

# Measuring Global Migration Potential, 2010–2015<sup>1</sup>

## Key findings

- **Less than half a per cent of adults worldwide are making preparations to migrate abroad** – While large numbers of people around the world express a general desire to migrate (710 million), far fewer people report that they are actually planning or preparing to migrate in the next 12 months. Less than 10 per cent of those expressing a general wish to migrate say they are making plans to move in the next 12 months (66 million adults), and only 23 million adults report taking specific steps to realize their plans. This figure is based on IOM's analysis of international survey data for the period 2010–2015.
- **One in three adults surveyed plans to migrate to a developing country** – When asked where they would like to move, most people said they would prefer to move to Europe or North America, but one in three said they were preparing to move to a developing country. The most popular destination for those planning to migrate is the United States of America followed by the United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, France, Canada, Germany and South Africa. Half of those planning to migrate live in just 20 countries, eight are in Africa, but two are in Europe – Italy and Spain.
- **Migration potential surveys may provide an indication of likely flows** – The number of people planning to migrate is a good predictor of actual flows of people as recorded by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Eurostat and UN DESA. Further analysis of migration potential may contribute to developing migration scenarios and forecasting.
- **Profile of potential migrants** – Adults planning and preparing to migrate are more likely to be male, young, single, living in urban areas and more likely to have completed at least secondary education.

## INTRODUCTION

This data briefing analyses people's migration intentions globally for the period of 2010–2015. Every year, the Gallup World Poll conducts nationally representative surveys in over 160 countries. These surveys provide an indication of who is planning to migrate, which countries have the highest number of potential migrants, and which countries people would like to move to. The data also provide a profile of the

sociodemographic characteristics of potential migrants. By comparing several years of data, it is possible to explore whether migration potential has increased over time. The briefing also explores to what degree data on migration potential can be a useful predictor of actual migration by comparing results from Gallup surveys with data on officially recorded migrant in- and outflows.

1 Prepared by Dr Frank Laczko, Dr Jasper Tjaden and Daniel Auer, IOM's Global Migration Data Analysis Centre (GMDAC), 2017.



## The Gallup World Poll

Gallup World Poll (GWP) data provide a unique insight into people’s migration intentions. Every year, Gallup conducts nationally representative surveys in over 160 countries, asking three key questions about people’s migration intentions (see Table 1).

**Table 1:** Survey questions regarding potential migration in the GWP

Type of migration potential	Survey question
Migration desires	“Ideally, if you had the opportunity, would you like to move permanently to another country, or would you prefer to continue living in this country?”
Migration plans	“Are you planning to move permanently to another country in the next 12 months, or not?” (asked only of those who would like to move to another country)
Migration preparations	“Have you made any preparation for this move?” (asked only of those who are planning to move to another country in the next 12 months)

Source: Gallup World Poll.

While previous studies have tended to focus on reporting on general “migration desires”, we look more closely at answers to questions two and three, to explore how far people are really *planning and preparing* to migrate. General questions about people’s migration desires tend to produce very high numbers. The most cited figure using Gallup data suggested that 700 million people around the world would like to migrate. This figure is nearly three times higher than the current global number of international migrants – 244 million. Such figures could be an indicator of people’s general dissatisfaction with conditions in their country, rather than an indicator of

a real intention to migrate.<sup>2</sup> When we look more closely at who is actually planning and preparing to migrate, the numbers are much lower, as shown on the next page.

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<sup>2</sup> N. Esipova, J. Ray and R. Srinivasan (2011): *The World’s Potential Migrants: Who They Are, Where They Want to Go, and Why It Matters*. Gallup. In 2017, Gallup released new figures reporting 710 million potential migrants worldwide, accessible from [www.gallup.com/poll/211883/number-potential-migrants-worldwide-tops-700-million.aspx](http://www.gallup.com/poll/211883/number-potential-migrants-worldwide-tops-700-million.aspx)

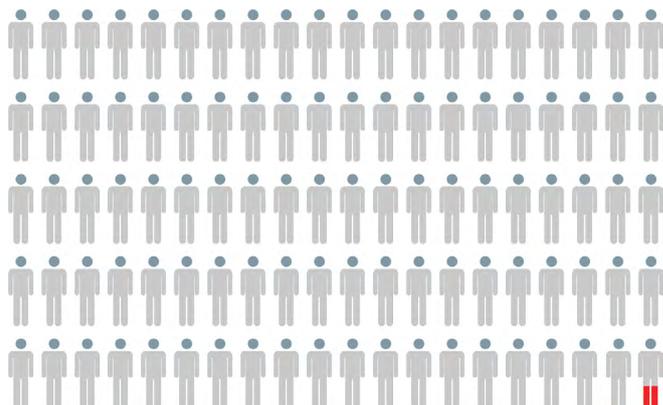


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### GLOBAL SCALE OF MIGRATION PLANS AND PREPARATIONS

Worldwide, 1.3 per cent of the adult population, **66 million** people, said they were planning to migrate permanently within the next 12 months. However, of this group, only approximately a third, **23 million**, or 0.4 per cent of adults around the world have made preparations to move, such as applying for a visa, saving money for the trip or learning the language of their desired destination. These estimates are based on data from 2010 to 2015.

**Figure 1:** 2010–2015 – Less than half a per cent of adults worldwide said they were making any preparations to migrate



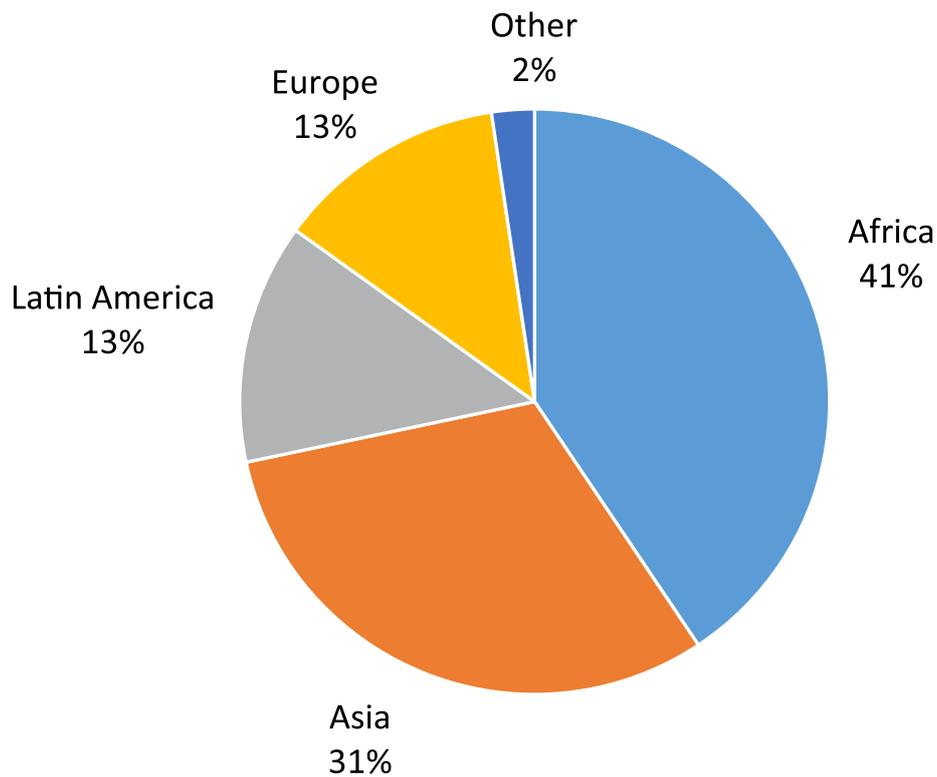
Source: Gallup World Poll, 2010–2015, authors’ calculations.

Plans to migrate have increased on average by 2 per cent per year between 2010 and 2015. Comparing total numbers over the whole period of six years shows that in 2015, there were 5 per cent more adults with migration plans worldwide compared to 2010. Potential migration has seen faster increases in some regions of the world. The number of adults planning to migrate

in West Africa – the region with the highest migration potential – has increased by 7 per cent between 2010 and 2015. However, there is notable variation from year to year.

In absolute terms, nearly three quarters of adults planning to migrate live in Africa and Asia (see Figure 2).

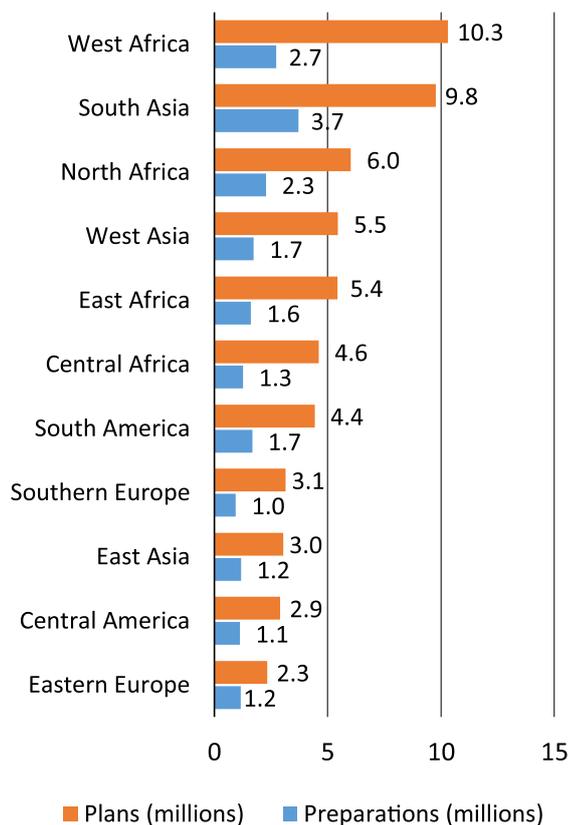
**Figure 2:** In which regions live the most adults who want to migrate abroad? (in %), 2010–2015



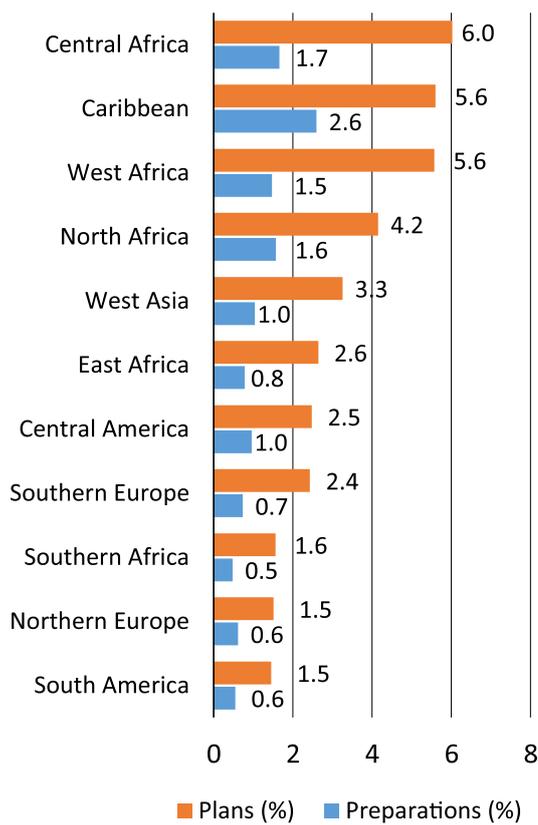
Source: Gallup World Poll, 2010–2015, authors' calculations.

Broken down by subregion, most adults planning a move abroad live in West Africa, South Asia, North Africa and West Asia (i.e. Middle East) (see Figure 3). Relative to population size, the regions with the highest number of potential migrants are Central Africa, the Caribbean, West Africa, North Africa and West Asia (see Figure 4).

**Figure 3:** World regions with the highest number of adults planning or preparing to migrate (in millions)



**Figure 4:** World regions with the highest percentage of the population that is planning or preparing to migrate (in % of the adult population)



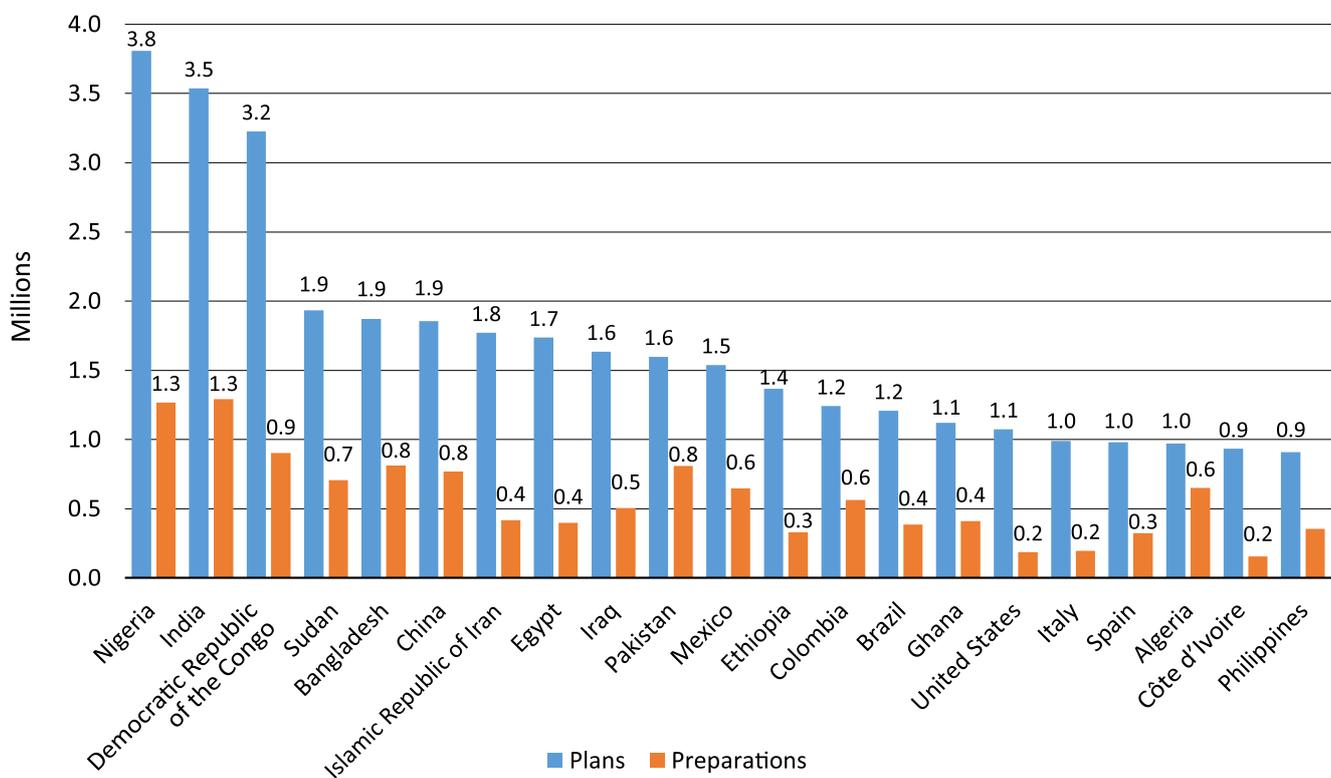
Source: Gallup World Poll, 2010–2015, authors’ calculations. Regional classifications are based on UN geographical regions (M49 Standard).



Half of adults planning to migrate live in just 20 countries (see Figure 5), including eight African countries (Nigeria, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan, Egypt, Ethiopia, Ghana, Algeria and Côte d'Ivoire), four Asian countries (India, Bangladesh, China and Pakistan), three Latin American countries (Mexico, Colombia and Brazil), two Middle Eastern countries (Islamic Republic of Iran and Iraq) and two European countries (Italy and Spain) (see Figure 5). Following the European financial crisis in 2009, Spain and Italy both suffered a period with high unemployment, which may have led many to consider leaving the country in search of work or training opportunities.

The picture is slightly different for the number of adults *preparing* to migrate. For example, Pakistan, Mexico, Colombia and Algeria have higher numbers of adults preparing to migrate than the Islamic Republic of Iran, Egypt and Iraq even though the number of adults *planning* to migrate is lower in comparison. The difference between plans and preparation needs to be explored further. It may reflect the difficulty of realizing migration plans due to policy, geography and lack of information or resources.

**Figure 5: Top 20 countries with the highest number of adults planning and preparing to migrate (in millions)**

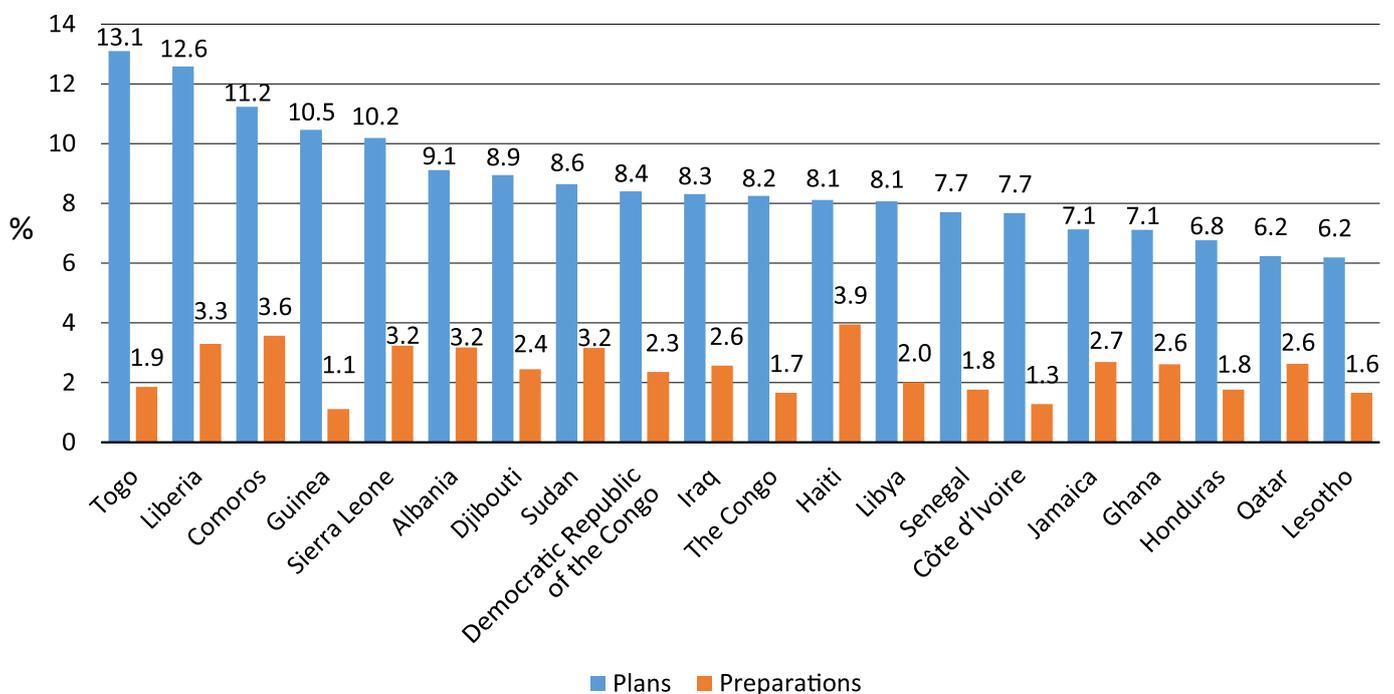


Source: Gallup World Poll, 2010–2015, authors' calculations.

The absolute number of adults planning or preparing to migrate is relative to the size of the population in the respective country. This means that even a low percentage can result in a high number of potential migrants in countries with large populations. Figure 6 shows the migration potential as a share of the country's adult population.

The top 20 countries with the highest share of the adult population with migration plans include 14 African countries, particularly in West and East Africa (Togo, Liberia, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Comoros, Djibouti, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Congo, Libya, Senegal, Sudan, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Lesotho), three Caribbean and Central American countries (Haiti, Jamaica and Honduras), two Middle Eastern countries (Iraq and Qatar) and Albania (see Figure 6). The countries with the highest percentage of adults preparing to migrate are Haiti, Comoros, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Sudan.

**Figure 6:** Top 20 origin countries with the highest percentage of adults planning and preparing to migrate (in % of the adult population)



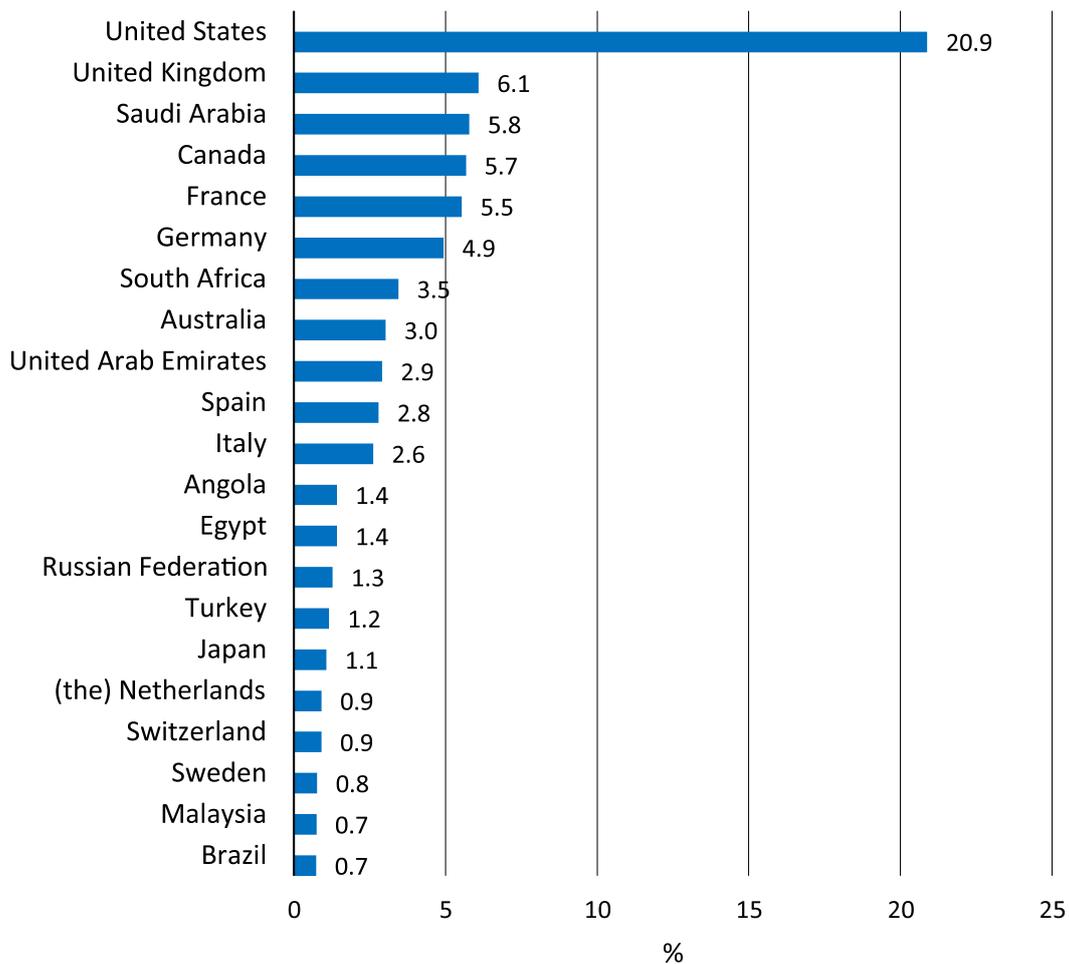
Source: Gallup World Poll, 2010–2015, authors' calculations.

## DESTINATIONS

Three quarters of potential migrants are planning to move to just 20 countries (see Figure 7). The United States is the most popular destination, followed by the United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, Canada, France and Germany. Overall,

62 per cent plan to migrate to an OECD country, 29 per cent to the European Union. A substantial proportion of adults plan to move from one developing country to another.

**Figure 7:** Top 20 desired destination countries among adults planning to migrate (in %)



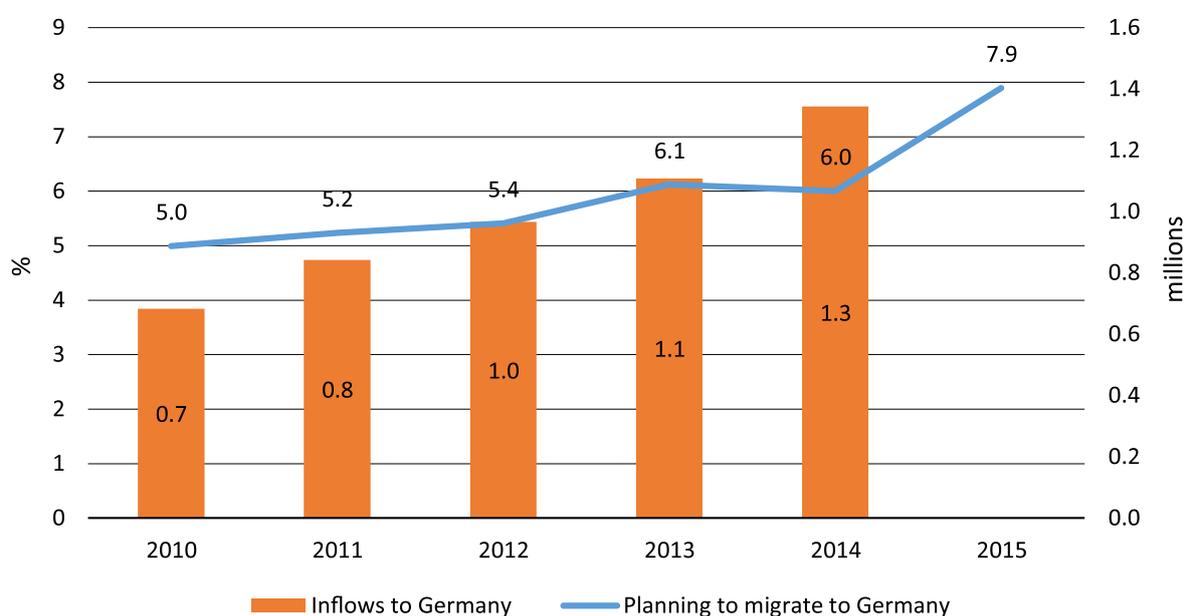
Source: Gallup World Poll, 2010–2015, authors' calculations.

For example, 40 per cent of adults with migration plans in Africa and the Middle East are planning to move to another country in that region. Overall, one in three potential migrants plans to move to a country other than the group of the 50 most developed countries in the world (as defined by the UN's Human Development Index).

Sixty per cent of adults planning to migrate to the European Union from outside the European Economic Area are from Africa, one in four from West Africa alone. There is large variation across the main destination countries. For example, 3.3 million adults worldwide had plans to move to Germany in an average year between 2010 and 2015, 1 million on average had made preparations for their move. The number of adults who prepared to move is close to the average number of permanent inflows (750,000) to Germany per year between 2010 and 2015 (OECD).

The share of adults worldwide with plans to move to Germany increased from 5 per cent in 2010 to 7.9 per cent in 2015, an increase of approximately 60 per cent (see Figure 8). The increase has been lower for all OECD destination countries as a whole (1% increase). This shows that moderate increases of potential migration globally mostly affect individual destination countries. Generally, this upward trend in the number of adults planning to migrate to Germany is consistent with trends that can be observed in inflows to Germany as reported by the OECD (see Figure 8).

**Figure 8:** The share of adults planning to move to Germany (in %) compared to official inflows to Germany, 2010–2015



Source: Gallup World Poll, 2010–2015; OECD inflow data; authors' calculations.

## FROM MIGRATION PLANS TO MIGRATION FLOWS

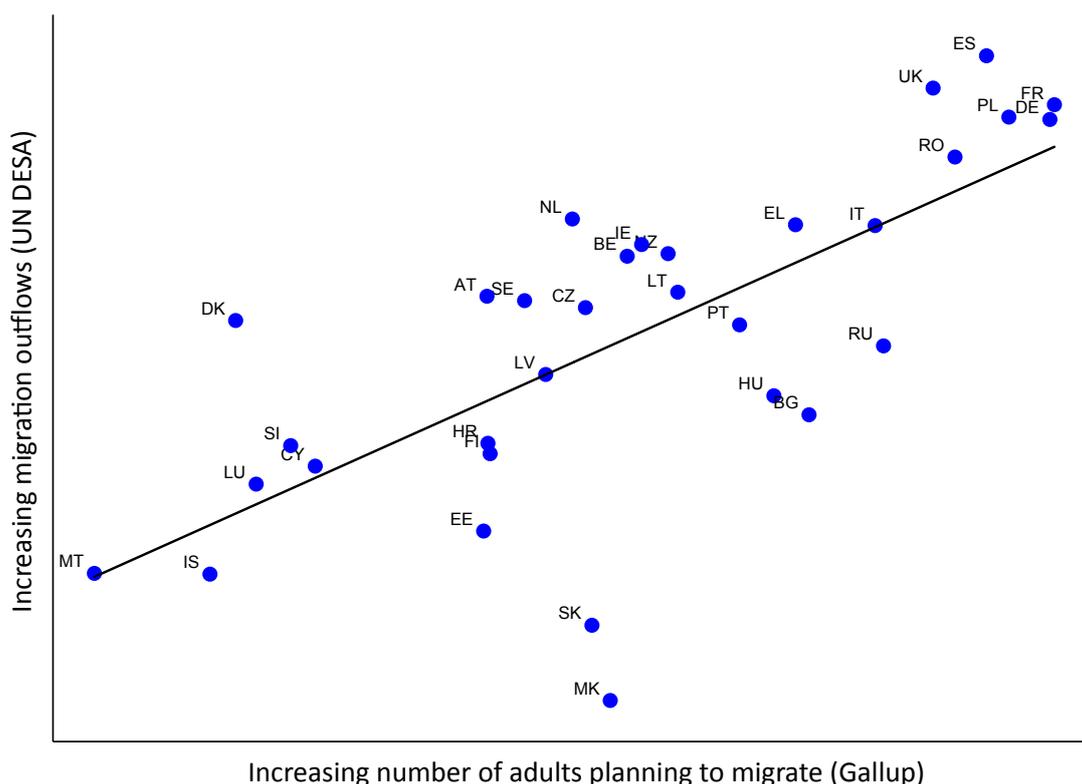
It is important to note that potential migration (in the form of plans or preparations) is not the same as actual migration. There is an important difference between the intention to leave one’s country and actually doing so. There may be many reasons why a plan to migrate may never become reality including policy restrictions, a lack of resources or a change in the personal situation.

In fact, this analysis reveals that – on average across the world – the scale of actual recorded migration flows is approximately three times smaller than the number of adults who have made preparations for a move and seven times smaller than the number of adults who are planning to migrate.<sup>3</sup> The difference between migration

potential and migration flow varies considerably across sending and receiving countries. For instance, in Finland almost eight out of ten adults who were preparing a move are recorded in official UN outflow data; in the Russian Federation, two out of ten potential migrants actually migrate. In a few countries, more persons leave the country in a year than would be expected based on public opinion data (such as Spain and the United Kingdom).

Despite differences across countries, our study finds a strong relationship between the number of potential migrants and the number of actual migrants across the world. Figure 9 shows the number of potential emigrants by the number of outflows over the period 2010–2013 as compiled by UN DESA. The results show that the number of outflows from a particular country is positively correlated with the number of potential migrants who want to move abroad in the same country.<sup>4</sup>

Figure 9: Migration plans and UN migration outflows



Note: Original axes based on logarithmic scale to improve comparability. Estimates based on pooled data for 2010–2013 for presentation purposes. The correlation holds when single years are displayed separately.

Source: Gallup World Poll, 2010–2015; UN DESA authors’ calculations.

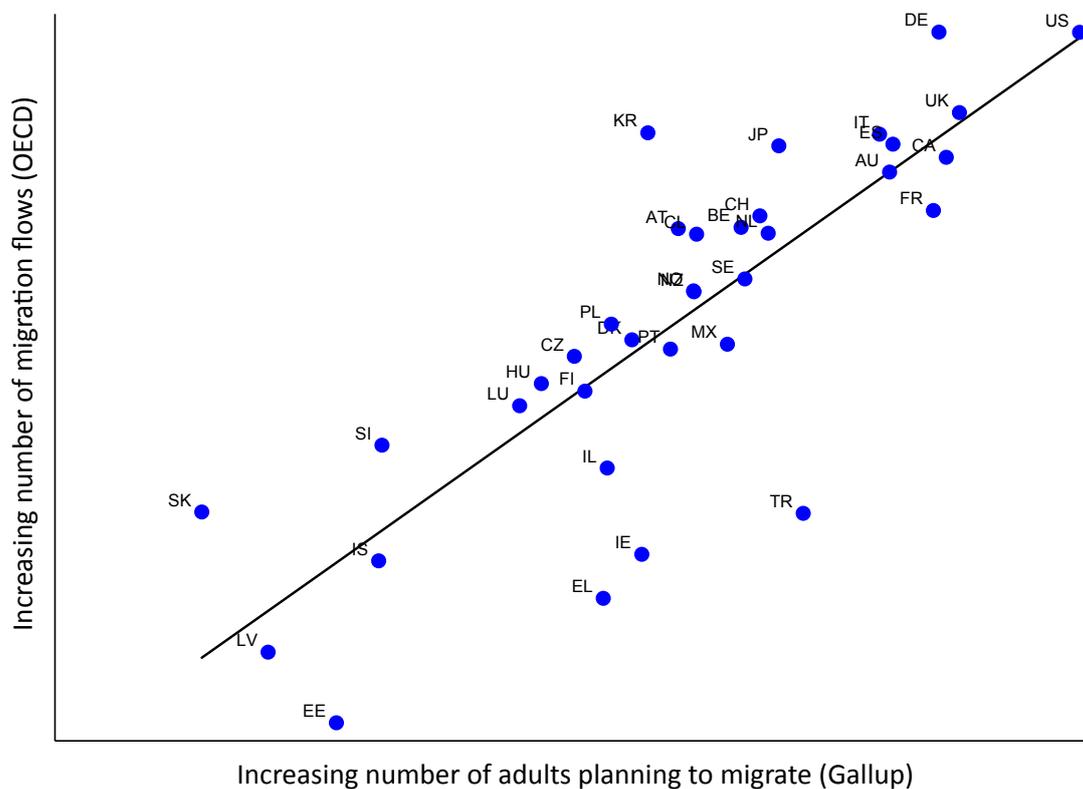
3 The ratios are based on comparing potential migration estimates with OECD and Eurostat flow data.

4 On average, a 1 per cent increase in emigration potential (logarithmic values) increases actual outflows (logarithmic values) by 0.9 per cent, which is statistically significant at the 1 per cent level.

Figure 10 reaffirms the strong relationship between potential migration and flow using OECD data on inflows for the period 2010–2014. Again, the higher the number of adults worldwide that are planning to migrate

to a particular OECD country, the higher the number of migration inflows that were reported for the same country.<sup>5</sup>

**Figure 10:** Migration plans and OECD inflows



*Note:* Original axes based on logarithmic scale to improve comparability. Estimates based on pooled data for 2010–2014 for presentation purposes. The correlation holds when single years are displayed separately.

*Source:* Gallup World Poll, 2010–2014; OECD International Migration Database; authors' calculations.

Data on international migration flows and public opinion data on potential migration have limitations. For example, migration flow data are only available for a limited number of mostly Western countries. However, the strong link between potential and both out- and inflows suggests that information about global migration plans and preparations could be used to predict actual flows in the future. While further research is needed,

these results are a promising contribution to improving efforts to forecast migration. The link between migration plans and flows can also be explored to develop future migration scenarios. IOM's Global Migration Data Analysis Centre (GMDAC) is currently conducting research to assess the impact of demographic, economic and political changes on potential migration.

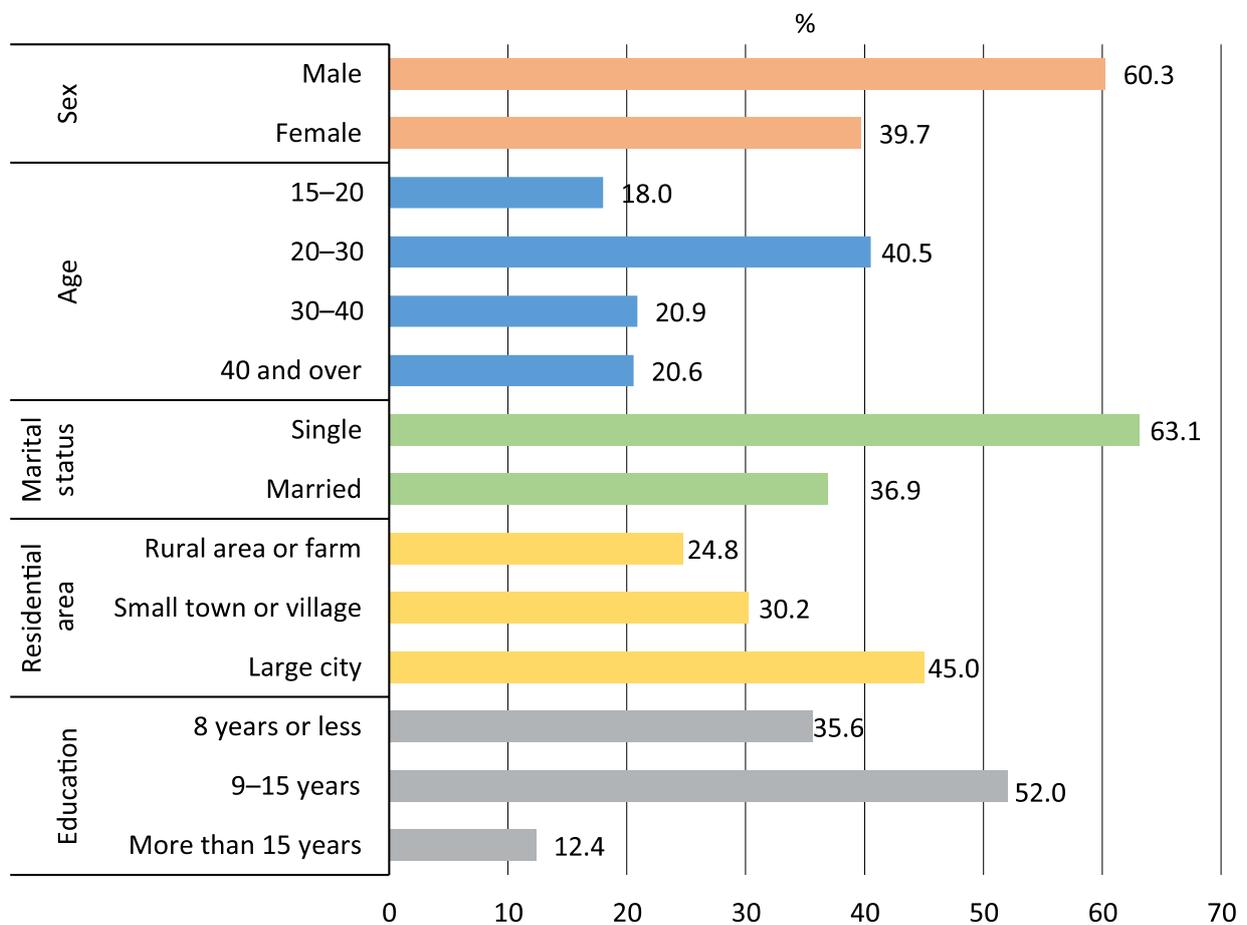
<sup>5</sup> On average, a one per cent increase in immigration potential for OECD countries (logarithmic values) increases actual inflows (logarithmic values) by 0.9 per cent, which is statistically significant at the 1 per cent level. The significant relationship continues to hold when analysing yearly flows, flows in the following year and when considering alternative data on actual migration flows, for instance as provided by Eurostat.

## GLOBAL PROFILE OF ADULTS PLANNING TO MOVE

Adults with migration plans worldwide are more likely to be male (60%), single (63%), young (80% under the age of 40) and living in larger cities (see Figure 9). Most have 9 to 15 years of schooling, and only 12 per cent completed four years of education beyond

high school and/or received a four-year college degree (i.e. more than 15 years of education). Reasons for leaving a country permanently are complex and vary considerably across countries and regions. GMDAC is currently analysing a wide range of additional individual characteristics and country-level variables that may drive migration plans. The results will be presented in one of the following briefings in this series.

**Figure 11:** Socioeconomic profile of adults planning to migrate (in %)



Source: Gallup World Poll, 2010–2015; authors' calculations. Note that the profile of adults preparing to migrate is similar.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper suggests that much more could be learned about migration potential by analysing public opinion surveys such as the Gallup World Poll data. The Gallup finding that 700 million people express a general desire to migrate has received a great deal of media attention, but this is likely to be a poor indicator of actual migration flows. The number of adults who plan or prepare a potential move abroad is a more appropriate measure of potential migration as it is directly correlated with recorded migration in- and outflows.

It would also be possible to learn much more about migration intentions, by including additional migration questions in the Gallup World Poll. For example, currently Gallup does not ask people to state the reasons why they wish to migrate or how they plan to migrate. It would also be possible to learn more about structural migration drivers, such as economic, political and social push and pull factors, particularly in regions of high migration potential.

Improving our understanding of people's migration intentions could be useful for a range of different policy purposes. It could help policymakers plan for migration, understand better migration pressures, as well as highlighting potential migration trends where alternative sources of migration data are scarce.

### Methodological annex

Since creating the World Poll in 2005, Gallup has conducted studies in more than 160 countries that include 99 per cent of the world's adult population (above 15 years of age). Gallup uses telephone surveys in countries where telephone coverage represents at least 80 per cent of the population or is the customary survey methodology. In countries where telephone interviewing is employed, Gallup uses a random-digit-dial (RDD) method or a nationally representative list of phone numbers. Telephone methodology is typical in the United States, Canada, Western Europe, Japan and Australia, among others. In the developing world, including much of Latin America, the former Soviet Union countries, nearly all of Asia, the Middle East and Africa, Gallup uses an area frame design for face-to-face interviewing in randomly selected households.

With some exceptions, all samples are probability based and nationally representative of the resident population aged 15 and older. The coverage area is the entire country including rural areas, and the sampling frame represents the entire civilian, non-institutionalized adult population of the country. Exceptions include areas where the safety of the interviewing staff is threatened and scarcely populated islands in some countries. The typical survey includes at least 1,000 individuals by country annually. In some countries, Gallup collects oversamples in major cities or areas of special interest. Additionally, in some large countries, such as China and the Russian Federation, sample sizes of at least 2,000 are collected. Gallup weights World Poll samples to correct for unequal selection probability, non-response and double coverage of landline and cell phone users when using both, cell phone and landline frames. Gallup also weights its final samples to match the national demographics of each selected country.

For this analysis, most estimates are based on pooled data from 2010 to 2015 to increase accuracy and reliability. Data are available for 155 countries that together represent more than 90 per cent of the world's population. For the remaining UN countries (mainly small countries and Islands), we use an imputation technique to estimate missing values based on the country's size, development level, age structure, urbanization and location. Weights are adjusted – when appropriate – for pooling countries, years or number of surveys per year. As with any survey-based estimate, the results have a corresponding margin of error for each country. Gallup claims a margin of error of 3 per cent for a country estimate in a given year. The margins of error varies considerably depending on the kind of analysis, for example, the error may be different when producing regional or global estimates. For example, we estimate that 66 million adults around the world reported migration plans. The “true” value ranges from 53 to 80 million adults worldwide.

Data on actual in- and out-flows stems from the OECD International Migration Database and UN DESA. For reasons of comparability, estimations are based on logarithmic values of actual and potential flows. While the analysis shows variation across countries in the differences between actual and potential migration, the correlation is, on average, exceptionally high. This finding is robust across different statistical models and data sources.

## About

### GMDAC

In response to growing calls for better data on migration, and better use and presentation of migration data, IOM has created a Global Migration Data Analysis Centre (GMDAC). Located in the heart of Berlin, Germany, the Centre aims to provide authoritative and timely analysis of data on global migration issues as a global hub for data and statistics on migration.

### Data Briefing Series

The GMDAC Data Briefing Series aims to explain what lies behind the numbers and the data used in migration policy and public debates. The Briefings explain what “the numbers” indicate about movements of migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers, on a range of topics for policy across the globe.

The way the data are presented has an important influence on public perceptions of migration in Europe and the development of policy. The Series will serve to clarify, explain and exchange specialist knowledge in an accessible format for wider public and policy audiences, for capacity-building and evidence for policy. Briefings will be of interest to expert, as well as lay audiences, including journalists, students, local authority and city planners and lawyers.

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