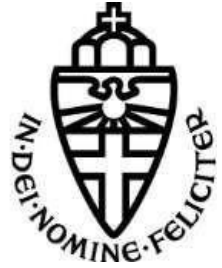


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# **Transit and that is it?**

Facilitation and control: The in/opportunity  
ambits of Romanian workers in the agri-food  
industry in the Netherlands

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## Abstract

*Oh dear, the reality is so different than I thought*

Eastern low-skilled migration to Western Europe is an ongoing, yet powerful topic in migration studies. This study looks into how the brokers offer in/ opportunities through facilitation and control, ultimately affecting the migrants' migration trajectories. The study combines a review of the literature with actual information acquired through interviews with Romanian migrants, drawing on a conceptual framework that sees brokers as bridges of in/opportunity. According to my findings, intermediaries of labor migration are essential in easing the migration process, lowering the hurdles and expenses related to migration by providing useful information, resources, and help to migrants through their expertise, language abilities, and network connections. They play the role of facilitators, simplifying the procedure and enabling migrants to take advantage of mobility opportunities.

Nevertheless, this same study also emphasizes the control that intermediaries have over migratory paths. They control migrants' experiences and outcomes by steering them toward particular employment opportunities, limiting their access to necessities like housing and transportation, and exerting control over their decision-making processes. This control then leads to migrant workers having unstable working conditions, receiving unfair treatment, and having little agency.

**Keywords:** low-skilled migration, labor migration intermediaries, brokers, facilitation, control, Europe, migration trajectory, in/opportunity

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Setting the stage

One of the driving engines of the Dutch economy is the agri-food industry. This business has been steadily growing in the Netherlands in recent years, culminating in 2017 with exports of 92 billion euros, making the country the world's second largest agricultural exporter, trailing only the United States of America (Schröder, et al., 2018). When one considers that the United States has a landmass 270 times larger than the Netherlands, it is easy to see how effective Dutch agriculture is (Vivano, 2017). The fact that The Netherlands is home to many internationally renowned institutions that lead research aimed at developing innovative technologies that enable higher crop yields and more sustainable production is what sets the Dutch agricultural sector apart and makes it so competitive (Vivano, 2017). The Netherlands is often recognized and sometimes referred to as an 'agri-food marvel' by some because to its innovative agricultural successes produced by its research institutes and the economic surpluses created by Dutch firms (Vivano, 2017). However, there is another component of this story that has not received as much attention (de Graaf-Zijl, Scheer, & Bolhaar, 2018).

Simultaneously with the agricultural sector's economic and technical progress, the Dutch labor market has seen an increase in flexible employment, which has had a significant impact on the agri-food business and its numerous migrant employees. According to de Graaf et al., about 1.8 million employees were employed through non-standard forms of employment in 2016, accounting for more than a fifth of the Dutch labor force. Furthermore, one out of every three employed immigrants in the Netherlands are said to have a flexible contract (de Graaf-Zijl, Scheer, & Bolhaar, 2018).

Even though the International Labor Organization of the United Nations has stated that "non-standard jobs can provide access to the labor market, including for disadvantaged groups such as youth or migrants, and in some instances, can provide opportunities for moving to better jobs", it appears that migrants' opportunities for

upward social mobility in the Dutch labor market are limited (Schmid & Wagner, 2017; Burri, Heeger-Hertter, & Rossetti, 2018). Only 20% of the temporary labor in The Netherlands can sustain themselves financially, leaving the remaining 80% of these employees subject to exploitation and poor working conditions. When it comes to migrant labor in the Netherlands, like in many other areas of the globe, many of them are concentrated in low-wage jobs like construction, services, or agriculture, and they are more likely to be involved in unstable work arrangements (McGauran, de Haan, Scheele, & Winsemius, 2016).

Jobs in agriculture are difficult and workers frequently work in a variety of difficult conditions, leading to a variety of mental and physical difficulties. Because of how plants develop, some of these challenging situations are hard to overcome. There are two times of the year when a lot of work must be done quickly. As a result, there is a heavy workload and extended working hours (Douw & Spierings, 1998). In addition to having heavy workloads, these times are sometimes accompanied with difficult secondary circumstances, such as high carrying or moving heavy loads or variable starting/ finishing times (Pérez, et al., 2012). The criteria for working conditions are not often met, even in regions where they have been established. At least 50% of the farms that were audited in 2015 did not fulfill the rules for working conditions, according to the Dutch inspection for social affairs (Inspectorate SZW, 2016). A significant percentage of migrant laborers continue to work in agriculture despite these unfavorable working circumstances.

Aside from fundamental labor laws, there are several elements that contribute to the precariousness of migrant workers, such as labor migrant intermediaries. In response to an uptick in reported occurrences of migrant worker mistreatment in The Netherlands, Fair Work and SOMO collaborated on a study that revealed the essential role that recruiting agencies play in rendering migrants vulnerable to exploitation (McGauran, de Haan, Scheele, & Winsemius, 2016). The preponderance of worker complaints, according to their research, has nothing to do with the nature of the job. Rather, they are aimed at some recruiting agencies and unscrupulous employers for unjust wage

deductions, insufficient housing, transportation issues, and the lack of any form of social insurance (McGauran, de Haan, Scheele, & Winsemius, 2016).

Migration between the Netherlands and Romania has been ongoing for many years, with both countries experiencing significant inflows and outflows of people. In the Netherlands, Romanians have made up a significant portion of the immigrant population in recent decades (34.185 in 2019 – (CBS Statistic Netherlands, 2022)). Many Romanians have migrated to the Netherlands in search of work and a higher standard of living. The Netherlands, with its strong economy and high demand for labor, has been a popular destination for Romanian workers. Moreover, migrants often choose to work in the Netherlands due to the availability of jobs in sectors that do not require high levels of education or specialized skills.

There are a number of ways that migrants can learn about foreign work opportunities. One common method is through social networks and word of mouth, as individuals may learn about job openings or other opportunities through friends, family members, or other acquaintances who have migrated themselves (Blumenstock, Guanhua, & Xu, 2019). They may also learn about foreign opportunities through employment agencies or recruiters, which will be the main focus of this thesis. These intermediaries do advertise job openings or connect individuals with potential employers. Additionally, another way they may learn about foreign opportunities is through online job boards, classified ads, or other resources that list job openings and other opportunities.

This thesis focuses on the scope of intermediaries (brokers), which can play an important role in low-skilled labor markets, as they can help to connect workers with job opportunities and can provide support and guidance throughout the hiring process. Some studies have found that recruiters can be particularly important in low-skilled labor markets, as they can provide a valuable source of information and support for workers who may not have the same level of education or experience as those in higher-skilled markets, which is the case for my research (Lindquist, Xiang, & Brenda, 2012);

(Cranston, 2017); (van Meeteren & Pereira, 2016); (Dekker & Engbersen, 2013). Intermediaries of migration refer to the individuals or organizations that facilitate the migration process for other people. Intermediaries may play a variety of roles in the migration process, including recruiting and transporting migrants, providing housing and other services, and advocating on behalf of migrants.

However, besides the fact that they facilitate migration, intermediaries can also exploit migrants by charging high fees for their services, by providing substandard housing or other services, or by engaging in other forms of exploitation or abuse. This can result in significant vulnerabilities and negative outcomes for migrants (de Haas & Rodriguez, 2010). Overall, the motivations and practices of intermediaries of migration can have significant implications for the migration experiences and outcomes of migrants, and it is important to understand and address these factors in order to promote more positive outcomes for migrants.

The above-mentioned labor migration brokers connect the Romanian and Dutch labor market in such ways that are hard to be understood by the non-involved. I aim to disclose a bigger view on their implications in the low-skilled market and how they shape the experience of the migrants, whether for the better or worse.

## 1.2. Romanian agri-food workers' migration to the Netherlands



Figure 1: Romanians harvesting vegetables (Melenciuc, 2019)

One of the clearest advantages of European integration is labor mobility. By successively easing constraints on the territory and most labor markets of the founding EU member-states, the EU enlargements of 2004 and 2007 offered this cherished freedom to the peoples of Central and Eastern Europe. As a result, tens of thousands of migrants from Romania, Bulgaria, and Poland migrated to Western European nations (Black, Godfried, Marek, & Panțîru, 2010).

According to Garapich, some of these migrant patterns represented the continuation of migration routes that had already been established prior to 2004 (Garapich, 2008). Following the fall of communism, a number of Western European nations signed bilateral agreements with nations including Poland, Bulgaria, and Romania to permit temporary labor migration. A similar agreement between Germany and Poland was already reached in 1991, and as a result, 25,000 Polish employees were employed seasonally in Germany in 2002 (Garapich, 2008). Tens of thousands of

workers from Poland and other CEE nations were able to work transiently in the UK because to the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Schemes (SAWS) that the UK developed with a number of CEE nations (Castles, 2006). Such agreements were also reached in the Netherlands. Additionally, on the eve of 2004 significant flows of unauthorized migration from Romania to Italy and Spain had already established themselves (Bleahu, 2007); (Sandu, 2010).

Most of the labor force in agriculture is made up of migrant workers from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), which the Netherlands Labor Authority (NLA) rates as one of the industries with the highest risk of unfair labor practices. The NLA warned in its report "The state of fair work", that an increasing number of people face the threat of underpayment, excessively long hours, and exploitation, with horticulture and employment agencies being the most severely affected industries and migrant workers from CEE countries making up a large portion of the victims (Siegmann, Quaedvlieg, & Williams, 2022). These procedures are frequently connected to legal loopholes that immoral actors utilize to save labor expenses. The COVID-19 outbreak brought attention to the precarious situation of these people. Due to the fact that, in addition to losing their jobs, migrant workers frequently also lost their home and health insurance, increasing their risk of contracting the COVID-19, they were unable to maintain their distance from one another at work, forced to live in cramped, wretched housing during the corona crisis, or ended up on the streets (Siegmann, Quaedvlieg, & Williams, 2022). The Dutch government established the Migrant Worker Protection Taskforce in May 2020 as a result of the public attention the situation has received.

The Dutch agricultural industry has long been structurally reliant on migrant labor. During the 1980s and 1990s, irregular immigrants, primarily from Morocco and Turkey, served as a significant component of the Netherlands' greenhouse economy (ARC, 2020). However, their position has been replaced since the EU's enlargement in 2004 and 2007 by regular CEE immigrants, mainly Poles, Romanians, and Bulgarians. In the same time frame, there has been a significant increase in the proportion of migrant laborers employed in agriculture through direct and indirect agencies. Dutch immigration

laws allow for the application of a "single permit" that combines a work visa with a residence permit for seasonal agricultural labor. In reality, however, the Netherlands barely ever gets non-EU seasonal employees because of the logistical challenges and expenses involved, not to mention the continuous accessibility of CEE labor for producers (de Lange, Oomes, Gons, & Spanikova, 2019).

The largest employers of CEE migrants are thought to be employment agencies and the agricultural industry, with estimates of 275,000 and 49,000 jobs, respectively (Heyma, Bisschop, & Biesenbeek, 2018). The nations of origin of the migrant labor supply for agriculture have recently relocated further east, including to Southeast Asia, the Balkans, and Ukraine. The significant level of precarity experienced by CEE migrant workers is unaffected by having EU citizenship privileges.

Due to the widespread use of zero-hour employment contracts with employment agencies, most CEE farmworkers have a high level of job and income insecurity. These agreements limit remuneration to the number of hours worked and provide for dismissal if there is no work available or if the employee reports for sick leave (Siegmann, Quaedvlieg, & Williams, 2022). In addition to the ensuing lack of assurances of a consistent and adequate income, the workforce is frequently disciplined using illegitimate fees or penalties, overtime payments, wage discrimination, and withholding wages. Due to this, almost one-fifth of immigrant employees from CEE earn less than the minimum wage, on average ten euros per hour, or half of what other European workers make (McGauran, de Haan, Scheele, & Winsemius, 2016). Health risks or job instability are associated with physically demanding work, and employees who request sick time are threatened with termination. Because training opportunities are few, skill reproduction insecurity is also significant. Finally, migrant workers from CEE lack a collective voice in the labor market and, consequently, representational security because of the low union membership among migrant workers in agriculture, which also reflects unions' "othering" of migrant workers (Siegmann, Ivosevic, & Visser, 2021).

### 1.3. Research objective

Gaining a deeper knowledge of the part labor migration intermediaries play in determining migrant workers' career trajectories in the Netherlands and how this affects their experiences is the main study goal of this thesis. This goal aims to be met by examining the many roles that these brokers play in the recruitment, selection, placement, and management of migrant workers in the Dutch labor market, as well as how this affects their ability to find job, living circumstances, and general well-being. The study uses a qualitative research technique, collecting information from migrant workers through semi-structured interviews. The study aims to identify the factors that enable (provide opportunity) or control (provide in/ opportunity) the agency and autonomy of migrant workers in navigating the Dutch labor market and how this is mediated by the actions and practices of the intermediaries by analyzing the perspectives and experiences of migrants involved in the process. This study targets to explore the potential influence of brokers on aspects of low-skilled Romanian migration to the Netherlands, particularly focusing on migrant workers' access to services. It will also tentatively examine their living and working conditions, as well as aspects of social integration, while being mindful of the complexities and limitations inherent in such an investigation. In the end, the results of this study will advance knowledge of the intricate dynamics of labor migration in the Netherlands and the part the brokers play in influencing these patterns. These findings have implications for practice and policy in the areas of migration governance and labor market regulation.

Through my perspective, experiences may vary before departure and are influenced by how the migrant learnt about the opportunity; the travel facilitators; arrival and may continue with the job itself, the on-site experience and decision to stay and/ or leave. I dive into the two possible situations, continuing the migration journey or settlement. Challenges that the migrants face might include discrimination. Although it is widely recognized, as evidenced by Ferrer & Riddell's study, that immigrants perceived as more 'foreign' or 'different' tend to face greater discrimination in the labor market, this study seeks to delve deeper into how this general observation plays out specifically in the

context of low-skilled Romanian migrants in the Netherlands (Ferrer & Riddell, 2011). The aim is to understand if and how these broader patterns manifest in this particular group, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of their unique experiences. This research paper is particularly important within the study of low-skilled Romanian migrants in the Netherlands because it underscores the potential vulnerabilities and challenges these migrants may face due to their perceived differences, which can further shape our understanding of the specific barriers they encounter while seeking employment and integrating into the Dutch labor market. These vulnerabilities can be exacerbated by language barriers, cultural differences, and the lack of social support networks in the host country. Additionally, a study has found that there are also legal challenges that low skilled migrants might face, due to the lack of information and support through navigating the legal system of the country (Vadean & Piracha, 2010)

To answer and follow the objective of the research, I have formulated the next catalyst question and sub-questions:

**“What role do brokers play in shaping the mobility trajectories of Romanian workers migrating to the Netherlands, and how do these agents influence the dual nature of in/opportunity experienced by these workers within the migratory process?”**

- a. What are the mobility trajectories of Romanian low-skilled agri-food workers?*
- b. What and who are the intermediating actors shaping these trajectories?*
- c. How does this shaping result in experiences of in/opportunity in the Netherlands?*

It is highly debatable if people choose to migrate based on their own will, and unfortunately, many of them do not have any control of their trajectory after departure. Whether they lose this control due to the above-mentioned challenges: language barriers, contractual boundaries or lack of medical accessibility, they tend to rely on a third party,

the brokers. I choose to categorize this involvement as being part of the im/ mobility trajectory, due to the uncertainty involved.

Following the main research question, three sub-questions arose. Along with them, I will explain why I do find them to be relevant to the objective of the paper.

- a. *What are the mobility trajectories of Romanian low-skilled agri-food workers?*

Mobility trajectories refer to the pathways that migrants follow in terms of their movement and settlement patterns. For Romanian migrants in the Netherlands, mobility trajectories may vary depending on a range of factors, including the reasons for migration, the availability of employment and housing, and the policies and practices that regulate and shape the migration process.

One study has found that migrants are more likely to follow circular migration trajectories, in which they moved back and forth between their country of origin and the host, rather than settling permanently; whereas another one states that they are more likely to follow settled migration trajectories, in which they settled permanently in the Netherlands and established long-term ties with Dutch society (Piętka-Nykaza & McGhee, 2017) (Snel, Bilgilib, & Staring, 2020). This study found that factors such as access to employment, social support networks, and cultural adaptation played a role in shaping settled migration trajectories (Snel, Bilgilib, & Staring, 2020).

Moreover, there is evidence that one can not “fix” migration in the rural parts of Romania, even though it is a common practice. For instance, Fitzgerald suggests "international urbanization" as a better way to conceptualize migration: "The urban receiving context characterizing much international migration may be as important in shaping migrants' experiences as the fact that the migration is international," suggesting that migrants come from rural areas (Fitzgerald, 2006). However, according to De Haas, it is incorrect to characterize migration as the result of underdevelopment because, in

many cases, development—particularly urbanization—at the location of origin serves as a catalyst for movement (de Haas, 2005).

*b. What and who are the intermediating actors shaping these trajectories?*

There are a range of actors that shape the mobility trajectories of Romanian workers, including recruitment agencies, social networks and the government, as well as the process of globalization. Wickramasekara and Baruah have analyzed the role of recruitment agencies in the immigration of low-skilled workers. They found that these agencies play a crucial role in matching workers with employers, but that they also have the potential to abuse their power and exploit workers (Wickramasekara & Baruah, 2017).

Globalization and employers have also been linked as processes and actors in shaping these trajectories. A study conducted by Menz found that intermediaries often play a key role in the migration process, both by actively recruiting workers from abroad and by creating incentives for workers to migrate (Menz, 2009).

*c. How does this shaping result in experiences of in/opportunity in the Netherlands?*

This sub-question aims to dive into the results of the studies of the actors. In this study, 'in/opportunity' captures the varied experiences of Romanian migrants, ranging from access to employment, where opportunity signifies job availability and fair wages, and in/opportunity includes underemployment or exploitation, to social integration, where it encompasses the ability to connect with Dutch society versus facing isolation or cultural barriers. It also considers access to essential services like healthcare and education, distinguishing between equitable access and the presence of systemic barriers. Additionally, the concept extends to legal and civic rights, contrasting the ability to fully exercise these rights with experiences of legal uncertainties or restricted rights. This comprehensive view encapsulates both the positive and negative aspects of migrant

experiences in the Netherlands.

#### 1.4. Societal relevance

The greatest societal issue that has directed me into writing this project is that the low-skilled Romanian migrants that are trying to work and start a new life in the Netherlands are being guided by so-called “brokers”. Those third parties are the main facilitators of migration, and they are shaping the experience of the individual based on their personal interests. At a first glance, those facilitators may appear to be kind and good-intended, however in the money-driven, capitalist world, the chances of those intermediaries to fulfill the expectations of the migrant and not deviate from the promises made are very low. In Romania, we have a saying “Socoteala de acasa nu se potriveste cu cea din targ”, which translates to “The calculation made at home does not match the one in the market”. I think this “saying” really matches what this thesis is about, due to the similarity of the environment: home being Romania, the market being the Netherlands agri-food working market and the calculations are what the intermediaries told the migrants.

By analyzing the trajectory of the migrant, from their own personal home to the arrival at the workplace, one can get a better insight into how this whole process was facilitated and experienced. This experience is, unfortunately, mostly negative, as I have seen during my volunteering stage at the ROMPRO Foundation and concluded in this thesis. While volunteering, we were receiving around five emails and/ or phone calls daily from the Romanians that have been deceived by the companies which helped them find a workplace and accommodation in the Netherlands, which will be further explained in the “In/opportunity insights” chapter. All of these individuals were supposed to work in the agri-food industry, whether crop farming, cereal processing or packaging of goods before their displace in the markets. However, after being told that they have to buy their own plane ticket from Bucharest (OTP) to Eindhoven (EIN), once they arrived it all goes downhill. Whether nobody from the company waits for them at the airport and they are forced to take buses by themselves, in a foreign country with little to no knowledge of the

English language, or once they get to the work-plant they realize the accommodation is not what they were told about in the first place. Another turning point for them is when they are given a contract, mostly only in Dutch, which requires to be signed. Fundamentally, any employee in the Netherlands that signs a contract must be paid with a gross wage of €1725.00, work in a safe and healthy environment, have the opportunity to visit a doctor if needed and receive a pay slip (Business Gov NL, 2023). However, this does not happen for the majority of the migrants. I have extracted a post from the ROMPRO social group, wrote by a Romanian low-skilled migrant:

"Good evening. I have a request, I came to Holland 2 days ago by plane, and an agency does not answer me, it is now missing from the advertisement that gave them, and no phone number. I stayed outside Eindhoven for 2 days I have documents from the Netherlands, I worked here for almost 2 years. I speak English, but I also came with my record, clean, medical certificate, as the agency lady wanted, a personal name. Yes, agency, full of Facebook something like that, we each post what we want. ok. If someone can help me with the job, accommodation. And they could pick me up from here at Eindhoven Central Station. I've already entered the third day I'm staying outside. Can someone pick me up from here, not at work, that's why I came. Thank you with respect! Or a job with urgent accommodation. Thank you with respect."

I find the above paragraph important for the societal relevance of the thesis. The migrant states that he has just arrived in Eindhoven 2 days prior to the post. The agency that has guided him and provided him with the "job opportunity" is no longer answering the calls and has deleted all the posts from the internet. He states that he has a clean record, and just wants to find a place to live and work, because he has been on the streets for the past two days. It is happening to too many migrants, and it is important to acknowledge that it is an ongoing problem.

The research should contribute to expanding the awareness of the issues involved with those facilitators and how they shape the experience of the migrant for both societies involved, the home (Romania) and the host (The Netherlands). The primary image of

those intermediaries is at least “not positive” among the migrants, however due to language barrier, lack of international experience and a low living standard in Romania (min. net wage of €357,87 in 2023) many of them still decide to ask for guidance hoping for a good outcome, or at least a better one than they have in their home country (Statista Research Department, 2023)

## 1.5. Scientific relevance

Through researching the role of labor market intermediaries in the migration of Romanian agri-food workers in the Netherlands, this paper has the goal of displaying how the mobility intermediaries shape their experience in the low-skilled agri-food market. Researchers have focused on the reasons of migration and have stated that because of EU adhesion, the Romanian migrants started looking for increased productivity, higher income and better living standards, as well as on the role of intermediaries (Frunza, Maha, & Mursa, 2009). However, there has not been a study conducted on how the intermediaries provide in/ opportunities to low-skilled Romanian migrants in the agri-food industry, in the Dutch context. Moreover, even less consideration has been given to how brokerage affects both pre-existing social in/ equalities and new ones brought on by migration. It is important to examine brokerage as a kind of social glue, particularly in the context of migration (Faist, 2014)

However, I aim to take a more holistic approach, and display through the interviews and data analysis how the two sides of the story, which might look different at the first glance, the migration itself, and the market of migration intermediaries coexist and impact the Romanian migrant.

Previously, research has been mainly conducted on migrants’ mobility trajectories (Schapendonk & Steel, 2014); (Cross, 2013); (Schapendonk, 2018); (Schapendonk, van Liempt, Schwarz, & Steel, 2020). There has also been a significant amount of research on mobility trajectories, with a particular focus on the factors that influence labor migration and the impact of migration on individuals, communities, and economies (Siddiqui,

2012); (Dustmann & Görlach, 2016). One area of research has focused on the economic factors that influence labor migration, such as wage differentials, unemployment rates, and job opportunities. For example, a study published by Dustmann and Fabbri found that wage differentials are a significant predictor of labor migration, with individuals tending to migrate to countries with higher wages (Dustmann & Fabbri, 2003).

The available literature provides the argument that migrants need intermediaries due to not being able to move without one, and usually they end up being dragged into a bad environment. This is due to the structural need for inexpensive, adaptable labor being fueled by a worldwide economy. This theory holds that recruiting migrants for low-wage, demeaning jobs will help firms meet their demands for higher productivity and profitability. Compared to residents, migrants frequently take low-paying occupations, are more accepting of unfavorable working conditions, and are less likely to belong to a union.

Besides it being a qualitative and descriptive study, this research also aims to provide a new entry point for the study of this linking point of Romania and the Dutch labor market. More specifically, the facilitators of low-skilled migrants in the agri-food industry in the Netherlands.

The agri-food sector in the Netherlands has been heavily reliant on migrant workers for many years. This dependence on migrant labor has raised concerns about working conditions and human rights. Therefore, understanding the experiences of migrant workers in the agri-food sector is essential for policymakers, researchers, and other involved actors. The following literature review aims to provide a comprehensive overview of previous studies on agri-food worker migration to the Netherlands. It examines the key themes, findings, and limitations of the existing literature, as well as identify gaps in the knowledge base. By analyzing the existing literature, this paper will contribute to a deeper understanding of the experiences of agri-food migrant workers in the Netherlands and inform policies and practices to improve their working conditions and well-being.

Some of the challenges that researchers may face in conducting interviews with migrants include language barriers, lack of trust and lack of accessibility. As a Romanian conducting this research among Romanians, I did not face those problems, therefore I am to provide a new scientific paper in regard to the topic.

## 2. Conceptual framework

This chapter aims to explore the complex interactions between migration brokers, precarity, opportunity and the migrant itself. It looks at the critical function that migration brokers play in matching prospective migrants with employment and in enabling migration. This approach recognizes the role of migration brokers as facilitators who provide helpful assistance and open doors to new opportunities or controllers who shape the migrant's trajectory. In addition, it acknowledges the difficulties and risks that can arise from their engagement, notably with regard to exploitation, unethical behavior, and a deterioration of migrant's vulnerabilities through the conceptual framework of "brokerage as bridges of in/opportunity".

### 2.1. Migration trajectory

The focus of this paper is on the analysis of the migration trajectory of Romanians, from their personal viewpoint. Their trajectory is not limited to the physical journey, but also encompasses the pre and post migration arrangements, a complex process that shapes their overall experience. The concept of migration trajectory involves tracking of various "twists and turns" that occur throughout the migration process (Schapendonk & Steel, 2014). According to Schapendonk et al., the view should be on tracking the movement of migrants among different locations, rather than only examining their sole presence within certain regions (Schapendonk, van Liempt, Schwarz, & Steel, 2020)

Schapendonk et al. state that this approach sees migration as a complex process, in which multiple instances of movement and stillness are intricately correlated (Schapendonk, van Liempt, Schwarz, & Steel, 2020). The concepts of mobility and im/mobility are connected, and mutually influence each other. While mobility encompasses the movement of individuals, there are also restrictions that the migrants face such as border barriers, which are part of a bigger network of mobility (Schapendonk & Steel, 2014).

Im/mobility occurs when multiple instances such as border regimes that control, visa laws and deportation happen. Given the significance of the migratory process in migration, determining the precise geographical locations that serve as the definitive starting and finishing points of the migratory trajectory can often be ambiguous (Schwarz, 2020). To begin with, the process of migration typically commences with preliminary arrangements such as visa applications and visits to embassies, which frequently occur prior to the actual relocation of migrants. Secondly, it is worth noting that migrants frequently experience many instances of im/ mobility split between their periods of movement. The durations of im/ mobility might exhibit diverse manifestations, and these times can span varying lengths, ranging from several weeks to several months or even years. (Schapendonk, van Liempt, Schwarz, & Steel, 2020).

Schapendonk et al. propose the idea of following the migrants “through places” instead of “in places” (Schapendonk, van Liempt, Schwarz, & Steel, 2020). This aims to provide the researchers with a broader view of the migrant’s moves “through time and space” (Schapendonk & Steel, 2014). Moreover, in a paper that followed, Schapendonk et al. stated that in relation to the distinction between migration and mobility, two fundamental interpretations can be identified (Schapendonk, Bolay, & Dahinden, 2020). From a mobilities perspective, migration is regarded as merely one among various manifestations of movement that contribute to the construction and enactment of our everyday existence. Within the context of a migration framework, the concept of mobility is predominantly understood as the migratory process, which encompasses the movement from a specific point of origin to a designated destination.

Schwarz and Schapendonk et al.’s papers exemplify an emerging "trajectory approach" in migration studies that aims to capture the fluidity and complexity of contemporary migration journeys (Schwarz, 2020); (Schapendonk, van Liempt, Schwarz, & Steel, 2020). Situating themselves within mobilities paradigms, the authors critique prior tendencies toward methodological nationalism and static binaries like origin/destination in migration research (Schapendonk, van Liempt, Schwarz, & Steel,

2020). Adopting mobile methods, the papers follow migrants through multiple sites and across borders to reveal unfolding processes of movement, immobility, and status change (Schwarz, 2020); (Schapendonk, van Liempt, Schwarz, & Steel, 2020). Schwarz focuses ethnographically on unauthorized migrants in the France-Germany-Switzerland triangle, while Schapendonk et al. bring together cases expanding the approach more broadly.

Both contributions argue studying trajectories enables analysis of interactions between migrants and diverse, overlapping mobility regimes which facilitate migration for some groups while constraining others. Migrants creatively navigate these regimes, using tactics like strategic adoption of legal statuses (Schapendonk, van Liempt, Schwarz, & Steel, 2020). However, regimes also produce precarity and marginalization (Schwarz, 2020). Theoretically, the papers situate trajectories as open, transformational processes spanning pre- and post-migration lives. Empirically, challenges include maintaining longitudinal contact, ethics, and unpredictable routes, but rich insights emerge into migrancy as lived experience and its subjective meaning-making (Schwarz, 2020); (Schapendonk, van Liempt, Schwarz, & Steel, 2020).

Situating trajectories as their unit of analysis allows the authors to challenge assumptions, like linearity and migrant passivity, underpinning traditional perspectives. Instead, migration emerges as an ongoing accomplishment, crafted through evolving migrant networks and capital accrued through border-crossing experiences (Schwarz, 2020); (Schapendonk, van Liempt, Schwarz, & Steel, 2020).

While recognizing limitations in capturing complex realities, the research papers make a persuasive case for trajectory approaches as a lens to resituate migration conceptually and empirically. They offer complementary foundations for this promising line of inquiry into the processes, experiences and politics shaping contemporary migration (Schwarz, 2020); (Schapendonk, van Liempt, Schwarz, & Steel, 2020).

## 2.2. Brokerage, facil & contra

Towards the establishment of my conceptual framework, this study examines brokers as facilitators and controllers of migration, acting as bridges in the migration process. The argument posits that labor migration intermediaries, commonly referred to as brokers, serve as pillars of infrastructure, enabling or regulating migration. To support this argument, Kern's idea of “middle space of migration” is employed, suggesting that brokers can assist low-skilled Romanian migrants in their quest for work in the Netherlands by providing knowledge and infrastructure (Kern & Müller-Böker, 2015). Kern explains the concept of the “Middle space of migration” as the role played by the labor brokers, who “bridge” the empty space between the migrants, employers and regulations (Kern & Müller-Böker, 2015). Moreover, the concept of strategic use of language and narratives, in order for a better reputation to be created for them. Lastly, the concept of “multi-locality” is used, as an explanation for the transnational nature of migration, and the broker’s field of work. They assist the migrant through “bridging the gap” between the place of origin and destination, which also consists of distances, borders and language.

Firstly, drawing upon Lindquist's assertion, I will be further stating that brokers serve as the initial catalyst for the migration process (Lindquist, Xiang, & Brenda, *Opening the Black Box of Migration: Brokers, the Organization of Transnational Mobility and the Changing Political Economy in Asia*, 2012). Through various channels such as word-of-mouth, social networks, and the Internet; brokers, equipped with adequate knowledge, language skills, and the display of in/opportunities, guide migrants towards migration (Lindquist, Xiang, & Brenda, *Opening the Black Box of Migration: Brokers, the Organization of Transnational Mobility and the Changing Political Economy in Asia*, 2012); (Cranston, *Calculating the migration industries: knowing the successful expatriate in the Global Mobility Industry*, 2017). Lindquist effectively opens the “black box” of migration by highlighting the lack of attention given to the infrastructures that shape migrant mobility (Lindquist, Xiang, & Brenda, *Opening the Black Box of Migration: Brokers, the Organization of Transnational Mobility and the Changing*

Political Economy in Asia, 2012). This perspective shifts the focus from traditional research themes like reasons for migration and experiences in destination countries to the underlying systems that facilitate or constrain movement. Adding to this, Kern's concept of the 'middle space of migration' offers a pivotal extension to the understanding of migrant journeys (Kern & Müller-Böker, 2015). This concept delves into the intermediary stages of migration, areas that often remain unexplored in traditional migration research. It emphasizes the complexities and nuances of the migration process, moving beyond the initial reasons for migration and experiences in the destination countries to examine the critical, yet frequently overlooked, transitions and spaces migrants encounter.

In the context of migration research, the “black box” represents the overlooked but crucial infrastructure including institutions, networks, and people, that enable the movement of migrants from one place to another (Lindquist, Xiang, & Brenda, *Opening the Black Box of Migration: Brokers, the Organization of Transnational Mobility and the Changing Political Economy in Asia*, 2012). Lindquist argues that government regulations and rise of circular migration shapes the role of intermediaries, this is relevant for the post-EU ascension Romanian migration patterns. Moreover, brokers are likely playing integral roles in navigating the complex bureaucracies involved in EU mobility, managing long distances between Romania and the Netherlands, and mediating information shortfalls for low-skilled migrants (Lindquist, Xiang, & Brenda, *Opening the Black Box of Migration: Brokers, the Organization of Transnational Mobility and the Changing Political Economy in Asia*, 2012). As the paper focused on “opening the black box of migration” demonstrates, broker-centered research holds promise for challenging assumptions while prompting deeper discussion around the migration experience beyond availability of push/pull factors. By following Lindquist's lead in opening this obscured “black box”, my study can generate new insights into the organization and governance of low-skilled Romanian mobility to the Netherlands (Lindquist, Xiang, & Brenda, *Opening the Black Box of Migration: Brokers, the Organization of Transnational Mobility and the Changing Political Economy in Asia*, 2012).

Building upon the insights from Lindquist and Kern, we can further deepen our understanding of the migration process through Thomas Faist's concept of the "third," drawing from Georg Simmel's theory (Faist, 2014). Faist categorizes migration brokers into "triads" like "Partisan arbitration," "Tertius Gaudens," and "Divide et impera," each representing different actors within the migration industry (Faist, 2014). This framework introduces a novel dynamic to the study of migration. In this manner, I propose an extension: viewing the Migrant-Intermediary-Employer relationship as a triad in itself. Specifically, in the context of Romanian migrant workers, the intermediary's role is crucial, as they often initiate the migration process. This perspective underscores the significant impact one actor in the triad can have on the overall dynamics of migration.

Expanding on Faist's concept of the "third", the Migrant-Intermediary-Employer model I propose adds a new layer to understanding migration dynamics (Faist, 2014). This "triad" underscores the intricate and reciprocal relationships among migrants, intermediaries, and employers. Each actor plays a crucial role: migrants seek opportunities, intermediaries facilitate movement, and employers provide the demand that drives migration. This model exemplifies how each entity within the triad can influence and reshape the migration process, reflecting a complex web of interactions and dependencies. In essence, this theoretical extension offers a comprehensive framework for analyzing the multifaceted nature of migration, aligning with and enriching the foundational concepts presented by both Simmel and Faist (Faist, 2014).

The concept of the "migration industry" has emerged as a way to understand the various private actors and businesses that facilitate and profit from global migration flows. Goss and Lindquist first defined the migration industry as "the ensemble of labor, social networks, entrepreneurs, agencies and other institutions either facilitating or controlling labor migration" (Goss & Lindquist, 1995). Hernández-León describes the migration industry as encompassing "the ensemble of entrepreneurs, businesses, and services which, motivated by the pursuit of financial gain, facilitate and sustain international migration" (Hernández-León, 2008). Lindquist examines how labor recruitment agencies are embedded within and help constitute wider migration industry

circuits (Lindquist, 2010).

Furthermore, viewing the migration industry as an integral part of the overall migration experience, Cranston, Schapendonk and Spaan advocate for examining the actors who intersect with the migrant's journey and life (Cranston, Schapendonk, & Spaan, 2017). This perspective highlights the importance of studying brokers as bridges of in/ opportunity, providing valuable insights to the migration field.

In the complex space of migration, the dichotomy of “facilitation” and “control” plays a primordial role in shaping the trajectories of migrants. Facilitation, derived from the Latin "facilis," implies the simplification or easing of the migration process by various actors, who may include non-state entities such as recruitment agencies and social networks, as identified in the works of research papers such as (Wickramasekara & Baruah, 2017). These facilitators function as the builders of opportunity, constructing pathways that enable the movement of individuals across borders with greater efficiency and less friction. On the other hand, control, deriving from "contra," the Latin for “opposite”, represents the mechanisms of restriction and regulation. As Menz elucidates, controllers are those who, either through the exertion of legal frameworks or the imposition of bureaucratic barriers, can influence the direction and nature of migration, often reducing the autonomy of the migrants and reshaping their intended paths (Menz, 2009). These two forces, facilitation and control, often intersect and interact in the middle space of migration, Kern’s previously mentioned idea, who argues that this interstitial zone is where the power dynamics of migration are mostly seen (Kern & Müller-Böker, 2015).

Facilitation in migration refers to the providing of information, resources and support to the migrant, as well as reducing the costs of it (van Meeteren & Pereira, 2016); (Dekker & Engbersen, 2013). On a legislative level, the European Commission defines a facilitator of migration as "any person who, for financial or other gain, intentionally assists a person who is not a national of a country to enter, or transit across its territory" (THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION, 2002). Therefore, in the context of

labor migration, a facilitator empowers migrants' "mobility turn" (Cranston, Schapendonk, & Spaan, 2017).

Contrary to the previous positive ideology of facilitation in migration, the juxtaposing idea of control is highlighted in Axelsson et al.'s paper, "Re-visiting the 'black box' of migration", which discusses how control in migration, particularly concerning Romanian agri-food low-skilled migrants in the Netherlands is co-produced through interactions between state actors and migration intermediaries (Axelsson, Hedberg, Pettersson, & Zhang, 2022). Their research highlights that regulatory spaces of labor migration are manipulated by various exchanges between these parties. Intermediaries, including recruitment agencies, staffing agencies, and local brokers, play a crucial role in navigating and influencing migration regulations, often exploiting regulatory loopholes or working within the system to establish pathways for migrants. The state actor is not just a backdrop but an active participant in this process, relying on intermediaries to manage labor migration effectively. This co-production of regulatory spaces reflects a complex interplay of power, influence, and negotiation, reshaping the governance and control of migration in ways that accommodate both state objectives and the interests of intermediaries. Building on the earlier discussion of co-produced control in migration involving Romanian agri-food low-skilled migrants in the Netherlands, Snel et al.'s work further nuances this understanding by examining migration trajectories and transnational support mechanisms within and beyond Europe (Snel, Bilgilib, & Staring, 2020). Snel et al. emphasize that migration is not entirely about crossing borders but involves complex journeys shaped by migrants' interactions with both formal and informal control actors (Snel, Bilgilib, & Staring, 2020). These include state policies, internal and external migration control mechanisms, and the pivotal role of transnational social networks and migration industries. The dynamic interchange significantly influences migrants' decisions, pathways, and experiences, highlighting the importance of considering both restrictive controls and the agency of migrants in navigating these constraints. This perspective bridges the structural factors of migration control with the agency of migrants, offering a comprehensive view that accounts for the multifaceted nature of migration processes.

Additionally, Kern, Lindquist, Cranston, Schapendonk, Spaan and Faist critique the methodological nationalist approach in migration studies and prefer to focus on transnationality (Kern & Müller-Böcker, 2015); (Lindquist, Xiang, & Brenda, 2012); (Cranston, Schapendonk, & Spaan, New directions in exploring the migration industries: introduction to special issue, 2017); (Faist, 2014). They emphasize the importance of networks and infrastructure in enabling mobility and reject overly simplistic “push-pull” explanations. Despite their common rejection of simplistic approaches, Kern and Lindquist employ ethnographic methods and focus on particular actors, while Cranston & Schapendonk and Faist engage more theoretically. The latter emphasizes temporal aspects of mobility like precarity, while Kern and Lindquist focus more on spatial and infrastructural dimensions.

In conclusion, the literature review conducted on the topics of brokerage, facilitation, and control serves as a crucial building block for the development of the conceptual framework centered on the idea of "brokers as bridges of in/opportunity" of this thesis. By exploring a range of scholarly works, theories, and empirical studies, this review has provided an understanding of the roles and dynamics of brokers in the migration process.

### 2.3. Precarity

In the present study, the focus lies on examining the experiences of low-skilled agri-food Romanian workers employed in the Netherlands. To develop a comprehensive framework, the concept of "precarity as in/opportunity" will be employed. This concept is derived from Siegmann's article, which portrays the migrant precarity as being "legalized" within the context of the flexible Dutch labor market, marked by a transition from traditional employment to ir/regular forms of work (Siegmann, Quaedvlieg, & Williams, 2022). This state of precarity manifests itself in workplace inequities, reduced regulatory protections, and deteriorating living conditions (Broughton, Green, Rickard, & Swift, 2016). However, it is important to establish a link between the precarity prevalent

in this industry and the notion that it also encompasses elements of both opportunity and lack thereof, as experienced by the Romanian workers.

In his paper, Volchik explains that precarity, a defining characteristic of informal work, is associated with increased insecurity, instability, and flexibility (Volchik & Maslyukova, 2019). Additionally, Keune asserts that precarious jobs exhibit lower levels of job security, often limited access to social security benefits, lower wages, worse working conditions, and limited prospects for training (Keune, 2013). These conditions align with the situation faced by low-skilled agri-food workers, who lack any form of insurance coverage, possess contracts that do not ensure long-term employment or well-being, and are susceptible to sudden terminations or unemployment. Wolcott suggests that a shift in demand away from less skilled workers contributes to employment inequality, thereby leading to the adoption of irregular employment by such workers (Wolcott, 2021).

In addition to discussing the precarious nature of irregular, low-skilled jobs, it is also crucial to acknowledge that informal work environments are prevalent in developing countries, where a significant number of individuals seek better opportunities. Jütting emphasizes the widespread occurrence of informal employment in developing nations, which may offer employment prospects but often deprive workers of social protection (Jütting & de Laiglesia, 2009). Furthermore, the substantial wage gap between origin and destination countries acts as an incentive for individuals to migrate in search of improved economic prospects (Voivozeanu, 2019).

However, there is some evidence that precarity also can provide the migrants with opportunities. One study conducted by the Scottish Government highlights the association of flexible and irregular jobs, often characterized by precarity, with opportunities for individuals at different stages of life (Scottish Government, 2021). Another study by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development reveals that 60% of the survey participants expressed a preference for flexibility (CIPD, 2023). Furthermore, it remains inconclusive to what extent this flexibility truly represents an

opportunity, as it can also include zero-hour contracts, which can be considered in/opportune.

The aforementioned article from the Scottish Government also suggests that irregular jobs can serve as a "steppingstone" towards other career paths (Scottish Government, 2021). As it will be debated in the present study, working in the agri-food industry in the Netherlands as a low-skilled Romanian migrant is not the final destination of the migration journey; rather, it constitutes a part of a spatio-temporal process (Schapendonk, Bolay, & Dahinden, The conceptual limits of the 'migration journey'. De-exceptionalising mobility in the context of West African trajectories, 2020). Moreover, the appeal of working abroad is further enhanced by the employment, health insurance, and accommodation packages offered by intermediaries, along with the hope that a temporary contract will be converted into a permanent one after two years (Siegmann, Quaedvlieg, & Williams, 2022); (Ballafkih & Zinsmeister, 2020).

Additionally, based on the findings of this study, it can be argued that for many individuals engaged in the migration industry, there may be no other viable option. They may find themselves trapped in an environment that lacks opportunities for advancement. Thus, migrating and entering precarious and irregular jobs through intermediaries becomes their means of escape. Whether they ultimately succeed or not is yet to be determined; nevertheless, their numbers continue to rise, as depicted in Figure 2, below.

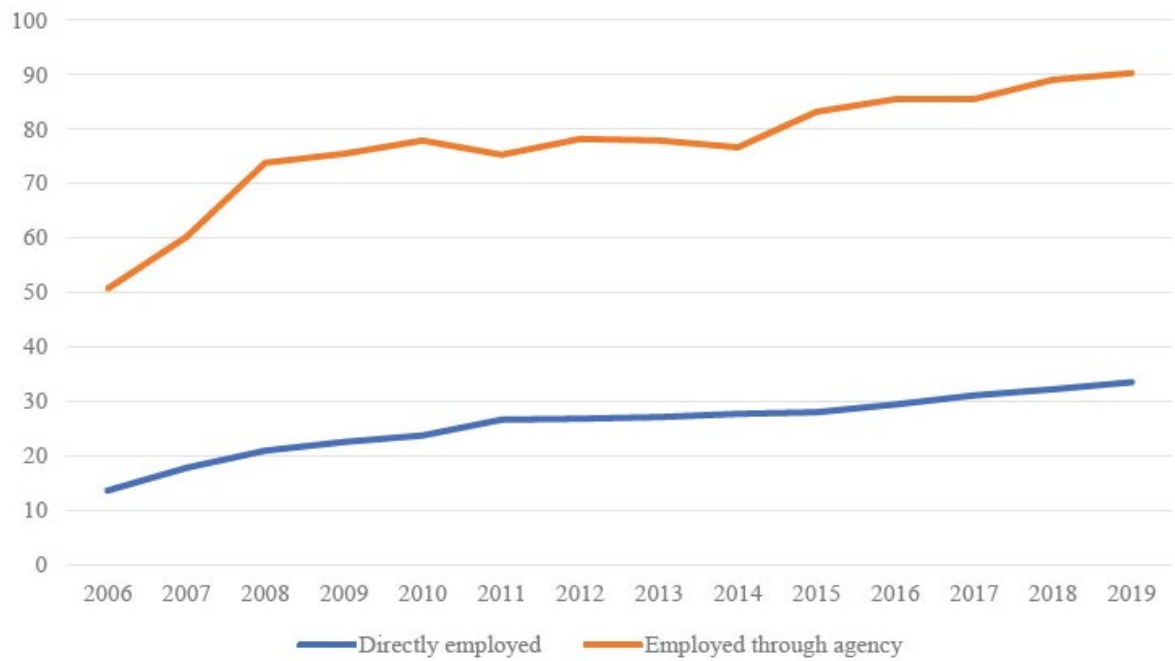


Figure 2: Migrant workers as share of the workforce in Dutch agriculture, 2006–2019 (%) by (Heyma, Luiten, Splinter, & Puister, 2020)

In conclusion, this conceptual framework chapter has outlined key concepts that will guide an analysis of low-skilled Romanian migration experiences in the Netherlands. Drawing on existing migration scholarship, the framework centers the notions of migration trajectories, brokerage, and precarity of the catalyst topic, as conceptualized in the below figure.

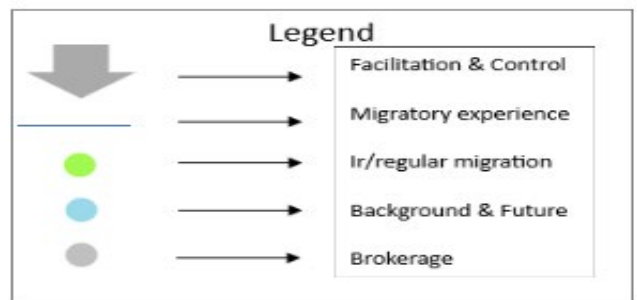
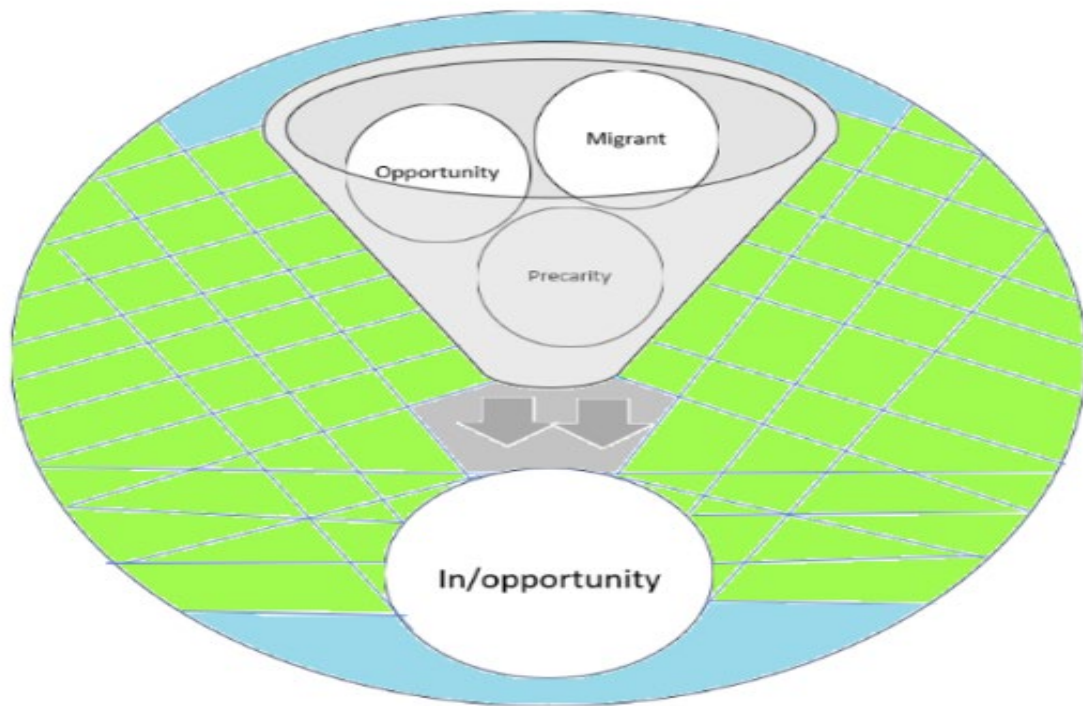


Figure 3: Conceptual framework of “Brokerage as bridges of in/opportunity” (Author, 2023)

### 3. Methodology

This paper aims to find about what is the scope of the labor market intermediaries and how do they facilitate and control the trajectories to the Netherlands, impacting the migrant's experience. Hereafter, this research provides the background of the migrant, how did they come into contact with the LMIs, the facilitation of the migration per se. Therefore, the associated fees, working and living conditions and the possibility to settle in the Netherlands will also be looked upon.

The above are achieved through the qualitative research methods, as they can highlights the significance of comprehending individuals' subjective reality, giving voice to underrepresented groups, and revealing their distinctive viewpoints (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017)

#### 3.1. Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews have been conducted to better understand migrant workers and how the labor migration intermediaries influenced their experiences. Semi-structured interviews add order to the process, making it easier to include preexisting theories and beliefs about the phenomenon. It makes it possible to compare the responses of various interviews more effectively. In order to determine whether they would apply to the respondents, theories and concepts from previous research were included in the interview guide.

This study's initial focus was on the idea of labor migration intermediaries acting as migration brokers. However, throughout the interviews, I ought to see whether this type of brokerage was beneficial for the migrants, and if the experience of working with them was positive or negative – as in/ opportune. The initial purpose of the interview guide was to investigate the circumstances surrounding the migrants' decision to depart from Romania, their motives for getting into the agri-food sector, and the course of the process in which the LMIs were involved. Numerous questions in my research are related

to the decision to continue living in the Netherlands or return home, as well as working conditions, relationship with the brokers, living conditions and contractual terms.

Finding trustworthy qualitative data on the working conditions of migrants was challenging due to the sensitivity of the subject. Planning interviews requires a lot of effort and time. Fortunately, the ROMPRO Foundation, where I volunteer, gave me access to a sizable network of Romanian agri-food workers. Since many of the interviewees could only speak Romanian, I had to transcript the entire interview and translate it into English.

Being Romanian myself, I was fortunate in that I had few problems with trust difficulties or language barriers. The interviewees embraced the scope of my research well, and I was able to gather insightful information that I would present in the thesis' "In/opportunity insights" section.

In order to conclude this research, nine interviews have been organized, all of them which were between me and Romanian (seasonal) labor migrant workers in either the agricultural or food processing sector. The respondents have similar backgrounds, and they all wanted to work right after finishing high school, which has happened. Despite the fact that all of the respondents came from a relatively poor environment in Romania, they had access to Internet, which was the main channel of communication with the brokers. Moreover, every respondent has stated that they went home during their employment, either to their family or not. They were aged between 22 and 32.

To conclude, I would want to emphasize that getting into contact with these low-skilled migrants was complicated, as they were working, and the ways of communication were not properly set up. Initially, my aim was to interview twelve individuals, however due to the specificity of the topic and its subtlety, I managed to arrange and conduct nine. As a number of papers, book chapters and articles suggest, a number of at least 5 participants are needed for qualitative research to be conducted (Dworkin, 2012)

### 3.2. Participation in workshops

This research was not limited to the conducted interviews, as I have also participated actively in workshops organized by the ROMPRO Foundation, one of which was called “Be careful what you sign for.” The above has helped me both understand the legislation of the Netherlands, as well as directly encounter the issues that the low-skilled Romanian migrants are facing.

The main points of the workshop were that the minimum wage in the Netherlands is €1.995 (gross), the employee has the right to personal time off and a maximum of 60 summed up working hours per week. Moreover, the employee has the right to work in a safe and healthy environment, and access to social security services (Government of The Netherlands, 2024).

Further to the above, the employee also has the right to receive a contract and is recommended to demand it in a known language, as well as receiving a monthly pay slip. Unfortunately, during the workshop and through my experience as a volunteer, I have noticed that most of the time their rights are not respected, either by the intermediaries which the process, or by the direct employer.

To conclude, I have conducted the semi-structured interviews, and have actively participated in the communication and problem solving of the precariousness of the Romanians working in the Dutch agri-food sector, in order to come with a cohesive conclusion and recommendations.

### 3.3. Data analysis

The nine conducted interviews have been recorded and shortly transcribed using the available Microsoft tools. As mentioned in the “Interview guide”, to protect the interviewees’ privacy and identity the recordings have been deleted. The interviews have been conducted in Romanian and translated using an online tool as well, but I have tried

to maintain their originality and hereafter the grammatical errors have not been corrected. This is mostly to capture the originality and that accurate verbatim transcription of every interview is crucial and extremely beneficial for qualitative research (MOS Legal, 2023)

To analyze my findings, I have started off by coding the interviews using the “MAXQDA” software. At first, I coded the following: (1) Migrant’s background, which implied the answers to the first question of my interview. Then, I coded the (2) Labor Migrant Intermediaries, that covered the answers to questions related to how the migrant heard about the brokers. Lastly, I have coded (3) Migration trajectory, (4) Settling to the Netherlands and (5) Experience with the Labor Migration Intermediaries. During this part of the research, however, I have concluded that there were more themes that needed to be touched upon such as (6) Working conditions, (7) Fees, (8) Opinion on the workplace, (9) Reason to leave Romania.

During this part of the research, I have come to the conclusion that the coding had to be narrowed down, therefore I have redistributed the codes into the following: (1) Facilitation, (2) Control, (3) Experience, thus enabling a better chance of answering the core question of the thesis: “What role do brokers play in shaping the mobility trajectories of Romanian workers migrating to the Netherlands, and how do these agents influence the dual nature of in/opportunity experienced by these workers within the migratory process?”

As an example, such wording as “*be careful who you venture with and, of course, think of your own good*” has been coded as “Control”, and “*I come from a poor place in in Romania with not a lot of opportunities*” to “Experience”, as this background was shaped by the broker. This will be further explained in the related Appendix.

Furthermore, in the chapter “In/ opportunity insights”, the literature about Romanian migration towards the Netherlands, the conceptual framework of LMIs as migration brokers and the precariousness of the industry is compared to the codes and interview results.

Finally, I have realized that the interview could have been more focused towards the precariousness of the workplace, employer and industry as a whole, from point A (Romania) to point B (the workplace). This is mostly due to the answers I have received, which convinced me that there is a problem that needs to be addressed publicly, both in Romania and the Netherlands. Fortunately, it has been flagged in the media (Dutch News, 2022)

## 4. In/opportunity insights

In this chapter, the results of the interviews conducted with low-skilled Romanian agri-food migrants in the Netherlands will be presented. The aim of this chapter is to showcase the voices and experiences of these individuals and correlate them with the conceptual framework outlined in Chapter 2, which focuses on "migration brokers as bridges of in/opportunity." The experiences of the migrants will be categorized into positive and negative aspects, with a particular emphasis on those that were facilitated towards opportunities and those that were controlled towards in/opportunities.

### 4.1. Migration trajectory

When accounting for the influence of the intermediary on the migration trajectories, which is an extensive concept of migration that can include multiple moves to various destination within a period of time and includes the possibility of residence the following questions have been addressed to the interviewees: "Did you go back to Romania and then returned to the Netherlands during your working contract? Have you thought of permanently settling in one place?" and "Did the LMIs play a significant role in shaping your migration trajectory, such as by suggesting a specific employer or geographic place to work in?" (Schapendonk, Bolay, & Dahinden, 2020).

Answers varied from "*they suggested my you, my employee and they help me. They help me get the place to work in*" and "*they specifically told me, uh, who to work for and they told me that the places where to work in the Netherlands. I don't think I would have chosen the Netherlands if it wasn't for them*", which indicates that intermediaries provided guidance on job location that align with the interviewee's preferences and requirements: "*And yeah, they told me and helped me get the job in the Netherlands*".

The mobility trajectories of the interviewees reveal a complex picture of migration, work, and life decisions across various sectors in the Netherlands. The first group of respondents, including those involved in vegetable harvesting and meat packing,

show a pattern of return trips to Romania, coupled with contemplation about their future residency. For instance, one respondent mentioned, *"Yes I went back. I went back to Romania to my family but now I don't know. I don't know if settle in Netherlands or not,"* indicating the uncertainty that often accompanies the migrant experience. Another noted, *"OK so you I returned to Romania during summer but I plan on staying here. It's already 6 years and I think my future is better here than in Romania"* reflecting a decision to potentially settle due to perceived better opportunities. Similarly, others have echoed this sentiment of oscillation between staying and leaving, with statements like *"Yes I have sometimes returned to Romania during my work. But to I don't know maybe I will go back to Romania and start something there. Who knows?"*

Going forward, the interviews also encapsulate the experiences of those who have made repeated journeys between their home country and the Netherlands, highlighting the fluid nature of their migration trajectories. For example, one respondent shared, *"Yes I have been doing this job for many years so I think maybe 12. Oh and always go back to Romania some more times in a year? For my family you know"* showing the strong ties to their homeland despite long periods abroad. Another remarked, *"Yes I have returned to the country but I am thinking of staying somewhere in the West because... you know how it is at home there are not many opportunities"* which points to the economic motivations driving their stay in the West. The narratives collectively underscore the complexity of migration decisions, influenced by economic opportunities, family ties, and personal aspirations, as migrants navigate their lives across borders.

Another important point is that some participants were considering other countries from the West, such as Germany. One respondent mentioned, *"My brother told me he worked in Germany and the Netherlands and a lot of money and better life"*, suggesting that the decision to migrate was influenced by the positive migration experiences of relatives in multiple countries. Another one stated, *"Yes of course I think that if I hadn't seen their offer I would have gone to another country. For example Germany"*, indicating that while the Netherlands was the chosen destination, other countries were also considered viable options for migration. These statements reflect the dynamic and

comparative nature of migration decisions, where potential migrants weigh the opportunities and conditions in various destinations before settling on a particular country. The inclusion of Germany highlights the broader European context in which these migration decisions are made, underscoring the role of familial advice and perceived opportunities.

The interviewee responses provide compelling evidence to support the argument that intermediaries play a crucial role in guiding low-skilled Romanian agri-food migrants towards specific employment opportunities in the Netherlands. These intermediaries offer valuable insights, recommendations, and support, thereby shaping the migrants' job choices and influencing their decision to migrate to the Netherlands. Moreover, intermediaries not only provided recommendations but actively facilitated the process of finding employment opportunities for the migrant, as shown in one of the interviews: *“Oh, they influence my decision because I did not know in which part of Europe to go to work, and they showed me that the Netherlands might be a better place for me”* A woman added: *“then they tell you what you have to do there, what documents you have to give them, they ask you what your preferences are, what you want to work in. And after (they) send you to work.”* Another woman told me that she has been informed *“that (she) will be picking blueberries and they told (her) that (she) will live close to the place”*.

Letting the migrants know what is expected from them prior to the departure, as well as introducing them to the job *“they present the offer, then they tell you what you have to do there”* can build trust between the two actors. This trust is essential, as many of them have stated there was no previous contact between them: *“I didn't have any relationship with them before my migration”* and *“I think there was no relationship between me and them”*. Contrary, one interviewee categorized the interaction as *“I think that we were talking friendly”*.

One man has stated that there was a prior experience with the intermediaries, that of his brothers': *“I didn't know them, but uh, my brother worked with them. And yes, I*

*found them through my brother*". This is similar to what Portes and Sensenbrenner's paper concluded, as social networks play a vital role in aiding migration by giving those looking to immigrate to a new nation information, resources, and social support (Portes and Sensenbrenner, 1993). These networks, which include family and friends, provide as a conduit for connecting migrants to possibilities like employment, as mentioned by an interviewed man: *"I learned this opportunity from my friend"*.

In sum, the subchapter paints a picture of the migration trajectories of Romanian agri-food sector migrants, shaped by the instrumental role of LMIs. It reveals how these intermediaries not only facilitate the logistical aspects of migration but also significantly impact migrants' decisions and experiences, guiding them through the complexities of cross-border mobility. This analysis confirms the importance of understanding the nuanced interplay between individual agency, intermediary influence, and broader structural forces in shaping migration trajectories. It underscores the need for a higher appreciation of the migration process, recognizing the catalyst role of social networks and intermediary actors in facilitating access to opportunities and resources across borders. Through this lens, the migration trajectory emerges not just as a series of moves but as a complex journey of hope, adaptation, and negotiation within the global migration landscape.

#### 4.2. Facilitation as opportunity

Going forward, the focus shifts to the idea of "facilitation" in the context of low-skilled Romanian agri-food migrants in the Netherlands. In order to support migrants on their journey and during the migration process, intermediaries often provide assistance, direction, and resources. The goal of this section is to examine the multidimensional role that intermediaries play in enabling different aspects of migration, such as access to employment opportunities, paperwork, and critical services.

This section seeks to identify the ways in which intermediaries serve as facilitators, bridging the gaps and barriers that migrants experience during their migration process. It does so by examining the experiences and viewpoints provided by the

interviewees. For understanding the complex experiences and opportunities afforded to low-skilled Romanian agri-food migrants in their pursuit for a better life and greater economic prospects in the Netherlands, understanding the facilitation offered by intermediaries is essential.

#### 4.2.1. Background

In order to shed light on their demographic traits, migration reasons, and socioeconomic backgrounds, this section tries to look into the contextual elements that influenced the experiences of low-skilled Romanian agri-food migrants in the Netherlands.

This sub-chapter presents the analytical findings derived from the data collected, incorporating thematic patterns that have emerged throughout the study. These patterns, identified through a rigorous process of coding and categorization, serve to enhance the understanding of the migrants' experiences and shed light on the underlying factors shaping their migration journey. Additionally, this sub-chapter provides space for my personal reflections and thoughts on the findings, offering an interpretive lens to contextualize the results within the broader academic discourse on migration and the agri-food sector. The inclusion of my perspectives aims to contribute to the academic conversation and stimulate further inquiry into the experiences of low-skilled Romanian agri-food migrants in the Netherlands.

Coming from a poor place is not opportunistic, to start off. The nine respondents have stated that their background was either a “*poor place in Romania*” “*with not a lot of opportunities*” or that the “*situation was difficult*”. This is an ongoing and acknowledged problem, as Ignat et al.’s paper states that rural Romania has a high instability of youth, scarce job market and low entrepreneurial training (Ignat, Stoian, & Rosca, 2014). Moreover, there seems to be no coincidence that the migrants I have interviewed are coming from the countryside, not major big cities. The World Bank shows that 45% of the Romanians are living in rural areas (8,732,240) as of 2021 (World Bank, 2024).

Furthermore, when questioned about how they first encountered the intermediaries, the nine respondents have stated that “*Ohh, I searched on the Internet and found them*”; “*I saw the company on the Internet*” and “*I saw the post on a Facebook group*”. There are multiple migrants’ groups across the Internet, and because Romania has an 82.1% coverage of high-speed connections, it is expected that many low-skilled migrants have learned about the intermediaries this way (Reștea, 2022).

Finally, when researching their background, one final query arose: Why did the migrants decide to leave. Besides the mentioned answer: “*I want to have a future for my family*”, another migrant pointed out that “*I felt that I could not find anything in the country, so I decided to go abroad*”. As mentioned earlier, the rural Romania lacks an attractive job market. Not only that, but “*the money wasn't enough*”. Even if they end up getting a job in their county or village, they still think somewhere else “*the pay is higher and um... I don't know*”. This argument is supported by a Statista survey conducted among 1103 respondents, which showed that 34% of the respondents said that job opportunities in rural Romania are “Fairly bad” and 30% “Very bad” (Statista Research Department, 2023).

Nevertheless, as my study has been conducted on low-skilled migrants, they have also added that “*I finished high school and wanted to work*” and “*I just finished 12th grade and had to start working*”. One of the respondents pointed out that “*I was also a driver for a while, but the money wasn't enough*”. Originating from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds characterized by poverty and a lack of developed skills, the interviewees embarked on their migration journey driven by aspirations for a better life and improved financial prospects, including higher salaries. But the catalyst question is still in place: “How did the intermediaries shape their migration trajectory and experience in the Netherlands?”

#### 4.2.2. Experience with the intermediaries

While exploring the facilitation of migration for low-skilled Romanian agri-food migrants in the Netherlands, I found it essential to examine the perspectives and

experiences expressed by the interviewees regarding the role played by intermediaries. This part presents the interviewees' responses that shed light on their interactions with intermediaries and the perceived facilitation of their migration process. The following excerpts from the interviews provide insights into the interviewees' perspectives: "Can you describe your experience working with the labor migration intermediaries?" A subjective, yet powerful experience that has given shape to my whole thesis. Given the importance of separating those experiences from good, opportunistic ones and unfortunate, in/opportunistic, I have created two sections, as follows.

#### 4.2.3. "They gave me"

A small sentence that for a migrant could mean the shaping of his migration experience. One respondent has stated they he feels they (the brokers) "*have acted in my best interest*". This interest could translate into moving to another country, starting a new life and hoping for a better future. He then continued saying that "*they told me what to do and they gave me a house to live in*" and that he is "*happy with their help*".

*"If it wasn't for them, I don't think I would have worked in the Netherlands because I didn't know about the opportunities there."*

One respondent showed gratitude towards the intermediary and their help. Moreover, she stated that "*before my leave they helped me get to the documentation done and they helped me with the contract and uh, the transport*". The intermediaries facilitate the migration process by providing the Romanian worker with the necessary assistance getting the documents, and transportation to the "host" country, which in our case is the Netherlands (Lindquist, Xiang, & Brenda, 2012).

Moreover, another respondent has stated that "*(they) told me that they have these opportunities in the Netherlands and that they can help me with getting the documentation and everything going so I can start working*", whereas another woman said that "*(they) told me where I can work, what should I do*" and helped her "*getting the*

*you know, necessary papers done*". The language barriers, lack of international labor market knowledge and understanding, as well as lack of opportunities in the home country led to the above scenarios. It is important to note that the interviewees were not totally happy with the overall process.

One man has stated that *"without them I wouldn't have ended up working here"*, however other answers from the same man such as *"after I arrived in the Netherlands, I was practically handed over to the employer"* do show the experience was negative.

### 4.3. Control as in/opportunity

The following section delves into the concept of "control" within the context of low-skilled Romanian agri-food migrants in the Netherlands. Control refers to the extent to which intermediaries exert influence, manipulation, or restriction over the migration process and the subsequent experiences of migrants. This section aims to explore the various dimensions of control that emerge from the narratives and experiences of the interviewees. By examining the ways in which intermediaries exercise control over migrants' decision-making, employment opportunities, working conditions, and overall agency, this section sheds light on the complex power dynamics at play within the migration journey. Understanding the role of control is crucial for comprehending the nuanced experiences of low-skilled Romanian agri-food migrants and the potential vulnerabilities they face within the context of migration.

When talking about control, I have included the "Fees" associated with the services provided by the intermediaries. In their study, Lindquist, Xiang & Brenda argue that the fees associated with brokers have increased, as well as the number of market intermediaries (Lindquist, Xiang, & Brenda, 2012). However, the people I have interviewed told me that *"Ha ha. Oh yes, I paid them. Oh, but. Not, not much"* and *"I paid them a small amount of money"*. One woman told me that *"they didn't make me pay anything before"*. Money and fees are an important topic, as the gross minimum wage in Romania is around 460€, and therefore any high fee associated with the process would influence their decision to work with the intermediary: *"I wasn't having that much*

*money*” (Botea & Pâslaru, 2022). Therefore, I argue that fees can control the migration journey. Other interviewees told me that “*they can get money from my first salaries*” and “*money can be withdrawn over the course of several months*”. This practice of getting the fees associated with the brokering service from their salary is well known among the Romanian migrants, however it is in the grey legal zone, as the employer or intermediary can deduct some fees for the health insurance or rent, but not as the mentioned fees (Wekzoekenden, 2023). Lastly, one woman stated that “*they told me that there are two options, either I paid them up front or they can deduct the fee from my wage during a month period.*”, whereas another man said that “*they told me that I have to pay for my accommodation and insurance, but that I can pay after I get my first salary*”, which coincides with the above mentioned regarding the associate fees.

#### 4.3.1. “A company is a company”

The quote “*a company is a company*” reflects a pragmatic view of the workplace, underlining an universal truth across cultures: companies operate with a primary goal of profitability. This acknowledgment from the interviewees shows a recognition of the intrinsic nature of businesses to prioritize financial outcomes over individual welfare. It's a direct reflection on the transactional nature of labor migration, where personal aspirations intersect with the economic objectives of employers and intermediaries.

The statement of a respondent: “*I think at first that they wanted to they wanted to help me, but after a while I realized that their support is limited and they got the money off of me and that's about it.*” captures a common disillusionment among migrants. Initially, there might be an expectation of mutual benefit and support, but this often gives way to the realization that financial transactions dominate the relationship. This quote speaks volumes about the transitional support provided by companies or intermediaries, which is perceived as conditional and retractable once financial benefits are secured. It underscores a critical aspect of migrant labor—the initial promises of support and assistance may not always align with the long-term realities of the job and living conditions.

The positive remark “*Netherlands is nice and it matched my expectations*” juxtaposed with “*Staying a lot to work, but the money was good compared to Romania*” illustrates the complex motivations behind migration. Here, the migrant acknowledges the benefits of their migration experience, appreciating the socio-economic improvements it brings compared to their home country. Yet, this acknowledgment comes with the recognition of the sacrifices made, particularly in terms of comfort and work-life balance. The emphasis on financial gain over comfort highlights a willing trade-off many migrants make, prioritizing economic security over other aspects of well-being.

Similarly, the observation “*they told me what work to do and that I will live with the other Romanian working in the same place*” points to the structured and sometimes restrictive nature of migrant work arrangements. It implies a lack of choice or control over one’s living and working conditions, with the intermediary or employer dictating terms that consolidate workers by nationality, possibly to streamline management or exploit familiar bonds for better compliance.

Lastly, the repeated mention of the importance of the money incentive for both the broker and the migrant highlights a critical aspect of the labor migration industry. It shows how financial interests on both sides shape the migration experience, from the services provided by intermediaries to the workers’ tolerance of less-than-ideal conditions. This financial dynamic underscores a broader economic reality: labor migration is driven by the pursuit of better opportunities, but it is also constrained by the economic interests of those who facilitate it.

In sum, these quotes reveal a layered understanding of the migration experience, marked by an acceptance of economic realities, strategic sacrifices for financial gain, and a nuanced negotiation of support and independence. The interviewees’ reflections offer insight into the complex interplay of hope, exploitation, and resilience that characterizes the migrant journey.

#### 4.3.2. Working and living conditions

Several studies showed that experiences as a whole, including migrant's well-being, job satisfaction, and overall quality of life, are greatly influenced by their working and living conditions. As Svensson et al. pointed out, unfavorable working conditions can have a range of negative effects, including exploitation, physical and mental health issues, and a lack of opportunities for social integration (Svensson, et al., 2013). Additionally, unfavorable working conditions, such as long hours, low pay, a lack of job security, hazardous working surroundings, and restricted access to labor rights, may make labor migrants more vulnerable and marginalized (Svensson, et al., 2013).

The narratives from migrant workers reveal a nuanced layer of control exercised by intermediaries, impacting their perception and experiences. For instance, one worker's reflection, "*They told me where I will live. They told me what my wage was. They told me how far the work is from the place I would live in. They tried preparing me for it, but I don't think it was accurate, to be honest*" highlights a common practice of selective disclosure by intermediaries. This manipulation of expectations not only maintains control over migrants' perceptions but also prepares them for a reality that often falls short of promises, underscoring a discrepancy between expected and actual conditions.

Another important observation, "*The reality is totally different from what is presented to you and what you see in the pictures. We work a lot, we are crowded and nobody really talks to us or helps us*" illustrates the contrast between the intermediaries' representations and the migrants' lived experiences. This gap evidences the intermediaries' influence over migrants' perceptions, potentially exploiting their vulnerability by controlling crucial information about living and working conditions.

Furthermore, the sentiment, "*I don't think they were for our own good, but I think they were more interested in getting us here and then practically washing their hands*" captures the transactional nature of the intermediaries' engagement with migrants. It underscores a shift in attention once the financial transaction is completed, leaving migrants to navigate their new environment with diminished support. This experience of

decreased contact post-arrival, as articulated by “*until I left we were constantly talking, they answered the phone, but after I arrived the contact decreased quite a lot*” further reflects the intermediaries' control strategy, restricting migrants' access to support and reinforcing their dependency.

The assignment of specific work and living arrangements, as noted in “*They told me I was going to work in a factory, basically packing meat. And they told me that I will live with other Romanians and other immigrants in a house quite close to the place*” demonstrates the extent of control intermediaries exert over migrants' employment and housing, directly influencing their daily lives and social interactions.

Lastly, the reflections on work conditions and contractual negotiations—or the lack thereof—reveal the constraints placed on migrants' agency. Statements like “*Most of the time we work 10-12 hours. Uhh, I couldn't negotiate anything, unfortunately*” and “*I did not negotiate because the pay was good*” highlight the power imbalance between migrants and their employers/intermediaries, further emphasizing the controlling influence of the latter over key aspects of the migrants' experiences.

These citations, contextualized within the broader narrative of intermediary control, paint a vivid picture of the challenges faced by migrants. They underscore the complex dynamics of power, control, and vulnerability that define the migrant worker experience, shaped significantly by the actions and priorities of labor migration intermediaries.

Despite the advocacy efforts of NGOs like FairWork and ROMPRO, which promote the use of contracts in a language that the migrants understand, rather than exclusively in Dutch, my research findings indicate that the practice of not providing Romanians with such opportunities is prevalent among brokers and employers. Consequently, the prevailing norm appears to be the absence of negotiation possibilities and the absence of Romanian/English contracts. This indicates a lack of transparency and accountability in the recruitment and employment processes of low-skilled Romanian

agri-food migrants in the Netherlands. The findings suggest that intermediaries and employers may exploit the language barrier to their advantage, restricting the migrants' ability to fully comprehend and negotiate the terms and conditions of their employment. Such practices contribute to the power imbalance between the intermediaries/ employers and the migrants, further reinforcing the control exerted by the former over the latter.

Collectively, these interview responses provide strong evidence of intermediaries' control over the migrant workers' experiences. The intermediaries' selective information disclosure, manipulation of expectations, influence over living conditions and payment, limited support after arrival, assignment of specific tasks and accommodations, and control over the narrative all demonstrate the power dynamics at play. Understanding and addressing this control is crucial for safeguarding the rights and well-being of low-skilled Romanian agri-food migrants in the Netherlands, promoting fair and ethical migration practices, and empowering migrants to exercise agency and autonomy in their migration journeys.

#### 4.3.3. “Oh dear, the reality is so different than I thought”

Within the context of low-skilled Romanian agri-food migrants in the Netherlands, the desires of individuals to either settle in their destination country or continue their migration trajectory are influenced by the bridge of in/ opportunity constructed by migration brokers. These brokers play a pivotal role in shaping migrants' experiences and opportunities, acting as facilitators or controllers in their journey. Understanding the motivations and aspirations of migrants in relation to settlement or continued migration is crucial for comprehending the complex dynamics and outcomes of their migration experiences (de Haas & Rodriguez, 2010). This section delves into the desires and decision-making processes of low-skilled Romanian agri-food migrants, exploring how the “bridge of in/ opportunity” constructed by migration brokers influences their choices regarding settlement or onward migration. By examining their perspectives and experiences, this section seeks to shed light on the intricate interplay between migrants' desires, the opportunities presented to them, and the agency they exert

in navigating their migration trajectories.

The profound statement provided by a female interviewee working in strawberry picking: "*oh dear, the realities so different than I thought*" serves as a pivotal pillar for this section of the thesis. Its significance extends beyond its emotional impact during the interview, as it resonates with the experiences of both the research participants and me. It is what a woman working in strawberry picking has shared during the interviews. It is what I have also lived throughout my experience in the Netherlands and doing my research. The same woman continued saying that "*maybe I will go back to Romania and start something there. Who knows?*" which provided me with high hopes for her.

Another respondent replied that "*always go back to Romania [...] for my family, you know*". This sentiment reflects the migrants' desire to maintain a connection with their home country and prioritize familial relationships, underscoring the complex interplay between personal aspirations, economic opportunities, and social obligations within the migration process. Moreover, another woman stated that "*I want to go back home and build something maybe*".

However, amidst the complexity of migrant aspirations, I have also come across responses that shed light on the motivations and considerations underlying the desire to stay in the Netherlands or explore alternative destinations. Some participants expressed the intention to establish roots in Western countries due to limited opportunities in their home country, as reflected in statements such as, "*I am thinking of staying somewhere in the West, because... you know how it is at home, there are not many opportunities*". Others expressed a specific preference for relocating to the Netherlands, often citing the appeal of larger cities, as exemplified by the remark, "*I would like to move here to the Netherlands, maybe to a bigger city.*"

Nevertheless, language barriers emerged as a significant factor influencing migrants' decisions and perceptions. Several participants highlighted the difficulties they faced in language acquisition, recognizing its importance for successful integration and

settlement. Expressions like "*I couldn't just stay here. It's hard with the language*", "*Oh, the language is hard,*" and "*I don't know if to settle in the Netherlands or not*" underscore the challenges associated with language proficiency and its impact on migrants' ability to navigate their new environment effectively (Belot & Ederveen , 2011). The complexities surrounding language acquisition and its potential implications for social and economic integration warrant further investigation and consideration within the context of low-skilled Romanian agri-food migrants' desires to stay in the Netherlands or explore alternative paths.

In conclusion, the interviews demonstrate the nuanced and complex decision-making processes that migrants undergo as they weigh their options. While some express a firm intention to establish roots in the Netherlands, others remain uncertain, contemplating potential return to Romania or exploring alternative destinations in the Western world. The interplay between personal aspirations, economic considerations, familial ties, and the challenges encountered in the migration process underscores the intricate nature of settlement decisions.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

To address the first sub-question, "What are the mobility trajectories of Romanian low-skilled agri-food workers?", this study concurs with Piętko-Nykaza's research, which suggests that migrants often follow circulatory patterns (Piętko-Nykaza, 2017). The findings from this study reveal that Romanian migrants choose to leave their home country but typically refrain from settling permanently. Instead, they continue their migratory trajectory, either returning to Romania, seeking better living conditions within the Netherlands, or continuing onward through Western Europe.

Regarding the second sub-question, "What and who are the intermediating actors shaping these trajectories?", it can be argued that these actors encompass a range of individuals, including labor market intermediaries and social networks. However, in line with the existing literature emphasizing the significance of brokers in the migration process, the findings of this study align with this perspective (Lindquist, Xiang, & Brenda, 2012); (Faist, 2014); (Cranston, Schapendonk, & Spaan, 2017). All nine interviewees in this study had experiences with migration brokers, indicating their pivotal role in shaping the trajectories of low-skilled agri-food Romanian migrants. Although the social network was briefly mentioned, the primary actors involved in shaping the migrants' trajectories were brokers. It is important to note that this study does not delve into the specific nature of these actors, whether they are individuals or entities such as companies, although some interviewees mentioned the involvement of "a company."

Moving on to the third sub-question, "How does this shaping result in experiences of in/opportunity in the Netherlands?" it is evident that the actions of the aforementioned actors resulted in experiences of in/ opportunity within the Netherlands, given their direct involvement in the migration process. These experiences encompassed various aspects, such as guiding Romanians through job listings, facilitating transportation and accommodation, assisting with documents and insurance, or failing to provide necessary support by not answering phone calls or fulfilling required obligations. These experiences directly impacted the movement of the migrants.

Lastly, it is crucial to highlight the presence of precarity throughout the entire process. Several interviewees mentioned receiving "flexible" contracts, experiencing workplace inequality, and enduring poor living conditions, which aligns with the existing literature on the subject (Siegmann, Quaedvlieg, & Williams, 2022). The research findings also corroborate the literature by identifying lower wages, lack of social protection, and communication challenges as significant issues faced by the migrants (Keune, 2013); (Jütting & de Laiglesia, 2009).

Based on the array of experiences and insights shared by the Romanian interviewees, as well as the conceptual framework I have developed, a more comprehensive conclusion can be drawn regarding the catalyst question of this thesis: "What role do brokers play in shaping the mobility trajectories of Romanian workers migrating to the Netherlands, and how do these agents influence the dual nature of in/opportunity experienced by these workers within the migratory process?"

The findings of this study shed light on the multifaceted role of intermediaries in shaping the migration trajectories and experiences of low-skilled Romanian agri-food migrants. It is evident that intermediaries play a significant role in facilitating the migration process, offering valuable assistance and guidance to migrants. The interviewees' testimonies reveal that intermediaries provide crucial support in terms of arranging accommodation, securing employment opportunities, facilitating documentation, and organizing transportation. They act as bridges of opportunity, connecting migrants with employment prospects that may not have been accessible otherwise. The positive experiences recounted by some interviewees highlight the instrumental role of intermediaries in opening doors and expanding horizons for migrants, enabling them to improve their living conditions and pursue better economic prospects in the Netherlands.

However, alongside the facilitation of migration, the control exerted by intermediaries also emerges as a notable aspect of the migration process. The

interviewees' accounts reveal instances where intermediaries exercise control over migrants, influencing their decision-making and limiting their agency. This control is evidenced through the lack of transparency surrounding working and living conditions, limited negotiation opportunities, and the absence of contracts in languages understood by the migrants. These practices not only restrict the autonomy of the migrants but also create a power imbalance that favors the intermediaries and employers.

The interviewees mentioned multiple situations in which their migration trajectory has been facilitated and/ or controlled, which resulted in experiences of in/opportunities. The concept of brokers building bridges of in/ opportunities is important as it showcases both the positive and negative sides of the process. These experiences are what then result in the decision to continue with the journey or return home “*and start something there. Who knows?*”, as mentioned by one respondent.

The participants in this study shared valuable insights into their background, highlighting their origins in rural areas or impoverished regions of Romania. While specific locations were not always mentioned, two participants disclosed completing high school, without specifying whether they had passed their "Baccalaureate" examination. Others mentioned engaging in various flexible jobs, such as previously working as drivers. These narratives reflect the daily reality faced by many Romanians hailing from similar backgrounds.

Considering the facilitation of their migration trajectories, all nine respondents affirmed receiving some form of assistance with finding work or securing a job. Six respondents reported receiving support with transportation to the receiving country, while all nine were aided in securing accommodation. However, it is worth noting that two respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the accommodation provided for them. In terms of contracts, only four respondents received assistance, and unfortunately, two of them had negative experiences with the contractual arrangements. The intermediaries extended help with documentation to five Romanian migrants, while only two respondents received assistance with insurance matters. These findings highlight the

varying degrees of support provided by intermediaries during the migration process. While the majority of respondents received assistance with finding employment, transportation, and accommodation, there were notable shortcomings in other areas. The limited provision of support for contractual matters, documentation, and insurance suggests potential gaps in the services offered by the brokers.

From a controlling perspective, an examination of the interviews reveals several key findings. Firstly, it is noteworthy that a significant majority of the interviewed Romanians, specifically eight individuals, reported the presence of associated fees imposed by the intermediaries. This suggests that intermediaries exercise control over the financial aspects of the migration process, potentially exploiting the vulnerability of the migrants. Secondly, the intermediaries played a prominent role in guiding the interviewees towards suitable accommodation. The consensus among the respondents is that the intermediaries took charge of recommending and arranging their housing arrangements. This level of involvement demonstrates the intermediaries' control over the living conditions and arrangements experienced by the migrants. Furthermore, all nine interviewees indicated that the intermediaries proposed the direction of their migration journey. This indicates a significant level of control exerted by the intermediaries in determining the destination country and, by extension, the opportunities available to the migrants.

In terms of the employment aspect, a considerable number of respondents, specifically eight, reported that the intermediaries proposed and provided them with employment contracts. This suggests that the intermediaries have a significant role in shaping the contractual arrangements of the migrants, potentially limiting their ability to negotiate terms that align with their interests and rights. The lack of negotiation reported by eight respondents further reinforces the control exerted by the intermediaries. This indicates that the intermediaries hold a dominant position in the decision-making process, potentially restricting the agency and autonomy of the migrants in negotiating their employment conditions.

The analysis of the interviews reveals several important findings regarding the control exerted by intermediaries in the migration trajectories of the Romanian interviewees. Firstly, the presence of associated fees imposed by intermediaries indicates a significant level of control over the financial aspects of the migration process. This suggests a potential exploitation of the migrants' vulnerability. Secondly, the intermediaries played a prominent role in guiding the interviewees towards suitable accommodation, highlighting their control over the living conditions experienced by the migrants. Furthermore, the intermediaries proposed the direction of the migration journey for all interviewees, demonstrating their control over the destination country and the opportunities available to the migrants.

Corroborating the above mentioned, I can state that the intermediaries play a dual role in the migration trajectory of low-skilled Romanian agri-food workers in the Netherlands. On one hand, intermediaries facilitate the migration process by offering opportunities that are not readily available in their country of origin. These opportunities include access to employment, accommodation, and a destination for migration. On the other hand, intermediaries exercise control over the migrants by influencing their access to such in/opportunities. They determine the terms and conditions of employment contracts, guide the migrants towards specific destinations, and have a significant role in arranging their accommodation. The provision of these in/ opportunities can significantly influence the experiences and ultimate outcomes of the migration journey for the individuals involved.

*“Oh dear, the reality is so different than I thought.”*

## 6. Recommendations for future research

In the course of my research, I engaged with nine participants for interviews. While this figure might appear modest, especially in the context of broader quantitative analyses, it was chosen deliberately to enrich the study with detailed, qualitative insights that such narratives afford. This methodological choice aligns with my objective to explore the nuanced experiences of migrants beyond mere numerical representation. It's important to acknowledge that a larger sample size could potentially offer a more comprehensive overview of migrant experiences and facilitate a quantitative analysis, adding valuable dimensions to the field of migration studies through statistical significance and graphic visualizations of trends.

My relocation from the Netherlands, paralleling a migration journey of my own, presented unique challenges, including the inability to conduct on-site fieldwork in farms or food factories. Recognizing the limitations imposed by the scope of this study, I advocate for future research to expand on this groundwork by including a broader array of interviews that encapsulate a more diverse spectrum of migrant nationalities, thus enriching the tapestry of migrant narratives within migration studies

There are several recommendations for further research and exploration that can contribute to a deeper understanding of intermediaries in the context of migration. Firstly, it is necessary to broaden the scope of the investigation beyond the Dutch context and extend the research to encompass other countries in Western Europe. The current study focused exclusively on Romanian migrants in the Netherlands who had connections with the volunteering organization ROMPRO. Conducting more extensive research across different countries would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the role of intermediaries in facilitating and controlling migration trajectories.

Secondly, while this study primarily examined jobs within the agri-food sector, it would be insightful to explore how the conceptual framework of in/opportunity “bridges” applies to regular jobs as well. Understanding the dynamics and effects of intermediaries

in both irregular and regular employment settings would contribute to a more nuanced understanding of their role in shaping migration experiences and outcomes.

Thirdly, the examination of im/mobilities associated with low-skilled Romanian agri-food workers should be expanded to consider the broader migration industry. Exploring how intermediaries operate within the larger migration industry ecosystem, including sectors beyond agri-food, would shed light on common patterns, challenges, and power dynamics that may exist across different sectors of the labor market.

Lastly, the typologies of intermediaries identified in the "In/ opportunity insights" section of the thesis, namely "Partisan arbitration" and "Tertius gaudens", provide valuable insights into their roles and potential outcomes (Faist, 2014). However, it would be beneficial for the field of migration studies to incorporate the "Divide et impera" typology, which involves intermediaries intentionally creating divisions between the parties they mediate (Faist, 2014). Examining the impact of this particular typology would enhance our understanding of the complex dynamics and power relations between intermediaries and migrants.

Addressing these research gaps and expanding the scope of investigation would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the role of intermediaries in shaping migration trajectories, the experiences of migrants, and the potential inequalities or divisions that may arise within the migration process.

## 6.1. Policy recommendations

A range of policy recommendations can be proposed to effectively address the issues identified and promote equitable and just migration practices based on the findings and insights derived from my study on the facilitation and control of migration trajectories by intermediaries in the context of low-skilled Romanian agri-food workers in the Netherlands. These recommendations seek to address concerns related to the influence of intermediaries on migration outcomes while upholding the rights and welfare

of migrant workers.

Firstly, it is recommended to establish robust regulatory frameworks, incorporating licensing requirements and accreditation processes for intermediaries. Such measures would ensure the legitimacy of intermediaries and enforce compliance with ethical standards, contributing to more accountable and transparent practices. Additionally, the enforcement mechanisms should be strengthened to effectively penalize intermediaries engaging in exploitative or fraudulent activities, including the imposition of fines and the revocation of licenses.

Secondly, the development of standardized employment contract templates is crucial. These templates should comprehensively outline the rights, responsibilities, and working conditions of migrant workers, and be made available in multiple languages to ensure accessibility and understanding. Encouraging transparent and fair contractual negotiations between employers, intermediaries, and workers, with the provision of legal assistance and support, can empower migrant workers to actively participate in negotiating terms and conditions that align with their interests and rights. This will help prevent situations where workers face exploitative or unfair contractual arrangements.

Furthermore, language training programs tailored to the specific needs of migrant workers can be explored. These programs should focus on job-related vocabulary and cultural integration, helping workers overcome language barriers and facilitating their integration into the host society. However, the implementation of such programs may face challenges in reaching individuals from rural areas in Romania, who often form a significant proportion of the low-skilled migrant population.

By implementing these policy recommendations, policymakers and relevant stakeholders can work collaboratively to establish a more transparent, fair, and rights-based migration system for low-skilled Romanian agri-food workers and other migrant populations. These measures aim to mitigate the potential exploitation and control exerted by intermediaries, while promoting the agency, well-being, and successful

integration of migrant workers within their host countries.

## 7. Appendix

### Interview guide

#### **Introduction**

I appreciate it a lot that you took your time to have this interview with me. I am Paul, a 23-year-old student at Radboud University in Nijmegen. I am researching the migration of the Romanian workers in the Dutch agri-food industry. Therefore, I will be asking questions about your current experience and, if applicable, your previous one. Lastly, I am interested in the way this experience was shaped by the intermediaries which helped you along the way. Furthermore, if those intermediaries met the expectations and respected what they promised you before your departure.

*Some significant aspects of the interview include:*

- *The interview will be recorded for transcription. The responses will be anonymized. After then, the recording will be removed.*
- *You are not required to respond to any questions with which you are uncomfortable.*
- *The interview could conclude at any time.*

If everything is clear, I would like to start the interview.

#### **Opening questions:**

1. Can you tell me about your background and how you ended up deciding to work in the agri-food sector in the Netherlands?
2. How did you first learn about the opportunity to work in the Netherlands, and what motivated you to pursue this opportunity?

### **Question about LMIs:**

3. Can you describe your experience working with LMIs (Labor Migration Intermediaries)? What exactly do they do, and how are they involved in the migration process? Have they influenced your decision to migrate to the Netherlands?
4. How did you encounter the LMIs, and what kind of relationship did you have with them before and during your migration to the Netherlands?
5. Did the LMIs play a significant role in shaping your migration trajectory, such as by suggesting a specific employer or geographic place to work in?
6. Were there any fees or charges associated with working with the LMIs, and if so, were these fees reasonable and transparent?
7. What kind of information did the LMIs provide you with about your work and living conditions in the Netherlands? Did they adequately prepare you for what to expect upon arrival?
8. Did the LMIs explain to you the terms of your contract, including your salary, working hours, and other benefits? Were you able to negotiate the terms of your contract, or did you feel that you had little say in the matter?
9. How did you feel upon arrival in the Netherlands? Did the reality of working and living there match your expectations?
10. Can you describe the working conditions and environment on the farm where you are currently/ were employed? Do you feel that you have been treated fairly by your employer?
11. Have you experienced any difficulties with the LMIs or your employer since arriving in the Netherlands, such as issues with your contract or your living conditions?
12. Do you feel that the LMIs have acted in your best interests, or do you feel that they prioritize the interests of your employer over your own?
13. In your opinion, what role should LMIs play in the migration process, and what changes, if any, would you like to see in how LMIs operate?

14. Did you go back to Romania and then returned to the Netherlands during your working contract? Have you thought of permanently settling in one place?
15. In your opinion, how much of your experience working and living in the Netherlands was influenced by the LMIs versus other factors such as your employer, government policies, or personal circumstances?
16. Looking back on your migration experience, do you feel that working with LMIs was a positive or negative experience overall, and why?
17. What advice would you give to other migrant workers who are considering working with LMIs in the Netherlands, and how can they ensure that they have a positive and ethical experience?

**Closing Questions:**

18. Is there anything else you would like to add or discuss that we haven't touched upon yet?
19. Can you share any recommendations or suggestions for future research in this area?
20. Is there anyone else you know who may be interested in sharing their experience working with LMIs in the Netherlands?

**Thank you Note:**

Thank you for taking the time to share your valuable insights and personal experiences with us. Your contribution will undoubtedly aid in furthering our understanding of the role that LMIs play in shaping the migration trajectories and experiences of agri-food labor migrants in the Netherlands. I appreciate your willingness to participate and share your perspective, and we hope that this interview has been a positive and insightful experience for you as well. Thank you again for your time and input.

## **I. MAXQDA Template**

### 1. Background

1.1. Decision to leave

1.2. Opportunity met

1.3. Aspiration

1.4. Background

### 2. Facilitation & Control

#### 2.1. Netherlands

2.1.1. Opinion on employer

2.1.2. Opinion on Netherlands

#### 2.2. Facilitation

2.2.1. Assistance with contract

2.2.2. Assistance with trajectory

2.2.3. Assistance with transport

2.2.4. Assistance with documents

#### 2.3. Control

2.3.1. Living/ working conditions

2.3.2. Pay discrepancies

2.3.3. Lack of help

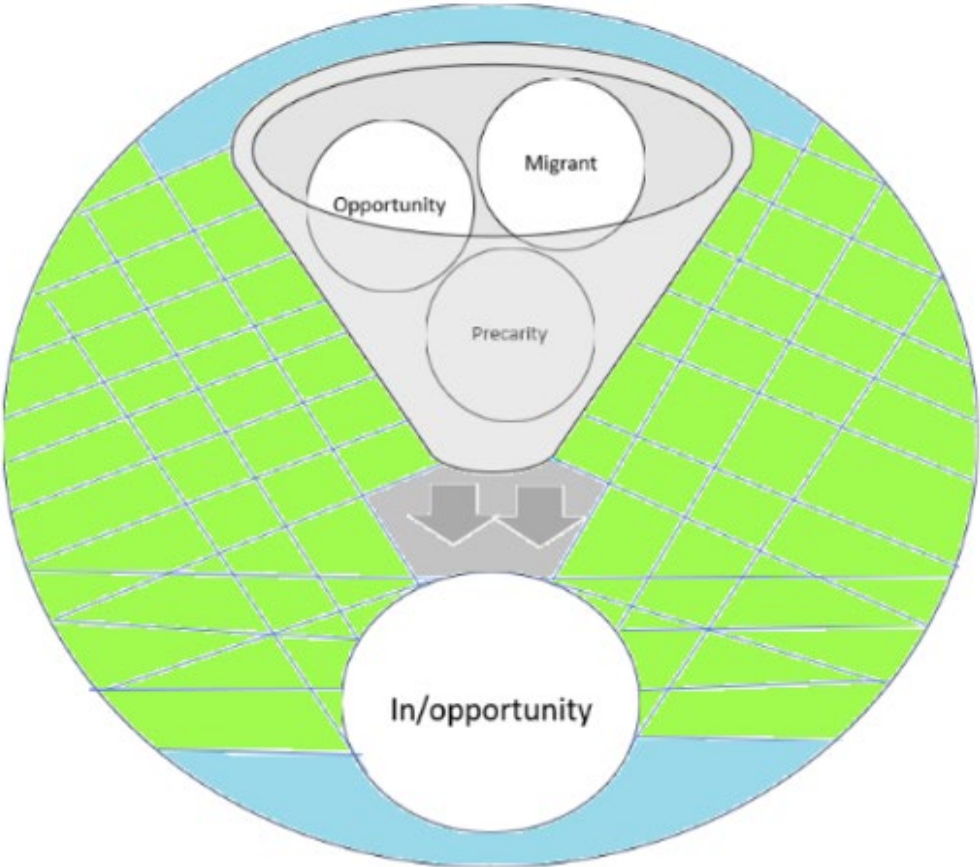
2.3.4. Fees











#### 2.4. Future

2.4.1. Settlement/ return

2.4.2. Advice for other migrants

**II. Conceptual framework**



Legend	
	 Facilitation & Control
	 Migratory experience
	 Ir/regular migration
	 Background & Future
	 Brokerage

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