



The reach and impact of migration information campaigns in 25 communities across Africa and Asia

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Abstract

Migration information campaigns seek to influence migration decision-making, averting the use of migrant smugglers and reducing irregular migration. Recent research has examined both the ethics and the efficacy of such campaigns, often with specific campaigns as the object study. In this article, the authors provide a complementary bird's-eye perspective by placing migration information campaigns and their effects within broader dynamics of migration and development in diverse settings. The analyses are based on survey data covering almost 13,000 young adults in 25 local areas across 10 countries in Africa and Asia. The article examines how exposure to migration information varies, how messages are perceived, and how warnings against migrating affect migration aspirations. Between 4 per cent and 86 per cent of young adults in each area have seen or heard some form of migration information during the past year, most commonly in the form of warnings against migrating. It is found that such warnings rarely have an impact on migration aspirations, and that when they do, they are most often associated with a higher desire to leave.

Introduction

Migration information campaigns have become a key component of migration policy in different parts of the world. These seek to influence migration decision-making, avert the use of migrant smugglers and reduce irregular migration. Since 2015, the European Commission alone has allocated more than EUR 40 million to information campaigns for preventing irregular migration.²

Yet despite the growing investment and assigned relevance to these information campaigns, little is known about their impact and effectiveness. In particular, large quantitative studies assessing the reach and effect of these campaigns on migration aspirations are almost non-existent.³

Based on uniquely extensive survey data, this article provides a complementary bird's-eye perspective on the scope of these campaigns and their influence on migration aspirations. This is done by placing migration information campaigns and their effects within broader dynamics of migration and development in 25 local areas across 10 countries in Africa and Asia.

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² European Migration Network, *Network events* (n.d.); European Commission, *Awareness raising and information campaigns on the risks of irregular migration in selected third countries and within Europe* (AMIF-2019-AG-CALL-04), Funding and Tenders portal (2019).

³ Jasper Tjaden, Sandra Morgenstern and Frank Laczko, *Evaluating the Impact of Information Campaigns in the Field of Migration: A Systematic Review of the Evidence and Practical Guidance*, Central Mediterranean Route Thematic Report Series (Geneva, IOM, 2018); Raffaella Pagogna and Patrick Sakdapolrak, "Disciplining migration aspirations through migration-information campaigns: A systematic review of the literature", *Geography Compass*, 15(7):e12585 (2021).



A growing number of studies and media reports have examined the ethics and politics of information campaigns that seek to deter migration, and sometimes raised serious concerns.⁴ While this article does not engage directly with these dimensions, these are recognized as an essential context for policy evaluation.

The MIGNEX project and the MIGNEX survey

The analysis is based on the collaborative project Aligning Migration Management and the Migration–Development Nexus (MIGNEX), a six-year research project (2018–2024) with the core ambition of creating new knowledge on

migration, development and policy.⁵ MIGNEX involves researchers at nine institutions in Europe, Africa and Asia, coordinated by the PRIO.

The project is designed to understand migration dynamics at the level of local communities. Most of the data collection is concentrated in 25 research areas across Africa and Asia (see Figure 1). Each research area can be a town, part of a city or a rural district. They have been selected with an emphasis on complementarity between and within countries, so that the 25 areas overall reflect the diversity of contexts in which migration originates. The research areas were referred to by their name and an ID that includes the country abbreviation such as Enfidha (TUN1).

Figure 1. MIGNEX research areas



Source: MIGNEX, 2023.

Note: This map is for illustration purposes only. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the International Organization for Migration.

⁴ Verena K. Brändle, "Claiming authority over 'truths' and 'facts': Information risk campaigns to prevent irregular migration" in *Europe in the Age of Post-Truth Politics* (Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), p. 151; Nassim Majidi, "Deterring migration in times of crises: The ethics of behavioral change in migration information campaigns", *American Behavioral Scientist*, 0(0) (2023).

⁵ See mignex.org. MIGNEX has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement no. 770453.

While the project gathered both quantitative and qualitative data, this article is based on the quantitative survey component. The survey was carried out face to face by trained interviewers using quality-approved translations to relevant local languages. In each research area, the survey covered a random sample of approximately 500 residents aged 18 to 39 years, yielding a grand total sample of nearly 13,000.⁶ (The research area Kombolcha (ETH1) is excluded because survey data collection was aborted for security reasons.)

Sources of information about migration were a minor theme among many others in the survey. To assess exposure to migration information campaigns, the respondents were first asked the following broad question:

Sometimes there are TV shows, events or other information about migration – about people moving from one country to another. Over the last year, have you seen or heard of any of the following in [Research area]?

- (a) A TV advert or programme about migration?
- (b) A workshop or event about migration?
- (c) A radio programme or advert about migration?
- (d) Social media or a website about migration?
- (e) A poster or newspaper advert about migration?

Respondents who had seen or heard information about migration via any of these channels were subsequently asked if they remembered the

message. Based on the respondents' spontaneous answer, enumerators selected from a pre-defined list of messages. Answers that did not fit any of the options were recorded as text and later recoded.

Which messages are conveyed in information about migration?

The most recalled message was “telling people not to migrate” followed by “warning people about the dangers of smuggling”. These messages are typical of campaigns that are implemented as policy interventions. In the analyses, these are combined under the label “warning against migrating”.

Many respondents also recalled other messages, including “explaining what migration is”, “warning people about immigrants” and “telling people how to migrate”. This is unsurprising, since respondents were asked broadly about seeing or hearing information about migration, which could also include media coverage and commercial advertisements, for instance.

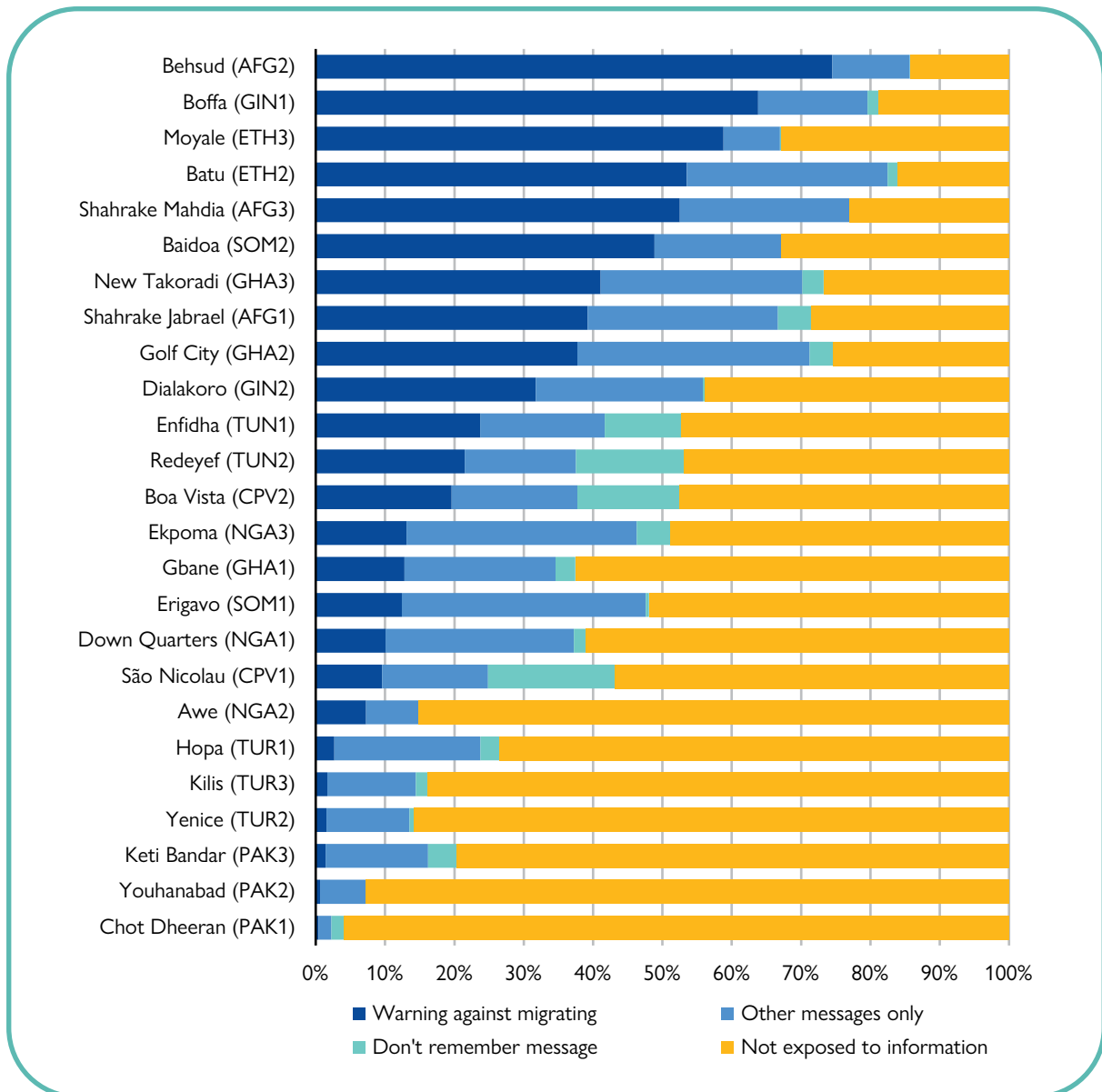
As shown in Figure 2, the proportion of respondents who had seen or heard campaigns warning them against migrating ranges from close to zero in the research areas in Pakistan to well over half in some of the research areas in Afghanistan, Ethiopia and Guinea. In other words, migration information campaigns are truly a large-scale phenomenon, not only in terms of funding allocated but also in reaching a very large number of people.

Overall, about half of the respondents who had seen or heard information about migration recalled the message to be warning them against migrating. It is striking that this is the dominant message that people in these low- and middle-income communities hear about migration.

⁶ For detailed methodology and documentation, see Jessica Hagen-Zanker, Gemma Hennessey, Jørgen Carling and Rashid Memon, “Chapter 7: Survey data collection” in *MIGNEX Handbook* version 2 (Oslo, PRIO, 2023); and Jessica Hagen-Zanker, Jørgen Carling, Nicolás Caso, Gemma Hennessey and Marcela Rubio, “Chapter 10: Documentation of survey data” in *MIGNEX Handbook* version 2 (Oslo, PRIO, 2023). For more detailed information on MIGNEX survey data collection strategy, please read chapter 7 of the MIGNEX Handbook.



Figure 2. Exposure to information about migration



Source: MIGNEX survey data set (restricted variant, v1), 2023.

Note: N = 12,966. Data are weighted to reflect the survey design. "Warning against migrating" include such messages alone or in combination with other messages. Research areas are ordered by the proportion who have been exposed to warnings against migrating.

Channels for information about migration

As previously explained, respondents were asked about seeing or hearing information about migration in five specific channels: (a) television; (b) workshops or events; (c) radio; (d) social media

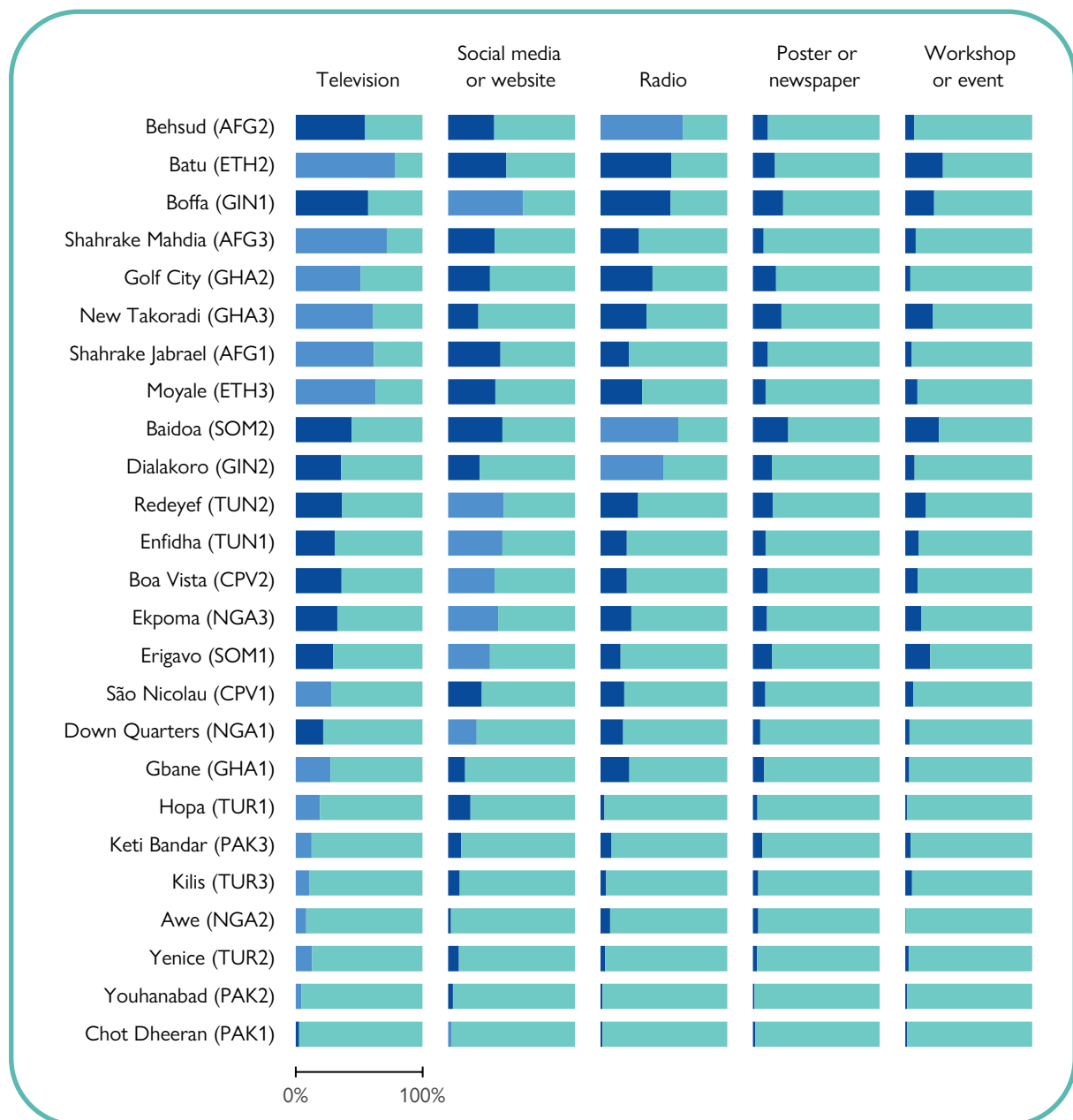
or websites; and (e) posters or newspapers. On average, the respondents who had seen or heard information about migration reported doing so via two channels.

Figure 3 shows the proportion of respondents in each research area who reported hearing or seeing information about migration via each of the five channels.

Television was the most common channel in fourteen of the research areas, while social media

or websites were most common in eight research areas. In the remaining three research areas, information about migration was most often received via radio. In general, the distribution of channels is similar regardless of the type of message that was recalled by respondents.

Figure 3. Exposure to information about migration, by channel



Source: MIGNEX survey data set (restricted variant, v1), 2023.

Note: N = 12,966. Data are weighted to reflect the survey design. Research areas are ordered by the proportion who have seen or heard information about migration via any channel. Darker bars indicate the most common channel in each research area.



Assessing the impact of migration information campaigns

There are several ways of measuring the effectiveness of information campaigns, all of which have limitations. Where other studies seek to precisely measure the impact of a single campaign in a single location, the approach is less precise but broader in scope. In short, this paper analyses whether people who have been exposed to warnings against migrating have different migration aspirations than otherwise similar individuals who have not been exposed.

Exposure to warnings against migrating are measured in three ways. First, the same basic measure as previously presented is used: having seen or heard information about migration in one or more channels, and recalling the message as being telling people not to migrate and/or warning people about dangers of smuggling. Second, differentiation within this group is done by counting the number of channels through which individuals have been exposed to such messages. Third, those individuals who have been exposed via all five channels are singled out.

Migration aspirations

This paper is interested in the effects of migration information campaigns on migration aspirations, which is an umbrella term for the conviction that migrating would be preferable to staying.⁷ Migration aspirations could, in other words, mean an active desire to migrate, as well as the view that migration is the lesser of two evils, for instance in situations of insecurity. There are diverse aspects of migration aspirations that can be measured through carefully formulated survey questions.

Two such measures from the MIGNEX survey are used:

- *Preference to migrate*, measured with the question “Would you like to go and live in another country some time during the next five years, or would you prefer to stay in [Survey country]?”
- *Readiness to migrate*, measured with the question “If someone were to give you the necessary papers to live and work in a richer country,⁸ would you go, or would you stay in [Survey country]?”

The preference to migrate ranges from 4 per cent in Keti Bandar (PAK3) to 86 per cent in Ekpoma (NGA3). The readiness to migrate is generally higher, reflecting people's inclination to seize an opportunity that appears, even if it is not the most desirable one. The values range from 23 per cent in Keti Bandar (PAK3) to 92 o in Ekpoma (NGA3). In other words, the research areas cover a great range of outmigration contexts.

Do warnings against migrating make a difference?

If migration aspirations among individuals who have and have not been exposed to warnings against migrating are simply compared, it will yield misleading results. For instance, if people who are unemployed spend more time watching TV, they are also more likely to see televised migration campaigns, and the results would confound the effects of unemployment with the effect of exposure to campaigns.

⁷ Jørgen Carling and Kerilyn Schewel, “Revisiting aspiration and ability in international migration”, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 44(6):945–963 (2018).

⁸ The reference to “a richer country” differentiates this hypothetical migration opportunity from regional migration. Migration to higher-income countries is an established phenomenon in nearly all research areas, although it varies whether the most relevant and desired destinations are in Europe, North America or elsewhere.

Similar arguments can be made for many other individual characteristics that might affect the likelihood of seeing or hearing warnings against migrating and have a bearing on migration aspirations.

To address this challenge, a series of multivariate logistic regressions were implemented.⁹ These statistical analyses allow for measuring the effect of being exposed to warnings against migrating given a number of other individual characteristics. The results are striking: there is no discernible effect of being exposed to warnings against migrating, nor of the number of channels through which respondents have been exposed to warnings. Even when respondents were exposed through five channels, there is no effect on their migration aspirations. Both the preference to migrate and the readiness to migrate are unaffected.

Other influences on migration aspirations

As previously explained, the regression models take account of many other individual characteristics that could affect migration aspirations. The results show that they do, and this puts the negligible effect of information campaigns in perspective. The following factors are associated with significantly lower migration aspirations:

- Being female;
- Being married or cohabiting;
- Being the parent of at least one child aged 0–15;
- Being employment or running a business.

The following characteristics are associated with significantly higher migration aspirations:

- Having a higher level of educational attainment;
- Being aware of current, recent or former international migrants;
- Knowing of someone's failed migration experience;
- Having family, relatives or friends in a high-income country and having had contact;
- Having lived in a high-income country for at least one year;
- Having received remittances to the household during the past year.

The latter two factors only affect the preference to migrate and not the readiness to migrate. Household wealth also affects migration aspirations, although in a more complex way. Among poorer households, increases in wealth are associated with higher migration aspirations, but above a certain level of wealth, this is no longer the case. There was no consistent effect of age (within the 18–39 age range of the respondents) nor of being an internal migrant.

It is striking that knowing of someone's failed migration experience – defined here as being stuck en route, detained, deported, injured or killed – is associated with higher migration aspirations. It resonates with the finding that warnings against migrating can also have such an effect, perhaps because of people's willingness to take risks, or their belief in their own ability to avoid danger.

⁹ For detailed methods and results, see Nicolás Caso and Jørgen Carling, "The reach and impact of migration information campaigns in 25 communities across Africa and Asia: Technical note", *Migration Policy Practice*, XII(3) (2023).



Context-specific effects

Even though no clear effect of migration information campaigns in the overall sample is found, the picture might be different in individual research areas. Therefore, the analyses were also run separately for each of the 25 research areas, with the same measures of exposure to warnings against migrating, and considering the effects of both the preference and the readiness to migrate.

Only in one research area, Baidoa (SOM2), was exposure to warnings against migrating consistently associated with lower migration aspirations. Those who had seen or heard warnings against migrating were 19 per cent less likely to express a readiness to leave if the opportunity arose. For respondents who had been exposed through five different communication channels, the effect was twice as large. The preference for migration was similarly affected.

In 12 of the remaining 24 research areas, respondents who had been exposed to warnings against migrating had significantly different migration aspirations from those who had not. However, these patterns were not consistent: the effect was only evident with certain ways of measuring exposure, or only on one type of migration aspirations. And in more than two thirds of the cases, exposure to warnings against migrating was associated with higher migration aspirations.

There are two possible explanations for this pattern. First, the campaigns could have an effect, which is the opposite of what the funders and implementers intended. Repeatedly seeing information about migration could make individuals more aware of migration as a possibility. And even if campaigns emphasize the risks, the individuals who see them probably also know of

migrants who have succeeded, and they might reason that they personally will be able to avoid the dangers.¹⁰ A second possible explanation is that individuals who have migration aspirations at the outset are more alert to information about migration, and therefore more likely to notice and recall campaigns. However, their attention to these messages does not mean that their attitudes towards migration will necessarily change.

Conclusion

Drawing on a survey with nearly 13,000 young adults in 25 local communities in Africa and Asia, new insights on the reach and apparent effects of migration information campaigns have been produced. The following five points stand out:

- Across local communities in Africa and Asia, there is great variation in exposure to information about migration.
- In most of the locations surveyed, warnings against migrating is the dominant message that people recall.
- Migration information campaigns are part of a broader migration information landscape with diverse messages.
- Overall, young adults' migration aspirations appear unaffected by being exposed to warnings against migrating.
- In cases where warnings against migrating have an effect, they are more likely to raise migration aspirations than to lower them.

These are broad observations that gloss over the specific characteristics and effects of individual campaigns. Moreover, statistical patterns of who has been exposed to warnings and who aspires to migrate do not prove a causal effect. It cannot

¹⁰ María Hernández-Carretero and Jørgen Carling, "Beyond 'kamikaze migrants': Risk taking in West African boat migration to Europe", *Human Organization*, 71(4):407–416 (2012).

be ruled out that people who have migration aspirations in the first place are more attentive to information about migration, including messages intended to deter departures.

The readiness to migrate irregularly was not asked specifically, which is what many campaigns seek to prevent. However, the most commonly recalled message was telling people not to migrate in general. The distinction between regular and irregular migration might also not be as clear in practice as in policy discussions.

The findings add to other research that questions the wisdom of investing so heavily in migration information campaigns. This paper complements other studies by showing the reach that such campaigns already have. When the international community appears concerned with promoting nuanced and unprejudiced information about migration, it is striking that in many low- and middle-income societies, the message that dominates is essentially “don’t go”.