicates give irregular migrants strong motivation about keeping their migration secret."* *(Key informant interview, migrant-led organisation, Bangladesh, BD3)*

Programme design and implementation: Many existing programmes take a one-size-fits-all approach, failing to address the diverse needs of different populations.[76] These programmes often lack contextual relevance, overlooking varying literacy levels, cultural norms, and information-seeking behaviours of refugees and migrants. Additionally, these programmes are frequently short-term, one-off project-based initiatives, lacking the sustainability required for long-term impact. The top-down nature of these programmes also compounds this problem, as they fail to incorporate community perspectives and reflect local realities. This misalignment between programme design and the actual needs and preferences of the target population further diminishes the programmes' effectiveness and ability to drive meaningful change.

Another key issue is that the content of these programmes often focuses too heavily on fear-driven, alarmist narratives, which can be counterproductive. Such messages, which focus solely on the dangers of irregular migration, may alienate prospective migrants and fail to address the underlying motivations that drive their decisions. These approaches can reinforce a sense of distrust and may even lead some to dismiss official information as overly simplistic or not relevant to their circumstances. Approaches that offer a balanced, informative view on the risks of irregular migration and the benefits of safe migration pathways, combined with a more empathetic approach that considers the prospective migrants' needs and aspirations, could potentially be more effective in empowering individuals to make informed decisions.

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76   Key informant interviews (NGO, Bangladesh, BD4); (Migrant-led organisation, Indonesia, ID1); (International organisation, Indonesia, ID2); (NGO, Indonesia, ID7); (NGO, Malaysia, MY2); (International organisation, Malaysia, MY3); (academia, Malaysia, MY4); (International organisation, Malaysia, MY5); MY7); (NGO, Thailand, TH3); and (NGO, Thailand, TH4).

> *"...having more personal information or a more personal approach by using stories and having migrants speak about the dangers of irregular migration to them personally is important. People need personal information and informal channels for obtaining and understanding information for example, social media... Awareness raising, and dissemination activities should not be undertaken in formal government offices." (Key informant interview, International Organisation, Indonesia, ID2)*

> *"It is important to bring some of the victims who attempted that but unsuccessful into that campaign session. So in his own voice, he can explain the atrocities or explain his stories as a victim. That would be credible for the students, rather than we tell them, don't do that. If you see it with their own eyes, if they see the victims, then they will believe it more. I think that would be an alternative way to disseminate in the information awareness campaign." (Key informant interview, academia, Bangladesh, BD7)*

Monitoring and evaluation: A recurring issue across programmes is the lack of robust monitoring and impact evaluation creating a paradox: despite the widespread implementation of these initiatives, there remains a significant gap in understanding their effectiveness. While some programmes do incorporate impact evaluation elements, these often focus solely on the number of audiences reached or the immediate knowledge gained after the programme. However, such metrics fall short of capturing true measures of effectiveness. Simply knowing how many people attended a session or how much they learned in the short term does not reveal whether the programme has influenced migration decisions or resulted in meaningful behavioural changes—in this case, safe and regular migration. Most programmes lack long-term follow-up with participants to assess whether the information received has influenced their migration decisions or actions. Without this longitudinal assessment, it remains unclear whether increased awareness leads to safer migration practices, or if individuals continue to rely on informal networks despite receiving formal information. The assumption that better knowledge automatically reduces the likelihood of engaging in irregular migration is challenged by survey findings, which show that many still choose irregular migration, even when aware of its risks.

Limitation of information programmes: beyond access to information

The prevailing approach to information programmes often oversimplifies the relationship between information and migration decisions, failing to consider the complexities involved in the decision-making process and how it is unlikely to be solely influenced by the availability of information alone. While well-designed information programmes that take into account the information-seeking behaviour of target populations may be effective in preventing irregular migration in some contexts, many prospective migrants may still opt for irregular pathways even when equipped with more accurate information. As discussed in the section on *Perceptions among refugees and migrants*, the majority of respondents from Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, and other Myanmar ethnic groups, for example, who had already taken irregular routes, indicated that despite being aware of the risks and challenges, they would have chosen the same path again. This finding challenges the common assumption that better information will automatically result in safer, more regular migration choices, as captured in the quote below.

> *"I think now the perception has changed. People usually prefer regular migration. There are safe migration campaigns. People are more worried about risks of irregular migration, but some still choose irregular migration because somehow, they are trapped in a particular situation." (Key informant interview, NGO, Bangladesh, BD1)*

Many individuals embark on perilous journeys despite the risks involved and, in some cases, higher costs, often borrowing heavily or selling their possessions in pursuit of a better future. As one key informant in Bangladesh noted, while many are aware of the dangers—such as drowning at sea—they remain convinced that they will defy the odds, motivated by success stories of others who have made it to destinations like Europe or Malaysia.

> *"Sometimes, they understand that they are irregular. But, sometimes, they know someone who has succeeded, like a brother, and they are convinced by that example. If they fail, they think or their family think that they had bad luck. And that's why they will try again with the same way. They are prepared to struggle maybe for one or two months. Most of them prepare dry food in their backpack to go abroad. They know that maybe 1 month you have to struggle and then after that you can get a job. That's the commitment they have." (Key informant interview, research institute, Bangladesh, BD6)*
>
> *"Our less educated people who are using irregular channels, they know that there are risks to going through irregular channels, that people are sinking in the sea. But they think that won't happen to them… I told people several times, don't go this way but they will say 'No, I've heard of this other guy who has reached Europe, Malaysia, Singapore.' That's why they take this risk always. They hear about problems, but they are too eager to go to the destination country." (Key informant interview, migrant-led organisation, Bangladesh, BD3)*

More importantly, this behaviour underscores the complexity of migration decision-making, which is influenced by a multitude of factors. While programmes may effectively communicate the risks associated with irregular migration, they often fail to address all other intersecting vulnerability factors (see Figure 2)—such as economic hardship, conflicts, or lack of accessible regular migration—that compel individuals to pursue irregular routes. Without understanding these nuances, programmes risk operating under the misguided belief that providing more information alone will suffice, overlooking the multifaceted nature of migration decisions. To address the broader context of migration, it is essential to acknowledge the limitation of information programmes in effecting behavioural change, and in complement to these initiatives, to consider additional strategies, such as those outlined below.

Expanding and diversifying accessibility of regular pathways

Expanding and improving regular migration pathways is crucial to offer viable alternatives to irregular migration. This involves addressing the barriers that currently prevent prospective migrants from pursuing these options, including high costs, complex bureaucracy involved in the application process, limited availability of regular pathways, and delays or slow migration processes. Streamlining and expediting procedures for regular migration can make these options more efficient, transparent and accessible to prospective migrants. Simplifying the process and making it more affordable and user-friendly are essential steps in this direction.

However, it is important to acknowledge that regular pathways do not always guarantee better protection. Many migrants who initially followed regular channels find themselves in highly exploitative situations and may end up in irregular pathways for various reasons. For instance, delays in renewing documentation by employers or choosing to leave exploitative jobs can result in irregular status, particularly in countries where work permits are tied to specific employers, such as Malaysia and Thailand. Addressing these gaps by, for example, providing timely remedy through effective state-based and non-state-based grievance mechanisms in line with relevant national and international frameworks relating to forced labour can help improve overall protection and reduce the likelihood of migrants falling into irregular status.[77]

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77   OHCHR (2011) The United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, accessible at https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/guidingprinciplesbusinesshr_en.pdf

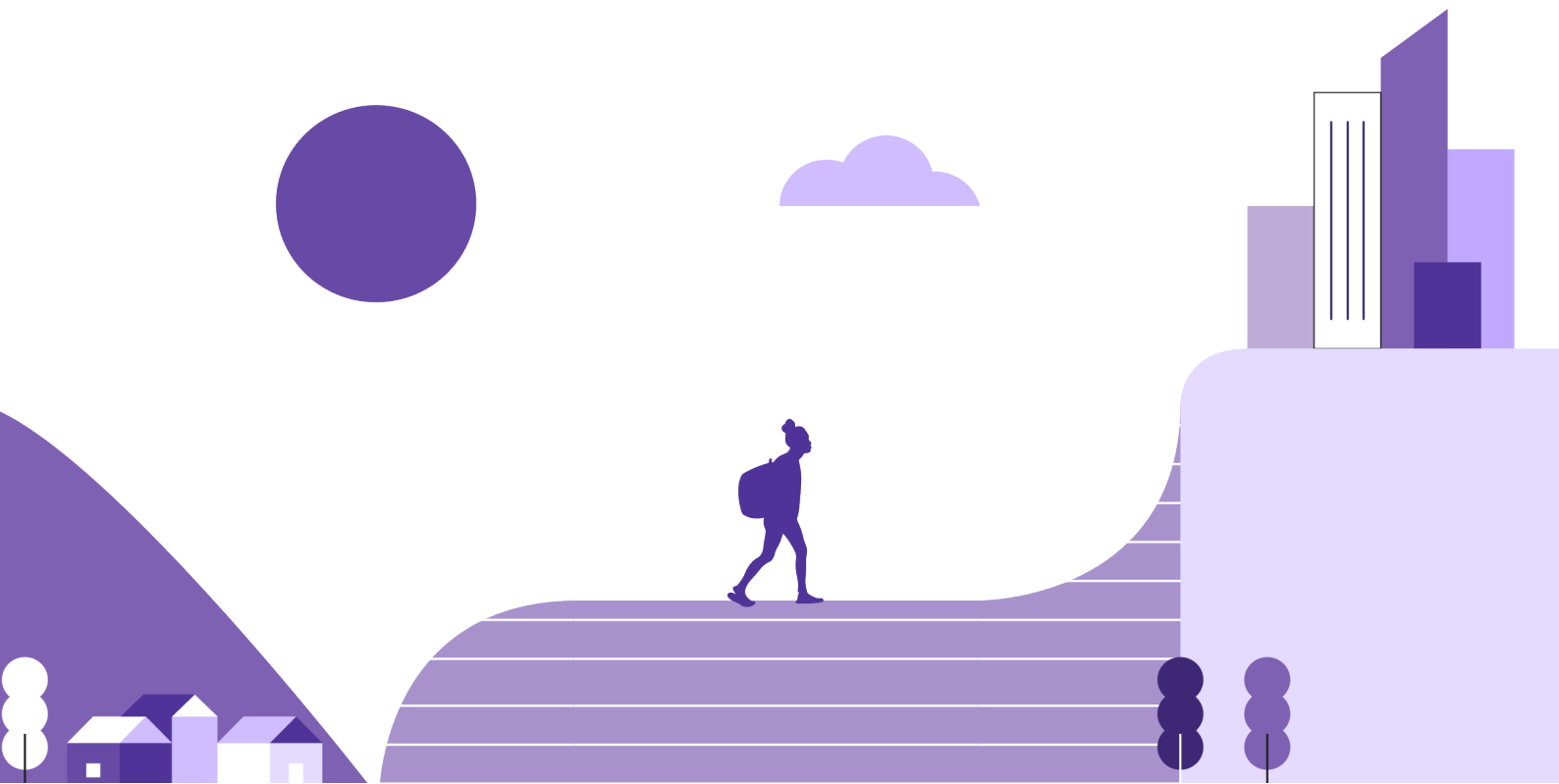## Fostering local economic development and educational opportunities

In addition to better access to information, it is vital to focus on enhancing local economic development and educational opportunities to mitigate the pressure to migrate irregularly.[78] Investing in local educational programmes and vocational training can empower individuals by improving their job prospects and economic conditions within their home countries. This is evident in The Gambia, where information programmes about the risks of irregular migration, combined with policies offering alternative pathways to improved livelihoods—such as facilitating regular migration to Senegal or providing vocational training opportunities—resulted in long-term positive impacts on migration knowledge and intentions. These effects surpassed those of information campaigns alone, which, while improving knowledge about irregular migration, had limited influence on migration intentions.[79] Supporting local economic development projects can create more and better job opportunities, thereby addressing the situational and contextual vulnerability factors that drive migration. By coupling information programmes with initiatives aimed at offering alternative pathways to irregular migration such as vocational training, the impact on reducing irregular migration can be greater.

78 Key informant interviews (NGO, Bangladesh, BD1); (academia, Bangladesh, BD7); (Migrant-led organisation, Indonesia, ID1); and (NGO, Thailand, TH8).

79 Bah et. al. (2022) Can Information and Alternatives to Irregular Migration Reduce "Backway" Migration from The Gambia?, accessible at https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/f591e1dd-1c73-59c8-81f4-f9297d780d0c/content

Recommendations

Drawing from the survey responses and interviews, the assessment identified some recommendations that could improve the effectiveness of future information programmes.

Design and development

- Contextual relevance and community engagement
- Tailored information and messaging
- Simplicity and accuracy
- Addressing misinformation and disinformation

Monitoring and evaluation

- Robust monitoring evaluation mechanism
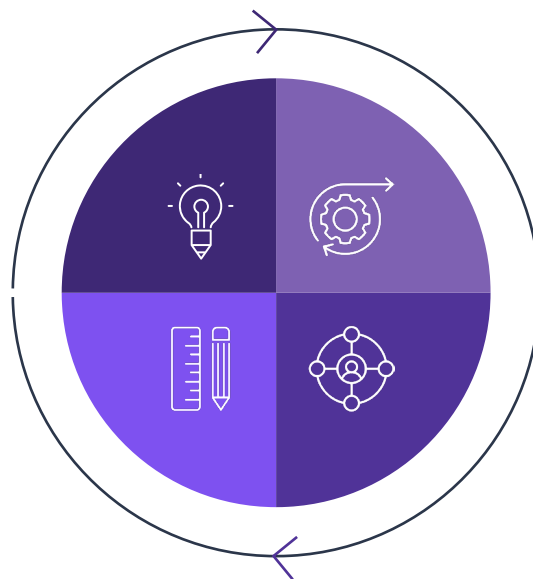
Implementation and delivery

- Understanding information-seeking behaviours
- Consistent and localised implementation

Coordination and collaboration

- Better coordination between actors
- Sustainability and scalability

Design and development

Contextual relevance and community engagement: Effective programmes must be tailored to the specific cultural, socio-economic, and geographical contexts of target populations. This involves understanding the unique challenges and opportunities faced by different communities, whether in urban or rural areas, and adapting content accordingly. For instance, while certain messaging may resonate with urban populations, it may be less effective in rural areas where access to resources and information is more limited. Including the voices of people with lived experience, and involving CSOs and local government actors who work with these groups, in the design and delivery of information ensures that messages are relevant, credible, and resonate with the target audience. A community-based approach that leverages local trust networks can significantly enhance the programme's effectiveness.

Tailored information and messaging: Crafting content that speaks directly to the needs of various subgroups is crucial. This includes tailoring messages to specific audiences such as low-literacy populations, rural or urban dwellers, and different cultural backgrounds. It is important to go beyond generic information about migration risks and draw from evidence-based research to address specific concerns and perspectives. For example, in rural areas where education levels may be lower, coupled with limited outreach, there is often a stronger reliance on agents or facilitators for migration information. These communities may require more support to verify the credibility of these agents and the information they received, including migration procedures, logistical details, and costs. In contrast, more educated urban dwellers, or younger generations, who may already access information through social media, might need guidance on verifying information such as job offers found on these platforms. Understanding local norms and expectations makes the messaging more relatable and acceptable, increasing its likelihood of success. Applying a more balanced approach—one that offers a clear, informative view of both the risks of irregular migration and the benefits of safe and regular migration pathways—rather than focusing on fear-based, alarmist messaging, could be more effective in empowering individuals to make informed decisions.

Simplicity and accuracy: The information provided must be clear, concise, easy to understand, and accurate. Complex jargon or overly technical details can alienate certain audiences, reducing the programme's impact. Simplifying content while maintaining accuracy ensures that it is more user-friendly to all prospective migrants, including individuals with limited education or language proficiency. For illiterate individuals, relying on visual aids, audio formats, or oral communication may be more effective in conveying important information. Accuracy is equally important, especially given the fluid nature of migration policies. Outdated or inaccurate information not only undermines the credibility of the programme but could also endanger migrants by leading them to make ill-informed decisions.

Addressing misinformation and disinformation: Programmes should go beyond providing accurate information by actively countering misinformation and disinformation, particularly on social media or through agents, which agents or recruiters frequently use to spread false narratives to recruit migrants. Empowering prospective migrants with the skills and tools to verify the information they receive—whether from social media, agents, or peers—is essential. Capacity-building initiatives that focus on information literacy will equip migrants to make more informed decisions.

Implementation and delivery

Understanding information-seeking behaviours: Programmes should account for how different groups seek and receive information. Some populations, such as, for instance, those from Indonesia and Myanmar, prefer in-person interactions, while those from Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Bangladesh rely on phone calls or social media (e.g. Facebook and TikTok). Traditional media (e.g., radio, pamphlets), which are still commonly used in these programmes, may not gain enough traction. Recognising these preferences allows programmes to choose the most effective dissemination methods for the context. For example, personal stories from returnees, especially through social networks, can be a powerful

tool for reaching prospective migrants.[80] Furthermore, programmes should address language barriers by offering information in the local languages of the origin countries, rather than relying solely on English or on official languages of destination countries, which many migrants may not fully understand. Grassroots organisations in Indonesia have pioneered innovative strategies by using content creators – often migrants themselves – who reach broader audiences through platforms such as TikTok and Facebook.

Consistent and localised implementation: One-off, short-term interventions are insufficient to create lasting impact. Programmes should aim for consistent and localised implementation, particularly in areas where persons at risk of irregular migration are prevalent. Community-specific approaches, especially at the village level, foster trust and allow programmes to engage more deeply with their target populations. For instance, rather than relying solely on external parties for information dissemination, 'train-the-trainer' initiatives targeting religious figures or village heads can equip them with information on safe migration. This model can be extended to the school level, particularly in areas with high migration rates, by incorporating age-appropriate safe and regular migration topics into school curricula. Integrating migration-related education into school curricula can help ensure that the information reaches younger populations who may be at risk of irregular migration in the future. This ongoing community-driven communication can foster sustained engagement and increase the potential for lasting behaviour change.

Coordination and collaboration

Better coordination between actors: Effective coordination between governments, civil society organisations, and international bodies can prevent duplication of efforts and waste of resources. For example, instead of developing multiple mobile applications with similar functions,[81] stakeholders should collaborate to create unified, scalable solutions that streamline the user experience and increase accessibility. This can be achieved by setting up a cross-agency and multi-stakeholder working groups to foster ongoing communication and collaboration. This could include regular meetings, information sharing, and updates on ongoing initiatives, ensuring alignment and preventing duplication of efforts. A respected international or regional body or platform like the Bali Process and ASEAN could serve as the central coordinator, ensuring balanced representation and fostering collaboration among governments, civil society, and international organisations.

Sustainability and scalability: To ensure long-term impact, awareness programmes must build enduring partnerships and be designed for sustainability beyond initial funding. Investing in capacity-building initiatives is crucial, empowering local organisations and communities to independently manage and sustain programmes, fostering ownership and reducing dependence on external funding. Additionally, programmes should be designed with a flexible framework that can be easily adapted or scaled to different contexts. By embedding scalability into programme design, stakeholders can ensure continued support for safe migration practices over time. Additionally, aligning awareness programmes with existing governmental ones—such as those of the Ministry of Indonesian Migrant Workers Protection/ the Indonesian Migrant Worker Protection Board (BP2MI) in Indonesia or the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment in Bangladesh – and regional migration initiatives helps to ensure their integration into established systems and policies, creating a sustainable infrastructure with ongoing support from public institutions.

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80 Key informant interviews (migrant-led organisation, Bangladesh, BD3); (International organisation, Indonesia, ID2); and (Labour right expert, Thailand; TH6).

81 The assessment identified three apps designed to provide better information to prospective migrants and migrants: Just Good Work, Golden Dreams and SafeStep. While Just Good Work and Golden Dreams are still active, SafeStep's last update on its YouTube channel was a year ago, and its Facebook link seems to be discontinued.

Monitoring and evaluation

Robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms: Many current programmes either lack impact evaluation entirely or focus solely on basic metrics, such as audience reach or short-term knowledge gains, assuming that greater reach automatically leads to better awareness and, consequently, safer migration. However, it is crucial to track whether increased awareness translates into meaningful decision-making or behavioural changes among target populations. As the assessment has demonstrated, better information does not necessarily impact migration pathway decisions. Regular and thorough evaluations are essential to refine programmes and ensure they achieve their intended outcomes. A longitudinal approach could include tracking target populations for an extended period of time (one year or more) to assess how their decisions and behaviours evolve, whether they follow through on migration, and whether their experiences or intentions change as a result of the programmes.

A spotlight on the lessons learned from migrant resource centres[82]

Migrant Resource Centres (MRCs) are part of the "Improving Migration Management in the Silk Routes Countries" project to reduce irregular migration and increase awareness of safe migration options. These centres offer services such as telephone and online counselling, pre-departure sessions, and community outreach. Impact evaluations of MRCs in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Iraq, and Pakistan[83] revealed that participants who engaged with these services reported a decrease in their intention to migrate irregularly. They were also better informed about safe migration pathways and knew whom to contact for assistance while on the move.

Role of information in migration decision-making: While the intersection of vulnerability factors such as economic conditions, politics, and social or culture influences remains central to migration decisions, MRC activities illustrate the importance of accessible and accurate information in empowering individuals. By providing reliable information, MRC services help migrants make more informed decisions, reducing the likelihood of risky, irregular migration.

Design: contextual relevance, tailored messaging, and accessibility:
Personalised and interactive communication through telephone and online counselling allowed for flexibility in engagement, enabling individuals to reach out for information at their convenience. This approach fosters a richer understanding of migration, as individuals can direct the conversation towards their specific needs, exploring both the potential benefits and the risks. Such engagement enhances the credibility of the information, making it more likely to influence decision-making. Moreover, community outreach, particularly visits to technical and vocational colleges, ensured that the messaging was accessible to younger, more vulnerable populations.

Implementation: Personalised, interactive interventions vs. Traditional Information Campaigns:
Traditional information campaigns—whether print media (e.g. posters, billboards) or digital broadcasts (e.g. television and radio)—tend to provide broad, one-way information but lack interactivity and personal engagement. In contrast, MRC activities, whether in-person or virtual (via phone call or messaging apps like WhatsApp), offer more personalised, interactive support that allows for deeper conversations. Tailored outreach efforts, including visits to educational institutions, provide a platform to address individual concerns and motivations directly, fostering a more meaningful and lasting impact.

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82   ICMPD (2020) Migrant Resource Centres Factsheet, accessible at https://www.icmpd.org/file/download/50286/file/Factsheet%2520MRC.pdf

83   Dennison, J. (2023) How Migrant Resource Centres affect migration decisions: Quasi-experimental evidence from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Iraq and Pakistan, accessible at https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/imig.13082

For States

Recommendations on addressing information gaps:
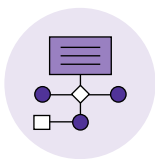
- **Conduct a targeted needs assessment and stakeholder mapping:** Undertake in-depth stakeholder mapping to identify gaps in information and access, especially for vulnerable groups (e.g. intersecting vulnerabilities faced by women, including cultural norms and lack of information on safe migration routes). Stakeholder groups could include government agencies, civil society organisations, prospective migrants as well as returnees, local community leaders, and the private sector (focussing on recruitment agencies, travel agents, and other intermediaries).

- **Enhance and tailor information programmes:** Tailor information dissemination based on these findings, prioritising accessibility and relevance for various demographics, especially those with intersecting vulnerabilities. Information programmes should have dedicated sections on the heightened risks linked to irregular migration for women, men, and children, including as physical abuse, sexual violence, rape, torture, exploitation, and trafficking in persons, including for forced criminality into online scam centres.
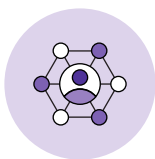
- **Leverage social networks and digital platforms especially Facebook and TikTok:** Design information programmes targeting networks of friends and family in countries of destination, since they are recognised as reliable sources and key mediums for information dissemination. Expand the use of digital platforms and social media to reach younger and more tech-savvy populations and engage content creators and influencers to enhance engagement and trust for disseminating information about the key risks of irregular migration.

- **Implement a localised and decentralised approach in information dissemination:** Empower local actors, including community leaders, returnees, and migrant-led CSOs by providing technical and resource support in the design and implementation of information-dissemination activities. Drawing on migrants' experiences and community insights, develop localised and culturally relevant content that resonates with the targeted audience. Engage local influencers, such as religious figures and village heads, alongside community members, including current migrants and returnees, CSO and local government bodies who they work alongside to share their experiences and disseminate accurate information about safe migration. Additionally, incorporate age-appropriate migration-related education into school curricula to ensure that young people are informed about safe and regular migration from an early age. In order to gather and share information on the specific risks faced by different groups, draw on CSOs focussing on gender and human rights. Creating safe spaces for returning migrant women to discuss their experiences and risks is crucial, particularly as this content may be sensitive. Similarly, providing platforms for young migrants, both male and female, to voice their concerns and experiences can help highlight the unique vulnerabilities faced by the youth. Ensuring that these spaces are inclusive and gender-sensitive will help gather a comprehensive understanding of the risks associated with irregular migration and contribute to more informed and targeted interventions.

- **Strengthen the regulation of recruitment agencies, including sub-agents:** Enhance oversight of recruitment agencies, intermediaries and sub-agents to promote transparency, fair conduct, and accountability in the recruitment process, and safeguard the rights and interests of both migrant workers and employers. Disseminate information through actors linked to migrant workers, such as recruitment agencies, intermediaries and sub-agencies, on the existence of grievance mechanisms in host countries, including details on how they can access them. Offer continued support (e.g. in the form of translation services, people support, and emergency shelters) to migrant workers in host countries, for instance through consular offices, if they need to access grievance mechanisms. Ensure that women who are recruited through agencies and sub-agencies have access to information on their employment, including information on where and how they can get help if they are exploited or suffer any abuse at any stage of the migration process.

- **Couple information programmes with alternative pathways**: Combine information programmes with initiatives that provide viable alternatives to irregular migration, such as vocational training and skills development. Work to increase the transparency and accessibility of regular migration pathways by removing barriers that hinder access, such as spousal consent requirements for female migrants, and simplify migration procedures.
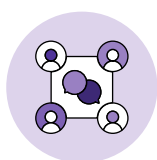
- **Strengthen cross-border collaboration**: Enhance collaboration between host countries and migrant-sending countries to address cross-border migration issues and share best practices through dialogue and interactions with initiatives such as the Bali Process and ASEAN forums. Use these platforms to strengthen cross-border information programmes, ensuring that migrants and prospective migrants have accurate, accessible information about regular migration pathways and their rights. Collaborate on the dissemination of information related to labour mobility agreements, ensuring that migrants are aware of available regular migration options and the protections afforded to them through bilateral agreements.

Recommendations on addressing misinformation and disinformation:

- **Raise awareness against misinformation and disinformation:** Incorporate education about the risks associated with recruitment intermediaries into information programmes. Use lived experiences of exploitation to highlight how to identify and avoid fraudulent practices, thereby equipping prospective migrants with the knowledge to make informed decisions. Provide information in clear, simple language, and disseminate it in an accessible manner. This could include organising information sessions at villages or districts with high incidences of irregular migration, either through in-person meetings or video formats circulating on social media platforms and messaging apps like Facebook and WhatsApp. Provide access to data or WiFi for the purposes of enabling people to download data-heavy information materials.
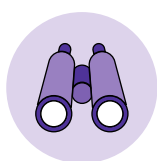
- **Strengthen monitoring on social media platforms**: Collaborate with social media companies, particularly Meta and ByteDance, to advocate for enhanced protection measures against misinformation and online abuse targeting migrants. Additionally, bolster the presence of government institutions on the social media platforms most frequented by migrants, including active participation in online community spaces, such as public Facebook groups, to ensure accurate information and support are readily available.

For Civil Society and the Private Sector

- **Strengthen community level engagement:** Collaborate with local authorities, including officials at district and provincial levels, and the community, including community leaders, religious leaders, and teachers to enhance the delivery of targeted migration information and support services. Utilise local knowledge and networks to increase programme relevance, reach, and impact.

- **Address misinformation:** Actively combat misinformation and disinformation about migration by providing accurate and reliable information through trusted channels – leveraging strong, pre-established social networks with friends and family who already migrated can play a key role in disseminating credible information. Empower prospective migrants to verify the reliability of the information they receive.

- **Enhance monitoring and evaluation:** Establish and maintain robust mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the impact of information programmes. Regular assessments should be conducted to identify effectiveness, gaps, and areas for improvement including programme design, reach, and accessibility. Additionally, longitudinal assessments should be carried out to measure the long-term impact of these programmes on migration decisions.

- **Promote capacity building and empowerment:** Support initiatives that foster local economic development and educational opportunities, thereby enhancing conditions and creating more opportunities within source communities.

For Development Partners

- **Support innovative programmes:** Fund and support innovative, evidence-based approaches to migration awareness and information dissemination, particularly community-based initiatives.

- **Ensure sustainable funding:** Transition from short-term, one-off projects to long-term investments. Sustainable funding supports ongoing effectiveness, allows for adaptation to evolving needs, and prevents disruptions due to funding gaps. It enables the development of durable solutions and resilient systems that can adapt to changing migration dynamics and address emerging challenges effectively.
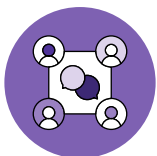
- **Promote cross-border solutions:** Support regional and cross-border initiatives that facilitate information-sharing and collaboration among countries facing irregular migration.

- **Enhance monitoring and evaluation:** Invest in the development and implementation of robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks for funded programmes. Ensure that these mechanisms are used to optimise resource allocation and that interventions remain relevant and impactful over time.

Conclusion

The assessment findings highlight the complex nature of migration, driven by an interplay of economic, political, and social factors. Economic motivations are significant but often intersect with other drivers like historical migration patterns, personal and family reasons, and entrenched cultural practices. Insecurity, conflict, and persecution also drive migration decisions, as evidenced by the escalating conflicts in Myanmar and the deteriorating conditions in Cox's Bazar. These intersecting factors illustrate that migration is rarely influenced by a single issue but is the result of multiple, intertwined drivers. Irregular migration is further shaped by cross-cutting issues, primarily the inaccessibility of regular migration pathways and the lack of reliable information. Many prospective migrants view irregular routes as their only viable option due to barriers such as high costs and bureaucratic complexities associated with regular migration channels. Additionally, the absence of accurate and accessible information, especially in rural areas, exacerbates vulnerabilities, leading individuals to make decisions based on incomplete information. These factors, combined with intersecting vulnerabilities such as socio-economic status and education level, create a challenging environment that drives individuals towards irregular migration.

The findings also reveal significant gaps in meeting the information needs of prospective refugees and migrants, despite the existence of various information programmes. Many individuals originating from Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, and Myanmar remain inadequately informed about the risks and processes associated with irregular migration. This persistent information deficit points to the inefficiency of current programming, which often fails to reach the most vulnerable populations or to deliver content that is contextually relevant and resonant. To address these gaps, it is imperative to redesign and tailor them to the specific needs of different communities. This involves leveraging local

knowledge, utilising diverse media channels, languages, and integrating informal social networks into dissemination efforts. However, it is crucial to recognise that improving information programming alone is not sufficient to address the complex realities driving irregular migration.

A comprehensive approach must include the expansion and diversification of regular and safe migration pathways, ensuring that these options are accessible, transparent, and less bureaucratic. Additionally, it is vital to provide alternatives to migration by enhancing local economic opportunities, education, and skill-building initiatives. Empowering individuals with these options can reduce the pressure to migrate and contribute to more sustainable, community-based solutions. Addressing the migrants' own deeply rooted perceptions and aspirations related to migration is essential. In many communities, migration is not only seen as a means to better economic prospects and safety, but as a cultural aspiration – a rite of passage or a path to fulfilling one's dreams. This culture of migration, coupled with the belief that irregular migration is a calculated risk worth taking, must be carefully navigated. Programmes should aim to balance the narrative, emphasising the risks and challenges of irregular migration while also promoting the benefits of regular pathways and local opportunities.

In conclusion, while enhancing information programming is necessary, it must be part of a broader strategy that addresses the underlying factors driving irregular migration. This includes expanding and diversifying accessible regular migration pathways, strengthening protections against exploitation, reducing vulnerabilities, and shifting perceptions within prospective migrant communities and their social networks. Only through this multifaceted approach can we effectively mitigate the risks associated with irregular migration and support safer, more sustainable migration practices.

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