Essays on the decision-making processes of irregularised migrants over the course of their migration trajectories

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Impact paragraph

This doctoral dissertation contributes to the emerging literature on the decision-making processes of irregularised migrants over the course of their migration trajectories and has been developed in pursuit of both scientific and social impact.

In terms of the dissertation’s scientific impact, the four empirical chapters contribute to three under-studied aspects of migration decision-making. These are: 1) family-level aspects of decision-making; 2) the role of social, psychological and emotional factors; and 3) the role of policies in migration decision-making. Regarding the first, Chapter 4 offers an exploratory analysis of family mobility strategies. In contrast to the dominant focus in the literature on the individual migrant as ‘lead’ decision-maker, this chapter pays attention to the ways in which families jointly navigate mobility regimes in order to best achieve their migration aspirations. This chapter illustrates how family groups wanting to seek asylum together are particularly affected by the spiralling costs and challenges of irregularised journeys, which have differing impacts on individual family members. In this context, family separation – with the aim of later accessing family reunification channels – is an adaptive strategy undertaken by families in order to overcome the physical and financial constraints on their movement. Drawing also on insights from the Albanian families studied in Chapters 6 and 7, this dissertation contributes to an understanding of the particularities of decision-making among family groups who (aspire to) migrate together. The analyses demonstrate that, in such cases, the family may assess risk differently, prioritise in particular ways, and may have to navigate the different challenges faced by, and opportunities available to, individual family members.

Regarding the second research gap on social, psychological and emotional factors, Chapter 5 firstly suggests the importance of understanding mental (ill-)health as an influence on migrant decision-making processes. Chapter 6 adds to the growing literature on how irregularised migrants may receive and process information. In contrast to the ways in which unfavourable information may be ignored or minimised in importance by aspiring migrants in the country of origin, Chapter 6 finds that, in a country of destination, migrants may be more accepting of, and responsive to, information that runs counter to their hopes and objectives. Chapter 7 adds weight to the small but growing number of studies which have highlighted the role of legitimacy perceptions in migration decision-making and raises questions for the further development of scholarly and policymaker understandings of how the legitimacy of migration policies and practices are assessed by (potential) migrants.

Finally, each of the case studies presented in Chapters 4, 5 and 6 illustrate the key role that hope plays in motivating irregularised migration in the context of high uncertainty, risks and costs. Drawing on Hayenhjelm (2006) and Zinn (2016), these analyses develop the link between the role of hope and the potential effectiveness of policy. The dissertation argues that policies that aim to shape the decision-making of irregularised migrants by altering the relative costs and benefits of a particular course of action fail to account for the role of hope in motivating decisions to stay or leave when the decision-maker perceives no acceptable alternatives.

Hope is therefore central to the findings that contribute to developing understandings of the role of policy in the decision-making of irregularised migrants – the third research gap considered in this dissertation. Taken together, the analyses find, on the one hand, that irregularised migrants ignore or resist restrictive policies where they perceive no alternative way of accessing security, dignity and a meaningful life (Chapters 4, 5 and 6). On the other hand, Chapters 4, 6 and 7 find that migrant decision-making is responsive to policies which offer (an alternative) pathway to fulfilling their aspirations, or which treat the migrant with respect and dignity. In particular, Chapter 7 offers evidence on the under-studied role of EU entry bans, and argues that, in the Albanian case, the deterrent effect of entry bans should be seen in relation to the access that Albanian nationals have to legal re-entry to, and labour migration in, the EU. Overall, these chapters add further evidence to the argument that ‘policies that incentivise matter more than policies that deter’ (Mallett & Hagen-Zanker, 2019, p.175) and further suggest that (relevant) favourable policies may moreover encourage responsiveness to policy restrictions (at least where the migrant has a reasonable alternative to non-compliance).

Regarding social impact, Chapters 4 and 5 highlight the contradictions between multilateral commitments to facilitate ‘safe, orderly and regular’ migration as set out in the Global Compact for Migration and the Sustainable Development Goals and the reality of increasing migration restrictions and risks imposed on migrants who are excluded from legal migration channels, and thereby from accessing their fundamental rights. Collectively, the findings from Chapters 4, 5 and 6 urge an acknowledgement that people have basic rights and needs – which include safety, dignity, an adequate standard of living, and family life – and will continue to migrate in order to fulfill these in spite of restrictions, unless they are offered a reasonable alternative. It is hoped that this evidence should open up space for a more realistic and pragmatic discussion of the need for legal provisions to allow migratory movements and residence to take place in a safe, orderly and regular manner, including via family reunification, labour migration channels, humanitarian visas.
or corridors, and basic protections for irregularised migrants throughout their migration trajectories. In addition, Chapter 7 offers further evidence in support of the expansion of legal labour migration channels, by demonstrating how such access has promoted compliance with return obligations among rejected Albanian asylum-seekers. The findings on the relevance of perceived legitimacy furthermore suggest that policymakers should pay attention to the ways in which policies and practices shape assessments regarding the legitimacy of migration governance, and should therefore explore ways to make mobility regimes fairer and more humane from the perspective of (potential) migrants.

About the author

Talitha Dubow (9 June 1992, Brighton, United Kingdom) is a Researcher at the UNU-MERIT Graduate School. Her research focusses on migrant experiences, decision-making and trajectories, and the impacts of policies on these. In this role, Talitha has worked on studies funded or commissioned by the European Commission; the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ); the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) The Netherlands; the Research and Documentation Centre (WODC) of the Dutch Ministry of Justice and Security; the World Food Programme (WFP); and the Worldwide Universities Network (WUN). Before joining the UNU-MERIT Graduate School, Talitha completed an MSc. in Public Policy and Human Development at UNU-MERIT and Maastricht University, while also working as a Research Assistant at the Maastricht University School of Business and Economics, focussing on refugee entrepreneurship. Prior to moving to Maastricht, Talitha worked as a Research Assistant at RAND Europe, Cambridge, where she worked on topics spanning innovation and entrepreneurship, civic engagement and political participation, and counter-radicalisation and violent extremism. Prior to starting her research career, Talitha graduated from the University of Cambridge with a bachelor’s degree in Modern and Medieval languages (French and Spanish), and worked in intern and volunteer roles for NGOs working with communities in Colombia, the Dominican Republic and France.