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Published in:
International Migration

DOI:
[10.1111/imig.13142](https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.13142)

Publication date:
2023

License:
CC BY-NC-ND

Document Version:
Final published version

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Cham, O. N., & Trauner, F. (2023). Migration information campaigns: how to analyse their impact? *International Migration*, 61(6), 47-57. <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.13142>

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Migration information campaigns: How to analyse their impact?

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Funding information

The financial support of the
Erasmus+ Programme is
gratefully acknowledged (Project
621045-EPP-1-2020-1-BE-EPPJMO-Chair)

Abstract

Information campaigns aim at discouraging potential migrants from leaving their countries irregularly. This article discusses how to analyse the impact of such campaigns by identifying different research lines in the literature. The impact of migration information campaigns may be explored by, firstly, focusing on transnational migratory data and inter-state relations (the macro-level); secondly, by investigating their impact on narratives within societies (the meso-level); and, finally, by investigating the micro-level of their influence on migratory decision-making. At each level, scholars face considerable methodological challenges to filter out the impact of campaigns. This article suggests that a promising research avenue is to analyse more widely the narratives and information sources upon which (potential) migrants rely. Opening up the research focus may avoid the risk of over-emphasising the impact of information campaigns by only looking at them. It allows to better understand which sources of information actually influence migratory behaviour.

INTRODUCTION

Policy-makers tend to consider information campaigns as a viable policy tool to deter irregular migration (Brekke & Thorbjørnsrud, 2018; Browne, 2015). Information campaigns are deliberate communication strategies to discourage potential migrants from leaving their countries irregularly (Oeppen, 2016). Potential migrants are seen to lack

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adequate information on the reality of a migration trajectory and the life or opportunities in a destination country. The knowledge held by potential migrants prior to being exposed to an information campaign is assumed to be incomplete or inaccurate. As a matter of fact, the actors behind information campaigns aim at making a potential migrant trust their information. This should lead to a change in his/her migratory plan and behaviour (Carling & Hernández-Carretero, 2011).

There have already been some serious engagements and overview articles on information campaigns, recently by Pagogna and Sakdakpolrak (2021). Comparing the findings of 17 peer-reviewed articles on the subject, they investigate different aspects of such campaigns including communication and media strategies. In terms of research gaps, they come to the conclusion that “future research is advised to focus on empirical studies on the impact of information campaigns on migrants' aspirations” (Pagogna & Sakdakpolrak, 2021: 1).

Our analysis starts from this observation. Indeed, the question of how to establish the impact of such campaigns is methodologically and empirically challenging. In this article, we look at how scholars have attempted such an undertaking and propose some new ideas on how to research the impact (or non-impact) of migration information campaigns. We discuss three ways to come closer to the impact of migration information campaigns: a focus on the macro-level in terms of impact on migratory data and inter-state relations; on the meso-level, looking at the impact on narratives within societies; and, finally, an investigation of the micro-level focusing on migratory decision-making and the impact of campaigns thereon.

In terms of our approach, we comprehensively searched for scholarly work on information campaigns in the ISI Web of Knowledge and Google Scholar. However, we do not seek to systematically summarise these texts (as was done by other overview articles) but to work out the different research lenses and methodological approaches when investigating the “impact”-dimension. Information campaigns are usually implemented in countries of migrants' origin. That said, information campaigns towards migrants can also target ‘transit’ and even ‘destination’ countries. Some scholars have even drawn parallels between the communication and information initiatives aimed at discouraging migrants to leave and those encouraging them to return (Balty et al., 2021; Schans & Optekamp, 2016). As a matter of fact, information campaigns can also be labelled as ‘awareness-raising’ or ‘behaviour-change’ campaigns, or even as ‘strategic communication’. This polysemy raises specific challenges to identify what should be considered as an ‘information campaign’, as well as to circumscribe the relevant literature in this field.

In this article, we will stick to a narrower understanding of information campaigns, implying a focus on campaigns for countries of migrants' origin and transit. A key reason for doing so is that this type of campaigns has gained particular relevance and momentum in the Global North, notably in the EU (Musarò, 2019; Pécout, 2010). In the wake of Europe's 2015–2016 refugee crisis, a total of 104 campaigns were organised by different Member States and 25 campaigns by different EU institutions (European Migration Network, 2019). The growing relevance of these campaigns has yet to be followed by academic scrutiny – not only but in particular with regard to the question of the impact of such campaigns.

TYPES OF INFORMATION CAMPAIGNS TARGETING MIGRANTS

In the next section, we briefly analyse types of information campaigns as well as the different actors involved in their conduct. This will enable us to prepare the ground for a more comprehensive understanding of how to study the impact of such campaigns.

In terms of set-up, the conventional methods of information campaigns include face-to-face conversations or information provided in theatres, workshops, concerts, roadshows and the like (Brekke & Thorbjørnsrud, 2018; Rodriguez, 2017). Campaigns have been traditionally put forward in print media, leaflets, posters, billboards (Browne, 2015; Heller, 2014), as well as in cinema, TV and radio broadcasts (Heller, 2014). Through a review of 60 studies on information campaigns, Tjaden et al. (2018) suggested that most information campaigns involved venues such as workshops, concerts, roadshows or theatres.

With new technological possibilities, information campaigns have been implemented in more diversified ways (Pagogna & Sakdakpolrak, 2021). The relevance of social media among young potential migrants have made web-based information campaigns gained momentum (Vammen et al., 2021). Different stakeholders such as the IOM or EU institutions have expanded web-based information campaigns, especially in key migrants' sending and transit countries. Social media platforms, first and foremost Facebook/Meta, YouTube, Instagram and Twitter have been used as tools to disseminate information on the dangers of irregular migration and of engaging with smugglers as well as on local job opportunities (Musarò, 2019).

Brekke and Beyer (2019: 16) highlight that the social media platforms offer possibilities to put forward information in more diverse formats (texts, audio, graphics and videos). The easy and (often) cheap(er) nature of social media (compared to traditional media) has facilitated the engagement of stakeholders, including governments, with potential migrants (Brekke & Thorbjørnsrud, 2018). However, social media also have downsides. A high number of 'views' on social media may not yet say much about the relevance and impact of information campaigns. Social media platforms have a commercial incentive to use algorithms or sponsoring techniques to inflate views so that a client gets satisfied.

In all forms of public information campaigns, different actors are involved in their conceptualization, planning and implementation, albeit not all are equally influential. Pécoud (2010: 190) argued that "information campaigns rely on partnerships established with a wide range of social actors." In the context of information campaigns for potential migrants, destination countries (funders), civil society organisations, NGOs, IOM, UNHCR, migrant returnees and celebrities are among the key stakeholders. The governments of countries of migrants' origin may endorse an information campaign but they tend not to get involved in their design and implementation. Since the 1990s, the IOM has been a leading partner in the implementation of information campaigns (Pécoud, 2010). Civil society organisations have also been partners in their implementation from the very beginning, similar to the case of 'anti-trafficking' campaigns (see Andrijasevic & Anderson, 2009). Private consulting and communication firms are increasingly hired for information campaigns (Pagogna & Sakdakpolrak, 2021). A growing number of actors involved in the implementation of information campaigns have resulted in the fact that the main funders (such as the EU and its member states) have become increasingly invisible.

New strategies for conducting information campaigns have further expanded the range of involved actors. IOM-led campaigns in Africa have often employed a strategy to use former migrants to conduct information campaigns on their behalf. 'Migrants as Messengers' (MaM) is the title of the campaign run in Senegal and Gambia, but the 'peer-to-peer' information campaigns can be called differently in other countries. For instance, the intermediaries are referred to as 'community mobilisers' in Niger (see Van Dessel, 2021). In such peer-to-peer messaging campaigns, returnees share testimonials of their journeys through (often emotional) videos. They often target communities from which many people migrate (Dunsch et al., 2019; Vammen, 2021). This strategy is still used for information campaigns primarily in West African countries. According to Dunsch et al. (2019: 3), a major rationale for doing so has been that "returnees are a trusted source of information for potential migrants, and that their emotional message has a large impact on risk perception and reducing intention to migrate irregularly". In the case of Sudan, Brekke and Beyer (2019) observed a similar pattern of engagement on the basis of returnees. Testimonies of former migrants were exhibited, accompanied by dramatic images and videos, emotional music and voiceover to deter potential migrants from leaving.

Aside former migrants' testimonies, local artists, musicians and theatre groups are also engaged in the dissemination efforts of information campaigns (Vammen et al., 2021). An example is the "Aware Migrants Information Campaign" funded by the Italian government and implemented by the IOM in 15 African countries. A series of music videos transmitted messages that should deter young people from leaving irregularly. For example, the Ghanaian musician and songwriter Kofi Kinaata featured in an IOM-produced video titled "No place like home". Musarò (2019: 635) describes the music video as follows:

In this video, the images of the 'cool' musician singing 'Say no to irregular migration' are alternated with scenes of local young people discussing about travelling to Europe through Libya. After a long discussion with several warnings to change their mind and invest their money at home, at the end of the video we discover that one of them died along the route while the family was not even informed about that.

Within the same project, another IOM-produced video was prominently displaying the well-known Senegalese musician Coumba Gawlo Seck, alongside other Senegalese and African artists. The video is entitled “Bul sank sa bakkane bi” (Do not put your life at risk).¹ This type of messaging with celebrities has a long tradition in West Africa. Already in 2007, Youssou N'Dour – described in 2004 by the Rolling Stone Magazine as “perhaps the most famous singer alive in Senegal and much of Africa” (Considine & Matos, 2004) – warned about the dangers of irregular migration in an IOM-produced video financed by Spain.²

A final group involved in the campaigns are local development actors. Engaging in these campaigns is mainly a strategy for these people to get access to material and symbolic resources (see Rodriguez, 2017). These local development actors provide training and income-generating activities for potential migrants and facilitate awareness-raising campaigns. Knowing the environment, these actors help adapting messages to a local context (Olivier de Sardan, 2005). However, Rodriguez (2017) maintains that the effectiveness of such approach in influencing potential migrants' behaviour, decisions and aspirations remains largely unclear. Whilst potential migrants are the primary target of the different campaigns, initiators of such campaigns now target families and communities with specific campaigns giving their important role in influencing migration decisions.

DIFFERENT WAYS OF STUDYING THE IMPACT OF INFORMATION CAMPAIGNS

There are considerable methodological challenges to establish the impact of migration information campaigns. According to Obi et al. (2019), there is limited evidence of the impact or effects of information campaigns primarily due to methodological struggles. Evaluations which reported information campaigns to be successful would be often based on a small number of participants. They lack rigorous assessment tools, possibly exacerbated by the high costs of data collection. According to a review of academic studies on information campaigns, rigorous research on the implementation, local outcomes and migrants' perception of such campaigns is still missing (Pagogna & Sakdakpolrak, 2021). Information campaigns are carried out in different local settings and often have slightly diverging assumptions and dynamics at play. This complicates a comparative and in-depth study of their impact. In his study of IOM information campaigns in Cameroon, Heller (2014: 313–14) argued that “in a context of which information circulates through multiple different networks which vary in scale from the local to the global, controlling information – let alone its reception – seems an impossible task.”

Despite the difficulties in assessing the impact of information campaigns, media science provides some insights on the means of evaluating the impact of information campaigns. The standard campaign theory offers to provide an evaluation of campaigns by distinguishing between inputs, outputs, outtakes and outcomes (Brekke & Beyer, 2019; McNamara, 2014). Based on this theory, inputs refer to the messages deployed in campaigns and the different channels to reach the intended audience. Outputs refers to the number of recipients. Outtakes and outcomes refer to the key takeaway messages by targeted beneficiaries and the number of campaign beneficiaries who changed their views, plans or aspirations after coming into contact with a campaign respectively (ibid).

Starting from these observations of methodological challenges, we structure our next section in three ways. We start by looking as to whether the impact can be established at a macro-level.

The macro-level: Impact on migratory data and inter-state relations

A macro-level of analysis may investigate as to whether migratory trends and inter-state relations are impacted by information campaigns. A linkage between migratory trends and information campaigns, however, is methodologically very challenging, if not impossible. The development of an information campaign might correlate with a decrease in numbers, but this does not mean that the information campaign has caused this decrease. It is very difficult to establish a causal connection between the implementation of the campaigns and a reduction in irregular

migration (European Migration Network, 2012). This does not imply that donors do not hope for such an effect. Brekke and Beyer (2019) studied government-led information campaigns in Sudan. These campaigns tend to be considered successful when government notice a decrease in the number of people who are leaving, even if only to a modest extent.

However, information campaigns rarely pursue the official objective of reducing the emigration from one country. In fact, it is often difficult to grasp the core objectives of these campaigns. According to an IOM-commissioned evaluation of 60 information campaigns, an evaluation of the impact has often been a challenge due to ill-defined campaign objectives such as “awareness-raising” or “knowledge creation” (Tjaden et al., 2018: 7). “A common issue is the lack of a clearly defined campaign objective and/or target group” (Ibid). Tjaden et al. maintain that only very few programmes or evaluations fulfil the methodological standards (e.g. quasi-experimental method for causal inference or large-N studies involving pre- and post-measurements) to draw empirically substantiated claims about the effects.

The problems of clear-cut campaign objectives and unclear evaluation criteria were echoed in an evaluation study ordered by the European Commission (Seefar, 2021). Few campaigns would credibly be able to demonstrate “evidence of sustainability” beyond their duration (Seefar, 2021: 10). However, this study may shed light on why these campaigns continue to be financed

Irregular migration awareness-raising campaigns are a migration management tool that could not realistically yield results without ongoing funding. ... such campaigns should be understood as an ongoing cost of migration management similar to other migration management controls such as law enforcement and passport controls, rather than as traditional aid and development projects (Seefar, 2021:10).

From such a perspective, only a persistent and sustained financing of these campaigns adds to a comprehensive ‘international migration management’ (for a critical reflection of this concept, see Geiger & Pécoud, 2010), irrespective of the effects or effectiveness of individual campaigns.

These insights are of relevance for scholars interested in analysing the effects of information campaigns at a macro-level. Even the designers or funders of such campaigns often do not analyse them in a narrow, impact-oriented manner. Such campaigns are rather seen as one (migration control) tool among others. In a combined form, such tools may – or may not – impact wider migratory trends and migratory behaviour. Scholars have already suggested to consider campaigns therefore as a ‘symbolic’ policy, which do not address the challenges leading to migration or those posed by restrictive border regimes. Based on the example of European information campaigns in Afghanistan, Oeppen (2016:1) argued that

These information campaigns are symbolic, fulfilling the need of policymakers to be seen to be doing something, and also – and more ominously – serve a role of shifting responsibility for the risks of the journey onto Afghans themselves, rather than the restrictive border regimes of the EU.

At a macro level, a promising avenue of further research for scholars may therefore be to investigate more carefully as to how ‘knowledge’ on the impact of such campaigns affect the decision-making of (Western) donors. Which factors make (EU or nation state) funders continue or stop information campaigns? How relevant is knowledge of prior campaigns for them to maintain or stop campaigns? To what extent does the objective of (European) policy-makers to ‘do something’ when facing migratory pressures override other, more empirically substantiated considerations (such as evaluations or academic and policy findings)?

Another aspect that deserves further investigation is the ways in which the political context of a third country impacts the conduct or nature of (EU-funded) information campaigns (and other externalisation measures). An interesting example is the non-conduct of information campaigns targeting Afghan migrants and refugees fleeing to Turkey after the Taliban take-over in August 2021. In a “Statement on the Situation in Afghanistan”, the Council (Justice and Home Affairs) (2021:3) called for different measures on how to react including “targeted information

campaigns [...] to combat the narratives used by smugglers, including in the on-line environment, which encourage people to embark on dangerous and illegal journeys towards Europe.” In a similar vein, Greece announced the set-up of a campaign for Afghan migrants funded by the EU. However, no such targeted campaign was launched on the EU's side for Afghan migrants in Turkey, a main entry point for them into the EU, in the year that followed (Brekke & Thorbjørnsrud, 2023).

Information campaigns can be considered sensitive by a non-EU-state such as Turkey hosting already large communities of refugees. After all, they are meant to slow down migration movements, thereby potentially shifting protection responsibilities to the (transit) countries in which migrants and refugees are currently seeking shelter. The Turkish example therefore invites more general reflections. Which governments of countries of migrants' origin or transit take a (formal or informal) stance on the conduct of EU-funded information campaigns on their territory or online (while targeting migrants in their countries)?

The meso-level: The impact on narratives

The impact of information campaigns may be analysed at a meso level, focusing on how narratives are produced and influenced by information campaigns.

Since information campaigns have been first employed in the 1990s, they have evolved considerably in terms of outreach strategies – less so in terms of content. The messages of information campaigns have remained relatively stable. Irregular migration tends to be depicted and framed in a negative light in information campaigns in Africa and other parts of the world (Van Dessel & Pécoud, 2020). The discourses and norms conveyed by such campaigns have been seen to promote a sedentary life dedicated to ‘development at home’ (Freemantle & Landau, 2020) while ‘victimising’ and ‘stigmatising’ irregular migrants (Van Dessel, 2021). In the view of Oeppen (2016: 2), the message has consistently been the same since the inception of information campaigns targeting potential migrants: “Do not come here!”. These exclusionary messages, she added, are framed with the argument of protecting human lives. According to Schans and Optekamp (2016: 21), information campaigns are dominated by “dark messages about the risk, the inevitable failure and exploitation but not complemented by messages of ‘making it’”.

In our literature review, we did not come across examples of EU- or state-funded information campaigns that would pursue the objective of informing migrants (or potential migrants) about how to stay safe during an irregular migration trajectory. Some NGOs such as “Alarme Phone Sahara” do so but they are usually not funded by destination countries.³ The information campaigns tend to have a different focus on issues of security and safety. According to Oeppen (2016: 11), “information campaigns fulfil a humanitarian narrative about protecting would-be migrants from exposing themselves to risk of being smuggled to Europe.” Oeppen (2016) argues that this narrative obscures the reasons why people want to leave their countries and fails to recognise the role of Europe's securitized approach to migration. Moreover, Van Dessel and Pécoud (2021) noted that the ‘care and control’ approach adopted by the EU towards migrants can be traced back to colonialism where the use of force to protect the ruled was legitimised in the name of protecting their interest.

While the content remains relatively stable, the outreach strategies have been subject to change. Some campaigns have become more disguised. Private consulting and communication firms have been increasingly engaged in using social media as a prime medium for information campaigns (Brekke & Thorbjørnsrud, 2018; Pagogna & Sakdakpolrak, 2021). The clips and messages are no longer necessarily associated with the EU or other international donors. In a way, the messages of information campaigns are getting framed as “ordinary” inputs to a wider public debate on migration. It is not only the messages that are getting less easily connected to international donors. The messengers of the campaigns have also changed. Returnees' and local celebrities have become central “faces” and actors of the information campaigns. Here again, a random observer may believe that these messengers act on own initiative given that donor structures remain in the background.

These changes bring about new avenues for research. Can high-profile local celebrities and “trustworthy” messengers (such as returnees) alter a discourse/narrative on migration? Have the campaigns managed that the

public discourse in the target country focuses more on the “problematic” aspects of migration (such as risk factors)? To what extent do international donors influence a narrative on migration more widely in a given context?

There is another aspect to the engagement of local intermediaries of information campaigns. In which ways do they change the messages of the campaigns? Local actors, notably if they are celebrities, may have their own views and take on the subject even if they cooperate with international donors. As a matter of fact, the following question may evolve: Are they only implementing agents, or do they also influence the framing and the development of information campaigns? Do they, in particular circumstances, even alter the framing originally intended by the donors?

On the other hand, however, some campaigns have kept on being very clearly associated with particular states or actors. Analysing the example of Denmark, Gammeltoft-Hansen (2017) has called this ‘negative nation branding’. The Danish government has run an ‘anti-refugee ad campaign in Arabic-language newspapers warning the refugees against going to Denmark’ (Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2017: 99). Potential migrants and refugees should be deterred by getting to know the details of harsh reception and asylum policies in Denmark. Also, EU-funded campaigns have often built upon the message that life in Europe is not as one may believe it is (Brekke & Beyer, 2019; Brekke & Thorbjørnsrud, 2018).

How are these messages influencing a migration narrative in a country of migrants’ origin? It can be tested whether this negative branding stands in contrast to other discourses promoted by the EU or its member states. The EU delegations may highlight their achievements in terms of development assistance, human rights and rule of law as well as economic exchanges and opportunities. These European ‘success stories’ may undermine the ‘negative nation branding’ attempted by Denmark and others. Is there even an issue of a counter-narrative (involuntarily) promoted by the EU to citizens of third countries including potential migrants? How do different communication streams of EU actors impact narratives on migration and Europe in countries of migrants’ origin?

The micro-level: The impact on migratory decision-making

A micro-level of analysis implies to elaborate on the impact of information campaigns on the decisions of individuals.

Even if the prevailing objective of information campaigns relates to deterrence, potential migrants often dismiss the messages as untrustworthy and biased (Oeppen, 2016; Pécoud, 2010; Schans & Optekamp, 2016). They are often well-aware of the risks of a migratory trajectory (Mbaye, 2014; Van Dessel, 2021). In a lab-in-the-field experiment, potential migrants even tend to overestimate the risk of dying *en route* (Bah & Batista, 2018). Most scholarly evaluations of IOM-run information campaigns e.g. in the Cameroon (Heller, 2014) or Senegal (Carling & Hernández-Carretero, 2011; Rodriguez, 2017) therefore assume a limited effect of such campaigns on migrants’ decision-making. Evaluations of online information campaigns also demonstrate a limited efficacy in changing the minds of potential migrants in Senegal, Guinea and Nigeria (Haarman et al., 2020). Migrants have manifested resistance towards restrictive border control policies, with information campaigns often seen to belong to this category. In his analysis of EU-funded IOM information campaigns, Pécoud (2010:184) argues that “information campaigns point to one of the greatest obstacles to the control of migration, namely the refusal of migrants to accept the legitimacy of the policies aimed at stopping them.”

While most studies therefore assume a rather limited impact of information campaigns on the decisions of individuals, the picture is not yet fully clear-cut. Do different communities or groups react in the same way to the campaigns? What is the type of influence such campaigns can unfold in the decisions of the people consuming them? Which messages of information campaigns resonate more or less with their target groups?

Finding a sound methodological approach is again a challenge. It starts with the question as to how to define the target audience of information campaigns, usually seen to be ‘real’ or ‘potential’ migrants. Information campaigns can target migrants who are already ‘on route’ and try to convince them not to come to a particular place. Although there is not a single understanding, migrants are commonly defined by “foreign birth, by foreign citizenship, or by their movement into a new country to stay temporarily (sometimes for as little as a year) or to settle for the long-term” (Anderson & Blinder, 2015: 2). Such a definition of a migrant, however, does not yet reveal that migratory routes are rarely

straight from a given country of origin to a specific destination country. Analysing Sub-Saharan migration to the EU, for instance, Schapendonk (2012) demonstrates that the “unidirectional and often frictionless metaphors of migration” do not correspond to realities. By following sub-Saharan migrants over longer periods of time, his study showed how they made unexpected moves or adapted to different circumstances by staying longer or leaving earlier than planned. This type of studies questions a rather simplistic understanding of ‘transit migrants’ as a temporary phenomenon or in-between stadium between country of origin and country of destination. Such individuals may not easily be identified or can be convinced by information campaigns. That said, an obvious solution can be to focus on a particular nationality among the migrants (e.g. Syrians or different West African nationalities) and how they react to information campaigns.

It is equally difficult to define ‘potential’ migrants for a study on the impact of information campaigns, even if some scholarly work exists in this respect too. A way to define potential migrants is to look at individuals subject to “involuntary immobility” (Carling, 2002: 5). Those people wish to migrate but are not able to migrate as their aspiration is not matched with their abilities. Carling names a range of factors deriving from a “common emigration environment” that define such an ability including migration control policies, a lack of development but also the risk-aversiveness of potential migrants (ibid). From this perspective, a study on the impact of information campaigns may select “potential migrants” as people keen to migrate but not having had (yet) the opportunity or will to do it. In which ways have the messages of information campaigns influenced their decision to stay at home or not to migrate in the first place?

However, potential migrants can be defined differently. In migration societies, there are often structural factors influencing decisions on migration. For instance, first-born sons may face pressure to migrate in order to contribute to a family’s income, irrespective of whether or not they have an individual aspiration to migrate. In the context of West Africa, Gaibazzi (2015: 94) argues that “men shoulder the financial obligations for their parents and households, and since households are in a chronic need of cash for basic consumption items, men are expected to go and find it.” From this perspective, potential migrants targeted by information campaigns are not only people who express a wish to migrate but also those who are likely becoming migrants 1 day due to societal expectations and structural factors.

Identifying the target audience is only one challenge. Filtering out the impact of information campaigns from the universe of other information sources is an equally daunting task. Information campaigns may be ineffective when and if individuals are compelled to leave for different reasons including poverty, persecution or climate change. It would not be a lack of information that is making a migrant to leave a country but a lack of livelihood opportunities to stay (see also Czaika & Reinprecht, 2020). Information and knowledge of real and potential migrants have hence to be evaluated against migratory opportunities and constraints. Qualitative research methods, notably in-depth interviews or focus groups with real and potential migrants, may be an appropriate way to assess these questions and come closer to the dynamics of decision-making of these individuals.

One approach is to open up the focus and look at the relative importance of information campaigns vis-à-vis other sources of information. In two reports with similar research designs, Brekke and Thorbjørnsrud (2023) as well as Trauner et al. (2023) investigate how locally held narratives interact with and relate to narratives promoted in EU-funded information campaigns. Their two case studies were potential migrants in the Gambia and Afghan (transit) migrants in Istanbul. Through focus groups and in-depth interviews with Gambians and Afghans, they first sought to establish as to what the Master – or dominant – narrative of these individuals on the themes of migration and Europe. In a second step, the focus moved to the question as to how EU-promoted messages are received, contested and endorsed by the individuals. At this stage, they investigated as to whether these campaigns can unfold any impact at the decision-making of the study participants. This setup allowed to avoid the risk of attributing too high influence to EU-funded information campaigns by only looking at them. Those campaigns are embedded in a wider study of information sources and narratives. Both studies underline (again) that information is only one factor among others influencing migratory decision-making – and information campaigns are only one of the information sources. Such campaigns tend to unfold an impact only under very particular circumstances. In the Gambian case, for instance, two out of three EU-promoted messages did not really align with locally held narratives (see Trauner et al., 2023).

Overall, these studies demonstrate that the analysis of information campaigns may be embedded into an analysis of information and narratives in the decision-making of (potential) migrants. Such studies may reflect upon how the

narratives promoted by EU actors such as the European Commission or EU member states interfere or interact with locally held migration narratives – and how such narratives then actually impact on migratory decisions. Also, how do information campaigns actually relate to other sources that potential migrants consult and listen to? What is the role of migrants' families and social networks (and social media) in shaping how prospective migrants view migratory options?

CONCLUSIONS

This article has discussed the state of the literature and some avenues of research regarding the impact-dimension of migration information campaigns. Such campaigns have become an important tool to control migration for the EU and member states since their inception in the 1990s. This is evident in the number of campaigns and financial resources committed to information campaigns. With the quest to make them more effective, funders of information campaigns have engaged more and more diverse groups of actors to implement campaigns on their behalf. Different means of communication have been used to transmit messages ranging from conventional to social media. A diversification of the actors and the means of transmitting messages have implied a higher level of exposure of potential and real migrants to information campaigns. Overall, information campaigns continue to have a momentum and are widely used – even more so when there is a perception of a looming “migration crisis” in Europe or elsewhere. Scholars have often highlighted the symbolic nature of this migration management tool and have tended to assume that they have only limited influence.

Indeed, it is a methodological and empirical challenge to actually establish the impact or effects of such campaigns. The article has looked at three ways to approach such an impact-dimension. A macro-level of analysis may look at the ways in which information campaigns impact wider migratory trends. Existing research and the methodological challenges to establish such a causal relationship, however, has made us caution against such an endeavour. From a macro-perspective, it may be more worthwhile to look at the impact that knowledge, feedback and evaluations have on donors in terms of deciding upon new campaigns. Another possibility is to investigate how bilateral relations constrain or enable the conduct of information campaigns. At a meso-level, a researcher may look into ways in which information campaigns may – or may not – impact migratory narratives. The messages promoted in such campaigns tend to be relatively stable (with an overarching objective of convincing individuals not to come to a particular destination place), yet the strategies of communication have multiplied and diversified. This opens up new ways of investigation as to how migratory narratives have been influenced or changed in a given societal or regional context.

Finally, a research may focus stronger on how these campaigns actually influence potential and real migrants' decision-making. This is a third level of analysis, the micro-level. Despite the growing popularisation of the campaigns, the perception and perspective of migrants on them is the probably least analysed dimension. Some comparative angles may still refine our knowledge e.g., whether different communities or groups react in the same way to the campaigns. It could also be a promising research focus to analyse more widely the narratives and information sources upon which (potential) migrants rely – and see as to whether the EU-promoted messages play any role in this respect. Opening up the research focus may avoid the risk of over-emphasising the impact of information campaigns by only looking at them. It would also improve our understanding as to which information and information sources are of actual relevance in migration decision-making.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank Ilke Adam, Jan-Paul Brekke, Kjersti Thorbjørnsrud and Julia van Dessel for their constructive comments on an earlier draft. This is a substantially revised version of a Working Paper published for the H2020 BRIDGES project – ‘Assessing the production and impact of migration narratives’.

FUNDING INFORMATION

The financial support of the Erasmus+ Programme is gratefully acknowledged (Project 621045-EPP-1-2020-1-BE-EPPJMO-Chair).

PEER REVIEW

The peer review history for this article is available at <https://www.webofscience.com/api/gateway/wos/peer-review/10.1111/imig.13142>.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available in the public domain.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ The musicians distinctly discouraged young people from migrating irregularly and suggested to explore local opportunities and alternatives.
- ² The video is available at: <https://youtu.be/5pPAODIjYKM>.
- ³ See e.g. the section 'Advice for Migrants' of the website 'Alarm Phone Sahara': <https://alarmphonesahara.info/en/>.

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How to cite this article: Cham, O.N. & Trauner, F. (2023) Migration information campaigns: How to analyse their impact? *International Migration*, 61, 47–57. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.13142>