

The role of information campaigns in addressing irregular migration

Information plays a critical role in the migration process, influencing both migration decisions and migration management approaches as well as the facilitation of migration movements. Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in particular have transformed the way that migrants can potentially access information, enabling them to easily contact social networks across the globe. In the context of irregular migration, digital tools and social media have changed how migrant smugglers operate – leading to a rise in ‘digital smuggling’. Social media has become key to advertising smuggling services and circulating (mis)information about routes and risks, while helping smugglers to shield their activities from authorities. It enables aspiring migrants to connect with smugglers, although users are often unable to determine the authenticity of online posts, the information provided, or the trustworthiness of the persons behind them. Furthermore, monitoring and responding to smuggling activities has become increasingly challenging due to its proliferation and encryption online. At the same time, social media can play an important role in terms of increasing migrants’ relative power vis-à-vis smugglers and thus reducing opportunities for exploitation and deception.

With irregular migration high on the EU agenda, governments have increasingly recognized the potential of intervening before and while migrants embark on an irregular journey and providing them with information through awareness-raising activities. Indeed, information campaigns constitute one of the backbones of the [renewed EU action plan against migrant smuggling \(2021-2025\)](#). Seen as an element of ‘external’ migration management, they represent a significant field of investment and action: Individual EU Member States and the European Commission commissioned over [100 migration information campaigns](#) in countries of origin and transit during the 2014-2019 period alone.

A key factor determining the success of information campaigns is who the message is coming from. While social media is among the most common communication tools and channels utilised, largely on account of the low cost and seemingly wide engagement, [ICMPD research findings](#) warn against overestimating the efficacy of online-based interventions. Research shows that information available on the internet remains less relevant in prospective migrants’ decision-making than personal social ties.

What are information campaigns?

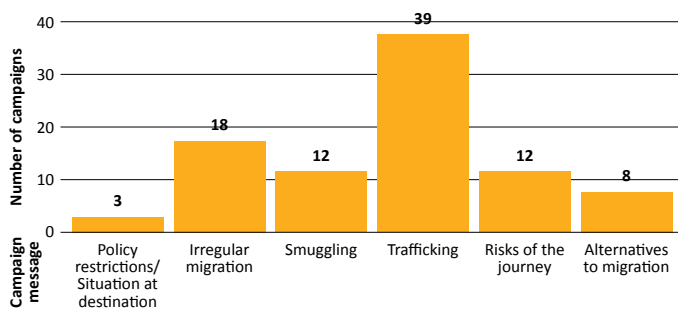
Information campaigns typically aim to influence migration decisions, counter disinformation, and discourage potential migrants from embarking on an irregular migration journey. Less often, these campaigns share information about opportunities for legal migration or alternatives to migration (such as employment opportunities). Campaigns can take many forms, ranging from basic tools such as leaflets, advertisements in newspapers, and TV commercials to hotline services and community events. They also use various, often multiple channels, including mass media, social media, and word-of-mouth engagement. Increasingly sophisticated technological solutions, developed in cooperation with the private sector, are used in campaigns, with the aim of crafting targeted messages and thus magnifying their impact. Some utilise traditional and social media channels to reach a large group while also providing personalised counselling for target/priority groups.

Migration decisions, including the selection of smugglers, are still often based on face-to-face interactions, relations of trust, and personal recommendations from family, friends, or community members. Least trusted sources are destination governments and other official sources, reflecting low levels of trust in public institutions in many countries of origin. Indeed, information campaigns managed by destination countries’ governments are often identified by migrants as part of broader deterrence strategies, and are thus seen as providing biased information. Efforts to engage [diaspora members](#) may also run into obstacles, as these individuals may provide biased information and may be seen by prospective migrants as strangers. As a result, some information campaigns have sought legitimacy by involving local community representatives.

Effective messaging remains another key challenge. While most campaigns have elected to carry ‘[negative](#)’ messages reflecting the manifold dangers of irregular migration, studies have shown that these often reflect misunderstandings of migrants’ perceptions of risk (for instance, risk tolerance for migrant and non-migrant populations may differ). Additionally, potential irregular migrants are more likely to disregard purely negative messaging about migration, especially when con-

veyed through strangers. A better understanding of migrants' assessment of risk, as well as of migrant decision-making more broadly, is essential to developing effective messaging.

Figure 1: Topics of information campaign messages vary



Source: Tjaden et al., Evaluating the impact of information campaigns in the field of migration, IOM, 2018.

The use of information campaigns raises important humanitarian considerations, especially when they focus exclusively on deterrence. [Migrant Resource Centres](#), currently operated by ICMPD in five Silk Routes countries, are among the minority of awareness-raising initiatives that combine information about the risks of irregular migration with information on accessing legal pathways as alternatives. Despite this effort, a lack of sufficient legal pathways to Europe, whether for work, family reunification, or refugee resettlement, means that many prospective migrants, including displaced persons – even when they do receive information about these pathways – do not see them as a viable option.

Despite the flurry of activity around information campaigns, there is not yet sufficient evidence on their relative impact compared to other interventions aimed at irregular migration.

For example, an evaluation of an IOM [peer-to-peer campaign in Senegal](#) found that it resulted in a decrease in the intention to migrate irregularly by 20% (at least in the short term). Whether this number seems small or large may depend on the stakeholder in question and the definition of campaign success. Furthermore, the diverse effects of such campaigns beyond solely migration decisions (such as further information-seeking behaviour) have not been sufficiently considered. Finally, the limited number of publicly available evaluation reports restricts understanding of which campaigns are most effective and why – and, ultimately, assessments as to what role they should play in Europe's 'toolbox'. Information campaigns can be a piece of the puzzle in efforts to better manage migration, but several challenges remain in implementing them well.

Policy considerations:

→ Information campaigns can be more effective when tailored to a narrowly defined group of migrants. Identifying

and analysing particular subgroups and relevant communication channels is essential to ensure that messages resonate with potential migrants. Campaigns should be based on an understanding of prospective migrant decision-making and risk perception, using the right balance of emotional and informational content. Campaigns would be wise to combine any use of social media, meant to ensure high outreach, with other channels with a higher potential to achieve behavioural change.

- Trusted messengers are key to any successful information campaign, influencing perceptions of risk and intentions to migrate irregularly and potentially inducing further information-seeking behaviour. Local communities, including returnees, could be tapped to provide a more complete picture of smugglers and the possible risks of irregular journeys. Information campaigns should be cautious about relying on diaspora members as messengers. There is a dearth of evidence on the impact (positive or negative) of their involvement, meaning that they should be seen as one messenger but not the only one.
- It is important to consider potential tensions within information campaigns, namely between migration management objectives (reducing irregular migration) and humanitarian objectives (addressing urgent needs). This might be addressed by also providing information about legal migration pathways and alternatives to migration as well as by implementing actions to improve livelihood opportunities in origin countries.
- It is imperative to increase investment in evaluating which information campaigns are effective. Rigorous and publicly available evaluations, including longitudinal studies, can help policy stakeholders to determine whether messaging does in fact lead to behaviour change. Internal evaluations and the documentation of lessons learned are also useful for informing future campaigns.

Related ICMPD publications:

[Influencing from a distance: Are diaspora members effective as “credible messengers” in migration information campaigns?](#) | 2022

[Mind the gap: Can information campaigns address migrant information needs?](#) | 2022

[Leveraging migration information campaigns for state and migrant security: Lessons learned and open questions](#) | 2021

[Irregular migration dynamics from Pakistan and the role of information campaigns](#) | 2021