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# Migration aspirations and the perceptions of the political, economic and social environment in Africa

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## Abstract

While much research has investigated how objective pull factors in the destination countries affect migration movements, and how subjective push factors affect migration aspirations, we know little about the interrelationship between subjective and objective factors. This paper therefore examines how people's perceptions of their political, economic and social structural environment affect their migration aspirations and to what extent these perceptions are determined by the objective situation in a country. Accounting for individual perceptions is important because individuals may be affected by structural factors to different degrees, and their knowledge of the objective situation may vary. Perceptions may also be affected by individuals' norms and values as well as people's different expectations. This study is based on data from Round 7 of the Afrobarometer survey, fielded between 2016 and 2018 in 34 African countries. Our findings show that positive perceptions of the structural environment are related to lower migration aspirations and that this relationship is only partly dependent on the objective situation in a country.

Marc Helbling and Sandra Morgenstern contributed equally.

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## INTRODUCTION

Migration movements are a widely researched field, and numerous studies have already investigated why people move away from one place to settle in another (De Haas et al., 2020). According to Lee's seminal push–pull theory, migration decisions depend on the conditions in the migrants' origin countries, the situation in the destination countries, and obstacles that lie between these places: in both places, there are factors that “attract people to it, and there are others which tend to repel them”. (Lee, 1966: 50). Most studies are interested in structural factors that refer to the political, economic and social conditions and institutions in origin and destination countries and how they affect migration movements (e.g., Ashby, 2010; Cooray & Schneider, 2016; Dreher et al., 2011; Meierrieks & Renner, 2017). While such an approach can provide important insights, it also suffers from limitations. Most importantly, focusing on aggregated migration data does not allow us to understand which people migrate and what the explanatory mechanisms are at the individual level. This could lead to ecological fallacy problems and excludes from the analyses all those who aspire to move but cannot due to obstacles that prevent them from leaving their place of origin (Carling, 2002; Carling & Schewel, 2018).

In this study, we address the individual level of migration in two ways. First, we aim to explain individual migration aspirations instead of aggregated migration movements.<sup>1</sup> Second, we are interested in the role of the individual perceptions of the political, economic and social environment in relation to objective measures that reflect the situation at the country level on the basis of country statistics and expert surveys. Studying migration aspirations allows us to investigate the very first step of a migration process when individuals become convinced “that leaving would be better than staying” (Carling & Collins, 2018: 915). Focusing on aspirations allows us to investigate both people who will stay and those who will eventually migrate (Czaika, 2015), which prevents us from sampling on the dependent variable (Koikkalainen & Kyle, 2016: 760; Etling et al., 2020: 1389). We believe that push factors play the most important role at this stage of the migration process (Lee, 1966: 50). In contrast, pull factors become more relevant when migrants start to prepare for their journey and think more concretely about the potential destination countries (Ortega & Peri, 2013).

Focusing on the individual perceptions of the situation in relation to the objective environment provides additional information that would otherwise be missing (Jahedi & Méndez, 2014). As already emphasized by Lee (1966: 51), “it is not so much the actual factors at origin and destination as the perception of these factors which results in migration”. This is not to say that the assessment of subjective measures shall replace the assessment of objective measures, but to highlight its complementary benefits, because subjective measures come with their own pitfalls. Even though people's perceptions may be vague, inaccurate, or influenced by certain norms and unrealistic expectations, they might be more consequential than objective descriptions if these do not correspond to people's individual experiences. To study perceptions, we need to measure them when potential migrants are still in their origin country because it is difficult, if not impossible, to retrospectively ask people who have already migrated about their past experiences without running into biases due to cognitive dissonance or limited abilities to remember these situations.

The main questions in this study are thus *how people's perceptions of their political, economic, and social environment affect their migration aspirations and to what extent these perceptions are determined by the objective political, economic, and social environment*. To answer these questions, we investigate data from Round 7 of the Afrobarometer survey, fielded between 2016 and 2018 in 34 African countries. In contrast to other studies that focussed on perceptions in one particular field, we take a broader perspective and investigate the areas of political civil liberties, rule of law, corruption, welfare and the economy. We account for objective measures to see to what extent these are mediated by subjective measures. Our findings show that negative perceptions of the political, economic and social environment are related to higher migration aspirations and that this relationship is only partly dependent on the objective situation in a country.

This paper covers new ground as there are only few studies on migration aspirations, and these are limited in several respects (for an overview, see Aslany et al., 2021). Those studies that follow such an approach focus

on single countries or a small number of countries (Bakewell et al., 2016; Beauchemin, 2018; Becerra, 2012; Carling, 2002; Creighton, 2013; Hagen-Zanker et al., 2009). Some also conduct lab experiments (Baláz et al., 2016; Batista & McKenzie, 2018). Large-N studies on migration aspirations either focus on perceptions in one particular field (Auer et al., 2020; Bekaert et al., 2021; Dustmann & Okatenko, 2014; Etling et al., 2020; Ruysen & Solomone, 2018) or hardly investigate (non-economic) push factors (Docquier et al., 2014; Manchin & Orzabayev, 2016). Most importantly, there are hardly any studies that investigate the interrelationship between individual and structural factors (Hiskey et al., 2014).

## From objective pull to subjective push factors

For a long time, migration movements have been explained by means of structural factors in the tradition of a push-and-pull model. Migration has been considered an adaptation strategy when the utility in the migrant's former country of residence is reduced and out-migration allows for the maximization of the utility. A common reason to migrate is to improve one's economic situation (Borjas, 1989). Accordingly, migrants often come from poorer countries and migrate to more developed countries, where they can expect a higher income (e.g., Ashby, 2010; Grogger & Hanson, 2011).<sup>2</sup> Migration can also be triggered by other structural factors such as political violence, demographic conditions, and institutions that govern economic and political participation (e.g., Ashby, 2010; Cooray & Schneider, 2016; Dreher et al., 2011; Hatton & Williams, 2005; Meierrieks & Renner, 2017).

Most of these studies only look at pull factors or add cultural and social factors that concern the difficulties in reaching the destination countries, such as geographical distances, land borders, common language or colonial ties (Mayda, 2010). Some studies account for additional factors in the destination countries, such as immigration policies (Bertoli & Fernandez-Huertas Moraga, 2013; Czaika & de Haas, 2017; Helbling & Leblang, 2019) or social networks (Bertoli & Ruysen, 2016; Espinoza & Massey, 1997) which either facilitate or complicate migration.

These studies hardly account for push factors. Push and pull factors are often directly related to each other, as they constitute the two sides of the same coin. Nonetheless, it is necessary to distinguish these two as pull factors might help us understand which destination countries are chosen and push factors why people decided to move in the first place (Ortega & Peri, 2013). Push factors might play a more important role in the early phase of a migration decision-making process. As already Lee (1966: 50) pointed out, people know the area in which they have spent all or most of their lives very well, while their knowledge about a country in which they have never lived is mostly minimal (see also Helbling & Leblang, 2019). It is likely that destination country factors only become more relevant when concrete preparations for migration are undertaken. Some studies have therefore focussed on context factors in origin countries and have shown that economic freedom discourages high-skilled migration (but not low-skilled migration) (Meierrieks & Renner, 2017), corruption leads to higher emigration (intentions) (Auer et al., 2020; Cooray & Schneider, 2016), or gender discrimination leads to higher migration aspirations among women (Ruysen & Salomone, 2018).

To better account for push factors, an increasing number of studies has started to investigate individual-level data that allow us to better understand which people (aspire to) migrate for which reasons.<sup>3</sup> A recent overview paper has shown that a large number of demographic, family-related, socio-economic and other explanatory push factors have already been investigated (Aslany et al., 2021; see also Czaika & Reinprecht, 2020). These studies allow us to see how age, gender, the socio-economic status, family situation, migration history or personality traits increase the likelihood to aspire emigration.

In contrast to the literature on aggregated migration movements, structural factors have played a rather minor role so far in the literature on migration aspirations. The probably most extensive study of migration aspirations in terms of countries covered neglects push factors: besides potential obstacles between origin and destination countries, Docquier et al. (2014) investigate the role of GDP, ratio and increase of employment in the destination countries.

The few studies that are interested in structural push effects looked at perceptions of selected context factors and show that a more favourable environment in the origin country or more positive perceptions of these contexts decrease migration aspirations (Aslany et al., 2021: 38). It appeared that migration aspirations are lower in countries that are economically more developed (Wood et al., 2010), where the governance quality seems higher (Hiskey et al., 2014), where people exert more democratic influence and have more confidence in the legal system (Etling et al., 2020), whose public healthcare system is judged as more reliable (Dustmann & Okatenko, 2014), whose system is perceived as less corrupt (Auer et al., 2020) and where people experience less violence (Nieri et al., 2012).

## The interrelationship between subjective and objective push factors

As it appears, most studies look at the effects of either objective pull factors in destination countries or the perceptions of objective push factors in origin contexts. There are almost no studies that look at the interrelationship between individual and structural factors (Aslany et al., 2021: 58; for an exception see Hiskey et al., 2014). It is however crucial to understand to what extent individual and structural factors are related to each other. While we already know that a worse environment or negative perceptions of people's environment leads to more migration or aspirations to migrate, we do not know to what extent perceptions mediate the objective situation in a country. Objective measures tell us about the situation at the country level and thus provide valuable information to understand why people might want to leave their countries. However, they do not necessarily capture people's individual experiences. Moreover, objective factors can only have an effect if they are also perceived by people as problematic. For example, Auer et al. (2020) have shown that objective measures of corruption are only moderately related to individual beliefs in corruption, suggesting that objective and subjective measures affect migration aspirations independently from each other.

While there might be good reasons to expect that objective factors have an influence on how people perceive their country, there are several (interrelated) reasons why perceptions are not necessarily determined by the objective situation in people's countries and why we should thus consider individual perceptions separately. First of all, individuals do not necessarily know a country's objective political, social or economic situation (especially in comparison to other countries' situations). Accounting for subjective factors allows us to measure people's knowledge of a specific context more directly, which, in turn, allows them to understand how their environment affects their interests and life situation (Galston, 2001: 223; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). Only when people know about a problematic situation, they can act accordingly and adapt to it by migrating to another country. Helbling et al. (2021), for example, show that climate change affects emigration aspirations only for climate literate persons who understand that climate change is irreversible. Of course, people's knowledge or perception may be wrong. However, action is not triggered by an unknown situation but by its perception, distorted or right.

Second, even if people's knowledge of an objective situation is correct, they might interpret the situation very differently depending on their norms and values in the light of which a specific context is considered more or less problematic (Koubi et al., 2016: 138). Depending on their democratic norms or understanding of a welfare system, for example, people might already be satisfied with some basic democratic institutions or small increases in welfare state benefits even if the levels of developed countries have not yet been reached. For example, in a study on democratic values in the Arab world, Jamal and Tessler (2008: 99) have shown that economic considerations are more important to people than political rights and freedom. An objective improvement of these rights and freedoms might therefore not affect people's migration aspirations if economic aspects are more relevant to them. Put differently, whether a person is happy or unhappy with a specific political or social institution depends on their expectations and how they imagine an ideal situation. Hiskey et al. (2014) show, for example, that emigration aspirations decrease if people have hope that the situation in their country will improve.

Third, people's expectations depend on their individual socio-economic and socio-political positions as not all people in a country are affected by poor or flourishing economic and political conditions to the same degree. Education affects people's knowledge about their country (also in comparison to potential destination countries) and their socio-economic situation determines their cost-benefit calculations as has already been widely studied (e.g., Docquier & Rapoport, 2012; Grogger & Hanson, 2011; for an exception see Gonzales Ferrer et al., 2017). While people's socio-economic situation affects their personal interests, it also shapes their perceptions of an objective situation that can be seen as more or less problematic depending on the means one has to mitigate the negative consequences of a certain environment. These perceptions might also be affected by people's relative economic, social and political deprivation as these might be more relevant to their personal experience than their country's absolute economic, social and political situation (Stark, 2006).

In sum and based on the literature on migration movements and aspirations so far, we expect that (1) *more positive perceptions of the political, economic and social environment are related to lower migration aspirations*. Based on our discussion on the relationship between objective and subjective factors, we expect that (2) *perceptions that are related to migration aspirations are not fully determined by the objective situation in a country*. Perceptions do not simply mediate the objective environment as people's knowledge of the objective situation may vary, and perceptions may be influenced by their norms and values, their different expectations and also by the fact that due to their socio-economic positions they are not equally affected by objective conditions.

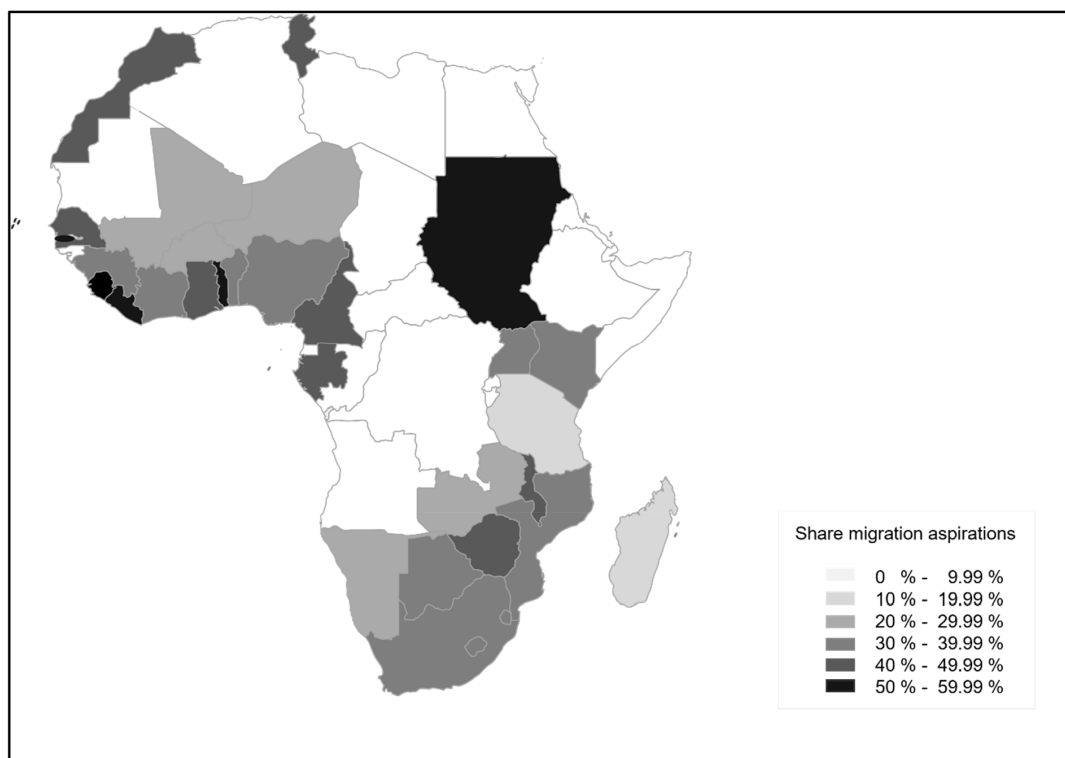
## Data

We used the Afrobarometer Round 7 (2016–2018) data for our analyses. The data set contains 37,692 respondents of in-person interviews from the following 34 countries, with around 1000 respondents per country (see Figure 1)<sup>4</sup>: Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Eswatini, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritius, Morocco, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Sudan, Tanzania, Togo, Tunisia, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. While not all African countries have participated in the survey, all African regions are represented.

Afrobarometer conducts a clustered, stratified, multi-stage, probability sample design of all citizens in voting age based on the most recent census data. They use random selection methods at every stage with a sampling probability proportionate to the population size and a stratification based on key social characteristics, which increases data precision. However, given the field setting they also need to apply a clustering based on units with sufficiently reliable data and limit their sample sizes, which reduces the precision partwise. Overall, the data can be seen as reliably representative for inferences to national adult populations with an average margin of sampling error of maximum 2.8 percentage points (Afrobarometer Network, 2017).

The respondents' aspirations to migrate are captured by the question "How much, if at all, have you considered moving to another country to live?", with the answer categories "not at all", "a little bit", "somewhat" and "a lot". We re-coded the variable into a dummy distinguishing between "not at all" and the other values, which indicates that respondents have at least some migration aspiration. Robustness checks with the original variable and ordered logistic analyses as well as analyses with alternative dichotomizations do not show any relevant deviations and are reported in Appendix C.01 and C.02. Figure 1 gives a first descriptive insight into the average distribution of aspirations to migrate per country (see Appendix B.01 for detailed numbers).

Of course, migration aspirations do not always lead to actual migration (Carling, 2002; Docquier et al., 2014). Tjaden et al. (2019) have however shown that there is a strong link between emigration aspirations and out-migration. Lu (1999) reports a similar relationship with individual data but with greater variation (see also Creighton, 2013). In any case, migration aspirations can be seen as an upper bound of anticipated emigration (Manski, 1990; see also Docquier et al., 2014). They give us a better idea of a society's inner desires and attitudes.



**FIGURE 1** Geographic map of African countries studied; white, not in the sample; grey-blank, in the sample; intensity indicates the percentage of people with migration aspirations per country (see table of shares per country in Appendix B.01 for detailed statistics).

Furthermore, aspirations to migrate may affect not only the society through its materialization but also the everyday behaviour of the mentally preparing (Koikkalainen & Kyle, 2016) or the (involuntarily) immobile migrants (Carling & Schewel, 2018).

The perception of the political, social and economic situation has multiple dimensions. We captured this multidimensionality by building indices based on multiple indicators per category. Within each category, we performed an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) based on a set of variables that were available in the data set and corresponded to these dimensions. We restrict ourselves to variables referring to the current situation in the country. Indices based on the recent development of the situation are highly correlated with the current ones and explored as robustness tests. The EFA results structure the political situation category in three indices, the social and economic category in one each. Table 1 lists the five resulting indices with a short description of the corresponding variables used (for detailed wordings see Appendix A.01). All variables are measured on a four-level scale.

We also considered several control variables that have been shown to influence people's perception of a situation as well as the individual migration decision-making. We controlled for gender and age because women and older people are more likely to perceive the situation differently but are also less likely to aspire to migrate (Hunter et al., 2015: 7f). Furthermore, we expected the level of education to have a particularly high influence on both variables. As described earlier, a higher level of education may enhance the ability to perceive the situation more accurately and gather more information. At the same time, people with higher education migrate more often (Docquier et al., 2014). In line with Isaksson et al. (2014), we included the Poverty Index of the Afrobarometer to capture variations in the socio-economic status, as a higher poverty level is expected to reduce migration aspirations (Dustmann & Okatenko, 2014). People with a migration history, either direct or indirect through a migrated

TABLE 1 Classification: indices created using exploratory factor analysis (EFA).

Perception	
Political civil liberties	Alpha=0.69 Free to say what you think [not] careful what you say about politics [not] careful what political organizations you join [not] careful how you vote in an election
Rule of law	Alpha=0.56 People are [not] treated unequally under the law Officials who commit crimes [do not] go unpunished
Welfare situation	Alpha=0.84 Government is improving the living standards of the poor Government is narrowing gaps between rich and poor Government is improving basic health services Government is addressing educational needs Government is providing water and sanitation services Government is ensuring everyone has enough to eat
Political corruption	Alpha=0.90 President and officials in his office are [not] involved in corruption Members of Parliament are [not] involved in corruption Government officials are [not] involved in corruption Local government councillors are [not] involved in corruption Police is [not] involved in corruption Judges and magistrates are [not] involved in corruption
Economic situation	Alpha= Good present economic condition of this country

household member, are more likely to perceive the country's situation differently, which increases the probability of migrating (Hunter et al., 2015: 7f). Similar expectations hold for people who have a migration network, that is, contacts with people living abroad (McKenzie & Rapoport, 2007; Ruysen et al., 2014). Due to data limitations, we had to proxy the network through indicators of being a remittance-receiving household, thus building a lower bound of people with contacts abroad. Lastly, we assumed that people living in urban areas are more involved in the country's political, social and economic situation, which influences their perception of the situation. Although city dwellers have a higher probability of migrating, it is shown that they have lower aspirations to migrate than individuals in rural regions (Creighton, 2013). Finally, since only citizens are interviewed, the sample does not include (recently arrived) migrants who might be planning to return to their country of origin or move to another country, which would increase the number of people who aspire to migrate (Ruysen & Salomone, 2018: 23).

To account for the objective country-level information, we run our models with country indicators that are based on country statistics and expert interviews and correspond to the perception variables. We applied a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). The Political Civil Liberties Indicator Index, the Rule of Law Indicator Index and the Corruption Indicator Index consist of multiple variables and indices from the V-Dem project (Coppedge et al., 2020). The Welfare Situation Indicator Index is based on variables from the World Bank (2017), and the Economic Situation Indicator Index is a mix of variables from the ILO (2017), the World Bank (2017), and the Penn World Table (2017). Many of these variables have been used in earlier research to explain the change in migration



(aspirations) (Fitzgerald et al., 2014; Neumayer, 2005). The operationalization of all indices and variables is reported in detail in Appendix A.01.

The mean of the perception indices ranges from 2.154 (perception of welfare situation) to 2.561 (perception of corruption) with standard deviations between 0.699 and 1.197 on a four-point scale [1–4] (see detailed Table 4 in Annex B.03.). In other words, most of the mean values of the perceptions are slightly below the middle category (2.5) with rather large deviations. The objective measurements are scaled between 0 and 1. It can be seen that the mean of the civil liberties index and the rule of law index are slightly above the middle category (0.5) and the other three indices are slightly below. Recoding all indices to a scale of 0 to 1 (see figure 1 in Appendix B.03) shows that the mean values of the objective and perceived values are quite similar, but that the distribution is much larger for the perception indices for all topics. Political freedoms and rule of law are the only two issue categories where the countries' situation is perceived to be worse on average than objectively assessed. The other issues, which are presumably closer to the majority population, are perceived on average as objectively presented. Finally, Table 4.1 in Appendix B.03 provides the average values for each index and the structural and individual level across all countries. As appears in Table 4.2. in Appendix B.03, the correlations between structural and perception indices vary from very low to moderate.

## MAIN RESULTS

To test our first hypothesis, Figure 2 shows the average marginal effects of the different categories of perceptions of the political, economic and social environment on the aspiration to migrate. The results are based on logistic regressions with country-fixed effects to account for heterogeneity in characteristics and conditions in the countries of origin. Covariates are included as described above. Higher values stand for more positive perceptions of

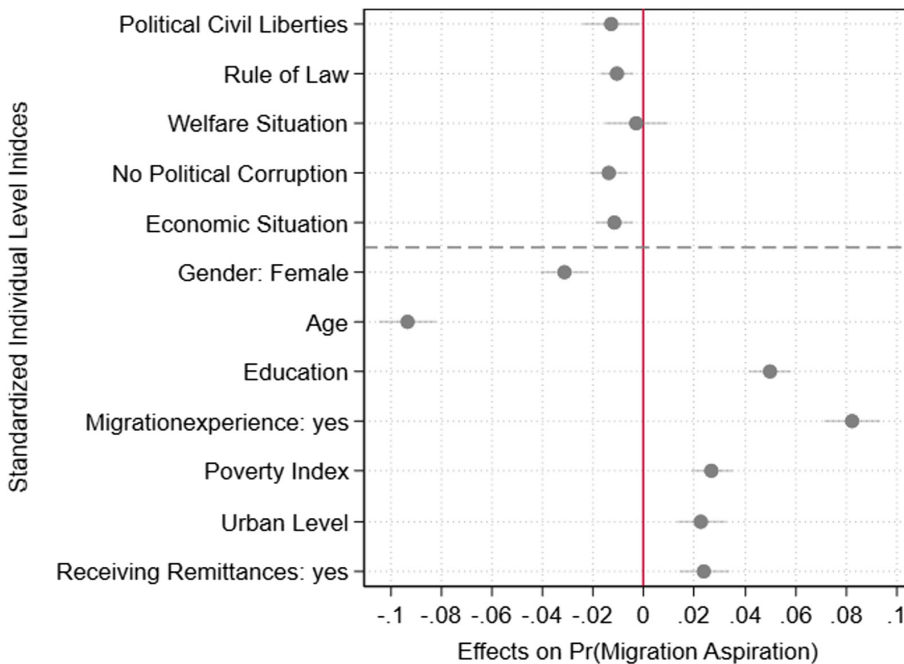


FIGURE 2 Average marginal effects on the probability of migration aspirations based on standardized independent variables, based on logistic regressions with country-fixed effects and covariates; bars represent 95 per cent confidence intervals.

the country's situation, that is, a high level of political civil liberties, a reliable rule of law, general welfare, no political corruption and a good economic situation.

As shown in [Figure 2](#), in all categories people are less likely to aspire to migrate if they have a more positive perception of the current situation in their country. However, this relation varies in size. The effect of perceptions of political civil liberties and political corruption is largest [-0.016 to -0.019]. The effect sizes of perceptions of the rule of law and of perceptions of the economic situation are smaller but still substantial [-0.009 to -0.012]. The marginal effect of the perceptions of the welfare situation is minimal [-0.004] and not statistically significant.

Since the effect size in average marginal effect calculations is hard to grasp, it may be useful to compare it to effect sizes of well-known drivers of migration aspirations from the same model. It appears that the effect sizes of perception indices are overall smaller than the average marginal effects of standardized individual demographics. However, the perception indices are comparable to the average marginal effects of the poverty index, urban-level scale or being part of a remittance-receiving household. All three variables are among the important explanatory factors for migration (Docquier & Rapoport, 2012; Grogger & Hanson, 2011).

The negative effect in all categories confirms our first hypothesis, according to which positive perceptions of the political, economic or social environment are related to lower migration aspirations. This confirms earlier studies that have investigated perceptions and migration aspirations in specific areas (Auer et al., 2020; Ruysen & Salomone, 2018). The regression analyses and estimations with alternative coding of the dependent variable (Appendix C.01 and C.02) and an index that includes all five categories (Appendix C.04) lead to the same results. We also run our models with alternative indices that are based on items that did not ask people about their perception of the current situation but how the situation changed over the last years. As Appendix C.03 shows, these analyses yield the same results. Appendices C.07 and C.08 also show that the results are identical when we include the indices individually in our models and when we run an OLS model. Additional analyses in Appendix B.03 show that the correlations between the indices are relatively low and that there is no issue of multicollinearity.

To better understand the relationship between perceptions and aspirations to migrate, we put them in context with the countries' objective political, economic and social situation. This allows us to verify our second hypothesis that the relationship between perceptions and migration aspirations is not (entirely) determined by the objective situation in a country. To test this argument, we need to show that there is no (substantial) effect of the objective environment on the perceptions thereof and that the perceptions do not mediate (strongly) the effect of the objective environment. In other words, a complete (or partial) mediation would make one of the two measurements entirely (or almost) meaningless.<sup>5</sup>

[Figure 3](#) shows the estimation of a mediation model of the objective situation on migration aspirations, indicating the direct path, that is, reduced model, and the indirect path, that is, full model. Following the traditional mediation analysis approach,<sup>6</sup> the coefficients of the country indicator indices would approximate zero in the full model in case of full mediation and reveal a relevant change in size in case of partial mediation. In a non-linear setting, as the present one, the simple subtraction of both logit estimates is not feasible to interpret the change. The KHB method (Karlson et al., 2012) substitutes the mediating variables (i.e., individual-level indices) by their residuals and makes it possible to compare coefficients also in a non-linear setting.

Most estimates for the relationship between the objective situation and migration aspirations are insignificant, and hence the coefficient estimates should be interpreted with caution. This can be explained by the limited variation in the independent variable, given the relatively small N of 34 countries under study. Most effects are negative, which confirms the argument that people's aspirations to migrate are higher in countries that are worse off (e.g., Cooray & Schneider, 2016; Meierrieks & Renner, 2017). The welfare situation has a positive effect, meaning that the better the objective situation concerning welfare, the higher the migration aspirations. This relationship contrasts with most literature, where it is shown that welfare provision in country of origin works as a "safety net" keeping people from leaving intentions (e.g., De Jong et al., 2022).

More central to our study is however the potential mediation through individual perspectives of the situation. Comparing the reduced model with the full model allows us to see to what extent the perception variables

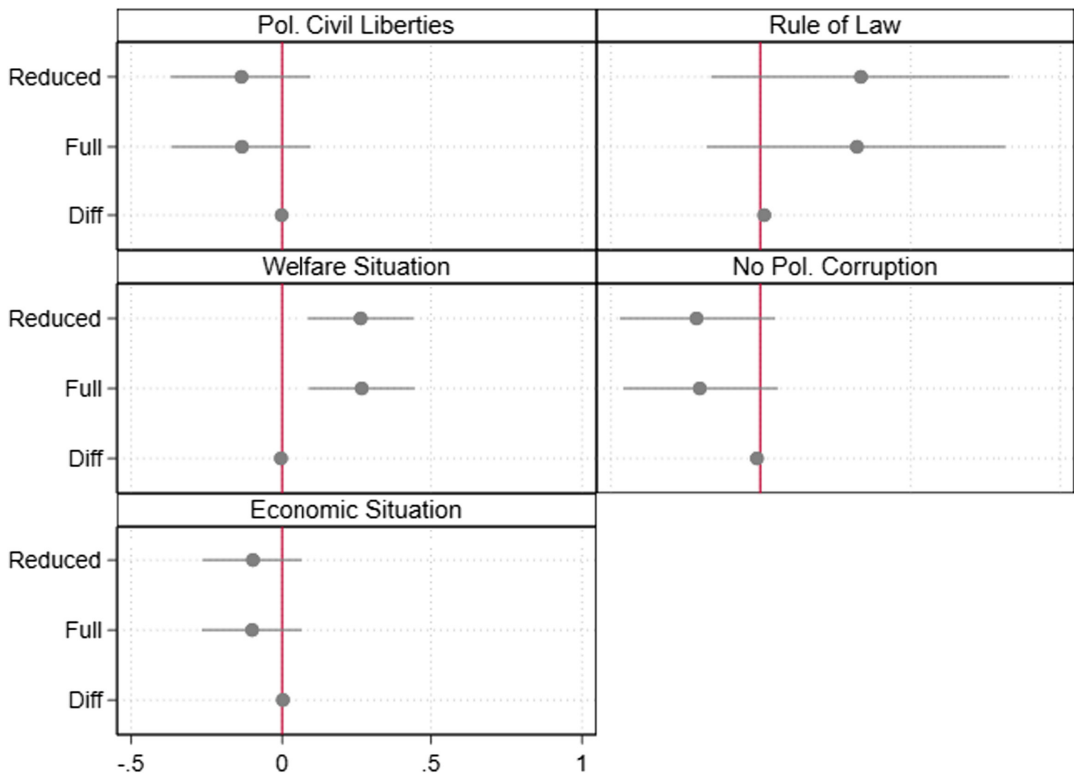


FIGURE 3 Mediation analysis on the dichotomous-dependent variable migration aspirations [0, 1]; Karlson-Holm-Breem Approach (Karlson et al., 2012): the reduced model indicates the direct effect of the objective macro-level indicator on the individual aspirations to migrate; the full model captures the same link but includes the perception of the countries' situation on the individual level as a mediator; diff defines the difference in the macro-level estimates and hence the level of mediation, that is, high difference suggests high mediation; all models present logits and are based on logistic regressions with covariates and country-fixed effects.

mediate the effects of the objective situation on migration aspirations. As the effect estimates are unequal to zero, a full mediation can be ruled out. Additionally, the estimations of the differences between the full and the reduced model indicate the absence of a relevant change and, therefore, no partial mediation. The rule of thumb for a relevant change would be around 10 per cent (James & Brett, 1984; Judd & Kenny, 1981). Hence, the analysis confirms our second hypothesis and suggests that the more objective country-level situation at most partly influences, but does not determine, the perception of the situation. This supports our argument to account for individual perceptions of a country's political, economic and social situation.

### Robustness tests

There are three potential threats to identification, which we address with additional analyses. First, it could be argued that the perceptions of the political, economic and social environment do not reflect concerns about these issues but general degrees of dissatisfaction. Most of the independent measures refer to democratic values and rules. To ensure that our findings are driven by a desire to live in more democratic societies and that the survey questions are understood accordingly, we should observe these effects only among people who find a democratic regime and the respective institutions desirable (Etling et al., 2020). In Appendix D.01 (Figure 5) we re-estimated our main model with subsamples based on the respondents' preferred political system (68% prefer democratic

system). It appears that the results are driven by people who prefer a democratic over an authoritarian regime. The effects for people who prefer an authoritarian regime are in the same direction. They are, however, partly smaller and not statistically significant. This suggests that our indicators truly measure how people perceive their political environment.

A second problem is that migration aspirations and people's perception of a country's political civil liberties, rule of law, welfare situation, political corruption and economic situation may constitute sensitive issues. In authoritarian regimes, people may not give honest answers to such questions, fearing negative consequences (Tourangeau & Yan, 2007). This is particularly problematic in the context of surveys in developing countries, in which interviews are primarily conducted face to face (Kreuter et al., 2008). It has been shown that demographic characteristics play a particular role in explaining biased answers: the rich, the young and women demonstrate higher social desirability bias than others in an authoritarian regime (Kalinin, 2016). For this reason, all our models control for age, gender and education.

Social desirability biases may also be driven by respondents believing that state authorities sent the interviewers (see Tannenbergh, 2021; Zimbalist, 2018). In the Afrobarometer survey, enumerators tell the respondents at the beginning of an interview that they were from Afrobarometer, an independent research organization, and did not represent the government or any political party. At the end of the interview, people were asked who they thought sent the interviewers to do this interview. We ran our models separately for those who gave the correct answer (47% of all respondents) and for those who suspected a political actor behind the survey (34% of all respondents).<sup>7</sup> As shown in Appendix D.01 (Figure 4), the results for both groups are almost the same, which supports the assumption that there are no social desirability biases. This corroborates the findings by Calvo et al. (2019), who investigated the “fear-of-the-state” bias by comparing similar items from the Afrobarometer and data collected by National Statistics Offices (NSOs).

Biased answers may also be caused by people influencing the interviewees. In about 15 per cent of cases, the enumerators indicated that non-close family members or even a tiny crowd were present during the interviews. To test whether such situations led to different results, we replicated our analyses, splitting the sample between those who gave the interview alone and those who may have been influenced by others. As shown in Appendix D.01 (Figure 6), there are no substantial differences between the two groups. Thus, there is no reason to believe that answers were influenced by other people.

Unobserved variables that are correlated both with our independent and with our dependent variables may constitute a third problem. As we pointed out above, we have included several control variables in our models. To further mitigate endogeneity concerns and to make our argument more plausible, we run our model using the Mahalanobis matching technique. We divided the sample into two groups, simulating a treatment and a control group, based on the perception of the current situation below or above the median for each category. Both groups are balanced, that is, matched, on the described covariates and the country region using Mahalanobis nearest-neighbour matching pairs. The results are reported in Appendix D.02 and support the main analyses above, as the ATE estimates are all negative and most are statistically significant. Using a different cut-off point for the treatment group allocation – for example, the first and last quantile, the extremes – yields similar results.

## CONCLUSION

This paper set out to investigate how perceptions of the political, economic and social environment affect migration aspirations independent of the objective structural factors. Confirming our two hypotheses, we have shown that people who perceive their environment more positively are less likely to develop aspirations to move elsewhere. We have also shown that these perceptions do not simply mediate the objective situation in a country but have an independent effect. Several robustness checks lead to the same results.

These findings make a significant contribution to the current literature on migration movements, which has so far focussed either on objective pull factors in destination countries or (more recently) on subjective push factors in origin countries. In contrast to most research so far, this study provides a systematic comparison of objective and subjective measures across different issues and investigates to what extent these measures are related to each other. Objective measures certainly help us understand why people seek to move to other countries. However, people may know more or less about the situation in their country and elsewhere and have different expectations of an ideal situation depending on their experiences, norms and values. Such cognitive aspects have been largely neglected in migration research so far (Koikkalainen & Kyle, 2016). Moreover, not everybody is equally affected by restricted free speech, a corrupt administration, a poorly functioning welfare state system or a bad economy.

This study suffers from some limitations. Even though we do not think we would come to different conclusion with data from other parts of the world, our findings are limited to the African continent and future research should show to what extent our analyses can be replicated elsewhere. A more severe limitation of our study is that we were unable to systematically test the various mechanisms that we discussed due to a lack of data. Using further survey data and original survey experiments, future research should investigate why exactly perceptions divert from the objective situation in a country. A first and simple way to gain a better understanding is to look at how education moderates the relationship between subjective and objective factors. It can be expected that education affects the way people interact with their state, their relative economic and social position, their norms and values, and their knowledge about their country.

We conducted a heterogeneous effect analysis using the individual level of education as a proxy for the capabilities of understanding the macro-situation (see Appendix E.01). The results reveal small differences in perceptions of the economic situation between the group with a low level of education and those with medium or high education. This might be because higher educated people understand the country's situation better. However, it could also be due to varying points of reference, as lower education is highly correlated with income and dependency on the job market. This example already demonstrates how difficult it is to tease out the impact of the different moderating variables on the link between objective situation and individual perceptions.

As has been shown by Koubi et al. (2016) and Helbling et al. (2021) in the literature on climate change and migration, perceptions tell us how people understand their environment, how they evaluate the risks of being affected and how much they understand its long-term consequences. People leave when they understand the long-term, irreversible consequences of climate change. Such an argument could also be tested more broadly in the context of the political, economic and social developments that are the focus of this paper. As long as people perceive specific changes as non-permanent and hope that the situation will improve in the near future, they see no reason to leave. However, if they consider the situation in their country hopeless and have lost trust in their government, their desire to move to another country will most certainly increase. The Afrobarometer allows us to measure how people perceived recent developments for some of the topics under study and reveals that a positive development in recent years is linked to reduced probabilities of migration aspirations (see Appendix C.03). Future studies should however include questions on how people see the future of their country and whether they think their situation will remain the same or change.

We have shown that perceptions of the countries' situation concerning the political, economic and social environment is relevant for understanding the formation of migration aspirations and that this relationship is not inevitably determined by the objective situation of the country. This also means that improving a country's institutions does not necessarily lead to more positive perceptions, especially among those people who are not directly affected by certain changes or have different priorities. It is thus important to understand which people are ignorant about what their state does or why they misperceive what it does. To avoid such divergences, education and communication are essential. However, since these two can also lead people to recognize the problems a state faces, it is not enough to inform people but also to build a society that trusts its government and their capacities to improve their lives, which builds hope for a better future in their country instead of somewhere else.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

## PEER REVIEW

The peer review history for this article is available at <https://www.webofscience.com/api/gateway/wos/peer-review/10.1111/imig.13148>.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available in Afrobarometer at [https://www.afrobarometer.org/data/data-sets/?select-survey-rounds\[\]=survey-round-7&hidden-current-page=1](https://www.afrobarometer.org/data/data-sets/?select-survey-rounds[]=survey-round-7&hidden-current-page=1).

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The term “aspirations” is often used interchangeably with other terms such as desires, plans and intentions. These terms are most often used without a particular theoretical framework, although they can be understood differently (Carling & Collins, 2018: 918–919; Carling, 2019). We use the term “aspiration” as it is often understood “as a shorthand for a broader lexicon” (Carling, 2019: 2).
- <sup>2</sup> Most potential migrants aspire to migrate to rich countries in North America and Western Europe. Rich countries in other parts of the world such as Australia, Japan, Singapore, South Africa and Saudi Arabia also belong to the most preferred destination countries (see here: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/245255/750-million-worldwide-migrate.aspx> [accessed 5 January 2023]). Nonetheless, most migration happens between countries of the Global South. For Africa, for example, it has been shown that most migration occurs between countries of the African continent and especially between neighbouring countries (Flahaux & De Haas, 2016: 11). Many of these migrants move to more fertile agricultural areas, urban areas or areas with oil economies to improve their economic situation (Flahaux & De Haas, 2016: 11–12). It has also been shown that within Africa, Nigeria, South Africa and Egypt are the main destinations, three countries that are among the most developed African countries (see here: <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/african-migration-trends-watch-2022> [accessed 5 January 2023]).
- <sup>3</sup> Several large projects have investigated individual-level factors by means of surveys in Africa and Latin America such as the Migrations between Africa and Europe Project (MAFE, <https://mafeproject.site.ined.fr/en/>), the Mexican Migration Project (MMP, <https://mmp.opr.princeton.edu/>) and the Latin American Migration Project (LAMP, <https://lamp.opr.princeton.edu/>) (all accessed on 5 January 2023).
- <sup>4</sup> Non-responses on variables of interest are excluded. We do not select by nationality (no data available), race (too wide categories) or mother tongue (too fluid categories). The representative sample (following Afrobarometer Round 7 sampling report) includes respondents who are interviewed in their country of birth or nationality but also others. However, we control for (household or own) migration experience as a covariate variable.
- <sup>5</sup> A complete mediation would indicate that the perception of the situation is determined by the objective situation, making the measurement of these perceptions meaningless. A significant partial mediation would indicate that this is only true to a major extent, that is, giving some relevance to the measurement of perceptions. One could interpret a partial mediation as supporting the argument that the perception of the situation is merely another measurement of the objective situation with a measurement error, with the measurement error being the variation based on perceptions.
- <sup>6</sup> In the traditional four-step approach of a mediation analysis (James & Brett, 1984; Judd & Kenny, 1981), a relation must be demonstrated between (1) the country-level indicators and the dependent variable of individual migration aspirations, (2) the country-level indicators and the individual perception, (3) the individual perception and the dependent variable, (4) and the country-level indicators and the dependent variable while controlling for the perception of the environment.
- <sup>7</sup> Correct answers are the categories Afrobarometer, Research Company, NGO and University. Political Actors are the categories Political Party, Politician and Government. Further answers included the categories No one, Private Company, Media, IGO and God.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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