

Focus:

Migration in Sub-Saharan Africa, do information campaigns change migratory aspirations and behaviours?



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Migration, particularly irregular migration, between Africa and Europe regularly makes headlines. Reports of sinkings in the Mediterranean frequently appear in the news, at a time when there is growing electoral support for nationalist and anti-immigration parties in Europe. There have been a number of initiatives led by international organisations such as the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), the European Commission and the governments of certain European countries to try to discourage migration to Europe. Such initiatives include information campaigns to raise awareness about the dangers of irregular migration and inform potential migrants about admission regulations in Europe.^{1,2} The European Union (EU) also finances large vocational training programs in West Africa with the express aim of tackling the economic root causes of irregular migration and supporting youth employment and entrepreneurship.³

Although there are a growing number of such initiatives, there is little research rigorously assessing their effectiveness. The review of some sixty studies on information campaigns targeting potential candidates for migration by Tjaden et al. (2018) showed that most of these studies are not published, are based on small samples, and do not use robust statistical techniques making it possible to identify a potential impact. Yet, the general impression about these campaigns – some of which have rather vague objectives – is that they do help bring about a change in potential migrants' knowledge and perceptions of the dangers of migration and modify migratory behaviour.

Two original experiments in Mali and Gambia

To help fill this knowledge gap, several assessments based on experimental programmes have been conducted recently in different sub-

¹ For example, the OIM project Aware Migrants, financed by the Italian Ministry of the Interior, works with African artists and media outlets to produce short documentaries shown in African countries. <http://awaremigrants.org/> [Accessed on 23 March 2023]. HCR developed Telling the Real Story, which aims to share the stories of Ethiopian and Somali migrants who have crossed the Mediterranean. <https://tellingtherealstory.org/en/> [Accessed on 23 March 2023].

² One example is InfoMigrants, a partnership between three European news agencies providing news for migrants during their journey. <https://www.infomigrants.net/fr/> [Accessed on 23 March 2023].

³ In The Gambia, for example, the EU launched the Gambia Youth Empowerment Project (YEP) in 2017 through its Emergency Trust Fund for Africa. <https://www.yep.gm/> [Accessed on 23 March 2023].

Saharan African countries. Tjaden and Dunsch (2021), for example, conducted an experiment with potential candidates for migration living in Dakar, Senegal. It involved showing these individuals a documentary informing them of the risks of migration and conversations between individuals who already had migratory experience and potential candidates for migration. The results suggest that, three months after the programme, participants feel better informed, are more aware of the risks of migration and have lower intention to migrate irregularly. Paradoxically, however, the programme does not seem to have an effect on the factual knowledge about migration (such as cost of migration or type of visa required).

Two other experiments with the participation of DIAL researchers were conducted with rural youth in Mali and The Gambia (Mesplé-Somps & Nilsson, 2023; Bah et al, 2023), the results of which are discussed in this FOCUS.

The first experiment was conducted in Mali from October 2018 to June 2019 and involved 2,000 young men (aged 18 to 35) selected from 200 rural villages in the Kita circle, in the Kayes region. It examined the impact of showing three videos lasting around twenty minutes each to three groups of individuals, selected at random. A fourth group was also formed, which was shown a Malian comedy unrelated to migration, serving as the control group (placebo). The first film featured testimonials from Badlen and Lassana, two individuals who have achieved economic and social success without migrating. The second film showed Bamadi, who talked about the difficulties he encountered when trying to reach Italy by way of Libya, and his ultimate failure. The third film is the story of two successful migrations: for Dialankou, who migrated to Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, and for Badri, to Libya. The skills and experience acquired abroad helped them create and develop their own local companies, which employ many workers and apprentices. This type of programme is in keeping with research demonstrating how peer examples, perceived as role models, can influence individuals' aspirations, and even their behaviour (Bernard and Taffesse, 2014; Beaman et al., 2012; Riley, 2022). It seeks to examine the impact of messages conveyed by people with whom the targeted individuals (here young men) can identify, based on a set of variables: their economic and social aspirations, their perceived ability to control their destiny (locus of control), their mental health (measured by their likelihood of suffering from depressive syndromes), and their aspiration to migrate, whether internally, to Europe, or within the African continent. These potential effects were measured in the short term, a few months after watching the documentary films.

The second experiment conducted in The Gambia focused on 3,641 young men (aged 18 to 30) living in 391 rural communities in the centre and East of the country. It was conducted from April 2019 to November 2020. The young men were randomly assigned to one of four groups. The first group was shown a film featuring testimonials from Gambians who had attempted to migrate to Europe (most of them unsuccessfully), along with detailed information about the risks involved at each stage of the journey. Individuals in the second group were shown the same film, enhanced with testimonials from Gambians who had chosen to migrate to Dakar and describing the conditions of their migration, as well as their living and working conditions in their new city. Individuals in this group were also given a voucher for a face value of 1,200 dalasi (around €20) to cover their travel costs to Dakar. Individuals in the third group also watched the same film as the first group, but were instead given a voucher for six months of free vocational training in a sector of their choice. The fourth group was shown a film that had nothing to do with migration (placebo). As in the previous example, the protocol was designed in order to assess the impact of the information provided through testimonials about the perception of the risks of irregular migration to Europe, and the migratory behaviour of the young men targeted by the programme. However, it was also designed to assess the extent to which such testimonials combined with the promotion of regional migration via additional information about economic opportunities in the region (more precisely in Dakar) and covering travel costs, or combined with the possibility to take part in free vocational training, were more effective in reducing intentions to migrate and actual migration to Europe.

The underlying assumption of information campaigns is that migration candidates are often poorly informed, especially about the risks they face. This assumption is supported by research such as that of Shrestha (2020) on Nepalese candidates for labour migration to Malaysia and the Persian Gulf countries. The reasons for this lack of knowledge are not fully understood, but anthropology and sociology research (Bolzman, Gakuba and Amalaman, 2017; Gakuba and Amalaman, 2019) has shown that declarative bias may be responsible. Individuals who have had successful migratory experiences are more likely to share their experience than those who have failed, and regardless of whether or not they have succeeded, all of them prefer not to talk about the difficulties they may have encountered during their journey or upon arrival. Investment in the migratory initiative, both by the migrant himself and his loved ones, often makes it impossible to admit failure. A programme aimed at providing factual information about irregular migration (in terms of the costs or risks

involved, for example) is therefore expected to allow participants to gain such awareness, and in turn change their aspirations to migrate to Europe.

The experiment in The Gambia shows that the reality is more nuanced: the findings suggest that each of the three treatments significantly improves the young men's level of knowledge about irregular migration to Europe and the dangers involved. But this impact, estimated just after watching the videos, is modest and decreases over time: 18 months later, it is no longer significant. The young men assigned to the second group, who were also shown testimonials from Gambians living in Dakar, also saw their knowledge of migration conditions to Senegal improve,⁴ in a more lasting way: the estimated impact remained significant after 18 months. Nevertheless, none of the three treatments seem to change intentions to migrate to Europe in the short term. The findings were a bit more mixed 18 months later: the share of young people who said that they would certainly migrate to Europe within the next five years decreased in the groups assigned treatments 2 and 3 (both groups saw a drop of 4 percentage points compared to a baseline value of 28%), while it remained insignificant in the group assigned treatment 1.

The experiment conducted in Mali yielded similar findings: watching a documentary in which peers discuss the difficulties they encountered on the way to Europe does not seem to have an effect on the average aspirations to migrate to the North or on the professional and social aspirations among the targeted individuals. Fortunately, neither does it increase the frequency of depressive symptoms or decrease these young men's confidence that they control their destiny. The only individuals on whom these testimonials seem to have an effect are those whose migratory plans are the most advanced, either because they come from families where migration is more common, or because they have started saving. Among this latter group, the share of those who plan to migrate within Sub-Saharan Africa increased by 2.2 percentage points (from an initial level of 1.2%).

Informing people about local or regional employment opportunities

In Mali, as in The Gambia, international migration is a common phenomenon due to geographical and historical factors. Emigrants make

⁴ More unexpectedly, individuals assigned to group 3, who were offered vocational training in The Gambia also demonstrated better knowledge of migration conditions to Senegal.

up 8.9% and 6.4% of the Gambian and Malian populations, respectively.⁵ In such settings, where there is a prevailing "culture of migration", it is often seen as the only alternative in order to secure decent living conditions. Moreover, out of the 2,000 young respondents in Mali, 60% said that they wanted to migrate, predominantly in order to improve their living conditions, which three quarters of the respondents described as fair or difficult. However, not all of them wish to leave their country: out of these 2,000 young people, 28% and 31.9%, respectively, said that they wanted to migrate within Mali and abroad. Out of the latter group, 28% wish to migrate to another sub-Saharan African country (most often Gabon or Côte d'Ivoire), 14.1% to a North African country (Algeria or Libya), and 58% wish to leave Africa and cite France, Spain and Italy as the top destinations they wish to reach. In the case of The Gambia, among the 3,641 young respondents, 82.3%, 6.5% and 55.7%, respectively, said that they wished to migrate within The Gambia, to Senegal, or to Europe, and 22% said that they had already migrated to Senegal at least once during the baseline survey.

Beyond informing people about the risks of irregular migration to Europe, the two experiments therefore sought to promote alternatives to migration to Europe. The experiment in The Gambia did so either by promoting migration to Senegal (treatment 2) or improving employment prospects in The Gambia through vocational training (treatment 3), whereas the experiment in Mali did so by presenting positive testimonials from two Malians who had remained in the country and two Malians who had migrated within Africa.

In both cases, the findings are rather consistent: promoting alternatives to migration based on positive messages has a greater impact than simply informing individuals about the risks of migration. Being exposed to positive testimonials from non-migrants and migrants within Africa appears to help raise young Malians' aspirations. Those who hear about the positive local experiences of non-migrants are also less likely to suffer from depressive symptoms (the share of individuals reporting depressive symptoms decreased 9.5 percentage points compared to a baseline value of 27%) and have a greater feeling of being able to control their own destiny. However, this is not enough to change average aspirations to migrate. Regardless of the intended destination, the estimated average effects are not statistically significant. Yet, these average effects conceal disparities: individuals whose migration plans are the most advanced or who come

⁵ Source: <https://www.migrationdataportal.org/>.

from families where migration is more common tend to lower their aspirations to migrate. For example, those who had started preparing to leave and saw the film about the local success of non-migrants were less likely to say that they wished to leave the African continent: initially 7.65% of them wanted to migrate, but after watching the film only 4.25% of them expressed this wish. Likewise, the film showing successful examples of migration within Africa resulted in a 1.9 percentage point increase in the share of those who wished to migrate within Africa.

In the case of The Gambia, information about the risks of migration to Europe combined with promoting migration to Senegal decreased the share of young people who said that they would certainly migrate to Europe within the next five years, while it increased the share of those who said that they would certainly migrate to Senegal within the same period. The same outcome on intentions to migrate to Europe is obtained when information about the risks of migration to Europe is combined with the offer of vocational training. In addition to intentions, treatments 2 and 3 also had an impact on actual migration, despite low use of the travel and vocational training vouchers: they resulted in increased migration to Senegal (the share of young people living in Senegal at the time of the survey was, respectively, 2.2 and 2.6 percentage points higher than the baseline value of 1.7%), which appears to be to the detriment of migration to Banjul, the capital of The Gambia (which decreased by 7.6 and 3.6 percentage points from a baseline value of 41.1%). In terms of migration to Europe, the only notable effect is the number of steps taken to prepare to migrate to Europe in the near future, which was slightly lower among individuals in group 3.

Conclusion

The results of these two experiments are in keeping with the work of Carling and Collins (2018) and De Haas (2021): reasons for migration are varied and shaped by the constraints facing individuals, as well as their economic, social and professional aspirations. Programmes, such as the one implemented in Mali, based on testimonials from similar individuals who have achieved social success, impact these aspirations. But this is not enough to significantly change intentions to migrate. The programme carried out in The Gambia shows that promoting alternatives to irregular migration to Europe, combined with an information campaign about the risks and dangers of this migration, is more likely to change migratory intentions and behaviours than an information campaign alone. In both cases, the findings also underscore the importance of carefully targeting

these programmes, and the difficulty of reaching individuals who are the most likely to migrate.

Flore Gubert*, Sandrine Mesplé-Somps* and Björn Nilsson†

*DIAL, LEDa, CNRS, IRD, Université Paris-Dauphine, Université PSL, 75016 Paris, France.

†Université Paris-Saclay & DIAL.

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