What impact do information initiatives have on migration from Africa to Europe?

European countries have funded several migration information initiatives aimed at dissuading people in Africa from pursuing irregular migration to Europe. But how effective is this approach? Drawing on a new study, **Katerina Glyniadaki, Nora Ratzmann** *and* **Julia Stier** *examine the impact of such initiatives through the eyes of the migrant returnees who implement them.*

Africa is the world's youngest continent, with a [median age of 20 and 60% of its population under 25](). By 2050, the continent's projected population is expected to reach 2.5 billion, a stark increase from today's 1.4 billion. These [demographic trends]() are expected to influence [future outward migration flows](), alongside the potentially dire effects of conflicts and climate change, particularly in the Sahel region.

This prospect has not gone unnoticed by European leaders. A series of incentives and disincentives have been put in place for the purpose of controlling and preventing irregular migration movements from Africa to Europe. At the intergovernmental level, this is done through different channels: the official Euro-African dialogue on migration and development (the [Rabat Process]()); the [EU trust fund]() for addressing the root causes of irregular migration; and the deployment of security and policing on the African coast, such as by [FRONTEX in Senegal]().

Migration information initiatives

At the micro-social level, efforts to control and prevent irregular migration may also take the form of migration information initiatives, including awareness raising and sensitisation campaigns or workshops. The aim of these initiatives is to combat smuggling and irregular migration by informing future potential migrants of the risks and dangers involved, ultimately dissuading them from attempting such a journey. They may be funded and implemented by international organisations, bilateral development agencies or foreign-funded but locally run NGOs.

A prominent example is the ['Migrants as Messengers' programme]() of the International

Organization for Migration (IOM), funded by the Dutch government. Its purpose is to "facilitate safe and informed migration choices among potential migrants". The programme relies on the volunteer voices of local West Africans who have previously attempted to migrate to Europe and have now returned to their homeland. Through a peer-to-peer approach, migrant returnees share "candid and emotional stories" with their compatriots and connect with them at an individual level.

Some of the scholars who examine such campaigns highlight their effectiveness while others have been critical of their impact. Among the latter group, migration information campaigns are seen as concealed efforts to curb movements from Africa to Europe and yet another manifestation of the EU's externalisation of border control and migration management. From this viewpoint, such campaigns seek to depoliticise the debate and overcome existing mistrust towards European initiatives and actors stemming from colonialism.

The experiences of 'migrant messengers'

Against this background, in a recent study we sought to examine the experiences and perspectives of migrant returnees who had taken on the role of 'migrant messengers' as part of internationally funded local migration information initiatives. Between April 2022 and January 2023, we spoke to 15 migrant returnees in different regions (Dakar, Casamance, Tambacounda) of Senegal, which is one of the International Organization for Migration's primary countries of focus.

The 'migrant messengers' in our study were Senegalese men and women in their 20s, 30s and 40s, which is representative of Senegal's current and future potential migrants. There was a considerable variation in their migration experiences, depending on whether they managed to reach European soil or remained stuck in a northern African region for a prolonged period before returning.

In both cases, their motivation for attempting the irregular migration journey had broadly been the 'dream of a better life'. Equally, upon their return, they commonly had to face the stigma of failure and overcome the shame of 'empty handedness'. Through their role as migrant messengers, they managed to break the cultural silence around unsuccessful settlement in Europe, advising "don't be like us, take regular pathways".

In terms of the delivery of this message, however, we observed a contrasting reality. On the one hand, migrant messengers genuinely hoped to save and protect "their brothers and sisters" from the dangers of irregular migration. According to their experiences, their efforts were fruitful in parts, as there were clear instances where the message of dissuasion was successfully conveyed:

"You see that people are crying, so if you see that, you'll know that the message has gone through. […] The children who are there also come to ask you if that's what you've been through, and then they tell you, I'll never do that." (MM2)

Nonetheless, the feedback they received from their compatriots was not always what they expected or desired. While our research is ongoing, our findings so far indicate some level of mistrust towards migrant messengers, thereby calling into question the basic assumption of such 'peer-to-peer' initiatives. Despite being 'one of them', or perhaps because of it, migrant messengers also encountered reactions of suspicion:

"Whenever I talk to them, they tell me no, you were paid by the whites to do sensitisation […] It's not easy because they think that we were paid for it [which we are not]." (MM4)

"When you want to explain that yes, it's hard, others think you're mean. You don't want the others to have the same experiences that you were able to have." (MM11)

In the first quote, the history of European colonisation and the permeating racial and socio-economic inequalities seem to become filters through which the audience interprets the anti-migration message, deeming messengers as 'sell-outs'. Interestingly, it was a similar kind of suspicion that we, as white European researchers, also occasionally encountered during our fieldwork.

In the second quote, the mistrust appears to stem from the incongruence between the messenger's message and migration experience, and potentially their relatively elevated prestige within the community as a spokesperson of an international donor. The latter suggests that migrant messengers' social status and access to resources as volunteers, such as training opportunities and potential subsidies of living costs, make them less representative of the local population, and therefore less relatable and believable.

Lastly, the lack of tangible alternatives to making a living locally also seemed to compromise the appeal of the dissuasion message:

"[the audience members] say that if you come to raise awareness, at least you give us funding or you do something for us. How can you tell us to stay here in Senegal […] We can't get by, we have to leave." (MM5)

Here, it appears that potential migrants are not necessarily unaware of the dangers of irregular migration. In fact, this awareness is also reflected in today's [Senegalese popular culture](). Rather, this quote shows that the messengers' audience may perceive the possibilities for a better future to be greater than the risks an irregular migration journey may entail.

A drop in the ocean

Our research so far allows for a few tentative conclusions to be drawn. First, the complex socio-cultural and racial stratifications into which migration information initiatives are embedded shape how the anti-migration messages are conveyed by migrant returnees and received by the target audience.

Second, while migrant messengers can be seen as representative of the local Senegalese population in terms of race and nationality, the effectiveness of their messaging may be compromised by their implicit associated belonging to the world of international migration management, funded by foreign actors. Third, such initiatives may indeed spread awareness about the dangers of irregular migration, but this information is often already available and part of a calculated risk, given the lack of viable alternatives.

European-funded migration information initiatives in Africa may indeed dissuade some from migrating irregularly. Curbing Africa-to-Europe migration, however, seems overly optimistic. Such efforts are driven from the European side by a preoccupation with population projections, but in a context of persisting global inequalities, these initiatives are likely to remain a drop in the ocean.

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [Migrants as Messengers / International Organization for Migration]()