



MIGRATION RISK CAMPAIGNS ARE BASED ON WRONG ASSUMPTIONS

When migrants die in attempts to reach Europe, one response is to launch information campaigns about the risks involved in irregular migration. However, information campaigns seldom stem migration, primarily because they are based on two wrong assumptions: First, that aspiring migrants are ignorant about the risks involved, and, second, that the root causes of exploitative migration rest with human smugglers and traffickers.

The recent deaths of desperate boat refugees in the Mediterranean have once again addressed the unacceptability of border management aimed at preventing people from reaching European shores. An

RECOMMENDATION

- Migration brokers may exploit migrants, but they do not create migrant vulnerability in the first place. To have the desired effect, information campaigns must be based on the right assumptions.
- To increase credibility, campaigns must include information on safe and legal migration options.
- To support the prevention of high risk migration, more knowledge is needed on how migrants perceive and experience 'risk of failure' in the countries of origin.

Few information campaigns lead to the expected outcomes of either reducing migration pressure or preventing migrant death and exploitation.

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important EU measure to prevent migration is awareness campaigns, designed to discourage potential migrants in migrant sending and transit countries from embarking on irregular migration projects. Ideally information campaigns should assist aspiring migrants to make well-informed decisions regarding migration. Based on balanced information, migrants might hold the disadvantages and risks of irregular departures against the advantages of regular migration. However, with few open channels for regular migration, information campaigns focusing only on risks tend to be little credible to an audience considering themselves already disadvantaged and at risk in their countries of origin.



Example of *illegal immigration kills* t-shirt

Risk assumptions

Large sums are spent on warnings against the risks involved in irregular migration, smuggling and trafficking. Information campaigns often connect illegality with dangers of dying at sea. Yet, irregular migration is not in itself the threat to a migrant's life. Information campaigns further assume that migrants

lack information about the realities in Europe and, additionally, that migrants are exploited because of the interference of migration brokers – in particular human smugglers and traffickers - who assist migrants for profit. Informing potential migrants about death rates at sea, the socio-economic implications of irregular migration and the risks involved in relying on human smugglers are consequently seen as an appropriate policy response.

People know that migration can be dangerous

Information campaigns are based on unfounded ideas of why and how people in the global south seek out migration. In fact, most aspiring migrants are aware that successful migration takes hard work, perseverance and the endurance of some degree of hardship, hoped to be of a temporary nature. Although successful migration might be uncertain, chances for improvements in relative well-being is often higher through migration than through locally available avenues. In the absence of satisfactory local jobs and state provisions for social protection, migration often functions as a means to alleviate local risks. European observers witness the risks migrants face during dangerous journeys, but easily overlook the risks involved in staying put in the countries of origin. In comparison to dangerous local jobs or war-like situations, irregular migration does offer the possibility for safety.

Why is information not trusted?

What matters for the choices of aspiring migrants or asylum seekers is not necessarily whether or not they have information, but rather whether they trust the information they are given. Potential migrants may doubt information about the dangers of migration, whether given by state actors or NGOs. In the eyes of those who never have been able to escape local

hardship, irregular migration - even when working at the bottom of the European labour market is the prospect - may fulfil many criteria of success. Migrants send money back home, they may be able to save and invest in small businesses, or at least they got to see Europe. Consequently, many will discard information if they consider that its intention is to prevent them from realizing their aspirations. Why trust negative and discouraging information from people who are visibly much better off than themselves? Information campaigns will remain ineffective if people continue to consider campaigns as mere attempts to prevent them from migrating.

How is information interpreted?

Information campaigns assume that migratory decisions are based on objective information. Research shows that migration decisions rather are based on interpretations of information. These interpretations will depend on the contexts and common migration experiences of each sending country. In some migrant producing countries,

aspiring migrants interpret unsuccessful migration as a sign that the migrant has been lazy, unlucky or badly behaved. Migration failure is the result of personal inadequacies – not of illegality or irregularity. In conflict countries, deportations of assumed bogus refugees have become common and are increasingly blamed on deporting states. In both instances, the failed migration project and involuntary return do not call into question irregular migration as an avenue for successful migration. Information campaigns will remain ineffective if they continue to assume that irregular migration is the main cause of migration failure.

What information is relevant?

Information about the dangers involved in irregular migration is often irrelevant. When local livelihood opportunities are scarce, migration (even if irregular) may be considered among the only means for one's social survival. What aspiring migrants need is therefore information about opportunities for regular work abroad, information about scholarship pro-



Poster from "A campaign designed to drop sales" in South Africa.

grams, and information on how to attain temporary or permanent visas and work permits. When such opportunities do not exist, people may feel obliged to use smuggling services to achieve personal and family objectives nonetheless. In these cases, aspiring migrants need information about so-called safe migration programs, i.e. how they can protect themselves from exploitation and where they can get humanitarian and other assistance along the way.

Aspiring migrants may place greater trust in brokers than in state officials

The discourse of human smuggling and trafficking connects the dangers of migration brokerage with the vulnerability of potential and actual migrants. Within places of departure, aspiring migrants nevertheless often admire and respect brokers because they are able to overcome hurdles to migration. For many, access to mobility would not be possible without their patronage. Many brokers are individuals whose work facilitates the irregular crossing of borders, without necessarily being connected to transnational criminal networks. The degree of professionalism and organization vary considerably. Brokers are able to acquire their position because legal migration methods - involving local consular offices - have become ever more difficult, costly and unlikely to succeed.

The trusted broker

Instead of distinguishing between legal and illegal brokers, aspiring migrants distinguish between brokers on the basis of their success. While some brokers abuse their powers, others have made it their job to facilitate the migration trajectories of those rendered vulnerable by restrictive migration laws and harsh migration controls. In the light of legal constraints on migration, brokers are expected to deliver the means of migration (i.e. the travel documents or the boat passage), but not necessarily the ends. This is not dissimilar from the work of consular offices that charge aspiring migrants for examining the applica-

tion form without necessarily delivering a visa.

Aspiring migrants in countries with high visa rejection rates can feel acutely vulnerable towards consulate officers. Visa application decisions are taken at great speed. Consequently, outcomes are uncertain and volatile. In the case of a visa rejection, consulates (or the commissioned private companies) do not reimburse aspiring migrants for the paid fees. In addition to the official fee, visa applicants have to cover additional travel costs and fees when trying to secure all necessary support documents for the visa application. Citizens in the global South are often under more (or different) bureaucratic pressures than citizens in the global North, as consulate offices may request documents that people have never needed before in their life and work trajectories. Policy makers need to realize that migrants often need the mediation of a broker in the 'document jungle' - regardless of whether their migration trajectories are likely to be classified as 'illegal' or 'legal'.

Whose expectations?

Information campaigns often assume that states are the only authorities within the lives of migrants. However, moral expectations put on migrants by family members are also crucial yardsticks for legitimate behaviour. Thus, migrants are exposed to a plurality of norms and controls. Information campaigns on migration risks can only be effective if they reckon with the moral authority not only of states, but also of migrant families and the broader need for social protection.

This policy brief forms part of a series from the DIIS-based Migration Industry Research Network.

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Cover photo: Polfoto/AG

Photo on page 3: "A campaign designed to drop sales"



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