



## Addressing root causes and drivers of irregular migration: an evidence gap map

Irregular migration and forced displacement rates are rising worldwide in response to crises such as natural disasters, conflict, violence, persecution, state insecurity, and persistent poverty. Although migration serves important development needs and is globally recognized as a human right, when it occurs outside of the norms and protections of regular or formalized channels, individuals become vulnerable to exploitation, physical or psychological harms, and death.

Mass informal migration flows into destination countries have led to several global policy response efforts, including large-scale investments in “root cause” programming by high-income country funders. “Root cause” programming attempts to address unfavorable systemic conditions in origin countries that may lead to involuntary migration out of necessity, desperation, or survival. While billions of dollars have been invested in such programming, and in supporting displaced populations, little is known about whether these efforts are working, and if they are, how or why.

To address this research gap, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), with funding from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), commissioned this EGM to identify the available effectiveness evidence on interventions addressing the root causes of irregular migration. This EGM presents evidence on migration programs that seek to increase economic opportunities and decent work in origin countries, strengthen resilience against shocks and stressors, build safe communities through violence prevention, inform people of the risks of irregular migration, and increase access to legal pathways in receiving countries.

### Highlights

- There is limited evidence on migration outcomes, including types of migration (international versus internal, regular versus irregular) and final outcomes. We found only eight studies reporting effects on irregular migration and zero studies examining forced displacement as an outcome.
- The majority of studies were impact evaluations of interventions that never intended to focus on migrant populations or issues of irregular migration.
- There were several methodological and reporting gaps in included systematic reviews. We found no medium- or high-confidence reviews.
- These findings underscore large primary evidence and synthesis evidence knowledge gaps in root cause and migration programming. Rigorous evaluative evidence on these programs is urgently needed to understand whether current policy efforts are adequately supporting vulnerable and crises populations.





## Main findings

Through our systematic search and screening procedures, we identified 89 impact evaluations, 7 systematic reviews, and 15 linked studies, with the number of available publications steadily increasing since 2013. Most studies were carried out in Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean.

**Most studies evaluated interventions on human capital strengthening** (n = 43), such as cash transfers and active labor market policies (n = 16), which are both part of the “economic opportunities and decent work” intervention domain. We found 21 studies looking at information/awareness campaigns on legal rights, risks of irregular migration, working conditions, legal alternatives, and the creation of legal channels by the receiving countries. Ten studies fell under the “strengthening resilience against shocks and stressors” domain, including those evaluating disaster-risk financing policies and index-based insurance interventions, technology-based assistance, in-kind social assistance and employment assistance. However, we found no studies for the other six interventions in this domain. For all other interventions in the EGM, we found fewer than five studies, and none in the “building safe

communities through violence prevention and intervention” domain.

**While all studies reported migration outcomes (this was a requirement of our inclusion criteria), only one third of the evaluated interventions specifically targeted migrants.**

This had direct implications on measurement of types of migration, as well as final versus intermediate migration outcomes. We found only eight studies reporting outcomes related to irregular migration, meaning that there is limited evidence on whether certain interventions have any effect on irregular migration and decision-making.

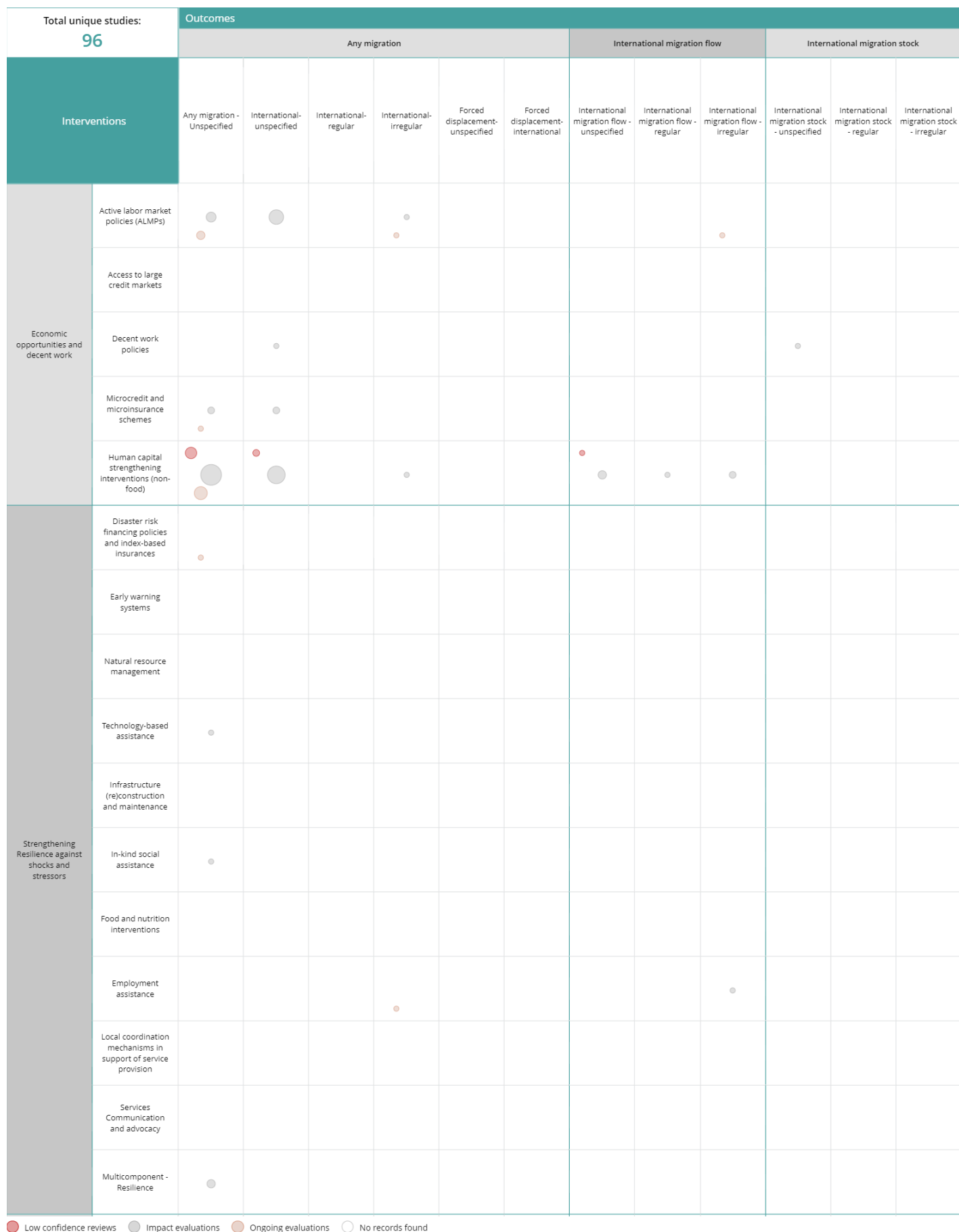
**The geographical distribution of studies is uneven, leading to evidence gaps.** Most studies were implemented in Mexico, Nigeria, and other Sub-Saharan African countries. The evidence base from Mexico is driven by one program, PROGRESA/Oportunidades/Prospera, and few studies were conducted in Central and South America. Similarly, we found no studies from many other African countries, and a limited number from Asia. Only three studies covered legal pathways from high-income countries: the United Arab Emirates, Italy, and the US. More evidence is needed in this sector overall.

**A limited number of studies reported adopting equity- and gender-sensitive approaches in their studies or conducted cost analysis.** These key dimensions should be examined in future research to understand gender dimensions, whether interventions have different effects on dimensions of vulnerability, and which programs might lead to the best outcomes given finite resources.

**We have low confidence in the results of the seven included systematic reviews due to methodological and reporting gaps.** These gaps included how studies were identified, lack of bias assessments of underlying studies, and potential bias in screening procedures. We encourage adoption of conventional and accepted systematic review standards by future evidence synthesis researchers.

Overall, the evidence base in this field is scarce due to a variety of factors, including irregular migration being an emerging policy issue and the challenges arising from surveying mobile populations. The existing evidence base is a good starting point, but more evidence on programs explicitly targeting migrant populations and addressing migration issues across the entire range of root cause programming and contexts is urgently needed.

## Addressing root causes and drivers of irregular migration: an Evidence Gap Map



\* This image shows only a part of the Addressing root causes and drivers of irregular migration: an Evidence Gap Map. For the full map, please visit the [website](#).

## How to read an evidence gap map

The International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie) presents evidence gap maps using an interactive online platform that allows users to explore the evidence base. Bubbles appearing at intersections between interventions and outcomes denote

the existence of at least one study or review. The larger the bubble, the greater the volume of evidence in that cell. The color of each bubble represents the type of evidence and, for a systematic review, a confidence rating (as indicated in the legend). In the online version, hovering over

a bubble displays a list of the evidence for that cell. The links for these studies lead to user-friendly summaries in the 3ie evidence database. Users can filter the evidence by type, confidence rating (for systematic reviews), region, country, study design and population.

## What is a 3ie evidence gap map?

3ie evidence gap maps are collections of evidence from impact evaluations and systematic reviews for a given sector or policy issue, organized according to the types of programs evaluated and the outcomes measured. They include

an interactive online visualization of the evidence base, displayed in a framework of relevant interventions and outcomes. They highlight where there are sufficient impact evaluations to support systematic reviews and where more studies are

needed. These maps help decision-makers target their resources to fill these important evidence gaps and avoid duplication. They also facilitate evidence-informed decision-making by making existing research more accessible.

## About this brief

This brief is based on the full report, *Addressing Root Causes and Drivers of Irregular Migration: An Evidence Gap Map*, by Miriam Berretta, Maria Daniela Anda-León, Carolyn Huang, and Shannon Shisler. The EGM was developed by 3ie with funding from the International Organization for

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IOM, USAID, the U.S. government, 3ie, its donors or its Board of Commissioners. Any errors or omissions are also the sole responsibility of the authors. This brief was designed and produced by Akarsh Gupta, Mallika Rao, Tanvi Lal, and Durgadas Menon.

## About this project

The authors identify, map, and describe the evidence base of impact evaluations and systematic reviews of interventions that aim to address the root causes of irregular migration in low- and middle-income countries. The report

describes 89 completed and ongoing impact evaluations and 7 systematic reviews, mapped on a framework of economic opportunities and decent work, strengthening resilience against shocks and stressors, building safe

communities through violence prevention and intervention, and orderly and safe migration management interventions and final and intermediate irregular migration and related migration outcomes.



The International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie) develops evidence on how to effectively transform the lives of the poor in low- and middle-income countries. Established in 2008, we offer comprehensive support and a diversity of approaches to achieve development goals by producing, synthesizing and promoting the uptake of impact evaluation evidence. We work closely with governments, foundations, NGOs, development institutions and research organizations to address their decision-making needs. With offices in Washington DC, New Delhi and London and a global network of leading researchers, we offer deep expertise across our extensive menu of evaluation services.

For more information on 3ie's evidence gap maps, contact [info@3ieimpact.org](mailto:info@3ieimpact.org) or visit our website.

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