



37.

Assessing the impact of awareness-raising campaigns on potential migrants – what we have learned so far¹Jasper Tjaden²

Abstract: Information campaigns are not a new policy tool, but only in recent years has evidence slowly caught up with implementation in the field of migration. This chapter outlines the learnings of three comprehensive studies completed by the IOM Global Migration Data Analysis Centre on the impact and effectiveness of information campaigns on the risks of irregular migration. Some of the lessons so far include: (a) there is a clear need and demand for more and better information relating to migration among potential (irregular) migrants; (b) participating in awareness-raising events can have clear effects on potential migrants' risk perceptions and intentions to migrate irregularly; (c) the cost advantage of online activities versus offline events is likely to be exaggerated; (d) campaign goals and effect sizes vary which highlights the need for discussion among implementers, researchers and donors about what success means for campaigns. Lastly, the chapter outlines a research agenda to tackle the many questions that remain.

37.1. What we know about migration campaigns

Every year, thousands of migrants crossing Africa and the Mediterranean Sea die during their journeys.³ Research has shown that migrants sometimes begin their journeys without accurate or complete information, and as a result, may put their lives at risk (Foran and Iacucci, 2017; IOM, 2017; RMMS, 2014; UNHCR, 2017).

International organizations, civil society organizations and governments have turned to information and awareness-raising campaigns as a tool for raising awareness about the risks of irregular migration, in the hopes of keeping migrants out of harm's way and facilitating informed choices. According to the European Commission's working group on information campaigns, the European Union and individual European Union member States have funded more than 100 migration campaigns since 2014.⁴

¹ The author would like to acknowledge the contribution of Felipe Dunsch, Marie-Luce Bia-Zafinikamia, Horace Gninafon, Gustavo Lopez and Esther Haarmann for key IOM Global Migration Data Analysis Centre (GMDAC) studies that form the basis for this chapter.

² IOM's Global Migration Data Analysis Centre.

³ MHUB, Survey Snapshots, available from www.mixedmigrationhub.org/survey-snapshots/; and IOM, Missing Migrants, available from <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/>.

⁴ Presentation of the Vice-chair of the European Commission working group on information campaigns at the European Migration Network, Annual Conference in Vienna, on 3 December 2019.

Despite the growing number of information campaigns on the risks of irregular migration, there is limited empirical evidence on the impact and effectiveness of these campaigns (Browne, 2015; Tjaden et al., 2018). In a systematic review of available studies, we found that the increase in number of information campaigns has far outpaced any rigorous assessment of their effects (Tjaden et al., 2018). In the absence of reliable evidence, the debate on the potential of this policy tool often relies on largely anecdotal evidence.

Awareness-raising campaigns are also not short of critics, both in academia (Schans and Optekamp, 2016) and more generally in the public debate (Vermeulen, 2020). One common claim is that campaigns are ineffective by design, as they are built on wrong assumptions about how individuals make migration decisions. According to some critics, most migrants may be perfectly aware of the facts but accept the danger due to a lack of alternatives.

Awareness-raising campaigns rely on many assumptions – assumptions that are often not easy to back up with data. Up to now, there is still limited information on a range of relevant questions:

- What information do potential migrants already have?
- Is available information lacking or biased?
- Do potential migrants want and trust new information?
- Do migrants remember and internalize information?
- Are migrants rational decision makers who weigh costs and benefits of migration?
- Do migrants themselves make decisions or are families and communities the more important factors?
- Do migrants change their attitudes, perceptions and intentions as a result of information provided to them?
- Are changes in perceptions related to change in actual (safer) migration behaviour?

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) itself is implementing many awareness-raising campaigns around the world.⁵ From an institutional perspective, GMDAC has a key interest in providing guidance and evidence on which approaches work to our colleagues in the field. There is a growing emphasis on data-driven, continuous learning, and evidence-based programming, to ensure that we can assist migrants as best as available resources permit.

It was in this context that IOM's Global Migration Data Analysis Centre (GMDAC) decided to work towards addressing glaring gaps in the evidence base and to conduct studies that can be used to inform programming in this field in the future. Three comprehensive studies have been completed. This chapter is a brief reflection on what we have learned so far.

37.2. The emerging evidence base: studying the effects of information campaigns (2018–2020)

Since 2018, GMDAC has released a series of studies on the effects of awareness-raising campaigns on potential migrants.

First, we conducted a large and systematic literature review of the available evidence base (Tjaden et al., 2018).⁶ Most of the evaluations reviewed provided relatively little evidence of the full impact of information campaigns. While many of the evaluations reported the number and profiles of campaign recipients or beneficiaries, impact – a change in the outcome attributable to the campaign – was not directly measured.⁷

⁵ GMDAC is a separate and independent entity within IOM. Formally part of IOM Headquarters, it is not directly involved in the implementation of awareness-raising activities designed and led by colleagues in the field. Dedicated funding for impact studies and external review of all research activities ensured an objective perspective – while at the same time being part of IOM – allowed us full access to relevant campaigns under study.

⁶ The report also included a short annex with guidance for campaign implementers on how to consider important questions for an impact evaluation.

⁷ A common issue is the lack of a clearly defined campaign objective and/or target group. This hampers any rigorous evaluation of programme effects. The majority of the campaign evaluations reviewed claimed that the campaign under study was “successful” in inducing a change in knowledge, perceptions, attitudes and – to a lesser degree – (intended) behaviour.

Second, GMDAC, in collaboration with the IOM Media and Communications Division, released a so-called randomized controlled trial that assessed the impact of IOM's "Migrants as Messenger" campaign in Dakar. Migrants as Messengers⁸ is an innovative awareness-raising campaign using mobile technology and social media networks to collect and share first-hand accounts of irregular migration in communities across West Africa. The idea behind the campaign was to help migrants who returned voluntarily from Libya share their experiences with neighbours, friends and family. The concept is simple: Potential migrants listen to returning migrants, who share their experiences with their peers. The impact evaluation was IOM's first randomized controlled trial, which is considered the most rigorous and scientific way of evaluating the direct effect of a programme or policy. Potential migrants (community members who expressed interest in migrating) in eight neighbourhoods of Dakar were randomly invited to attend either a Migrants as Messengers film event or an unrelated "placebo" film screening (with no informational content on migration). This study used a longitudinal dataset of approximately 1,000 interviews of potential migrants surveyed several times over a period of five months.

Third, GMDAC conducted another comprehensive impact evaluation assessment of the IOM "CinemArena"⁹ campaign in Guinea (Bia-Zafinikamia et al., 2020). CinemArena is a mobile cinema initiative launched to raise awareness about the dangers of irregular migration among potential migrants in rural areas in West Africa, as well as to share information about safe alternatives to irregular migration, including opportunities for potential migrants in their home countries. In January and February 2019, the CinemArena team organized 32 film screenings in 32 villages across various regions of Guinea. The evaluation applied a particular type of scientific impact evaluation design, a so-called "difference-in-difference" estimation. The impact study is based on a sample of 2,861 potential migrants in 63 villages in the regions of Boké, Boffa, Gaoual and Kundara in rural Guinea. Potential migrants were surveyed a day before the arrival of the cinema caravan and then again three months after.

Fourth, GMDAC started to investigate the potential of online information campaigns, particularly ways to reach potential migrants via Facebook. Considerable funding is invested in engaging potential migrants online. However, the effects of such efforts are not well researched. Much practical knowledge and expertise are available within IOM, but data are often not systematically collected and the results from online engagement are often not documented and shared for public use. In an article contributed to the journal *Migration Policy Practice*, GMDAC first reviewed the available literature on evaluating the effects of Facebook posts and described the potential and pitfalls of using Facebook to engage with potential migrants (Lopez, 2019). Subsequently, a range of assessments was conducted based on the previous IOM Facebook campaign outreach. The analysis was based on a series of so-called A/B tests (split tests) – a method to assess which messages and which targeting works best for engaging target audiences (Haarmann et al., 2020).

37.3. Lessons so far

37.3.1. Many potential migrants lack information and want more

In our Senegal study, we found that almost 43 per cent of respondents with a general interest in leaving Senegal reported they did not feel well informed about how to migrate to Europe in general. Thirty-seven per cent said they were not well informed about the risks associated with irregular migration. The impact assessment revealed that participating in awareness-raising events in Dakar increased how well-informed potential migrants felt by an average of 20 per cent – in other words, one in five potential migrants. The study revealed striking gaps in knowledge regarding the number of casualties along the migration route to Europe, the duration of the journey to Europe and the asylum system in destination countries. Information on potential earnings in Europe and travel costs were consistent with estimates in the literature. Almost half of campaign participants said they sought out additional information after attending the events. This indicates that the events were successful in triggering some curiosity and additional information-seeking behaviour.

⁸ Available from www.facebook.com/MigrantsAsMessengers/.

⁹ Available from www.iom.int/news/latest-edition-cinemarena-mobile-cinema-initiative-launched-rome.

Our study in Guinea revealed a similar pattern. Sixty-nine per cent of respondents who considered migrating did not know how much it cost to migrate to Europe. Forty-one per cent said that they did not know how long it would take to migrate to Europe. Among those who had a general idea, 56 per cent estimated that it would take less than three months to arrive in Europe irregularly. Only 8 per cent estimated a journey longer than one year. These results stand in contrast to many testimonials and qualitative accounts describing how undocumented migrants get stuck in transit countries and have to work to save up additional resources to fund a trip across the Mediterranean. Regarding the legal context of regular migration, striking gaps emerge. Eighty-eight per cent of potential migrants in this survey reported that they did not know what asylum was. Fifty-three per cent of potential migrants in the study thought it was likely or very likely that they would get a visa to travel to Europe or the United States. Ninety-nine per cent of participants in the Guinea study said they would like to receive additional information.

In sum, the common claim in the literature that migrants are already perfectly informed does not square with the surveys we conducted. However, not everyone, of course, needs or wants information. The picture is much more mixed, which speaks to the importance of targeting those potential migrants who most demand information on safe migration, rather than targeting whole regions and villages, just because overall emigration rates appear to be high.

37.3.2. Young West African migrants often decide for themselves

Some evidence suggests that young migrants are often pressured by their families to migrate (Hernández-Carretero and Carling, 2012). Much of the theoretical economic literature describes migration as a collective household strategy to maximize income and hedge risks. However, we find that this pattern may depend strongly on the context. In the Senegal study, 56 per cent felt at least some family pressure to migrate. In Guinea, only 10 per cent of migrants reported feeling any pressure from family members. There are many stories of West African youth leaving without even telling their relatives, fearing that their parents would stop them. In several countries – for example, the Gambia and Guinea – there are now grass-roots organizations of mothers, fathers, siblings and others that urge the youth not to set out on the dangerous journey to Europe.¹⁰

37.3.3. Information campaigns can change risk perceptions

Both our surveys with campaign audiences in Guinea and Senegal confirm that many potential migrants think that irregular migration is generally very dangerous. In Senegal, of the interviewed potential migrants, 51.1 per cent assessed the risk to suffer from any form of violence to be “very high” or “critical”, and 68.8 per cent evaluated the risk to the life of someone who tries to migrate irregularly as “very high” or “critical”. On average, 34.7 per cent of the surveyed population held the perception that specific risks (food shortages, drowning, beatings and imprisonment, for example) were “very likely” to occur, and another 53.7 per cent thought they were “likely”. This means that, on average, only 11.6 per cent of the respondents assessed the risks as neutral or not likely to occur. In Guinea, 72 per cent of respondents said that irregular migration to Europe was either “very” or “extremely” dangerous.

Despite these already high levels of risk awareness, both studies found that participating in awareness-raising events can further increase risk perceptions by 25 per cent (Senegal) and 10 per cent (Guinea). This means that 1 in 4 or 1 in 10 potential migrants may change their views to think that irregular migration is very or extremely dangerous.

Whether potential migrants distinguish between general risks that can occur from specific risks they may be exposed to remains an open question. While a general appreciation of the danger involved is widespread, only the realization that one’s self could face it may influence safe migration decisions. Further research is needed to shed light on this.

37.3.4. Information campaigns can change migration intentions

Do awareness-raising activities change the behaviour of migrants? This is one of the key questions of governments, implementing agencies, academics, civil society and media. Changes in behaviour are clearly difficult and costly to measure, especially over time. As a proxy for eventual migration behaviour, GMDAC started to investigate migration intentions. Whether or not somebody wants to move or actually moves are, of course, two very different things.

¹⁰ For example, the Youth Against Irregular Migration, which was formed in the Gambia.

However, several studies have shown that intentions, aspirations and migration plans are systematically associated with migration behaviour (see Dunsch et al., 2019 for a review; see also Tjaden et al., 2019).

In Senegal, we found that potential migrants who participated in awareness-raising events in Dakar were 20 per cent less likely to report high irregular migration intentions compared with potential migrants who did not participate in the campaign. In Guinea, we found that, on average, 1 in 10 potential migrants change their intentions to migrate without a visa.

37.3.5. Defining “success” and realistic expectations

The studies presented above aimed at responding the question many observers have: “Are campaigns working?”¹¹ “Working” in this case means whether or not they increase awareness and reduce the likelihood to migrate irregularly.

Before answering the question of whether campaigns are a useful investment, it is important to define what success means. We have found that campaigns can change perceptions and intentions of 1 to 3 out of 10 potential migrants who participated in relevant campaigns. Whether this is a large effect or small effect may depend on the perspective. For social scientists, effects of 10–30 per cent are considered to be very large. These effects are also large in comparison with similar studies that assessed the effects of development or health interventions.

Policymakers, however, may perceive these effects to be small. The effects may also be smaller than those reported in conventional evaluation studies that apply less rigorous methods and risk overestimating the “true” effects of campaigns.¹²

To manage expectations, donors, implementing agencies and evaluators should agree on what success means before the start of the project. There needs to be a clear idea on how “success” is measured. For some observers, there might even be an ethical argument that campaigns should provide information even if that information does not change anything.

An example from another field: In 2012, the United States Center for Disease Control launched a paid national anti-smoking campaign disseminating ads.¹³ The campaign profiled real people who were living with serious long-term health effects from smoking and second-hand smoke exposure. According to an evaluation study conducted in 2012, during the campaign, the percentage of smokers who tried to quit increased by 12 per cent, translating to 1.64 million people. At the end of the three months, about 200,000 of them remained smoke-free (equivalent of 0.02%). On the one hand, an effect of 0.02 per cent appears small. On the other hand, a lot of people were still positively affected. Effect sizes have to be discussed in relation to a general responsibility to inform about risks and reduce suffering.

37.3.6. Emotion trumps knowledge

A growing body of research in social psychology and behavioural science suggests that facts alone do not change hearts and minds (Kolbert, 2017). It is possible that the effects we saw in Senegal and Guinea are related to the “emotional” and personal form of communication between peers. While the campaigns that we studied heightened risk perceptions and reduced intentions to migrate irregularly, campaigns had limited effects on factual knowledge questions such as costs, duration, legal procedures and the like. This may not be surprising. The information interventions that we assessed used personal and often emotional testimonials of returnees to convey information on the risks of irregular migration. While facts were mentioned in materials and discussions, the main approach focused on enabling identification of audience members with the messages as a result of emotional connection.

Overall, this suggests that changes in factual knowledge are not a prerequisite for changes in attitudes and perceptions towards irregular migration.

¹¹ As mentioned above, what it means to have a successful campaign is not always clearly defined. Do effective campaigns increase awareness, change perceptions, reduce intentions to migrate irregularly? Do they also reduce actual migration towards Europe?

¹² Limitations of conventional project evaluations include the absence of a counterfactual (control group), selection (randomization), small sample sizes and cross-sectional designs, among other things.

¹³ Available from www.cdc.gov/tobacco/campaign/tips/about/index.html#two.

37.3.7. Outreach via Facebook involves many unknowns

Online Facebook campaigns are now part of many awareness-raising projects that aim to engage with potential migrants in countries of origin (Lopez, 2019). In fact, many of IOM's own campaigns make use of Facebook, a platform that has the appeal of reaching large audiences at relatively low costs. Common Facebook metrics cited in final evaluation reports sound impressive, yet their meaning is often not well understood. One example is "reach". The reach of a Facebook post is the number of users on whose wall the post appears – those users who hypothetically had the chance to see the post. This does not mean that as many users were actually reached, meaning that they saw or engaged with the information. More meaningful measures include clicks, views, comments or likes, which indicate how many Facebook users directly engage with the content that is disseminated.

However, many of the metrics do not provide reliable information about the impact of Facebook campaigns (Haarmann et al., 2020). There are several limitations:

- First, Facebook allows campaign implementers to target their campaigns according to a wide range of factors, such as users' sex, age group, country of residence, and other factors. However, who eventually engages (or clicks) on Facebook posts is not clear. It is not possible to directly identify potential migrants on Facebook. This means that Facebook posts need to include surveys or other ways to assess whether engaged users are actually members of the intended target groups. We find that surveys have dramatically low response rates and increase the cost of ads (Haarmann et al., 2020). If campaigns verify that Facebook users represent the target group and engage with the content, the costs of Facebook ads are more comparable to offline, in-person activities (ibid.).
- Second, even when posts reach the right audience, it is difficult to measure whether the content that users are exposed to on Facebook actually leads to a change in perceptions, intentions or behaviour – the overall objective of most campaigns. To measure such changes requires recruiting users into a longitudinal survey where users' reactions are collected before and after exposing them to posts. This requires more resources and undermines the low-cost appeal of Facebook.
- Third, Facebook users in a country are not necessarily representative of the population in that country. Access to the Internet is still low in many regions where emigration rates are high.

Overall, these limitations highlight the importance of further research to examine the relative advantages and disadvantages of online campaigns versus offline campaigns.

37.4. What we still don't know: a proposed research agenda

The knowledge base for information campaigns has improved significantly in recent years, and is likely to further improve in the future.¹⁴ Information campaigns have become a key issue of interest for academics, policymakers and practitioners. Information campaigns are not new, but it has only been in recent years that evidence is slowly catching up with implementation in the field of migration. Despite new insights and collective learning in this field, there are many remaining questions that should excite implementers, scholars and donors in the years to come.

Several key questions include:

1. **Behaviour:** Results from two of our impact evaluations reveal that participating in awareness-raising events can change perceptions and intentions regarding irregular migration – at least in part. However, all studies so far were unable to measure changes in actual migration behaviour. There is evidence suggesting that intentions are a useful predictor of behaviour. Nevertheless, whether campaigns actually have an influence on who migrates, and how, remains uncertain. Beyond the technical issue that measuring behaviour is difficult and costly, it is also

¹⁴ There are several ongoing research initiatives led by Catia Batista, Tijan Bah (both at the NOVA Business School), David McKenzie (World Bank), Bernd Beber and Alex Scacco (both at Berlin Social Science Center).

worth debating whether reducing flows, for example, is actually a meaningful outcome measure for a campaign. Preventing harm and reducing unsafe migration through sensitizing and raising awareness of the risks of irregular migration are not the same as stopping any form of migration altogether. Potential migrants may choose to migrate within the region, migrate legally or gather more information on how to migrate in safer ways. Further discussion and innovative methods are needed to measure migration behaviour that are ethical, rigorous and in line with campaign objectives.

2. **Sustainability:** We were able to assess the effects of campaigns three to four months after subjects participated in IOM events. The long-term effects of campaigns remain unclear. For example, it is possible that participants forget or get new and conflicting information. Similar research on health campaigns showed mixed results on the sustainability of information effects. Many wane after several months. Follow-up surveys are needed to assess how long-lasting the impact is and whether or not there is demand for repeated interventions and regular communication with target groups, rather than one-off events.
3. **Relative importance:** Ongoing impact assessments are primarily concerned with the question of whether or not they have an effect on potential migrants. As more evidence emerges, the next question will be: How do information campaigns compare against and/or interact with alternative interventions, such as development or livelihood interventions, different messaging and/or migration policy changes, among other things? The question remains whether campaigns are more cost-effective than alternative approaches to make migration safer.

These points highlight that there is still much to be learned in this field – for the benefit of migrants, policymakers, practitioners and donors.

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