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**Whole-of-route
approaches to
irregular
migration**

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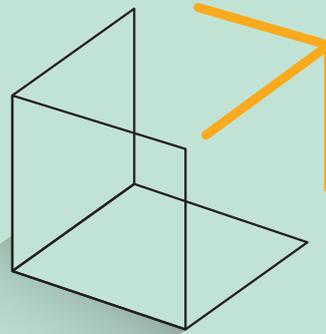
**Policy Brief by
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Leveraging migration information campaigns for state and migrant security

Lessons learned and open questions

Introduction

Although migration information campaigns have emerged as a popular policy tool for European policymakers, substantive evidence of their effectiveness remains limited. Moreover, the aims of such campaigns remain a source of contestation.

As one view would have it, informing (potential) migrants of the possible dangers involved in irregular migration can be seen as an urgent humanitarian intervention – particularly vis-à-vis the dangers of the Central Mediterranean route, such as starvation in the desert, human trafficking, abduction and slavery in Libya, and deaths in the Mediterranean Sea. The opposing view would highlight the vested interest of European governments in using such campaigns mainly for deterrence purposes.

Discussion around migration information campaigns is largely based on anecdotal knowledge.

Another fundamental and contested question is: Are information campaigns reaching (potential) migrants? Due to a lack of evidence, discussion around migration information campaigns is largely based on anecdotal knowledge, with migration researchers typically sceptical of their effectiveness and migration policymakers often taking the contrary view. New studies and evaluations have, in principle, demonstrated that migration information campaigns can have a certain (limited) impact.

However, the literature also raises new questions – and compounds existing conundrums inherent to such campaigns. Recent desk-based research undertaken by ICMPD has reviewed the aims and assumptions underlying such campaigns in light of the available evidence. This brief will highlight the key findings that have emerged thus far.

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Migration information campaigns: An overview

Individual EU Members States and the European Commission commissioned over 100 migration information campaigns in countries of origin and transit during the period 2014-2019 alone.

Migration information campaigns have been conducted since the 1990s. They constitute a significant field: Individual EU Members States and the European Commission commissioned over 100 migration information campaigns in countries of origin and transit during the period 2014-2019 alone.[1] A recent report on the European Trust Fund for Africa estimates that €12 million of the protection portfolio was allocated to campaigns informing migrants of the risks of irregular migration and local alternatives in countries of origin (four per cent of funds allocated to the protection portfolio under the instrument).[2]

A crucial tool

Migration information campaigns have arisen as a means to address issues related to irregular migration. In the anti-human trafficking field, campaigns are seen as a crucial tool to prevent trafficking from the outset, inform and counsel victims of human trafficking, and address the demand side of trafficking.[3] Other campaigns speak to the risks involved in engaging smugglers or or embarking on particular routes, such as crossing the Mediterranean.[4] Most campaigns target (potential) migrants in their countries of origin (often those countries most relevant for the donor in terms of migration flows), with some campaigns also conducted in transit countries or across entire regions.[5]

> **Box 1: How relevant is online information provided by campaigns?**
> Social media outlets, and particularly Facebook, have become very attractive for migration information campaigns, since they involve low costs and promise large outreach, easy implementation and the possibility of differentiating specific target groups.
>
> However, the effectiveness of this approach should not be overestimated. Although the availability of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) has in general transformed the way migrants organise their journeys, research shows that information available on the internet, including through social media channels, is less relevant and less trusted in migrants' pre-migration decision-making compared to personal social ties (although it becomes more relevant during the journey). Moreover, not everyone has access to the internet, and those who are illiterate may be excluded in this regard – an important consideration for campaigns.
>
> There is only very limited evidence on the actual impact of social media on migrants' plans. While platforms such as Facebook do provide metrics on how many people are reached by messaging, it is unclear how such "engagement" translates into real-life impact.

While most information campaigns typically run for one year, larger-scale regional campaigns have been ongoing for several years, and are implemented by, or in cooperation with, international organisations such as ICMPD (e.g. Migrant Resource Centres), International Organization for Migration (IOM) (e.g. "I am a migrant" campaign, "Aware migrants") and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (e.g. Glo.ACT).

Campaign objectives range from awareness raising and knowledge dissemination to changing potential migrants' perceptions or attitudes towards migration, their intention (to migrate), or their actual behaviour (i.e. choosing staying over leaving).

Another aim – arguably important from the perspective of destination country governments – relates to migration management, including the deterrence of potential migrants from embarking on irregular migration journeys. Considering the politicisation of reducing irregular migration flows in the public debate, information campaigns may also play at least a secondary role as a means to demonstrate to the public that governments are "active" in preventing irregular migration and "in control".[6] Finally, the potential tension between humanitarian and migration management goals can cause fragmentation in campaign impact, since the respective objectives might diverge.[7]

Target groups and tools

Aside from potential migrants, campaigns also address migrants en route, victims of trafficking or forced labour, families of (potential) migrants, or even entire communities, including community or religious leaders, or traffickers and smugglers themselves. Anti-trafficking campaigns more often target women, while anti-smuggling campaigns tend to target men. Since so many different actors can be influential in decision-making on irregular migration, campaigns often aim to reach more than one target group.[8]

Most campaigns use multiple communication tools to reach their audience. Among the most common communication tools and channels are social media, largely on account of the low cost and seemingly wide engagement. However, "reach" achieved by social media can be deceptive (see Box 1). Other preferred means of delivery include television and video, radio, print media (such as newspapers, billboards, posters and flyers), informational events involving dedicated question and answer sections (including workshops, theatre productions, film screenings and concerts), hotlines and pre-departure counselling.[9]

Messaging

Most campaigns carry "negative" messages ("If you decide to leave by boat, you might die!").

Campaign messaging can cover a wide range of topics deemed important for migrant decision making and protection, and differ based on the target group selected. Issues addressed include smuggling, trafficking and other forms of exploitation, risks relating to the journey, alternatives to migration, the risks involved in irregular migration in general, and policy restrictions in the country of destination. Reflecting these manifold dangers, most campaigns elect to carry "negative" messages ("If you decide to leave by boat, you might die!") , although there are campaigns that also include "positive" messages. Anti-trafficking campaigns often focus on communicating rights to potential victims and protection options, or empowering the community to protect potential victims. Some campaigns also present alternatives to irregular migration and legal pathways.[10]

"I don't mind if it's risky": The challenge of influencing migrants' plans

Existing research highlights the difficulty in influencing a potential migrant's intentions to (irregularly) migrate.

Migration information campaigns have multiplied in recent years to span a range of aims, topics and formats. Far less clear, however, is the extent of the impact that can be expected from their pursuit. Although it is evident that potential migrants benefit from the receiving of constructive, timely information, it remains to be seen whether (and how) migration information campaigns can adequately reach those who are contemplating leaving. Existing research highlights the difficulty in influencing a potential migrant's intentions to (irregularly) migrate.

Key assumptions underpinning past campaigns have been questioned both in the public debate and by migration scholars. Pertinent questions in relation to potential migrants include:
→ Do they actually lack information on migration? On which aspects?
→ Will they find information provided by campaigns trustworthy, and under which circumstances?
→ Do they make decisions on their own, or should their family be included?
→ Will they change their plans based on new information provided – or will they leave regardless?
→ Can a campaign make a difference, considering major drivers of migration (such as poverty and unemployment)?

Difficulty in measuring campaign success

Firstly, campaigns often lack clear objectives and a honed idea of how their intervention will lead to results (the "theory of change").

Secondly, there is a lack of rigorous and public evaluation of such campaigns. A 2018 systematic literature review found that, out of hundreds of migration information campaigns conducted, only 60 had been evaluated, with only 30 of these evaluations publicly available. Even among those campaigns that were studied, most evaluations were limited in quality and deemed not rigorous by the authors.[11] A DG HOME-commissioned report reviewed recent AMIF-funded campaigns and found that "campaigns have the potential to change beneficiaries' knowledge, attitudes and behaviours. However, few campaigns were well-designed to achieve and prove it."[12] New campaigns often have little to build upon in terms of vetted implementation methodologies.

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This lack of a robust foundation is particularly problematic in relation to the risk aspects involved in migration. Campaigns often seek to highlight the risks involved in irregular migration, as this is considered the most important and impactful information for potential migrants to receive. However, addressing risk in a way that potential migrants can quickly and accurately digest is no straightforward task.

Box 2: How can the "success" (concrete impact) of a campaign be measured?
Can awareness raising translate into a change in behaviour among migrants? Demonstrating such a causal link is a challenge that plagues public information campaigns in general. Migration information campaigns are no exception, since the most telling real-world impact would be reduced irregular migration – which is impossible to measure, since the extent of actual irregular migration is not known.

Thus, various approximations are put in place to measure what is ultimately assumed to result in impact. Usually these proxies are changes in:
- Knowledge (awareness and information retention on migration);
- Perceptions (of migration);
- Attitudes (toward migration);
- Intentions (to migrate or not); or
- Behaviour (migrating/not migrating).

Measuring these proxies in a sound manner involves considerable investment in terms of cost and time, alongside significant expertise – which is among the reasons that rigorous evaluations are lacking.

Those migration information campaigns delivered often exhibit fundamental misunderstanding of migrants' perception of risk of irregular migration, with some campaigns assuming a near complete absence of knowledge on the part of migrants . However, the literature indicates that migrants typically do possess a general awareness that migration involves risk.

Box 3: Death tolls as campaign messages[13]
Particularly for the Central Mediterranean route, campaigns seek to highlight the high death rate in order to deter migrants. However, a study found that potential migrants would have estimated the death much higher than it is in reality.

A campaign providing death toll information might thus paradoxically promote irregular migration.

As migrants are generally aware of the risks, they may receive new information in a filtered way, dismissing it offhand.

Risk might even seem attractive.

Studies have also shown that (potential) migrants are more risk tolerant, that is, they are more willing to engage in risky behaviour.[14] Therefore, there are specific dynamics that can lead migrants to dismiss information provided by a campaign:
- → If they perceive that the underlying intention is to prevent them from migrating altogether.[15]
- → If they see the information as not relevant for them, because they put the foreseen consequences down to individual bad luck or inadequate decision-making.[16]
- → If risky behaviour actually seems appealing to them. For instance, in the context of Pakistan, a study speaks of the "romantic appeal" of irregular migration for young men, including because of the (envisioned) danger.[17]

Existing evidence: Returnees as messengers in Senegal

Do migration information campaigns actually influence behaviour?

The challenges outlined above and the available evidence suggest that campaigns achieve their stated aims only to a limited extent. One of the most insightful available examples on the effects that can be achieved by disseminating information in this way comes from a campaign implemented by IOM, which conducted a randomised control trial[18] that was published by the authors in a peer-reviewed journal. Employed in Senegal, this peer-to-peer campaign aimed to change migrants' plans to migrate to Europe by engaging them via a film screening featuring returnees' (negative) emotional experiences, and a subsequent question and answer session with returnees, some of whom were featured in the film. The authors report:

> *Testimonials of returning migrants focused on the dangers of irregular migration including personal experiences of physical abuse, extortion, robbery, blackmail, forced labor, lack of food, water and medical care, witnessing death, detainment, sexual exploitation and situations akin modern-day slavery. Some returnees spoke about their relief about being back in their country safely. The stories were deeply personal and consistent with other accounts in the literature and news stories.*[19]

Three months after the event, participants were contacted again and asked follow-up questions, for instance, about specific risks on the journey. The evaluation found that while the rate of people planning to move in general remained the same, the campaign had decreased *irregular* migration intentions by 20 percent – i.e. fewer people wanted to migrate irregularly after participating.[20] The effects were stronger among younger participants. Risk perceptions had also substantially changed, particularly with regard to specific risks.

The campaign evaluation actually showed little or no effect on potential migrants' factual knowledge on irregular migration and their perceptions of the chances of arriving and staying in Europe. The initiative's aim of providing information was not reached, with the evaluation finding that migrants kept searching for information for some time after the campaign, indicating a continued need for information.[21]

Thus, this campaign achieved only mixed results. The authors offer the interpretation that participating migrants may not have changed their plans due to receiving better information, but because of the negative emotions conveyed.[22] While the results are encouraging with regard to campaign effectiveness, they also lead to further questions and cast doubt on the effectiveness of campaigns aimed at improving migration decision-making processes by better informing migrants. A 20 percent decrease in irregular migration intentions is a solid result on the one hand; on the other hand, it implies that it may only be possible to influence a minority of campaign participants.

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Lessons learned and open questions for migration information campaigns

Due to the dynamic outlined above, actual evidence of effective information campaign sis still quite limited. Nevertheless, some tentative lessons learned can be drawn, which require further analysis in future studies.[23]

→ **Learn about the specific migrant profile and migration drivers you are trying to target.**

As demonstrated in the example of assumptions around death rates (see Box 3), substantive background research is crucial for campaigns to have a sound understanding of the drivers of migration in the target country and group(s).

- For instance, one potential target group may be lower educated or even illiterate migrants with low awareness of risk (and high confidence). This target group would require a completely different approach than students, who may also be likely to leave but can be reached through their campuses, or online. With regard to messaging, less well-off and less educated migrants may see no alternative to emigration and economic drivers may be predominant.
- More educated potential migrants may be driven by educational aspirations. A desire to migrate comes from a desire to change one's life, but this change could also be achieved through other channels; for instance, pursuing education within the country could be an individual alternative to migration, if it appears feasible.
- Gender aspects should also be taken into consideration. In some countries, very few women emigrate, but this group may still be influential in the decision-making process. In other contexts, women may choose specific migration channels and may have different motives than men, again requiring a tailored approach if this group is to be effectively reached.
- Depending on the country context, it may also be important to consider protection needs as a driver of (irregular) migration and provide according information.

→ **Consider what makes irregular migration attractive for your target group, especially the emotional dimension.**

The attractiveness of irregular migration may lie in its (perceived) low cost or easy accessibility, or lack of other options. Background research should be conducted in order to understand what is relevant – keeping in mind that such perceptions may differ, even from region to region.

However, emotional factors and ideas and norms around masculinity also play a major role and should be kept in mind. Irregular migration can often be attractive for young men in particular, including because of the associated risks. Irregular migration may thus hold a "romantic appeal", as it can be seen as a kind of adventure. For campaign messaging, this means that over-emphasising the hardship of the migration process may trigger unforeseen effects – even if the effort on the part of the migrant is great, the outcome can be worth it (even more).

Economic motives can be closely interlinked with emotional motives framing the im-

agined life as an emigrant, such as:

- Frustration with the current situation;
- Shame or guilt at not being able to provide a living;
- Jealousy of migrants' success or returnees (perceived) wealth;
- Fear or lack of hope in the origin country; and
- Emotional attachment.[25]

Migration can also be a path towards individual autonomy for young men or a perceived escape from oppressive circumstances. Migration can also financially enable young men to marry and to provide for their family through remittances.

There is still a lack of research into how beliefs and values shape migration decisions. Religious and spiritual beliefs may provide the hope needed to embark on the journey. They can also influence destination choice, as different destinations are imagined to be a more or less "moral" or fitting religious environments. Other studies find that religious beliefs are tied to fatalist beliefs, implying that religious people may be more likely to disregard the risks entailed with migrating irregularly.[26] Regarding messaging, it may be relevant to target what is actually perceived as failure from the potential migrant's point of view; this may include failure to settle, failure to find wealth and failure to start a new life.

→ **Find out who the key influencers of migrants are and how migration is embedded in society as a livelihood strategy**

Migration information campaigns usually address individual potential migrants. But individuals do not usually take emigration decisions by themselves. Although there are certainly cases of people leaving without letting anyone know, decisions are usually made together as a household. Finances often need to be pooled to pay for the journey, and households often use the migration of at least one member as a source of additional income through remittances.

- For campaigns, this means that household and (extended) family members can be seen as "key influencers" of most potential migrants. They may put pressure on their family members to migrate (irregularly), or even connect migrants to a smuggler. Reversely, they might be able to convince them to stay. Therefore, they can form an important additional target group for campaigns.
- Families may need to be targeted with specific channels (for instance offline, in rural areas) and specific messages (including addressing financial needs).

A key lesson from previous campaigns is to work with credible messengers, such as returnees, in order to ensure that information will be trusted. Partnerships with civil society organisations, diaspora, and returnees can be useful, including in identifying such messengers. Migration research shows that aspiring migrants gather information through networks of family and friends, followed by intermediaries, including smugglers. This includes social contacts with migrants who have already "made it", or friends or family who have returned. However, information shared by social networks may not be factually correct. For campaigns engaging such messengers:

- Returnees may act as trusted messengers as long as they are not framed in

messaging as having "failed" at migration.
- Diasporas can form parts of campaigns, as long as their role is carefully assessed, as not all individuals may have the right profile, motivations or (provide) accurate information.

→ Actively address the role of smugglers as trusted sources of information and risk attitudes around irregular migration

Smugglers are often trusted sources of information, even influencing the decision to migrate in the first place, but in reality, they can be deceptive. The role of smugglers is ambivalent: They are facilitators of migration, but migrants are also – sometimes precariously – dependent on them during the journey. Research has shown that migrants (and their families) put great care into choosing a smuggler, but they do so under uneven conditions, including information asymmetry and difficulty in confirming reputation.

Since potential migrants already have a general risk awareness, increased awareness and knowledge of risks may have little influence on migration behaviour (i.e. the decision to not migrate). Migrants will disregard information around (irregular) migration if they see the underlying intention as preventing them from migrating altogether. Potential migrants can easily dismiss information about instances of failed migration as being due to individual "bad luck" or inadequate decision-making, which they themselves will surely avoid.

- Campaigns targeting or involving (former) smugglers are rare, but might actually be pertinent, especially for countries like Pakistan, where smugglers are often locally embedded co-nationals ("travel agents").
- With regard to trusted messengers, returnees and diasporas may be engaged to provide more complete information on smugglers and what can go wrong en route, as long as migrants are not portrayed as naïve or victims of smugglers (triggering problematic risk attitudes).
- Campaigns may aim to openly address the ambivalent role of smugglers, who can have very ambiguous relationships with migrants, and whose behaviour can range widely from the helpful to the criminal.
- Campaigns should also consider how perceived migration risks, compared to other perceived risks, lead to (imagined) rewards and figure as options that potential migrants can take into consideration.

→ Consider whether there are obstacles in accessing regular migration channels, and address them accordingly

Various factors can act as obstacles or facilitators for regular and irregular migration. Background research should ensure that, if it is crucial to do so, these factors are addressed through campaign actions focused on:

- (Un)availability of frameworks for regular migration;
- Cost of moving;
- (Un)availability of supportive social networks;
- (Un)availability of technology; and
- Prevalence of recruitment agencies or smugglers.

There may also be confusion surrounding the difference between official and unofficial migration channels, as smugglers can seem quite professional, while government information may be less accessible, particularly in rural areas. Returnees and diasporas make the ideal trusted messengers for this type of content, highlighting, for example, the differences between accurate information and fake information disseminated online.

→ Remember that migration is a global and long-standing phenomenon, balancing messaging accordingly

If the goals of campaigns are indeed humanitarian, migrants would have to receive information based on their actual urgent needs – e.g. on how to safely engage with a smuggler, even if this might facilitate irregular migration. Where approaches are not deliberately chosen, a recent evaluation of EC-funded campaigns shows that there occurs a trade-off between humanitarian and migration management goals, with the respective goals not fully aligned.[27] Nevertheless, implementers of migration information campaigns would do well to keep in mind that there are numerous factors that fall outside of their control.

There continues to be a demand for irregular low-paid, low-skilled, exploitable workers, in Europe and elsewhere, for specific sectors. There is also a lack of legal migration channels to Europe for un/low-skilled workers, including for these sectors. For instance, European embassies are often described as inaccessible to Pakistani citizens looking for migration opportunities in Europe.[28] Considering these wider trends, migrants may follow the logic of available work opportunities rather than state regulations (when the two considerations conflict). Keeping in mind the demonstrable positive effects of successful irregular migration for migrants and their families, including remittances, messages should be balanced between deterrence and delivery of more neutral or positive information. Such an approach is advisable from an ethical perspective; what is more, it has been demonstrated to be most effective through communications research. When aiming for deterrence, feasible alternatives to irregular migration should be considered and discussed.

→ Make your campaign "evaluable" – and evaluate

As long as the effectiveness of migration information campaigns has not been adequately assessed, with the results of such evaluations made public, the quality of future campaigns will continue to suffer. While full-scale scientific evaluations, as seen in randomised control trials, will be beyond the budget of most campaigns, there are still important steps that campaigns can take to assess their results and share them with others.

These steps include setting clear SMART[29] objectives and indicators; defining campaign features such as target groups, messengers and channels; and developing a clear idea of how an intervention will lead to results (the "theory of change").[30] Particularly for those implementers who continue working on campaigns, a minimal approach may be to conduct internal evaluations and record lessons learned for future campaigns. The insights gained can also be shared with others interested in running campaigns through factsheets. Wherever possible, independent evaluations should be factored into budgets from the beginning, including by donors.

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Conclusion

Studies show that campaigns can have an impact, but there is still little tried-and-tested guidance available, and numerous open questions remain.

Although the above lessons provide relevant inspiration for campaign implementers, it is also clear that they remain at a superficial level, as more granular information about what works, and what does not, is not available. This brief has shown that a few studies and evaluations have in principle demonstrated the possibility of migration information campaign impact.

However, there are still numerous open questions:

→ Which formats (counselling, video, Q&As) are most effective, and in which context?
→ Are "negative" messages more effective than "positive" messages?
→ Is factual information provision relevant, compared to emotional and convincing stories?
→ How long-term are the achievable effects?

New findings have also made some of the conundrums inherent to campaigns more pronounced. Campaigns often claim or imply humanitarian goals by simply conveying information to improve migrants' awareness of options.[31] Yet campaign evaluations seem to show that migrants changed their intentions because of the negative emotions conveyed, while the information was not retained – challenging common campaign rationale. Some incompatibility in terms of goals pursued may also prove irresolvable, for instance in relation to empowering migrants in negotiations with smugglers. Campaign implementers – be it consciously or unconsciously – often remain vague concerning their target groups, their objectives for changing migration behaviour, and their "theory of change" explaining how they expect to achieve results,[32] which weakens the potential impact of campaigns and the ability to measure their effects.

Moreover, when migrant decision-making reflects wider, more structural issues, including the demand for low-skilled workers in Europe and lack of pathways for legal migration, an information campaign will not be sufficient.

Finally, we need to ask what success means. Will a 20 percent decrease in the intention to migrate justify what was invested in a campaign?

At this point, any conclusions drawn are still tentative, because of the limited evidence base. Despite hundreds of campaigns being undertaken during the last decades, many of the results – when actually collected – remain locked in the filing cabinets of donors and therefore cannot contribute to our collective understanding of what information campaigns can achieve. In order to redress this dynamic, funders of campaigns need to dedicate budgets for the sound evaluation of migration information campaigns.

New findings can then provide a basis for discussion as to whether funding is better invested elsewhere; for instance, in addressing the demand side of irregular migration in Europe, or in building up alternatives to migration for young people in countries of origin through improving the education sector and other means.

Related ICMPD Publications

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Download
Summary

Acknowledgements

Endnotes

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2.   Altai Consulting (2021). Learning Lessons from the EUTF - Phase 2 - Paving the way for future programming on migration.
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4.   There are also campaigns informing (potential) returnees; and campaigns aimed at highlighting migrants' positive contributions in Europe. These are not treated the present brief.
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18. Randomised control trials imply, aside from the highest scientific standards, that there is a high number of participants involved, some of whom participate in a "fake" event in order to then compare the results (control group). In this case, the control group was shown a non-migration related film.

19. Tjaden, J. and F. A. Dunsch (2021). "The effect of peer-to-peer risk information on potential migrants – Evidence from a randomized controlled trial in Senegal." World Development, 145 (Sep. 2021), 4.

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23. This chapter focuses on campaigns addressing migrant smuggling, and does not reflect anti-trafficking campaigns.

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