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How information campaigns (can) influence migration decisions. Findings from several studies in Nigeria.

Information campaigns can reduce irregular migration—but their content, emotions conveyed, and the sender’s credibility are crucial.

Since the so-called migration crisis in 2015, European foreign policy has increasingly used migration information campaigns to raise awareness among potential migrants

about the topic of irregular migration and to reduce their intentions to migrate irregularly. However, this policy is controversial - regarding the type of information conveyed, its effectiveness, and its implementation from an ethical perspective. Can such campaigns make young adults think differently? And if so, how?

What is irregular migration?

In the context of migration, the term “irregular” is often misunderstood. Strictly speaking, an irregular *stay* means being in a country without the legally required documents (e.g., a visa), usually as a result of overstaying the visa allowance or crossing the border without the necessary documents. The studies presented here focus exclusively on irregular *entry*, or more precisely, the planned irregular entry.

To avoid judgement, the author deliberately refrains from referring to irregular migrants as refugees or economic migrants. It is difficult to distinguish whether people emigrate because they flee for their lives or because they seek a better life. From the perspective of migration policy, this distinction only becomes relevant after immigration, when it comes to integration in the destination country. The studies presented here refer to emigration and migration and thus up to the very moment of entry—without the required documents.

What are migration information campaigns?

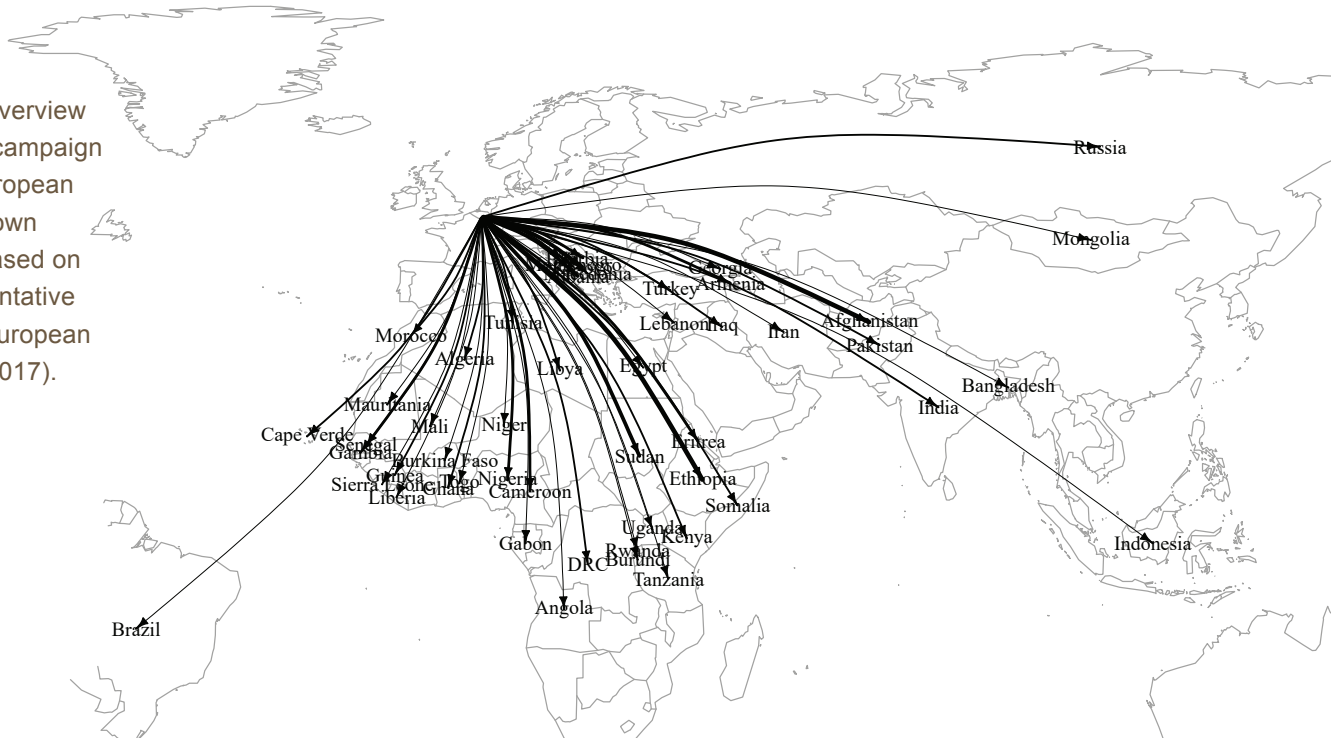
There is a wide range of migration information campaigns, which differ in their approaches and implementing bodies of governments and organisations. From a scientific perspective, this diversity can lead to inconsistent or even (seemingly) contradictory research results when studying the impact of information campaigns. Generalisations at the European level are also difficult as there is no comprehensive overview of the numerous campaigns conducted by European governments. Nor are European publics well informed about this kind of information campaigns. Figure 1 (p. 2) shows a conservative overview of European governments’ migration information campaign activities.

The two objectives that are common to the migration information campaigns considered here are to increase the target persons’ knowledge about the issue and to reduce irregular

migration. To this end, the campaigns convey information about the challenges before, after, and especially during irregular migration, but also—although less frequently—about regular alternatives. The specific content and focus of the campaigns vary greatly.

The most common means of strategic information transmission are workshops. However, television, radio, newspapers, posters, and the internet are also popular channels. While mostly funded by governments, the campaigns are carried out by many different actors: local and international NGOs, international organisations, diaspora organisations, or governments themselves. The targets of these campaigns are generally young adults from ‚safe countries of origin‘: young adults are strongly represented in irregular migration, while the label of safe country of origin means they have little chance of staying.

Figure 1: Conservative overview of information campaign activities of European governments; own visualisation based on a semi-representative listing by the European Commission (2017).



Can information campaigns influence the decision to migrate irregularly?

The panel surveys of the studies presented here show that the target group’s awareness of irregular migration was higher after the information campaign. The effect sizes are relatively small in absolute numbers but statistically significant. However, it is crucial to consider the size of an effect in relation to its treatment, in this case the information campaign. In this respect, the small increase in awareness can be evaluated as remarkable, since it is a one-time external transmission of information targeting relatively stable attitudes. However, it is unclear whether this effect is stable over time. Preliminary results suggest that it is rather temporary.

The before-and-after measures show a decline in intentions of irregular migration among the audience of the information campaign. This is evident in the self-reported data from direct questioning of the target persons and even more from indirect measurement of hypothetical irregular migration behaviour based on different scenarios. As in the case of awareness, the effect size is relatively small in absolute numbers but also statistically significant and relevant compared to the treatment size. In contrast to the observed increase in awareness, the decrease in irregular migration aspirations seems to remain stable at the post-treatment level.

How can information campaigns influence the decision to migrate irregularly?

The 'how' can be examined using two mediating variables that are central to research on information campaigns. Mediating, in this case, means a component associated with the information campaign that can vary according to the campaign and where this variation impacts the outcome. A classic example of mediation in the sense used here is the effect of eating a lemon (which in our case represents migration information campaigns) on health (in our case the migration decision), with the mediating factor being the level of vitamin C, which may vary between lemons and thus change the impact on health. The two mediating factors of the campaign studied here are: (1) the evocation of fear in the audience through the information conveyed, and (2) the perceived credibility of the sender of information.

Study design and samples

We here look at four studies that were conducted in the context of a real migration information campaign funded by a European government and implemented by the NGO Rarduja e.V. in five secondary schools and two universities in two cities in Nigeria with exceptionally high levels of irregular emigration, Abuja and Benin City. The campaign fulfilled the criteria of a 'typical' migration information campaign in many respects: the campaign was implemented in the form of a workshop and primarily provided information about the challenges during and after the irregular journey, and to a lesser extent about regular alternatives. The studies used individual before-and-after measurements as well as field and survey experimental causal designs to assess whether and how the information campaigns had the intended effects.

Figure 2 (p. 4) shows that, in total, almost 5,000 young adults participated in the studies. The 200 and 600 participants in the before-and-after studies at the universities in Abuja and Benin City were on average 23 years old, were mostly male, and reported high intentions to emigrate in general, i.e. not necessarily in the form of irregular migration. In the five secondary schools at the Nigerian epicentre of emigration, Benin City, the 700–900 participants per school were on average 15 years old, were more often female, and had relatively high intentions to migrate, both generally and irregularly. Compared to representative studies such as the Afrobarometer (2017), the study participants had a slightly higher socioeconomic status, but other demographic characteristics were comparable to their age group.

Two mediating factors: fear (1) and credibility (2)

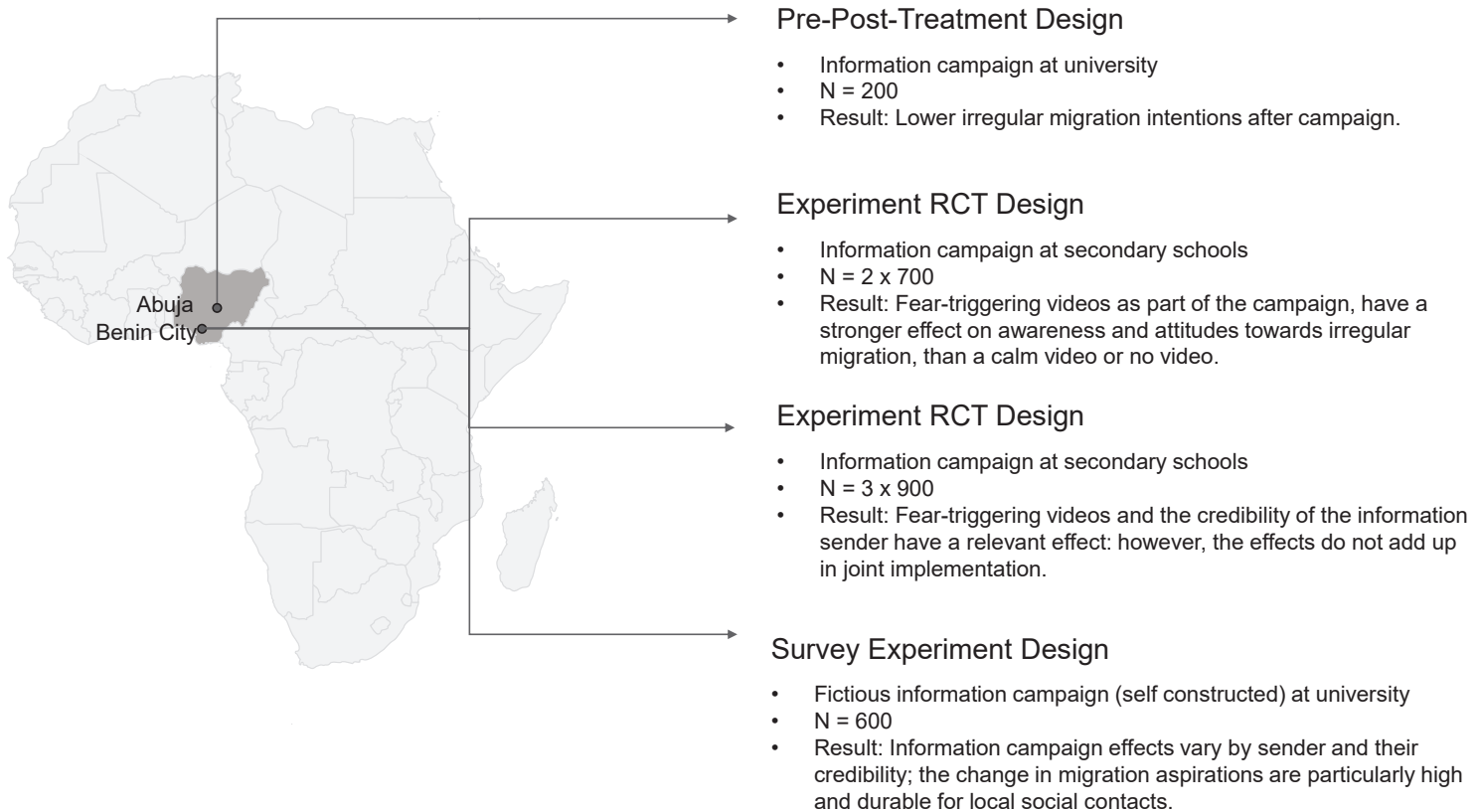
(1) The evocation of emotions in information campaigns, and especially the emotion of fear, is often discussed on ethical grounds. Proponents argue that the 'lesser evil' of inducing fear is justified by a greater good, i.e., the higher effectiveness of information. The experimental studies support this claim by showing that, in the migration information campaign studied here, inducing fear leads to more substantial changes in consciousness and intensity than evoking calmness or no specific emotion. However, it remains to be reconsidered whether this increase in effectiveness legitimises the use of an ethically questionable technique.

(2) The experimental field study shows that the effectiveness of the campaign is higher when the sender of the information is a local NGO or an international government than when the sender is mixed or ambiguous. However, to do justice to the diversity of perceived information campaign senders—which are actually much more numerous and vary between international NGOs, national governments, but also social contacts at home and abroad, often peers or the diaspora—the studies also use an online survey experiment in which a fictitious information campaign is tested with different senders. The results show that the effects differ according to the type of sender and that the perceived credibility is specific to the target group and the topic. An overall evaluation of the strength and durability of change shows that local social contacts are the optimal transmitters of information.

Does credibility beat anxiety?

Moral considerations aside, we might now conclude that the combination of high sender credibility and fear-inducing content is the most effective information campaign strategy. However, one of the studies directly comparing the two mediators by using field experimental independent manipulation of the two treatments within one design shows that the individual effects of the mediators do not add up. In terms of both thematic awareness-raising and reducing intentions to migrate irregularly, using a more credible sender—in this case an international government and a local NGO—shows larger effects than inducing fear. The strategic implementation of both mediating variables seems redundant here because the combined effect is somewhat smaller than the information effect of credibility taken alone. This is also the case when the campaign information is retold by the audience, a behaviour that fulfils the multiplier effect intended by governments.

Figure 2:
The four studies and their results.



Implications & recommendations

In summary, information campaigns have an effect in the expected direction. Although the effects are relatively small in absolute terms, they are significant in relation to the treatment. Information campaigns are lucrative for implementing actors from both an administrative and a financial perspective, especially compared to other migration management strategies such as border controls or integration measures.

However, political actors should transparently communicate the intentions behind their information campaigns to avoid speculation, backlash, and polarisation to the extremes within their society. Besides the 'self-benefit' of social support for political action, this is also essential for ethical reasons. It must be noted that the information campaigns are not carried out in the implementing government's territory but abroad. This is particularly relevant because the area abroad, where the campaigns are implemented, generally has lower global power than Europe and hence requires sensitivity. For information campaigns to have a positive and moral overall value, transmitted information must be truthful and undistorted. A superordinate control institution with a detailed overview of European campaign implementation behaviour would be necessary here. This transparency could prevent individuals or target groups from being subjected to multiple information campaigns, which might lead to unintended backlash. Providing truthful and undistorted information on the challenges of irregular migration is a balancing act. Diversifying information instead of sticking to one sub-topic might prevent biased information transmission. For example, a campaign should inform about the challenges of the journey, legal alternatives, but also rights and safety mechanisms during irregular migration.

The studies described here provide initial causal results but are not representative or sufficiently validated and replicated. Further research evaluating different target groups and different information campaigns (within the ethical framework) over a longer period and a representative macro-level study will be beneficial to reduce research uncertainties.

Conclusion: Migration information campaigns can reduce the intentions to migrate irregularly, but the content, emotions conveyed, and the credibility of the sender are crucial.

References

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Warm thanks to the NGO Rarduja e.V. for the valuable cooperation (<https://rarduja.org/>).

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25521/mzesfokus.2022.241>

Editor:

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