

# Influencing from a distance: Are diaspora members effective as “credible messengers” in migration information campaigns?



Migration information campaigns have become a popular policy mechanism amongst donors and implementers to deter irregular migration. With the increasing number of information campaigns introduced in countries of origin, attention is also being focused towards the design of these campaigns, including considerations on engaging people that can act as “credible messengers” or “key influencers” to convey the content of the campaign. It is in this line that campaign funders and designers are exploring the potential of involving diaspora members as messengers in information campaigns. Backed by a dedicated research study on diaspora engagement in information campaigns under the PARIM project, this policy brief questions the assumptions behind engaging diaspora members as “credible messengers”. One major assumption is that since potential migrants rely on friends and family abroad for their migration process, following the same principle, they would be more receptive to information received through diaspora members in campaigns. However, this policy brief argues that diaspora members engaged in campaigns are imperfect proxies for potential migrants’ friends and family abroad. With this caveat, it presents certain considerations to take into account when designing a migration information campaign that involves diaspora members as messengers.

## Introduction

As information campaigns gain popularity as important policy tools for influencing migration decision-making, **the modalities of implementing an effective information campaign** are becoming an important point of consideration for donors and implementers. Besides the content of the campaign and the channels of communication, the choice of messengers plays a pivotal role in how information is received and what impact it has on decision-making.

Based on social network theory, an increasing number of information campaigns consider engaging diaspora members for outreach to potential irregular migrants with **the assumption that diaspora members are considered “credible messengers” for migration-related information**. Specifically, for irregular migration, reliance on social networks abroad is particularly important as potential migrants seek to gather relevant information from informal and trusted sources. While numerous studies confirm that potential migrants rely

social networks for migration planning,<sup>1</sup> how potential migrants perceive information received from diaspora members through a formal information campaign remains unclear and warrants further inquiry.

It is in this context that the PARIM project<sup>2</sup> research explored the potential of **Pakistani diaspora members in Europe**<sup>3</sup> as “key influencers” and “credible messengers” within migration information campaigns implemented in Pakistan.

## How may social networks abroad influence irregular migration?

Research finds **social networks play an important role in migration decision-making**.<sup>4</sup> Friends and family abroad influence aspirations, decisions, as well as preparing and planning for migration, either directly or indirectly. The impressions of “abroad” disseminated through the narratives, visits, the material possessions

1. Qaisrani, Ayesha, Hahn-Schaur, Katharina and Hendow, Maegan (2021). *Irregular migration dynamics from Pakistan and the role of information campaigns*. PARIM Final Report. ICMPD: Vienna; European Commission, “Study on Best Practices in Irregular Migration Awareness Campaign: Interim Report Phase II,” 2021; Mixed Migration Centre, “The Decision to Migrate among Afghans: Access to Information and Key Influencers,” 2020; IOM, “Pakistan: Survey on Drivers of Migration - Migrants in Europe during Covid-19.”
2. More information on the PARIM project and related research is available at: <https://www.budapestprocess.org/our-work/parim>. This policy brief is based on the PARIM report: Qaisrani, Ayesha and Jokic, Jelena. (2021). *Engaging Diasporas in Information Campaigns on Migration: Diaspora Mapping Report*. ICMPD: Vienna.
3. *In four countries: Austria, Bulgaria, Greece, and Italy*.
4. Hahn-Schaur, Katharina (2021). *Awareness raising and information campaigns on the risks of irregular migration in Pakistan: Background Report*. Vienna: ICMPD; Ali Nobil Ahmad, *The Romantic Appeal of Illegal Migration: Gender, Masculinity and Human Smuggling from Pakistan*, ed. Leo Lucassen Marlou Schrover Joanne van der Leun and Chris Quispel, Migration (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008).

and perceptions of migrant friends and family often foster migration aspirations among some of those who are in the community of origin. For instance, migrants may appear to have expensive material possessions, clothing, lifestyle, and they may share stories of their experiences abroad that portray a drastic improvement from their living standard before migrating.<sup>5</sup> The greater the social and economic disparity between the migrants and the non-migrants, the higher is the chance for more people to be attracted by the potential gains of migration, and consider attempting themselves.<sup>6</sup>

As a next step in the decision-making process, aspiring migrants then engage in collecting information about **the processes of migration and life after arrival at the destination country**. At this stage as well, friends and family abroad, particularly those who are in the desired country of destination, play a key role. This is especially true for those intending to migrate to destinations with limited legal migration options, or where they are unaware of regular pathways. Where potential migrants' intention may be to attempt irregular migration, they may prefer to seek help and get information from informal contacts, especially given distrust of formal or institutionalised sources which they often perceive as aimed to discourage irregular migration.

Besides information, **social networks abroad also provide tangible support to potential migrants** as they prepare for the journey.<sup>7</sup> This may entail financial support to cover the costs of the journey, but also non-financial support such as introduction to networks, arrangement of documents, referring an agent (or smuggler), etc. This kind of support is often extended during transit as well, including by social connections made on the journey. On arrival, social networks in the country of destination support migrants to find accommodation, connect to an employer, find a job, familiarise themselves to the new location, etc., thereby lowering the financial, social and emotional costs for newly arrived migrants.

In all these stages, the underlying factor that determines the reliance of aspiring, potential, and newly-arrived migrants on social networks abroad is the credibility of these sources. **Credibility** is determined by the **perceived expertise, trustworthiness and goodwill** that these friends and family abroad offer.<sup>8</sup> For instance, due to their own migration experience, friends and family abroad are considered to be knowledgeable about the process of migration, which potential migrants value. Expertise alone is not a decisive matter though. The aspiring or potential migrant should also trust the friend or family who is abroad in terms of the accuracy of the information, as well as their motivation for providing the information. This is also related to the third point – that friends and family in the diaspora also are assumed to have an intrinsic goodwill or intention to help and support the potential migrant.<sup>9</sup> The combination of these factors make certain friends and family abroad ideal contacts for migrants as they contribute to a potential migration decision (particularly in the case of irregular migration). This also implies that potential migrants trust the information received from people in the diaspora that they already know and have a degree of trust over, especially those who may have undergone through a journey similar to the one they are opting for.

### How effective is engaging diaspora members in migration information campaigns?

Drawing on various studies that establish the high reliance of potential irregular migrants on support from their social networks abroad, there is an increasing trend among donors and implementers of migration information campaigns to engage diaspora members as messengers or key influencers in their campaigns to show the risks of irregular migration.<sup>10</sup> The intention is to engage diaspora members as proxies for friends and family of potential migrants with the assumption that potential migrants will place higher trust in messages received from diaspora members and thereby be more influenced by them.

5. Yordanos Seifu Estifanos, *Social Networks, Dreams and Risks: Ethiopian Irregular Migrants into South Africa* (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa and Social Development Policy Division, 2017).

6. *Ibid.*

7. Qaisrani, Ayesha, Hahn-Schaur, Katharina and Hendow, Maegan (2021). *Irregular migration dynamics from Pakistan and the role of information campaigns*. PARIM Final Report. ICMPD: Vienna; IOM Pakistan: *Survey on drivers of migration. Regional Evidence for Migration Policy and Analysis*. 2020;

8. James C McCroskey and Jason J. Teven, "Goodwill: A Reexamination of the Construct and Its Measurement," *Communication Monographs* 66, no. 1 (1999): 90–103; Sandra Morgenstern, "Strong & Longlasting Attitude and Intention Change? Causal Field Evidence on Sender Credibility," 2022, submitted for review.

9. Sandra Morgenstern, "Strong & Longlasting Attitude and Intention Change? Causal Field Evidence on Sender Credibility," 2022, submitted for review

10. European Commission, "Study on Best Practices in Irregular Migration Awareness Campaign: Interim Report Phase II," 2021

However, there are four important aspects to consider when engaging diaspora members as information providers to potential irregular migrants:

- i. **Who in the diaspora is engaged:** The assumption that potential irregular migrants would be influenced by information received from any co-ethnic or co-national in the diaspora overlooks the importance of credibility. Social connections and interpersonal networks are much deeper than receiving information from strangers in the diaspora who merely share a common country of origin; thus messaging from them is less likely to have a meaningful impact. Moreover, even in cases where diaspora members are personally known to potential (irregular) migrants, friends and family who share similar socioeconomic and demographic profiles (at least at the time of migrating) are more likely to influence migration decision-making. PARIM research shows that potential irregular migrants tend to rely more on returnees in their communities for migration-related information than on friends and family abroad.
- ii. **The channel of communication used by diaspora member:** The choice of channel of communication in relation to the “credible messenger” is important. Potential irregular migrants tend to reach out to friends and family abroad through trusted means of communication. Interactions between them often take place through personal and one-on-one channels as opposed to channels popularly used by information campaigns such as one-way communication media (e.g. video recording of testimonials), or a more public interaction (e.g. a seminar or a workshop).
- iii. **The message being communicated by diaspora member:** Another aspect that is often overlooked in campaign design is that potential irregular migrants are likely to disregard unsolicited information received from sources with institutional affiliations if the intention is to discourage migration. Irregular migrants distrust messaging focused solely on risks

of irregular migration (negative messaging) as propaganda, thus they may similarly distrust the messenger of this message, including from members of the diaspora. Moreover, potential irregular migrants may also disregard such messaging as a selfish act of the diaspora members to stop others from migrating when they themselves are abroad. No matter how difficult the process may be, the fact that the migrant “made it” abroad makes the journey worth it for potential migrants.

- iv. **The timing of the diaspora intervention:** As with other interventions of an information campaign, the timing of the information delivered by a particular diaspora member makes a difference. If the potential irregular migrant has already made the decision to migrate, discouraging information (negative messaging) received through a member of the diaspora personally unknown to the potential migrant may have limited impact, if any.

Besides these four points of consideration, there is another **underlying assumption** made by campaign designers that **diaspora members are also willing to discourage potential irregular migrants** by sharing their own stories of struggle. Existing research highlights that diaspora members, or irregular migrants in countries of destination, may actually be hesitant to share details of troubles and difficulties that they have experienced, especially if they have projected a more positive or rosy outlook of their life abroad to community members in the country of origin.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, the point of argument on the effectiveness of diaspora engagement in migration information campaigns also depends on **the objectives of the campaign and the key performance indicators it values**. For instance, if the aim is to influence information levels through the diaspora interventions, then it may be successful in making potential migrants aware of certain risks. However, the impact on actual migration behavior is difficult to track and no conclusive evidence exists determining the effectiveness of involving diaspora members in information campaigns in terms of actual migration.<sup>12</sup>

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11. Ali Nobil Ahmad, *The Romantic Appeal of Illegal Migration: Gender, Masculinity and Human Smuggling from Pakistan*, ed. Leo Lucassen Marlou Schrover Joanne van der Leun and Chris Quispel, Migration (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008).

12. Jasper Tjaden, “Assessing the Impact of Awareness-Raising Campaigns on Potential Migrants – What We Have Learned so Far,” *Migration in West and North Africa and across the Mediterranean*, no. December (2020): 426–34.

## Conclusion

The PARIM research thus recommends that **diaspora engagement in migration information campaigns should be conducted with caution**. The lack of comprehensive evaluation mechanisms of completed and ongoing migration information campaigns makes it complicated to even gauge the effectiveness of information campaigns. Measuring the effectiveness of diaspora engagement in information campaigns adds another layer of complication that is not captured in existing evaluation strategies yet. Nevertheless, through existing reports on the topic, and PARIM's own research contextualised for the case of Pakistan, we conclude that **diaspora members in general may have limited impact on migration decision-making if engaged in information campaigns**. Therefore, when designing migration information campaigns, the following aspects should be kept in mind, especially if the campaign aims to engage diaspora members:

- The campaign should be designed with realistic expectations of **the degree to which potential irregular migrants would trust the diaspora members** that the campaign has selected. If the diaspora members in the campaign are strangers to the target population, the degree of impact is lower. This is especially true for those individuals who already have their own personal connections abroad, and would likely corroborate the information received through the campaign with those they seek their migration support from.
- Related to the above point is the **nature of the message** that diaspora members share as part of the campaign. Potential irregular migrants are more likely to disregard purely negative messaging about migration received through strangers, even if they are diaspora members living in their desired countries of destination. Therefore, if diaspora members are involved, the messages they share should be balanced in terms of the hardships and risks, as well as the positive side, including opportunities of regular migration to reach the particular destination.
- Engaging diaspora members in information campaigns would be **more effective if potential**

**irregular migrants have not concretely finalised their plans**. Those potential migrants with firmer decisions to migrate would prefer to seek information that supports migration rather than that discourages it.

- **For negative messaging** – i.e. information that may discourage potential migrants from adopting an irregular pathway – individuals in the diaspora may still be engaged, under specific conditions. PARIM research highlights the potential of engaging with individual vloggers or social media celebrities – especially those who themselves are diaspora members and already create content on topics of relevance. Those with more followers would allow greater outreach for a campaign, and it would also avoid the impression of “institutionalised” campaign, which is more likely to be distrusted by target population.
- **For positive messaging**, and content that focuses on legal migration opportunities and support services such as job opportunities or skill development programmes, migrant associations in countries of destination may be useful to engage with. Campaigns would benefit from engaging with well-connected migrant associations who already have some experience in counselling and supporting potential migrants to opt for legal routes (e.g. some migrant associations interviewed under PARIM were involved in awareness campaigns in Pakistani universities to encourage students to adopt legal paths to Europe).<sup>13</sup>
- If diaspora members are engaged, it should be ensured that **the profile of diaspora members** narrating their experiences should be similar to the target population in terms of age, education, place of origin etc.

To conclude, the PARIM research finds that while friends and family abroad are important source of migration-related information, engaging diaspora members that are unknown to potential irregular migrants may have limited impact. Campaigns should **utilise a range of different mechanisms to convey the message** to potential irregular migrants, and diaspora engagement should be one of the mechanisms, rather than the only mode used.

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13. Qaisrani, Ayesha and Jokic, Jelena. (2021). *Engaging Diasporas in Information Campaigns on Migration: Diaspora Mapping Report*. ICMPD: Vienna.

## Related ICMPD Publications

Qaisrani, Ayesha and Jokic, Jelena. (2021). Engaging Diasporas in Information Campaigns on Migration: Diaspora Mapping Report. ICMPD: Vienna.

Qaisrani, Ayesha, Hahn-Schaur, Katharina and Hendow, Maegan (2021). Irregular migration dynamics from Pakistan and the role of information campaigns. PARIM Final Report. ICMPD: Vienna.

Hahn-Schaur, Katharina (2021): Leveraging migration information campaigns for state and migrant security. Lessons learned and open questions. Vienna. ICMPD.

Hahn-Schaur, Katharina (2021). Awareness raising and information campaigns on the risks of irregular migration in Pakistan: Background Report. Vienna: ICMPD.

*All research findings from the PARIM project are available at:  
<https://www.budapestprocess.org/our-work/parim>*

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