Shedding light on regret in migrant decision making: Insights from the Ethiopia-South Africa and Haiti-Brazil corridors

WORKING PAPER

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Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Charlot Jn Charles, Valner Didieus, Mélanie Montinard, Natália Guindani, Heloisa Melino, Richemond Dacilien, Ismane Desrosiers, and Danilo Sato for conducting the focus group discussions with Haitian migrants in Brazil. The authors also want to thank Ernest Casseus, Lilian de Senna, Luckner Guerrier, Mariela Dangervil, Raymond Francois, Alix Vladimir Bellagarde, Catiana Guillaume, Dady Simon, Dieumettre Jean, Reginald Pierre, Jean Raymond Exantus, Valner Diedus, Wisnel Joseph, and Stephat Pierre for conducting the interviews with Haitian migrants in Brazil.

In addition, the authors would like to thank Azwi Netshikulwe, Dr. Faisal Garba, Dr. Henrietta Nyamnjoh, Yordanos Seifu, and Bernice Boafo for conducting the interviews with Ethiopian migrants in South Africa.

The authors would also like to thank the reviewers, Amanda Gray Meral (ODI) and Julia Stier (WZB Berlin), for their time and contribution to this working paper.

Finally, the authors would like to thank Baindu Kallon (Coventry University) for copyediting this working paper.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Regret is a feeling that all people, including migrants, commonly experience. Nevertheless, this topic is still underexplored in migration studies, and we posit that this happens for a number of reasons. First and foremost, this takes place because of narratives around migration and success, which pressure migrants into ticking all the boxes of a 'successful migration' such as owning a house or sending remittances. Second, migration is such a sizeable material and emotional investment that acting upon regret, for instance by returning, signifies not only the loss of the investment but also of other potential opportunities (Hernández-Carretero and Carling, 2012; Limbu, 2023). And third, migrants' expressions of regret are stigmatized and labelled not only as 'migration failure', but also as an ungrateful attitude towards the country of destination. Migration scholarship and literature has in many ways reflected the suppression and stigmatisation of this topic, though the evidence base has grown in recent years as we show.

Yet regret exists: our study has uncovered the existence of this feeling in the migration trajectory of some migrants. To understand it well, we asked: what subjective and material elements inform regret in migration decision-making? We believe that bringing it to the fore means we can demystify success narratives and stop dehumanising or infantilising migrants, conceiving them as complex human beings rather than unappreciative or simple abstract characters. Moreover, feeling regret, as unpleasant as it could be, comes from a person's agency and capability to take and evaluate their own decisions. It links to wider discussions on the need to acknowledge migrants' agency, which always exists, although at times in restricted circumstances (Bivand Erdal and Oeppen, 2017; de Regt and Mihret, 2020).

We also consider it important to normalise regret in migration decision-making because migration is not a linear trajectory. In fact, some people might regret migrating but stay in the destination country nonetheless, while some people might regret one aspect of their migration experience and be content with the decision in other aspects of their lives. Yet, migration policies and programmes operate according to a double standard when it comes to Global South migrants' decision-making. For instance, IOM campaigns raising awareness on the risks of migration hint at regret when sharing the stories of returnees (see IOM, 2023). Even though we acknowledge the relevance of awareness-raising, an approach centred on personal stories risk ignoring the structural conditions in the countries of origin that push people to (aspire to) migrate. Therefore, we hope this paper contributes to normalise the feeling of regret in *anyone's* migration, without translating it into a prescription not to migrate.

In fact, with this research we point at regret not only as an individually-felt emotion in response to lived experiences, but also as the by-product of structural

political and economic dynamics that place migrants in extremely precarious positions – and undocumented ones even more so. On the one hand, migration policies are becoming more restrictive across the world, thus giving way to dangerous irregular journeys as the only remaining alternative, while on the other hand, neoliberal labour markets profit on the exploitation of workers, such as migrants, with little bargaining power or rights protection. This context may lead to feelings of regret amongst migrants, although not necessarily about the decision to migrate itself as much as about the conditions under which they were forced to migrate and the precarious work conditions they found in their new destinations.

This article is grounded on qualitative data from the Ethiopia-South Africa and Haiti-Brazil migration corridors, collected as part of the MIDEQ project on South-South Migration and Inequality by researchers from the University of Cape Town, South Africa, and the Instituto Maria e João Aleixo (IMJA), Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The interviews were not designed to focus on regret, but rather on various project themes[1], including migration decision-making. However, regret came out as a theme in many of the interviews and the authors pulled the data together to form this paper.

For the sake of transparency, we clarify this is not a psychology research project. Thus, the interviews by our colleagues in South Africa and Brazil were not conducted in a clinical setting, nor was it possible to ensure that all migrants were in the same mindset at the time of the interview. We hope however, that it stimulates discussion and that similar and more rigorous research on the topic can be conducted in the future.

This article is situated in the growing literature on subjective factors in migration decision-making, which we discuss in the next section. Building on the classification proposed by Hagen-Zanker, Mazzilli and Hennessey (2023), we explore regret as a feeling informed by both subjective and tangible elements.

2. REGRET IN THE MIGRATION LITERATURE

2.1 SITUATING REGRET IN THE STUDY OF SUBJECTIVE FACTORS UNDERLYING MIGRATION DECISION-MAKING

Research on migration decision-making has greatly expanded over the decades, not just in terms of the number of studies dedicated to this topic, but also – and crucially for this article – with respect to the elements considered relevant for the decision-making process. The literature tended to ascribe migrants' decisions to either rational cost-benefit calculations (functionalist approach), or to the effect of

[1] We provide the complete list in the methodology section.

ungovernable circumstances (historical-structuralist approach). However, more recently, scholarship also acknowledges the importance of subjective elements such as imagination, personality traits, emotions and feelings, and beliefs and values (Hagen-Zanker and Hennessey, 2021; Hagen-Zanker, Mazzilli and Hennessey, 2023).

These subjective elements work not in opposition to the functionalist or historical-structuralist approaches, but rather *in addition* to them, as they add layers of complexity and realism to, for instance, the understanding of someone's individual cost-benefit calculation on migration (Boccagni and Baldassar, 2015; Khan, 2018). In the findings section, we will see how material and subjective considerations overlap, but sometimes also clash, when Ethiopians in South Africa and Haitians in Brazil reflect on their migration choices. For instance, despite the greater profitability of running a business in South Africa, emotional components such as longing for someone's family or fear for the violent environment in the country of destination, weigh considerably in the participants' feeling of regret (see also Mixed Migration Centre (MMC), 2023).

Yet emotions and feelings work in manifold ways, as they are not only mediated by circumstances, but also by meso-level factors such as a group culture (Kalir, 2005; Ryo, 2013). For example, some popular Haitians songs describe Haitians as '*responsible for their own survival'* – a feeling and value that often translates into migration, alongside the structural constrains reproducing poverty and inequality (Cela *et al.*, 2022). As we will see, despite the hardships Haitians experience due to their working conditions and low salaries in Brazil, they conceive migration as a survival strategy and a better option than staying in Haiti.

Some of the emotions and feelings most frequently analysed in the migration literature are hope (Ransan-Cooper, 2015; Hernández-Carretero, 2016; Kuschminder, Andersson and Siegel, 2017; Grabska, 2020); shame (Constable, 2014; Chan, 2018; Bredeloup, 2019), jealousy (Feyissa, Hagen-Zanker and Mazzilli, 2024), fear (Tucker *et al.*, 2013), love (Mai and King, 2009; Assunção, 2016), and attachment to either people or places (Schewel, 2020)[2]. This working paper turns the spotlight on regret, a feeling which is increasingly explored in migration research, although usually more as a secondary element than as the specific focus of a study. One definition of regret that we will build on in this article is as follows:

> *"Psychology defines regret 'as a feeling in which emotional aspects (sadness, sometimes anger, shame, or uneasiness) and cognitive aspects (evaluation of not having acted as one should) interact. Regret can occur either because of an action or because of the lack thereof: for having done*

[2] For a thorough review of these studies and additional references, please see Hagen-Zanker and Hennessey (2021) and Hagen-Zanker, Mazzilli and Hennessey (2023).

> *something that should not have been done, or, conversely, for not having done what should have been done" (André, 2006: 28, cited in Bendaoued, Navas and González-Martín, 2016:194).*

We argue in this paper that regret is a feeling informed by both material and other subjective factors, including cognitive aspects, though we are unable to explore the cognitive aspects in depth due to our research design. We also attempt to show that although regret is by no means always present, it is more common across some migrant populations than what might be commonly assumed. Before proceeding, it is essential to say that we approach the presence of regret in the participants' stories with no judgement on what they should or should not feel. On the contrary, we find that unpacking the variety of feelings experienced by migrants throughout their trajectory highlights that they are not an abstract 'category' but rather just people with their own complex and ever-mutable set of feelings and thoughts.

2.2 FINDINGS FROM THE LITERATURE

We conducted a rigorous literature search based on two main keywords, 'migration' and 'regret'. We conducted our searches in English, Spanish, Portuguese, and Italian in order to capture the broadest possible range of studies[3] while at the same time minimising the English language bias[4]. We then scanned the retrieved articles and included them in our review, if thematically relevant. We also searched the internet for non-academic material on migration and regret and found a small selection of forum entries and blog posts on the topic, which complemented the scholarly literature. These are also included in our analysis, given the nascent nature of this topic. The geographical scope of this review extends over most of the world, although overall African and Asian countries are better represented.

In our extensive searches, we only found one article on migration decision-making including 'regret' in the title, that is Knausenberger et al.'s 2023 article 'Refugees' and non-refugee migrants' regret about migration and confidence in integration: The role of forcedness and perils before and during migration'. Their research considers the role of forcedness and perils encountered before and during migration in triggering feelings of regret and/or hope for integration in the society of destination, concluding that "perils encountered during migration increased regret about having migrated when perceived forcedness was low" (Knausenberger *et al.*, 2022:535).

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[3] The search in Italian did not produce any result.
[4] Future research could expand on the linguistic range, for instance including French – which was not possible to include due to practical constraints, but also some of the languages spoken by migrants across the world, such as (for this case) Amharic or Creole. Research should also expand on the type of literature covered, including for instance novels and poems, where these languages might be more represented.

At the same time, we identified several other studies that touch upon regret as a secondary point when discussing mental representations of migration (Field, Meyer and Swanson, 2010; Tyldum, 2021), aspirations (Czaika and Vothknecht, 2014; Belloni, 2021), expectations (Mehari and Kaneko, 2022), economic prospects (Czaika, 2015; Steiner, 2019), or return/onward migration options (Sabharwal and Varma, 2016). We now discuss this literature further.

2.2.1 EXPECTATIONS AND REGRET

The literature shows the multiplicity of reasons regret could be triggered by. One of the perhaps most evident causes is the often-stark contrast between the future imagined before the onset of migration, often influenced by word of mouth[5], and the reality encountered in the process and at destination – which, as we will see, is also a cause of regret for Ethiopian migrants in South Africa and for some Haitians migrating in Brazil.

For instance, in the case of Senegalese migrants to Argentina explored by Kleidermacher (2016), disappointment – and disenchantment – is caused by the difficulty of their insertion in the local labour market. This means they not only lead a different life from what they had imagined but also perceive the possibility of return as distant – thus feeling regret for the decision they have taken. Hernández-Carretero and Carling (2012) reflect on the costs of return as well. Return represents “the loss of a significant investment” (Hernández-Carretero and Carling, 2012:410), since migrants finance their journey by selling personal and/or family assets, or by borrowing money. Return also entails the social cost of ‘failing’ the migration project (Hernández-Carretero and Carling, 2012; Field, Meyer and Swanson, 2010). As such, migration is imbued with ambivalent feelings, among which is regret. It is key to mention that regret for the entire or some aspects of migration is not necessarily always correlated with a ‘failure’ in economic terms – as we will see in the next section. Crucially, one of the migrants interviewed by Hernández-Carretero and Carling (2012) brought up his regret *not to have migrated* when his peers had left – thus showing that regret can refer to different aspects of migration decision-making, including timing.

Other studies have observed that migrants experienced a loss of social status with migration, leading to feelings of frustration or worsening mental health. For example, Costa et al. (2020) reported that asylum seekers and refugees in Germany compare their situation before and after migration, and that their perceived downward social status led to a higher probability to present anxiety and depressive

[5] 40 years ago, Thomas-Hope, (1980) described the formation process of West Indians’ expectations around their future overseas. She claims that hopes surrounding migration are constructed by a convergence of, on the one side, real information received about the destination country, and, on the other side, preconceptions.

symptoms. Moving closer to our own data, Joseph (2015) discusses how Haitian women in Brazil experience frustration and disappointment when they perceived a loss in their social status after migration. While in Haiti or the Dominican Republic they were considered “successful women”, with maids at home, in Brazil they became domestic workers themselves. For instance, one migrant woman in the study expressed regret because the only jobs that were available for her were in the cleaning sector rather than in hotel management, the sector she was qualified and expected to find a job in. Similarly, Moroccan women in the study by Bendaoued, Navas and González-Martín (2016) expressed regretting the loss of their social status resulting from their migration to Spain. Again, it relates to the type of work they did there: in Morocco they owned their own business, worked at office jobs or were students, while in Spain they only found work in the cleaning or agriculture sectors.

The perception of lost opportunities emerges quite often in the analysis of more cognitive aspects of regret. For instance, Limbu (2023) studies Nepali migrants' desires for to their migration to the Gulf countries, and how they are reflected in the tangible outcomes of their migration. The gap between someone's real versus ideal self as generating regret has been mainly explored by the psychology literature. For instance, Davidai and Gilovich (2018) talk about the “ideal road not taken”, explaining that people's most enduring regrets are those connected to what they ‘could have been if’. Circling this analysis back to migration allows us to understand that cognitive factors informing regret are long-lasting because imagination enhances them. Alternative scenarios about ‘what could (have) happened if’ can almost torment people after their migration has taken place (see also Maphosa and Morojele, 2013; Jolaoso and Olajimbiti, 2021).

2.2.2 FEELINGS AND REGRET

Speculations about an alternative course of events, as well as worries and uncertainties about the future shape feelings of regret. In her research on African migrants' experiences of Europe's security measures, Sumari (2020) reports that asylum seekers in Cyprus expressed regret for having migrated when they were facing the bureaucratic complications of the asylum process and harsh treatment by European border forces. In general, worries and anger at their situation were compounded by regretful feelings about having left. Many respondents stressed their love for Africa and “how they would have never come if they had known the reality in Europe” (p. 11) – which matches many accounts by Ethiopian migrants in South Africa, as we see below.

Tyldum (2021) discusses Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon and their thoughts about onward migration to Europe. She sheds light on the importance her interviewees place on interpersonal connections, proximity to their family and community network, and on feelings such as their fear of loneliness when

considering re-migrating to a Western context. Tyldum (2021) writes that, according to two young men she interviewed in Lebanon, those who migrated to Europe might now regret having done so because their new friendships and relations could never replace those they had before. At the same time, however, the two participants were attracted by the prospect of economic security in Europe, admitting they regretted not having migrated themselves. This article clearly shows that “positive and negative regrets”[6], as defined by Jolaoso and Olajimbiti (2021, see also Bendaoued, Navas and González-Martín, 2016) overlap continuously and sometimes seemingly incongruously – as they are reflecting the complexity of human thoughts and feelings.

2.2.3 MATERIAL FACTORS AND REGRET

Several studies on migration and return also point at material reasons causing migrants’ sadness, distress, and regret. As noted above, material factors overlap with cognitive elements and feelings. One example is found in the literature exploring Haitian migration to Brazil where the poor working conditions and occasional situations of homelessness led Haitians to regret having migrated to Brazil and to mourn their inability to return (Miura, 2014:161).

Another study by Kwankye et al. (2009) studied young people’s (10 to 24 years old) independent internal migration in Ghana. While not all young migrants in Accra and Kumasi regretted migrating because it allowed them to find a job, learn a trade, or save some money, nearly half (45%) of the young migrants interviewed in Accra and almost a quarter (23%) of those interviewed in Kumasi *did* regret migrating. “Those who reported regretting their migration were critical about their living and working conditions. Amongst other reasons provided by these migrants were: not making as much money as anticipated; financial problems; no job; difficult work; unsatisfactory income and general hardship in their present location elements” (Kwankye et al., 2009:29).

A study by Nyberg Sørensen (2006) attributes regret to the costs migrants incurred in financing their journey. Reporting the accounts of sub-Saharan African migrants stuck in Morocco on their intended journey to Europe, Nyberg Sørensen (2006) writes, “Regrets at the spiralling costs were frequently expressed, especially since none of the migrants interviewed had yet reached their final goal, and some of them had been in Morocco for longer than a year” (p. 136). Further, Imoagene (2017) explored the impact of migration to the US on the life of Ghanaian and

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[6] Jolaoso and Olajimbiti (2021) defined positive regret as “a cognitive phenomenon, a way of expressing a truth eloquently asserted as relief over dissatisfaction experiences” (p. 517), while they describe negative regret as “constructed when an individual expresses feelings of sadness or sorrow about something beyond his control and wished it had not happened. It relates to a scenario that may warrant a person to express value judgment by comparing actions, situations, or circumstances” (p. 520).

Nigerian Diversity Visa winners. She reports that, amongst those respondents who stated regretting having migrated, one man attributed the cause of his regret to not having been able to obtain his degree and working in an underpaid job. This finding also applied more generally to other participants who left for the US before completing their university education and were unable to continue it there (ibid).

Field et al.'s (2010) discussion of Nigerian migrants' experiences in Cape Town, South Africa touches upon similar points. Material factors such as unemployment, the unaffordability of decent housing or not having a dignified quality of life, lies at the core of the participants' regret for having migrated (see also Akintola and Akintola, 2015; Driessen, 2016), together with the social stigma faced by many Nigerians in South Africa. Although their regret is grounded in material reasons, the participants in the study also regretted their decision because of cognitive reasons, namely the crumbling of their pre-migration expectations – which demonstrates that material and subjective elements exist simultaneously. One interviewee powerfully stated, "You know, from the first time that I came here, I regret this country because you know what I think is not what I see" (p. 104).

Some literature also identifies considerations of regret specifically by female migrants. For example, female Mexican migrants living in the US voiced sadness, concerns and, at times, regret when their children stayed back, even though the material situation of their children improved with the remittances the mothers had sent (Dreby, 2010). Similarly, women can also experience feelings of sadness when they are not able to contribute as they would like to the expenses of their families, as observed among Haitian women who migrated to Brazil (Mejía and Cazarotto, 2017). Missing or longing for family members in the homeland was observed as an important element informing regret for Moroccan migrant women in the study by Bendaoued, Navas and González-Martín, (2016). Migrant women in their study regretted missing not only the close contact with their relatives but also important family events such as birthdays, weddings, and funerals.

3. CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 CONTEXT OF RESEARCH

3.1.1 MIDEQ

The interviews at the centre of this article were conducted as part of the Migration for Development and Equality (MIDEQ) project, which aims to unpack the complex and multi-dimensional relationships between migration and inequality in the

context of the Global South. MIDEQ explores 10 thematic areas[7] within the context of migration, situating data collection and analysis along six migration corridors: Burkina Faso – Côte d'Ivoire, China – Ghana, Egypt – Jordan, Ethiopia – South Africa, Haiti – Brazil, and Nepal – Malaysia. This working paper draws on data collected for two of the corridors, with Ethiopian migrants in South Africa and with Haitian migrants in Brazil.

3.1.2 ETHIOPIAN MIGRATION TO SOUTH AFRICA

Migration from Ethiopia to South Africa started in the 1990s, although at that time migrants were few and far between, as national laws both in Ethiopia and in South Africa were very restrictive regarding emigration and immigration alike. On the one hand, until the end of the Derg military rule, Ethiopians needed an exit visa to leave the country, which was notoriously difficult to obtain. The policy reform issued by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) in 1991 sensibly expanded Ethiopians' freedom of movement, enshrining it in the constitution. On the other hand, during the apartheid rule, South Africa's borders were practically impenetrable for citizens of other African countries. This regime was relaxed only after the end of apartheid in 1994, when the African National Congress (ANC) was elected ruling party (Feyissa, Hagen-Zanker, and Mazzilli, 2024).

Scholars closely working on this migration corridor (Feyissa, 2022; Feyissa and Garba, n.d.; Feyissa, Hagen-Zanker and Mazzilli, 2024) take 2001 as the informal start of an intense flux of Ethiopians to South Africa. It was in 2001 that Canadian pastor Peter Younger gave a prophecy in Hosaena, one of the major cities of the Hadiya[8] zone in Southern Ethiopia. In his prophecy, Younger talked about having seen "a route to the South", which would "bring prosperity to the Hadiya" (Feyissa, Hagen-Zanker and Mazzilli, 2024). At the time, some Ethiopians already lived in South Africa, who had been able to accumulate wealth relatively quickly thanks to a positive economic conjuncture. As such, people interpreted the prophecy as a blessing of the migration journey to South Africa.

To this day, Ethiopians are amongst the most-represented nationalities in South Africa, mainly living in big cities with active economies – such as Cape Town, Johannesburg, Port Elizabeth, East London, and Georgetown. Statista (2023) reports that, in 2020, Ethiopians regularly residing in South Africa were just over 44,000. Undocumented migrants are not included in this count, which means the overall figure is much higher (Zewdu, 2018). Not only is their migration journey long

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[7] The thematic areas are: 1) gender inequalities, 2) childhood inequalities, 3) poverty and income inequalities, 4) migrant perception, knowledge, and decision-making, 5) migration intermediaries, 6) resource flows, 7) political mobilization and transnational solidarity, 8) access to justice, 9) digital technologies and inequality, and 10) arts, creative resistance, and wellbeing.

[8] The term Hadiya refers to both an administrative zone in the South-West of Ethiopia and to the population that inhabits it.

and dangerous, but also life in South Africa is extremely vulnerable. Ethiopian migrants embark on a 10.000 kilometres-long journey that stretches across multiple state borders. Those travelling irregularly do so over land, by bus, car, or even on foot, relying on brokers to whom they pay exorbitant fees. Yet these fees do not always protect them from dangers: virtually every account that we analysed included experiences of being stopped by border police along the way and sometimes imprisoned, even for years, together with testimonies of physical threats and starvation. Once at destination, Ethiopians take up physically demanding jobs while facing the xenophobia and violence that characterises much of the South African context.

The overwhelming majority of Ethiopian migrants in South Africa work in informal retail trade (Yimer, 2012; Estifanos and Zack, 2020; Estifanos and Freeman, 2022), and their stories tend to follow a well-established path. The newly-arrived commonly start working as door-to-door vendors, then after a while become *borders* – or shopkeepers, in small informal convenience stores called *spaza shops*. After saving for some time, borders usually get into a partnership with a family member, a friend, or another member of the diaspora, or ask them for an informal loan to open their own shop. Other research within the framework of MIDEQ has explored the reasons behind such a risky migration: Feyissa, Hagen-Zanker and Mazzilli (2024) have explored the relevance of spirituality, social norms, and feelings such as emulative jealousy in Ethiopian migration to South Africa, while Mazzilli, Garba and Hagen-Zanker (2023) have analysed the allure of South Africa as a place where it is deemed possible to "become someone". Yet the negative components of this migration have been somehow overlooked so far, perhaps involuntarily reinforcing a partial narrative which describes migration as the aspiration of virtually all Africans (see Landau, 2019). With this article and its focus on regret, we thus aim at rebalancing our understanding of this migration in particular and of migration decision-making more in general.

3.1.3 HAITAIN MIGRATION TO BRAZIL

Despite a long tradition of Haitian migration to other countries (the US, France, Canada, the Dominican Republic, French Guyana), following the 2010 earthquake, Brazil rapidly became a popular destination for migrants leaving Haiti (Interuniversity Institute for Research and Development (INURED), 2020; Muraro *et al.*, 2023; Queiroz Telmo Romano and Pizzinato, 2021). This happened for several reasons. Although other countries in the region began offering humanitarian visas to Haitians as a relief measure during the post-earthquake years (Argentina, Chile, Ecuador, and Peru), Brazil was the only country to openly announce its welcoming migration policies. President Lula indeed invited Haitians to emigrate to Brazil during his visit to Haiti a month after the earthquake (Mejía and Cazarotto, 2017). In 2012, the Brazilian government began granting humanitarian visas for Haitians to regularise

their status. Subsequently, the 2017 Migration Law guaranteed the right to a family reunion and accepted the humanitarian reception principle as the foundation for granting visas and permits to enter Brazilian territory[9] (Dacilien and Melino, forthcoming).

Furthermore, Brazil's image of a prosperous country was reinforced by its leadership role in the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH), lasting from 2004 to 2017, including during the 2010 earthquake (Cazarotto and Mejía, 2017; Guindani *et al.*, 2024; Landry, 2018). The 2014 Football World Cup and the 2016 Olympic games, hosted in Brazil, also contributed to an image of a country that was economically booming, with increasing labour opportunities for locals and migrants that were indeed publicised by the Brazilian government (Guindani *et al.*, 2024; Muraro *et al.*, 2023; Yates, 2021). Simultaneously, migration restrictions for Haitians in the Dominican Republic, and in other traditional destinations for Haitian migration (the US, Canada, and France) also played an important role in tracing a new migration trajectory (Landry, 2018). Over 161,000 Haitians settled or transited through Brazil between 2010 and June 2023 (Alto Comissaria do das Nações Unidas para Refugiado (ACNUR) Brasil, 2023). In 2021, the Haitian population was estimated to be around 143,000 (Yates, 2021).

Despite the image of Brazil as a country that was economically booming, the economy stagnated between 2014 and 2016, accompanied by political instability (Yates, 2021; Muraro *et al.*, 2023). Several Haitians already experienced challenging work conditions with long working hours and lower wages compared to Brazilians, which were exacerbated by the economic and political crises, followed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the 2018 election of former President Jair Bolsonaro (a conservative former military officer), influenced racism and growing xenophobic sentiments against migrants. All these events contextualise the accounts and experiences described by our Haitian participants during their interviews and focus groups.

Initially, Haitians began entering the country mainly by land, through Acre State. With the humanitarian visa, Haitians began entering through São Paulo city to then

[9] Haitians benefit from two main programmes that aim to promote regular migration: 1) the Family Reunification Visa Programme (VITEM XI), targeting specific relatives (e.g. spouses, children, grandchildren, parents, siblings) of a Haitian with a resident permit living in Brazil (Ministério das Relações Exteriores, 2023) and; 2) the Humanitarian Visa programme (VITEM III) for Haitians and nationals from other countries (Afghanistan, Syria, and Ukraine) who have been experiencing serious instability, armed conflict, disaster or human rights violations. VITEM III grants residency initially for two years, with the possibility to obtain permanent residency. This programme also grants access to educational and labour opportunities in the country (Muraro *et al.*, 2023). However, the VITEM III programme expires in December 2024 (Ministério da Justiça e Segurança Pública/Gabinete do Ministro, 2023). Interministerial Ordinance MJSP/MRE No. 38, which was released in April 2023, intends to make it easier for stateless individuals and Haitian nationals with familial ties in Brazil to get a temporary visa for the purpose of family reunion, as allowed by the 2017 Migration Law (Ministério das Relações Exteriores and Ministério da Justiça e Segurança Pública, 2023).

move to smaller municipalities where work is available (David, Rizzotto and Gouvêa, 2023). According to the Observatório das Migrações Internacionais, Haitian migrants are concentrated in the cities of São Paulo, Paraná, Santa Catarina and Rio Grande do Sul (Observatório das Migrações Internacionais (OBMigra), 2017). While men are employed mainly in the construction, mechanics, the wholesale sector, or the meat processing industries (poultry and pig slaughtering), women are employed in the poultry slaughtering industry, food services, cleaning services and the healthcare industry (Observatório das Migrações Internacionais (OBMigra), 2017; Landry, 2018; Leão *et al.*, 2018).

Some studies have shown that, despite many Haitians have a high level of education, they do not usually find employment in the areas of their training (Handerson and Joseph, 2015; Dacilien and Melino, forthcoming). Additionally, the opportunities available to Haitian women in the labour market are further restricted by the racial hierarchies that currently exist in Brazil and link black or darker women to domestic work (Interuniversity Institute for Research and Development (INURED), 2020). These data should not be read as context-specific, but rather as part of the wider body of literature on racial capitalism, which argues that the very structure of capitalist markets has grown and prospered owing to the differential exploitation of people according to their intersecting social dimensions (i.e., race, class, and gender)[10]. As such, and as already highlighted in the introduction, it is worth asking whether regret at the material conditions of life at destination emerging from this and other studies relate to individual life trajectories or rather to the underlying capitalist dynamics that push migrants and women “to the margins” (Netshikulwe, Nyamnjoh and Garba, 2022).

3.2 METHODOLOGY

3.2.1 DATA

ETHIOPIA-SOUTH AFRICA

For this corridor, we analysed a total of 67 interviews with Ethiopian migrants, some of whom were in South Africa while others had already returned to Ethiopia. The interviews covered topics relating to three different thematic areas: ‘childhood inequalities’ (12 interviews), ‘poverty and income inequality’ (18 interviews), and

[10] Bhattacharyya (2018) explains that racial capitalism is “a way of understanding the role of racism in enabling key moments of capitalist development” – such as for instance a reading of the Industrial Revolution as grounding on the exploitation of the goods and populations of the colonies. Further, Melamed (2015) describes racial capitalism as the technology producing that “social separateness […] needed for capitalist expropriation to work”, which can be gauged, by means of example, in the prospering of global cities thanks to the often irregular work of racialised citizens and migrants.

'resource flows' (47 interviews), though migration decision-making and regret came up organically.

The in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted by MIDEQ partners from the University of Cape Town in the South African cities of Cape Town (including a group interview conducted in the suburb of Belville), East London, Georgetown, Hermanus, Johannesburg, and Port Elizabeth, and in the city of Hosana in Ethiopia[11]. Apart from two women, one of whom was interviewed together with her husband, the other participants were all male. Their age, although not always captured, varied greatly, and was reflected in the length of their stay in South Africa, which ranged between three and 35 years. The participants held different professions, although the vast majority were small entrepreneurs owning one or a couple of *spaza shops*, often in partnership with a friend or a family member. Other professions reported were cafeteria and clothing shop owner, NGO employee, church deacon, customer care employee, kindergarten teacher, door-to-door vendor, handyman, and translator.

Even though there is some degree of variation amongst the participants' background, as some come from wealthier families living in Ethiopian urban centres and others from poorer and rural towns, their education levels are fairly similar. Most participants dropped out of school after grade 8 or 10, but there are a few exceptions on either side of the spectrum, as one participant dropped out of school after grade 6 and two others did so after grade 12, after fully completing their secondary education. The most common reasons for leaving education are either failing the exam needed to progress to the year ahead (especially for those who left after grade 10, which marks the end of the first cycle of high school) or simply prioritising the migration to South Africa. It was not possible to establish patterns between family background, dropout year, and reasons based on the collected data.

The demographic composition of the sample is in line with existing studies, such as the information collected along the 'Southern route[12]' by the Mixed Migration Centre's 4Mi survey (Mixed Migration Centre (MMC), 2023), which shows that over half of African migrants to South Africa have completed secondary education (p. 5). Even though it might be assumed that young men from wealthier families migrate later when they complete higher levels of education, recent literature (Feyissa, 2022; Feyissa, Hagen-Zanker and Mazzilli, 2024) has uncovered the perceived urgency migration is imbued with, which transcends age and economic factors.

HAITI-BRAZIL

[11] Here the team also included two focus groups with return migrants.
[12] The MMC defines the Southern route as the multiplicity of migration "journeys running from East and the Horn of Africa, as well as the Great Lakes region, to South Africa."

In the case of the Haiti-Brazil corridor, we analysed a total of 65 interviews collected in 2021. They were in the form of full transcripts or summaries prepared by the Brazil country team. The semi-structured, in-depth interviews covered the topics of five thematic areas: 'migrants' perception, knowledge, and decision-making' (25 interviews), 'gender inequalities' (20 interviews), racial issues (20 interviews), 'digital technology and inequalities' (16 interviews), and 'migration intermediaries' (16 interviews).

The interviews were conducted by the MIDEQ partners of IMJA in the cities of Porto Velho, Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Braço do Norte and Foz do Iguaçu. Most interviewees arrived between 2010 and 2020, with only one man who arrived in 2008. The interviews were comprised of 44 men and 21 women. Most participants were in their late twenties and thirties, but there were also those in their forties and fifties, with an average age of 33 years old. The participants held different professions, although we observed these were gendered. For instance, some female participants worked as nurses or in the cleaning sector while male participants worked in construction or as drivers (see also Leon-Himmelstine et al.,2024).

Most participants had achieved high levels of education including some years of high school (20), university (13), and post-graduate education (2), and nine participants did not specify their education level. While the economic background of interviewees back in Haiti was not asked, once in Brazil there was an almost equal distribution of those living in favelas/peripherical areas (31) and those living in middle class neighbourhoods (34). The average salary of the 65 participants was R$1,870.00 (USD$368.39).

The coding of the Haiti-Brazil corridor interviews showed that none of the participants explicitly mentioned 'regret' nor similar feelings such as 'frustration' or 'failure'. However, some interviewees spoke about the 'disadvantages' of living in Brazil, which mostly were due to the mismatch between the material elements of what they *imagined* about Brazil (becoming well-off) and their reality (inability to pay bills, jobs that did not match their skills, difficulties in sending remittances back to Haiti). They still remained mindful that their economic situation and wellbeing improved both in absolute terms and if compared to their lives back in Haiti.

3.2.2 THE ANALYSIS

We analysed the interviews with the qualitative analysis software MAXQDA (for the Ethiopia-South Africa interviews) and manual coding using Excel (for the Haiti-Brazil interviews)[13]. To do so, we inductively created a coding structure including the

[13] The differences in the analysis method are due to some setbacks experienced with MAXQDA when trying to code the Haiti-Brazil interviews.

following labels[14]: information available pre-migration, aspirations and expectations, regret, consequences of regret, and coping strategies. Under regret, we created the following sub-labels: material considerations around migration, cognitive/narrative aspects of regret (imagination), connected feelings (guilt, shame, sadness). After coding, we matched the coded segments to the research question at the core of this study ('What informs regret in migration decision-making?'), pinning down patterns, similarities, and differences.

In the analysis, we grouped the results under the two categories with the most data: 'subjective elements of regret' and 'material elements of regret'. The former included data discussing both emotions and feelings (such as sadness, shame, or longing) and cognitive elements (narratives, imagination, reflections, or worries[15]). The latter comprised data referring to the tangible components of migration and migrants' life at destination, such as the main features of someone's job.

It is arguably difficult to establish a clearcut division between these categories, especially because cognitive elements sit on a continuum between emotions/feelings and material elements. Drawing on the classification by Hagen-Zanker, Mazzilli and Hennessey (2023), we decided to group emotions/feelings and cognitive elements together under the label 'subjective elements'. This allowed us to point at those elements that refer to individuals' own mental and emotional processes, which can be connected to, but are not the direct effect of, material conditions. For instance, we argue that the participants' accounts of the disappointment they felt once they realised what working conditions in South Africa and Brazil were like referred to *both* material *and* cognitive elements. In fact, not only Ethiopian migrants were subject to exploitative working conditions and living in a dangerous environment, but those conditions also stood in sharp contrast with the expectations on their future life they had before migrating.

An interesting aspect we observed in our analysis is the way that participants expressed feelings related to stress, unhappiness, powerlessness, or hopelessness quite openly during their interviews. These feelings are certainly important in the interviewees' daily life, which might explain why they talked about them. However, we do not know whether the relevance given to these feelings in the interviews stems from the interview providing a space to unload and disclose otherwise taboo emotions or whether the interviewees still held back a substantial number of details

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[14] Labels are also called nodes. The initial list included some nodes that were subsequently dropped because they did not capture the core of the discussion, such as for instance 'individual vs collective plans' or 'imitation as decision-making method'.

[15] Although worry might come across as an emotional element, we decided to classify it as a cognitive one because worrying has a component of projecting oneself in future situations, thus is similar to imagining or visualising.

on their feelings. The latter could have happened if the interviewees had felt too proud or wary to admit their struggles, or if that had felt too painful.

It is key to note that the interviews did not focus on regret directly. Doing so might have provided a space for the participants to talk about this feeling without being constrained by social desirability. More generally, feminist literature has explored the conditions under which qualitative interviews can create a space "in which participants were invited to, and felt able to, narrate their personal experiences" (Birch and Miller, 2010:189). The questions, as well as interactions such as "spaces and endurance of silences, or supportive comments made in order to invite and allow disclosure" (Miller, 2017) can encourage participants to "disclose a sense of 'real' self". Reflecting on that literature, we posit that the rapport built during the MIDEQ interviews encouraged interviewees from both corridors to open up and discuss their regret or perceived disadvantages of their migration experience (e.g. in Brazil, Haitian researchers were closely involved in the data collection process), even when this involves sharing a narrative countering the mainstream one of success. However, we are aware that we do not know to what extent the participants ended up sharing their innermost thoughts and feelings with the interviewers. Finally, we used pseudonyms to protect the participants' anonymity, while removing any information that could have identified them.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 SUBJECTIVE ELEMENTS OF REGRET

EMOTIONAL ELEMENTS

The most frequent point raised by Ethiopian participants with regards to the subjective elements of regret was the perceived **impossibility to communicate** the hardships of migration to the family in Ethiopia, and the **frustration** this generated. One reason for this is that, generally, families in the country of origin find it hard to believe accounts that contradict the established narrative of migrants accessing easy economic success and a wealthy lifestyle in South Africa. When asked if his family knew about the reality of his daily life, ZAF037 replied,

> *'They don't know. Even if I tell them, they will not understand. They think that in South Africa, money rains from the sky. They don't know the hardship here.'*

Other studies have demonstrated the power of well-established narratives: once widely reproduced and disseminated over time, they become like an axiom,

becoming difficult and at times illogical to disprove (Wetherell, Taylor and Yates, 2001).

Another explanation for why this message on the reality of migration proves to be so complex to convey might lie in what migrants themselves share. More generally, negative accounts of life in the country of destination can be perceived as a 'failure' of the migration project, thus preventing migrants from sharing those accounts because of pride or shame – or potentially driving them to regret having migrated. Success, and its counterpart failure, strongly influence migrants' aspiration and behaviour, but also social relations with their community of origin (Constable, 2014; Bredeloup, 2017).

Connected to the inability to communicate openly, some participants expressed **resentment** at their family members in Ethiopia who ask for remittances and spend the money sent seemingly carelessly, without either following the respondent's own preferences on how to spend or invest that money, nor appreciating the sacrifice that goes into earning it. Related to this, participants in Brazil observed **they struggled to send remittances** back to Haiti. Because family members often financed migration as a family strategy to improve the overall financial situation, migrants felt pressure to pay their debts or to fulfil their 'duty' to those back in Haiti. Other migrants expressed frustration, powerlessness, guilt, and anguish because of this situation, given that their relatives back in Haiti were expecting their economic support.

> *"The expectations towards people who migrate are […] to help those who are there in Haiti. Yet, for those who migrated and are earning the minimum wage, it is very difficult to help someone who is in Haiti." (BRA12)*

Crucially, frustration and resentment emerged alongside **longing for both one's homeland and loved ones**. When discussing these feelings, one participant expressed the tension between not wanting to leave their homeland and moving to a well-regarded place. ZAF029 explained it well when he said,

> *''No one wants to leave the place where he was born and grew up in. Even if you go to Europe to work, it wouldn't be as good as your birthplace.'*

Moreover, as already widely documented in the literature (Parreñas, 2005; Bendaoued, Navas and González-Martín, 2016; Zainal and Barlas, 2022), sadness, stress, longing, and sometimes fear tend to become more acute in times of holidays or special occasions, such as birthdays and anniversaries.

The feelings mentioned above do not always, nor necessarily, translate into regret of having migrated, but a strong connection emerged from the interviewees conducted with returnees in Hosana. Some indeed explained that the regret they felt about their conditions as migrants, compounded by the longing for their country and

family, triggered the decision to go back to Ethiopia. When they took this decision, they were well aware that they would not necessarily be able to establish a profitable business in Ethiopia, or at least not as profitable as in South Africa. However, emotions and feelings of safety were carefully weighted up vis-a-vis the material dimension (that is, the loss of a more stable economic situation) in the evaluation that preceded the return, and their importance was decisive. For instance, ZAF033 stated,

> *"I think it is better here [Ethiopia]. When I was there [South Africa], I had nothing to eat, and I was starved. If there was work all the time, I would prefer staying here. First of all, it's peaceful in here. Secondly, no one robs you and thirdly, your money is yours and no one would dare to take it from you."*

Similar to what we identified in the Ethiopia-South Africa corridor, some Haitian migrants in Brazil expressed longing for both their homeland and loved ones, which at times triggered feelings of regret. Women felt particularly guilty and worried when they migrated with some of their children while others stayed back. This finding shows that while the decision to migrate to join someone's partner/family is very important, at times different types of relationships can compete with each other (Hagen-Zanker, Hennessey and Mazzilli, 2023). It also shows the strong feelings, like the sadness that Haitian women in Brazil can experience, when they find themselves unable to meet their family responsibilities, especially the needs of their children back in Haiti (see also Mejía and Cazarotto, 2017). As mentioned above, sadness and guilt do not necessarily transform into regret, although in some cases they do.

Most interviewees did not envision a possible return to Haiti, but they wished to at least visit their country to reunite with family members. Yet even visiting can be difficult because of bureaucratic and financial barriers, which is demonstrated by only one participant having returned to Haiti to visit family and friends. Accepting the inability to return is extremely painful, as these two participants shared.

> *"You bring with you a whole life created before, with memories of people, places, smells, tastes, moments that you know you will probably never relive again. So, I think the most complicated thing about being a migrant is this baggage of memories, of longings that you carry with you for a long time, and until you die. Because there are many people who migrate without the possibility of returning. Or even in their heads they already know that they will never return." (BRA09)*

> *"I have never left my family to live in another country, another city and I miss them very much, I can't get this out of my heart…also, leaving my girlfriend*

> *in the country that I love so much…I haven't seen her for two years." (BRA62)*

In addition to the points above, many interviewees discussed **feelings of desperation,** such as ZAF104, who claimed, *"Before I returned my inner self was dead and I was a sad guy."* Participants also felt **hopeless and powerless** against the challenges of life in South Africa, with one participant even recalling an attempted suicide.

In parallel to the point above, and somehow representing the flip side of regret, the Ethiopians who had already returned expressed **relief** at their current life in Ethiopia, chiefly motivating it with the higher degree of safety in their daily life. ZAF107 described this feeling as,

> *"In general I am happy because I returned to Ethiopia. I am gracious to God. I can work until midnight [keeping the doors open] and no one can touch me. In South Africa you even do not sleep properly. Now a new form of gangsters is emerging in South Africa. These gangsters collect 1000 rand/month in the name of protection. If you refuse to pay, they will kill you. The gangsters are not afraid of police officers, rather the police is afraid of them."*

Coming back to the Brazil data**, insecurity**, although only mentioned by three participants, contributed to the disadvantages that interviewees perceived from migrating to Brazil. This element does not emerge as clearly in the interviews with Haitian migrants as in those with Ethiopians in South Africa – very likely because insecurity in Haiti is very high and so is the perception of relative safety in Brazil. These few interviews show a mismatch between expectations and reality – which we will discuss more in depth in the next section – given that an important driver of Haitian migration is the perception that other destinations (including Brazil) will be safer compared to the gang and state-sanctioned violence in Haiti (OECD/INURED, 2017; Yates, 2021).

Coming back to South Africa, more generally, the precarious life migrants lead brings about a constant stream of worries in several aspects of life. ZAF021 gave the following example:

> *"Back at home, you are not worried about any possible police raid or forced repatriation. For instance, my wife is living here but without paper; I have a child and still undocumented; this is a huge psychological burden for me."*

COGNITIVE ELEMENTS OF REGRET

We define the 'cognitive elements of regret' as those aspects that migrants planned, imagined, expected, and hoped for, alongside other mental processes such

as reflecting, hoping, or worrying. Although hoping or worrying might be seen as feelings, in this article we have included them under 'cognitive processes', as they always have a component of imagination for the future. Imagination in the realm of migration decision-making indeed includes a variety of mental processes, such as visualising a destination and a future life there[16]. As such, regret, or its absence, can be mediated by what migrants imagined before migrating and the reality that they encountered at destination, including what they imagine might happen in the future.

As already noted above, for Ethiopian migrants this specific type of regret was mainly informed by the stark **contrast between migrants' expectations and the reality** they encountered once they settled in South Africa. Their hopes to change their lives through migration were shattered by the bleak living conditions they faced in the country of destination, which also carried a sense of disconcert at discovering they had never been told (or had never listened to) the full truth. ZAF020 described his disappointment as,

> *"When I came here, I dream to work hard and change myself and my family's life within a short time. When I was in school, I was an industrious man. I was participating in different clubs (HIV/AIDS, Red Cross) and [I was a] student representative too. I was very much alive back home. Here I feel like am already dead."*

Many Ethiopians interviewed for the study subsequently **reflected on their life choices**, in particular dropping out of education in order to pursue migration. This chimes with previous studies across very different contexts, which have also identified dropping out of education for migration as a long-lasting regret (de Regt, 2016; Imoagene, 2017). One participant, in particular, reflected that only few people succeed in migration, especially if they migrate through irregular routes (see also Knausenberger *et al.*, 2022). A few other respondents also stated that it would have been better not to migrate even if they would have not been able to improve their life through education, just to be spared the suffering and hardship they had gone through. ZAF042 incisively stated,

> *"I didn't expect South Africa to be the way I experienced it here. If I had had the right information, I would have changed my mind to stay in my country."*

Looking now at the mismatch between imagination and reality in relation to work, across the board, Ethiopians engaging in migration to South Africa set off to pursue a good job, both in terms of working conditions and social prestige. As discussed in

[16] This has been discussed for some years in the literature on geographical imagination in connection to migration decision-making, such as for instance in Riaño and Baghdadi's (2007) work on the role of gender and geographical imagination in Latin American, Southeast European, and Middle Eastern women's migration to Switzerland, or in Thompson's (2017) seminal article on the importance of cultural dimensions into research concerning migration decision-making practices.

the opening of this section, it was quite a shock for participants to come to terms with the contrast between their expectations and the reality of their life as a migrant. While one respondent shared the disappointment from working in a menial job, in particular the perceived descent on the social prestige ladder, two others resented not having profited from migration as much as they should have based on the amount of effort they put into their business. And altogether, these mismatches and disappointment resulted in regret.

Finally, a couple of Ethiopian migrants shared their thoughts about the **absence of personal ties with South Africans and other residents there** and, generally, of community support. A participant (ZAF-FDG045) in one of the focus groups discussions held in Ethiopia stated that in South Africa

> *"[There] is no one to help you. There is nothing to eat and drink. […] There is nothing to eat. It is better to eat the soil in Ethiopia."*

These points stand out because they are in sharp contrast to the expectation of the **amicable relationships** that Ethiopians thought they would have with South Africans. Those who brought this point up, discussed the discrimination they instead experienced in South Africa and the violence committed by the native population against migrants. This insecure living condition triggered feelings of alarm and constant tension, but it also caused several participants to regret their choices. ZAF047 summarises such an experience,

> *"After my arrival here, I came to realize the reality on the ground is different from my expectations. There are several challenges; the natives here are not friendly to migrants and engage in sporadic mass lootings. You are forced to regress with your economic gains back to square one, even to the point that you cannot secure daily bread. Once again you start from scratch, but to face another cycle of imminent danger of being robbed and losing everything you have."*

This is an important similarity with the accounts of Haitian participants who noted feelings **of discrimination and inequalities based on race and/or nationality were** part of their migration experience in Brazil. For instance, some participants observed they had experienced a different everyday treatment between them and locals in several areas of their lives (education, employment, healthcare), leading to feelings of sadness, powerlessness, and at times melancholy for their home country where '*everyone is black*'.

> *'When I got to the hospital they told me: "I'll call you in a little while"… but a Brazilian came in front of me and passed, another one came and passed, a third one came and passed, and then when I went to ask they said "I forgot"; it makes you angry… and also on the streets there are people who swear*

and say horrible things, when we are here to live and find a better life.' (BRA38)

These experiences came as a surprise for some participants. Existing literature has identified that some Haitians imagined Brazil as a "racial paradise" free from racial discrimination and xenophobia (Observatório das Migrações Internacionais (OBMigra), 2017). The experiences also show the challenges that the participants may face to fully integrate into Brazilian society, with a combination of discrimination, a lack of social acceptance, and inadequate knowledge about rights limiting migrants' prospects for full participation in core institutions at destination (Hendriks and Bartram, 2019)[17]. The connection to regret is not straightforward, nor always present, but these are the elements that ignite it when it emerges.

Despite the similarity on perceptions of discrimination between Haitians and Ethiopians in their destinations, the qualitative research with Haitian migrants in Brazil showed a markedly different picture, as participants were overall satisfied with life at destination. Several interviewees stated that **what they imagined about Brazil matched or surpassed their expectations**. This was voiced by interviewees who indicated they were achieving their migration aspirations, leading to **feelings of satisfaction, enjoyment, and accomplishment**.

"I imagined that Brazil would bring me better [economic] conditions, more opportunities to work, to study, to be able to have a professional career and a fixed income... everything I imagined I found it, even a little more… I got a job, I got a house, I managed to establish a stable life, everything was worth it." (BRA17)

"The country is incredible, beautiful, there are a lot of people, I imagined that. I wasn't mistaken, everything is the way I thought… you can get whatever you want, a car, a lot, an apartment, whatever you want you can achieve it over time by working… I'm having a good life here, and I'm really enjoying it." (BRA21)

This finding shows that satisfaction with the migration decision can emerge when experiences at destination match what migrants imagined before migration, leading to greater wellbeing than at home – and subsequently not regretting the decision to migrate. As illustrated by the quotes above, the expectations that several participants envisioned in areas such as work, education, or material wellbeing matched their

[17] In their research on dignity and humanitarian action in displacement, Holloway and Mosel (2019) discuss how not been treated with respect affects' migrants and refugees' feeling of not belonging, thus affecting their dignity. They also mention self-reliance and independence as core elements of dignity. The journeys, living, and working conditions of Ethiopian migrants in South Africa and, to a lesser extent, Haitians in Brazil do not always allow them to exercise their self-reliance and independence, thus heavily affecting their dignity and potentially triggering regret.

lives in Brazil. Likewise, similarities in culture and weather between the two countries were deemed as important. Several interviewees appreciated Brazilian culture because they considered it “rich” and “enjoyable”. For example, some participants referred to Brazilian music (particularly samba), others to carnival, to the football scene or to the soap operas. This finding shows that positive perceptions around culture does not only shape imaginations that inform the decision to migrate (see Guindani et al.,2024), but it can also contribute to a positive migration experience once at destination. And in cases like this, participants were less likely to feel regret.

Despite these positive elements that informed feelings of satisfaction and accomplishment, some migrants **identified a mismatch between what they imagined and their reality**. This was particularly expressed by interviewees who arrived after the 2014 political and economic crisis. They had received information portraying Brazil as a stable country with a booming economy where jobs were ‘*easy to find*’ and incomes made ends meet. However, when they arrived their financial situation was different, leading to feelings of disappointment and uncertainty.

> *“I can say that my expectation was not like I was going to a country that was a paradise… but seeing the economic and political crisis that Brazil is going through at the moment, I was surprised by this… Every day I think ‘I wouldn't like Brazil to be in the same position as my country’… I left my country because of the crisis, so I wouldn't like to come to a country that is getting worse in that regard.” (BRA46)*

This mismatch was significant for the participants that brought it up because most talked about leaving Haiti to escape economic deprivation and political instability. Given the importance of these domains to the decision to migrate, they make an important contribution to how worthwhile they perceived the whole migration project to be. Their narratives further show that cognitive factors informing regret are enhanced by unmet material expectations that were at the core of the migration-decision making process (Beekma, 2015; Field et al., 2010) leading to feelings of pity and loss (Bendaoued, Navas and González-Martín, 2017) and regret. We now move on to these material aspects.

4.2 MATERIAL ELEMENTS OF REGRET

The material elements informing regret for our participants trace back to two aspects of their life: 1) the **material conditions of work in South Africa and Brazil**, 2) **bureaucratic obstacles** encountered in daily life for Ethiopian migrants. It is worth noting that migrants’ working life takes up much more space in the interviewees’ accounts than their personal life – this is undoubtedly because of the long hours they spend working, but it could also reflect the core aim of their

migration, that of establishing a better life and social position through a successful business or a stable job.

The literature on the working conditions of migrants has extensively documented their exploitation in what are called '3D jobs', standing for 'dirty, dangerous, and demeaning' – which matches the results of this study. Several academic and policy studies have demonstrated that the majority of migrant workers lead precarious lives working in low-paid and energy-consuming jobs, while not accessing the same level of social protection of nationals (Pajnik, 2012; International Labour Organization, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic was perhaps the most recent moment of global reckoning regarding migrants' working conditions but also, simultaneously, their status as key workers (Fasani and Mazza, 2020). Moreover, irregular migration status is acknowledged as compounding such working conditions, to the point it has been defined as a proxy of poor occupational safety and health (Flynn, Eggerth and Jacobson, 2015) – again, resonating with the majority of data emerging from this study.

In fact, the majority of Ethiopian participants discussed regretting having migrated because they work long hours, do physically demanding jobs, and earn little in comparison to their expenses. One participant went a step further and equated those working conditions to slavery. The quotes below clearly illustrate this disappointment:

> *"My husband was doing this job when I came here but when I saw the work, I said, 'Is this what I came here for?' […] The first business we were doing was door-to-door [vending]. We used to sell blankets and curtains door to door and that brought some reasons that made [me] consider returning home." – ZAF051*

Most of the time, newly arrived migrants take out a loan from a member of the diaspora community, which provides them with the starting capital for their business. However, having to repay the debt while also being exposed to the constant threat of looting and robbery and, at the same time, feeling obliged and committed to sending remittances to the family in Ethiopia, means that the surplus migrants can retain for themselves is extremely low, if anything at all. One participant also pointed out that the current overall economic climate is less favourable than it used to be, which makes migrants' life more difficult.

Similar findings were observed for Haitians in Brazil. Despite a general positive perception around the improvement of their material position with the decision to migrate, interviewees reflected on their inability to make ends meet. These participants noted that their unstable employment situation. precarious working conditions and low salaries - exacerbated by the 2014 financial crisis and the

COVID-19 pandemic - shaped their migration experience in a negative way. Two participants explained their experience:

> *"When we work here, the minimum wage ends up being too little to survive. Because rent is expensive, food is very expensive. Observing how much money comes in and how much we spend; it becomes very difficult. Before it was easier, as everything was cheaper. The dollar rate was lower, food and everything were cheaper. But at this moment, the salaries remain the same and everything is more expensive." (BRA26)*

> *"The worst thing is the salary in Brazil… because it's very low… Here in Brazil a person has to pay rent for him, for his family, he also has to eat, he also needs money to support his family. Brazil's money doesn't have much value. This, for me, is the worst." (BRA51)*

The quotes above give a clear example of how perceptions about the material elements of migration can be complex and nuanced. On the one hand, interviewees appreciated their economic situation improved and that 'life was better in Brazil' compared to Haiti, resulting in satisfaction with having migrated. On the other hand, they also discussed the feelings of frustration that economic hardship in Brazil generated, accompanied by their inability to send remittances to Haiti (as much as desired), as observed above.

The second element informing material regret, observed primarily in the Ethiopian interviews, is the bureaucratic obstacles that migrants encounter in their life in the country of residence. In fact, most are either undocumented or relying on a short-term permit. Some participants referred to the lack of documents, adding that this burden becomes heavier after having children. Practical obstacles such as not being able to register one's business, to open a bank account, send remittances through legal means, register the birth of a child, or to enrol children in a public school, constitute expensive and limiting barriers to enjoying the "good life" the participants migrated for. These barriers, while practical, all constitute different aspects of lack of rights and protection. The **differential legal and everyday treatment** between South Africa citizens and Ethiopian migrants, often causes resentment and regret. For this reason, another participant described migration as degrading for someone's humanity.

> *"In fact, migration is not good in whatever ways. Here you are a citizen, there you are a migrant. Here you have rights, there you are not better than animal. I know for certain that in South Africa you don't have rights, even at the dogs' standard." – ZAF028*

Concerning Haitian participants, they mostly did not voice bureaucratic obstacles because most interviewees had a **regular migration status**. Some of these interviewees had previously lived in other countries as irregular migrants (particularly in the Dominican Republic and French Guyana) where they had strongly perceived their lack of rights. In contrast, Brazil offered to them the possibility to regularise relatively easily, and with that to access jobs, education, and health services. In this case, their regular migration status thus contributed to a lower likelihood of regret.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Regret is a common feeling in human nature, yet it has so far found limited space in the migration academic literature. This article thus expands scholarly knowledge on regret, situating it within the growing literature on migration decision-making and migration experiences at destination. Building on the advances made by scholars over the past decades, and using the classification proposed by Hagen-Zanker, Hennessey and Mazzilli (2023), we unpack the feeling of regret experienced by Ethiopian migrants in South Africa and Haitian migrants in Brazil. Their perception of regret is informed by the multiplicity of decisions and experiences throughout their migration journey that have led them to their current place of residence, and by both subjective and material factors.

The data at the core of our study focuses on the Ethiopia-South Africa and Haiti-Brazil corridors, which are part of the MIDEQ project. We selected these two case studies because of data availability, despite the many differences between them. However, we find that comparing two corridors with geographical, political, migration policy, and socio-economic differences has allowed us to identify interesting patterns. Future research could expand the geographical focus, tracing potential similarities between different elements that shape regret across different contexts. Research could also look more in depth into intersectionality to verify whether there is a correlation between social class and age at the time of migration. Finally, it will be key to explore connections between social class, age, gender, and other relevant dimensions in the country of origin and achieved 'success' at destination, in order to provide an intersectional lens on these migration stories.

Before getting into the specifics of the research findings, it is paramount to highlight that the participants' perspectives on regret were diverse: while some people might regret the entire decision to migrate, others might regret just part of the process or have no regrets. Moreover, some participants decided to return even if there was seemingly no major problem or downside in their life in the host country. In these cases, factors that seem unimportant on the surface (e.g. longing for one's homeland and loved ones, feelings of dignity), weighed heavily in their individual decision to return, highlighting the importance of considering subjective aspects of decision-making. Our analysis also showed that regret can be informed by migrant's

perceptions of achievements at destination. In some cases, migration allowed people to reach their aspired objectives (e.g. in terms of economic wellbeing), although not always, not completely, or sometimes less than expected. Migrants might evaluate the extent to which this goal is obtained and whether it is worth staying on to keep working towards it – and regret can then form part of these considerations.

The elements influencing the decision on whether migration was worth it, whether to return, stay, or migrate onwards, and the extent to which regret comes to the surface, are many and vary in importance and intensity according to each person' life story and value system. In our data we established the relevance of two categories of elements that inform regret: a) *subjective* and b) *material* ones.

We argue that subjective elements include both i) *feelings* and ii) *cognitive processes*. The most common feelings identified were the challenges in communicating the hardship of migration, subsequent frustration, and resentment at family and friends in the home country. These feelings were, however, present simultaneously with the longing for loved ones staying back. At times, this longing generates feelings of isolation, anxiety, and powerlessness. Cognitive processes instead refer to the mental processes where imagination and evaluation are involved. Here we saw that the most common regret amongst our participants stemmed from the clash between pre-departure expectations and reality. Similarly, worries about the future and the current precarious situation, and the perception of discrimination against migrants in comparison to locals were also common amongst participants and resulted in regret.

Material elements concern the tangible aspect of someone's life at destination, such as income, job, access to healthcare or to education. These factors are distinct, but always overlap with subjective factors and it is difficult – nor necessary – to neatly tell them apart. For instance, the consequences of material regret show up as emotions alongside their material manifestations (e.g. inability to send remittances). In both corridors, migrants expressed feelings such as frustration and disappointment driven by the material conditions of work in their respective destinations. These tough economic conditions prevented some migrants from sending remittances back home, exacerbating feelings of frustration. Another important material element mediating regret was the presence of bureaucratic obstacles. For Ethiopians in South Africa, these obstacles were part of daily life due to their unstable migration status. Meanwhile, most of the Haitian participants interviewed in Brazil had a regular migration status and did not face these bureaucratic obstacles. As such, they were overall less likely to voice regret.

With this article, we brought regret and other uncomfortable feelings to the fore of migration research. We are aware that discussing this topic risks exposing it to potential hijacking by the hostile rhetoric that is currently common in the politics of many countries around the world. Over the past years, policy-making and political

rhetoric has doubled down on discouraging low-income and racialised migrants from the Global South moving to the Global North[18]. Giving way to misinterpretations or exploitations by those in support of increased border securitization is by no means our intention. And yet it would be naïve to think that simply avoiding this conversation can protect migrants. On the contrary, we believe it is essential that migration scholars analyse regret in migration decision-making and do so ethically, both for public knowledge and to achieve a positive change for those who experience migration.

Engaging with this work can help overcome how much of a taboo regret still is, partially because migrants invest so much both in terms of material resources, but also hopes and expectations. Exploring regret and its dynamics can serve to **demystify mainstream narratives about migration and success and the stigma associated with them**. By so doing, it will be possible to shed light on the fact that migration alone does not bring success, but rather success stems from the structural conditions at origin and at destination: work environment, migration policies, and social cohesion between migrants and natives, to name a few. Shifting the focus could then not only reduce the emphasis currently put on achieving a 'successful' migration[19], but also **point at those structural areas** often constituting the roots causes of migration **that should be improved** through migration and other policies, first and foremost a context-specific focus on **livelihoods**, improved **job market**, and fight against **corruption** (Hagen-Zanker, 2024).

Similarly, we hope that this and related research can **provide relief for migrants** who feel constrained in their dialogue with those who stayed behind, opening up a more frank and freer exchange.

Finally, digging into regret and migration, and their connection to the structural element determining migrants' access to regular residency permits and social protection – or lack thereof – can show the **web of negative effects that tight border control and securitisation policies have on migrants' lives**, showing the importance of more liberal migration policies in increasing not only the material and mental wellbeing of migrants, but also livelihoods in the origin and destination countries.

[18] An example is this video produced by a border town in Hungary in 2016: Small town mayor tells migrants not to go to Hungary (youtube.com)

[19] Migrants do not have to put on a mask just at home, but also in the host country, where they feel constantly pressured to show their best self. See for example the book "The Good Immigrant" by Nikesh Shukla.

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Suggested citation

Mazzilli, C., Leon-Himmelstine, C., and Hagen-Zanker, J. (2024). *Shedding light on regret in migration decision-making. Insights from the Ethiopia-South Africa and Haiti-Brazil corridors.* MIDEQ Working Paper. Coventry, UK: MIDEQ. Available at: https://www.mideq.org/en/resources-index-page/shedding-light-on-regret-in-migrant-decision-making-ethiopia-south-africa-and-haiti-brazil

Cover image

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. An outside view of returnees as they prepare to embark on a trip back home. Photo by UNICEF Ethiopia/2013/Ayene . CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

Funding

This work has been funded by the UKRI Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) [Grant Reference: ES/S007415/1]. The GCRF is a five-year £1.5 billion fund aimed at addressing the problems faced by developing countries.

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