

What policies are needed to deter irregular migration from Africa to Europe?

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on ‘*The effectiveness of policies to reduce irregular migration: information campaigns vs. economic opportunities?*’

While attempting to reach Europe, irregular migrants undertake extremely risky journeys across the Mediterranean Sea. Embarking on this perilous route to Europe remains one of the most popular migration options for many sub-Saharan Africans. Policymakers have scaled up their efforts to curb this phenomenon. Nevertheless, the impact of these interventions has never been rigorously evaluated, which leaves room both for unintended effects and for the waste of resources spent on policies that may be ineffective. In this context, it is crucial to implement rigorous impact evaluations of the policies aiming to prevent irregular migration. In order to be successful, such interventions must evaluate the relevant factors in the decision-making process of the potential migrants. Do they know how risky their intended voyage is? Do they have realistic expectations regarding their chances of being granted asylum upon arrival? If not, are their migration

intentions and decisions affected by more accurate information? What other policies could be put in place to save lives in this process?

To address these questions, we have recently conducted a Randomized Controlled Trial (RCT) in The Gambia,¹ one of the countries with the highest rate of irregular migration to Europe. Our RCT evaluated the potential effects of three different policy interventions to curb irregular migration. The first policy consisted in an **informational campaign** about the expected costs and benefits of irregular migration. Since information alone might not be enough to alter migration intentions when individuals lack economic opportunities at home, we implemented two additional policies that provide further alternatives beyond irregular migration: (i) information and economic incentives to **migrate to neighboring Dakar** (Senegal) and (ii)



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¹ Randomized control trials (i.e., RCTs) are the gold standard for policy evaluation. This methodology randomly assigns a policy to certain individuals (i.e., treatment group), while restraining it from others (i.e., control group). Since treatment and control status are randomly defined, individuals in both groups have (on average) similar characteristics before the treatment. Any differences arising over time can thus be fully attributed to the policy itself, helping decision makers to understand the causal effects of interventions.

access to free **vocational training**. The first policy aimed at increasing the salience and knowledge about the regional migration option as well as lowering the costs to undertake it. The vocational training intended to change the potential migrants' cost-benefit calculation as well as allow them to get new jobs for which there is high demand both inside and outside the country.

We implemented an RCT providing information about irregular migration to Europe and encouraging other alternatives

Experimental Design

The field experiment included 3,641 men aged 18 to 33 residing in 391 villages in Eastern Gambia. We specifically targeted the areas with the highest incidence of irregular migration to Europe. Individuals across these villages were randomly assigned to three intervention groups and one control group in a way that communication was very limited across them (to limit the potential contamination of the research design) and to guarantee that the characteristics of individuals were similar across the groups. Participants were shown a video individually in their local languages and received further information (in either video format or other).

The **first treatment group (T1: 97 villages, 953 individuals)** was shown a video with information about irregular migration to Europe, including detailed statistics (e.g., the cost of migrating,

the chances of dying in the journey, obtaining legal residence status, or being deported), and testimonies of both unsuccessful migrants and current irregular Gambian migrants in Italy (e.g., personal experiences, witnessing of accidents, deaths, kidnapping during the journey, as well as general advice to prospective migrants).

The **second treatment group (T2: 98 villages, 907 individuals)** was shown the same video as the first one, as well as (i) additional video information about migration to Senegal (testimonies of Gambian migrants residing in Dakar); (ii) a cash transfer to support travel expenses to Dakar for those interested (GMD 1200, or about EUR 25); (iii) the contact details of a Gambian association in Dakar, which provides advice and support for migration to Senegal, and an additional cash transfer paid once in Dakar (CFA 10,000, or about EUR 15).

The **third treatment group (T3: 892 individuals in 98 villages)** was shown the same video information as the previous groups and in addition, individuals had the opportunity to participate in a tuition-free vocational training program. The training was provided locally by the *Gambia Technical Training Institute (GTTI)*. The courses had a planned duration of six months. The available courses were building construction (block work), carpentry and joinery, electrical installation, plastering and tiling, plumbing and gas fitting, refrigeration and air conditioning, small engine maintenance and repair, and welding and fabrication.

The **final (control) group (C: 889 individuals in 98 villages)** was shown a "placebo" video unrelated to migration decisions but on the importance of exclusive breastfeeding.



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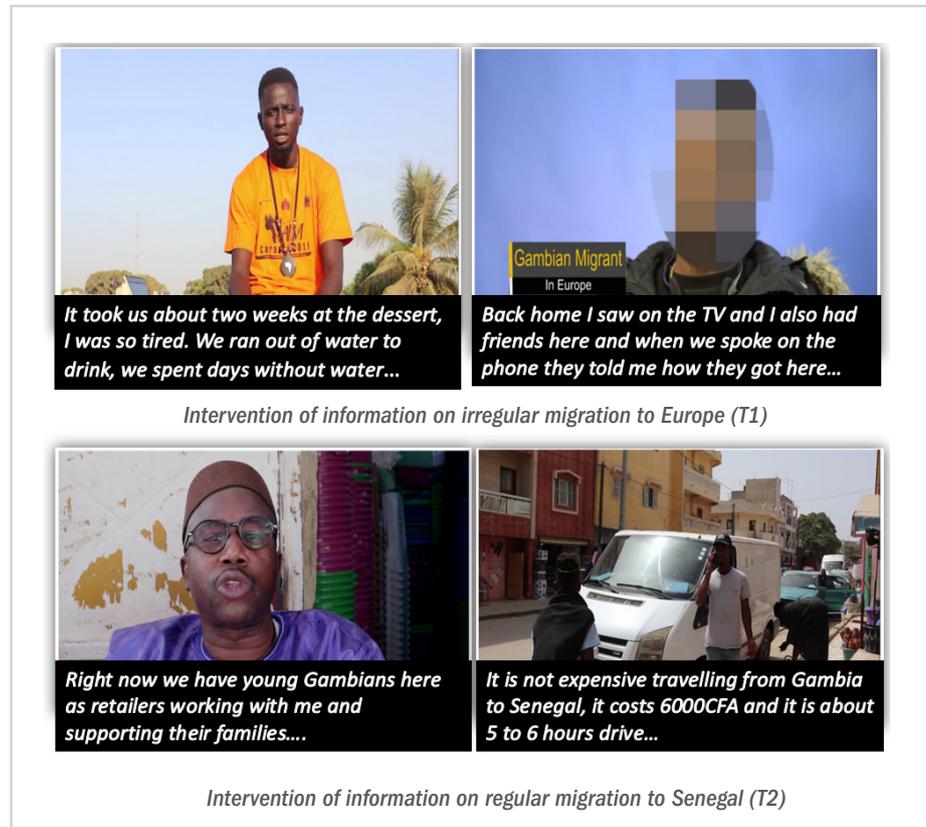


Figure 1: Example of the testimonies in the video-documentaries

Source: provided by the authors

Data Collection

The intervention took place during the spring of 2019. We conducted a preliminary survey gathering information on socioeconomic characteristics and migration (e.g., past migration, intentions to migrate, knowledge about the journey, expectations, etc.). After the survey, individuals watched either the treatment video or the placebo video, and received further information depending on their respective treatment group. To examine the impact of the different interventions, we conducted a final survey 16 months later. The main dimensions of interest covered in the final survey were intentions to migrate irregularly to Europe in the next 5 years, whether individuals had taken steps towards irregular migration, and

actual international migration (to either Europe or Senegal). Some additional aspects covered in the survey related to general knowledge about migration opportunities, perceptions about the risk of migrating irregularly, and beliefs about the chances of being granted asylum status upon arrival.² A common challenge in this type of study is being able to find all the initial participants to survey them again and avoid that the sample loses its representativeness (sometimes referred to as attrition bias). Our team of researchers was extremely successful in this task, being able to re-interview 73% of the initial participants face-to-face, 13% on the phone, and obtaining additional information about the remaining ones from close contacts and village chiefs.

² The final survey took place 6 months after the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe. While the pandemic reduced migration intentions, they remain very high. Among the participants in the experiment, 65% reported being likely to migrate to Europe (and almost all of them irregularly).

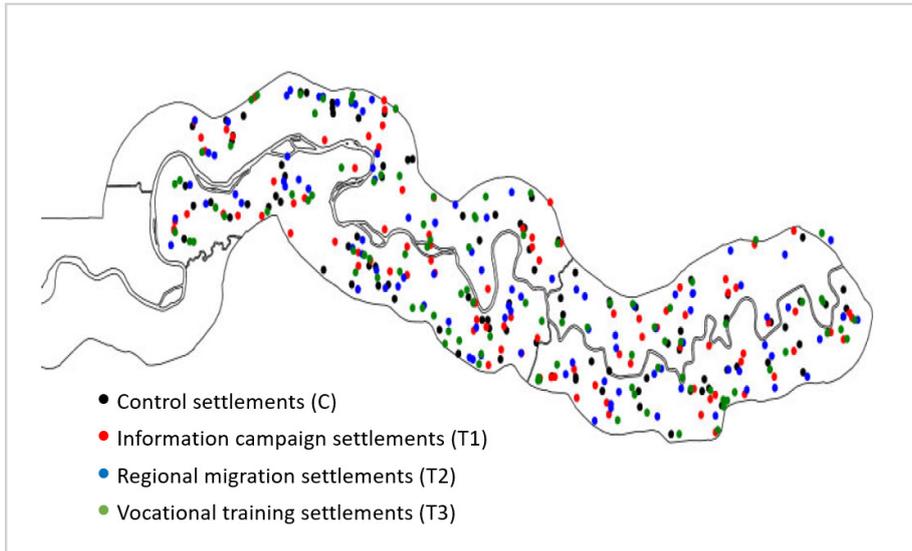


Figure 2: Location of the settlements in the different treatment groups

Source: adapted from Bah et al. (2020)

Main findings

The main results of the RCT are summarized in Figure 3. We found that the information campaign (**T1**) did not significantly change any outcomes related to migration to Europe (e.g., migration attempt, actual migration, intentions to migrate in the next 5 years), regional migration to Senegal (actual migration or plans to migrate in the next 5 years) or internal migration within The Gambia (residing elsewhere 16 months after the intervention). Exploring other outcomes, we found that the information campaign decreased slightly intentions to consider an illegal crossing through the most dangerous route, but migrants may still consider other pathways to reach Europe.

Information about the potential risks and benefits is not enough to limit irregular migration to Europe

The policy encouraging regional migration, coupled with information about irregular migration to Europe (**T2**), did not have any effects on the outcomes related to actual migration to Europe but reduced future migration intentions by 4.4 percentage points (relative to a baseline of 27.7%). This policy was very effective raising intentions to migrate to Senegal in the near future by 7.2 percentage points and actual migration to Senegal by 1.7 percentage points (relative to baseline 22% and 11% respectively). These changes in actual migration to Senegal as well as plans to move in the near a future seem to have come at the expense of lower internal migration within The Gambia, which fell by 7.2 percentage points (relative to a baseline of 44%).

The vocational training coupled with information about irregular migration (**T3**) did not change actual migration patterns to Europe in the short run but reduced future intentions strongly. Individuals in this group were 7.2 percentage points less likely to declare they would try to migrate to Europe during the next 5 years. This

Promoting regional migration and access to training can be effective ways to reduce irregular migration and improve economic prospects

policy raised migration to Senegal by 2.3 percentage points, a sizable increase, again at the expense of reducing internal migration within The Gambia by 4.2 percentage points. This evidence suggests that providing information about opportunities in neighboring countries as well as specific skills that are useful for such labor markets may make individuals replaced irregular migration to Europe by regional migration.

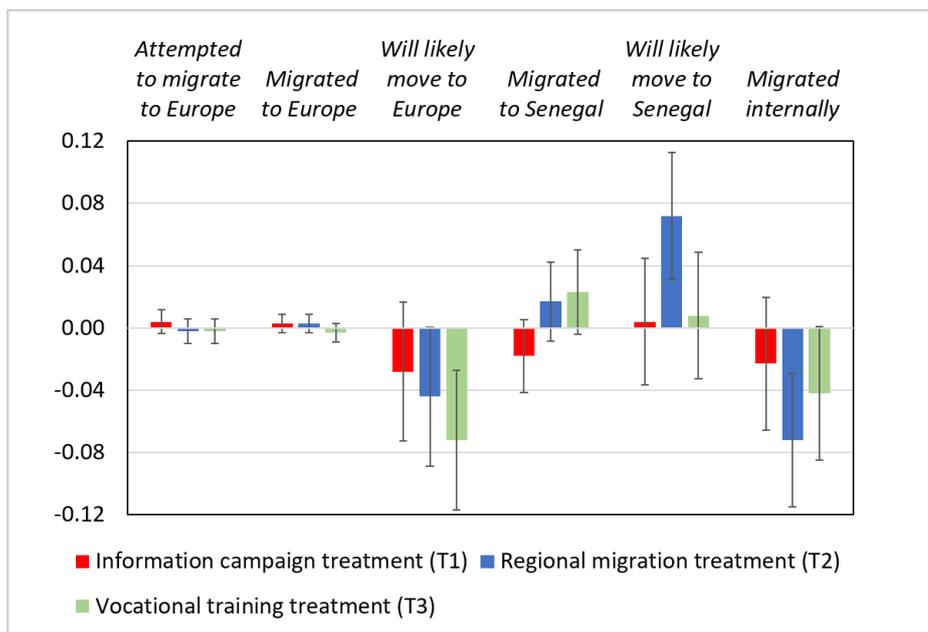
Conclusion

This project provided evidence on the short run effects of alternative policies to dissuade risky irregular migration

to Europe. The evidence supports the potential for a positive impact of policies that go beyond the commonly used information-based campaigns seeking to dissuade risky migration without offering a hopeful alternative. In this sense, we see vocational training and information about regional migration as part of a series of policy efforts that could be used to provide potential migrants with a pathway to better jobs (at home or elsewhere). We do not claim that training is the only, or indeed the best policy. We just claim that policies providing a viable alternative to irregular migration, in addition to information only, seem to be options worthy of further exploration.

Figure 3: Main effects of the different policy interventions

Source: adapted from Bah et al. (2020). The bars represent the effect of a given policy intervention (relative to the control group). Confidence intervals at the 95% level are displayed.



Based on

Bah, Tijan et al. 2020. "Information and Alternatives to Irregular Migration." AEA RCT Registry. January 15. <https://doi.org/10.1257/rct.3998-3.0>