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Simon, Miranda; Schwartz, Cassilde; Hudson, David

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RESEARCH NOTE

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Covid-19 insecurities and migration aspirations

Miranda Simon ^a, Cassilde Schwartz ^b, and David Hudson ^c

^aUniversity of Essex; ^bRoyal Holloway, University of London; ^cUniversity of Birmingham

ABSTRACT

Using an original survey, this paper examines how pandemic-driven insecurities have affected aspirations to migrate internationally among youth in The Gambia. We find that individuals perceive wide inequalities between their government's performance and the speed of Covid-19 recovery abroad. However, superior recovery abroad does not have significant effects on aspirations to migrate. Individual and local sources of security are more important: Individuals who were able to maintain their jobs throughout the pandemic are less likely to aspire to move abroad. The insecurity of Covid-19 job loss may be compensated by confidence in one's government's ability to tackle the pandemic. This suggests that, in the context of an event that has upended people's lives, would-be migrants who managed to maintain a source of stability may seek comfort in familiar contexts; even if they appear worse than alternatives abroad.


KEYWORDS

International migration;
development; Africa

Mediante una encuesta original, en este artículo se analiza cómo las inseguridades provocadas por la pandemia han afectado las aspiraciones de emigrar al extranjero entre los jóvenes de Gambia. Comprobamos que los ciudadanos perciben grandes desigualdades entre la actuación de su gobierno y la velocidad de recuperación del Covid-19 en el extranjero. Sin embargo, una mayor recuperación en el extranjero no tiene repercusiones significativas en las aspiraciones de emigrar. Las fuentes de seguridad particulares y locales son más importantes: Las personas que pudieron conservar su empleo durante la pandemia muestran una menor tendencia por aspirar a mudarse al extranjero. La inseguridad de la pérdida de empleo a causa del Covid-19 puede verse compensada por la confianza en la capacidad del gobierno para hacer frente a la pandemia. Esto sugiere que, en el contexto de un acontecimiento que ha alterado la vida de las personas, los posibles emigrantes que lograron mantener una fuente de estabilidad pueden buscar consuelo en contextos familiares; incluso si parecen peores que las alternativas en el extranjero.

Cet article s'appuie sur une enquête originale pour examiner comment les insécurités liées à la pandémie ont affecté les aspirations à la migration internationale des jeunes de Gambie. Nous constatons que les individus perçoivent de

CONTACT Miranda Simon  miranda.simon@essex.ac.uk  Department of Government, University of Essex, Wivenhoe Park, Colchester, CO4 3SQ, UK

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grandes inégalités entre les performances de leur gouvernement et la rapidité de reprise suite à la COVID-19 à l'étranger. Cependant, la reprise supérieure à l'étranger n'a pas d'effets significatifs sur les aspirations à la migration. Les sources individuelles et locales de sécurité sont plus importantes : les personnes qui ont été en mesure de conserver leur emploi tout au long de la pandémie sont moins susceptibles d'aspirer à une migration à l'étranger. L'insécurité liée à la perte d'un emploi du fait de la COVID-19 peut être compensée par la confiance dans la capacité de son gouvernement à lutter contre la pandémie. Cela suggère que, dans le contexte d'un événement qui a bouleversé la vie de la population, les aspirants à la migration qui ont réussi à maintenir une source de stabilité peuvent potentiellement chercher du confort dans des contextes familiaux même s'ils semblent pires que les alternatives à l'étranger.

Over a year since the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a global emergency, the unequal burden of Covid-19 is becoming increasingly apparent. While wealthy governments have secured vaccine doses to supply their populations many times over, many African states are still struggling to vaccinate essential frontline workers. While wealthy governments have deployed large amounts of monetary, fiscal and macroeconomic support to protect incomes and jobs, several African states have been hard-pressed to divert key government funds into fighting the outbreak (IMF2021; Selassie and Hakobyan 2021; WFP 2020). The destabilizing effects of Covid-19 are likely to reverberate throughout Sub-Saharan Africa for years to come; it is projected to be the slowest growing region in 2021, and GDP per capita in many states may not reach pre-pandemic levels until 2025. Because of the pandemic, existing economic inequalities between the region and the rest of the world are expected to widen even further in the coming years (Selassie and Hakobyan 2021).

A core tenet of migration theory is that economic inequalities are key drivers of migration (Lee 1966; Sjaastad 1962; Borjas 1989; Czaika and De Haas 2012; Massey et al. 1998, 8), and the pandemic is creating new differentials of insecurity that may already be fueling a desire to emigrate (Mixed Migration Center 2021). Though mobility restrictions may have reduced legal migration from the region, movement in some irregular routes is increasing. Between March 2020 and February 2021, there was reported to be a 91% increase in the number of people attempting to cross by boat from North Africa to Italy and Malta through the Central Mediterranean route. There has also been a steady increase in crossings from the coast of Senegal, Mauritania and Morocco to Spain's Canary Islands (IOM 2021). An even larger population of individuals is likely to be rendered 'involuntarily immobile' in environments made more difficult by the pandemic (Carling and Schewel 2018).

Covid-19 is a particularly important case for literature on migration decision-making. Because the pandemic rendered economic and social functioning in both origin- and destination countries extraordinarily contingent on government actions, it provides a lens into how government can permeate traditional migration drivers in extreme events. Yet, there is little empirical evidence on the effects of Covid-19 on international migration decisions (however, see Martin and Bergmann 2021 on past pandemics; Yueping et al. 2021; Menon and Vadakepat 2021; Mixed Migration Center 2021). Using an original survey, this paper seeks to understand how various pandemic-driven insecurities have affected aspirations to emigrate among young people in Sub-Saharan Africa.¹ Aspiration to migrate indicates a psychological detachment from one's home (e.g. Scannell and Gifford 2010); a necessary but not sufficient condition for migration.² Individuals will vary in the extent to which they are able to withstand the shock of the pandemic, and in how they perceive their future prospects. An important and long-term source of insecurity has been the widespread loss of jobs (ILO 2020). Additionally, because pandemic emergencies require goods and services that only governments can provide, we expect individuals to concern themselves not only with their individual circumstances, but also with the ability of governments at home and abroad to usher in a satisfactory recovery.

We test our expectations in The Gambia, an ideal case for examining the effects of the pandemic on migration aspirations. Largely due to its reliance on tourism, a labor-intensive industry, The Gambia suffered among the hardest economic blows of the pandemic (GBoS2021; UNDP 2020). Faced with few legal migration options, The Gambia's young citizens rank among the most common nationalities undertaking the dangerous Central Mediterranean route to Europe (Armitano 2017).

We conducted a telephone survey ($n = 829$) of young and highly qualified aspiring entrepreneurs roughly nine months into the pandemic.³ By circumstance, our survey not only captures the employment shock of Covid-19, but it also identifies a population that has likely perceived some of the greatest changes as a result. Our unique sample of highly qualified aspiring entrepreneurs will have a strong (and portable) skill-set, and higher than average pre-pandemic rates of employment, but Covid-19 will have thrown exceptionally high levels of uncertainty over their potential to succeed at home.

¹Migration from Sub-Saharan Africa is mostly intra-regional (Gonzalez-Garcia et al. 2016). In this paper, we limit our focus to emigration outside the region, in line with the aspirations of the majority of our sample (see Table 1).

²This reflects a growing literature in migration decision-making that considers aspiration to migrate as distinct from opportunity, in context of economic migration (e.g. Carling 2002; Simon et al. 2018) and refugee movement (e.g. Schon 2019, 2020)

³Entrepreneurship is more common than working for someone else. The rate of self-employment in Sub-Saharan Africa is 70% (Fields 2019). To be clear, by "highly-qualified", we do not mean "high-skilled". High-skilled workers are individuals who have formal higher-level education. This measure misses an important category of highly-qualified youth who were not able to access higher education. Only 15% of African adults have access to formal higher-level education (Krönke and Olan'g 2020), and African youth will often learn how to run a business through informal training (Robb, Valerio, and Parton 2014). See 'Data collection' for further context.

Sub-Saharan Africa's outlook hinges heavily on governments' ability to secure access to vaccines and funds that can allow them to stimulate economic recovery (Selassie and Hakobyan 2021; World Bank 2020). We find that individuals perceive a large gap in expected recovery relative to wealthy countries: both in terms of vaccine distribution and the wider economy. However, contrary to expectations, superior recovery abroad does not have significant effects on aspirations to migrate. The most important factors appears to lie closer to home. The perceived efficiency of Gambia's post-pandemic recovery is associated with a lower aspiration to migrate. Aspiration to migrate is also lower when individuals held onto a job throughout the pandemic. However, those who lost their jobs are less likely to want to migrate if they have confidence in the Gambian government's ability to tackle the long-term consequences of the pandemic. This finding indicates that Gambians may look to their government when individual circumstances take a turn for the worse.

The Covid-19 pandemic has the potential to alter migration decisions and outcomes for a generation. The historical importance of the event alone makes it an important context to study. However, by studying migration aspirations in this context, this research note makes a theoretical contribution to the literature as well. Research within international relations and political economy considers a wide range of institutional drivers in migration (e.g., Fitzgerald, Leblang, and Teets 2014; Hollifield and Wong 2014). Covid-19 presents an important case for this literature. With the economy severely impaired, governments have had a particularly strong influence on normal economic and social functioning. Indeed, the pandemic has fed on global inequalities in government capacity. Classic models would expect these inequalities to drive movement. However, we find something of the opposite: would-be migrants resist the pull of other countries – despite increasing global disparities – when they find comfort in familiar anchors. This finding poses key scope conditions on the applicability of classic models of migration in the context of extreme global events.

Governments, Jobs and Migration Aspirations

Covid-19 will be particularly destabilizing for individuals who do not feel confident that their government can handle the emergency, and are unable to draw on this resource to satisfy a “cognitive need for security” (Schraff 2020, 2). Covid-19 has forced citizens to rely on their government: In the face of extreme events, the quintessential role of government is to protect citizens from uncertainty and adverse impact (Comfort 2005; Reinhardt and Ross 2019, 336). In the short term, citizens expect governments to help shore up the health sector, minimize the adverse effects of the pandemic on other sectors, and protect residents. In the long term, governments may be expected to help nudge economic and social life back into normal functioning (World Health

Organization 2010, 16, 47). In all these tasks, the speed and efficiency of government response is not only key, but will also cater to a public anxious about a lengthy disruption to their normal lives and livelihoods (de Jong, Ziegler, and Schippers (2020)). Governments are differently equipped to perform these functions, and citizens will benchmark their expectations on pandemic performance against prior experiences. Still, we are likely to see variation in public confidence even in states with low institutional capacity (Haim, Ravanilla, and Sexton 2021; Hutchison and Johnson 2011). In the context of extreme events, institutional performance is especially salient for migration decisions (Asad 2015; Reinhardt 2015) and potential migrants are also likely to be keenly aware of political and economic developments abroad (Carlson, Jakli, and Linos 2018; Fitzgerald, Leblang, and Teets 2014; Giménez-Gómez, Walle, and Zergawu 2019).

Individual circumstances matter as well. A significant and potentially long-term, source of Covid-19 insecurity has been the loss of jobs, which has been particularly widespread among young people (ILO 2020). Once again, government policies on social distancing and economic support will affect pandemic employment rate (Robalino 2020). Having a job matters more than the money it provides. Even if one's household finances can withstand Covid-19, these monetary resources, in and of themselves, will not substitute for the absence of a job (World Bank 2013, 277). A job can be a unique source of stability because it speaks directly to individuals' "sense of competence or status in domains that make up their core identity" (Cohen, Murphy, and Prather 2019, 585). Individuals derive meaning from the work they do, but the workplace itself also provides stability. Workplaces serve as anchor points for communities, allowing people to form identity-affirming social groups, and providing continuity through routine (Clopton and Finch 2011; Grzymala-Kazłowska 2018). For young people, Covid-19 job losses are likely to be particularly stressful also because they interrupt key socio-cultural milestones that are expected to happen in early adulthood (Cohen, Murphy, and Prather 2019; Hernández-Carretero 2008). Jobs are important to migration aspirations because they are 'social anchors': they allow people to feel stable and secure in the place where they live. Losing one's job may disrupt one's attachment to home and spur a desire to emigrate (Ghosn et al. 2021; Grzymala-Kazłowska 2018; Scannell and Gifford 2010).

Data Collection

Between January 7 to 27, 2021, we conducted an independent telephone survey of young aspiring entrepreneurs deemed eligible by expert judges to participate in a 1–1 coaching and cash grant program conducted by the International Organization for Migration (IOM).⁴ The program was open to people aged

⁴Sessions were held in compliance with Gambian social distancing restrictions.

18–35 who wished to start a business or grow their existing business. Recruitment began in November 2020 in three major urban areas: The Greater Banjul Area, the Lower River Region and the Upper River Region. To be considered by the judges, applicants would have completed at least two years of high school and some combination of practical work experience and vocational training. Expert judges then assessed youth based on the sustainability of their business idea, their capacity for self-reflection and learning, and their personal leadership skills. This process yielded a set of finalists from which we generated our sample. Operational constraints required a fixed number of spots per region. As such, we generated a survey sample from the list of finalists by selecting respondents randomly from within each region. Individuals were contacted before the program started as part of an independent evaluation. They were told that their contact details were obtained from their application, but were not given any details about their application status.⁵

Our survey was carried out independently of the IOM and no individual-level data – anonymized or otherwise – has or will be shared with the IOM, as per our ethical commitments.⁶ However, we remained concerned that finalists might feel insecure when answering questions about migration, and that they may not answer truthfully. Interviewers assured respondents of our independence and our ethical data sharing obligations at the beginning of the survey and before the migration module. Furthermore, quality control questions indicate that 92% of respondents were “cooperative” and 89% were “at ease” (Appendix B describes question wording).

We compare our sample to a nationally-representative health survey (DHS) carried out in The Gambia just prior to the pandemic (GBoS, MOH [The Gambia], and ICF 2020) to detail the biases in our data more specifically. As expected, our sample is more educated and likely to have been employed prior to the pandemic compared to the age-equivalent group in the DHS – and the SSA region more generally (ILO 2020). Despite the flexibility of the program, the number of women in our sample is 14 percentage points lower than in the DHS (see Appendices D for more on logistics and implementation, G for DHS comparisons and Table 1 for descriptive statistics, including samples allocated to each region, and F for ethics).

Covid-19 in the Gambia

We have witnessed several fast-moving changes since the start of the pandemic. As such, it is important to briefly examine the context in which our survey took place. The Gambia registered its first Covid-19 case in mid-March 2020. President Adama Barrow closed the airspace and land borders before

⁵Data and replication materials can be found at: <http://dvn.iq.harvard.edu/dvn/dv/internationalinteractions>.

⁶Pre-pandemic job status, age, education, region and gender were merged from application forms with permission from respondents.

declaring a state of emergency on 27 March, closing all non-essential businesses. Throughout the pandemic period, Barrow used executive powers to instate brief lockdown periods, sometimes with opposition from the National Assembly.

January 2021, when this survey was completed, captured an important turning point in the trajectory of the pandemic. North America and Europe had only recently authorized the first Covid-19 vaccines the previous month (EMA 2020; McGinley, Johnson, and Dawsey 2020), shifting discussion into long-term recovery. The Gambia would receive its first 36,000 doses of the vaccine – enough to vaccinate less than 2% of its population – approximately two months later (Reuters 2021). In partnership with international financial institutions and several UN donor agencies, the Gambian government has provided relief to public entities, the tourism sector and the media. It has also provided social assistance to households and tax relief (see IMF, 2021). However, Covid-19’s long-term moratorium on travel has meant a “total shutdown” of the tourism sector, which has had severe ripple effects on a range of related industries and jobs (GBoS2021).

Figure 1 examines respondent perceptions on how quickly the Gambia might recover from the pandemic, relative to the Global North. Respondents clearly perceived a global disparity in vaccine distribution, with most respondents believing the Gambia would receive a vaccine within a year (43%) and 19% believing the Gambia would have access to the Covid-19 vaccine within 2 years or the distant future, respectively. In contrast, the vast majority of

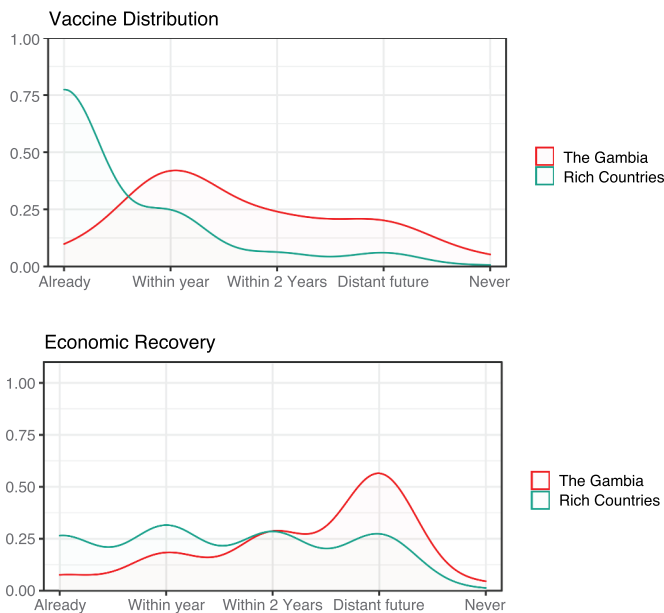


Figure 1. Distribution of perceived timelines.

respondents believed vaccine distribution was already taking place in wealthy countries. Similarly, while a majority of respondents believed the economic situation in The Gambia will recover in the distant future (46%), economic recovery for rich countries is more evenly split: Approximately 46% of respondents believe recovery is already happening or will happen with a year, while 44% believe it will happen within 2 years or in the distant future (see Appendix C.3 for Covid-19 case counts during fieldwork and Appendix A for case selection).

Results

Table 1 shows a further set of descriptive statistics relevant to our analyses. We measure aspiration to migrate by asking respondents on a scale of 1–5, ‘Whether or not you think you would be able to move abroad, how much would you like to move to another country within the next year?’ Because mobility was restricted at the time of the survey, interviewers reminded respondents that their answer should be given in the scenario that borders reopened. On average, respondents report they would ‘like’ to migrate (62% answered ‘like’ or ‘like a great deal’). Figure 2 shows the distributions of these two variables. Approximately 40% of our respondents lost their jobs after the pandemic and individuals ‘disagree’ that their household has enough savings to withstand the pandemic. Pre-pandemic benchmarks show Gambians have high levels of confidence in government. More than 80% express somewhat or a lot of trust in their national legislature and their president (Dodsworth and Cheeseman 2020) and, according to the 2016–2018 Afrobarometer survey, 26% of Gambians believed the delivery of public services is improving (Bratton, Seekings, and Armah-Attoh 2019). However, respondents are ambivalent or uncertain about the government’s ability to handle the long-term consequences of Covid-19.

To examine the effects of Covid-19 insecurities on aspiration to migrate, we present five OLS models in Table 2.⁷ Before describing our findings, it is important to note that the specificity of our sample – aspiring young entrepreneurs – places some limitations on what we may infer from these results relative to the wider population. We focus on the direction of relationships without placing too much stock on the absolute magnitude of these effects. However, it is important to remember that our sample has higher levels of education and is likely to display larger variation on pre- and post-pandemic job status. *Model 1* examines the effects of maintaining or losing one’s job, controlling for household savings – our individual-level sources of insecurity; *Model 2* includes our efficiency variables and *Model 3* includes an additional

⁷Ordinal Logit models in Appendix C.2. show very similar results. See also Appendix E which shows the distribution of the dependent variable is approximately normal.

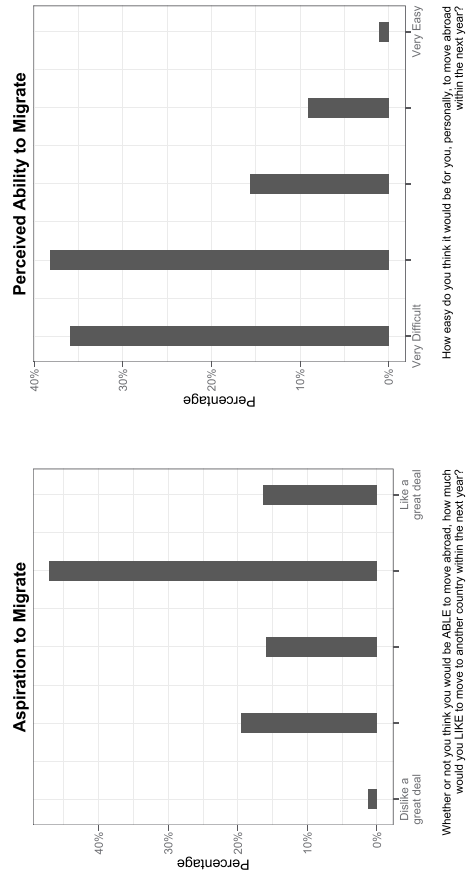


Figure 2. Distributions for aspiration (Dependent variable) and perceived ability to migrate.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for variables in regression analyses.

Variable	N	Statistic	Range
Aspiration Mig. (Within Year)	818	Mean: 3.58 ('Like') SD: 1.02	1 = 'Dislike' 5 = 'Like A Great Deal'
Jobs, CV-19	804	No Job: 16.77% (139) Lost Job: 39.81% (330) Kept Job: 40.41% (335)	0–2
HH Savings, CV-19	828	Mean: 2.269 ('Disagree') SD: 1.03 Median: 2	1 = 'Disagree' Strongly 5 = 'Agree Strongly'
Trust Gov., CV-19	822	Mean: 3.08 ('Neither agree nor disagree') SD: 1.17 Median: 3	1 = 'Disagree Strongly' 5 = Agree Strongly
Effcy. CV-19 Vaccine, Gambia	747	Mean: 3.31 ('Within 2 years') SD: 1 Median: 4 ('Distant Future')	1 = 'Never' 5 = 'Already Happening'
Effcy. CV-19 Econ, Gambia	761	Mean: 2.73 ('Within 2 years') SD: 0.99 Median: 2 ('Within a year')	1 = 'Never' 5 = 'Already Happening'
Effcy. CV-19 Vaccine, Rich	778	Mean: 4.51 ('Already happening') SD: 0.86 Median: 5	1 = 'Never' 5 = 'Already Happening'
Effcy. CV-19 Econ Rich	757	Mean: 3.48 ('Within a year') SD: 1.12 Median: 4	1 = 'Never' 5 = 'Already Happening'
Ability Mig. (Within Year)	814	Mean: 2.01 ('Difficult') SD: 0.99 Median = 2	1 = 'Very Difficult' 5 = 'Very Easy'
Risk Averse	827	Mean: 2.67 SD: 3.41 Median: 1	0 = 'Risk Avoider' 10 = 'Fully Prepared to Take Risks'
Migrant Networks	703	Mean: 11.47 SD: 10.08 Median: 10	0–60 Contacts
Age	829	Mean: 27.64 SD: 4.42 Median: 27	18–48
Gender	829	Female: 39.08% (324) Male: 60.92% (505)	0/1
Education	806	Mean: 2.21 ('Secondary school') SD: 0.45 Median: 2	1 = 'Primary school' 3 = 'University'
Region	829	Greater Banjul Area: 81.42% (675) Lower River Region: 06.76% (56) Upper River Region: 11.82% (98)	1–3

Judges accepted some candidates over the age limit if they were deemed especially promising. Approximately 96% of our sample is between 18 and 35, and 99% is between 18 and 36. 82% stated their preferred destination to be outside of Africa.

source of government-level insecurity – generalized government trust. Literature from other contexts has found government efficiency and trust to be linked, as crises and emergencies are widely expected to increase government trust (Nielsen and Lindvall 2021). Our efficiency items specifically compare perceptions of Gambian performance relative to the performance of rich countries.⁸ *Model 4* also includes seven variables that are not tailored to Covid-19: Perceived ability to migrate, risk aversion (self-reported), the size of

⁸These indicators are not highly correlated with one another. The correlation matrix presented in Appendix C shows correlations between these items never exceed 0.35. However, we present them in different models due to their theoretical link.

Table 2. Main analyses: aspiration to migrate.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Lost Job, CV-19 (Baseline = No Job)	-0.18*** (0.05)	-0.19*** (0.05)	-0.18*** (0.06)	-0.18*** (0.07)	0.35*** (0.13)
Kept Job, CV-19 (Baseline = No Job)	-0.28*** (0.07)	-0.23*** (0.08)	-0.22*** (0.07)	-0.23*** (0.08)	-0.25 (0.22)
HH Savings, CV-19	0.11*** (0.01)	0.10*** (0.01)	0.08*** (0.01)	0.08*** (0.03)	0.08*** (0.02)
Effcy. CV-19 Vaccine, Gambia		0.08*** (0.02)	0.07*** (0.02)	0.07 (0.06)	0.06 (0.06)
Effcy. CV-19 Econ, Gambia		-0.04*** (0.01)	-0.06*** (0.01)	-0.04*** (0.01)	-0.04*** (0.01)
Effcy. CV-19 Vaccine, Rich		-0.01 (0.05)	-0.01 (0.05)	0.02 (0.05)	0.01 (0.06)
Effcy. CV-19 Econ, Rich		-0.00 (0.02)	-0.00 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.02 (0.01)
Trust Gov., CV-19			0.06*** (0.02)	0.03*** (0.01)	0.11 (0.07)
Risk Averse				0.02** (0.01)	0.02*** (0.01)
Ability to Migrate				0.03 (0.03)	0.03 (0.03)
Migrant Networks				0.01*** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)
Male				-0.12 (0.12)	-0.12 (0.11)
Age				-0.02*** (0.00)	-0.02*** (0.00)
Education				-0.04 (0.04)	-0.04 (0.04)
CV-19 Cases Cum. PMP	0.01*** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)
Lost Job, CV-19:Trust Gov., CV-19 (Baseline = No Job)					-0.17*** (0.06)
Kept Job, CV-19:Trust Gov., CV-19 (Baseline = No Job)					0.01 (0.10)
R ²	0.05	0.05	0.05	0.08	0.09
Adj. R ²	0.04	0.04	0.04	0.05	0.06
Num. obs.	791	690	688	601	601
SEs clustered by region					

an individuals' migrant network, as well as their gender, age and education. *Models 5* additionally interacts trust and jobs. All models cluster standard errors by region and control for the cumulative count of cases during the fieldwork period (Ritchie et al. 2021). See descriptives in Appendix C.3.

Table 2 shows that losing one's job and maintaining one's job through the pandemic are both significant predictors of aspiration to migrate, relative to the baseline (no job before pandemic). Analysis of alternative baselines (Appendix C.1.) tell us a clear, transitive story: Those who kept their jobs have a lower aspiration to migrate than the recently unemployed, and the recently unemployed have a lower aspiration to migrate than the long-term unemployed. To contextualize this finding and accentuate the importance of jobs as a 'social anchor,' it is worth noting that risk aversion is associated with a higher aspiration to migrate, suggesting that youth, in general, may consider staying home to be more risky than emigrating. This effect is small

and we do not know whether or how it has been affected by the pandemic. However, it does suggest that a context of insecurity is driving aspirations to migrate.

It is interesting to contrast these findings with the effect of household savings for the pandemic, our alternative source of monetary resources. Higher confidence in household savings for Covid-19 is associated with a higher desire to migrate. This suggests that household savings do not serve as a source of stability that may attach individuals to places. A recent systematic review shows wide geographic variation regarding the effects of monetary resources on aspirations to migrate: Some studies show a negative relationship between income and migration aspirations, several others show that migration aspirations *rise* with income, while yet others fail to find a clear relationship (Aslany et al. 2021). Our finding – that aspiration increases in tandem with household savings but decreases with the presence of a job – may shed some light on this discrepancy.

Turning to our macro-level indicators, we find evidence that individuals' aspirations are associated more with the post-pandemic economic recovery of their home country than that of rich countries. This is despite the fact that, as [Figure 1](#) shows, individuals clearly perceive large inequalities between The Gambia and rich countries in terms of post-pandemic recovery. Trust in the Gambian government's ability to handle the pandemic, *Trust Gov., CV-19*, is significant across all models. However, *Model 5* and [Figure 3](#) shows that effects may be heterogeneous depending on individuals' post-pandemic job status. The recently-unemployed aspire to migrate less the more they trust their government. These results suggest that the recently-unemployed may feel confident they will regain employment, if they are optimistic about the Gambia's ability to recover from the pandemic. This interpretation is strengthened by the negative association between the perceived efficiency of Gambia's economic recovery and aspirations to migrate. Overall, confidence in one's local and personal circumstances appear to matter more than the pull of rich countries, even in the presence of clearly perceived global inequalities.

Discussion

Using an original survey, this paper examines how pandemic-driven insecurities have affected aspirations to emigrate among youth in the Gambia. We find that individuals perceive wide inequalities between their country's performance and the speed of recovery abroad. However, the pandemic recovery

⁷Ordinal Logit models in Appendix C.2. show very similar results. See also Appendix E which shows the distribution of the dependent variable is approximately normal.

⁸These indicators are not highly correlated with one another. The correlation matrix presented in Appendix C shows correlations between these items never exceed 0.35. However, we present them in different models due to their theoretical link.

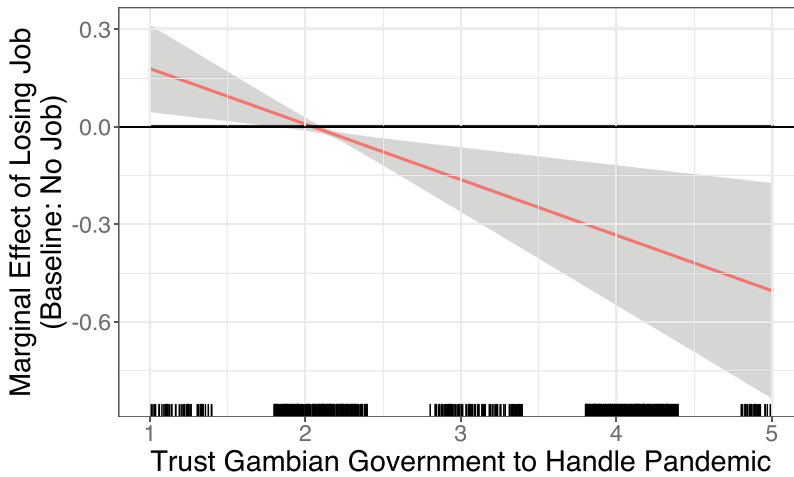


Figure 3. Marginal effect of losing one's job on aspiration to migrate.

of rich countries does not have significant effects on aspirations to migrate. Local sources of security appear more important. Individuals who were able to maintain their jobs throughout the pandemic are less likely to aspire to move abroad. Furthermore, the insecurity of Covid-19 job loss may be compensated by confidence in one's government's ability to tackle the pandemic. This suggests that, in the context of an event that has upended people's lives, would-be migrants who managed to maintain a source of stability may seek comfort in familiar contexts; even if they appear worse than alternatives abroad. Moreover, not only does employment have a unique stabilizing effect, but this effect goes above and beyond the safety net that savings might provide. This finding is particularly relevant to political economy debates on whether governments should protect jobs or provide income support in crises (World Bank 2013, 277); a debate that has foregrounded governments' pandemic policies.

We tested our expectations with an original survey aspiring entrepreneurs in The Gambia with a higher than average pre-pandemic employment rate. In Sub-Saharan Africa, approximately 50% of young people were unemployed prior to the pandemic. Informal jobs and precarious self-employment were already commonplace (ILO 2020). For a large portion of African youth, the pandemic has likely fed into an unfortunate cycle of precarious employment and unemployment.

We encourage more research to determine if our findings travel beyond our particular sample. In many ways, The Gambia is highly representative of African emigration (see Appendix A for a discussion of Gambian emigration in context). However, in some ways, it is a unique case. For instance, there is some evidence that Gambian migrants are proportionately more highly

educated (Government of the Gambia (GoTG) 2020, 118), or that they are proportionately more likely to travel through irregular channels (Bah and Batista 2020). Furthermore, the country no longer suffers under a repressive authoritarian regime. More research would need to be done to examine how changes in these circumstances might influence migrant calculus. Regarding our particular sample, it is likely that our sample displays greater variation on pre- and post- pandemic job status than would exist in a wider sample of youth. This places limits on the generalizability of our findings. However, it also allows us to detect an important trend that might be diluted in a wider sample, and may hold insights for post-pandemic recovery.

Overall, evidence suggests that deterring migration will continue to be an important consideration for donor countries as we shift further into post-pandemic recovery (e.g. Bermeo and Leblang 2015; Czaika and Mayer 2011). However, Covid-19 setbacks on the developing world make it even more necessary that rich states provide opportunities for legal migration, in addition to helping individuals regain stability in the country where they were born. Furthermore, this assistance should not be limited to those most likely to migrate; it should go to all those who need it.

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ORCID

Miranda Simon  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4000-6234>

Cassilde Schwartz  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4184-8222>

David Hudson  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8020-1870>

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