Masterthesis

An EU pilot on circular migration: many interests, many demands, but in whose favour?

An academic study on the European Commission's policy on circular migration and the goals pursued by the actors involved in an EU legal migration pilot project called Digital Explorers

Nadia van de Weem
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Author:	Nadia van de Weem
Registration number:	960713933010
Master:	Master International Development Studies
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Abstract

In 2018 the European Commission (EC) started to financially support pilot projects on circular migration between selected African countries and EU Member States. However, it is not the first time that the EC promotes circular migration and that Member States develop pilot projects. In the mid-2000s already, several European countries, such as the Netherlands and Germany, started pilot projects on circular migration. Although the EC has promoted circular migration as a triple win (for the country of origin, the country of destination and the migrant), the results of previous projects have been mixed. Some of the former pilots have been extended or scaled up. Other pilots ended after the pilot stage. The EC's re-emerging attention for circular migration pilots raises, therefore, questions about the EC's objectives for pilot projects; and if these objectives are also in line with the objectives of actors involved in a pilot project. Therefore, this research aims to create a better understanding of how the interests of the different parties involved in an EU circular migration pilot project can be related to the broader EU policy on circular migration.

This thesis explored this question in depth using a case-study called Digital Explorers. Digital Explorers is one of the four current pilot projects of the Mobility Partnership Facility (MPF) on legal migration. The project started at the beginning of 2019 and brought young ICT-specialists from Nigeria to Lithuania for a one-year paid job in a Lithuanian ICT-company. The thesis results are based on data gathered from literature research, analyses of policy documents, semi-structured interviews, and webinars.

This thesis showed that although the EC had clear goals for Digital Explorers - presenting an alternative for irregular migration, filling labour market gaps, and increasing the cooperation with third countries on return and readmission -, it turned out that these goals were difficult to reach. The explanation of this outcome should not be found in the project outcome itself but within the EC's formulated objectives. The DE-project showed that the EC's objectives are not realistic for pilot projects because it goes ahead of the context in which these pilot projects are created: a context in which the project implementers must start from scratch. The EC presents circular migration pilot projects as a ready-made triple win framework that Member States can implement in any context to reach macro and long-term political goals. However, this thesis showed that a pilot project cannot achieve these long-term macro-political goals if the environment in which this project needs to be implemented is not ready for a mobility project in the first place. Therefore, it is also difficult to relate the interests of the different parties involved in the DE-project to the EC's broader policy on circular migration. It seems that these two different levels do not really interact: the macro-level of EU policy that has macro ideas on how Member States should implement circular migration to reach specific political goals, and a micro project level in which the project implementers of the DE-project are busy creating an environment that makes a circular migration project possible in the first place.

However, suppose the EC ever wants to fulfil their long-term political goals, they should first consider making the objective 'creating an enabling environment including a positive migration narrative' one of their main drivers to

implement pilot projects. Because only when a context is created that allows mobility in the first place it can become more realistic that the EC leaves this pilot mode. And only when the EU can leave this pilot mode sustainable circular migrations projects can be built, which have a higher chance to be successfully used as a tool at the negotiation table with third countries on readmission and return of irregular migrants.

Key words: *circular migration, legal migration pilot projects, triple win, European Commission (EC), irregular migration, migration-development-security-nexus, migration narratives.*

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Glossary

CAMM	Common Agendas for Migration and Mobility
DE	Digital Explorers
EC	European Commission
EL	Enterprise Lithuania
EU	European Union
GAMM	Global Approach to Migration and Mobility
ICMPD	International Centre for Migration Policy Development
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
LMFA	Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MP	Mobility Partnership
MPF	Mobility Partnership Facility
SMEs	Small and Medium-sized Enterprises
VP	Ventures Platform

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Introduction

> *"Enhanced and tailored cooperation on legal migration with third countries of origin and transit of migrants will help reduce irregular migration by offering safe and legal alternatives for persons wishing to migrate; it will contribute to bridging gaps in certain sectors of Member States' labour markets; and will be an incentive to facilitate cooperation on issues such as prevention of irregular migration, readmission, and return of irregular migrants*" (EC 2018, 6-7).

In 2018 the European Commission (EC) stated that 'controlled and legal migration' should play a vital role in a 'balanced and comprehensive migration policy'. The EC is convinced that legal migration could answer the EU's labour market needs and attract more international talent needed to 'remain competitive in the global economy'. While at the same time, it could reduce irregular migration and contribute to better migration management and cooperation with third countries (EC 2018a, 6-7). Legal migration, and in particular temporary or circular migration, could, therefore, according to Vermeulen (2020), be an answer for the current political migration deadlock[1] that the EU and its Member States face. For every party in the political spectrum, from left to right, there should at least be one attractive benefit when circular migration is presented as something with so many advantages (Vermeulen 2020). However, so far, Member States did not make many efforts to offer legal migration pathways for African countries. The number of residence permits issued to Africans actually dropped by 70% between 2008 and 2017 (Barslund et al. 2019, 2). Moreover, from the total budget that the EU and its Member States spent on migration in Nigeria, only around 0.09% is spent on legal migration pathways between the EU and Nigeria (Vermeulen, Tromp and Zandonini 2019). Therefore, different academics, international institutions, and politicians, argue that the EU has focused too long and unsuccessfully on irregular migration (that covers only 5% of the total migration to the EU), making a new migration narrative needed: *"it's time the EU shifted its narrative and policy approach from border management and control to investing regular channels for migration*" (Boeselager member of VOLT in the European Parliament in Dempster et al., 2021).

Against this backdrop, the EC decided in 2018 to (financially) support pilot projects on legal migration (for labour and traineeship purposes) between selected African countries and EU Member States (EC 2018a, 7). However, it is not the first time that the EC promotes circular migration, and that Member States develop pilot projects. Already in the mid-2000s, several European countries, such as the Netherlands and Germany, started pilot projects on circular migration (Hooper 2019, 3). The results of these pilot projects have been mixed, and many challenges have occurred when it comes to the creation of the programs. Some of the former pilots have been extended or scaled up. Others were ended after the pilot stage (Hooper 2019, 4). This re-emerging attention for circular migration pilots by the EC raises questions: What is the reason for the EC to re-launch a 'pilot project

[1] This means that between Member States there is a lack of agreement on how a common migration and asylum framework should look like and how it should be implemented. In September 2020 the EC did a new attempt to find an agreement with her new Pact on Asylum and Migration, but until today there is still no progress in the negotiations on the migration and asylum file.

phase'? Is it because there is friction between the goals of the EC and the outcomes of the projects or because the view of the EC has completely changed, making new pilots necessary? What does the EC want with legal migration schemes precisely? And what do actors involved in the pilot projects want to achieve with these projects? And are these goals in line with the objectives of the EC? Or are there contradictions, which can explain why new pilots are promoted?

Looking at the literature on circular migration, different academics write about the motives and benefits to participate in a circular migration scheme from the perspectives of the three categories involved: the country of destination, the country of origin, and the migrant (Wickramasekara 2011). For the country of destination, policymakers consider legal and circular migration as a way to reduce the amount of (partly) economically motivated asylum seekers and irregular migration coming to Europe (ACVZ 2019, 10), while helping to address labour shortages in specific sectors in the EU (EC 2018a, 6). For the country of origin, circular migration programs could reduce unemployment through relocation of citizens to other countries, while benefiting from both the remittances and from the application of skills and experiences that nationals gained in the country of destination and can use after return (Adamba and Quartey 2016, 240). In contrast to permanent migration, circular migration solves, according to proponents, the issue of brain drain[2] and even ensures brain circulation (Adamba and Quartey 2016, 240). Furthermore, policymakers and academics argue that circular migration could create more significant opportunities for the migrant to increase his/her employability, knowledge, and skills (EMN 2011, 10).

Although the benefits of circular migration sound very promising, different researchers have questioned this triple-win outcome (Segatti 2016, 86). Especially when it comes to the so-called advantages for migrants themselves (EMN 2011, 12), academics have criticized that circular migration might not be the ideal form of migration (Wickramasekara 2011, 23). Within some circular migration programs, several protection problems and rights' issues have occurred (Wickramasekara 2011, 2). Also, there is little evidence so far on whether these projects actually help to reduce irregular migration (Hooper 2019, 4) and to what extend legal migration could actually be a solution for the political deadlock that the EU and its Member States are confronted with and the migration 'crisis' that the EU faced and might face again in the nearby future.

Next to that, in literature research, the motives and interests of the three categories are analysed very generally. They do not go deeper into the perspective of specific parties that can be found in these 'triple win' categories. For example, when looking at a circular migration program from the 'country of destination', there are multiple actors involved, such as government institutions, NGOs, and private sector companies. However, most literature so far is only focused on the general interest of the category of the 'country of destination', ignoring that the actors within this category all have a different interest in a circular migration project (Stefanescu 2020, 5). For example, during the Dutch Blue Birds circular migration pilot project in 2011/12, it turned out that even the different Dutch ministers that were involved in the project had competing project goals (Siegel and van der Vorst

[2] Brain drain is "*the situation in which large numbers of educated and very skilled people leave their own country to live and work in another one where pays and conditions are better*" (Camebridge Dictionary 2021).

2012, 23). Let alone all the other national actors that were involved with their varied objectives and perceptions. Therefore, the 'win' for the country of destination is not as simplistic as often presented. The lack of knowledge on the interests of these different actors within these 'triple win' categories is striking since these actors do have much influence on the design and outcome of the project. For example, according to Wickramasekara (2011, 26), there is not much known about the possible interest of employers in circular migration programs. However, in current pilot project evaluations, it turned out that employers do play a crucial role in the success of circular migration programs (Stefanescu 2020, 8).

To fill these knowledge gaps, this thesis will:

1) analyse the view of the EC on the goals of circular migration projects and consider why (not) (and how) this view has changed in the last ten years;
2) examine the motivations and interests of the participants and partners that are involved in one of the current EU-pilot projects on circular migration to get a better understanding of their interests in the project;
3) combine these two aspects, placing the goals pursued by the actors involved in an EU migration pilot in the broader objectives that the EC tries to achieve with circular migration schemes.

I draw on the case-study 'Digital Explorers' (DE) to fill the above-presented knowledge gaps. Digital Explorers is one of the first legal migration pilot projects launched by an EU Member State in collaboration with the EC. The project started at the beginning of 2019 and brought young ICT-specialists from Nigeria to Lithuania for a one-year paid job in a Lithuanian ICT-company. The program is financed with the EU Asylum Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) and is one of the four current pilot projects of the Mobility Partnership Facility (MPF) (MPF 2020a).

Research aim and objective

The broader aim of this research is to reflect on to what extent it is possible to regulate migration, what the effects of these regulations are, and who benefits from these effects. The specific purpose is to create a better understanding of how the interests of the different parties that are involved in an EU circular migration pilot project can be related to the broader policy of the EU on circular migration. The parties involved in a circular migration pilot vary from public institutions to private sector companies, NGOs, and project participants. All these parties might pursue different goals within the pilot project. It is realistic to say that, not all these goals of all parties can be achieved in the end. Some parties have more wins than others. This thesis aims to offer insight into all these different goals, including the goal of the EC herself, with the purpose to situate the outcome of this specific project into its broader policy context. This research contributes to the knowledge and literature on circular migration that just started to develop (Adamba and Quartey 2016, 241) and to a better understanding of why the EC is still in a pilot project phase when it comes to circular migration.

Main question and sub-questions

This thesis research answers the following main question: *How do the goals, pursued by the different actors involved in the EU pilot project on legal migration called Digital Explorers, relate to the current policy objectives of the European Commission on circular migration?*

To be able to answer this question, the main question is divided into the following sub-questions:

Sub-question 1: *What are the European Commission's objectives for circular migration projects in general and the digital explorer's project in particular, and how does the European Commission translate these objectives into policy frameworks?*

Sub-question 2: *To what extent did the Digital Explorers project fulfil the aspirations of the participants and partners involved in the project?*

Sub-question 3: *How do the participants' and partners' interests in the Digital Explorers project match with the policy objectives of the European Commission?*

Thesis outline

This thesis is structured as follows: the first chapter places circular migration in a theoretical context and focuses on the different debates currently going on around the topic of (circular) migration. The second chapter explains how the main question of this thesis is operationalized and which methodology and methods are used to answer this question. Chapter 3 provides in more detail the context of the case-study 'Digital Explorers' and the context of the respective countries, Nigeria and Lithuania, involved in the DE-project. Chapter 4 explains how the EC looks at circular migration and why the EC is interested in circular migration pilot projects and formulates an answer on sub-question 1. Chapter 5 analyses the aspirations and objectives of the participants and actors involved in the DE-project and answers sub-question 2. Chapter 6 combines the findings of chapters 4 and 5 to answer sub-question 3, elaborates further on the aspects that still block a 'triple win' outcome and analyses how the project created benefits that go beyond this 'triple win' outcome. This thesis ends with a discussion and conclusion.

Chapter 1 - Theoretical framework

1.1 Migration labels, discourses, and narratives

In the last ten years, migration has become a dominant theme in the political-, public- and academic debates. Migration is "*a population movement encompassing any kind of movement of people, whatever its length, composition and causes*" (WHO 2020 in Sahin-Mencutek 2020, 1). Migration is thus an umbrella word for all sorts of migration forms, whether national or international, forced or voluntarily, legal or illegal, temporary or permanent. Using only the word migration might therefore be confusing since it covers many different labels. Labels affect the way people look at a specific group of migrants, and the way labels are used will impact the support base for different forms of migration within society (Wyszynski, Guerra and Bierwiaczonek 2020, 608). For example, someone asking for asylum can be labelled as a refugee but also as an economic migrant. The first label is connected to this idea that a refugee is vulnerable and should get support since it is an 'ethical duty' to give so. The second label is often connected to the idea that economic migrants do not deserve support, and in some media, these 'economic migrants' are even labelled as "bogus" refugees (Wyszynski, Guerra and Bierwiaczonek 2020, 608). Whether an asylum seeker gets the label of 'refugee' or 'economic migrant' impacts the support that someone receives. The fact that people are labelled as an 'economic migrant' in the first place is, in my opinion, one of the current problems of why there is a lack of public support for migration in general. By labelling asylum seekers whose application is rejected as 'economic migrants', all these people are stigmatized in the same group. This stigmatization is problematic since the boundaries of categories, in which migrants are placed, are often blurred (Erdal and Oeppen 2018, 981). For example, Erdal and Oeppen (2018, 981) argue that it is impossible to describe someone's decision to migrate as either voluntary (that is often linked to economic migrants) or forced (that is often linked to refugees). Therefore, using the label 'economic migrants' creates this over-generalized idea that all these people would only have an economic motivation to apply for asylum, while there are often many reasons that play a role in someone's decision to migrate.

Next to the debate on the use of labels, there is also a debate about the discourse used when discussing migration. Frouws (2021), the head of the Mixed Migration Centre, argues that it is problematic that in the migration debate discourse a lot of water metaphors (such as a 'flow' of migrants) are used. These water metaphors, not only used by politicians but also by academics, are, according to Frouws, very problematic because:

> *"It dehumanises the individual human beings who migrate and it takes away their agency, as if they just flow from one place to the other, as an uncontrollable natural phenomenon. For public support to humane and sensible migration and refugee policies, people need to feel that their leaders are in control, but these water metaphors signal the exact opposite. The notion of danger and lack of control fuels anti-migration sentiments"* (Frouws 2021).

Because the impact of labels and the use of some specific discourse are so powerful, it is essential also to be aware of the labels that I use in this thesis. To make this clear, I put certain words or labels between quotation marks if I think it is important to stand still and be aware of the specific label or discourse used. As an academic, I think it is important to be aware of the discourse and labels that are used in academic literature because also academic discourses impact the support base for all sorts of forms of migration.

The decision to use a specific migration label or discourse will depend on the narrative that someone wants to tell, which depends on what policies someone wants to achieve because the use of a particular narrative has several policy implications (Sahin-Mencutek 2020, 18). Within the current migration debates, several narratives around migration co-exist. Migration narratives are stories offered to look at migration, migrants, and a country's migration history in a specific way. Next to that, migration narratives "*incorporate values, interests, knowledge, and claims (including rival ones) explaining the causes and impacts of migration but also legitimizing certain sets of policy preferences*" (Sahin-Mencutek 2020, 4). Therefore, it matters which narratives are told because it impacts which actions are taken and the support these actions receive. Migration narratives are created, mobilized, diffused, and contested by different actors varying from state actors and politicians to international organizations, NGOs, the media, social movements, academics, and individuals (Sahin-Mencutek 2020, 5). Migration narratives are not static and fixed but are "*as diverse as the people and institutions, the times and contexts that create them*" (Sahin-Mencutek 2020, 5).

Since the establishment of the Schengen Agreement in 1995, the EU and its Member States are struggling with finding a shared migration narrative (Schöfberger 2019, V). Member States divers in the way they look at migration because every Member State has a different history with migration, a different experience in the level of immigration they receive (depending on, for example, their geographical position), and a different need for immigration. Some Member States experience, for example, a lack of workforce and need immigration for their labour market; others do not (Schöfberger 2019, 3). Besides, within a Member State, there are also different migration narratives used by different groups. Socialist parties, for example, uses different kinds of migrations narratives than conservative parties. These differences within Member States makes it even more challenging to create a narrative agreed upon and shared by all Member States.

Because the migration standpoints of Member States and their political parties are too diverse, the EC has tried to combine all these different views in her policy documents. This resulted in migration policy documents with a varied number of narratives combined. According to Ceccorulli and Lucarelli (2017, 87), six different narratives can be identified in EU migration policy documents that clearly show the political and normative dilemmas the EU and its Member States must deal with. First, a value narrative can be identified that underlines the importance of upholding values such as protecting universal human rights when dealing with migration (Ceccorulli and Lucarelli 2017, 88). The second narrative that Ceccorullli and Lucarelli (2017, 92) mention is the global responsibilities narrative that emphasizes the responsibility the EU has, to address the root causes of poverty, conflict, and human rights violations, that are connected to one of the possible causes of migration. Then there

is the resilience narrative that draws mainly on the idea that migrants should stay close to their home countries, and should avoid taking the dangerous journey to the EU. To accomplish this, the resilience narrative supports the idea that the EU should engage with third countries of origin and transit to improve their capacity to 'manage migration' better and improve the conditions in which people live (Ceccorulli and Lucarelli 2017,90). The fourth narrative is the selective narrative that refers to the idea that some categories of migrants should be prioritized over other categories. For example, migrants who came through legal channels (with for example the Blue Card Directive, or with resettlement programs from the EU-Turkey deal) should get priority over migrants who arrive through 'irregular' channels (Ceccorulli and Lucarelli 2017, 91-92). A fifth identified narrative is the security narrative that underlines the idea that migration can be connected to security issues such as smuggling and terrorism, making 'border management' one of the EU's main policy priorities (Ceccorulli and Lucarelli 2017, 89). Lastly, Ceccorulli and Lucarelli (2017) identify the economic-societal narrative. This narrative refers to the idea that migration is an opportunity for the hosting community to fulfil labour market shortages that the EU will experience due to the decline in and aging of its population (Ceccorulli and Lucarelli 2017, 87). However, the economic-societal narrative could be described as a dual narrative because it can relate to two different perspectives. On the one hand, this narrative can focus on the social-economic benefits from the perspective of the Member States. On the other hand, it can focus on the perspective of the countries of origin that gain socio-economic benefits from migration.

Although Ceccorulli and Lucarelli (2017) do not pay much attention to this second perspective, within social science many academics have written about the social-economic benefits from the perspective of the country of origin in the context of the migration-development nexus (Geiger and Pécoud 2013, 369). This migration-development nexus can be explained in two different ways. First, there is this narrative that migration will contribute to the development of the country of origin at the economic, social, and political dimensions, due to for example the generation of remittances from the diaspora. This narrative of the migration-development nexus has become a dominant paradigm within the EU, academic literature, and among international organizations (Den Hertog 2016, 33). Nevertheless, there is a second explanation of the migration-development nexus that is more often used by policymakers within the EU, namely that "*more development can limit irregular migration towards Europe as the 'root causes' are addressed*" (Den Hertog 2016, 34). In this explanation, it is argued that the root causes of migration (such as poverty), can be addressed with the help of more development in the country of origin. However, research has often demonstrated the opposite: stimulating economic development in third countries will lead to an increase in migration to the EU rather than a decrease (Den Hertog 2016, 34). Poor people do not have the means to migrate, while more development will increase these people's income and give them the capabilities to migrate. Only when a country reaches a certain level of development emigration will decrease. This happened, for example, with Malaysia, China, and Brazil, which transformed from a net-emigration country into a net-immigration country (De Haas, Castles and Miller 2020, 73).

Although, Ceccorrulli and Lucarelli (2017) explain in their article that the six identified narratives can be contradictory, they do not argue whether certain narratives are more dominant than others. However, looking at the literature on EU migration policy documents in the social research domain, most academics write about

the tension and contradiction between two specific narratives. These narratives are the security narrative and the socio-economical narrative, or as some academics would name it, the development narrative. It is the policy tension between the development narrative and the security narrative that many academics write about, mainly in the context of what they describe as the EU migration-development-security nexus (see for example, Deridder, Pelckmans et al. 2020; Raineri and Rossi 2017; Zanker et al. 2019, or Schöfberger 2019). Between Member States, there is much negotiation on whether migration should be interpreted in terms of development or terms of security (Schöfberger 2019, V). Member States like Hungary, who perceive migration as a security phenomenon, argue that migration is a security threat and believe that the only group of people who benefit from migration are smugglers (Schöfberger 2019, 15). On the other hand, there are countries, like Germany, that see migration more as a development phenomenon. Germany sees migration as an opportunity for (economic) development both in the country of destination and country of origin[3], and is even implementing policies to make it easier for ('skilled') migrants from outside the EU to come to Germany to work (Sanderson 2020). This already shows that different narratives will also result in different policy outcomes. Migration-security narratives, which are prominent in Hungary, have strengthened national-oriented and solid borders-oriented policies, meaning that national borders are geographically fixed, and migration is seen as a threat to border security. Migration-development narratives, on the contrary, that are more prominent in countries like Germany, have strengthened transnational-oriented and liquid borders-oriented policies, meaning that transboundary movements are allowed, and migration is seen as an opportunity for transnational development (Schöfberger 2019, V, 2 & 4). Schöfberger (2019) argues that in the last few years, especially during and after the increase in migrant arrivals in the EU in 2015/2016, the security-oriented national and solid border approach has gained more prominence in the migration narrative of the EC and has taken over the development narrative (Schöfberger 2019, 13-14).

This shift to a more security narrative is, in my opinion, problematic for several reasons. The security narrative created a xenophobic and populistic climate in the EU (Castillejo 2018, 4) (Sahin-Mencutek 2020, 2) and it undermines the most important value of the EU, namely the idea of open borders. Over the years, different Member States have reintroduced border control in the name of national security, which resulted in a (temporary) suspension of the Schengen Agreement (Schöfberger 2019, 18). Currently, France, Denmark, Sweden, Germany, Austria, and Norway still have implemented temporary border controls to prevent 'secondary movement'[4] from happening or minimizing the risk of 'terrorist threats' or a combination of both (EC 2021a). Besides these consequences, the security narrative also created an out-of-portion focus on specific forms of migration within the migration debate. This one-sided focus on 'irregular'/ 'illegal' forms of migration creates a misperception that migration is mostly 'irregular' and 'uncontrolled', while actually, the opposite is true. Most migration takes place via what is often called in policy documents 'legal pathways'.

[3] This is for example visible in the 'triple win' program of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), that promotes the project that recruit international nurses for hospitals and care facilities in Germany as a project in which everyone is a winner (GIZ 2021).

[4] Secondary movement means according to the EC: *"The movement of migrants, including refugees and asylum seekers, who for different reasons move from the country in which they first arrived to seek protection or permanent resettlement elsewhere"* (EC 2021 - d).

Someone who uses a 'legal pathway', arrives in the EU with a valid permit or visa. These 'legal' migrants are often students, labour migrants, or migrants who get a permit for family reunification. In 2019 the EU issued 3 million residence permits. Only 9% of these permits (266.750 permits) were given to people who made a request for asylum and got their request accepted. In 2019 the EU received 699.000 asylum applications in total. Most resident permits, 41% (nearly 1.2 million permits), were granted for work-related purposes and 14% (nearly 400.000) for education purposes (Eurostat 2020). These numbers bring the different migration categories in perspective and show that 'legal pathways' to the EU are used way more often than the number of people that try to get a permit through an asylum request. Without migration, the EU population would have shrunk by half a million people in 2018 because more EU citizens died than there were born (EC 2021b).

That the EU needs migration for its survival is also noticed by the EC, and other actors, such as international organizations like IOM[5] and UNDP[6]. All these international organisations and institutions try to alter the security narratives course by promoting legal migration forms, particularly circular migration, as a policy strategy to respond to other migration narratives such as the resilience narrative, the selective narrative, the economic-societal narrative, and the development narrative. How and why circular migration could be an answer for these migration narratives will be discussed in chapter 6. In the next paragraph, I will first dive deeper into the concept of circular migration to find out how circular migration is discussed in the academic debate.

1.2 Defining circular migration

Circular migration has no standard definition (Wickramasekara 2011) (Geddes 2015, 3). Some academics even argue that it is hard to define: "*Governments, international organizations, academics, NGOs and trade unions focus on different aspects of circular migration, and therefore use different definitions"* (Castles and Ozkul 2014, 28). Within academic literature, definitions of circular migration vary in specific characteristics, such as the type of mobility (short-term or long-term), the number of cycles, the potential benefits, the number of countries involved, and the duration of stay (Solé et al. 2016, 5). However, within literature and policy documents, temporary migration schemes and circular migration schemes are often used in the same context with the same meaning. Academics who do describe a difference in these two terms explain that circular migration is about a 'repeated' movement between the country of destination and country of origin, meaning that the migrant has to go back and forth more than once (Geddes 2015, 5) (Solé et al. 2016, 7) (Rother 2016, 199). Temporary migration can therefore become circular migration, for example, in the case of seasonal workers. However, looking at programs described as circular migration programs[7], it is remarkable that these programs are only designed for a one-time placement. Therefore, it can be said that although in literature there might be a

[5] IOM in the Netherlands is currently working on a circular migration project called MATCH (IOM 2021a).
[6] UNDP promotes to expand circular migration pathways between Europe and Africa in their report 'Scaling Fences: voices of irregular African migrants to Europe' (UNDP 2019, 90).
[7] Such as the Dutch Blue Birds Circular Migration Pilot (2012) or the Circular Migration Project between Belgium and Tunisia in 2019 (IOM 2020), or the circular migration project MATCH between Nigeria and Senegal and Italy Belgium, Luxemburg, and the Netherlands (IOM 2021a).

difference between circular and temporary migration, in reality, these two definitions can mean the same thing. Or as Castles and Ozkul (2014, 42) stated: "*most official circular migration schemes are really temporary migration programs under a nicer-sounding name*". Especially the EC gave, over the years, different names to the concept of circular/temporary migration, varying from circular migration schemes to mobility partnerships and the latest version are talent partnerships, as presented in the New Pact on Asylum and Migration. To prevent confusion, this thesis will stick to the term 'circular migration', that in this thesis will mean: *"the providing of opportunities for people to come to the EU temporarily for work, study, training or a combination of these on the condition that they return home after a certain period"* (Castles and Ozkul 2014, 30). This definition will be used because it does not include an element of repetition and, therefore, also covers the definition of temporary migration.

Within the academic literature, there are different perspectives to look at circular migration. As presented in the introduction, some academics look at circular migration from the perspective of the country of origin, the country of destination, and/or from the perspective of the migrant (Wickramasekara 2011). Other approaches that are being used to look at circular migration are among others from an economic perspective (Weber and Saarela 2017; Ozkul and Obeng-Odoom 2013), a human right perspective (Fargues 2008), a development perspective (Adepuju, Noorloos, Zoomers 2010; Skeldon 2010; Privarova and Privara 2016), a policy perspective (Geddes 2015; Ozkul 2011; Nita 2016; Babar and Gardner 2016; Bustamante 2016; Segatti 2016), a transnational perspective (Castles and Ozkul 2014; Ottonelli and Toressi 2016) or even an environmental perspective (Rinke 2011). A particular approach used to look at circular migration can be linked to a specific migration theory (Castles and Ozkul 2014, 28) or migration narrative, as explained in the previous paragraph. De Haas, Castles and Miller (2020, 56) define two paradigms where most migration theories can be divided into: the functionalist and the historical-structural theoretical paradigms. The functionalist theories (such as the push-pull models and human capital theory) see migration as a positive phenomenon that contributes to greater equality and serves the interests of most people. On the other hand, the historical-structural theories (such as the globalization theory) are based on the idea that migration is an exploitation mechanism, serving only the interests of the wealthy receiving states, reinforcing social and geographical inequalities (De Haas, Castles and Miller 2020, 56-57).

Looking at the way the EC presents circular migration as a triple-win, the EC's perspective to look at migration is through a functionalist theory, in particular, the push and pull model. One of the first migration theorists, Ravenstein (1889), explained migration utilizing a push and pull model. Ravenstein (1889) defined push factors as undesirable circumstances that force someone to move and pull factors as desirable conditions that encourage someone to move. Lee (1966) later added to this theory that migration is determined in plus and minus factors in origin and destination areas (Kumpikaite and Zickute 2012, 392). Therefore, migration could be explained through push factors such as low income in one place and pull factors such as better prospects in a different place (Van Hear, Bakewell and Long 2018, 4). The push and pull model matches with the view of policymakers (De Haas, Castles and Miller 2020, 56) and the way the EC uses circular migration as a policy instrument (Nita 2016, 25), but this model has several defects. For example, the model only gives a list of factors without

explaining how these factors actually contribute to migration (Skeldon 1990: 125-126). Therefore, it is helpful to use a more critical migration theory to look at migration in a political context. The dependency theory, for example, states that "*selective immigration policies privileging the already privileged (the skilled and wealthy) and discriminating against the vulnerable (lower-skilled workers and the poor in general)*" (De Haas, Castles and Miller 2020, 63). In this case, this can be an interesting perspective since the case-study of this thesis is about 'high-skilled' migrants in the ICT sector. These 'high-skilled' migrants, who could also invest their knowledge in Nigeria, decided to go to Lithuania. Although it might only be a certain amount of time, there can be said that brain drain does occur in Nigeria. Lithuania, on the other hand, only becomes more privileged since it (temporarily) receives people with knowledge, who will help Lithuanian companies to develop further.

It is important for this thesis that readers are aware of the difference between 'high'- and 'low-skilled' circular migration programs.[8] Nearly all states in the world have implemented pathways for 'high-skilled' migration to attract talent, like IT professionals and medical practitioners (Castles and Ozkul 2014, 30). According to the EC, there is a "*global race for talent*" that "*the EU is currently losing*" (EC 2020, 25). For this reason, the EC works on frameworks such as the Blue Card Directive that needs to attract more 'highly skilled' talent (EC 2020, 25). On the contrary, for 'low-skilled' migrants, the available legal migration pathways are very limited (Castles and Ozkul 2014, 30). For Nigerians in particular, the few existing regular migration pathways to the EU that are available for Nigerians "*have no room for the majority of low social and income class in society*" (Arhin-Sam 2019, 33). And if Member States implement 'low-skilled' circular migration projects they often get a lot of criticism (for example, from human rights organisations) because of the inhumane conditions people must work in or the unethical selection procedures used (Castles and Ozkul 2014, 33-34). Because the difference in projects for 'high-skilled' or 'low-skilled' migrants is so big, it is important to be aware that the case-study used in this thesis research is focused on a 'high-skilled' circular migration program. If this thesis had been focused on a 'low-skilled' migration program, the outcomes would probably be completely different.

1.3 Circular migration: a tool to control migration?

To better understand circular migration in the context of European politics, this thesis will use Ozkul's (2011) perspective that defines circular migration as a tool to control migration. This perspective is used because the EC is convinced that circular migration, if well implemented, will lead to more control over migration in two ways: circular migration can be used to get control over irregular migration, and a circular migration framework will ensure that circular migration is a controlled form of migration, as this paragraph will explain.

EU politicians believe that circular migration can be used as a tool to 'control' irregular migration because it could reduce irregular migration in two different ways. First of all, the EC states that circular migration will reduce irregular migration because circular migration is presented as an alternative for irregular migration (Castles and

[8] Personally, I am not in favor of the categories 'low-' and 'high-skilled' jobs, because I think for every job you need specific skills, and this has nothing to do with low and high, but more with if someone has a practical or a scientific background. Using the label 'low-skilled' jobs undermines the fact that a society cannot function without these 'low-skilled' jobs. However, since these are international used concepts, I will still use them to prevent confusion, but in quotation marks to make clear that I am aware of the effects of this specific discourse.

Ozkul 2014, 44). This idea is based on the assumption that if the option is available, people will choose to migrate regularly instead of irregularly (McAliffe 2017 in Cooper 2019, 2). The second way the EC thinks that circular migration could reduce irregular migration is by linking a circular migration program to agreements with third countries on measures that third countries should take to regulate and decrease migration from their countries to the EU (Castles and Ozkul 2014, 44). However, there is a debate going on whether forms of legal migration could actually reduce irregular migration. Some academics argue that expanding legal migration pathways increases irregular migration along specific corridors (McAliffe 2017 in Cooper 2019, 2). Others argue that expanding legal pathways will not affect irregular migration because social, economic, and political factors, that are beyond the control of destination countries, will always have the biggest impact on migration, rather than legal migration policies (Cooper 2019, 3-4). Nevertheless, there are also academics like Leerkes (2016, 30) that argue that more opportunities for legal migration increase the willingness of third countries to cooperate on return and readmission procedures and would therefore indirectly reduce irregular migration. In practice, there already have been cases in which countries in Western Africa have signed contracts with Frontex agreeing to readmit their nationals in exchange for legal migration possibilities (such as visas) (Aguillon 2018, 4). However, these legal migration possibilities are not the only aspect of the agreements made with third countries, so other aspects, like financial support, might also play a role in the third country's decision to cooperate. However, because the amount of research that is done on the relationship between legal migration and irregular migration is really limited and diverse, there is not one concrete answer to the question of whether legal migration could reduce irregular migration.

The EC sees circular migration also as a tool to control migration because the EC believes that circular migration frameworks can ensure that migrants will return to their country of origin. "*Circular migration is regimented, planned to be directed and stringently controlled at each instant of the movement to make sure that migrants do return to their places of origin*" (Ozkul 2011, 2). Therefore, in a political context, the word 'circular' has often become a synonym for the word 'return' (Siegel and Van der Vorst 2012, 9). Of course, this focus on return has political reasons, as will be further discussed in chapter 4. However, also from a development perspective there is a reason why this return is so important, namely, to prevent that this form of migration will lead to brain drain.

1.4 Circular migration: the answer for brain drain?

In the sixties, African countries started to experience a so-called 'brain drain era' that became prominent in the mid-eighties (Joel, Ebenezer and Attah 2018, 68). During this period, health care professionals and other critical human resources left Africa "voluntarily" to find better job opportunities in other countries (Darkwa 2018, 14-15). In the seventies and eighties, the brain-drain phenomenon from the African continent received much attention in academic literature because academics argued that it would harm the continent's development. During this period, academics described brain drain as a loss of investment of 'developing countries' that invest in training people who left the country after their training, causing a waste of money for the 'developing country' (Darkwa 2018, 15). However, later, other academics downplayed this argument, saying that the training burden

was not for the country of origin but for the country of training. Also, in the twentieth century, some academics started to argue that this form of migration could actually lead to brain gain rather than brain drain since professionals from 'developing countries' could improve their skills in 'advanced' countries, creating a platform of expertise that the countries of nationality could also benefit from. In addition, it was argued that Africa's diaspora could also contribute to public policy, remittances, and intellectual capital (Darkwa 2018, 15-16). Especially remittances had and still have a significant impact on African countries because remittances contribute to poverty reduction, economic growth and can even influence political campaigns in the home country and support or debilitate democracies. However, if remittances will positively or a negatively affect good governance, democracy and institutions will depend on who receives the remittances and how it is spent (Darkwa 2018, 18-19).

So, although labour migration has gained more positive attention in terms of brain drain/brain gain since the twentieth century, there is also still a lot of criticism. For example, Joel, Ebenezer and Attah (2018, 68) argue that labour migration programs between Africa and the EU still leads to the loss of human- and material capital that can engender development, even if it is only temporary. Some academics even compare African labour migration with colonialism, arguing that this form of migration is an alternative for 'ex-colonial masters' to exorbitant European labour (Chiminanikire 2005 in Joel, Ebenezer and Attah 2018, 68). Therefore, this debate is far from over and needs, as I will argue in chapter 6, to be continued because I think it is crucial that the African migrants' and African partners' perspectives are more included in the debate.

1.5 Circular migration: a triple win?

Proponents of circular migration, including the EC, claim that circular migration is a win for the country of origin, the country of destination, and the migrants themselves. However, as I explained in the introduction, academics like Castles and Ozkul (2014) and Wickramasekara (2011) are very critical of this triple-win outcome. To find out if this triple-win argument is also questionable in current projects on circular migration, this research will find out how a triple-win outcome in the Digital Explorers project should look like and if it can be reached. Therefore, it is essential first to find out how the people and organizations, divided among the categories 'migrant' 'country of origin', and 'country of destination', themselves would describe their possible benefits of circular migration since many wrong assumptions are easily made. For example, for migrants, it is often assumed within the design of circular migration programs that they only base their decision to join such a program on possible economic benefits (Castles and Ozkul 2014, 31). This one-sided view of the migrant's possible 'win', is, according to Castles and Ozkul (2014, 31), a false understanding that can be seen as on one of the reasons why the past guest work programs, that were implemented in the sixties and seventies, failed. The personal ambition and individual motivation of people are the driving force of why people decide to migrate. If these ambitions and motivations are not taken into account, something that is often overlooked by the EC, it is more likely that a circular migration project will fail (Aguillon 2018, 5).

However, not only the 'win' for migrants in a circular migration project is too superficial described in literature and policy documents, but also for the country of origin and the country of destination there is only a very one-sided generalized idea about what is in there for them. For the country of destination, it is argued that circular migration is a win because migrants will return what reduces the cost. However, this one-sided view does not include the employer's perspective who might do not want migrants to leave after a specific time. According to Castles and Ozkul (2014, 32), this is also one of the reasons why previous programs did not work out well; employers were frustrated that they could not retain the employees they trained themselves. For this reason, it is crucial to gain a better understanding of the motives and goals of the participants and the other partners involved in a circular migration project.

To create a better understanding of the objectives of the actors involved in a circular migration program, I will use a migration theory of De Haas, Castles and Miller (2020) that presents an alternative migration theory that is more focused on understanding individuals. This is the aspirations-capabilities model (De Haas, Castles and Miller 2020). The model of De Haas, Castles and Miller (2020) is, on the one hand, based on the human capability theory of Sen (1999), who describes capability as "*the ability of human beings to lead lives they have reason to value, and to enhance the substantive choices (or 'freedoms') they have"* (Sen 1999 in De Haas, Castles and Miller 2020). Capabilities can, for example, be financial resources or social capital. On the other hand, there are people's aspirations; these are *"a function of people's general life aspirations and perceived geographical opportunity structures"* (De Haas, Castles and Miller 2020, 62). Aspirations can be divided into an instrumental and an intrinsic dimension. Instrumental aspirations are related to achieving a functional goal such as better education or a higher income. Intrinsic aspirations refer to the value someone attaches to the experience itself, such as pleasure obtained through exploring new cultures (De Haas 2014, 24). When life aspirations cannot be fulfilled by the opportunities in the country of origin, migration is likely to continue (De Haas, Castles and Miller 2020, 62). This could, I think, also apply to the case of return. When participants of a project need to return to their home country (because it is part of the program), they might not want this, since their aspirations can still not be reached in their country of origin. However, migrants need capabilities to migrate and to stay (such as a contract extension from their employer). If migrants do not have the capabilities to stay, they also have to return home, even though their aspirations are not fulfilled yet.

Although this aspirations-capabilities model is, just like nearly all migration theories, mostly used to understand why someone decides to migrate, this theory will also be used to understand why the employers and other partners involved in the project decide to participate in this migration project. These partners also have aspirations to achieve and a certain number of capabilities to reach this. For example, an employer has the aspiration to expand his business but does not have the capability to do so since the company has not enough employees. Joining a circular migration project can increase the capability of the employer and therefore fulfil its aspirations. The aspirations of employers and other partners involved in the project are probably equal to the goals that these partners want to achieve with the pilot project. Because this thesis tries to understand people's

objectives for the project, this thesis will mainly focus on aspirations rather than on capabilities. Nevertheless, attention will also be paid to capabilities because capabilities and aspiration depend on each other.

To conclude, this chapter created a theoretical understanding of the academic context and debates that circular migration is part of. Circular migration is, in the first place, part of a broader debate on migration and how migration should be understood. In this debate, multiple migration narratives co-exist. Politicians within Member States are aware that every narrative has a different policy outcome and will influence the public opinion about varied forms of migration differently. For this reason, countries such as Germany have a completely different view and policy on migration compared to for example Hungary. However, proponents of circular migration, present circular migration as an answer for different migration narratives because if it is well managed and selected, the outcome of circular migration can be beneficial for both the development of the country of origin and destination and the perspective of the migrants, while at the same time creating more control over (irregular) migration. However, these often-presented benefits also give food for thoughts and debate. Looking at literature on circular migration, there is no agreement on; the possible 'wins' for actors involved in a circular migration project; the question whether circular migration leads to brain drain or brain gain; or on the possible impact that circular migration has or has not on irregular migration. Next to these different debates, multiple perspectives and theories can be used to analyse a circular migration project. In this thesis, two of these theories are used. First, the theory of Ozkul (2011), who argues that the EC uses circular migration as a tool to control migration, will help to understand the EC's policy objectives for circular migration and the political context in which these specific objectives are formulated, as chapter 4 will explain. Secondly, the aspiration-capability theory of De Haas, Castles and Miller (2020) will be applied in chapter 5 to understand the project objectives of all the participants and actors involved in the pilot project. However, before these two theories are used in chapters 4 and 5, the next chapter first explains the methodology and methods used to complete this thesis research.

Chapter 2 - Methodology

2.1 Data collection

This research draws on a post-positivism approach, by which I mean that this research is about *"a reality which is socially constructed rather than objectively determined [..] Appreciating the different constructions and meanings that people place upon their experience"* (Noor 2008, 1602). Using a qualitative approach helps to understand how people experience something or construct their ideas (Noor 2008, 1602). The qualitative methodology and methods used to answer each sub-question will be further explained in this paragraph.

The first sub-question is answered with the help of literature research, a critical analysis of policy documents, and an interview with an employee of the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) (who coordinates the legal migration pilot projects for the EC). Next to this, I also collected data from webinars on legal migration (see Annex 1 'interview list and webinars'), in which representatives of the EC were often present. Literature and policy documents were analysed to find out how circular migration is related to other forms of migration, within particular irregular migration, described by the EC as their main "problem" when it comes to migration. Next to a review of articles that analyses EU's policies on (circular) migration, I also examined and compared EU policy documents myself to find out what frameworks the EC uses for circular migration programs and how the objectives for circular migration programs have changed over the years. The interview with an ICMPD employee and the webinars on legal migration helped to determine the EC's objectives for legal migration pilot projects in general and the DE-project in particular and to understand what the EC thinks about the DE-projects' outcome.

Sub-questions two and three are answered with the help of a case-study research. A case-study is often used to investigate the *"contextual realities and the differences between what was planned and what actually occurred"* (Noor 2008, 1602) and focuses on a particular issue or aspect (Noor 2008, 1602). I choose to use the project 'Digital Explorers' (a further description of this project can be found in chapter 3) as a case-study. Within this case-study research, the primary data-gathering method that was used is semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews are interviews in which the researcher asks questions about specific topics in a predetermined order while the researcher still creates room for the respondent to address certain issues and subjects (Dunn 2005, 80). Choosing for semi-structured interviews gives the respondent the possibility to come up with different topics that the researcher did not think about beforehand. On the other hand – in contrast to conversations or unstructured interviews-, it creates structure in the conversation and uniformity between the different interviews (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011, 139). This is necessary to ensure that in every interview, the same topics are discussed, which makes it possible to compare the data.

I conducted 14 semi-structured interviews with different actors and participants of the DE-project, distributed over the period December 2020 - February 2021 (see Annex 1 'interview list and webinars'). I interviewed six Nigerians who participated in the DE-project, from which four of them were still working in Lithuania, and two returned to Nigeria. I spoke with employees of two Lithuanian ICT-companies that employed some of the Nigerian ICT-developers of the DE-project. I interviewed representatives of the two project leaders from the Lithuanian side of the DE-project, AfriKo and Enterprise Lithuania (EL), and I spoke with two representatives of Ventures Platform (VP). VP was the project leader from the Nigerian side of the project. Next to that, I also interviewed a representative of the Nigerian office of the Vice-president who supported the DE-project. The data from the Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (LMFA) were collected through an online questionnaire with open questions instead of a semi-structured interview because the person I contacted at the Ministry did not have enough time to participate in an interview. More information about the organisations and participants can be found in textbox 1 in chapter 3.

Within qualitative research, several methods must be used to validate the research. Using mixed methods is called triangulation (Olsen 2004, 3). Due to COVID-19, it was impossible to do participant observation or other methods in which physical appearance is necessary. To compensate for this, I joined 10 webinars on circular migration organized by both international organizations, government institutions, and the project leaders of the DE-project themselves. Annex 1 gives an overview of the webinars I followed. To learn more about the organisation involved in the DE-project and prepare myself for the interviews, I also collected data through the analyses of documents and information about the organisation's vision and goals that were presented on their websites.

Due to the Covid-19 travel restrictions, it was, of course, also not possible to conduct the semi-structured interviews face-to-face. As an alternative, I decided to use Microsoft Teams as a tool to do the interviews online. Doing online interviews is not something new in social science. In the last decades, it has become more popular within academic research to do interviews online rather than face-to-face because it solves the problems of geographical dispersion and physical mobility boundaries between the researcher and the research population. Besides, it reduces the cost of doing an interview, both in time and money for the researcher but also the research participant (Janghorban, Roudsari and Taghipour 2014, 1) (Gray et al. 2020, 1297). This makes it for interviewees more attractive to participate in research, which might increase the willingness of people to participate (Janghorban, Roudsari and Taghipour 2014, 1). In addition, research participants might experience online interviews also less intimidating because it is easier to stop an online interview than leaving an in-person interview (Gray et al. 2020, 1297).

During this thesis research, I also experienced the benefits of doing interviews online. Doing interviews online made it possible to interview people living in Lithuania, Nigeria, and Belgium in the same week. Next to that, it was easier to schedule an online interview than a face-to-face interview because it would take less time. After all, the researcher and the informants do not have to travel to a particular place or calculate extra time to drink

a coffee and do some small talk before the interview starts. Besides, I could plan interviews over a more extended period since I was not tied to a specific period in which I would be physically present; that would be the case if I would have done fieldwork. Because of this, interviews could easily be re-scheduled when someone cancelled it, or I could plan interviews a few months in advance to make sure that someone was available.

However, doing interviews online also comes with some difficulties. For example, it is not possible to read body language when the webcam only shows the participant's face. Moreover, although it is convenient for the participants that they can choose the environment in which they want to do the interview, it might also affect the participant's focus since the participant might choose a chaotic environment (Janghorban, Roudsari and Taghipour 2014, 1). Next to that, whether the participant has access to high-speed internet or not, and someone's digital literacy also impacts the interview quality (Janghorban, Roudsari and Taghipour 2014, 2). Luckily, the interview respondents mostly found themselves, primarily, in a quiet space with a good internet connection. Only in a few interviews, the connection was bad, causing a problem with intelligibility. When this happened, and I could not hear the respondent's answer, I just asked someone to repeat him/herself. During some interviews, the respondents were distracted by background noises (for example, a dog or traffic noises or appliances), or I had the feeling that someone was also checking computer pop-ups such as e-mails and things like that. However, in general, I do not think that these minor distractions can be seen as an obstruction to the research data that I gathered. Overall, people were really focused on the questions I asked and the answers they were given. I was under the impression that people were relaxed during the interviews. This can be explained by the fact that informants were all very experienced in doing interviews/discussions online since everyone works from home right now (due to the pandemic) and because most of the informants are working in the ICT-sector themselves (so their digital literacy is high). I could not read any body language, but I do not think that was a problem. During a real-life interview, the researcher will also primarily focus on facial expressions rather than body language. However, it could be seen as one of limitations of the method I used.

Another downside, compared to face-to-face interviews, is that it is more common with online interviews that interviews are rescheduled or cancelled (Janghorban, Roudsari and Taghipour 2014, 2). This is also what I experienced during my research because a few times interviews were last-minute cancelled. However, this was not that much of a problem because it was also easy to reschedule them. Some interviews were rescheduled multiple times, but all the interviews took place in the end. However, I did experience that some people did not respond to my e-mail interview request in the first place, also not after a reminder. If I could have physically gone to an organisation's office, there was probably a bigger chance that I would have received a reaction. However, this only happened with two companies/organisations, and it did not obstruct the research.

Another shortcoming of online interviews is that there is less room to use small talk and informal conversations as a research method. When the online call starts, most of the time, the respondent immediately dived into the topic of the research and when the respondent answered all my question the call almost immediately ended. While in a face-to-face interview, I often experienced that when the researcher stops the recording, respondents

might still come with the information they thought was not relevant for the interview, but that actually turned out to be relevant. Therefore, I argue that this is an explicit limitation of doing interviews online rather than face-to-face.

Informal conversations and small talk are also essential research methods for the researcher to build rapport with the research population (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011, 2). Rapport is necessary to create a situation in which the informant trust the researcher and is willing to share accurate and dependable information about the research topic (De Walt and DeWalt 2011, 48). However, Weller (2017), who shifted in her qualitative longitudinal study from face-to-face interviews to interviews over FaceTime, found out that: "*physical separation can facilitate a greater (emotional) connection through participants' increased sense of ease with the setting and mode"* (Weller 2017 in Edwards and Holland 2020, 585). Furthermore, Dodds and Hess found in their research that online interviews are experienced less intimidated because research participants felt safer and non-intrusive because they could be in their own safe environment (Dodds and Hess 2020, 208). This clearly shows that not only informal chats but also the online environment can have a positive influence on the extent in which an informant feels free to openly discuss certain topics with the researcher. Therefore, informal chats might, in this case, be less necessary because the informants already felt comfortable because they could speak from their own setting. To conclude, although I did miss the fun and the extra information that a researcher can gather through small talk and informal conversations around a face-to-face interview, I do think that the quality of online interviews does not detract from face-to-face interviews, and in some cases, online interviews might even be more convenient.

2.2 Data analysis

Data analysis has been an essential element of this research. I started this process already during the data-gathering phase. As explained by DeWalt and DeWalt (2011, 179): "*the goal of all data analysis is the summarization of large quantities of data into understandable information from which well-supported and well-argued conclusions are drawn*." For the data analysis, I used a qualitative data program called Nvivo. When I finished an interview, I made sure that I transcribed the interview in the same week so I already could start with a first round of what Boeije (2010, 90) defines as 'open coding'. During open-coding, I started to attach codes to pieces of texts from interview transcriptions or webinars- and field notes. These codes "*refer to a more abstract concept or a hypothesized pattern for which the piece of text is an example*" (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011, 183). Codes, therefore, help to identify themes and patterns in the data. Starting this 'open coding' process already in an early phase of the research helped me find out if there were still gaps in the data and create some first hypothesis that I then could verify in the upcoming interviews.

After I transcribed all the interviews and gathered the notes I made during the webinars, I finished the open coding process and started with what Boeije (2010, 114) calls 'axial coding'. In this phase, I categorized and connected the codes that I already labelled. I checked if text fragments received the right code, and I categorized

the codes in ‘main codes’ and ‘subcodes’. This process helped me find out what elements of my research were essential and less important. The last phase of the data-analysing is called ‘selective coding’ (Boeije, 2010, 115). During this phase, I tried to find out -also with the help of schematic overviews and flowcharts- what the relationship is between certain categories, and I created an idea my thesis’s core message.

2.3 Ethical reflection

The ethical issues in online interviews are considered equal to the ethical issues with face-to-face interviews (Janghorban, Roudsari and Taghipour 2014, 2). When doing qualitative research, the most important ethical consideration is that research participants should not be subjected to harm. To make sure that this would not be the case, I started every interview with a clear description of the purpose of my thesis research, and I explained what I wanted to know from the research participant. For example, I explained that this research was for my study and not for my internship at Clingendael, although I did use my Clingendael e-mail address to use their network. I also described this in an introduction e-mail that I sent to the participants. I introduced myself, explained the purpose of the research, and invited them to participate. Before the interviews started, I asked the participant if it would be okay if I could make a recording of the interview (that I keep for myself), so I could make a transcription of the interview afterwards. All the interview participants gave their consent for this. Next to that, I also asked for permission to use quotes of the respondents in my final thesis while promising that I would not mention his/her name (guaranteeing anonymity), but only the name of the organisation/institutions that he/she was presenting. Alternatively, in the case of the project participants, I explained that I would only write down the term ‘project participants’ instead of their names. Lastly, just before I finished my thesis, I e-mailed four of the respondents with the question if they were okay with the way I used their quotes because they explicitly asked me during the interview if I could check this with them. Three of the four people I e-mailed confirmed over e-mail that they were okay with the way I used their quotes, or they had some suggestions to make some final adjustments. These adjustments did not impact the content because, most of all, these were only rephrasing suggestions.

Chapter 3 - Context

3.1 Context case-study

In order to operationalize the above-presented theories and get an insight into the motivations of participants and partners involved in a circular migration project, this thesis uses the Digital Explorers program as a case-study. Digital Explorers is one of the four current pilot projects of the MPF on legal migration. The DE-project is a temporary labour migration project that brought young ICT-specialists from Nigeria to Lithuania for a one-year paid job in a local ICT-company[9]. The implementation of the project started in 2019, and the project finished in early 2021. In 2021 the DE-project will start a second track, called the 'female track'. However, this second track is not part of the research because it had some delay due to covid-19. The total budget that is available for the DE-project is 1,34 million euros (MPF 2020a).

The application of the DE-project opened in April 2019 (receiving 1452 applications). 150 interviews were conducted, and 77 ICT talents were selected for a three-day hackathon and an on-side training in Abuja, Nigeria, in May 2019. Although the project aimed to place 50 Nigerian ICT-specialists within Lithuanian ICT companies, the first track placed 15 specialists, which equals little over 1% of the initial applications. The 15 participants were divided over 7 ICT companies in Lithuania.

The DE-program is built on and supported by non-profit, public, and private organisations in both Nigeria and Lithuania (Digital Explorers 2020). Figure 1 shows a schematic overview of the actors who participated in this research. Textbox 1 gives a short description of every actor and describes how the actor was involved in the DE-program. Not all the actors that were involved in the project were also part of this research. The Lithuanian IT-academy named 'Code-academy', the Lithuanian non-profit organisation 'Diversity Development Group', and the ICT-association 'Infobalt' were not part of this research. Either because it was not possible to contact them or because they were only involved in the program as a training provider or research institute and therefore did not have a significant role in the project development or project execution. Next to these organisations, seven ICT-companies, where

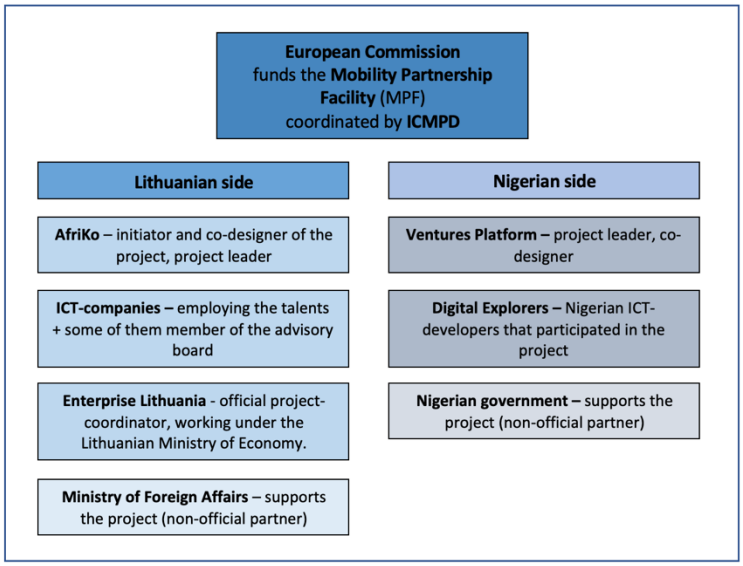

Figure 1 Digital Explorers actors who participated in this research

[9] The Lithuanian ICT-companies paid the salary of the Nigerian ICT-developers.

the Nigerian ICT-specialists were placed, have been involved in the project. It differs per company how many Nigerian participants they employed, ranging from one up to four.

According to the Mobility Partnership Facility (MPF) five elements are central in the Digital Explorers project (MPF 2020a):

1. Before departure, the Nigerian ICT-specialists should have followed a Workplace Awareness training.
2. Three tailor-made trainings should be provided for the selected ICT-specialists to enhance skills.
3. Capacity building between Nigerian and Lithuanian institutions should be realised.
4. Personal support for the participants should be given.
5. A reintegration program should be provided in the first two months after return, consisting of training and career/start-up counselling.

At the end of the first track of the Digital Explorers project, four ICT-developers returned to Nigeria because they did not fit the demand, or the participant did not find what he/she expected or got a better job offer in Nigeria. Eleven participants were retained in the same Lithuania ICT-company or employed by another company in Lithuania (Digital Explorers Webinar, 6 October 2020).

The DE-project is a relevant case-study for this thesis for several reasons. First of all, this project is chosen because, during a webinar on the project, it seemed that the involved partners were willing to speak openly about both the success and shortcomings of the project. Secondly, this project is interesting because this pilot is completed, despite the pandemic. Thirdly, this project is the only MPF-pilot-project completed so far that offers actual employment instead of internships. Fourthly, during the webinars on the project it turned out that some criteria made by the EC via the MPF (for example, the criteria of a reintegration program after participants returned to Nigeria) were not fully met, making it an interesting case-study for this thesis. Furthermore, it is interesting that Lithuania decided to implement this project. Lithuania is often known as one of the EU Member States (together with other Balkan countries) that are reluctant for immigration from outside the EU (Birka 2019). Therefore, it was unexpected that Lithuania would sign-up as one of the first countries for an MPF-project, which makes the project even more interesting to research.

The International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD): ICMPD is an international organization that "*takes a regional approach in its work to create efficient cooperation and partnerships along migration routes.*" (ICMPD 2021a). ICMPD has 350 staff members in 18 different Member States and is active in 90 countries (ICMPD 2021a). Within the Digital Explorers project, ICMPD can be seen as the secretariat of the MPF Steering Committee, providing technical assistance and support and reports everything back to the Steering Committee. The MPF Steering Committee provides leadership, strategic guidance, and oversight for the MPF-project's implementation. The Committee consists out of representatives of the European Commission (from DG HOME, DG NEAR, DG DEVCO, and EEAS). ICMPD helped the project coordinators of the Digital Explorers projects with their MPF-proposal, evaluated the processes and results of the project, and reviewed the project reports. ICMPD keeps in contact with the project coordinators during the implementation phase and helps if difficulties occur. ICMPD also organizes different events to bring the different MPF-pilot projects together.

AfriKo: AfriKo is a consultancy platform established in 2015 in Lithuania. AfriKo is developed by co-founders Mante Makauskaite and Eugenjia Kovaliova after studying African Studies in Denmark. AfriKo doesn't consider itself as an NGO although it is a non-profit organisation. It is not a research organisation in its essence, but they are very proud of their academic background. AfriKo has two ways of working: AfriKo implement projects, and they do (policy) research. AfriKo can be described as the brain behind Digital Explorers, and together with Ventures Platforms, they are the coordinators of the project. Within the project, they were working among others on the following things: finding partners and companies for the project and bringing stakeholders together, organizing the hackathon and the selection process, supporting the participants with their travel (paperwork, location to stay, etc.), and providing practical and emotional support during their stay and organizing events.

Enterprise Lithuania (EL): Enterprise Lithuania is a business and export promotion non-profit agent in Lithuania under the Ministry of Economy and Innovation. EL does, among others, encourage companies in different sectors to expand to foreign markets. ICT is one of their priority sectors. EL is the official project leader of the DE-program and coordinates the technical, financial, and administrative parts of the project, such as the financial reports. EL also organized business missions. AfriKo needed EL for the project because an MPF-project cannot be implemented without the involvement of a public institution. EL is also part of the Digital Explorers board.

Ventures Platforms (VP): VP is "*an Africa-wide network that helps entrepreneurs succeed*" (Ventures Platform 2021). VP focuses on supporting entrepreneurs, particularly those who deliver innovation and technology, to solve some of the most pressing problems on the African continent. The task they had within the project was: identifying and engaging with the local stakeholders in Nigeria; working with local networks and distribute the calls of application; helping with the recruitment of the team and the selection of participants; prepare the participants with their move to Europe; making sure that developers have a base in Nigeria that they feel connected to; providing the re-integration program after return and helping them to get jobs in Nigeria.

Lithuanian ICT-companies: For this thesis research, two employees of two Lithuanian ICT-companies were interviewed. The first company is TeleSoftas. TeleSoftas is a Lithuanian ICT-company that provides software solutions for companies all over the world. They have three offices in Lithuania and representative offices in Zurich, Amsterdam, and San Francisco. During the DE-project, TeleSoftas participated in the selection process for the candidates and went to Nigeria for the hackathon to provide workshops and to do interviews with possible candidates. TeleSoftas is also part of the advisory board of the DE-project and advises the second track of the DE-project. TeleSoftas placed four Nigerian developers and employed five developers (one from another Lithuanian company) after the project was finished. The second company is Ruptela. Ruptela is an ICT-company focussed on the telemarked industry. Their headquarter is in Vilnius, Lithuania, but they have branches worldwide (Mexico, Russia, USA, etc.). Ruptela is a medium-sized company with 280 employees worldwide, but they are growing fast. Within the program, Ruptela helped with the selection process design, went to Nigeria for the hackathon, and participated in the interviews with the candidates. Ruptela placed two Nigerian developers during the project and employed one of them at the end.

The Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (LMFA) Lithuania: The LMFA supports the DE-project but is not an official partner. The role of the LMFA in the DE-project was to follow the project and to facilitate its implementation. LMFA facilitated, for example, in the opening of the visa centres in Lagos and Abuja in August 2019 and accepted the applications for national visas from the program participants.

The Office of the Vice-president in Nigeria: From the side of the Nigerian government, the Vice-president's office supported the project, although they were not an official partner of the project. They were in contact with and informed about the project by Ventures Platforms.

Textbox 1 Description of the actors involved in the Digital Explorers project

3.2 Country context

3.2.1 Lithuania

Since 1991 Lithuania has one of the fasted slinking populations in Europe. In 1991, Lithuania had a population of 3.704.134 people; this decreased to a total of 2.786.844 in 2019 (World Bank 2021). The World Bank estimates that by 2050 the working-age population in Lithuania will be at an all-time low (Birka 2019). This development can economically be seen as a result of "*low wages, increasing income inequality, price policies and unemployment rates*" (Kumpikaitė-Valiūnienė and Žičkutė 2017 in Brunovskis and Sønsterudbråten 2017, 7). Despite this population decrease, the Lithuanian government is reluctant when it comes to immigration from outside the EU or the acceptance of refugees or asylum seekers from the Middle East and North Africa. Lithuanians Soviet Union history, in which the Soviet Union tried to impose Russian culture and language using cultural assimilation, might explain why Lithuania is stringent about 'protecting' their language, culture and maintaining their 'ethnic balance' (Birka 2019). In 2017 only 1.5% of the Lithuanian society was a foreigner. Most of these foreigners come from culturally similar countries such as Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine (Brunovskis and Sønsterudbråten 2017,7). Besides Lithuania's homogeneous society and its history, the Paris attacks in 2015 also underlined the belief of the Lithuanian population that migration can be 'dangerous' for society and discouraged the population from welcoming more migration (Shulga 2020, 47).

Lithuania receives few asylum requests, due to its geographical position and because migrants mostly use Lithuania only as a transit country. In 2015 Lithuania received 291 asylum applications (Brunovskis and Sønsterudbråten 2017,7) (Lindberg and Borrelli 2019, 2). Some argue that Lithuania is not an attractive country for migrants because, among others, the integration policies are lacking or are not sufficient enough (Brunovskis and Sønsterudbråten 2017,7). This could result from the fact that Lithuania is mainly used as a transit country, which does not positively influence the efforts to work on better integration (Brunovskis and Sønsterudbråten 2017, 8). However, this will probably work negatively in both directions.

Like other Baltic states, Lithuania did not fulfil its task in 2015 to reach the quota of the number of migrants that needed to be resettled under the EU agreement. In July 2018, only 468 of the 1,105 migrants pledged to be accepted were officially resettled, from which 338 of them already left the country to other EU Member States in 2018 (Shulga 2020, 47). Although Lithuania, as an EU external border country, is mainly used as a transit country, it does experience irregular migration. "*Fake marriages, fake businesses, and fake Schengen visas are three central concerns raised by officials in Lithuania, and combating irregular migration is high on the authorities' agenda*" (Brunovskis and Sønsterudbråten 2017, 8).

Despite the political sensitiveness of the topic within the Lithuanian population, the Lithuanian government decided in 2014 that something needed to be done to overcome the effects of emigration. Adding to the already in 2007 adopted Economic Migration Regulation Strategy, the Lithuanian government implemented the

Migration Policy Guidelines. This made it easier for third-country nationals to immigrate to Lithuania (Birka 2019). Labanauskas (2019) argues that Lithuania shifted its migration narrative "*from migration seen as a threat*" to "*migration/mobility as the main prerequisite of the knowledge economy and development potential*" (Labanauskas 2019, 229). Labour immigration became visible in the public discourse, demanding a new approach towards integration policies and labour immigration (Labanauskas 2019, 243). In 2018 amendments were adopted that simplified the residence permit acquisition for professionals in markets that experience labour shortages and gave foreign researchers and graduates the possibility to extend the duration of their stay (Birka 2019).

In the last few years, both legal and illegal labour migration is increasing in Lithuania (Shulga 2020, 54). Most labour migrants come from Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia filling labour shortages in 'low-skilled' employment sectors such as builders and truck drivers. However, Lithuania's population decrease will not compensate with an increase in 'low-skilled' people from third countries such as Ukraine because Lithuania also needs 'high-skilled' workers (Lithuanian Tribune 2019). One of the problems that makes it challenging to attract 'high-skilled' workers is the underexposed political domain of integration. Problems that occur range from a missing basic infrastructure (such as problems with the procedure for a residence permit or access to health care services) to discrimination and hate crimes (Labanauskas 2019, 244). To overcome these problems, the Lithuanian government is working on a strategy to attract 'highly-skilled' migrants and other talents from abroad, for example, with the help of the EU-funded program TALENTAS (2019-2020) implement by the Lithuanian government and ICMPD (ICMPD 2021b).

Besides changing migration policy and action on the national level, Lithuania is also getting more involved in migration policy at the EU level. The Valetta Summit on Migration has encouraged Lithuania to be part of migration governance between the EU and West Africa. In 2016 Lithuania contributed to the EU Trust Fund for Africa and started to fund small projects in West Africa to address the root causes of irregular migration (Makauskaite, Kovaliova and Soka 2020). Next to that, Lithuania was also the first Member State that applied for the Mobility Partnership Facility to implement a pilot project on legal migration between Africa and the EU. This is the project 'Digital Explorers' that in this thesis is used as a case-study.

3.2.2. Nigeria

With 209,5 million people (PopulationStat 2021), Nigeria is the most populated country on the whole African continent. However, a big part of this population is unemployed: "*one in every two Nigerians in the country's labour force is either unemployed or underemployed*" (Kazeem 2020). 21.7 million Nigerians of the 80.2 million labour force currently do not have a job. This unemployment problem, which is still increasing, is the biggest among young Nigerians between 25 and 34 years old (Kazeem 2020). Since unemployment is high and job opportunities are low, many Nigerians leave Nigeria to find a job elsewhere. In 2017 it was estimated that more than 17 million Nigerians were living abroad (Fidelis 2017). The most popular destinations that Nigerians

currently go to are the United States, followed by the UK and Cameroon (Nevin and Omosomi 2019, 5). However, also European Member States are popular. Nigeria is one of the main nationalities that apply for asylum in the EU. In most cases, these requests are rejected (EASO 2020, 14). It is believed that more than 100.000 Nigerians are currently living in the EU without having a legal residence permit (Tella 2020). And although the negative effects of irregular migration are a big topic in Nigeria, the Nigerians that do return home "*still face stigmatisation and branded failures when migration (regular or irregular) yields no economic return for the individual and his/her family*" (Arhin-Sam 2019, 34).

In 2015 the Nigerian government adopted the National Policy on Migration, which led to 'the Plan of Action for National Migration Policy (2019-2023)'. The plan constated out of six pillars. The first pillar on migration management has, among others, the policy initiative to: *"encourage orderly and regular migration of Nigerians and discourage irregular migration. [..] use migration channels as an avenue for poverty reduction. And [..] strengthen cooperation on migration matters between the Nigerian government and transit and destination countries"* (OHCHR, n.d., 4, 6 and 8). The second pillar focuses on the Nigerian diaspora, which has, among others, the political initiative to encourage the Nigerian diaspora to contribute to and invest in national development and tries to address the effect of brain drain on Nigeria's development. The third pillar is focused on labour migration. This pillar has, among others, the goal to increase opportunities for regular labour migration, reduce exploitation of labour migrants, and increase the Nigerian population's vocational, technical, and entrepreneurial skills to match with labour opportunities abroad. The fourth pillar focuses on 'migration data management', the fifth on 'border management', and the last pillar focuses on 'forced migration and return, readmission and reintegration' (OHCHR n.d., 25-26).

Within this new Action Plan, legal labour migration thus plays an important role. One of the reasons why labour migration is so crucial for Nigeria is the benefits of the remittances that Nigeria receives from it. According to data from the World Bank, Nigerians living abroad send back home 23,809 billion US Dollars in remittances in 2019 (World Bank 2021). To put this in perspective: in 2018, Nigerian's remittances, with a value of 23,63 US Dollars, was 7.4 times higher than the in 2017 received foreign aid and also higher than Nigeria's oil revenues (Nevin and Omomia 2019, 2, 4). Therefore, remittances are a very important source of income in Nigeria and count for 6% of Nigerians GDP (EASO 2020, 15).

Although remittances are crucial for Nigeria, the government more often also expresses its concerns about Nigerians working abroad. This is especially the case in the healthcare sector. Health professionals and doctors are leaving Nigeria, causing a shortage within the Nigerian health care sector (Umoru 2020). The Minister of Health even speaks about a 'physician's brain drain'. To combat this problem, the government tries to make it less attractive for physicians to leave Nigeria with the help of, for example, more funding for hospitals in Nigeria (Premium Times 2020). This problem, however, is also visible in the ICT-sector. According to Nigerian (start-up) companies it is really difficult to find good (senior) software developers and tech talents in Nigeria because after developers are trained locally, they often leave Nigeria to work abroad. Foreign companies often provide

improved work conditions, better remuneration, and more opportunities. This creates an enormous scarcity for local companies that are looking for tech talent (Ekwealor 2019). To tackle this problem, the government formulated in its Action Plan measures/preconditions for labour migration to stimulate that Nigerians working abroad do in the end return to Nigeria to contribute to the country's development. Therefore, the goal of the Action Plan is that brain drain and brain waste will be converted to brain gain and brain circulation (OHCHR n.d., 25-26).

3.3 A new partnership?

When looking at population, migration, labour, and development, Nigeria and Lithuania are two completely different countries. Before the Digital Explorers project started, these two countries had never worked together in these fields. However, when looking at the problems they have to deal with, such as high unemployment in Nigeria and an exodus of labour in Lithuania, it seems that one's problem can be the other's solution. Unfortunately, the reality is not that black and white. Migration is still a sensitive topic in Lithuania, which raises questions about the support base of circular migration. On the other hand, Nigeria also has to deal with brain drain that is more often being described as an issue. Within this context, the digital explorers project tried to make some first steps in a partnership between Nigeria and Lithuania. To understand the DE-project this context is therefore important to take in mind.

Chapter 4 - The perspective of the European Commission on circular migration

The EC invests quite some money in the MPF-pilot projects since the EC believes that, if well managed and implemented, legal migration pathways can be a tool to reduce irregular migration while filling labour market gaps in the Member States. Although the importance of circular migration is underlined for some time already, until recently, there was either a lack of willingness by the Member States to implement these projects (EC 2018a, 7) or many of the pilot projects turned out not to be successful enough to continue (Hooper 2019, 4). To find out why the EC still thinks that it is important to invest more in legal migration pathways and why they are financed and organized through the EU (even though it is a matter of Member States themselves), this chapter will focus on the following things. First, this chapter explains what the EC means with circular migration and will describe how the EC's objectives formulated for circular migration have shifted in its focus over the years. The second paragraph delves into the migration relationship between the EU and African countries and will describe how legal migration became inextricably linked with the return and readmission of irregular migrants. Thirdly, I explain what kind of frameworks the EC uses to try to 'manage' circular migration in a way that the EC thinks it will be beneficial for the country of origin, the country of destination and the migrant. This chapter ends with an explanation of the specific objectives that the EC has for the Digital Explorers project and if the EC and ICMPD think these objectives are met or not.

4.1 The European Commission's definition for circular migration

Within the years that the EC is writing about circular migration, the term is most often used without a clear explanation of what the EC means with it exactly. The EC mentioned the term circular migration for the first time in their Communication on Migration and Development in 2005 (as a form of migration that could contribute to brain circulation) (Nita 2016, 24). It was not until 2007 that the EC gave a somewhat vague definition in their Communication on Circular Migration and Mobility Partnerships. In this document, the EC defined circular migration as: "*a form of migration that is managed in a way allowing some degree of legal mobility back and forth between two countries*" (EC 2007, 8). This definition is widely interpretable since words as 'a form', 'in a way', and 'some degree' are leaving a lot left for someone's imagination. The decision to use such a vague description can be explained by the fact that migration is a matter of the Member States themselves. Choosing a loose description gives the Member States the possibility to give their own substance to the concept. This is important since the interests in the different aspects of circular migration might differ between Member States (Castles and Ozkul 2014, 28). Leaving this concept open for someone's interpretation might decrease the chance that a Member State immediately rejects it. Besides, this explains why the EC did not attempt to provide a more specific definition so far (González-Ferrer, Serrano and Van den Bunder 2019, 113). Next to this definition, the EC also explained that, in her opinion, there are two main forms of circular migration: "*circular migration of third-country nationals settled in the EU*" and "*circular migration of persons residing in a third country*" (EC 2007, 9).

The former can be diaspora returning temporarily to their home country to start up a business. The latter can be a Nigerian developer working temporarily in an ICT-company in Europe. However, this thesis will only focus on the latter form of circular migration.

4.2 The European Commission's objectives for circular migration

Since the EC first mentioned circular migration in 2005, the EC has formulated different objectives for this form of migration. Comparing the objectives of 2005 with the current objective of circular migration, I observe a shift from a more development-oriented perspective to a more political perspective, as I will show in the following analysis.

As outlined in the EC's 'Communication on Circular Migration and Mobility Partnerships', circular migration became interesting for the EC in 2007 for several reasons:

> *"The invitation from the European Council to explore ways of facilitating circular migration comes against the backdrop of changing patterns of migration around the world and the need for the European Union to offer a credible alternative to illegal immigration. Circular migration is increasingly being recognized as a key form of migration that, if well managed, can help to match the international supply of and demand for labour, thereby contributing to a more efficient allocation of available resources and economic growth. However, circular migration also poses certain challenges: if not properly designed and managed, migration intended to be circular can easily become permanent and, thus, defeat its objective*" (EC 2007, 8). *[..] "Circular migration schemes would need to be carefully monitored, with regard both to design and practical implementation in order to ensure both that they meet their twin objectives of responding to the needs of labour markets in the EU and contributing to the development of countries of origin and that circular migration does not become permanent"* (EC 2007, 12). Circular migration can help EU Member States to "*address their labour needs while exploiting potential positive impacts of migration on development and responding to the needs of countries of origin in terms of skill transfers and of mitigating the impact of brain drain"* (EC 2007, 2).

In 2007 the EC had, as described above, two main objectives for circular migration: circular migration could fill the gaps in the EU labour market and could contribute to development in countries of origin if circular migration is well managed. This connection between migration and development is what has been described in chapter 2 as the migration-development nexus or the development narrative, meaning that migration will contribute to the economic-, political- and social development of the country of origin (Den Hertog 2016, 33), but also to the development of the country of destination.

An additional key-objective mentioned less explicitly by the EC is that circular migration means that migrants will not stay permanent within the EU and return to their home countries. The return of migrants is presented as beneficial for both the countries of origin and the EU Member States, who do not want a repetition of the non-successful guest-worker programs of the sixties and seventies. The guest-worker programs did not succeed in

the EU's objective since most migrants stayed permanently together with their families they brought over (Ozkul 2011, 6). Therefore, circular migration could make a difference since migrants will "*re-establish their main residence and their main activity in their country of origin*" (EC 2007, 4). Besides, Member States can benefit from the fact that with temporary migration they do not have to pay the costs of long-term integration measures (Castles and Ozkul 2014, 43), such as perks regarding social security.

Although the general objective of circular migration did not change drastically over the years, it seems that some changes can be found in the context in which circular migration is used and the goals that the EC wants to use circular migration for. In 2017-2018, the year in which the EC started to finance and coordinate legal migration pilots between third countries and Member States, the EC formulated new objectives for legal migration, and thus circular migration:

> *"Enhanced and tailored cooperation on legal migration with third countries of origin and transit of migrants will help reduce irregular migration by offering safe and legal alternatives for persons wishing to migrate; it will contribute to bridging gaps in certain sectors of Member States' labour markets; and will be an incentive to facilitate cooperation on issues such as prevention of irregular migration, readmission, and return of irregular migrants*" (EC 2018a, 6-7).

In this text, also mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, it becomes clear that the EC had in 2018 three main objectives for legal migration and thus circular migration: 1) it can help to reduce irregular migration; 2) it can contribute to the shortages in the EU labour market; and 3) it stimulates cooperation with third countries on irregular migration, readmission, and returns. Comparing this view to the EC's objectives in 2007, a shift of focus can be identified. In 2007 circular migration was described through a more development perspective/narrative: the country of origin will develop due to returning migrants that have gained skills and knowledge in the EU. The country of destination can economically develop since circular migration can fill the gaps in the EU labour market. However, in 2018 this development perspective shifted to a more political perspective. While in 2007 the EC underlined that circular migration 'could be' an alternative for illegal migration, in 2018, the EC was more convinced, arguing that forms of legal migration could actually reduce irregular migration. Although there is a lack of data that shows how and if legal migration impacts irregular migration (Hooper 2019, 4), the EC did even add a new layer by saying that legal migration could also be an 'incentive to facilitate cooperation on issues such as prevention of irregular migration'. To stimulate this 'incentive', the EC argued that:

> "*These pilot projects could be explored with selected third countries based on the quality of the partnership on migration management and the level of concrete cooperation on combating irregular flows and readmission of irregular migrants*" (EC 2017, 19).

This clearly shows how legal migration, and thus circular migration, became presented as a concrete policy tool within migration management and the migration partnerships between the EU and third countries (Nita 2016). According to the EC, this tool could be used to negotiate other aspects of migration with third countries, such as

return and readmission. Under the precondition, that circular migration is well-managed, meaning that the pathways are beneficial for both the third country, the EU Member State, and the migrants who use the pathway (a triple win) (EPC Webinar Labour migration, 7 October 2020).

However, this is not the first time the EU negotiate on irregular migration with African countries. Since 2000, the EU uses different tools in different areas to negotiate readmission and return of irregular migrants with African countries. To better understand when, how and why circular migration transformed from a more development tool to a more political tool on readmission and return, it is essential to analyse the context in which this change occurred. For this reason, the following paragraph will analyse how the migration relationship between the EU and Africa, has developed over the years.

4.3 The EU-Africa migration relationship

Migration has always been an important topic in the EU's relationship with Africa. According to the EU, Africa is an essential partner on this topic because of its principal origin of irregular migration to Europe (Korvensyrjä 2017, 191). To stop irregular migration, the EU has made migration in the last twenty years a central element in negotiations between the countries of these two continents also within fields such as trade, security, and development which are not historically linked to migration policies (Deridder, Pelckmans and Ward 2020, 12). The first time a link was made within an agreement between migration and development was in the Cotonou agreement signed in 2000 between the EU and 79 countries within Africa and the Caribbean, and the Pacific. This agreement linked financial assistance from the Official Development Assistance to "*questions related to the removal of individuals in an irregular situation*" (Deridder, Pelckmans and Ward 2020, 12). In 2002 the European Council reinforced this link by urging that "*in all future co-operation agreements, [...] a clause be inserted on the joint management of migration flows as well as on compulsory readmission in case of illegal immigration*" (Presidency of the Council of Seville 21 and 22 June 2002 in Aguillon 2018, 8). After the incidents in Melilla and Ceuta in 2005 - when the Moroccan and Spanish police killed eleven migrants that tried to climb over the fences to cross the barrier between the Spanish enclave of Ceuta and Morocco – the European Council adopted its first Global Approach to Migration (GAM). This EU policy document also linked development with irregular migration since it was designed for "*cooperation with third states, the fight against irregular immigration and co-development*" (Aguillon 2018, 9).

So, since 2000 the EU has tried to link development assistance for African countries with readmission and return policies. However, it was not until 2006 that the EU decided to discuss migration and development policies with African countries instead of talking with EU countries about migration and development policies for African countries. In 2006 France, Spain, Morocco, and Senegal initiated to organize the first EU-Africa conference on migration and development in Rabat. During this conference, a declaration was signed, called the Rabat Process. The declaration formed the basis for "*a partnership between countries of origin, transit, and destination to provide specific and relevant answers to the central issue of the control of migration flows*" (Aguillon 2018, 9).

Although the Rabat Process created a platform for exchange for both sides, its operational effectiveness was minimal (Tardis 2018, 15). In 2007, followed by the Rabat Process, the EU and African countries adopted, during the Africa-EU Summit in Lisbon, the Joint EU-Africa Strategy and the Lisbon Declaration (Council of the EU 2007, 16-17). Based on this Strategy, the Africa-EU Strategic Partnership became the formal channel through which African countries and the EU could collaborate. Within the Partnership, 'migration, mobility and employment' became one of the eight focus areas, also known as the Africa – EU Partnership on Migration, Mobility and Employment (MME) (IOM 2021b). In 2011, in the middle of the Arab spring, the EU renewed its Global Approach to Migration (GAM) and renamed it the Global Approach to Migration and Mobility (GAMM). In this new approach, the EU decided that the second priority for the EU (behind the EU-neighborhood) should be given to the EU-Africa Strategic Partnership on MME and should function as the overarching regional framework (EC 2011, 8-9). The GAMM is an important document that consisted out of four 'equally' important pillars, which are (EC 2011, 7):

1) "*Organizing and facilitating legal migration mobility;*
2) *preventing and reducing irregular migration and trafficking in human beings;*
3) *promoting international protection and enhancing the external dimension of asylum policy;*
4) *maximizing the development impact of migration and development."*

The GAMM pays much attention to legal migration pathways and the role of development. Three of the four pillars could (in)directly be linked to legal migration. However, when the EU ended up in the migration 'crisis' of 2015-2016, this focus on legal migration moved to the background. This ensured that although the EC decided to offer more pathways for legal migration, not a lot was done because the migration crisis changed the EU's migration policy focus (Vermeulen 2019).

After the terrible accidents in 2015, in which hundreds of migrants lost their lives on the Mediterranean Sea while making their way to Europe, the EU decided that a new approach to migration was necessary. The GAMM had to make room for this 'crisis' approach, named 'the European Agenda on Migration'. This document was more focused on preventing irregular migration rather than improving legal migration (Vermeulen 2019). Improving the cooperation with third countries on readmission and return of migrants became a key element in the EU's response to the so-called migration 'crisis' (Zanker et al. 2019, 4).

The European Agenda on Migration created the following four new pillars "to manage migration better" (EC 2015, 6):

1) *"Reducing the incentives for irregular migration"* (EC 2015, 7).
2) "*Border management – saving lives and securing external borders*" (EC 2015, 10).
3) *"Europe's duty to protect: a strong common asylum policy"* (EC 2015, 12).
4) *"A new policy on legal migration"* (EC 2015, 14).

When comparing the pillars of the European Agenda on Migration with the GAMM, an important shift in focus can be identified. Legal migration lowered from being the first pillar to the fourth pillar, reducing irregular migration became more important and was now included in two pillars instead of one (Vermeulen 2019). The fourth pillar of the GAMM ("*maximizing the development impact of migration and development")* disappeared. The development narrative had to make more room for a security narrative focused on more border management.

The same year that the EC published the European Agenda on Migration, the EU also decided that more action was needed to step-up the dialogue with the African Union. For this reason, in November 2015, a migration summit in Valletta was organized between the EU and African leaders (EC 2015). During this summit, a political declaration was adopted, the Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) was formally launched, and the Joint Valletta Action Plan was designed (Council of the EU 2019). Although this was not the first EU-African summit dedicated to migration, "*the introduction of a comprehensive action plan and the creation of the Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) illustrated the determination of the Europeans to obtain concrete, and if possible, quick results*" (Tardis 2018, 27). The Valletta agreement clearly showed the wishes of both the EU and the African countries. The EU wanted better cooperation with African countries on the return and readmission of irregular migrants and border control. African countries wanted better cooperation with the EU to create legal migration pathways for African citizens and create freedom of movement within the African continent (Tardis 2018, 19).

The migration crisis in 2015/2016 and how the EU responded to it can also explain the shift of focus in the EC's approach to legal migration. Legal migration became presented as more useful for political/security goals rather than for more development goals. While legal and thus circular migration was used in the GAMM as the main priority by the EU to maximize the development impact in both the EU Member States and third countries, this perspective changed. In the Agenda on Migration and Valletta declaration, legal migration was now more seen as a tool of a package of measures needed to 'manage migration better'. Improving the possibilities and benefits of legal migration for third countries was presented as the medium of exchange for the EU to make third countries collaborate on readmission, return and border control. This shows the shift from a more development perspective to a more political perspective, as mentioned in the previous paragraph, but it also shows how a security narrative, rather than a development narrative became dominant within EU's policy.

So far, both continents have not put much effort into each other's wishes. Especially in the context of Nigeria, which this case-study is about, there is still a lot of work to do. The EU sees Nigeria as one of its most crucial migration partners for the upcoming years (Vermeulen 2019) and made Nigeria one of their five priority countries in the Mobility Partnership Facility (MPF) (together with Ethiopia, Mali, Niger and Senegal) (Collet and Ahad 2017, 1), because of the 'undesirable high' numbers of Nigerian asylum seekers in Europe (Arhin-Sam, 2019, 8).

However, it took many government officials' visits (from among others Merkel, Macron, and Rutte) to try to get Nigeria also on board to work together on this topic (Vermeulen 2019). In 2016 the negotiations on a readmission agreement between Nigeria and the EU started (European Court of Auditors 2020, 6), but so far, there is not an

agreement signed (EC 2021c, 6). That Nigeria is not that much interested in readmission and return of its nationals has several reasons. As mentioned before, migration is an essential income for the Nigerian economy. Helping the Member States with return might undermine the political and economic support that the Nigerian government receives from the diaspora community (Zanker et al. 2019, 9). Besides, the EU is not putting many efforts into the other promises formulated in the Valetta agreement, namely that the EU would offer more legal migration pathways. To understand to what extent the EU and African countries do not keep their promises as agreed upon in the Valletta declaration and why this is a problem, we must look at the numbers on irregular migration and legal migration.

4.4 Migration cooperation in numbers

Looking at the numbers of return and readmission, it becomes clear that the percentages of Nigerians who returned to Nigeria because they had no legal right to stay, are far below what the EU likes to see. Between 2014-2018 the EU tried on a yearly average to return 12.849 Nigerians to Nigeria; however, on a yearly average, only 25% of them (3216 people) returned to Nigeria (European Court of Auditors 2020, 6). For the EC, return is so important because:

> "*Returning people who do not have the right of asylum in Europe is one of the most effective ways to prevent and reduce irregular migration. It is a strong deterrent and therefore an essential part of a functioning EU migration and asylum system. Irregular (economic) migrants currently arrive in the EU believing that there is a good chance to stay because the return system is not working"* (EC n.d.- a, 1).

So, the EC believes that because the return system is not working and people stay in the EU, Nigerians continue to request asylum, even though most cases are rejected (EASO 2020, 14). Next to the problem of not being able to send people back to their home country, all these requests also overload the asylum systems of Member States. This overload results in delays and high cost, which then again contributes to the idea that the EU has lost 'control' over migration (AIV 2020, 8). Another result of not being able to return legally rejected Nigerians to their home country is that a significant group will live illegally in EU Member States. As explained in chapter 3, it is estimated that around 100.000 Nigerians are currently living in the EU without having a legal residence permit (Tella 2020).

On the other hand, looking at the budget that the EU and its Member States currently spent on legal migration projects, it doesn't seem like they are taking legal migration as their main priority and far from "equally" as important as irregular migration, as stated in the GAMM. The budget shows that the pillars formulated in the European Agenda on Migration, especially the first three, became way more important than the original focus on legal migration in the GAMM. Vermeulen, Tromp and Zandonini, published a research in December 2019 about migration spending in Nigeria. It turned out that the EU and its Member States spent around 771.3 million

euros on migration projects in Nigeria.[10] From this budget, only 300.000 euros are spent on legal migration pathways between the EU and Nigeria. Vermeulen Tromp and Zandonini believe that only around 0.09% of the EU's total migration budget for Nigeria is intended for legal migration pathways (Vermeulen, Tromp and Zandonini 2019). So, where does the money go? Well, most of it is spent on border control (389 million) and secondly on job creation (142 million) (Vermeulen, Tromp and Zandonini 2019). Two aspects that the EU believes will contribute to a decrease in irregular migration.

Besides the small budget for legal migration pathways, the EU is also not eager to issue visas to Nigerians. In general, the EU has decreased its number of issued residence permits for African countries by 70% between 2008 and 2017 (from 125.000 to 40.000 residence permits) (Barslund et al. 2019, 2). Looking at Nigeria in particular, data shows that Nigeria was the country with the highest uniform visa rejections in 2018. Of the 88.587 applications for a Schengen visa, 49,8% were not issued (Bisong 2020). Some African civil society organizations even argue that the cause of irregular migration is not the lack of development, but rather the restrictive migration policies that the EU developed over the last few years (West African Civil Society Organisations 2016; Diarra 2016 in Korvensyrjä 2017, 192). Looking at the drop in the numbers of visas issued for Nigerians in the EU, this argument makes sense. Besides, it is also argued in academic literature that the obstruction of legal migration pathways does not lead to a reduction of departures but rather to an increase in trafficking and smuggling (Raineri and Rossi 2017, 13), and thus in an increase in irregular migration.

Despite the low budget for legal migration pathways, the decrease in the issue of visas and the promises of Valletta, the EU seems not to be open for changing this any time soon. In 2020 the EC even implemented a new visa code that included a mechanism based on the cooperation of third countries on return and readmission of their nationals that should incentivize third countries to cooperate (Bisong 2020). Nigeria, in particular, is, according to the EU, not cooperating well with the EU on readmission and return and therefore, as a consequence, the EU planned to tighten the procedures for getting a visa (Schengenvisainfo 2020). The exact impact of this visa mechanism is due to the corona-19 restrictions so far unclear. However, it is questionable if this 'less-for-less' strategy will work. So far, I would argue that it seems that it contributes to irregular migration rather than decreasing irregular migration.

Based on these developments in the last few years, it might not be that interesting for Nigeria to work on readmission and return of nationals contributing to Nigerian's remittances, while the EU is not putting a lot of effort into legal migration and decreases the amount of visa issued. So why is the EU not putting more effort to implement legal migration pathways? First of all, the EU will argue that they did not because Nigeria and other African countries did not increase return and readmission. Nevertheless, it is a bit more complicated than that. The EU has many difficulties with implementing legal pathways. Legal migration is a matter of the Member States themselves, so the EC or other EU bodies and/or institutions cannot implement legal migration pathways without the help and the willingness of a Member State to cooperate. This brings us to the second problem, namely that

[10] However, it has to be said that it is very unclear how (much) the EU spent (on) its migration budget.

Member States experience a lack of support base for migration to implement these pathways. This has several reasons and is a study in itself, but this lack of support can often be linked to concerns about sovereignty, national security, citizenship, and/or identity (Hollifield 2012, 280).

4.5 Regulating circular migration with funds and frameworks

In 2017 the EC concluded, in the evaluation on the Agenda on Migration (2015), that on legal migration, presented as one of the four focus areas of the EU migration policy and part of the Joint Valletta Action Plan, no concrete results have been achieved. Or as the EC formulated it herself: "*The role of legal migration channels in our cooperation with third countries needs to become a more important component so that concrete results can be achieved*" (EC 2017, 19). To achieve concrete results, the EC announced to be willing to coordinate and financially support pilot projects on legal/circular migration between Member States and third countries. The decision of the EC to start to finance legal migration pathways makes it more attractive for Member States to implement them and makes it possible that these projects can be strictly managed and controlled by the EC.

If a Member State wants to implement circular migration programs, the EC has different funds that a Member State can claim to implement these projects. However, these specific funds all have their own framework. Moreover, every framework has its own objectives and criteria that a program should cover to qualify for the fund. This helps the EC to keep some sort of form of control over the content of these projects. Control is essential for the EC to ensure that its criteria are met, meaning that the program benefits the country of origin, the country of destination, and the migrant (a triple win).

Currently, the EC supports circular migration pilot projects through three different funds. First of all, pilots can be funded through EU development-related funding, such as the European Development Fund. Secondly, pilots can be supported through the Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (ICMPD 2018, 6). This fund was launched after the Valletta Summit on Migration in 2015 and has three different windows: the Sahel and Lake Chad, the Horn of Africa, and the North of Africa. For the North Africa window, money is available for legal migration and mobility (EC 2019, 2). With this fund, Belgium and Germany started in 2018 the 'Towards a Holistic Approach to Labour Migration Governance and Labour Mobility in North Africa' (THAMM) project. One of the goals of this ongoing program is to implement legal migration and mobility schemes between Germany and Belgium, and Tunisia, Morocco, and Egypt (EC 2018b). However, most pilot projects are currently funded through the EU Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF), which was set up for 2014-2020. For example, the circular migration program MATCH is financed with the AMIF. This ongoing program will match employees from Nigeria and Senegal to labour market shortages in the Netherlands, Luxemburg, Belgium, and Italy for a working period of 1-2 years (IOM 2021a). More important, under the AMIF, the EC also launched in 2016 the Mobility Partnership Facility (MPF). The objective of the MPF is, among others, to "*better organise legal migration and foster well-managed mobility*" (ICMPD 2018, 6) and contribute to the Global Approach to Migration and Mobility (GAMM) (MPF 2020b). Although the GAMM has been renewed in 2011, since 2005 the GAMM has been "*the overarching framework of the EU External Migration Policy*" (EC 2011, 5). Under the GAMM, the Common Agendas for

Migration and Mobility (CAMM) and the Mobility Partnerships (MP) are the most elaborated bilateral cooperation frameworks between third countries and the EU and its Member States. The difference between these two frameworks is that the MP is mainly used for neighbouring countries and includes negotiation on readmission agreements and visa facilitation. In contrast, the CAMM does not cover this and focuses mainly on third countries further from Europe (EC n.d. - b). If countries have signed a CAMM they can always, at a later stage, update this agreement to a MP (EC 2011, 11). However, circular migration pilot projects can be part of both frameworks (MPF 2020c). The MPF has been launched to support the implementation of the CAMM and MP frameworks. So far, nine MP's and three CAMM's (with among others Nigeria) have been signed. These official non-binding frameworks are used to make an agreement between the EU, Member States, and third countries on the four thematic pillars of the GAMM.

In the case of the MPF, which is used to fund the Digital Explorers project, the pilot projects on legal migration have to meet the following objectives: First of all, pilot projects on legal migration need to *"offer additional safe and legal pathways to migrate for work or study"* (MPF 2020d, 7). Secondly, pilot projects are implemented to "*contribute to addressing labour shortage gaps in certain sectors of the labour markets of Member States"* (MPF 2020d, 7). And finally, pilot projects also need to "*facilitate or further develop cooperation with third-countries on a comprehensive management of migratory flows, including on issues such as prevention of irregular migration and readmission of irregular migrants"* (MPF 2020d, 7). To ensure that the third objective is a realistic goal, the EC might decide not to fund a project with a partner country that does not cooperate with the EU on return and readmission.

Besides these objectives and criteria, the EC has also formulated different elements for MPF-pilot projects that should be included to make the project a triple win. These elements are as followed (MPF 2020d, 8-10):

1. An institutional capacity building element: this element is necessary to successfully recruit potential migrants and match the skills needed in the country of origin with the skills needed in the Member States. Capacity-building activities are a mandatory element in a pilot project to increase "*the capabilities of origin countries to reap the maximum benefits of such forms of migration for their own development, as well as ensuring that the structures are in place to ensure implementation*" (MPF 2020d, 8).
2. Pre-departure measures: these measures cover things like pre-departure training and recruitment to ensure that activities are successfully implemented.
3. A mobility phase: this element includes activities "*with a view to developing migrants' knowledge and skills for potential further use upon return. [..] to support the temporary/circular migration of selected candidates and their integration, albeit short term, in the local labour market of the Member State as well as its society, ensuring that agreed-upon professional development goals are met*" (MPF 2020d, 9).
4. Reintegration programs/activities in the country of origin: this element includes activities and programs supporting labour migrants with the reintegration in the local labour market or with their own business creation after returning home.

Because the EC has made such strict and extensive guidelines for MPF-pilot projects, the EC influences the project development. Therefore, the EC can to some extent regulate and manage the projects. For example, after an application is submitted, ICMPD, together with the Grant Evaluation Committee, will evaluate the application. If necessary, adjustments are made, and if the proposal is approved, a Grant Contract will be signed. Although ICMPD implements the MPF, the MPF Steering Committee, consisting out of representatives of the EC (from DG HOME, DG NEAR, DG DEVCO and EEAS), will provide leadership, strategic guidance, and oversight for the project's implementation. DG Home is the Steering Committee chair, while ICMPD fulfils the role of the secretariat (MPF 2020d, 4).

Besides funding frameworks that are used to regulate circular migration pilot projects, another framework is used after funding is provided. During the implementation of the projects, ICMPD will be in close contact with the project implementers. ICMPD will be informed about project changes, and extensive project changes need to get approval from the MPF Steering Committee. Also, ICMPD publishes lessons learned and formulates recommendations for pilot projects and organizes activities such as conferences and workshops with EU Member States and partner countries to discuss the priorities and implementation of the MP or CAMM (ICMPD 2016). Both the frameworks used for application and the implementation can be seen as tools used by the EC to regulate circular migration pilot projects as far as possible since migration is still a matter of the Member States themselves.

4.6 The Commission's view on the Digital Explorers project

Although the EC has formulated specific objectives and guidelines for MPF-projects, the EC and ICMPD also had some specific reasons why the Digital Explorers was an interesting program for the MPF and what distinguishes the program from other pilot projects. First of all, the ICMPD employee explained that Nigeria and Lithuania were interesting countries to do the project with. There was no program with Nigeria so far, and also Lithuania was an unexpected player who does not have an extensive track record of attracting talent from abroad. ICMPD was actually surprised by the fact that Lithuania was the first one to apply for the MPF: "*Who would have thought that first pilot project on legal migration would be the pilot between Lithuania and Nigeria*?" (Ralph Genetzke, Director and Head of the Brussels Office of ICMPD, in Digital Explorers Webinar, 8 October 2020). Nigeria and Lithuania did not even have a diplomatic relationship before the project started, so it was, according to ICMPD, a unique and exciting situation. Secondly, there was political support in Lithuania for the project, which is, according to the ICMPD employee, an essential prerequisite for the project to be a success. Besides, the EC does not want to fund a project that the Member State's government does not support. Third, with the Digital Explorers project as a first approved project proposal, the EC was eager to start implementing soon because the EC wanted to respond to some critics and demands from third countries and civil society to step up in cooperation on migration with third countries. Lastly, the proposal for the Digital Explorers project was of good quality. Even though the stakeholders were not very experienced in implementing this type of project, they were, according

to the ICMPD employee, relatively well prepared, and they had invested a lot of time and resources into the preparation of the concept.

According to the ICMPD employee, the DE-project implementers followed the MPF-guidelines quite strongly, ensuring that the EC significantly impact the project design. This is also visible in the way Digital Explorers is presented on the MPF-website. On the MPF-website it is stated, as also explained in chapter 3, that there are five elements central within the Digital Explorers project, which are: 1) a prior-departure Workplace Awareness training, 2) a tailor-made training in Lithuania, 3) a capacity-building element between Nigerian and Lithuanian institutions, 4) personal support for participants and 5) a reintegration program after return (MPF 2020a). These five elements correspond very well with the four pillars presented by the EC and ICMPD as essential elements to make a pilot project a "success".

In a webinar organized by AfriKo, the outcomes of the first track of the DE-project were discussed. During this webinar, the EC described the DE-project as a success because "*all the key elements were there"* (Fransesco Fusaro, Policy Officer DG-Home in Webinar on Digital Explorers, 8 October 2020). Also, the ICMPD employee describes the DE-project in general as a great success since it was very positively perceived by all the stakeholders involved. For example, the fact that many companies decided to keep the Nigerian developers shows, according to the ICMPD employee, that the companies were very positive about the project. For ICMPD, the project was also a success because of the many learnings and recommendations that the project gave. However, according to the ICMPD employee, some aspects could be improved the next time.

First of all, the ICMPD employee thinks that the Nigerian government could have played a more prominent role in the project. It is crucial to involve the different ministries of both countries to make a project also sustainable. The DE-project is one of the few MPF-pilot projects that choose not to involve the public sector of the third country. The ICMPD employee sees this as a missed opportunity and thinks that maybe in a project scale-up, the government should be more involved, making also sure that the project is useful for the partner country. To compensate that the Nigerian government was not involved and because it was unclear how many participants would return to Nigeria, ICMPD and the EC stimulated the DE-project leaders to include a capacity-building component to reach a form of benefit or advantage for the partner country.

Next to that, there is some criticism from the European Commission that the project is too expensive for only bringing this small amount of people and not the 50 that was promised:

> *"Some have questioned the fact that "only" 15 matches between candidates and companies materialized, which also pushed project staff to try to attempt to bring more candidates in a second track* (ICMPD employee, interview, 4 December 2020).

However, this is also the point where ICMPD differs somehow in its position compared to some stakeholders in the Commission, because, although ICMPD is happy with high numbers, they think it is important to look also beyond the numbers:

> "*There are some voices in the Commission that are criticizing the fact that it is so few people, while it is quite expensive. [..] But at the same time, the pilot projects generate a lot of learnings. The Commission is also realizing this and recognizes more and more that the success of the project is more than just the amount of people moved. It's really about testing what works and what doesn't and allowing for policy experimentation." [..] "You have to start somewhere. [..] Without these small numbers at the beginning, there would be nothing. So, we have to go through this stage to build trust and experience so that maybe, later on, we could build on the small successes and scale programs up to reach bigger numbers"* (ICMPD employee, interview, 4 December 2020).

To conclude, as this chapter showed, the EC has slightly changed its focus in its view on circular migration over the years. Before 2015, the EC had a more development perspective that emphasized that circular migration should be used as a tool to reach development. After 2015, the EC emphasized a security narrative that approached circular migration more as a political tool that can be used at the negotiation table with African countries on readmission and return of irregular migrants. However, it turned out that Member States have made not many efforts to offer more legal migration pathways, which caused, among others, also little result in better collaboration with African countries on readmission and return. To increase the incentives of Member States to implement legal migration pathways and make sure that circular migration will lead to a triple win outcome, the EC decided to start financing pilot projects on legal and circular migration in 2018. These funds are linked to clear frameworks that need to ensure that, this time, these circular migration projects do not defeat their objective, making them beneficial for both the country of destination, the country of origin and the migrant. To find out if the DE-pilot project actually reached a triple win outcome, the next chapter will analyse the results of the DE-project from the perspective of the migrant, the country of origin and the country of destination.

Chapter 5 – Digital Explorers: a triple win?

For the EC, a project must be a triple win, so circular migration can be used as a tool to 'better manage migration'. There is a general idea of what these 'wins' could be for the country of origin, the country of destination and the migrant. However, not much is known if these general assumptions do actually match with the specific interests, objectives and aspirations of participants and actors involved in a circular migration project. This is important to know because if it is not clear how actors involved in a project would describe their own possible wins, it is also not possible to say if the project fulfilled these wins. To better understand how the three 'winners' of circular migration describe their own win, this chapter will focus on the different expectations, aspirations, and objectives of the participants, organizations and institutions involved in the Digital Explorers pilot project. To find out to what extent these aspirations are fulfilled, this chapter will be divided into paragraphs along the lines of the three so-called "winners" of circular migration: the migrants, the country of origin, and the country of destination. Every paragraph will describe the aspiration and goals that each category has for the DE-project and will analyse how these are achieved or not. Finally, this chapter concludes with an analysis of how for some actors their 'win' is more extensive than for others.

5.1 Aspirations and expectations of the Nigerian ICT-developers

> *"Every individual will have different experiences with the program. We all have our personal aspirations, lessons, personal experiences, difficulties, and limitations"* (DE-participant 2, back in Nigeria, interview, 3 January 2021).

One of the DE-project participants noted that every individual had his/her own reasons to join the project and experienced the project in a different way. Understanding this individual perspective is important since macro-approaches that focus on policies seem to underestimate the relevance of including the more contextual daily on the ground micro-realities. The value of these micro-realities, also known as "views from below", has been underestimated within politics. Moreover, within academic debates, they are dominated by state-centric views (Deridder, Pelckmans and Ward 2020, 10). During this research, I spoke with six participants of the program and watched different webinars, in which also some of the participants were involved, to better understand this 'view from below'. Although the project participants all had their own stories, there are some shared aspirations between the DE-participants that can be identified. These aspirations can be divided into what De Haas (2014, 24) calls an intrinsic and an instrumental dimension. However, it is essential to note that these aspirations do not explain in general why people migrate but only explain why the participants of this specific project decided to join this project and (temporarily) migrated to Lithuania.

5.1.1 Instrumental aspirations: gaining knowledge, skills, and working experience.

First of all, the participants of the DE-project have instrumental aspirations. Instrumental aspirations have a more functional goal (De Haas 2014, 24) and are often also mentioned within academic literature as a reason why circular migration is a "win" for migrants themselves. Namely, migrants can get more knowledge, skills, and working experience from working abroad (Vertovec 2007, 2) (Adepoju, Noorloos, Zoomers 2010, 11). These "wins" match with the aspirations of the participants in the DE-project. Participants hoped with the program to gain more skills, knowledge, contacts, and (international) working experience within their field of expertise, as two of them explained when I asked in an interview what for them the goal was of the project:

> *"For me, the unique goal was to have the foreign experience and try to become more technical in my field. I thought I would get the experience to go like really technically deep in some parts of my field" (*DE-participant 3, still in Lithuania, interview, 8 January 2021).

> *"It looked like an opportunity to learn in the field. I always wanted to join the tech field. [..] It felt like an opportunity to get hands-on experience" (*DE-participant 5, still in Lithuania, interview, 12 January 2021).

The Nigerian developers wanted to get access to the international ICT-market. The DE-program gave them this opportunity, or as one of the participants formulated himself; the program could function as *"a gateway into the tech field" (*DE-participant 5, still in Lithuania, interview, 12 January 2021).

The DE-participants did not mention a higher salary as an argument to join the project, although in academic literature it is often argued that migrants will base their decision to migrate, among others on this economic argument (Wickramasekara 2011, 23). This can be explained because in Nigeria the DE-participants will earn the same amount of salary or even more (Friederici 2019, 3). Instrumental aspirations such as gaining knowledge and skills plays, therefore, a more important role in the reason for the DE-participants to join the project than economic considerations.

5.1.2. Intrinsic aspirations: international exposure and experiences

Besides these instrumental aspirations, the DE-participants also had some shared intrinsic aspirations. An intrinsic aspiration is a value that the migrant attaches to the international experience (De Haas 2014, 24). These aspirations are, however, often overlooked by migration theories, while this research data shows that the international exposure and experience is one of the main reasons why the Nigerian developers decided to sign-up for the project:

> *"What pushed me to go to Lithuania is this international exposure and the cultural differences"* (DE-participant 2, back in Nigeria, interview, 3 January 2021).

"I was looking to have that foreign experience. To see how work is done somewhere else rather than just doing it in the country. I did a remote job in Nigeria, but it is always different when working and see another country" (DE-participant 3, still in Lithuania, interview, 8 January 2021).

This aspiration to get international exposure needs to receive, I think, more attention within migration theories. Within this globalized world we live in today, it is more a matter of course that "*working abroad can become a normal rite de passage for young people*" (Castles 2004, 210). Intrinsic aspirations are important reasons why the participants joined the program and explain why it was more important for the participants that the program was in Europe than in Lithuania. Most participants did not even really know Lithuania before. They just wanted to get the experience of working in a European country, because one European country gives someone easy access to other European countries, as one of the participants explained:

*"I had never visited Lithuania before. So, I was like hmmm where is Lithuania? Lithuania is in Europe, well that is the only thing I need to know. I always wanted to find my way to Europe just so I could visit these countries and having all these countries accessible to me" (*DE-participant 6, still in Lithuania, interview, 14 January 2021).

Next to the instrumental aspiration of access to international knowledge and skills and the intrinsic aspiration to get international exposure, the decision to join a legal migration program emanate for some participants also from the urge to replace the chaotic cities of Nigeria with a more organized and quiet country:

"Completely honest with you, at that time, I just wanted to leave Nigeria. I have always been a high-energy person. I like working, exercising. So, when I look at the country [Nigeria] I think why is it not working? This is not difficult to fix. When I came out of school, I found out that the problem was not incompetency, but the institutions: a lot of corruption. It was really frustrating for me. It feels like your hands are locked. So, at that point, I just wanted to leave. I worked with people from other places so I knew what I could learn" (DE-participant 1, back in Nigeria, interview, 28 December 2020).

This quote clearly show that it is somehow complicated to categorize this aspiration in either an instrumental or intrinsic dimension. Participants want to leave Nigeria for more tangible reasons, such as getting rid of chaotic traffic, but also because someone did not want to feel 'locked' in his/her country anymore. Therefore, I would argue that there is no clear line between these two dimensions meaning that the intrinsic and instrumental motivations go hand in hand. The program could give them the international experience of living abroad in a different culture. At the same time, it gave them more tangible advantages of opportunities to improve their skills and knowledge in a European ICT-company and leave the sometimes difficult and chaotic situations within Nigeria behind.

5.1.3. Aspirations fulfilled?

In general, the project did contribute to the aspirations of the DE-participants to get international exposure and gain more skills and knowledge in their specific work field. Many of the participants I spoke with even said that the program was more than they could expect, as one of the DE-participants, who is still working for the same Lithuanian ICT-company, explained to me:

> *"I set aspirations and things I would like to achieve, and they were all I think somehow even beyond what I expected. [..] What I learned in the first three months when I got to my company was more than I learned in a year. [..] I think it's just one of the best decisions I have made in my career so far, apart from choosing to become a programmer. I am grateful for the program" (*DE-participant 4, still in Lithuania, interview, 8 January 2021).

The positive program experience DE-participants had was also the result of the big amount of support that the DE-participants received from AfriKo and the ICT-companies. The developers described this support as important to "*get a soft landing*" *(*DE-participant 6, still in Lithuania, interview, 14 January 2021):

> *"I am super grateful that I came with the Digital Explorers program because if I would have come by myself, I do not know how I would have survived. Because the loneliness that comes with it is something that is not talked about and I did not expect that" (*DE-participant 6, still in Lithuania, interview, 14 January 2021).

According to the participants, the support from AfriKo (consisting, among others, out of a buddy-project), and from the ICT-companies, was important for their integration. Most participants even said that this support was better than expected, and one participant even told me that the support gave him the feeling that: *"it was no longer a program it was like a family" (*DE-participant 4, still in Lithuania, interview, 8 January 2021).

When it comes to the job itself, some DE-participants did think that their expectations around their specific working tasks were not always completely in line with those of the employees. Some of the participants also mentioned that they were surprised about the fact that not everyone in the company could speak English, what made it sometimes difficult to do their job. Interestingly also the two ICT-companies mentioned expectation management as something that could be approved, both on the side of the participants and on the side of the companies:

> *"I believe it is both sides: maybe some companies were not prepared well enough, some people from Nigeria were not. You hear what you're told but when you experience it, it is a totally different thing. So, I believe that some of them had different expectations because they did not know the working culture in*

Europe. Some of them were not able to adapt to that and the same is for companies who were inviting those people to join" (Ruptela employee, interview, 23 February 2021).

However, the DE-participants who experienced that their job expectations were not fully met, did not all see this as a big problem. This also shows that the program was more than only the job itself: it was the complete package of experience that was important:

"My expectations were not well communicated, but it doesn't mean if I knew it before that I wouldn't take the offer. I would still take it anyway" (DE-participant 6, still in Lithuania, interview, 14 January 2021).

Although the program met most of the expectations for most DE-participants and for some even beyond their expectations, the program was too short for participants to be able to say that all their aspirations are completely fulfilled:

*"Experience-wise I think there is still a lot that could be achieved in terms of like technical experience for me. There is a lot that could be achieved, but then again, I would also say that one year is a short time. So, I think that there is still time to catch up on that" (*DE-participant 6, still in Lithuania, interview, 14 January 2021).

Eleven of the fifteen participants had the capabilities to stay in Lithuania after the program was finished because their companies or another Lithuanian company was willing to apply for an extent of their working visa. However, three DE-participants, who wanted to stay, could not stay in Lithuania. Although this was for some of them a big disappointment, two of the returned participants I spook with argue that their aspirations are to some extent fulfilled: they had the opportunity to travel outside Nigeria, get international exposure, and learn some specific skills. However, they would have preferred to stay longer in Lithuania to get more out of the opportunity. One of the DE-participants who had to return to Nigeria said:

*"I enjoyed myself, I met a lot of people. I worked with very intelligent developers, highly skilled guys and with real products. I met people and worked with different tools, I was able to attend a lot of meetups and seminars. [..] Coming back was really difficult. So, looking back now I wouldn't say it was 100% good, I learned my lessons, but I can also count my blessings (*DE-participant 2, back in Nigeria, interview, 3 January 2021).

The fact that the aspirations of the DE-participants were not completely fulfilled yet, is also the exact reason why most of the participants stayed in Lithuania: they still have the feeling that there is more to learn and more to see. According to De Haas, Castles and Miller (2020, 80) "*if people have broader life aspirations that cannot be fulfilled at home, this often generates aspirations to migrate*". As this research shows, this can also apply to why

people do not want to return. The aspirations of the developers are not fully fulfilled yet. Or, in some cases, it might even be that their experiences had broadened their aspirations, as one of the participants explained to me when I asked her how the project changes the things she wanted to achieve in her life:

> *"In Nigeria, there are so many odds against you right: the internet, electricity, policies that affect and hinder your growth professional. But coming to a place where things work makes you think better and increases your creativity. You don't have to worry about the basic things. Because all these things are met, you can expend your energy more on the things that matter, so I think that already puts me in a position where I can make better decisions and grow without so many challenges" (*DE-participant 6, still in Lithuania, interview, 14 January 2021).

To conclude, besides some differences in expectation, the program was described in general by all project participants as a success that contributed to their aspirations. The project participants had two main reasons to join the program. The first reason, that is often mentioned within policy documents and literature, is the chance to learn specific skills and knowledge in their field of work. Another important, often underexposed, reason for the participants to join the project was the chance to get international exposure. The developers who had the capabilities to stay in Lithuania felt that they could get the most out of the program and described the program often above their expectations. Their decision to stay can be connected to the wish to fulfil further their aspirations, and the positive experience they had, which makes them also willing to stay. The two participants who are back in Nigeria did feel that the project contributed to their aspirations, but because not all aspirations are fulfilled yet, one of them is sure that he wants to go back to Europe. The other participant is not sure yet because he came back with a lot of enthusiasm to start his own business to contribute to Nigeria's logistics. However, if he wants to leave Nigeria again, he will go back to a European country because he likes the European culture, traditions, and economic forecast.

5.2 Aspirations and expectations from the Nigerian side

From the Nigerian side, Venture Platform (VP) was involved in the project as project leader, and the Office of the Vice President supported the program. However, the Nigerian government was not officially involved as a partner of the project. For the representatives of the Nigerian government and VP, the project was, as will be explained in this paragraph, mainly interesting for three reasons: it could contribute to Nigeria's development, stimulate business collaboration between the two countries, and the program could contribute to a positive narrative about Nigeria(ns). However, this paragraph will show that it was difficult to achieve all these goals.

5.2.1. Developing Nigeria, collaboration, and a positive narrative

VP and the Nigerian government representative had as their main instrumental aspiration for the DE-project that the project could contribute to the development of Nigeria. This is also by Listiani (2018, 150) mentioned as one of the benefits of circular migration for the country of origin. The migrants who return to their country of origin could contribute to the country's national development using their newly acquired knowledge and skills (Listiani 2018, 150). Also, VP and the Nigerian government representative look at the DE-project in this way. The Digital Explorers project could give, according to VP and the Nigerian government representative, Nigerian citizens access to the development of skills and knowledge within the international market. Improving skills is, according to VP, parallel to the evolution of a well-functioning eco-system in Nigeria, because: "*today, many technologies and innovation businesses in Nigeria are built and developed by Nigerian returnees"* (VP representative, interview, 14 January 2021). The causality that is made here is that the development of Nigerian citizens will lead to the country's development. This corresponds with the theory of Muhammed (2014), who says that:

> "*Human resources are important for boosting innovation in any economy, especially in research and development as well as in management skills that lead to better products and economic processes. As a result, the potentials of Nigerian human resources can be utilized to contribute positively to the economic diversification and development provided*" (Muhammed 2014 in Edeh and Dialoke 2020, 17).

According to the Nigerian president Muhammadu Buhari, economic diversification is necessary because the oil and gas sector has demonstrated that the economy can no longer survive only with these two sectors. However, according to the Nigerian president, "*the success of such diversification of the economy will depend on the benefits accruing from the development of human capital through education*" (National Daily Newspaper, 2016). Therefore, circular migration could be seen as a form of education that develops Nigerians human capital and thus the Nigerian economy. Besides the development through knowledge and skills, VP also argues that, during the time Nigerians are working abroad, they can contribute to the development of Nigeria in the form of remittances. Remittances play a vital role in the Nigerian economy, as explained in chapter 2.

However, according to VP, to achieve this instrumental aspiration of development through knowledge and skills, some preconditions had to be met. First of all, the training aspect of the program should meet the market needs in both Lithuania and Nigeria and focus not only on technical skills but also on soft skills and the differences in working cultures. A second precondition was that the Nigerian developers should also return to Nigeria after the program ends. The project created access to relevant experience and exposure to relevant work skills and knowledge. However, it is only interesting for Nigeria as a country, if Nigerians also return with the right skills and knowledge and use them in Nigeria itself. A pathway back to Nigeria is in the program therefore crucial. Besides that, return is, according to VP, also needed to prevent that this project contributes to brain drain (I will come back to this topic in chapter 6). According to the representative of the Nigerian government, this pathway should not necessarily include a job in Nigeria. The physical return of Nigerians could already be the first step in the right direction. Nigerians could, for example, still work virtually for European companies after their return to Nigeria. However, their physical return to Nigeria is essential because people who live in Nigeria are more willing

to contribute to the country and the improvement of the Nigerian system, as a government representative who worked in Europe himself explained to me:

> *"Working remotely will enable them to gain and improve their skills and engage in a global world, while it is more likely that they want to provide a solution to challenges in Nigeria if they are in the system. If they are in the system every day, a lot more people will maximize the opportunities and build products that can help the Nigerian economy"* (Special assistant of the Nigerian Office of the Vice President, interview 12 February 2021).

A final precondition to make the program beneficial from a development perspective for Nigeria is that many Nigerians should be part of the program. Nigeria has a population of 209,5 million people with a very high unemployment rate. If these programs want to make a difference, they need impact as many people as possible. Since this was a pilot project VP, EL and AfriKo knew that they had to start with small numbers.

Next to the development aspiration, VP had two other goals in mind for the DE-project. VP hoped that Nigeria could benefit from both the Lithuanian and Nigerian ICT-sector collaboration and the institutional knowledge and policy exchange between these two countries. This exchange is essential for Nigerian actors to find out what is needed to create the right enabling environment for this form of mobility (I will come back on this in chapter 6).

Lastly, VP also had a more intrinsic aspiration for the project, namely that the DE-program can positively contribute to the image of Nigeria and to a symbiotic relationship between Nigeria and Europe. The project can, according to VP, show European countries that Nigeria has digital talent that is worth and necessary to invest in. The creation of this positive narrative is something that will be further discussed in chapter 6.

5.2.2. Aspirations fulfilled?

From the Nigerian side, one of the most important aspirations was the possibility that the program could contribute to the development of Nigeria. However, according to VP, the precondition for this was that the participants needed to return to Nigeria and would follow a reintegration program organised by VP. So far, only 4 out of the 15 Nigerian developers returned to Nigeria, and two of them were reintegrated by VP. Another precondition was that high numbers were reached, or, to make it more realistic, at least 50 developers should be placed. However, with the first project, the project coordinators could only place 15 Nigerians and not the expected 50. During the project, the project developers realised that they could not reach higher numbers before a proper framework was implemented and tested to create an enabling environment (as will be explained in chapter 6). This was a bit disappointing for VP in the beginning. However, VP does think that in the future, this created framework might lead to higher numbers:

"At first, we really wanted to reach those numbers, but we had to let ourselves understand that we need to learn and design probably a framework that can make this project move from a pilot to a more scalable project. So, I think that the main outcome for us is if we make this work now, I think, this can be replicated" (VP representative, interview, 14 January 2021).

Besides, VP thinks it is also still possible that participants will return to Nigeria after some years in Lithuania and will then start their own business. If that will happen, VP's objective to contribute to Nigerian's development can still be reached. Nevertheless, so far, it is too early to say. In the meantime, some participants and VP say that the program does contribute to remittances. However, although the participants do send money back home, it is questionable if, with this small amount of people and with the fact that some of them earn the same salary or could even earn more money in Nigeria, it is legit to say that it actually contributes to remittances (Friederici 2019, 3 & 8).

For the Nigerian government representative, it was somehow a disappointment that the project could not reach higher numbers. Higher numbers do for the Nigerian government representative not necessarily mean more people going abroad. It means giving a higher number of people access to international training or work experiences. This can be implemented in different forms, as explained by VP:

"We were only able to take 15 people out of a country where there are millions and millions of people. That does not move. That is not even a drop in the ocean, right? So, they [the Nigerian government] were like 'it is so small'. But we were like 'it is just a pilot project'. So, for them, they [the Nigerian government] like to see more people. That doesn't mean that they all have to travel. They like to see more blended type approaches like people traveling, people working remotely, or just being trained. Even if it is not necessarily a job placement" (VP representative, interview, 14 January 2021).

However, the ability to reach high numbers is a problem in more current pilot projects and has also been a problem in the past. More than ten years ago already, when the first legal migration projects of this kind were implemented, no high numbers were reached. For this reason, Wickramasekara (2011, 28) criticizes these kinds of projects by saying that they are just "a drop in the ocean" of work unemployment. However, there are circular migration projects on a larger scale, for example, the seasonal working programs between France and Tunisia, but these are for 'low-skilled' jobs. At the 'high-skilled' level, there are so far no EU pilot projects implemented that reach 'high' numbers. However, according to VP, this does not only have to do with the availability of pathways, but also with the education systems in Nigeria. Nigerian education systems do not always match the demand of skills and knowledge needed for jobs in the ICT-sector. Nigerians learn their ICT skills most often from the internet because the education system does not teach them these skills. This ensures that only a tiny percentage can pass the tests that candidates have to make to eligible for ICT-programs. For the DE-project, only 150 of the 1452 applications were selected for an interview. Also, other ICT-selection platforms (such as Caspar Coding and Tunga) that recruit African developers (among others in Nigeria) argue that only 1% of the people

who are making a test are qualified for a placement in a European company (Sie Dhian Ho et al. 2021, 79). Therefore, VP argues that time should be invested in the Nigerian developers that are talented but not qualified enough, as VP explained:

> *"As much as we know that there is talent in Nigeria, we realize that the talents are still diamonds in a rock. Most of the talented people learned themselves, right? So, there is still room for a more refined bright plan"* (VP representative, interview, 14 January 2021).

The instrumental aspiration to exchange knowledge between the two countries is, according to VP, an aspiration that is more successful reached with the DE-project. During the project, two documents have been written as part of broader institutional knowledge exchange. The first one, which is helpful for future projects, explains the digital talent market in Nigeria and gives a better inside into its skills and gaps. The second document is about policies in Lithuanian fintech and focuses on the financial service industry. This document can help determine what is necessary to build a thriving fintech industry, like Lithuania has, in Nigeria. Due to these documents, the program was able to contribute to VP's goal of knowledge exchange. Also, the project contributed, according to VP and the Nigerian government representative, to a positive narrative about Nigeria(ns) (which will be further discussed in chapter 6).

So, although the project made, according to VP and the Nigerian government representative, some first steps in the right direction, both think that there is still much work to do. Especially upscaling, involving the governments of both countries, and making a project sustainable are things that need extra attention according to the representative of the office of the Nigerian Vice President:

> *"For me, I think this was a really good project, the question should be 'how can we expand across the EU, beyond just Lithuania? How can we make it a solid and fixed government-to-government program to run over a period of time? But most importantly how can we make this program a sustainable one?"* (Special assistant of the Nigerian Office of the Vice President, interview 12 February 2021).

To make some first improvements in the achievements of a 'win' for the Nigerian side, Digital Explorers started in 2021 with a second project called 'the female track'. VP has put its hopes on this project since the second track is, according to them, so organized that all the project participants will this time return to Nigeria after the project ends. In this second program, young female Nigerians follow a 6-months traineeship in data science and data analysis in ICT-companies in Lithuania. Since it is a traineeship and not a working placement, it is assumed by the project developers that it is easier to return the participants. Participants do not get a working permit that can be extended, and it is not likely that a student gets a job offer. This might also explain why, all the other MPF-projects, except from the first track of Digital Explorers, are focussed on traineeships, study or internships: it is easier to return people. However, there is another argument why the second track focusses on traineeships rather than real employment. According to VP, there was some critics from the Nigerian side that the project

only focussed on 'high-skilled' people who already have working experience, while they are not the group of people who are currently unemployed. With the second track, VP wants to cater to this critic and focus only on young Nigerians who do not have a lot of working experience. While at the same the second track ensures that the project leaders come closer to the number of 50 participants that the project promised to reach, as mentioned before.

To conclude, already at the beginning of the project, it turned out that, due to a lack in capabilities, the goal of reaching the amount of 50 developers had to be postponed. Although VP thinks that the program contributed to their instrumental aspiration of knowledge exchange and to their intrinsic aspiration of a positive narrative, the Nigerian government representative's and VP's main instrumental aspiration to contribute to Nigeria's development was not something that the DE-project significantly contributed to, so far. Therefore, both VP and the Nigerian government representative see this program as a first step in the right direction to create an 'enabling environment' that will make it possible to upscale circular sustainable projects in the future, which might contribute better to their aspirations. For this reason, a follow-up on this pilot project is essential.

5.3 Aspirations and expectations from the Lithuanian side

From the Lithuanian side, many partners were involved. This immediately shows the complexity of a legal migration project. AfriKo was involved as project coordinator and Enterprise Lithuania (EL) as an official project leader. Seven Lithuanian ICT-companies were part of the program, and the Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (LMFA) supported the program without being an official partner. The aspirations and expectations of these different institutions and organizations vary a lot. Therefore, they will be divided in this paragraph into the following categories: AfriKo, the Lithuanian government actors, and the Lithuanian private sector.

5.3.1. AfriKo: the brains behind Digital Explorers

AfriKo - a Lithuanian non-profit research, policy, and consultancy organization - is the main initiator and designer of the Digital Explorers project. Digital Explorers was their first big project as an organization, but what aspirations did they have for the project?

Although AfriKo's main goal of the project was to ensure that all the actors involved in the DE-project would see the project as a success, they also had some specific aspirations for themselves. First of all, with the help of the project, AfriKo had the intrinsic aspiration to rationalize the narrative about Africa in Lithuania:

> *"When we say rationalize, it's like to show that Africa is not this place on the map that is just full of disasters with people you need to help, but that there are people that live their normal lives, do business and so on"* (AfriKo representative, interview, 16 December 2020*).*

Secondly, AfriKo wanted to demonstrate to policymakers and government representatives that Lithuania can do meaningful projects with African countries: *"We don't need to become a traditional donor country to be able to do something with African countries"* (AfriKo representative, interview, 16 December 2020). According to AfriKo, Lithuania is sceptical about projects with African countries because Lithuania has no historical relationship with the continent and is more traditionally focused on Eastern Partnership countries. However, AfriKo is convinced that because Lithuania is part of the EU, it should broaden up its approach to a more global foreign policy.

AfriKo's third objective for the program was to show that they could manage a complex project like this since AfriKo did not have an extensive track record as an organization. AfriKo sees this objective also as one of the drives of the success of the project:

> *"Maybe that's part of the reason why we managed to reach the result in a way that some other organisations didn't, because it was so important for us. We knew if we would fail, everybody will say that we failed because we're small and we didn't do it before"* (AfriKo representative, interview, 16 December 2020).

During the project, however, there were difficulties AfriKo had to deal with. This impacted the number of people they could place. According to AfriKo it had different reasons why they could only place 15 participants instead of the promised 50. First of all, it was not easy to find Lithuanian ICT companies welcoming a pilot project like this. Secondly, it turned out that they did not have enough capacity and budget to bring 50 Nigerian developers to Lithuania. The documentation for the immigration was a lot of work, and the necessary support for the participants cost more time than expected. However, now a framework is created and tested, AfriKo thinks that it might be easier to bring more people in the future. However, with the second upcoming program, again, only 15 people will be placed. This clearly shows how capabilities influences the extent in which aspirations can be fulfilled.

Besides these difficulties and different outcomes, AfriKo describes their project as a success. Even though in their experiences, the topic was sensitive and complicated, they think that all parties involved in the project are happy with the result. Besides that, the project also contributed to AfriKo's aspiration to show Lithuanian policies that these kinds of projects are possible. AfriKo also thinks that the project contributed to their intrinsic aspiration to create a positive narrative about Africa within Lithuania (as will be further discussed in chapter 3). However, it could be argued that there was only a narrative created about Nigeria as a country, rather than Africa as a continent, since other African countries were not involved in the project.

5.3.2 The Lithuanian government

From the side of the Lithuanian government, Enterprise Lithuania (EL) (a non-profit agency under the Ministry of Economy and Innovation) was involved as an official partner of the program and the LMFA supported the program (without being an official partner). EL had the instrumental aspiration that the project would offer new ways to access the Nigerian market and that a connection between the Lithuanian and Nigeria ICT-sector was made. EL describes the program as an opportunity for Lithuanian ICT-companies to explore talent in Nigeria and expand their markets to Nigeria. Also, it was for EL essential that the program would encourage Nigerian developers to create new start-ups and cooperation between the Nigerian and Lithuanian ICT-market.

The project showed EL two things that they did not expect before. First of all, the project showed EL that not all Lithuanian ICT-companies are yet ready to participate in these new innovative international programs. Another lesson learned is that there were several problems with the Lithuanian immigration office. It turned out that it was not easy to get a visa for Nigerians to work in Lithuania because, for example, the passports first had to be sent to the embassy in Turkey. To overcome this problem in the future, EL and AfriKo set up together with the Lithuanian government two visa-centres in Nigeria. These centres will make future immigration projects from Nigeria to Lithuania less-time consuming and the Lithuanian immigration system more accessible for Nigerians (this is what in chapter 4 is also called "the capacity building element"). This finding and solution were very important for EL because: *"Lithuania represents itself like a country open for innovation and people who want to create business opportunities, but one institution itself it [the immigration office] was blocking the roads"* (EL representative, interview, 7 January 2020).

Overall, Enterprise Lithuania describes the project as a success, although they underline that there are still things that can be improved. The project contributed to some extent to their instrumental aspiration to connect the Nigerian and Lithuanian ICT-market. Lithuanian ICT-companies came to Abuja to do a hackathon and find out what kind of talent is available in Nigeria. This visit was, according to EL, one of the most successful parts of the project:

> *"During our business mission to Nigeria with the representatives of the companies in 2019, there was one of the companies started to discuss 'maybe we could open an office in Nigeria to deliver some of the projects to our Nigerian counterparts'. So that was something we were looking for"* (EL representative, interview, 7 January 2020).

Another additional success for EL is that some small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) who participated in the project shifted their entire everyday internal communication from Lithuanian to English. According to EL, this is an absolute accomplishment because *"it makes them more open for international talent"* (EL representative, interview, 7 January 2020). The fact that most Nigerian developers stayed in Lithuania is, according to EL, one of the additional benefits of the project, because it showed that the project was a success for Lithuanian ICT-companies.

However, EL's desires to fully open-up for the Nigerian market and the wish that those Nigerian developers start their own start-ups while cooperating with the Lithuanian ICT-sector are not fulfilled yet. According to EL, one project alone is not enough to achieve these aspirations. Besides, as described in one of the DE-evaluations, turning the Nigerian developers into entrepreneurs was not something the project in the end really focused on and did not match with the aspirations of the Nigerian participants in the first place (Friederici 2019, 8). However, Lithuanian companies did connect with the Nigerian ICT-market and documents about the Nigerian and Lithuanian ICT market were drafted. The project did therefore fulfil EL's project aspirations to a small extent.

The LMFA did not have specific objectives for the program since they were not an official partner. However, they did have certain aspects that made the project interesting for them. These are in line with the aspirations of EL. The project was interesting for the LMFA because it could contribute to Lithuania's economic agenda, to business development, and institutional knowledge exchange between the ICT-sectors in the two countries:

> "*The project not only focused on matching Nigerian talents with companies' demands for skilled professionals but also extended its activities to create institutional knowledge exchange"* (Diplomat LMFA, open-questionary, 16 January 2021).

Besides these instrumental aspirations of the LMFA that the project contributed to, LMFA also had a more intrinsic aspiration since the project could re-shape the narrative around engagement with African countries and strengthen the image of Lithuania and Lithuania's relationship with Nigeria:

> "*We appreciate the fact that voices of countries that historically were much less engaged with the African continent compared to other Member States are being included. Such countries as Lithuania can bring new perspectives and experiences, for example, those of transitional experience. [..] Digital Explorers gives an opportunity for Lithuania to build relationships with unexpected partners (in this case – Nigeria) in new ways. That can be considered an innovative way to strengthen the diplomatic and external economic relations"* (Diplomat LMFA, open-questionary, 16 January 2021).

Besides this, the project also positively impacted Lithuania's image within the international community, which was for the LMFA an important achievement (this will be further discussed in chapter 6). All together the LMFA diplomat argues that the project was valuable for LMFA because the project showed that it is possible and beneficial for Lithuania to implement legal migration pathway between Lithuania and the unexpected partner Nigeria.

5.3.3. The Lithuanian private sector

Within MPF-pilot project the private sector plays a vital role. Without the involvement of the private sector, these kinds of programs cannot be implemented since the private sector is the employer of the participants of the legal

labour migration projects. The engagement of the private sector has a significant influence on the success of legal migration projects (Stefanescu 2020, 14). Therefore, it is, according to Lithuanian and Nigerian actors, and the ICT-companies themselves, crucial to involve the private sector in all the phases of the project (development, recruitment, return etc.). And also in an evaluation done by ICMPD, it was concluded that "*projects that take the time to consult with the private sector at the project design stage – through more than one channel – have the highest chances to create a relevant scheme with sufficient potential for scale-up and sustainability*" (Stefanescu 2020, 7-8).

But why would it be interesting for companies to join these kinds of projects? Within literature, the 'win' for the private sector companies involved in a labour migration project, is often described as the possibility of filling vacancies. However, within the DE-project, it became clear that getting qualified employees is not the only aspiration that the ICT-companies involved in the DE-project have. Besides this instrumental aspiration of access to skilled labour, companies also had a more intrinsic aspiration. Companies involved hoped with the program to get more international exposure because the Nigerian developers would bring a different culture, new knowledge, skills and perspectives. According to EL, Ruptela, and TeleSoftas, this can help a company to get outside their comfort zone and stimulate innovation and the creation of an international working environment since, among others, Lithuanian will no longer be the spoken language of internal communication within the company.

Although international exposure sounds like something that could easily be achieved within this globalized world we currently live in, this is not always as easy as it sounds. According to the companies involved in this program, employing a non-European citizen is very complicated since companies have to deal with a lot of paperwork, regulations, and laws. SMEs most often do not have the resources to accomplish this (Stefanescu 2020, 8). Digital Explorers, therefore, creates access to this international talent in Nigeria for SMEs, as explained by a Ruptela employee:

> *"Interviewer: Do you think that in the future you would employ more people from Nigeria with these kinds of projects, or maybe on your own?*
> *Ruptela employee: I believe we would consider that, but only if we will get that support. For me, the support was crucial because without the help of the lawyers who represented AfriKo it would not be possible because we had lots of obstacles during the employment phases. It was like crazy"* (Ruptela employee, interview, 23 February 2021).

The ICT-companies Ruptela and TeleSoftas believe that they achieved their aspiration of internationalizing their companies. However, these companies also mentioned that it cost a lot of time and effort to welcome internationals. This is in contrast to what is often said by some academics, who argue that circular migration is beneficial for companies because it could reduce the cost of training and integration. These academics argue that there is less incentive for employers to devote time and resources to workplace integration because the

migrants will return home after a certain period (Collett and Sitek 2008: 32 33). However, looking at this pilot project, it seems that the opposite is true. The arrival of the Nigerian developers within the companies cost a lot of time and effort. For example, in some companies, the whole internal communication had to be changed from Lithuanian to English, paperwork had to be arranged, and time was necessary to integrate the Nigerian developer(s) into the company's culture. Summing this up, it all costs much effort, or at least more than a national employee might cost. Therefore, the reduction in cost and integration might be only applicable in 'low-skilled' jobs, like seasonal work within the agricultural sector that already have experience with international employees. However, due to, among others, this lack of attention for integration, projects focused on more 'low-skilled' jobs are often accused of human rights violations. For example, in the circular migration program for 'low-skilled' employment in which strawberry pickers from Morocco are working temporarily in Spain, migrants often work in terrible conditions (Anarte 2020). Therefore, it is important to be aware of this distinction in 'low' and 'high-skilled' jobs, as already mentioned in chapter 1. MPF legal migration pilot projects are until now only focused on 'high-skilled' migration. Human rights violations are not noticed in any of the MPF-projects so far.

Within the DE-project every company involved has probably experienced the project differently since they all worked with different individuals. Some companies placed one Nigerian developer during the project, others up to four. Most companies retained at least one Nigerian developer after the project was finished. To what extent the aspirations of the companies are achieved differs from one company to the other. For example, for TeleSoftas, the project was a great success:

> *"I think I have a feeling that I am proud of the project. And I think that says a lot because it is not my project, but I felt proud like it would be mine. AfriKo could create that feeling that it is our project and that the explorers became like the Digital Explorers family. I think the outcome is really big. I think from the Lithuania perspective we introduced that we are international and within Europe we showed that we can do a lot. So, I think it is a very, very nice project"* (TeleSoftas employee, interview, 21 January 2021).

TeleSoftas started the project with four Nigerian developers, and they are now employing five Nigerian developers, all from the DE-project. TeleSoftas could internationalize itself as a company with these five employees and found this additional cultural perspective they were looking for to stimulate more innovation. Also, with a capability of five new employees, the project could also reach TeleSoftas' instrumental aspiration to fill their labour market shortages, while the other companies who only employed one explore, will probably argue differently. Ruptela, for example, argues that one project cannot solve the labour market gap, but it can at least set some first steps in the right direction:

> *"The gap is too big to fill it with a few people who are new. So, we understood very well that it won't solve all our problems and the lack of sources on the market. But as we have discussed with Mante [from AfriKo], it is all a first step. If it is going to be successful in the future, it might solve that problem. So, you*

don't know yet if it is going to solve your problems or not, you just need to test it" (Ruptela employee, interview, 23 February 2021).

Although the companies involved in the project had enough reasons to see the benefits of the project, it turned out that, as mentioned before, it was challenging to find companies who were willing to join the program. According to the Lithuanian actors involved, this had different reasons. First of all, since it was a pilot project, it was, according to EL, challenging to sell the project to the private sector because it was not possible to refer to any success stories. Secondly, if participants already leave the company when the project ends (after one year), it might not be worth all the companies effort. For TeleSoftas, this was also one of their doubts: *"There is no guarantee that people stay. I think this was one of the topics which occurred and made us think about if we want to participate or not."* (TeleSoftas employee, interview, 21 January 2021). Finally, not all companies are used to work with people from non-EU countries, which might feel like a barrier because people entered uncharted waters:

"The first couple of months it might be uncomfortable for some employees of the company. I mean culturally: if we talk about European people or people from neighbouring countries, it might not be so difficult maybe, but now we are talking about Nigeria and we do not know much about Nigeria after all" (EL representative, interview, 7 January 2021).

Although all these reasons are not eliminated with this one pilot project, Lithuanian actors do think that this one pilot project can help to convince other ICT-companies to join future projects, as I will further explain in chapter 6.

5.4 A triple win?

This chapter has shown that the migrant, the country of origin and the destination country have all their own aspirations, expectations, and objectives for the Digital Explorers project. Moreover, even within these categories, differences can be noted, especially when multiple actors are involved diverging from an NGO to private companies and government actors. Therefore, the success of a project will also depend on which actors are involved because every actor will have its own objectives, and success will depend on if these goals are achieved. Involving many actors leads to a broader impact because the project needs to fulfil different wishes within different policy areas. In this case, this led, besides the general goal of placing Nigerian developers in Lithuanian ICT companies, also to a capacity-building element (visa centres built in Nigeria), a market exchange activity (Hackathon in Abuja) and many knowledge exchanges documents. On the other hand, involving many actors also increases the change of competing interests (for example within the DE-project there were contradicting opinions about the aspect of return, as will further be discussed in chapter 6), and it makes a project more complex as explained by an employee of ICMPD:

> "*It is a particularly interesting project because it has a capacity-building component and a business exchange component. In this way, it can add value in other policy areas. However, this additional complexity also makes it less likely that this project will be able to continue on its own afterwards as these components add costs. We see this kind of tension between the added value and the success of the quality that improves with the complexity. At the same time, often the simpler schemes are the ones that have the highest chance of being taken forward by the private sector without additional funding from outside"* (ICMPD employee, interview, 4 December 2020).

So, on the one hand, the complexity decreases the chance that a program will be sustainable and increases the chance that the views of different actors will be competing. On the other hand, because so many actors are involved in the program, it will have a more significant impact because it has to fulfil the wishes of different groups and therefore has to include multiple elements. But are the wishes of all these different actors involved in the Digital Explorers project also fulfilled?

For the migrants/the project participants, the project can be described as a 'win' because the program contributed to their instrumental aspirations (such as improving their knowledge and skills) and their intrinsic aspirations (such as experiencing a new culture). However, it was more of a win for the migrants who could stay in Lithuania than for those who had to go back to Nigeria. The participants who stayed did that because they felt that DE-project did not entirely fulfil their aspirations yet. Moreover, they had the capabilities to stay since employers extend their working permits and contracts, in contrast to the two participants I spoke with who had to return.

For the country of destination/the Lithuanian actors, the project can, in general, be described as a win, although it varies from one actor to the other. For example, the project did contribute a lot to the aspirations of AfriKo. At the same time, Enterprise Lithuania had more long-term goals (such as international market exchanges), which are difficult to reach with the capabilities of only one project. The ICT-companies involved joined the program to fulfil their instrumental aspiration of filling labour market gaps, which is in literature often described as 'the win' for the country of destination. However, they also joined the program for a more intrinsic aspiration to get access to international talent that will bring a new culture and different experiences with them. The project contributed to their aspirations, but to what extent differs from one company to the other. With more capabilities (in this case more Nigerian employees), a company had a better chance to reach their aspirations. Furthermore, it turned out that the Lithuanian actors' objectives could also be contradicting. Whereas it was important for the employers that participants could stay after the program, AfriKo preferred that half of the group would return to counter the brain drain argument.

For the country of origin/the Nigerian actors, the program can be seen as a first step necessary to take before a future project can fully contribute to the 'wins' of the country of origin. The primary instrumental aspiration for both VP and the Nigerian government representative was that the project contributes to the development of

Nigeria. To reach this goal, some pre-conditions had to be met. For example, the project needed to place as many Nigerians as possible. However, as turned out during the project, there was a lack of capabilities (for example, there were not enough financial resources and insufficient capacity to provide Nigerians with a visa) to bring more than 15 people to Lithuania. According to VP and the Nigerian government representative, this, among others, made it difficult to reach this development aspiration. However, as described by representatives from both AfriKo, VP, and ICMPD, the pilot project did contribute to the creation of an 'enabling environment' and a positive narrative (as will be explained in chapter 6), which is needed to organize future programs. So, the country of origin might not be the winner of this pilot project. But still, the pilot project set light on the current obstacles, provided knowledge and recommendations for future projects, and made some first steps in the right direction. For Nigerian actors, it is essential that a future project reaches higher numbers and that participants will also return with knowledge and skills so they are back in the system and can contribute to the development of Nigeria. However, before the DE-project can fulfil these aspirations, many things still need to be done, and compromises must be made, as the next chapter will explain.

To conclude, this chapter has shown how the different groups involved in this circular migration project see their own possible win from the project. As turned out, these 'wins' are not always in line with how literature and policy documents present the 'wins' of these groups. When discussing the 'winners' of circular migration projects, it becomes clear that the wins are not equally shared within the project. For one party, there are more wins than for the others, and even within these three categories, the "wins" are not equally divided. The 'triple win' concept might imply that there are only three different views and "wins" for circular migration. However, this chapter showed that also within these categories, different actors are involved with all their own agendas, aspirations, and views. To give upcoming projects on circular migration a chance to succeed in the first place, I think it is important to acknowledge these differences, and create space in projects to pay attention to them and to open-up the debate. In the next chapter, I go deeper into these differences, elaborate on the current obstacles blocking the so-called "triple win", and explain the effect of these obstacles on the EU's position when negotiating with Nigeria about the readmission and return of irregular migrants.

Chapter 6 – Obstacles, compromises and (unnoticed) benefits

In this chapter, I bring together the objectives that the EC has formulated for pilot projects on circular migration and the aspirations and experiences that the actors and participants involved in the pilot project Digital Explorers have. In the first three paragraphs, I analyse how the DE-project actors look at the EC's three objectives for legal migration pilot projects, which are: presenting an alternative for irregular migration, filling labour market gaps, and increasing cooperation with third countries on return and readmission. In the fourth and fifth paragraphs, I go deeper into two objectives of the pilot project that are important for many of the actors involved in the DE-project, namely, creating an enabling environment and contributing to a positive migration narrative. These objectives are not recognized in EU policy documents as main objectives for pilot projects. With the last two paragraphs, I aim to demonstrate that I think there are reasons to believe that the EC should consider these objectives also as main drivers to implement pilot projects because the project developers see them as essential elements necessary to build or expand future or current projects on circular migration.

6.1 Presenting an alternative for irregular migration

As described in chapter 4, the EC believes that MPF-pilot projects will offer additional safe and legal pathways to migrate for work or study (MPF 2020d, 7), and will therefore help to reduce irregular migration since safe and legal alternatives are established (EC 2018a, 6-7). In this way the DE-program is presented by the EC as an alternative for irregular migration and could, therefore, as described in chapter 1, be seen as one of the two ways for the EC to get better control over irregular migration. Although the Digital Explorers project indeed offered a legal pathway to work in an EU Member State, it is questionable if this legal pathway will also help reduce irregular migration, as explained in this paragraph.

As stated by the dependency theory, as explained in chapter 1, if a circular migration program makes use of specific criteria and thus a selective migration policy, the outcome could be that such a program 'will privilege the already privileged' (De Haas, Castles and Miller 2020, 63). It can be said that this was the case in the DE-program, because first of all, the DE-participants had to meet a list of criteria and pass tests and assignments to prove that they were qualified enough for the placement. The program was therefore focused only on 'high-skilled' migration. Secondly, most Nigerian ICT-specialists who participated in the DE-project already had a job in Nigeria before joining the project. Some of them could already access existing legal migration pathways to other European countries, since there are, due to the 'global race for talent', more opportunities in the EU for 'high-skilled' migrants than for 'low-skilled' migrants (Castles and Ozkul 2014, 30). Although, also for 'high-skilled' migration, these possibilities are very limited, as explained in chapter 4.

The EC's goal of pilot projects is to reduce irregular migration. However, the migrants that are selected for this program are not the migrants who would otherwise consider travelling illegally to Europe, as explained by two DE-participants:

> *"The IT professionals aren't normally the people that would migrate illegally because these are people who already have skills and can get jobs abroad. So, I do not think that they are ever supposed to be worried that these people would, if there is no way to move from them legally, they will go illegally. Because already without Digital Explorers people are applying to jobs abroad"* (DE-participant 6, still in Lithuania, interview 14 January 2021).

> *"The people that have those skills will do well in their country. For example, I do not have to travel anywhere except if I want a functional system, but I can work here. And we are not the ones who live under the poverty line. People that are desperate to leave, most of them, don't have the skills that legal pathways require. If I am educated and have the resources, I wouldn't take the illegal pathway* (DE-participant 1, back in Nigeria, interview 28 December 2020).

So, instead of creating a legal pathway for unemployed Nigerians that might consider going to Europe illegally, the DE-project created pathways for people who could already make use of certain (limited) pathways to the EU and already had/or could find a job in Nigeria. Therefore, it could be argued that the DE-program does privilege the already privileged. Furthermore, although the EC presents circular migration as a tool to control irregular migration when a project implements strict selection criteria, it might not function as an alternative for irregular migration because these groups of migrants do not consider going to Europe illegally.

Therefore, many of the DE-participants are convinced that, if the EU and its Member States want to reduce irregular migration with this kind of projects, a project should focus on a different level of work, namely more on 'low' rather than only 'high-skilled' migration. Legal migration pathways should be accessible for unemployed people who do not have specific qualified skills that help them to get access to existing legal migration pathways (such as the Blue Card Directive), as one of the participants explained:

> *"To get me to Lithuania took a lot of qualifications. I had to have a bachelor's degree, and three years in development, these degrees can only be found in the very tiny level, tiny groups in Nigeria. So, what is the rest supposed to do? The rest will probably try to immigrate illegally. So, I believe Digital Explorers is a very good idea, which is good and fantastic, but I believe that there could also be other immigration schemes to the EU which could try to help with the lower levels"* (DE-participant 2, back in Nigeria, interview 3 January 2021).

Not only the DE-participants but also the Nigerian government representative speaks about two different layers that are mismatched in the DE-program when the goal is to create an alternative for irregular migration: "*the*

people who are able to take advantage of the legal migration options, will not be the ones that are illegally working somewhere else" (Special assistant of the Nigerian Office of the Vice President, interview 12 February 2021).

However, the government representative I spoke with does think that these 'high-skilled migration' pathways do make people aware that they might have a chance to apply for these legal pathways if they can get particular skills. This might ensure that people focus more on getting those skills instead of finding ways to migrate illegally. However, so far there is no data available that can prove this.

That legal migration pathways for more medium and 'low-skilled' jobs are important to offer is also more and more acknowledged by the EC itself (EC 2020, 26). However, as mentioned before, the problem still is that Member States experience more political resistance when it comes to 'lower-skilled' migration rather than 'higher skilled' migration (Hollifield 2012, 289). Also, some Member States, for example the Netherlands, do not have the right legal frameworks to create these pathways (Sie Dhian Ho 2021, 93). The Member States that currently are more open for 'low-skilled' migration from third countries, such as Spain, mainly invest in seasonal migration as a form of circular migration. However, as mentioned before, this raises often questions of human rights violations. So, when legal migration pathways are expanded to also 'lower-skilled' jobs, attention must be paid to the circumstances and conditions in which these migrants have to work.

6.2 Filling labour market gaps and the aspect of return

The EC argues that circular migration, and MPF-projects in particular, could contribute to addressing labour shortage gaps in EU Member States (MPF 2020d, 7). However, I noticed that it is this exact objective that could block the original goal of the EC for circular migration, namely that circular migration is a tool to control migration in a way that it is planned and directed to make sure that migrants will, in the end, return to their home country (Ozkul 2011). Labour market gaps reduce the change that migrants return home as follow.

First of all, a temporary program, that initially was the goal of the Digital Explores project and what is also preferred by the EC over long-term projects (MPF 2020d, 7), cannot fulfil the structural problem of labour shortages, because permanent labour gaps cannot be filled with temporary workers (Wickramasakera 2011, 40). For this reason, Wickramasakera (2011, 40) argues that temporary migrants will, in the end, stay permanent or at least for a more extended period than decided beforehand. Employers who hire migrants do not like to see their employees leave and might not even want to invest in a project from which they know beforehand that employees only stay temporarily. This was also visible in the Digital Explorers project. As explained by Ruptela and TeleSoftas, it is not interesting to invest time and effort in an employee when he/she leaves after half a year. A one-year contract is a minimum that a project should last, as explained by an Ruptela employee, but even then, the companies do hope that they can keep the employees longer:

Employee Ruptela: "We thought that if it was only six months or less then all the time will be only spent on the onboarding of these people. But one year is okay.
Interviewer: You employed one of the explorers, before you started the project was it already in the back of your mind that maybe you can keep some of the employees?
Employee Ruptela: Yes, we had such a plan. Because usually, if you put lots of effort in it you want to keep that person as long as possible, just to get the best result out of your efforts" (Ruptela employee, interview 23 February 2020).

Another reason why the gaps in the labour market blocks return is that because it is not interesting for employers to see their employees leave, they will provide the DE-participants with the capability to stay, in this case, the necessary requirements for a Lithuanian work visa. Staying in Lithuania is in line with the aspirations of the DE-participants since 14 out of the 15 DE-participants preferred to stay in Lithuania after the program ended. Therefore, the gaps in the labour market create the legal possibility for migrants to stay longer than what in the first place was agreed upon.

It depends from one participant to the other if he/she already had planned before the project started if they wanted to stay or not. For example, one participant who stayed in Lithuania explained that initially he had the plan to return, because the project was presented as an "*an opportunity to show how business was done in the other part of the world and return and use those skills back in Nigeria*" *(*DE-participant 5, still in Lithuania, interview 12 January 2021). Nevertheless, another participant knew from the beginning that she wanted to stay:

"*I did not have a plan of going back. So, the plan was to come here and that before the end of the one year, I would start looking for jobs, just in case, so that even if you are not retained, you find another job*" *(*DE-participant 6, still in Lithuania, interview 14 January 2021).

It was interesting to see that the policymakers and the Nigerian DE-actors see circular migration as a success when migrants return home after a certain period, while the DE-participants and ICT-companies often describe the success of the project using the number of people that stayed after the project ends:

"*11 people out of 15 stayed. That is a success that means that the company has been able to integrate the people very well culturally and very well in the ways of working. And I don't know what kind of success is better than that? You have integrated people successfully and the company wants them to stay" (*DE-participant 4, still in Lithuania, interview 8 January 2021).

This clearly shows how diverse the views of different actors are regarding the aspect of return. However, the aspect of return is not only seen differently by the actors of the DE-project, but also within the academic world people will have a different opinion about the fact that most participants did not return so far. Academics like Joel, Ebenezer and Attah (2018), or people who see migration more through the historical-structural theoretical

paradigm (as explained in chapter 1), will criticize that brain drain occurs when most Nigerian participants stay in Lithuania. However, the DE-participants themselves do not think that there is a valid reason to speak about brain drain for several reasons.

First of all, all the participants I spoke with are convinced (in contrast to the vision of the Nigerian government representative) that they do not need to be physically present in Nigeria to give something back to their country and their people:

> *"You still make an impact on the Nigerians here. That's where the internet is for: you could set up seminars, trust funds, a lot of stuff. So, if a Nigerian moves it can still open doors for Nigerians here. [..] Even when they are still there, it doesn't stop them from helping"* (DE-participant 2, back in Nigeria, interview 3 January 2021).

> *"I give programming sessions to a couple of guys in Nigeria. [..] We always think that being there means you are given back, but sometimes you can give back without being there physically, especially now* [due to covid-19]*"* (DE-participant 4, still in Lithuania, interview 8 January 2021).

Secondly, some of the participants argue that if they return home now, they cannot provide an added value for their country, so they prefer to stay longer:

> *"There still isn't so much that I can do with one year of experience abroad. Let's try five or six or ten years. Then I am better equipped to go back to Nigeria and do something for the country"* (DE-participant 6, still in Lithuania, interview 14 January 2021).

According to AfriKo, there could even be argued that if Nigerians return too soon, there would rather be a situation of brain waste instead of brain gain:

> *"When you have a super sophisticated engineer, who is working here and you want him to go back somehow forcefully to Nigeria, maybe there are not even companies that are working in his field. With the explorers, we also discussed this, like right now if they go back, it will be actually a brain waste in a way because most of them are not yet at that level that they could establish something themselves, not from a qualification point of view and not from a capital point of view, but in five years they might do that"* (AfriKo representative, interview, 4 December 2020).

One of the participants underlines this and thinks that senior Nigerian developers who come back after some years of working abroad will have the capability to become an employer themselves, which might not have worked out if they stayed in Nigeria.

Thirdly, according to the DE-participants, there are so many talented people in Nigeria who did not leave Nigeria, and for them, there is already no job. So, some of the participants argue that if they leave, they also create more opportunities for others:

> *"I don't think it [brain drain] is a value concern because as we already know there are way more people than there are jobs in Nigeria. So, you can look at it from the perspective that like a number of people leave to give the people who remain more opportunities and changes on the jobs" (*DE-participant 6, still in Lithuania, interview 14 January 2021).

> *"Even when it looks there is brain drain, we still have a lot of human resources that are pretty much good. But the country is really not leveraging on these skills [..] What are you doing about the brains in the country before you talk about the drain, right?* (DE-participant 3, still in Lithuania, interview 8 January 2021).

Besides, participants are convinced that Nigeria as a country first needs to be more attractive to return to since there are no opportunities for them now. It is hard to convince a Nigerian to return when there is not a better prospect, as one of the DE-participants explained:

> *"It is kind of hard to convince people from Lithuania to move to Nigeria, because of the social-political situation especially in Nigeria. The infrastructure in Nigeria is not as good as that of Lithuania. Convincing people from Lithuania to go to Nigeria is like a downgrade" (*DE-participant 5, still in Lithuania, interview 12 January 2021).

This is also acknowledged by the actors on the Nigerian side of the project. Although it is important for VP and the Nigerian government that participants return to Nigeria (so Nigeria does not lose its talent and benefit from their achieved knowledge and skills), they know that first they need to create better opportunities for people in Nigeria. VP argues that without better opportunities in Nigeria, such as access to power 24/7, it will not be attractive to return. For this reason, VP, but also the Nigerian government representative himself, are convinced that the Nigerian government should play a role in providing more opportunities, to stimulate people to return:

> *"I believe that it is important that people have the opportunity and the freedom to immigrate and emigrate as the opportunities allow globally. But I also believe as the government that we have a role to play to ensure that we can keep our professionals within the country. [..] As a government, what we have to do, is provide as many opportunities as possible. [..] When you create opportunities for people to return, I am sure that then you will get a lot of people returning"* (Special assistant of the Nigerian Office of the Vice President, interview 12 February 2021).

However, creating opportunities for people who return is quite a difficult task in itself, as also admitted by VP, who were responsible for the reintegration aspect of the DE-project. VP helped so far one of the participants to find a job. Some of the participants, even some of the ones who stayed in Lithuania, argued that the reintegration program of VP was not what they expected. They thought that VP would also provide them with possible job opportunities back in Nigeria, even though they had the opportunity to stay in Lithuania. According to some of the participants, this was not working out well because, in the end, they did not have a choice in job offers.

VP and the Nigerian government representative understand the different views on return and try to find solutions to deal with these different views. One of the solutions promoted by VP and the Nigerian government representative, as also mentioned in chapter 5, is working remotely after the project ends. Working remotely allows the company and the Nigerian developers to continue working together, while at the same time the Nigerian developers are back in the Nigerian system, which will help to stimulate to work on Nigeria's development. Also, the two ICT-companies I spoke with do think that this is not a bad idea, as one of them suggests the following thing:

> *"I think that the mindsets of the companies are very changing this year because now we can do all our work remotely and I think this could change the situation 180 degrees. [..] It is nice to work from the office to create that community feeling but from a workload and productivity perspective they are at the same productive level as they work from the offices, sometimes even higher. [..] Maybe people should come to Lithuania or to another country to know the organization and can go back to their own country and work from there remotely. I think now it is even more possible and it could be a solution for this*" (TeleSoftas employee, interview 21 January 2021).

However, if this is also the most attractive scenario for the migrants themselves is not sure because one of the reasons that they joined the program was because of the international experience they could have. Moreover, according to AfriKo and some of the participants, DE-participants do not want to return because they like the stability in Lithuania (for example, the access to electricity 24/7). Therefore, only a remote job is not the answer to the 'problem' that many Nigerian DE-participants did not return to Nigeria. It needs to be attractive for the participants to go back in different ways, or else participants would probably still prefer to stay. This means that the Nigerian government should invest in job opportunities and in a good infrastructure (including access to electricity, healthcare etc.) in Nigeria. However, when the moment is reached that it is as attractive to work in Nigeria as in an EU Member State, there could be argued that these programs will not be necessary anymore because one of the goals for the EC is to decrease irregular migration. Nigerians will, in this situation, only migrate for their intrinsic aspirations, such as the experience itself of living abroad, rather than to fulfil instrumental aspirations such as better opportunities, which will probably already decrease the number of people that migrate irregularly.

As this paragraph shows, to fill labour migration gaps, a compromise must be made on the aspect of return. However, this certainty of 'return' is what the EC always used as a banner for circular migration to show that it is a controlled form of migration. When looking at the framework used for the DE-project, as explained in chapter 4, it becomes clear that return has always been the project's goal, and it looked like there was also a plan available to reach return. However, the fact that employers have to deal with structural labour market gaps and that return is not the best outcome for the DE-participants themselves can explain why 11 out of the 15 participants did not return. However, this raises the question till what extent the framework of the program can be seen as a way to reach a 'controlled' form of migration.

6.3 Cooperation on return and readmission

The third objective of the EC is that MPF-projects should "*facilitate or further develop cooperation with third-countries on a comprehensive management of migratory flows, including on issues such as prevention of irregular migration and readmission of irregular migrants" (MPF 2020d, 7).* This objective is in line with the general goal that the EC tried to achieve with circular migration. This goal is to get more control over irregular migration with the help of migration agreements with third countries on measures that third countries should take to regulate and decrease irregular migration (as explained in chapters 1 and 4). However, supposing that the EC wants to use this project as a 'carrot' at the negotiation table with countries of origin, some pre-conditions need to be fulfilled. First of all, the win for the country of origin for this program should at least be achieved. Secondly, the Nigerian government should be involved in this collaboration. However, as this paragraph will explain, in both aspects, shortcomings can be identified when looking at the DE-project.

As explained in the previous chapter, the aspirations that VP and the Nigerian government representative had in mind were not completely achieved with the first program. To reach these goals, more people need to return to Nigeria after the project ends, and higher numbers of project participants need to be reached. However, as explained in the previous paragraph, not all the actors involved are seeing return as beneficial. Besides, it is not easy to find public and political support necessary to reach higher numbers (Hollifield 2012, 289). Next to that, the Nigerian government representative and the ICMPD employee, think that there was no strong government-to-government engagement. This raises the question of why the Nigerian government would want to cooperate on irregular migration and readmission if the DE-project did not collaborate with the Nigerian government in the first place. During the interview I had with the Nigerian government representative, it became clear that to work on better migration cooperation between Lithuania and Nigeria, the Nigerian government should receive a more prominent role in the project. Therefore, a more government-to-government approach should be considered in future projects because a lack of cooperation with the government makes it difficult to expect that the Nigerian government will contribute to further collaboration on (irregular) migration. Besides, the Nigerian government representative does think that the concept has potential, but therefore on both sides, more efforts must be made, as he explained to me:

"*Interviewer: The program is part of the MPF of the EU, and within that there is this idea that Europe is implementing this kind of legal pathways and in return Nigeria and other African countries should collaborate on taking back irregular migrants, what do you think about that?*
Government representative: I think that is a good win-win situation for everybody while working with us to create more legal options, we as a government also must work more on closing out the various loopholes that led people migrate illegally.
Interviewer: And this is already said during the Valetta Summit that all the countries decided to work on these two aspects, but so far not a lot of things are done on both aspects. What do you and the Nigerian government think about that?
Government representative: That might be a little bit above my pay grade. But I believe that both continents must do better in their own parts of the agreements" (Special assistant of the Nigerian Office of the Vice President, interview 12 February 2021).

The project implementers choose not to involve the Nigerian public sector as a partner in the DE-project, because they prefer a bottom-up approach over a government-to-government approach. The basic idea of Digital Explorers was created from a grassroots perspective. For AfriKo this makes the DE-project different from the other MPF-pilot project, which is, according to AfriKo, from the start, designed with partners who have a more political agenda. The political goal for the project took shape after the basic idea between VP and AfriKo was already designed. This political framework was, according to AfriKo needed so the EC would approve the program. It needed to be clear how the program could contribute to different political agendas. Or as AfriKo said: "*We had to pack the project idea into the migration agenda*" (AfriKo representative, interview 4 December 2020).

VP and AfriKo are convinced that the project's success can be dedicated to the project's bottom-up approach. AfriKo thinks that a bottom-up approach has multiple benefits compared to a situation in which the state would be the main implementer of the project: First of all, AfriKo thinks that with non-state actors, the project might be more hands-on because the project is their main priority. Secondly, AfriKo thinks that state actors often have difficulty working with the private sector. Organisations like AfriKo and VP might have a better idea of how to speak the language of the private sector because they are more involved in this field. Another argument the project leaders mentioned is that a bottom-up approach might prevent that funding is mismanaged. Organizations on the ground might have a better understanding of where money is necessary. Therefore, VP thinks that the financial model used in this project could be used as an example for other projects. In this model, a European state institution will receive the funding and outsource project management to more grassroots organizations. However, these arguments are inconsistent with the idea that the Nigerian government should be more involved to reach the long-term political goal of the project: using the projects as a tool at the negotiation table on return and readmission with Nigeria. However, if the EU and its Member States want to choose a more government-to-government approach, this will probably also affect the project's outcome. On the other hand, if the EU and its Member States do not work on a more government-to-government approach and a better 'win'

for the countries of origin, the project might never be suitable as a tool on the negotiation table around readmission and return. Therefore, trad-offs and compromises must be made, and a balance between government-to-government and a bottom-up approach needs to be found.

So, although I would argue that the current DE-project is, not yet, ready to be used as a tool to facilitate further collaboration with Nigeria on irregular migration (as also turned out to be the case because, as explained in chapter 4, there is still no agreement with Nigerian and the EU on readmission and return), the pilot project does function, as also argued by the Nigerian actors, as a stepping stone for future projects that might be suitable for the negotiation table.

6.4 Creating an enabling environment

In every webinar I joined, either ICMPD, AfriKo or VP stated that for a project to be successful, an enabling environment is necessary:

> "*Piloting is a notion which goes beyond counting how many people move from 'A' to 'B' and back or re-integrate. It is all-important, but it goes together with the enabling environment and the eco-systems that actually allow that*" (Ralph Genetzke, Director and Head of the Brussels Office of ICMPD, in Digital Explorers Webinar, 8 October 2020).

This enabling environment consists, according to ICMPD, out of broader policy frameworks and formal structures that are necessary to be able to successfully implement a project with multiple stakeholders (Diana Stefanescu, project specialist ICMPD in Prague webinar 15 April 2021). The time that is needed to create this 'enabling environment' can therefore be seen as the answer to the question, 'why is the EU still in a pilot phase, when it started to pilot circular migration projects already 20 years ago?', which was raised in the introduction of this thesis. Every time a new pilot is tested with new countries involved, it is impossible to use a blueprint from other countries since the context will be different every time; every country has a different labour market, different interests, and different migration policies.

Before the Digital Explorers started, there was no institution supporting labour migration programs between Lithuania and Nigeria or any framework that could function as a basis for a labour mobility project between the two countries. The program, therefore, had to start from scratch, without knowing who trustful partners are, which institutions and people need to be on board or what infrastructure is necessary, let alone which possible obstacles might occur. However, as argued by the DE-project implementers, the positive side of a pilot project is that since it is a pilot, the project developers have room to find out what is needed to create this enabling environment. The DE-program sets light on what works and what does not and sets some first steps in trust-building. This all together is what, according to ICMPD, contributes to this 'enabling environment' needed to

create sustainable mobility programs. Within the DE-project two elements were most important for the project implementers to create this 'enabling environment', namely creating trust and a well-functioning infrastructure.

ICMPD, AfriKo, and VP argue that trust-building is the first element necessary to create an 'enabling environment' to implement a labour migration pathway. Before the project was developed, AfriKo spent a year on finding the right people to work with and to let every actor get to know each other:

> *"We were going to Nigeria, they [Ventures Platform] were coming to us, to meet the different stakeholders. We organized meetings with our Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Economy so they would know, you know that they were not working with, I don't know, scammers and that there were actually real people behind everything" (*AfriKo representative, interview, 4 December 2020).

Building trust is often something that is taken for granted, although it is one of the most essential elements of a successful project, as Ralph Genetzke explains during a webinar on the DE-project:

> *"Emphasizing that we have to build trust is something that many people will question: why do you need to invest time and energy in trust-building? So, this is one dimension absolutely obvious, but so necessary that it is done in a proper way"* (Ralph Genetzke, Director and Head of the Brussels Office of ICMPD, in Digital Explorers Webinar, 8 October 2020).

During the interviews with the participants of the DE project, it turned out that trust is also an important element for the participants in their decision to join the project. For example, trust needs to be established at the beginning of the recruitment phase to make the Nigerian developers believe that the project is what it says it is. To create this trust, the hackathon in Abuja was very important, as one of the participants explained:

> *"When I saw it, it was too good to be real in the first place. Why would someone say that they want to take all the expenses and the only thing that they want is you? [..] It is not common in this [Nigerian] society that people do things for you without expecting something from you in return. So, I was sceptical about it, but I had nothing to lose. [..] I was invited to come for the hackathon in the capital of Nigeria Abuja and I was like 'okay chill, so it seems like this is maybe real?'"* (DE-participant 4, still in Lithuania, interview, 8 January 2020).

Besides trust, which is necessary to create an enabling environment, also a well-functioning infrastructure needs to be in place that arranges the actual mobility. This means that all the institutions, instruments, and regulations that are needed are working. To create the right infrastructure, it is crucial to know, according to ICMPD, what works and what does not. And that is what pilot projects like Digital Explorers are used for:

> *"The success of the project is more than just moving people. It's really about testing what works what and what doesn't. [..] To see where it fails and why pathways are not working, or why visa regulations are not working, so that we can adapt, replicate and scale-up"* (ICMPD employee, interview, 4 December 2020).

That Digital Explorers was an opportunity to set light on what works, and what does not, became, for example, visible in the part of the project in which the visa procedure needed to be arranged. During this period, it turned out that it was very costly to arrange the correct paperwork for the Nigerians to come to Europe. Placing 50 people would, with the capacity and budget at that moment, have been very difficult, according to EL, or even impossible, according to AfriKo. This clearly shows that to create an enabling environment, that can move more than 15 people from Nigeria to Lithuania, the visa procedure must be simplified. To already set some first steps for future projects, Lithuania built a visa office in Abuja, as mentioned earlier in chapter 5. This will make the visa application in the future less costly. Without the DE-project, it would not have been known what the obstacles in the procedures were. The gained knowledge about what is needed to create the right infrastructure will contribute to an enabling environment necessary to make circular migration programs work.

The fact that creating an enabling environment is not one of the EC's objectives for MPF-pilot projects is, I think, also one of the reasons why the EU stays in a pilot project phase. The objectives that are created by the EC get ahead of the context in which these pilot projects are created; a context in which project implementers have to start from scratch. This might explain why earlier projects have been stopped; they did not achieve politicians' formulated goals and were, therefore, described as unsuccessful. However, I do not think that the project was unsuccessful in reaching the EC's objectives, but I think that the EC's set goals are not realistic when a project starts from scratch. For this reason, I think the EC should consider making the search of 'finding out how an enabling environment can be created and what is needed to achieve this', as one of their main objectives for a pilot project. If the EC makes this one of their main objectives, she could see that a pilot project is doing what a 'pilot' should do: testing what works and what does not. Only when this objective is achieved, and the EC does not go ahead of things it can be more realistic to also reach the three objectives that the EC currently presents as objectives for MPF-projects.

6.5 Contributing to positive migration narratives

In evaluations on current MPF-pilot projects, it turned out that political and institutional support is crucial for a project's success in both the country of origin and the country of destination (Stefanescu 2020, 5). Since narratives influence policy and the support for specific policies, as explained in chapter 1, it is crucial that, if the EC wants the Member States to implement more circular migration schemes, a positive narrative on this topic is created. This positive narrative should help to show countries, companies, and institutions why it is beneficial for them to implement these legal migration pathways. According to the actors and participants involved in the DE-

project, the DE-project actually contributed to these positive narratives for both Nigeria and Lithuania, that can help increase support for future legal migration pathways. Therefore, contributing to a positive narrative on circular migration should, as I will argue in this paragraph, be seen as one of the additional benefits of an MPF-pilot project.

Digital Explorers contributed to different positive narratives that all had a different effect, according to the actors and participants of the pilot project. First of all, the DE-project contributed to a positive narrative about Nigerian developers working in Lithuania that will, inspire other companies to work with Nigerian talent, according to the Lithuanian partners of the project. According to the Nigerian government representative, VP, and some of the participants themselves, the project helped to break stereotypes about Nigerians, and "*it put Nigeria in a good light*" (DE-participant 6, still in Lithuania, interview, 14 January 2020). Before the program started, it was not common for Lithuania companies to look for employees beyond neighbouring countries. The DE-project helped to change this narrative, as AfriKo explained in one of the interviews:

> *"When we started the project there were a lot of raised eyebrows. Now, we are at a stage where it becomes normal that a developer from Nigeria is working in Lithuanian company, there is definitely a shift in this regard"* (AfriKo representative, interview 4 December 2020).

The DE-project inspired Lithuania and Lithuanian companies to broaden their horizons and explore Nigeria as a country to do business with. This should, according to among others Ruptela, also be seen as one of the goals of the project:

> *"We are European but still we are quite a closed country. Maybe in the big cities, it is quite common to have colleagues from our neighbouring countries but in some smaller cities, it is still really like something surprising. So, I believe it is about broadening the view like opening the mindsets of people and it* [the DE-program] *has more like an educational purpose"* (Ruptela employee, interview 23 February 2021).

According to EL, the DE-project might inspire the Minister of International Relations to see opportunities to set some next steps in other African countries. It might also inspire other Lithuanian ICT-Companies to open-up for Nigerian employees. According to TeleSoftas, it will be easier to attract more companies to join a project, now the outcome shows that most of the project participants were retrained by their company:

> *"Lithuanian people tend to design their behavior on recommendations. So, if they see there are other companies, or they hear their friend had a good experience with that, then they will be more willing to participate"* (TeleSoftas employee, interview, 21 January 2021).

For this reason, it was also a good outcome for EL and AfriKo that some of the participants stayed because it could be helpful to attract companies for future projects and show them that it is worth the investment. Even

for VP, although they would have like to see more people return, they also saw the outcome as beneficial for the image of Nigerian developers: *"As much as we did not want them to stay and come back, we were glad that they got a job because it also proves that they have good talent that the world needs"* (VP representative, interview, 14 January 2021).

Secondly, the DE-project contributed to a positive narrative about Lithuania in Nigeria and in the international community. The project helped Lithuania to be more present in Nigeria, according to EL. Next to that, it also showed other countries that Lithuania is a country open and excited for international talent, something that was also for the LMFA diplomat one of the additional benefits of the project:

> "*The project contributed to strengthening Lithuania's image not only as an attractive destination for businesses and foreign talents, but also as a country bold and innovative with its initiatives. This has also been recognized, for example, by the International Trade Centre, which has selected Digital Explorers as one of 5 finalists for its World Trade promotion organisation's (WTPO) award "Excellence in Export Initiatives"* (Diplomat LMFA, open-questionnaire, 16 January 2021).

The DE-project is therefore much more than only a mobility project for the Lithuanian partners involved, because it is also an opportunity to present Lithuania to the world, as the ICT-company TeleSoftas underlined during the interview:

> *"I think it is good that Lithuania is involved in this kind of project to get the world to know where Lithuania is and to show that we are not Russia and that we are open to those kinds of opportunities that connect different countries and that we are innovative and driving culture. So, I think it is a very communicative message to Europe that we are people who work hard and achieve a lot*" (TeleSoftas employee, interview, 21 January 2021).

Next to the positive narratives for Lithuanian and Nigeria, the project also positively contributed to the EU-Africa relationship, even though both governments were not an official partner of the project, as mentioned by the LMFA diplomat: "*Such projects as Digital Explorers re-shape the narrative around engagement of EU with African countries (from aid recipients to business partners)*" (Diplomat LMFA, open-questionnaire, 16 January 2021). According to the ICMPD employee, this is a very important result because ICMPD sees these pilot projects also as a tool to improve the relationship with Nigeria and show Nigeria that there is a willingness to work together on migration management from the European side. That this project set some first steps to this positive narrative is visible in image 1. In this picture, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania, Linas Linkevičius, shakes hands with

Image 1: Handshake Nigeria – Lithuania. Source: LinkedIn AfriKo 2020

the Nigerian Vice-President, Professor Yemi Osinbajo, at the EU-Africa forum in Vienna in 2018. Although they were both not an official partner of the project, they were part of the narrative created with the project in which Nigeria is working together with Lithuania on a (labour) migration partnership.

The ICMPD employee believes that the project will also inspire the other Member States to re-shape their narrative about their relationship with Sub-Saharan African countries:

> "*I felt that it did open some doors and maybe also made also some other Member States a bit less afraid to go to sub-Saharan Africa. It may help others to try to be more daring to explore this region of the world with the business opportunities that lie there and the potential of such projects*" (ICMPD employee, interview, 4 December 2021).

According to the ICMPD employee, this positive effect is already visible in one of the upcoming proposals that is very much modelled after the Digital Explorers project.

The EC is, according to the ICMPD employee, more aware of the positive effects of pilot projects that are achieved besides the objectives and elements that are important for the EC. This became also visible in one of the webinars of the Digital Explorers project in which Francesco Fusaro, policy officer at DG-Home, said:

> *"What is important for me is to see 'what is the impact in Nigeria and for Nigerians'. Adaeze* [from Venture platforms one of the participants in the webinar] *referred to the foreign investment and the perceptions of Nigerians and I think these are elements that all belong towards what a pilot project can be successful for*" (Fransesco Fusaro, Policy Officer DG-Home in Webinar on Digital Explorers, 8 October 2020).

However, the positive impact that pilot projects have on migration narratives, for example creating a positive perception of Nigerians in Lithuania as mentioned by Fusaro, is something that I think could be even more acknowledged by the EC. The narratives around migration are fundamental to create public support for circular migration, so the EC should also be more aware of what is needed to create these positive narratives and the role that pilot projects can play in this. Besides, these pilot projects can also function as an answer to the different migration narratives circulating within and between EU Member States, as explained in chapter 1. For example, circular migration is an answer for the selective narrative because participants of a circular migration program must meet some specific criteria and are strictly selected. Nevertheless, circular migration is also an answer for the economic-societal narrative. A circular migration program can fill labour market gaps in the host country while at the same time migrants gain more knowledge and skills that they can use to help family, friends or former colleagues that stayed behind in their home country.

Circular migration can not only be an answer for these different narratives, but pilot projects like DE-explorers can also stimulate Member States to look at migration from African countries through a more development

perspective rather than a security perspective. As I already argued in chapter 1, this is necessary because the focus on the security narrative in the last ten years has not paid off. So far, the only direct decreasing effect on irregular migration to the EU has resulted from arrangements with third countries (for example, the EU-Turkey deal or the deal with Libya). Also, in the new pact on Asylum and Migration that the EC presented last September, the whole legislation package is built like a house of cards on the collaboration with third countries (AIV 2020, 41-42). For this reason, it is crucial that if Member States expect from third countries that they will help the EU with return and readmission, Member States also stick to their side of the deal as agreed up-on in Valletta, namely the implementation of more legal pathways. To achieve this, a repositioning of the EU migration policy from a security narrative to a more development narrative is needed, and pilot projects like DE-explorers can help stimulate Member States to contribute to this repositioning.

So, to conclude, this chapter brought together the EC's objectives for circular migration and the objectives and aspirations of the actors and participants involved in the DE-project. The EC has clear goals in mind, but these goals will not be reached easily, as this chapter showed. First of all, although the DE-project provides an additional pathway for migration, the project cannot be presented as an alternative for irregular migration. The people who would decide to join these kinds of 'high-skilled' pilot projects would not consider going to Europe irregularly if the project was not provided. Secondly, the project did fulfil, to a small extent, to the labour market gaps in the Lithuanian ICT-sector. However, this same labour market gap ensured that the critical aspect of return (that makes circular migration a form of 'controlled' migration) was difficult to reach. The Lithuanian employers and the Nigerian participants preferred to stay, and the structural gaps in the labour market created the possibility to also extend their visa rather than that all the participants would, as planned, return after the project was ended. Because most participants did not return, the DE-project did not reach the Nigerian partners' development aspiration. What then again makes it difficult to reach the third objective of the EC, namely, to increase the cooperation with Nigerian on return and readmission of irregular migrants. As argued in this chapter, until a project can also fulfil the objectives of the country of origin, I argue that the project cannot be used as a 'carrot' at the negotiation table on readmission and return.

Although this project was not successful in achieving these objectives and a triple win outcome, the project should still be seen as a success according to the actors involved. This is because the project did contribute to an enabling environment and a positive migration narrative that were both nearly in place before the project started. While both aspects (enabling environment and a positive migration narrative) need to be established before it is possible to work on other objectives. For this reason, I argue that the project might not be a successful project but only a successful pilot project since it piloted what works and what does not and showed what is realistic to expect from future projects.

Conclusion and discussion

In November 2015, the EU and African leaders signed a political declaration on migration cooperation in Valletta. In this declaration, the EU promised African leaders that they would offer more legal migration pathways. African countries would then, on their side, increase their collaboration with the EU on the return and readmission of irregular migrants. However, as the European Commission (EC) noticed in 2017, not enough effort has been taken by Member States to offer these pathways. Even more remarkable, the number of residence permits issued to Africans dropped by 70% between 2008 and 2017 (Barslund et al. 2019, 2). Moreover, from the total budget that the EU and its Member States spent on migration in Nigeria, only around 0.09% is spent on legal migration pathways between the EU and Nigeria (Vermeulen, Tromp and Zandonini 2019). To stimulate Member State to offer more legal migration pathways, the EC decided to (financially) support pilot projects on circular migration in 2018. However, this is not the first time that the EU develops pilot projects on circular migration with third countries. More than ten years ago, countries such as Germany and the Netherlands already tried out pilots on circular migration, from which the outcomes were diverse. This re-emerging attention for circular migration pilots by the EC raises the following questions: Did the EC change its objective for circular migration, making new pilots necessary? Or are some of the previous pilot outcomes unsuccessful because the goals of the EC are not met due to friction between the EC's goals and the objectives of the actors involved in a pilot project? This thesis explored these questions in depth using a case-study called Digital Explorers. Digital Explorers is a temporary labour migration project that brought young ICT-specialists from Nigeria to Lithuania for a one-year paid job in an ICT-company. With the help of this case-study I was able to answer the following research-question: *How do the goals pursued by the different actors involved in the EU pilot project on legal migration, called Digital Explorers, relate to the current policy objectives of the European Commission on circular migration?*

The Commissions view on circular migration

The first step to answer the research-question was to analyse the view of the EC on the goals of circular migration projects and considers why (not) (and how) this view and its policy (frameworks) have changed in the last ten years. In 2007 the EC defined circular migration as: "*a form of migration that is managed in a way allowing some degree of legal mobility back and forth between two countries" (EC 2007, 8).* Although this definition is widely interpretable, as explained in chapter 4, the EC did not provide a more specific definition. This can be explained because choosing a loose description gives the Member States the possibility to give their own substance to the concept. This freedom of interpretation is essential since the interests in the different aspects of circular migration might differ between Member States.

Not only the definition of circular migration but also the benefits that the EC links to it have not drastically changed in the last fifteen years. As examined in chapter 4, the EC presents circular migration as a form of migration that, if well managed and streamlined, can lead to a triple win outcome for both the country of origin, the country of destination, and the migrants themselves. However, it can be argued that, over the years, some

benefits became more important than others because the EC slightly changed its view on the purpose of circular migration. At first, the EC promoted circular migration as a tool to contribute to development in both the country of origin and the country of destination. However, in recent years, the EC promoted circular migration more as a political tool. This means that, due to its triple win outcome, the EC argued that circular migration could be used as a tool at the negotiation table with African countries to direct towards readmission and return of irregular migrants and get better 'control' over irregular migration.

This change of focus corresponds with how the EC started to position itself after the so-called migration 'crises' of 2015-2016. Since that period, the security migration narrative, rather than the development narrative, became more dominant in the EU's migration policies. The EC started to describe migration more as a threat to national and European security instead of an opportunity for transnational development. This change in narrative matters because each migration narrative has its own policy implications. Instead of transnational-oriented and liquid borders-oriented policies, corresponding with a development narrative, this new focus strengthened national-oriented and solid borders-oriented policies. This repositioning also explains why the EC started to promote circular migration more as a tool to 'control' irregular migration rather than as a tool to increase development. However, analysing the history of the EU – Africa migration relation, it becomes visible that the political goal of readmitting and returning irregular migrants to third countries always has been one of the main goals of EU's relationship with Africa. Although the importance of some goals of circular migration gained more attention after 2015, already before 2015, the objective of getting control over irregular migration was one of the reasons why the EC promoted circular migration programs. For this reason, I argue that this repositioning cannot fully explain why new pilot projects are necessary since the goals of circular migration have always been somehow the same, only the order of priority of these goals changed.

Digital Explorers: a triple win outcome?

Looking at the evaluations of former projects, it turned out that many projects did not reach the EC's foreseen triple win outcome. At the same time, there is not much known about the aspirations of actors involved in a circular migration scheme. To find out whether there is friction between the goals of the EC and the goals of the actors involved in a pilot project, the second part of this thesis analysed the objectives of the participants and actors involved in the Digital Explorers project. The data gathered from the semi-structured interviews and webinars showed that, due to the many and diverse numbers of aspirations formulated by the actors involved in the DE-project, the projects' outcomes did not fulfil all these aspirations.

As explained in chapter 5, the different actors and participants involved see their own possible win from the project, sometimes differently from how literature and policy documents present their 'wins'. For example, both project participants and the involved ICT-companies had more than just instrumental aspirations to participate in the DE-project; they also had intrinsic aspirations. The Nigerian project participants want to gain more knowledge and skills (instrumental aspirations), and the possibility to get exposed to new cultures and

international work environments (intrinsic aspiration). The Lithuanian ICT companies did not only want to fill their labour market gaps with skilled talent (instrumental aspiration), but most of all, they wanted more international exposure to get outside of their comfort zone (intrinsic aspiration). Therefore, it is problematic that these intrinsic aspirations are often overlooked in migration theories and policies because this research data showed that international exposure and experience are actually one of the main reasons ICT-companies and participants joined the project.

In addition to this finding, chapter 5 also showed that the wins of circular migration are, within the outcome of the Digital Explores project, not equally shared between the country of origin, the country of destination, and the migrant. In general, there were more wins for the migrants and the country of destination than for the country of origin (as I will explain further at the end of this conclusion). Here I say 'in general', because a closer look shows that even within these three categories, the “wins” are not equally divided. For example, within the category ‘migrants’, the ‘win’ for the Nigerian migrants that had the capabilities to stay in Lithuania was more significant than for the participants who had to return to Nigeria because those who stayed could further fulfil their aspirations. However, also within the category ‘country of destination’ the ‘wins’ are different. This can be explained because the different actors involved in this category also have different project aspirations. For example, for the Lithuanian project developer AfriKo, there were more wins in the project outcome than for the Lithuanian project leader Enterprise Lithuania. This is because AfriKo had more short-term aspirations that were realistic to achieve with one project, but Enterprise Lithuania had more challenging and long-term aspirations. Enterprise Lithuania liked to see that the project participants became entrepreneurs and that Lithuanian companies would connect with the Nigerian ICT-market and start businesses there. While AfriKo’s aspirations were more focused on completing the project successfully - meaning that all the actors were happy with the outcome- and showing the Lithuanian government that Lithuania can do interesting projects with an African country.

The ‘triple win’ concept implies that there are only three different views and “wins” for actors involved in a circular migration program. However, this thesis showed that also within these categories, different actors are involved with their own aspirations, agenda, perceptions, and views. This makes it even more challenging to reach an outcome that is in everyone’s favour. However, the objectives of all these different actors need to be understood in their own context to make the project a success because, without this knowledge, it is impossible to fulfil these objectives, let alone to reach an outcome in which everyone is a winner of circular migration. Therefore, before a Member State implements a legal migration project more attention should be paid to the different and sometimes even contradicting objectives of the actors involved.

The success of Digital Explores in a political context

In the third part of this research, I analysed how the interests of the actors involved in the DE-project match with the EC’s policy objectives. The EC has clear goals: Pilot projects on legal migration should present an alternative

for irregular migration, fill labour market gaps, and increase the cooperation with third countries on return and readmission. Nevertheless, as chapter 6 showed, these goals are difficult to reach with the DE-project. According to the DE-project actors and participants, the project provides an additional pathway for migration, but this cannot be presented as an alternative for irregular migration. Because people who would consider these 'high-skilled' pilot projects, in this case Nigerian developers, are not the ones considering going to Europe irregularly if the project was not provided. To a small extent, the project did fulfil Lithuanian's labour market gaps. However, the eleven project participants that stayed in Lithuania will not make a huge difference in the total shortage in the Lithuanian ICT-sector. Despites also the third objective of the EC (cooperation on return and readmission) turned out to be challenging to reach. In the DE-project, both the Lithuanian and the Nigerian governments were not official partners of the project but only supporters. Since there was no direct government-to-government collaboration, it is difficult to expect a contribution of the project to a better migration collaboration between Lithuania and Nigeria. Also, the project did not obtain the Nigerian government objectives because, so far, the project could not reach high numbers, and most participants did, so far, not return to Nigeria after the project ended. Higher numbers and returns are for VP and the Nigerian government representative pre-conditions to contribute to their primary goal: contributing to Nigeria's development. And because the project did not fulfil the pre-conditions to reach this goal, it makes sense to conclude that the project cannot be used as a 'carrot' at the negotiation table on readmission and return.

Summing this up, pilots can be described as necessary because, so far, the EC did not achieve the outcome they like to see. However, my findings indicate that the problem of this outcome should not be found in the project outcome itself but within the EC's formulated objectives. The DE-project showed that the EC's objectives are not realistic for pilot projects because it goes ahead of what 'piloting' should be used for; finding out what works and what does not. A pilot project supposedly contributes to an 'enabling environment'. However, the EC immediately presented it as a ready-made triple win framework that Member States can implement in any context to reach macro and long-term political goals. As explained in chapter 6, this is problematic because, these long-term macro-political goals cannot be achieved, if the environments, in which these project needs to be implemented, are not ready for a mobility project in the first place.

Before the Digital Explorers started, there was no institution supporting labour migration programs between Lithuania and Nigeria or any framework that could function as a basis for mobility between the two countries. The program, therefore, had to start from scratch. However, the DE-project implementers argue that the positive side of a pilot project is that since it is a pilot, there is room to find out what is needed to create this 'enabling environment', including the right infrastructure, framework, and trust. Therefore, for both the Nigerian and Lithuanian project developers and ICMPD, it was also their project's goal to set light on what works and what does not and set some first steps in creating this enabling environment. This 'enabling environment' is needed to implement a pilot project first and create a basis for future sustainable projects that might have a chance to contribute to the EC's long-term macro goals eventually.

Next to that, to make it possible to perform a project like Digital Explorers, a positive migration narrative is needed to receive support on both a public and political level. As described in chapters 3 and 5, Lithuania is not very open to immigration, especially not from non-neighbouring or non-EU countries. Before the project started, many Lithuanians were sceptical about the idea that Nigerian developers would work in Lithuanian ICT-companies. Lithuania did not have any experience with labour migrants from Nigeria, and finding ICT-companies to join the project turned out to be challenging. However, according to the Lithuanian DE-project actors, Digital Explorers contributed to the emerging narrative in Lithuania - which started, as explained in chapter 3, with politicians realizing that Lithuania needs international labour to survive – to see migration more as an opportunity for development rather than a threat to security. For example, the DE-project contributed to a positive narrative about Nigerian developers working in Lithuania that inspired other Lithuanian companies to work with Nigerian talent in the next track of the DE-project. Lithuanian companies might have stayed reluctant to join the project without this positive narrative, which would make it impossible to continue with the Digital Explorers' second track. The DE-project encouraged the Lithuanian ICT-companies to see migration as an opportunity to contribute to the development of Lithuania rather than as a problem that needs to be solved. Therefore, this thesis concludes that the constructive narratives resulting from the DE-project positively affect the support needed to implement or continue projects on legal migration.

Contributing to a positive migration narrative and an enabling environment were therefore not only the project actors' objectives, but also the aspects that the project could successfully reach. The fact that creating an enabling environment and a positive migration narrative are in themselves not one of the objectives for the EC for pilot projects is, I think, also one of the explanations why the EU is still in a pilot project phase. The objectives that are created by the EC get ahead of the context in which these pilot projects are created; a context in which project implementers have to start from scratch. For this reason, it is also challenging to find a concrete answer to the main question of this thesis; '*how the interests of the different parties that are involved in an EU circular migration pilot project can be related to the broader policy of the EU on circular migration?*'. It seems that the two different levels do not really interact: the macro-level of EU policy that has macro ideas on how Member States should implement circular migration to reach certain political goals, and a micro project level in which the project implementers of the DE-project are busy creating an environment that makes a circular migration project possible in the first place.

The illusion of control

Besides the specific aim of finding out whether the EU is still in a pilot project phase and the research's goal to answer the main- and sub-question(s) of this thesis, this research also had a broader aim. I also tried to reflect on to what extent it is possible to regulate migration, what the effects of these regulations are, and who benefits from these effects.

As the case-study showed, it is not easy to streamline and regulate migration in a specific way, even if detailed frameworks are already used in the project's design phase. Although the EC argues that circular migration programs need to be managed and controlled to ensure that it does not defeat its objective – meaning that migration should be temporary and not permanent – this is easier said than done. Frameworks used to 'control and manage' migration projects do not consider that every migrant and actor involved in a migration process have their own reason to join a circular migration project and their own aspirations and objective they like to achieve. Therefore, managing migration is difficult and complex because a specific regulation might work for, or is in favour of, one migrant or migrant actor but not for the other. However, everyone will still try to achieve their goals, and this will create a limitation to the extent migration can be managed.

Within the Digital Explorers project, this became especially visible in the aspect of return. The framework implemented for the DE-program clearly outlined how it could be guaranteed that participants would return after the project ended. According to the EC, the participants' return is essential because it is the aspect of return that makes circular migration a controlled form of migration. However, chapters 5 and 6 showed that return was in the DE-project not beneficial for the migrant (because the DE-project did not fulfil their aspirations yet) and not for the employer (who did not want to let their employees go). Ironically, the other objective of the EC, namely filling labour market shortages in the Member States, made it also possible for the project participants to stay in Lithuania. Since structural labour market gaps cannot be filled with temporary labour and because the project was focused on 'high-skilled' migration, what makes – in contrast to 'low-skilled' migration - the access to visas easier, employers could retain the project participants. This shows that the EC's objectives can be contradicting in its outcomes and that even if everything is thought through on paper, in reality, it turns out that things work out differently. The effect of this outcome is that for the Nigerian actors involved in the DE-project – VP, and to some extent, the Nigerian government-, fewer objectives have become a reality than for the migrants and the Lithuanian actors involved. For VP and the Nigerian government, the project participants needed to return to Nigeria to contribute to the development of Nigeria with their new collected knowledge and skills. However, the Nigerian project participants are convinced that they do not need to return to contribute to Nigeria's development. The DE-participants are convinced that they can also share their knowledge and skills online with people in Nigeria. In the digital world we live in today, it is, therefore, realistic to say that the brain drain debate should be reopened to find out how this digital element also fit in and to discover whether the internet can reduce brain drain or not.

Next to that, it should be questioned whether the frameworks designed by the EC for pilot projects on legal migration are realistic to use for all sort forms of migration projects. It might be worth considering dividing frameworks between specific countries, sectors or between 'low-skilled' migration (that should contribute extra attention to living and working conditions for migrants) and 'high-skilled' migration (that should consider the duration of stay and possible brain drain). Also, within the Member States' public and academic debate, more attention must be given to the different forms of legal labour migration. For example, 'high-skilled' migration gets in Member States both public and within politics more support than 'low-skilled' migration. Besides, it is

often impossible to offer a legal migration project for non-EU migrants in the 'low-skilled' sector because Member States do not have the right legislation in place. This is problematic when the EC's goal is to present an alternative for irregular migration since the Nigerians who consider going to the EU irregularly are mostly 'low-skilled' rather than 'high-skilled' Nigerians.

Another aspect of the debate that needs to receive more attention is the question whether legal migration actually has an impact on irregular migration, and, if so, what kind of impact different forms of legal migration has on the different groups of irregular migrants and the decision that these people make to travel to the EU irregularly. This is important to know because if legal migration can impact irregular migration and increase collaboration with third countries, then circular migration can be used as a tool to get out of the current political deadlock. Because currently, the biggest problem for the EU and its Member State is that irregular migration is increasing rather than decreasing, and it is still very challenging to return irregular migrants who do not have the legal right to stay in the EU. If future circular migration schemes could decrease irregular migration, it can be part of the solution. However, before a project like Digital Explorers will actually contribute to better cooperation with third countries on readmission and return and decrease irregular migration, there is still a way to go, as explained in this thesis. Nevertheless, the DE-project set some first steps in the right direction to create a basis for future projects that might contribute to the EC's long-term goals.

Advice for future research

Since there are still many questions unanswered, further research could focus on different aspects of circular migration. First of all, more research is needed to find out to what extent circular migration projects between the EU and Africa impact the willingness of African countries to work more closely with Member States on the return and readmission of irregular migrants. Although there is no data available that proves this, it can be assumed that a large part of Nigeria's remittances is coming from Nigerians who work in the EU irregularly. Although the Nigerian government has proved by means of a new policy that they want to reduce irregular migration and brain drain (as explained in chapter 3), it is questionable if the remittances coming from the EU's promised legal pathways will come close to the current level of remittances coming from irregular migration. Therefore, it is also essential to do more research on the possible benefits for African countries for circular migration, what is needed to reach these benefits and how these benefits can also be combined with project actors' wishes to make sure these benefits will also become real. Next to that, I think more research is needed to find out how current projects can be skilled up and how they can become sustainable without the funding of the EU. Because if a pilot project stops after its pilot phase and a new project in a new context will be financed, the EU will never leave its pilot mode.

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Annex 1 – interview list and webinars

Nr.	Role in project	Reference in thesis	Gender	Country of residence	Type of conversation	Data
1	Participant	DE-participant 1	M	Nigeria	Interview	28-12-2020
2	Participant	DE-participant 2	M	Nigeria	Interview	03-01-2021
3	Participant	DE-participant 3	M	Lithuania	Interview	08-01-2021
4	Participant	DE-participant 4	M	Lithuania	Interview	08-01-2021
5	Participant	DE-participant 5	M	Lithuania	Interview	12-01-2021
6	Participant	DE-participant 6	F	Lithuania	Interview	14-01-2021

Nr.	Company/ institution	Reference in thesis	Role in project	Gender	Country of residence	Type of conversation	Data
7	ICMPD	ICMPD employee	Monitor & evaluation	F	Belgium	Interview	04-12-2020
8	AfriKo	AfriKo representative	Project leader	F	Lithuania	Interview	04-12-2020
9	AfriKo	AfriKo representative	Project leader	F	Lithuania	Interview	16-12-2020
10	Enterprise Lithuania	EL representative	Project leader	M	Lithuania	Interview	07-01-2021
11	Ventures Platform	VP representative	Project leader	M & F	Nigeria	Interview	14-01-2021
12	TeleSoftas	TeleSoftas employee	Employer of DE-participants	F	Lithuania	Interview	21-01-2021
13	Ruptela	Ruptela employee	Employer of DE-participants	F	Lithuania	Interview	23-02-2021
14	Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Diplomat LMFA	Program supporter	F	Lithuania	Open question naire	16-01-2021
15	The Nigerian Office of the Vice President	Special assistant of the Nigerian Office of the Vice President	Program supporter	M	Nigeria	Interview	12-02-2021

Nr.	Title webinar	Organized by	Date	Link
1	Potential of talent mobility between the EU and Africa	AfriKo	06-10-2020	YouTube-link
2	Are Lithuanian ICT companies ready for foreign talents?	AfriKo	07-10-2020	YouTube-Link
3	Labour migration- African perspectives on cooperation	European Policy Centre (EPC)	07-10-2020	YouTube-Link
4	Is Nigeria ready to harness talent potential?	AfriKo	08-10-2020	YouTube-Link
5	The Migration Pact: Future Proof? State of the Union conference 2020	Clingendael Institute	03-11-2020	YouTube-Link
6	Vienna Migration Conference 2020 (With sessions among other about the New EU Talent Partnerships)	ICMPD	16-11-2020 until 19-11-2020	YouTube-Link
7	From Pilot Projects to Talent Partnerships – Exploring the future of legal migration to the European Union (EU)	ICMPD & DG-Home	11-02-2021	
8	Attracting and working with international talent: Digital Explorers recipes	AfriKo	26-02-2021	YouTube-Link

9	State of the Art Annual Meeting “Moving across borders” Policy and Research Perspectives on Migration and Displacement	Dutch Ministry of Justice and Security & Ministry of Foreign Affairs	25-03-2021	
10	Which Perspectives for Labour Migration Partnerships in the Prague Process region?	ICMPD	15-04-2021	