



PERCEPTIONS



Policy Brief

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Practitioners' perceptions for improving migration management and services

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Executive Summary

First-line practitioners (FLPs) have direct professional contact with migrants, law enforcement authorities, border security experts, intercultural mediators as well as service providers. However, despite the crucial role they play in the migration ecosystem, their perceptions are often not reflected in migration policy orientation.

Findings from the PERCEPTIONS project show that FLPs: (i) experience poor working conditions, (ii) face legal barriers, (iii) perceive themselves and migrants as facing threats, (iv) are highly dissatisfied with both European and their countries' immigration policies, and, (v) are severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. These insights are relevant for policymakers to improve migration policy and address threats, challenges and barriers influencing the organisational effectiveness of practitioners. Therefore, this brief provides context-specific and evidenced-based recommendations from the fieldwork with FLPs in both Europe and North Africa.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely impacted daily life and mobility worldwide. Many countries have introduced new forms of restrictions on internal and cross-border mobility, while others reduced funding, support and services in their asylum and integration system. The pandemic has also increased poor working conditions and general dissatisfaction among FLPs (García Carmona et al., 2021, Bermejo et al., 2021). FLPs in precarious and vulnerable working conditions have found their work riskier, fatiguing and dissatisfying. In many areas of policy concern, the actions that could have avoided or reduced damage (economic, social, political, etc.) have not been taken or could not be foreseen. Furthermore, FLPs considered many governmental measures to be untimely, confusing and communication to be contradictory in many cases. As a result, COVID-19 and its prompted policy measures have significantly impacted the service provision of FLPs in both Europe and North Africa.

This brief is based on the findings gathered from the PERCEPTIONS project fieldwork conducted with practitioners from 14 countries in both Europe and North Africa (García Carmona et al., 2021, Bermejo et al., 2021).

Why do practitioners' perceptions matter for improving migration policy? As a fundamental stakeholder providing direct services to migrants (such as housing, information, basic healthcare, education, etc.), practitioners' perceptions help us to identify threats linked to migration and areas for policy intervention. This knowledge can enable us to identify challenges and barriers FLPs face at work and how that might potentially shape their practices and services. In general, practitioners' perceptions are important for the way policymakers make sense of migratory experiences, patterns and stories. Finally, by helping to fill the existing knowledge gap about practitioners' perceptions, these findings help us to make context-specific and evidence-based recommendations for policymakers which take into consideration practitioners' needs.

The next sections report thematically the key findings gathered from the fieldwork.

Key Issues:

- COVID-19 increased poor working conditions, reduced funding, support and services provision in the asylum and integration system causing general dissatisfaction among FLPs.
- FLPs consider many government's measures to be untimely, confused and communications have been contradictory in many cases.
- FLPs' perceptions help us to identify threats linked to migration and areas for policy intervention.

Practitioners' perceptions for better migration management

Migration drivers, trends and migrants' perceptions: Links between perceptions and mobility decisions is one of the central questions of the PERCEPTIONS project. The academic literature on migration patterns, drivers and migrants' perceptions of Europe show that they are dynamic, fragmented and non-linear. Accordingly, FLPs interviewed consider migration patterns, drivers and migrants' perceptions to be changing continuously throughout the migration experience (García Carmona et al., 2021, Bermejo et al., 2021). The majority of FLPs mentioned violence, war, extreme poverty and lack of opportunities as main drivers of

Key Findings:

- Migration patterns, drivers and migrants' perceptions about Europe are dynamic, multidimensional, fragmented and non-linear.

migration to Europe. Accordingly, political instability is considered as the major driver of migration from the so-called global south. FLPs from countries defined as “transit or countries of origin” (Algeria, Egypt, and Tunisia) considered person-specific threats such as religious persecution as a crucial motivation too. They also emphasise the importance of historical, colonial, cultural and linguistic ties between sending and hosting countries as a source of aspiration (for instance, North-African countries, i.e., ex-French colonies, tend to migrate to France). Although, FLPs evaluate so-called push-pull factors to be the major drivers of migration, they consider them insufficient to explain the whole complexity of the migration ecosystem. And while FLPs emphasised the nuisances and potential biases that can be involved in categorising migrants (as political or environmental refugees, economic migrants, suitcase or circular migrants, safe countries, etc.), they think that adequate humanitarian protection should be guaranteed to all migrants.

FLPs consider migrants’ perceptions about Europe to be “positive” in general and moderately accurate on themes such as the overall ‘quality of life’, ‘tolerance and non-discriminations’, ‘women’s and LGBTQ+’ rights. However, they evaluate migrants’ perceptions concerning ‘the rule of law’, ‘family unification’, ‘healthcare’ etc. to be less accurate (García Carmona et al., 2021, Bermejo et al., 2021). As a result, FLPs think many migrants become disappointed when their expectations and perceptions do not match the reality. In other words, a mismatch between expectations and the reality in Europe. Accordingly, FLPs suggest putting much more focus on improving migrants’ reality in Europe, since migrants are facing several threats including racism, discrimination, modern slavery, and excessive bureaucracy.

Migrants’ information sources, channels and threats linked to them: FLPs consider migrants’ main information sources to be informal (family, friends, Facebook and instant messaging applications such as WhatsApp). However, practitioners perceive a lack of fact-checking linked to informal sources and channels. And as such, they observe a high risk of migrants falling into the hands of migrant smugglers and human traffickers. Meanwhile, FLPs stressed that migrants are suspicious of formal channels of information (governments, NGOs, mass media) because they think they have an agenda against them.

While FLPs consider misinformation as a threat to migrant’s wellbeing, “they did not see any link between misinformation and greater likelihood of committing crimes, nor between inaccurate information and a greater probability of radicalisation” (Bermejo et al., 2021). This is in line with the literature review which states that “there is little consensus on the role of false narratives and their impact on migrants” (Bayerl et al., 2020, 4). Meanwhile, most FLPs believe that obstacles and threats on the journey and upon arrival to Europe (such as death, human traffickers, excessive bureaucracy, modern slavery, difficult living conditions, etc.) were known to many migrants. Accordingly, migrants are seen as the key referent objects (and not subjects) of many threats in the migration

- Historical, colonial, cultural and linguistic ties between sending and hosting countries are a source of aspiration for migration to Europe.

- FLPs consider migrants’ perceptions about Europe to be “positive” in general.

- Migrants’ main information sources and channels are informal (families, friends, Facebook, WhatsApp etc.)

ecosystem including COVID-19. This information is useful for EU-funded information campaigns.

Impacts of COVID-19 and prompted policy measures: the majority of practitioners said their service provision was severely affected by COVID-19 but only a few had completely stopped operation. In terms of policy measures, the majority of FLPs said they did not believe that the COVID-19 situation required the closing of borders or the suspension of essential services for migrants. While FLPs working in transit countries were in favour of closure, those working in Europe saw it as an unnecessary measure. FLPs in border enforcement services endorse closure as opposed to those working in support services (hosting, education, food, information, etc). While those working at intergovernmental level agree with the closure of borders and services, those working with migrants on daily bases disagree with both. We can observe these views as mirroring divisive discussions and polarised opinions surrounding the management of the pandemic as related to migration and service provision to migrants.

However, FLPs disagree that COVID-19 and its prompted policy measures will result in less migration to their countries. Rather, they consider Europe’s healthcare system as a motivating factor for migration from countries with poor welfare systems. Nevertheless, FLPs were undecided if migrants consider life under COVID-19 better in North Africa and Europe than in their countries of origin. Furthermore, most FLPs did not believe that COVID-19 would worsen their country’s image. As can be observed, these different perceptions posit the temporality of time and space and their relations to perceptions in migration management, policies and popular discourses. Furthermore, this also makes the study of perceptions increasingly fundamental for better and timely policy orientation.

FLPs’ work environment, organisational effectiveness and challenges they face: The majority of practitioners considered their organisations to be effective in both general service provision and provision of accurate information to migrants. However, the table below illustrates some key barriers that FLPs consider as hindering their organisational effectiveness.

Table 1: Key barriers hindering FLPs’ organisational effectiveness

Area of policy-politics & legislation	Area of management & administration
Political unwillingness	Limited scope of intervention
Regional policy centered on identity politics	Poor salary, infrastructure & general working conditions
Restrictive European, national & local politics as well as limited funding opportunities to few specific locations & sectors	Work stress or psychological burden (fatiguing asylum procedures, newcomer registration, document renewal, etc.)
Rise in anti-migrant rhetoric & attacks as well as	Insufficient human resources & funding as well as language & cultural barriers

- The majority of FLPs were severely affected by COVID-19 but did not believe COVID-19 situation required closing of borders and essential services.

- FLPs disagree that COVID-19 and prompted policy measures will result in less migration to their countries.

- FLPs consider their organisations to be effective.

underperforming governmental authorities & reception services	
Distrust towards NGOs & legal judicial constraints (crimmigration, territoriality, sovereignty, border externalization, etc.)	Heavy and ineffective bureaucracy as well as limited stakeholder engagement in policy orientation (FLPs, migrants, NGOs, etc.)
COVID-19 prompted measures	Difficulty in coordinating operations remotely & high risk of the virus in congested camps
Rise in anti-migrant rhetoric and attacks	Increased tensions in poor resourced and overcrowded camps

As can be observed from the above Table, FLPs point out **the disharmony between the law and their professional norms which shapes their services provision to migrants**. Those working at the intergovernmental level gave greater importance to language and cultural barriers. While the pandemic has increased the existing poor conditions of work for FLPs, it has also introduced new measures such as remote work, social distancing, etc. causing radical changes to the previous models of service provision. This suggests that policymakers should consider these barriers of FLPs’ organisational effectiveness to co-create a conducive work environment that will better shape and improve their practices as well as perceptions.

At the time of the survey, FLPs were highly dissatisfied with both the European Union’s current migration policies and their respective countries’ current migration policies. Those working in non-governmental organisations (both non-faith and faith-based) were particularly dissatisfied with both types of policies. Furthermore, FLPs were only moderately satisfied with their salary and not satisfied at all with their social recognition. One particular theme they stressed is “the criminalisation of those who help migrant people” – labelled as aiding irregular immigration. Accordingly, Open Democracy (2019) illustrates more than 250 cases of people having been detained, accused, or sanctioned for carrying out humanitarian work to aid migrants. Similarly, FLPs also believe migrants are accused of committing common minor offenses and suffer unfair detention, imprisonment and deportation. As a result, FLPs suggest a humanitarian and less restrictive approach to migration that shall include, mainly:

- I. De- bureaucratisation and humanisation of administration for both migrants and practitioners;
- II. Elimination of securitisation and externalisation of European borders to Third-countries, and;
- III. Abolishment of the criminalisation and human rights violation against migrant people and activists who defend them.

In conclusion, these findings suggest that national governments often do not find the right approach that would result in a tangible integration and inclusion of migrants. FLPs believe that since 2015 many structural problems within the border

- FLPs face poor infrastructure, legal barriers and are dissatisfied with both the European Union’s and their countries’ current migration policies.
- FLPs also believe migrants are accused of committing common minor offences.
- Practitioners’ perspectives suggest an immediate call for more humanitarian approach to migration.
- Structural problems within border management, asylum and integration system are being treated as an emergency.

management, asylum and integration system are being treated as an emergency. Meanwhile, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) too, easily fall into the trap of implementing separate and short-term actions. Consequently, while these so-called integration and inclusion project–programs are operating all around Europe, FLPs consider their job satisfaction and social image significantly decreasing. Table 1 suggests that FLPs are faced with challenges that are multidimensional, institutional and structural. Meanwhile, the legacy of discrimination, racism and xenophobia remain as notable barriers to protection, integration and inclusion of migrants in Europe. In this regard, FLPs report that intervention with instrumental, rather than expressive policies is highly and immediately needed. They echo that since 2015, there has been increased resistance, tensions and conflicts against the growing multi-ethnic reality and interculturalism making their work more fatiguing. FLPs believe migrants frequently face discrimination, racism, violence exploitation and abuse due to the rise of anti-migration rhetoric in policy, politics and media respectively. Accordingly, given their fundamental role (as ‘gatekeepers’) in migrants’ integration, enhancing FLP’s service provision and general working condition can in turn help strengthen the vision towards an “Inclusive Europe”.

- FLPs consider their job satisfaction and social image significantly decreasing.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1. Our findings suggest that **there is an increased need for improving the working conditions** (salaries, infrastructural, material, intercultural competences, etc.) **of FLPs, and closing of the disharmony between the law and their professional norms in order to improve their services to migrants.** Research on FLPs in the healthcare management systems for migrants should be particularly encouraged.

Recommendation 2. At the level of migration-related policy making, practitioners’ **insights on the drivers of migration invite consideration of policies based on improving conditions in migrants’ countries of origin.** Indeed, they highlighted creating positive **conditions in sending countries might be the best way of addressing migration.**

RECOMMENDATION 3. For political decision-makers, it is crucial to **humanise migration approaches by eliminating securitisation and externalisation of European borders.** This should go hand-in-hand with the **elimination of criminalisation and human right violation against migrant people and activists who defend them.**

RECOMMENDATION 4. Particular **focus should be given to appropriate framing and reporting of migration narratives, discourses and imageries in policy and legislation as well as in media.** Therefore, practitioners suggest politicians and the media to avoid referencing migration as ‘waves’, ‘invasions’, ‘crisis’, ‘emergency’

Key recommendations:

- Involve FLPs and create conducive working atmosphere for them.
- Improve the positive conditions in sending countries to avoid painful migration.
- Humanise migration approaches, eliminate securitisation and externalisation of European borders to Third-countries.
- Particular focus should be given to appropriate framing of migration narratives, discourses and imageries in policy and legislation as well as in media.

and to stop labelling migrants as ‘illegal’, which for them reinforces the “threat” images, the politicisation and securitisation of immigration.

Recommendation 5. There is a need to develop holistic and adequate models of investigations in order to appropriately orient policy actions. **FLPs suggest more research focus beyond push-pull factors in order to avoid reductive binary visions, euro-centric and westernised domination of migration discourses.** This knowledge suggests a decolonisation of the migration discourse in order to put at the center all possible relevant perspectives for a better policy orientation and migration management.

Recommendation 6. Finally, FLPs recommend the European Commission to effectively **engage relevant stakeholders through appropriate mapping and engagement strategies coherent with their realities. This suggests informing, consulting, involving, collaborating and empowering stakeholders in the migration ecosystem.** Such stakeholder involvement can ensure that toolkits and best-practice measures are customisable to practitioners’ context-specific needs.

- More research focuses beyond push-pull factors, avoiding reductive binary visions, euro-centric and westernised domination of the migration discourses.
- A mixed method that informs, consults, involves, collaborates, and empowers stakeholders should be encouraged.

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Deliverables

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