Youth migration intentions in Afghanistan and Somalia:
Rethinking decisions and aspirations

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Policies and programmes funded by international donors in countries of origin are generally based on the assumption that rational action underpins individual (or collective) migration choices – regardless of the nuances of human decision-making and priorities. Evidence from qualitative and quantitative databases in both Afghanistan and Somalia, resulting from an analysis of the impacts of individual indicators, shows that only a few variables appear very significant on their own, while *employment* and *economic situation* are not correlated to migration intentions. What can policy-makers and practitioners learn from such counterintuitive findings?

Which factors may influence migration decisions? How do people make the decision – be it individual or collective – to leave *or* stay in their home country? Literature on migration sees the decision to migrate primarily based on the rational choice theory and a neoclassical push-pull paradigm that regards migration *'as a rational action, maximizing the individual's net benefits.'*[1] It further theorizes that people will *'cease to move, or return home, if the cost-benefit equation changes.'*[2]

This framework – of rational economic decisions and cost-benefit comparisons of the factors leading to or limiting migration – has precipitated the establishment of priorities and programmes to improve local economies and thus stem the flow of migration onwards. The political and developmental rhetoric of most governmental agencies is still based on the assumption that migrants rationally assess which locations will provide them with the greatest economic benefits before making their final call. In practice, this unquestioned assumption has had two major consequences:

- To deter youth from the Global South from migrating to OECD countries, governments have invested heavily in job creation programmes, under the assumption that better economic and job prospects would anchor people – and youth in particular – in their home country;

- To inform and influence individual decision-making processes, funding agencies have invested in awareness raising campaigns, as well as in social and behavioural change interventions.

In other words, if people have decent jobs and accurate information on the objective risks of migrants' journeys, they will be less likely to *choose* to leave their home country to come to OECD countries – where the economic grass is seen as greener.

Yet, while economic factors are the backbone of many frameworks outlining the decision-making process of migration, data suggests that economic development actually increases migration flows until a country reaches an upper-middle level of GDP.[3] De Haas postulates that this is due to the impact that development has on both aspirations to migrate (especially if they outpace prospects in the place of origin) and the capability to migrate. By contrast, his model includes a stronger emphasis on behavioural economics concepts, including the concept of culturally and socially shaped 'utility' and bounded rationality – which limits a decision in light of available information, time, and cognitive capacity.[4] Moreover, non-economic dimensions have progressively been included into the equation: collective decision-making dynamics, access to information, socio-economic profiles, psychosocial characteristics, risk-adversity, etc. have all been incorporated into various models examining the migration decision-making process.[5]

This policy brief tests these hypotheses from a 'country of origin' perspective and assesses what individual decisions leading to *economic migration* are made of. How can researchers understand the root of this complex *decision-making process*? This policy note presents findings from the impact evaluations of six different datasets to propose an alternative approach to international cooperation on migration in countries of origin.

[1] Haug, S. 2008.
[2] Castles, S. 2004.

[3] Clemens, M. 2014.
[4] de Haas, H. 2010.
[5] Žičkutė, I. and Kumpikaitė V. 2015.

Methods – defining a 'rootedness' index

This policy paper intends to test such a common sense hypothesis on individual 'decision-making' processes by exploring the actual impact of youth employment and skills development initiatives in Afghanistan and Somalia. The analysis uses 12,200 quantitative interviews with youth from six data sets collected by Samuel Hall and Mercy Corps [i] to evaluate the correlation between key socio-economic variables and the tendency of youth to migrate or stay. The six datasets fuelled a composite 'rootedness' index that synthesizes certain variables to characterise a respondent's living conditions and outlook into scores that reflect underlying factors associated with 'rootedness', here conceptualised as a lack of intention to migrate in the near future. In so doing, the objective was to develop dimensions that are as independent as possible in order to maximise their descriptive power.

The first portion of the data analysis consisted of an examination of the tendency of respondents in each study to plan to migrate and all candidate *rootedness* variables.[6] Based on academic literature on the drivers and inhibitors of migration, and nuanced in light of the data composition, the variables the research team included, when present, from each of the six studies were: 1) Employment (and educational) situation; 2) Economic wellbeing and assets; 3) Family and household cohesion; 4) Community inclusion and cohesion; 5) Positive outlook; and 6) Perceived security. Following the examination of individual variables, more complex analysis was conducted to construct a 'rootedness' index showing key factors tied to whether or not a youth felt 'rooted' (in other words, did not express a desire to migrate) in his/her current location.[7]

Additional focus group discussions and qualitative exercises were conducted in Somalia, Afghanistan, Greece, and Italy, to complement and nuance the quantitative findings. Overall, the purpose of this analysis is to enable policy makers and practitioners to develop more effective programmes to support potential youth migrants.

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[6] Each dimension consists of one or more indicators that tend to correlate with each other such that the absence of one does not undermine the identification of a shortfall indicated by the others – this allows for researchers to capture more general aspects that may be tied to rootedness, as opposed to hinging on a few highly specific experiences.

[7] To do this, the variables were examined for internal correlations using factor analyses to determine an optimal weighting of the variables, showing which were most strongly correlated to a lack of migration intentions, to create a 'rootedness' index. This was a two-step process, where factors were identified as a result of internal covariance in the explanatories – independent of the response variable – and only then were the factors regressed against the response variable.

Picture 1: Somali participant drawing her personal story on a whiteboard (qualitative methods) – Kismayo, October 2017.

Key findings from Afghanistan and Somalia

Finding 1 = Employment

The employment factor is of particular interest, given the common association between unemployment in origin country and migration.[8] In the qualitative research conducted pre- and post-migration, this dimension is also often mentioned as a key driver in both contexts:

> 'If they had a better economic environment here (in Afghanistan) they would not intend to migrate. Most of the youth who are jobless want to migrate, some other just want a comfortable life there, but finding a good job comes first'.[9]

> 'In my opinion, Tahriib is a test we are undergoing. For most people who migrate, they don't have jobs. You'll find graduates with no job just because he/she is not from the locality. For example, if your clan doesn't have power in Kismayo, then you can't get a job here. So the best option is to risk your life.'[10]

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[8] In Afghanistan, see for example the 2015 launch of 'Jobs for Peace', a governmental initiative to stem the exodus of young Afghans to Europe or the 2016 EU Joint Way Forward agreement "combating irregular migration by improving employment"

[9] Focus Group Discussion, Kandahar, Nasirullah, 57 – August 2017.

[10] Focus Group Discussion, Kismayo, Saed, 30 – September 2017. In modern Somali slang, Tahriib refers to the emigration of young Somali

Paradoxically, though, the relationship of migration and employment varies significantly across studies. While the IOM *Youth, Employment and Migration (YEP)* data collected in Somaliland and Puntland show a significant counter-correlation between employment and intentions to migrate, the other databases suggest a correlation between factors related to access to employment (and education) *and* an intention to migrate.

- In the Urban Youth Displacement (UDY) study,[11] being employed – either temporarily or full-time – tends to increase the likelihood of intending to migrate. Such a non-linear relationship with migration suggests that employment does not imply rootedness, at least among Kabul's urban displaced youth.
- The INVEST-in-Kandahar endline survey, with participants in technical and vocational education and training (TVET) and recipients of unconditional cash transfers (UCT), had some of the most conclusive results. Of the five identified factors, the employment factor, including the perception of job security, was again the most strongly correlated with the intention to migrate.
- Lastly, in the SYLI Puntland and South-Central Somalia study,[12] none of the factors related to access to employment were correlated with an intention to migrate.

The mix of negative and positive correlations, as well as the absence of any correlation, suggests a non-linear relationship between employment and intention to migrate. Given such a contrary relationship, in comparison to the UDY *(negative)* and SYLI *(absence)* studies in particular, the employment component has been excluded from the index despite its statistical significance in the UDY and INVESTS studies. Such ambiguities were well captured in the qualitative discussions, where the same participants may well say that the absence of jobs is both an aspirational driver of and practical obstacle to migration:

> 'Fewer young men can leave today, as they do not have enough money to pay for the journey and smugglers. And you need money, contacts, and also a job here to leave. (...) But because there are no jobs in our country, people cannot borrow money easily and youth are forced to stay here.'[13]
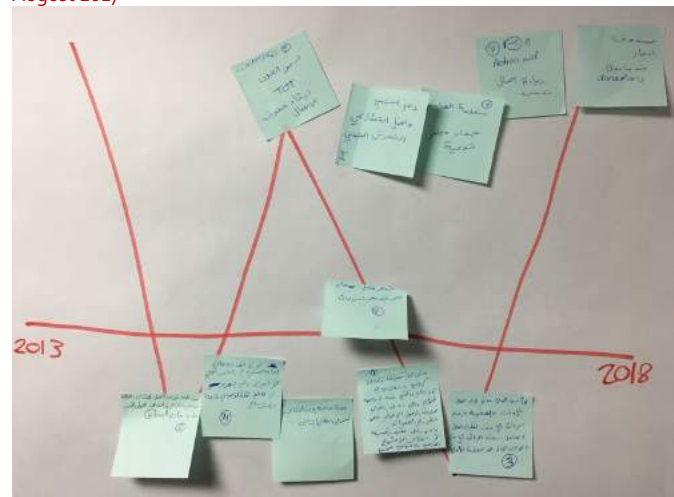
Finding 2 = Economic wellbeing and assets

The economic dimension was assessed through different triangulated statistical proxies – using asset-based estimates as well as declarative self-assessments. Based on convergent findings from the six surveyed studies and as shown in the two examples below, there does seem to be a positive correlation between economic wellbeing and the possession of assets, on the one hand, and an intention to migrate on the other.

- The possession of assets is a significant driver of the intention to migrate in the UDY study, which could indicate that households are more likely to intend to migrate if they are of greater means. This further suggests, in conjunction with the diverse findings related to employment for the UDY study, that the professional and economic status is not only an enabling factor that helps people materialize their aspirations, but it also regulates their aspirations.
- Among the results of the Livelihood Programmes for Displaced People in Urban Afghanistan (DUA) study, four factors were identified. The factor with the most obvious statistical significance in relation to intention to migrate was what has been termed "comfort assets". These are assets, such as a VCR, computer, car, and stove, that potentially suggest the existence of disposable income and which are unlikely to contribute to producing income (unlike assets such as a sewing machine, included in the non-significant factor of 'productive assets). Comfort assets correlate significantly with the tendency to migrate.

These studies highlight further justification to the complex interactions between socio-economic status and migration intention. It further indicates that households potentially are "rooted" not by the desire to remain, but by the lack of resources to make a move. These initial findings bring even more credence to the hypotheses that migration intentions may increase as means/capability to migrate increases, before levelling

off or declining. However, the data available and the limitations inherent to this study do not allow for a clear indication of this theory.

Finding 3 = Family and household cohesion

While family and household cohesion are key dimensions to explain individual stories, they can play different roles – associated to or excluded from the decision-making, supportive of or obstructive to the migration project. This also suggests a non-linear relationship between family-level cohesion and intention to migrate, as emphasized by the contradictory results below:

- Among all factors within this study, UDY's primary contribution to the 'rootedness' index is the indicator 'living with family', which consists of the respondent living with at least part of his family and, to a lesser extent, having several members in his household. The resuts show a strong negative correlation between family cohesion and intention to migrate, which is socio-culturally understandable in the Afghan context.

However, other studies present a contrasting picture, which points to both the absence of a clear linear relationship between the two observed variables *and* the lack of homogeneous questionnaires on this specific issue. It is therefore difficult to draw clear conclusions on this factor other than to acknowledge the catalytic role of the family circle in shaping individual aspirations and enabling youth psychologically and materially, as often highlighted by respondents:

> 'This bad family and my lack of education shaped me. I think it is my parents who made me who I am today, and not in a good way. I was also discriminated against in society. So I left home. Friends told me that migration is a good option and life in Europe is great. I started my journey and faced many obstacles to reach Sudan and also after that. Finally, I reached Europe but the discrimination and lack of support continued. Today I am here in front of you, still looking for a way to start living.'[14]

Finding 4 = Community inclusion and cohesion… *and* security (1)

The fourth dimension – community inclusion and cohesion – is the first dimension to be included within the 'rootedness' index, as highlighted in particular in the two SYLI studies:

- In the two SYLI studies, factors related to social cohesion or community inclusion were built with great detail. Be it in South Central Somalia, Puntland, or Somaliland, it apears that those

factors were not correlated with any intention to migrate. It does provide a solid basis for the integration of the community inclusion and cohesion dimension in the 'rootedness' index. The other datasets either confirm these findings or did not include the dimension per se.

More importantly, the SYLI studies brought strong support for the inclusion of a safety component within the 'rootedness' index. This is intuitive in light of the conflict that countries such as Somalia and Afghanistan face, while beginning to indicate the potential role of *positivity* or *optimism* in relation to migration intentions, as highlighted in the next finding and the qualitative component of the research:

> 'The hardest event I have ever seen was when I was 13 and going from school to home. A girl of age 14 was with me walking on a little road when we encountered an armed group. They ordered us to stop and they started ordering the young girl to lie down on the ground and they raped her in front of me and then killed her. They ordered me to go quickly and not to tell anybody, and that if I told anyone I would be killed. This (event) has stayed with me and was a formative influence on my notion of 'safety'. When I observe myself closely, the formative events that shaped me are related to education, family and safety.[15]

Picture 4: Focus group discussion in Mogadishu (September 2017)

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Finding 5 = Positive outlook… *and* security (2)

There were two independent factors with some common indicators, such as the perception of the respondent's role in the community[16] and a positive outlook for the future. However, one factor includes a sense of physical security while the other includes the perception of future job prospects – two underlying latent conditions that are not strongly correlated with each other. Both conditions tend to make their respondents feel a positive outlook for the future and that they have influence in their community, but one comes from whatever quality lends a sense of physical security, while the other seems to

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[14] Case study in Rome, Fuad (from Somalia, 19 – October 2017).

[15] Case study in Rome, Bashir (from Somalia 23 – October 2017).
[16] Under the 'community inclusion and cohesion' dimension (see finding 4).

make the respondent feel rosier about his or her job prospects.

Of further interest is that the factor related to community and physical security is clearly correlated with rootedness. This suggests that community inclusion and cohesion *and* a positive outlook are only elements of rootedness in the presence of physical security. As these variables were significant in the surveys studies, they can be included in the 'rootedness' index and also compared to the security and safety score. Thoee three interrelated dimensions have often been put into perspective by Afghan youth interviewed in Greece:

'I want to be treated like a human being, yes like a human. Like normal people.
What is normal? How do I see myself - currently and in the future? Normality for me is to go to school with friends, to speak to them freely, to be able to work after receiving education. Like normal people. No differences and no discrimination. Here (in Greece), I feel that process has started already. I feel safe here. Here I don't feel that they look at me as a Hazara, even other Afghans. It does not matter here.
For example, In Afghanistan a boy from Kabul loves a girl from Hazarajat. But they cannot marry. If the family of the girl comes to know that the girl loves the boy, they would kill her. But here it does not matter. People love and marry freely.'[17]

Finally, it is worth noting that the last two findings are corroborated by the qualitative group discussions conducted in countries of origin, with participants who were asked to visually represent the key determinants of youth actions and decisions. The nexus of 1) safety and security, 2) participation to local community dynamics, 3) personal achievements and hopes, is clearly perceived as strongly interrelated and influential:[18]

- For the two groups, **security** is a structuring parameter that not only shapes individual choices but also those relating to the collective sphere. Perceived security and safety risks increasingly put youth off getting involved in collective activities (politically, socially, professionally); likewise, many Somali youth mentioned a certain discouragement in front of the security situation in their country, as triggering their individual decision to leave.

- For Afghan focus group participants (light blue), religion remains the most structuring parameter at the individual and collective levels, while family also plays a strong role in shaping decisions regarding both the individual and public spheres. Unsurprisingly, in such a traditionalist **sociocultural setting**, more individualistic and

personal goals seem to be prioritized by urban youth (including girls).

Figure 1: Indicative qualitative assessment of Afghan youth decision determinants
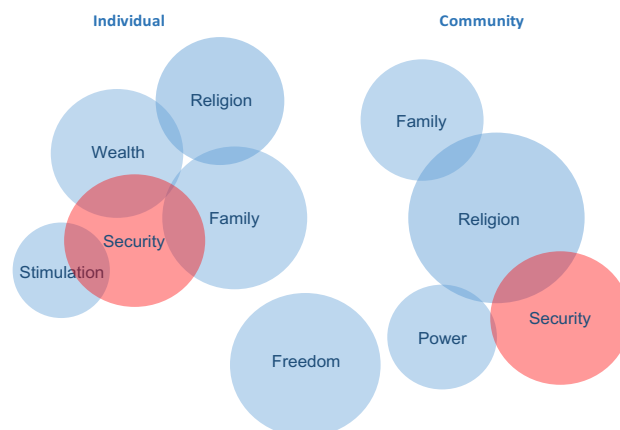
- According to Somali focus group participants (dark blue), religion is also a key parameter, but personal achievement does seem more central in their decision-making process, which strongly confronts a **safety** and security environment perceived as too volatile and hopeless.

Figure 2: Indicative qualitative assessment of Somali youth decision determinants
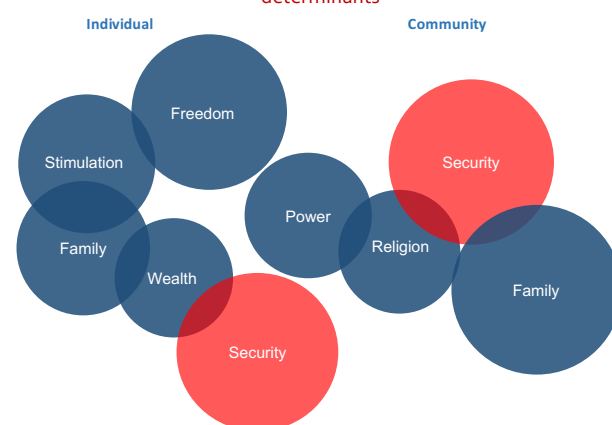
(Counterfactual) Finding 6 = Aspirations to stay

Based on the five initial findings, a 'rootedness' index may include two key dimensions:

1) community incusion and cohesion,
2) positive outlook,
3) safety and security.

To further test the robustness of these initial hypotheses, an additional aspect to consider beyond the decision to move, is also the decision <u>not</u> to move. As de Jong notes, '*The emphasis on why people move to the relative exclusion of why people do not move is apparent, and this emphasis undoubtedly contributes to our limited ability to explain and predict the mover/non-mover decision.*'[19] Carling further criticizes the conceptualization of non-migration as a 'residual option'

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[17] Case study in Greece, Sakineh (from Afghanistan, 16 – October 2017)
[18] These visual representations are indicative and based on mappings and discussions conducted in Kabul, Kandahar, Kismayo and Mogadishu with community focus group participants. Some circles appear on the left (individual) and right (community) sides, as they play a predominant role in influencing the decisions and actions of youth at the two levels.

[19] De Jong and Fawcett, 1981.

as opposed to an active choice. While acknowledging the underpinning of the level of effort involved in the decision to migrate resulting in the emphasis on this choice, he calls for *'a shift from 'migration aspirations' to 'spatial aspirations' as the object of analysis, giving equal weight to aspirations for leaving and staying.'*[20]

While analyses were only performed at SYLI Puntland and South Central Somalia, as well as UDY Kabul, it was possible to assess the five different dimensions (covering economic, social and security issues) already tested with the other group. The results show significant correlations between an *'intention to stay (and not to migrate)'* variable on the one hand, and future employment prospects, job security, and participation in community decision making on the other. The results also confirm significant negative impacts on the *'intention to stay'* variable wherever respondents have had experiences with insecurity, robbery or assault.

Applying the previous approach of using factor analysis to measure different aspects of respondent situation, it then appears that **safety and security** and **community inclusion and cohesion** are the two key dimensions or factors that are correlated with an intention to stay. Looking at regression results for the intention to stay as a function of the identified dimensions of 'safety and security' *and* 'community inclusion and cohesion', the study found strong degrees of correlation, with remarkably significant coefficients, showing a very high degree of explanatory value.[21] These results indicate strongly that the two factors are good indices of an intention to stay – and therefore 'rootedness' – and that using the intention to stay as a proxy for rootedness may be more effective than the intention to migrate alone, perhaps due to the sometimes coercive nature of migratory forces.

Picture 4: Afghan girls in Roma (October 2017)

Credit: P. Nallu for SH

Lessons learned

This policy paper calls for a rethinking of the conceptual compass that not only guides governmental policies and strategies but also prevails in the programmes of most of their implementing agencies. As noted by Carling (2017), *'homo economicus haunts pronouncements about migration policy, whether in discussing opening borders and attracting desirable migrants or reducing and discouraging the arrival of people.'*[22] Bearing in mind the important limitations of this study and the need for the suggested 'rootedness' index to be methodologically discussed and technically refined, its quantitative and qualitative findings would confirm Carling's assertion and point to the following conclusions.

First and foremost, however, what the preceding analysis indicates is that rootedness is complex, with numerous factors having either complex non-linear relationships with migration intentions (in particular, employment and socio-economic status appear to fit this category) or having relationships with migration intentions that are influenced by a multiplicity of other factors (for instance, optimism, which show different relationships to migration intentions depending on the other variables). Thus, while there are some components for which there is evidence to include in a 'rootedness' index, the amount to which they represent the decision to migrate or stay is relatively limited. In theory, while addressing these components may have a level of impact on migration intentions, it is likely that the factors which are both identifiable, linearly correlated with migration, and are influencing are not significant enough to have substantial impacts on the aggregate of individual youth's decisions to migrate. However, based on these results, a 'rootedness' index may include the following variables: 1) safety and security; 2) community inclusion and cohesion; and 3) positive outlook.

In other words, this suggests that youth who feel safe, socially included (predominantly in the presence of safety), and have a positive regard of their current or future situation are more likely to intend to stay in their current location than youth who have experienced insecurity (either directly or in their community at large), who lack social connections or networks, and who are pessimistic about their current or future situation in their current place of residence. By contrast, other factors were either significantly associated with an intention to migrate (such as possession of certain assets or economic profile) or correlated in different directions across the six studies (employment). A lack of these variables indicates a lower standard of living, and thus is not a suitable dimension for integration in a positively-oriented 'rootedness' index, as economic stagnation and endemic unemployment (or underemployment) cannot be turned into legitimate policy or programme objectives.

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[20] Carling, J. 2014.
[21] Even if the highly significant intercept suggests that there are certainly unobserved factors as well.

[22] Carling, J. 2017.

Table 1: Conclusions of the quantitative analysis

	Aspiration to migrate	Aspiration to stay
1) Employment	*Negative inconclusive*	*Negative inconclusive*
2) Economic wellbeing and assets	*Negative inconclusive*	*Negative inconclusive*
3) Family and household cohesion;	*Unclear (lack of data)*	*Unclear (lack of data)*
4) Community inclusion and cohesion	*Validated*	*Validated*
5) Positive outlook	*Validated*	*Unclear (lack of data)*
6) Safety and security	*Validated*	*Validated*

What does it mean for policy-makers and practitioners on the ground?

The nature of the 'rootedness' components suggests that youth who migrate are influenced to do so because they feel insecure, disconnected, and pessimistic about their current situations. However, what is displayed even more robustly in these findings is a question of the behaviour-change agenda as a whole, as migration intentions are complex and intertwined, and potentially only marginally influenced.

Thus, it raises the issue of whether initiatives that aim to influence migration intentions is a productive and valid focus of programming and policy efforts. However, in light of the rootedness findings, this does not negate a need for a focus on psychosocial or protection support. The chances of positive outcomes, whether youth migrate or not, are improved if youth are making decisions not based out of desperation, but based on such factors as safety or lack of social support and status.

In today's context, this also reveals that the political discourses, policy architectures, and practices towards managing migration intentions *(e.g. with massive short-term employment schemes)* or influencing individual decisions *(e.g. through behavioural change campaigns)* may be flawed and misguided. In this regard, the individual accounts of Afghan and Somali youth interviewed for the qualitative component of this study show that the lack of a sense of *agency* was central to many youths interviewed *before, during* or *after* their journey.

The nexus *safety-security, community inclusion and positive outlook* points to a more nuanced but simple reality: to integrate youth into tomorrow's ecosystems – political, economic, social, and cultural ones – the question should not be *'How should policy makers and practitioners influence subjective migration choices?'* but rather *'How can policy makers and practitioners optimise people's (and in particular youth's) agency?'* Policies and programmes should not seek to *anchor, root,* or *stabilise* youth in a given environment, but rather to contribute to broaden and deepen the spectrum of their choices.

To help youth restore their sense of agency and ability to optimise their own capabilities – whatever the environment they choose to live in or migrate to – policies and programmes would benefit from adopting such an alternative and necessary lens, in the fields of safety and security, community development, livelihoods and socio-economic inclusion, psychosocial support, as well as protection: *'The general opinion on youth migration in my community is that they lost hope due the long standing civil war and they are now migrating for better hope (sic), and I don't think this will stop unless their hope is restored'[23]*

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[i] The secondary analysis was based on existing databases on Afghan and Somali youth ranging from 2014 to 2017: 1) Mercy Corps Somali Youth Leaders Initiative survey results (2016 – Somaliland, 803 interviews); 2) Mercy Corps Somali Youth Leaders Initiative survey results (2017 – South Central Somalia and Puntland, 1221 interviews); 3) Mercy Corps INVEST (2015-2017 – Kandahar survey, 6367 interviews); 4) Samuel Hall Youth-Employment-Migration Nexus (2015 – Somaliland Puntland, 784 interviews); 5) Samuel Hall Urban Displaced Youth in Kabul (2014-2017 – Kabul, 2021 interviews); and 6) Samuel Hall Livelihood Programmes for Displaced People in Urban Afghanistan (2014 – Afghanistan, 1028 interviews).

Picture 5: Afghan youth in a temporary shelter in Roma (October 2017)

Credit: P. Nallu for SH.