A spotlight on economic reintegration for Afghan returnees

Since January 2020, MMC Asia has been interviewing returned Afghan returnees to better understand their experiences of return and reintegration.[1] Alongside continuing returns from Iran and Pakistan,[2] deportations of Afghans from Turkey[3] and European countries[4] resumed at the end of 2020. Returns and deportations of Afghans are happening against the backdrop of increasing socioeconomic strain and instability caused by the impacts of COVID-19, ongoing conflict, faltering peace negotiations, and the withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan. This snapshot explores the many challenges Afghans face upon return to Afghanistan, with a focus on economic reintegration. It aims to contribute towards building a solid evidence base to inform targeted responses on the ground, as well as advocacy efforts related to the situation of returnees.

Recommendations

- Suspend deportations of Afghans given the increasing insecurity and conflict within the country;
- Facilitate access to income-generating activities for Afghan returnees through cash transfer, vocational training and job matching;
- Address the basic needs of Afghan returnees unable to find work upon return, such as food and shelter;
- Provide targeted re-integration support to returnees, particularly deportees from Iran;
- Provide information about travel restrictions and regular migration channels for those looking to re-migrate.

Profiles of respondents

Information in this snapshot comes from 706 interviews conducted between 16 February and 25 April 2021 (540 by phone and 166 in person) in seven provinces of Afghanistan (Kabul, Herat, Balkh, Kunduz, Nangarhar, Kandahar, and Nimruz) as well as three border points (Zaranj, Islam Qala, and Turkham).[5] The majority (84%) of respondents were men.[6] The average age of respondents was 29. Respondents surveyed were primarily Hazara (27%), Tajik (25%), and Pashtun (25%), having mainly attained secondary/high school (34%), or primary school (33%) levels of education. More than half (58%) come from a rural background in Afghanistan prior to their migration. 62% were not working prior to their migration from Afghanistan.

The majority of respondents reported that they returned to Afghanistan from Iran (61%), followed by Turkey (19%), Pakistan (11%), European countries (7%) and other countries (2%). Most respondents reported that that they held irregular status in their country of migration (61%) with 71% reporting they were working, mostly in casual/occasional (52%) or regular paid work (42%).

More than half (58%) were deported to Afghanistan by authorities in their country of migration; the rest returned independently (26%), under Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR) programs (8%), journeys otherwise assisted by UN, IOM or other agencies (7%) or by the help of smugglers or others (1%). The main reasons for return among those who were not deported were to reunite with family or friends in Afghanistan (44%) or because they could not manage to make a living in their country of migration (32%).

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1   Due to the COVID-19 outbreak, in April 2020, MMC Asia shifted the focus of its returnee survey to under-stand returnees' experiences and needs during the pandemic. From 16 February 2021, MMC Asia has resumed data collection with returnees focusing on return and reintegration.
2   See https://afghanistan.iom.int/sites/afghanistan/files/Reports/iom_afghanistan-return_of_undocument-ed_afghans_situation_report_16-22_april_2021_0.pdf
3   See https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-turkey-afghanistan-idUSKBN1HE0DX
4   See https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/30778/more-than-1-000-afghan-asylum-seekers-deported-from-germany

5   MMC Asia continues to collect data in Afghanistan primarily over the phone, however, as the COVID-19 situation in the country has stabilized, in-person data collection has resumed in certain locations in 2021, with the observance of strict safety protocols.
6   The high number of male respondents is likely due, in part, to a high proportion of returnees overall being men, particularly among those returning from Iran and Pakistan. According to UNHCR's Border Monitoring Updates April – December 2020, the female to male ratio of returnees from Iran was estimated at 1:4.

Main challenges: finding decent work, violence and debt

Nearly half of survey respondents (49%) reported that finding decent work was a major challenge upon return to Afghanistan, see Figure 1. The figure was higher among those who returned from Iran (58%, n=429), likely due to the fact that the majority of those migrating to Iran were reporting to do so due to a lack of livelihood opportunities in Afghanistan prior to migration.[7]

Figure 1. What were your major challenges upon arriving in Afghanistan?
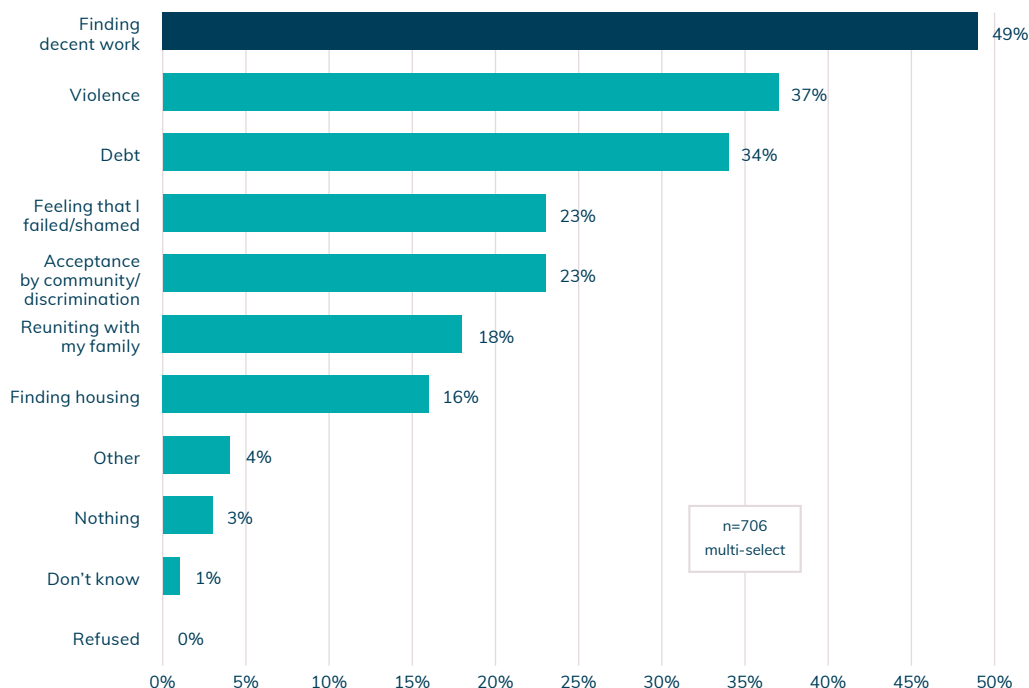
n=706
multi-select

Violence (37%) was the second most commonly cited challenge and more often reported among those who returned from European countries (51%, n=45), however sample sizes for this population are small. According to United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), conflict and violence have been escalating in 2021 with the number of civilian attacks increasing by 29% in the first of quarter of the year, compared to the same period in 2020.[8]

Debt (34%) was another commonly cited challenge reported by respondents. As reported previously by MMC, borrowing money from friends and relatives is one of the main sources of financing migration journeys reported by 4Mi respondents. This, coupled with a lack of livelihood opportunities and financial support upon return, likely compounds the levels of debt Afghans face upon return.

> *"After nine months without work because of the lockdowns, I borrowed money from my relatives and traveled to Iran from Zaranj, but I got caught in Saravan [by Iranian border guards] and was deported back to the country. Now I am still without job and with a lot of debt to pay."*
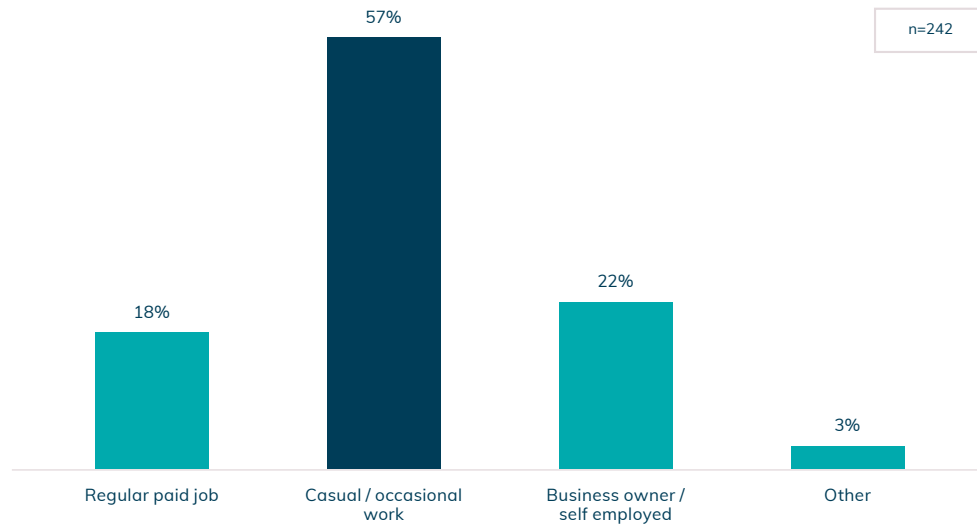> **36-year-old Afghan man deported from Iran, interviewed in Zaranj, Nimruz**

Most struggle to find work in Afghanistan; income does not meet needs

The majority of respondents (66%) reported that they have been unable to find a job since their return. Among the 34% who reported working (n=242), more than half cited this was in casual/occasional jobs (57%), as opposed to regular work (18%), see Figure 2. This includes work in construction (25%), agriculture/pastoralism (24%) and in small businesses (shop/ services/ catering) (20%). The majority of those working reported that they were fully (55%) or partly (40%) financially responsible for their household, however, more than half (64%) reported that their income does not meet the needs of their household. These findings are set against the backdrop of rising general unemployment in Afghanistan (up to almost 40% in Dec 2020).[9]

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7   77% of those who migrated to Iran reported economic factors as one of the main drivers of migration.

8   https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama_protection_of_civilians_in_armed_conflict_1st_quarter_2021_2.pdf

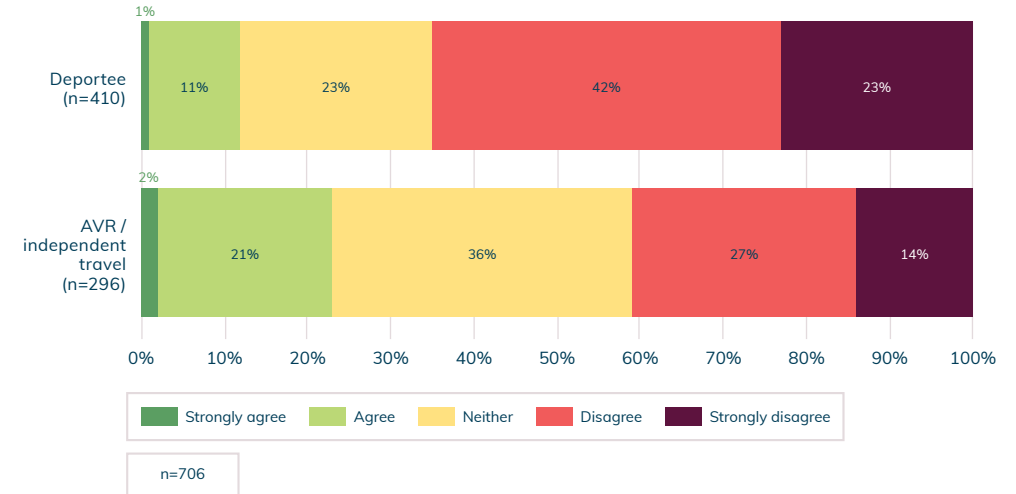9   https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2021-01-30qr-section2-economic.pdf

Figure 2. How are you making money?

n=242

- Regular paid job: 18%
- Casual / occasional work: 57%
- Business owner / self employed: 22%
- Other: 3%

Figure 3. To what extent do you agree with the following statement: I feel fully economically integrated in Afghanistan

Deportee (n=410): Strongly agree 1%, Agree 11%, Neither 23%, Disagree 42%, Strongly disagree 23%

AVR / independent travel (n=296): Strongly agree 2%, Agree 21%, Neither 36%, Disagree 27%, Strongly disagree 14%

Legend: Strongly agree, Agree, Neither, Disagree, Strongly disagree

n=706

Over half of all respondents (55%) perceive themselves not to be economically reintegrated after return. Only 17% of respondents agree they feel economically integrated. As Figure 3 indicates, the level of economic reintegration varies depending on the mode of return. Economic reintegration is reported as lower among those who were deported, compared with those who have returned via other means (AVR programs or independent travel). 65% of deportees (n=266) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that they feel fully economically reintegrated in Afghanistan, compared with 41% of those who returned via other means.[10]

"I did whatever I could [to find a job], but nothing is out there."

24-year-old Afghan man returned from Turkey, interviewed in Kabul

Access to assistance and support is limited, especially among those returning from non-EU countries

Despite the high level of need among returnees in Afghanistan, especially in the context of COVID-19 pandemic,[11] limited assistance is available. Only 16% of respondents overall reported that they have received assistance upon arrival, see Figure 4. Assistance received (n=113) included cash (49%) and food (47%) provided by NGOs (41%) and family/friends in Afghanistan (30%).
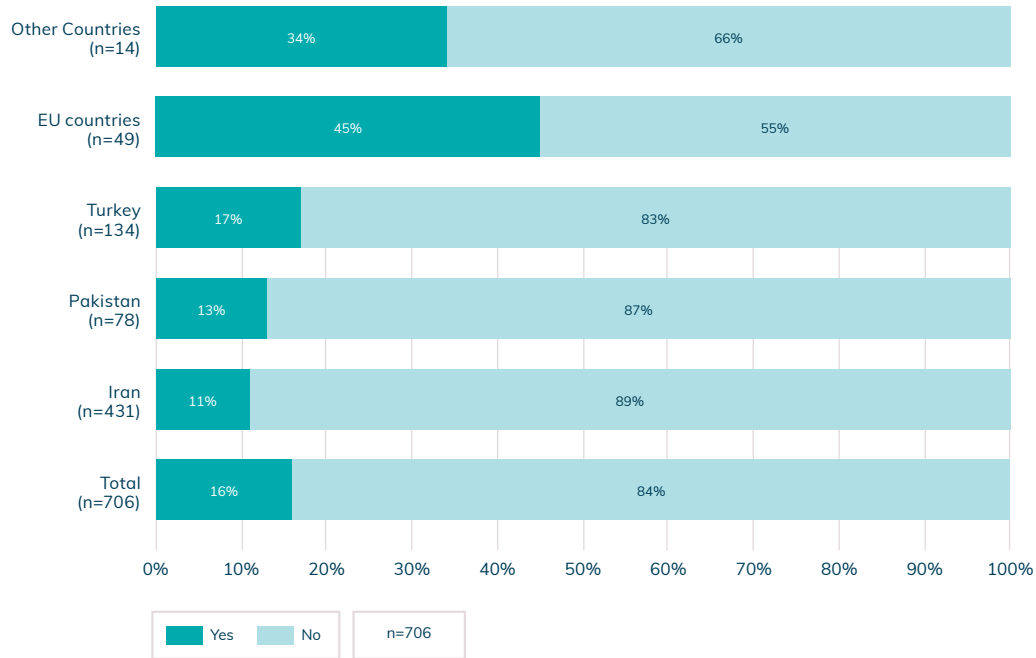
Those returning from EU countries (n=45) reported higher levels of assistance (45%) than other groups, however sample sizes are small, see Figure 4.[12] This may be due to the

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10 This is may be due to the differences in support received upon return between different cohorts as discussed in the next section. In addition, while nearly two thirds of those returning through AVR or independent travel reported some level of preparedness before return, the majority of deportees (92%) reported that they were not prepared for return at all.

11 See: https://mixedmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/120_covid_snapshot_Asia.pdf
12 It should be noted that half of returnees from EU countries (51%) interviewed returned under AVR programs with automatic access to assistance and reintegration support. On the contrary, in case of Iran, the majority of returnees were deportees (67%) or returned independently (19%) with no assistance or support from governments of NGOs available to them.

fact that over half of those returning from EU countries did so under AVR programs with access to assistance and reintegration support. This is compared to those returning from Iran (11%), the majority of whom are deportees or who have returned independently with no access to assistance or support from government.
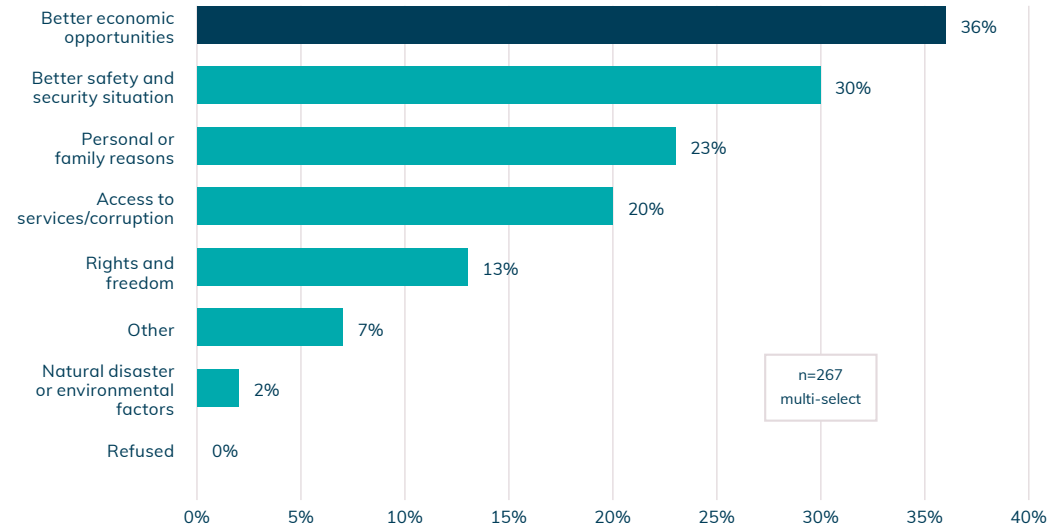
Figure 4. Have you received assistance since you arrived back in Afghanistan?

Country	Yes	No
Other Countries (n=14)	34%	66%
EU countries (n=49)	45%	55%
Turkey (n=134)	17%	83%
Pakistan (n=78)	13%	87%
Iran (n=431)	11%	89%
Total (n=706)	16%	84%

Yes   No   n=706

Many respondents migrated internally after their return for economic and safety reasons

When respondents were asked where they went upon return to Afghanistan, 62% reported that they went directly to their province of origin or previous province of residence. However, the remaining reported that they migrated internally to a new location, either directly upon return (13%), or shortly after (24%). The main reasons cited for their internal migration (n=267) were better economic opportunities (36%) and better safety and security situation (30%), see Figure 3.

Figure 5. Why did you migrate to this new location?

Reason	%
Better economic opportunities	36%
Better safety and security situation	30%
Personal or family reasons	23%
Access to services/corruption	20%
Rights and freedom	13%
Other	7%
Natural disaster or environmental factors	2%
Refused	0%

n=267 multi-select

> "there is no job [in my village] except agriculture, but the flood almost ruined most of the fields and trees… when I went to my home, after a while I had to come to Herat to find some work and earn some money."
> **29-year-old Afghan man returned from Iran, interviewed in Herat City, Herat**

Continued economic uncertainty and instability may increase pressure to re-migrate

> *"I am not going to stay here, otherwise my family will die out of hunger... I am trying to borrow money from relatives to go back to Iran"*
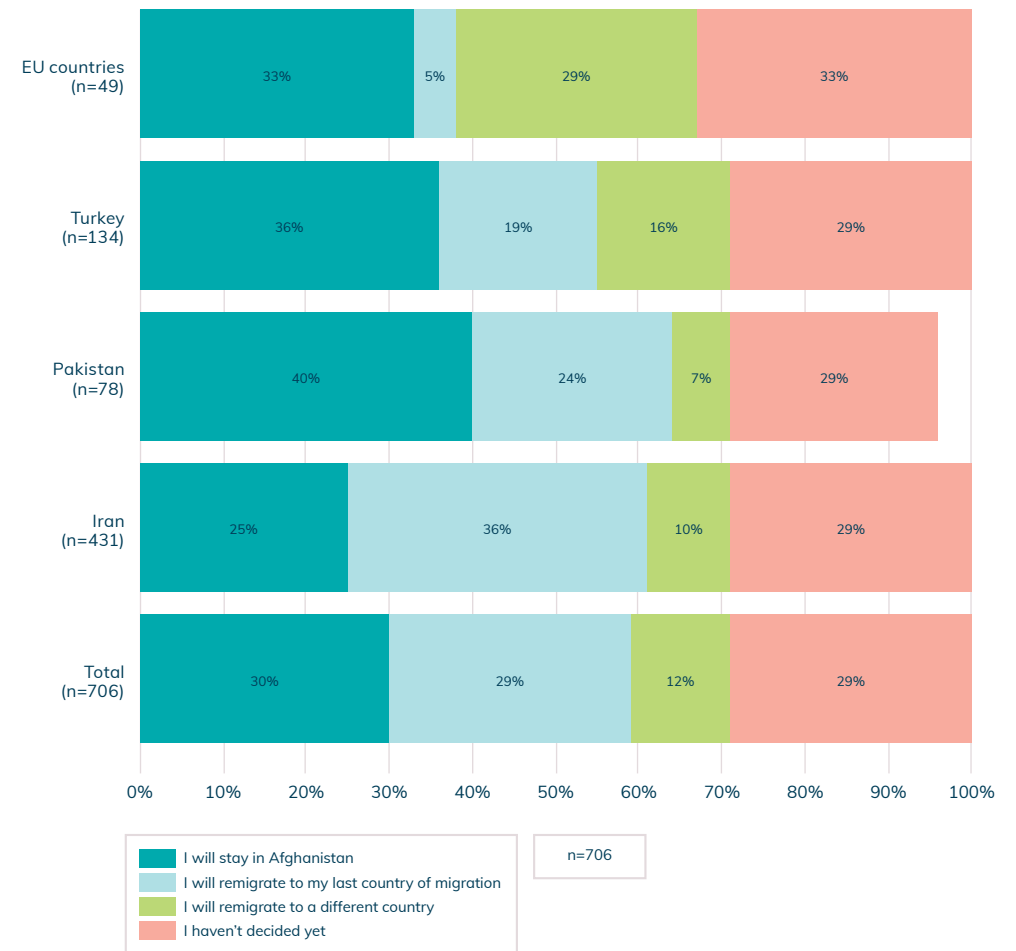> **31-year-old Afghan man returned from Iran, interviewed in Kabul**

> *"All I can do is to wait and see what will happen. My work is not bad at the moment, but with all the things going on right now, I am not sure the situation stays the same... if things get messy, I will take my family and flee to Quetta [Pakistan]."*
> **35-year-old Afghan man returned from Pakistan, interviewed in Nangarhar**

While instability grows and the economic situation in Afghanistan continues to worsen,[13] it is expected that many returnees will seek to re-migrate. Similar to the findings reported in MMC Asia's October 2020 Snapshot, 41% of all respondents reported that they were planning to re-migrate, either to their previous country of migration (29%), or to another country (12%), see Figure 6. 29% reported that they had not yet decided about their future migration intentions, with 30% reporting that they intended to stay in Afghanistan.

When disaggregated by country of return, returnees from Iran were less likely to report intending to stay in Afghanistan (25% n=429) and more likely to report intending to return to Iran (36%). This is compared to those returning from Pakistan (n=75) who were more likely to report intending to stay in Afghanistan (40%). Among those returning from EU countries (n=45) only a handful (5%) reported intending to re-migrate back to their previous country of migration, with 29% instead reporting that they would re-migrate to a different country, although the sample size for this group is small. Among those returning from Turkey (n=139), 19% reported intending to re-migrate back, compared to 16% who indicated they would re-migrate to a different country, see Figure 6.

Figure 6. What is your plan for the next 12 months?

	I will stay in Afghanistan	I will remigrate to my last country of migration	I will remigrate to a different country	I haven't decided yet
EU countries (n=49)	33%	5%	29%	33%
Turkey (n=134)	36%	19%	16%	29%
Pakistan (n=78)	40%	24%	7%	29%
Iran (n=431)	25%	36%	10%	29%
Total (n=706)	30%	29%	12%	29%

n=706

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13 See https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/what-the-covid-19-outbreak-means-for-afghanistans-troubled-economy/

4Mi data collection

The Mixed Migration Monitoring Mechanism Initiative (4Mi) is the Mixed Migration Centre's flagship primary data collection system, an innovative approach that helps fill knowledge gaps, and inform policy and response regarding the nature of mixed migratory movements and the protection risks for refugees and migrants on the move. 4Mi field monitors are currently collecting data through direct interviews with refugees and migrants in West Africa, East Africa, North Africa, Asia, Latin America and Europe.

Note that the sampling approach means that the findings derived from the surveyed sample provide rich insights, but the figures cannot be used to make inferences about the total population. See more 4Mi analysis and details on methodology at: www.mixedmigration.org/4mi