Can information campaigns address migrant information needs?

PARIM
RAISING AWARENESS
on migration in Pakistan
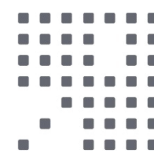
Irregular migration poses numerous risks to migrants during the journey and on arrival. It leads to adverse migration outcomes compared to regular migration, as migrants living with irregular status are more prone to exploitation. However, migrants often lack information about this, contributing to the prevalence of irregular migration. In certain regions of Pakistan, irregular migration has become normalised and smugglers can exploit a lack of government capacity to dispel disinformation about migration options in order to increase their business. Information campaigns countering misinformation and (deliberate) disinformation about irregular migration can be beneficial for migrants by supporting them in their decision-making, but they are often not sufficiently well designed to be effective. Campaigns need to couple trusted messengers, communication channels and target groups with comprehensive content that is based on the local context and is emotionally engaging in order to change people's minds about leaving through irregular channels.

Introduction

Irregular migration poses numerous risks to migrants during the journey and leads to adverse migration outcomes compared to regular migration, as migrants living with irregular status are more prone to exploitation and are less able to fully participate in the destination country society. However, potential migrants often **lack awareness** about the **difference** between regular and irregular migration, and the **consequences** of irregular migration, while also not being aware of **opportunities** for regular migration that do exist. This dynamic contributes to the prevalence of irregular migration – in Pakistan as elsewhere in the world. Government institutions are often not sufficiently equipped to address these information gaps.

Well-designed Information campaigns providing information about the risks and consequences of irregular migration, living with irregular migration status, and feasible regular migration opportunities, can be part of the solution to address the specific problem of misinformation around irregular migration. Attempts of using information campaigns for bridging information gaps have indeed proliferated over the past decades. Individual EU Members States and the European Commission have commissioned over 100 migration information campaigns in countries of origin and transit during the period 2014-2019 alone.[1]

Although such campaigns have clear potential to be an important tool, they often **suffer from being poorly designed** and implemented. Building on research conducted for ICMPD's Migrant Resource Centres (MRCs) and PARIM migration information campaign in Pakistan[2], this brief outlines the problem of misinformation and (deliberate) disinformation regarding irregular migration and summarises the main lessons learned for migration information campaigns, going forward.

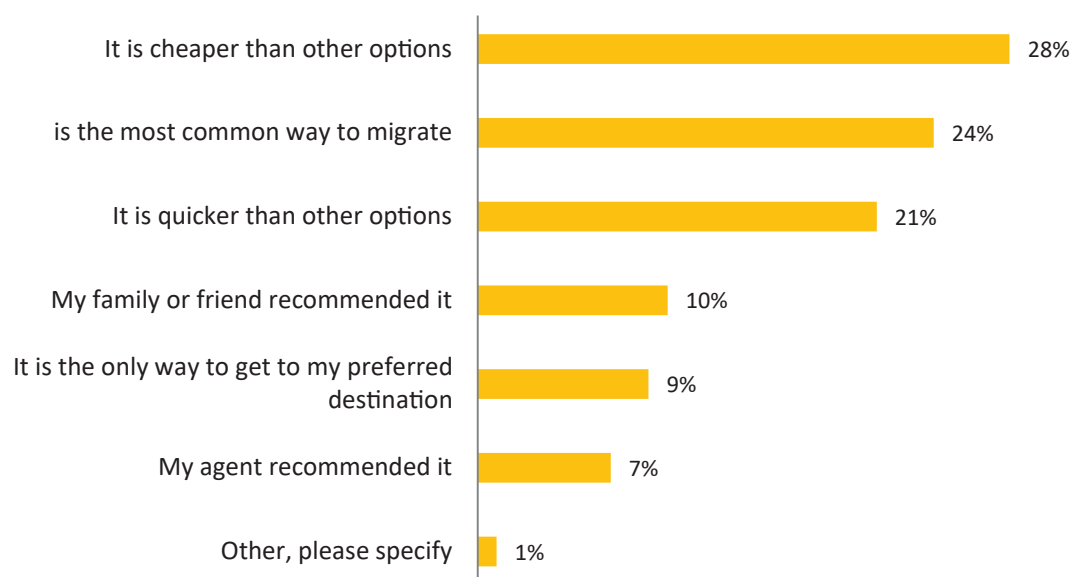## How information gaps influence irregular migration from Pakistan?

In certain regions and communities of Pakistan, there is **widespread misinformation** as irregular migration has become normalised, in some cases almost the standard way of going abroad. Migrants often lack awareness about different **migration options** potentially accessible to them, and the difference between regular and irregular migration. This is also because there is a shortage of government-licensed migration recruiting agents for providing credible information, particularly in rural areas. This gap creates an opportunity for local migrant smugglers who tend to operate in a manner similar to official agents (and often pretend to be official agents), making it difficult for potential

migrants to differentiate between them. They also lure young aspiring migrants by showing them mansions and properties of people who have migrated before, "selling dreams" of a prosperous future to them if they use their services to migrate.

Migration from Pakistan is mainly driven by **economic aspirations** such as a desire for wealth (79%), steady income (60%), and status (58%), as the PARIM study confirms.[3] These aspirations interact with individual level characteristics (such as age, gender, education, economic background, marital status, inherent personality characteristics etc.), intermediary factors (such as cost of migration, and social networks, etc.), and structural drivers (such as low standard of living, poor business and development opportunities, financial problems and debts etc.) to influence migration decision-making. In fact, in certain districts and communities of Pakistan (such as those targeted by PARIM project), there is a culture of irregular migration towards Europe and North America. Migration to Europe is also driven by such economic motives, and in addition by better living and working conditions (compared for instance to the Gulf, another major migration region for Pakistanis), better citizenship prospects, and long-standing social networks, i.e. previous migrants that help others to join them. **Legal** migration options to Europe – especially for low-skilled and less-educated men – are quite **limited**. Instead, migrants turn to irregular migration, for good reason perceived as cheaper, quicker and "the only way" (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Main motives behind irregular migration

It is cheaper than other options	28%
is the most common way to migrate	24%
It is quicker than other options	21%
My family or friend recommended it	10%
It is the only way to get to my preferred destination	9%
My agent recommended it	7%
Other, please specify	1%

Source: Qaisrani, Hahn-Schaur and Hendow (2021)

1. *According to a 2019 mapping by the EMN Working Group on information and awareness raising. Presentation of EMN INFO Working Group Co-Chair, Annual EMN Conference Vienna 2019.*
2. *Since 2016, ICMPD´s Migrant Resource Centres (MRCs) provide potential migrants in Pakistan with information and counselling. The EU-funded PARIM information campaign builds on this work and seeks to design an information campaign aimed at providing awareness to potential irregular migrants in six irregular migration-prone districts of Pakistan about the risks and consequences of irregular migration, the realities of life in Europe for irregular migrants, and safe and legal channels for migration. To guide the design of the campaign, multiple strands of research were conducted to understand the effectiveness of migration information campaigns, to identify the target audience, their information gaps and needs, credible messengers, and pertinent channels of communication for migration-related information.*
3. *The percentages are based on a sample of 1200 potential migrants in six districts of Punjab as per the PARIM study.*

Smugglers thus benefit from a lack of government capacity to provide sufficient information on and expand legal options to emigrate. Some smugglers may even **spread deliberate disinformation** in order to protect their reputation of providing a reliable, successful and safe service by obscuring the more negative risks and consequences of irregular migration. Potential irregular migrants are not naïve about irregular migration, either. Identifying a "good" agent and not becoming a victim of fraud or exploitation is among the **top concerns** of PARIM respondents. "Vetting" processes for agents that potential migrants and their families turn to include: asking for word-of-mouth references among extended family and friends, asking the smuggler to provide references, using different models of payment guarantees (e.g. upon proof of safe arrival) and collecting incriminating information as a bargaining chip.[4] Of course, such measures have their limits against smugglers who deliberately mislead, seek to defraud potential migrants or turn to trafficking vulnerable (or out-of-funds) migrants. Those with a smaller network of personal connections and lack of family support are more **at risk to be exploited**, and the PARIM research shows that it is usually those from lower income groups that also have fewer social networks to draw on for assistance. Unfortunately, **family and friends** abroad – the most trusted information and support for most migrants – can also play a problematic role in the misinformation dynamics of irregular migration: they may wish to **obscure their poor life conditions** as irregular migrants in order to "save face", and thus contribute to misinformation.[5]

How can information campaigns better address information gaps around irregular migration?

These dynamics demonstrate a **clear need for better information** about migration options for potential migrants. Many stakeholders in Pakistan interviewed

for PARIM research, including CSOs working with migrants, see an important role for information campaigns in order to reduce the risks for migrants. Such migration information campaigns have indeed become an increasingly widespread tool of migration management in the past decades.

However, conducting such campaigns in an effective manner is far from straightforward. Potential migrants with extraverted, highly confident, **risk-seeking** characters are **most likely to migrate irregularly,** but are simultaneously **least likely to be influenced** by campaign messages.[6] In the PARIM survey, potential irregular migrants self-reported a fairly low general awareness of migration-related risks, yet the same respondents still had a high intention to migrate irregularly. Studies show that migrants can **dismiss information provided by a campaign,** if they perceive that the underlying intention is to prevent them from migrating altogether[7] or if they see the information as not relevant for them, because they consider the foreseen consequences due to individual bad luck or poor decision-making[8]. To a certain demographic, **risk might even seem appealing** – research shows that some young men think of irregular migration as something adventurous and appealing precisely because of the (envisioned) danger.[9] This means that over-emphasising the hardship of the migration process may trigger unforeseen effects. The PARIM study also shows that migrants may opt for irregular pathways despite knowing the risks as the outcome of a successful migration may apparently seem worth the risk.

Such dynamics are often insufficiently taken into account in campaign design, and can therefore **render campaigns ineffective**. Simply aiming to "show the risks of the journey" or the "poor realities of life in Europe" in one way or another, often the professed

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4. Paolo Campana and Loraine Gelsthorpe, "Choosing a Smuggler: Decision-Making Amongst Migrants Smuggled to Europe," European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research, 2020, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10610-020-09459-y; Ilse Van Liempt and Judith Zijlstra, "Smart(Phone) Travelling: Understanding the Use and Impact of Mobile Technology on Irregular Migration Journeys," International Journal of Migration and Border Studies 3, no. 2–3 (2017): 1, https://doi.org/10.1504/ijmbs.2017.10001444.

5. Hagen-Zanker et al., "Migration from the Margins: Mobility, Vulnerability and Inevitability in Mid-Western Nepal and North-Western Pakistan Report 5."

6. Morgenstern, "Political Information & Migration."

7. Hernández-Carretero and Carling, "Beyond 'Kamikaze Migrants': Risk Taking in West African Boat Migration to Europe."

8. Jacob Townsend and Chrystal Ooman, Before the Boat: Understanding the Migrant Journey - EU Asylum towards 2020 (Migration Policy Institute, 2015).

9. Ahmad, "The Romantic Appeal of Illegal Migration: Gender, Masculinity and Human Smuggling from Pakistan," 2008.

goals of campaigns, is not sufficient if there is a lack of nuance informing the message design. For instance, one study showed that West African migrants overestimate death tolls in the Mediterranean. If they are then shown a message with actual death tolls, they might find the unexpectedly low numbers encouraging.[10] Campaigns thus often suffer because they **lack understanding of local drivers and motives** (and factors influencing them) of irregular migration, migrants' prior existing knowledge that informs their decision-making, and their risk calculations.

Although these implementation problems are well established, there is still frustratingly little research, and therefore **little solid evidence**, on what can be done to make campaigns work. On the one hand, this is because many aspects of campaign effectiveness will depend on local context and individual factors. On the other hand, there are also very few rigorous studies substantiating the methods of migration information campaigns, and very few evaluations of actual campaigns are made publicly available.[11] Nevertheless, recent years have seen renewed efforts to change this and new studies and evaluations have been published. Building on these and our own PARIM research, we have drawn the following lessons.

Firstly, the campaign **messengers** – those delivering the information – need to have high credibility among potential migrants. **Credibility** is defined by the messengers' perceived expertise (whether they can provide information on the specific topic), trustworthiness (appropriate motivation), and goodwill (willing to give accurate information).[12] Credibility may seem an obvious factor, but is far from easy to achieve. Most

campaigns are conducted or funded by government institutions and these often inherently suffer from a lack of credibility (potential irregular migrants may perceive them as "biased propaganda" for deterring migration to certain destinations) Friends and family are the most trusted resources of most migrants, but not everyone's friend or family member can be enlisted in a campaign action (at least not on a mass scale – they are certainly well placed as a secondary target group of campaigns). Migrants already abroad may have credibility in general, but if they are enlisted for a message deterring others, their trustworthiness and goodwill may be cast in doubt (perhaps they wish to have the good life abroad only for themselves?). The PARIM survey shows that **returnees** are actually among the most trusted sources of migration-related information, confirming other campaigns that have also demonstrated that returnees can be productively engaged in a campaign[13] – provided they are not perceived as having "failed at" migration.

Secondly, choosing the right **channel** is important and often a mix of channels will lead to optimal outcomes. Channels that establish **1:1 interactions,** through online, phone or face-to-face counselling, and smaller, **interactive formats** with an entertainment element, such as film screenings, have been the most effective in changing people's intentions.

Among social media, Facebook is the most popular in Pakistan, as in many other countries. Traditional mass media or largescale events are less effective in changing intentions, but can have their place in signposting people towards more personal interactions and in

10. Bah, Tijan L., and Catia Batista. "Why Do People Migrate Irregularly? Evidence from a Lab-in-the-Field Experiment in West Africa." Working Paper of the Helen Kellogg Institute for International Studies 2020, no. 435 (2020): 1–40.

11. Tjaden, Jasper, Sandra Morgenstern, and Frank Laczko. "Evaluating the Impact of Information Campaigns in the Field of Migration: A Systematic Review of the Evidence, and Practical Guidance." Central Mediterranean Route Thematic Report Series. Geneva, 2018.

12. 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.

13. Dunsch, Felipe Alexander, Jasper Tjaden, and William Quiviger. "Migrants as Messengers: The Impact of Peer-to-Peer Communication on Potential Migrants in Senegal. Technical Annex."; Tjaden, J. and F. A. Dunsch (2021). "The effect of peer-to-peer risk information on potential migrants – Evidence from a randomized controlled trial in Senegal." World Development, 145 (Sep. 2021), 4.

regions where there is less internet access. (Incidentally-,this is also the approach pursued by ICMPD's Migrant Resource Centres in Pakistan.[14])

Thirdly, campaigns need to segment **target groups** and design different contents, formats and channels depending on who is being addressed. The relevance of a campaign message is determined by individual motivations and prior knowledge, and these will differ depending on age, gender, educational and economic background, etc. requiring campaigns to have sufficient clarity on who precisely they want to reach, in order to be effective.

Finally, message **content** needs to be **emotional** to be effective. The idea of being a "neutral", hands-off provider of accurate information, allowing migrants to make informed choices on their own, can seem appealing to CSOs and other implementers of campaigns. But neutral information will not be listened to, at least not by itself. Invoking relevant emotions is required to reach people's ears: this is true for information on migration as for any other public education campaign. The evidence is still limited, but it appears that messages are most effective if they bring just the right balance of emotional content: **"negative" messaging** triggering fear, anxiety or worry by highlighting risks sparks attention. This can then be followed by **"positive" content,** pointing out legal pathways and job opportunities; and/or neutral information, highlighting alternatives to migration, domestic job or educational opportunities. Reaching the more risk-seeking or over-confident potential migrants remains a challenge even for the best-designed campaigns – and may elude the reach of campaigns altogether.

Conclusions

This final factor – that some potential migrants are simply too over-confident and risk-seeking to be convinced otherwise – seems to explain the high rate of potential migrants (70-90% according to one evaluation study[15]) which can not be influenced by campaigns.

However, public information campaigns, be they in health, nutrition or road safety, generally suffer from the problem that not everyone can be convinced.

In light of campaigns' significant potential in improving migration experiences for many migrants, they should not be dismissed too easily, despite the numerous challenges in implementing them effectively.

The following steps need to be taken in order to improve migration information campaigns in the future:

- The best approach to positively identify the most effective **messages** is to test (alternative versions of) messages and channels of communication in advance and to monitor and evaluate their effects on campaign participants vigorously.

- Campaign donors need to **reserve funds for rigorous evaluation**, assessing long-term impacts on migration behaviour, rather than just awareness levels, and should require that evaluation results be made publicly available.

- More in-depth **research** is needed to better understand the most effective approaches in reaching potential migrants. Recent efforts by donors to compile and **consolidate the knowledge and expertise** required for effective migration information campaigns, such as the good practice report commissioned by the EU, should pave the way for more rigorous studies in this field.

Finally, migration information campaigns are one tool among many to address the challenges of irregular migration. In order to effectively address the **global dynamics** of irregular migration, campaigns should be complemented by measures addressing the demand for irregular, exploitable workers in destination countries as well as building the capacity of origin countries to provide information, expand legal channels and protect migrants abroad.

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14. https://www.mrc.org.pk/en/about/migrant-resource-centre
15. Tjaden, "Assessing the Impact of Awareness- Raising Campaigns on Potential Migrants – What We Have Learned so Far."

Related ICMPD Publications

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.

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

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

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

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