



PERCEPTIONS

Policy Brief

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European-funded information campaigns contrasting irregular migration from The Gambia

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Executive Summary

According to the IOM, between 2014 and 2018, over 35,000 Gambians arrived in Europe along irregular routes through Niger and Libya, a phenomenon popular in The Gambia as the “back way”. This policy brief takes The Gambia as a focus for several reasons. Chiefly, surrounded on the three sides by Senegal, The Gambia lies at the mouth of the Atlantic Ocean within porous borders making it a strategic location for migrant smugglers and human traffickers. However, despite the risks involved, faced with educational and economic poverty, potential “back way” migrants perceive Europe as providing job opportunities and better welfare and are willing or constrained to take the journey. As a call for action, European-funded information campaigns are being implemented in The Gambia as part of a wider policy measure with the main aim at controlling and managing irregular migration. Therefore, supported by two relevant findings on information campaigns, this brief makes evidence-based recommendations for policymakers in the area of design and dissemination of European-funded information campaigns in The Gambia.

Introduction

The number of Gambians living in the 27 European Union countries (EU-27) is estimated around 65.000, with most of them living in Italy and Spain (Fall, 2020). Since the aftermath of 2015 and the subsequent migration management crisis, European-funded information campaigns are increasingly focused on addressing the “back way” irregular migration from The Gambia. However, information campaigns are highly contested especially in the academic literature. This brief used two main sources to base its recommendations: a survey with Gambian journalists and H2020 PERCEPTIONS qualitative interviews. Firstly, based on the survey with 54 Gambian journalists, the majority considered information campaigns to be ineffective (38.9%) or not very effective (29.6%). Secondly, in line with the Gambian survey, findings of PERCEPTIONS’ research with migrants from West Africa and with practitioners in third countries also contested the impact of information campaigns. Therefore, the complementary nature of the two findings helps us to highlight limitations and make policy recommendations to improve the design and dissemination of European-funded information campaigns in the context of The Gambia.

Key Issues:

- The “back way” phenomenon refers to adventurous journeys to Europe that involve illegal crossings of physical frontiers, the Sahara Desert or/and the Mediterranean Sea through migrant smugglers and human traffickers.

European-funded information campaigns in The Gambia: case study insights

The “back way” from The Gambia and European-funded information campaigns are at a crossroad of politically, socially and economically sensitive matters. The need to investigate perceptions of stakeholders (including journalists, migrants and practitioners from West Africa) alongside the impact of European-funded information campaigns and perceptions about Europe emerges because both play an important role in migrants’ decision making. It is also important for how policymakers make sense of migratory experiences, patterns and stories.

This knowledge could play a crucial role in the designing and dissemination of appropriate information campaigns to efficiently contrast the “back way” phenomenon from The Gambia.

A small country with big irregular migration flows to Europe

Between 2014-2018, 62% of 61,515 Gambians have travelled irregularly outside The Gambia (GBoS, 2020). Potential “back way” migrants perceive continental Europe as a “dream land”. In fact, between 2015 to 2017, Gambians (with significant proportion of minors) were among the top five arrivals by sea (IOM, 2017). Not surprisingly, Italy, Spain and Germany hosts the most (Fall, 2020; IOM, 2017). Although sea arrivals dropped from 2018, in 2021 a total of 430 Gambians illegally entered the EU-27 in 2021 (FRONTEX, 2022). These arrivals dropped mainly due to: (1) the end of Jammeh’s dictatorship in The Gambia, (2) the deportation of Gambians from Niger, Libya and Germany (3) the formation of an anti-migration government in Italy in 2018, (4) the Libyan conflict and gross violence on migrants, and (5) European anti-trafficking measures (Fall, 2020). Despite this, the “back way” remains the most popular migration pattern among Gambians (Jinkang, 2020). As a result, the country has witnessed increased European-funded information campaigns on the risks of the “back way”, legal channels to irregular migration and alternatives to choose to stay in The Gambia.

European-funded information campaigns in The Gambia

These campaigns use multiple strategies including online and offline communication channels and tools, broadcast on TV and radios, short films, songs, training, advertising on billboards, football games etc. to reach their audiences. Their actors (stakeholders) include governments, media, non-governmental and intergovernmental actors, civil society organizations, forced and voluntary returnees, the diaspora, sending migrant communities and local celebrities. These campaigns – in the form of projects – include among many things: funding, technical assistance, negotiation with policymakers and migration stakeholders, to the facilitation of return and reintegration of returnees. As part of their extensive portfolio, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) is a major actor of European-funded information campaigns in The Gambia. An example is the “Migrants as Messengers” campaign, which is being implemented under IOM’s supervision. This campaign involves migrant returnees as key messengers to their communities because they are considered (by IOM) as “trusted sources”.

Key Findings:

- Knowledge about migrants’ perceptions of the EU-27 and European-funded information campaigns is crucial in the adoption of migration and border management policies.

However, according to Gambian journalists, information campaigns apply a particularly Eurocentric approach not least because they are designed, financed and implemented under European leadership and policy goals. Historical evidences of slavery, colonialism, westernization as well as existing structural and educational poverty received little or no focus in the content of information campaigns. Nonetheless, legal channels and information are hardly accessible and the visa threshold of the EU-27 is laid very high for potential migrants. Meanwhile, there is increased need for efficient long-term strategies that will improve the positive conditions of potential “back way” migrants. Nevertheless, the positive stories about remittances (more than 15% of The Gambia’s GDP) make the “back way” more popular.

Information campaigns have a scarce reality of embedded belief systems. For instance, the majority of the Gambian communities believe in the notion of destiny. To put it simply, the belief that it is a matter of destiny – and nothing else – if a person dies in the Sahara Desert or in the Mediterranean Sea, if s/he finishes up in a detention camp or prison, or if s/he becomes successful. This belief therefore innately ignores statistics on humanitarian disasters. On the contrary, traditional authorities and influencers such as Marabouts, future tellers, and traditional healers are believed to ease difficulties for the diaspora through prayers and rituals. Marabouts are visited and consulted more like a therapist in a Western context. Furthermore, focus should be put into understanding the “Ubuntu” philosophy of communitarianism and interdependency in The Gambia as a cultural, socio-economic and psychological driver of the “back way” migration. Understanding “destiny” and “Ubuntu” is important for strategic and context-specific targeting of Gambian audiences.

Applying research insights to The Gambian context

The survey with Gambian journalists in the framework of the PERCEPTIONS project serves as a particular interesting case study and provides crucial context-specific information. Therefore, these findings are summarised into three thematic areas and applied to the Gambian context as follows:

- Historical evidences (e.g slavery, colonialism), westernization and increased structural and educational poverty received little or no focus in the campaigns.
- Traditional authorities and influencers such as imams, Marabouts, future tellers and healers are believed to ease difficulties for the diaspora.

Misinformation about life in Europe: While there is no unanimous agreement among stakeholders about migrants being misinformed about life in Europe, some practitioners consider information campaigns as deterrence campaigns. Nonetheless, policymakers see them as important as they provide useful information. However, both doubt their efficiency. While many migrants see them as useful, many also emphasised that without better alternatives, information campaigns cannot make a difference (Bermejo & Carrasco, 2021, 62-64). In fact, the “back way” irregular migration is most common among Gambian youths; those with secondary school education (13, 478), those without any formal education (10, 147) and very low among those with higher/tertiary education (273) (GBoS, 2018). This suggests that although IOM involves “Migrants as Messengers”, they need to contextualize both individual and collective motivations.

Lack of information about the danger of the journey: Information concerning obstacles and threats both on the journey and upon arrival to Europe (such as loss of life, falling victim to human traffickers, excessive bureaucracy, exploitative working conditions, difficult living conditions, etc.) were well known to migrants before arrival to Europe (Bermejo & Carrasco, 2021, 62-64). This finding is also in line with research conducted in The Gambia. Gambian journalists have manifested to regularly report on the dangers of the “back way” and challenges of integration but the phenomenon remains as a common practice that begets itself. In line with PERCEPTIONS findings, the two findings counter the assumption underlying many information campaigns that potential migrants lack information on risks connected to the “back way” phenomenon.

Information campaigns through social media: While information campaigns widely use their social media platforms and official traditional mass media, PERCEPTIONS research findings reveal that families and friends in Europe are one of the main sources of information for (potential) migrants not least because those are considered trustworthy (Bayerl et al. 2020, 87-95; Bermejo & Carrasco, 2021, 62-64). Accordingly, Gambian journalists considered as amplifiers and multipliers of European-funded information campaigns confirmed to use mostly official mass media and social media to

- Both practitioners and policymakers doubt the efficiency of information campaigns.
- Stakeholders believe that obstacles and threats linked to the journey are well known to migrants before arrival.
- Families and friends in Europe are one of the main sources of information for (potential) migrants.

disseminate information campaigns' messages to their (mostly unschooled) audiences. Despite the risk of misinformation, both studies have shown that migrants prefer informal sources of information about Europe. This means that information campaigns should improve their design and adopt multiple strategies beyond mass media and social media platforms to include one-on-one information provision in order to effectively contrast the “back way”.

Mistrust of formal and institutional channels: Potential migrants, migrants and refugees mistrust and perceive formal and institutional channels as having an agenda against migration (Bermejo & Carrasco, 2021, 64). Practitioners repeated that many potential migrants are suspicious and would not consult information presented by governmental institutions. When applied to The Gambian context, journalists contested that potential migrants do not trust European-funded information campaigns because they consider them as designed towards EU-27 interest. Although IOM stated on its official Gambia-page that potential migrants are “likely to believe information obtained through trusted sources” referring to the “Migrants as Messengers” campaign, paradoxically though, both forced and voluntary returnees are often doubted and many consider them as “those who did not make it!” (Jinkang, 2020). Therefore, despite toolkits developed by the IOM (IOM X C4D 2018) and United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2010), information campaigns' efficiency still remains highly contested.

Recommendations

Based on the insights of these two studies, this section draws context-specific and evidence-based recommendations targeted at better designing and disseminating of European-funded information campaigns aimed at contrasting irregular (“back way”) from The Gambia.

Recommendation 1. Information campaigns need to be relevant, timely and context-specific. When applied to The Gambian context, that means campaigns should be strongly based on, idealized and designed in consideration of proven local knowledge (through resource persons, case studies, researches etc). Topics of campaigns shall include specific information

Key recommendations:

- Information campaigns ought to be relevant, timely and context-specific.

about the destination countries such as details about reception system, educational opportunities, human rights situation (legal), living, socio-economic context (social), labour prospects (social security, labour market mismatches, the grey economy, unemployment), health state and access to healthcare and case studies of exploitation of Gambians in the EU-27. And campaigns need to be locally realized by credible and experienced staff who can reach out to people and engage them in real discussions.

Recommendation 2. There is high need for the development of feedback and evaluation mechanisms that are carried out as important elements of the campaigns' design and dissemination, that can give possibility for modification and monitoring of their success while it is being done. When applied to The Gambia context, all relevant staff members and actors shall internally, frequently evaluate the method, the implemented activities, the communication channels used and the response of the target group. Instead of putting emphasis on the quantitative factors (how many people reached, participated, etc.) the qualitative factors (approaches that are evaluated positively by internal staffs and external participants such as independent initiatives taken by campaign audiences like peer-to-peer conversations, start-ups and entrepreneurships based on the campaign messages) should be given more focus.

Recommendation 3. The duration of campaigns shall be longer, as part of a wider long-term strategy, implemented in different phases, with follow-up activities. Long-term designing of European-funded information campaigns would enable them to acquire sufficient cultural insights and adaptation in order to impact the socio-cultural tissues of the body-mind of their targeted communities in The Gambia. One efficient mechanism with proven historical evidence is through 'persistent tailoring out educational curricula on information about Europe'. Therefore, information campaigns face the formidable challenge of decolonizing the school syllabus as well as the media to provide a more realistic image of Europe to their Gambian audiences.

Recommendation 4. As a communitarian wisdom, the "Ubuntu" philosophy is a key cultural, socio-economic and psychological driver of the

- Information campaigns need to develop feedback and evaluation mechanisms.
- As part of a wider long-term strategy, the duration of campaigns shall be longer.
- Information campaigns should take into consideration the role of

“back way” migration. Target group segmentation should not focus solely on the irregular migrant himself, but rather also **take into consideration the role of the wider society and culture** (“Ubuntu”) in decision-making and to develop messaging according to influential target groups (such as wives, mothers, fathers, imams, marabouts and griots). Furthermore, the “back way” phenomenon, is shown as a collective “survival technique” to find ‘decent job’ opportunities in Europe and help those left behind and migration decisions are significantly made at collective level. This implies that information campaigns should focus on how to understand “Ubuntu” as a migration driver.

the wider society and culture.

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PERCEPTIONS Deliverables

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