

The role of narratives in migratory decision- making:

Analysing the impact of EU-funded
information campaigns in the Gambia

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March 2023

BRIDGES Working Papers 15

This project has received funding from the
European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation
programme under grant agreement No 101004564



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Reviewers

Ismaila Cessay and Blanca Garcés-Mascareñas.

Acknowledgements

We are extremely grateful to the 60 participants across the four regions of the Gambia who have shared their valuable experiences, stories, and insights with us. This study would not have been possible without their crucial contributions. We would like to express our profound gratitude to our local partners, the National Youth Council (NYC) of the Gambia, for their willingness to collaborate with us in this project. We are particularly grateful to Mr. Mustapha Sonko, Program officer for Migration at the NYC, for his help in organising the fieldwork and sharing his knowledge about information campaigns in the Gambia. Our appreciation also goes to Mr. Musa Cham for his invaluable research assistance. We also would like to extend our sincere appreciation to Mr. Faburama Jammeh for being an awesome driver and Bakary Tamba for capturing every moment of the fieldwork. Dr. Ismaila Cessay has been a valuable commentator and provider of feedback throughout the research process. Other special thanks and appreciation goes to Rosangela Caleprico who has been engaged in our work package. We also gratefully acknowledge the constructive feedback of Jan-Paul Brekke, Kjersti Thorbjørnsrud, Blanca Garcés-Mascreñas, and Cristina Sala on an earlier version of the report. Finally, we express our thanks to everyone who has helped in transcribing the interviews and focus group discussions.

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Abstract

This report of the BRIDGES project investigates as to how locally dominant and EU-promoted narratives related to migration, interact and influence the decision-making of potential migrants in the Gambia. The study is based on focus groups and in-depth interviews with 60 Gambian youngsters who think about migrating abroad.

The report starts by outlining the dominant - or Master - narratives on migration and Europe in the Gambia. These narratives put to the forefront the opportunities for a positive life change enabled by a person migrating to Europe. Europe is associated with (professional or educational) opportunities and a probability of getting high(er) living standards and achieving social mobility. Practically every participant tended to see a positive cost-benefit calculus in favour of migration, yet some considered the risks to outweigh the benefits of irregular migration.

The research shows that the messages promoted in EU-funded information campaigns struggle to unfold an influence in view of the dominant Master narratives on migration and Europe. Aggregately speaking, potential migrants in the Gambia rely little on the information of EU-funded campaigns when making decisions. The exception are potential migrants who are already sensitive about the risks of the journey. The campaigns are able to reinforce existing doubts, thereby tipping the overall calculus in some cases. That said, information is only one factor among others influencing migratory decision-making. More relevant ones are the actual livelihood opportunities or a lack of prospects in the Gambia as well as the social prestige that can be gained through migration.

Keywords: migration, narratives, EU, information campaigns, Gambia, potential migrants

1. Introduction

1.1 Research interest and research design

a) The research interest

The overall objective of the BRIDGES project funded by the EU's H2020 programme is to understand the causes and consequences of migration narratives in a context of increasing politicisation and polarisation.¹ While most researchers of the BRIDGES project have focused on inner-European dynamics and processes, we investigate the issue of migration narratives in countries of migrants' origin and transit. In the project's Work Package 6, two case studies were selected, the Gambia as a country of migrants' origin and Turkey hosting large number of Afghan (transit) migrants.²

In this report, we will present our findings on the Gambia. This report provides an in-depth understanding of migration narratives in the Gambia and the relevance and impact of EU-funded information campaigns targeting potential migrants. In precise terms, we aim to assess the influence of different types of narratives on the attitudes and decisions of potential migrants in the Gambia.

The report will be structured as follows. In the remainder of this introduction, we will introduce the Gambia as our case study and outline our research methodology. We explain how the fieldwork in the Gambia was conducted and the data analysed. In the second chapter, we discuss the relevant concepts regarding the possible impact of narratives on the decision-making of (potential) migrants. We also revise the relevant literature that helps to understand how (EU-funded) information campaigns may – or may not – influence their target audience. The empirical findings are outlined in three chapters. Chapter 3 outlines the dominant narratives (which we call 'Master narratives') on migration and Europe in the Gambia. In Chapter 4, we present our findings as to how the narratives of the (EU-funded) information campaigns have been endorsed or contested by the Gambians participating in this study. Chapter 5 reflects upon how the locally dominant and EU-promoted narratives interact and possibly influence (or do not influence) the decision-making processes of potential migrants in the Gambia. The final chapter contains the conclusions and recommendations.

b) The Gambia: a country of migrants' origin

A former British colony, the Gambia gained its independence in 1965. This tiny republic surrounded by neighbouring Senegal (on three sides with exception of its coastline to the Atlantic Ocean) had never experienced a change of government through the ballot until December 2016 - 52 years after gaining its independence. The independence leader, Sir Dawda Jawara, ruled The Gambia from 1965 until his forceful exit due to a military takeover by Yahya Jammeh in 1994. Yaya Jammeh, who ruled the Gambia for 22 years was defeated

¹ For more information on the BRIDGES project, you may visit its website: <https://www.bridges-migration.eu>

² This report may therefore be read in conjunction with the second BRIDGES report on the role of narratives in onward migration of Afghan nationals from Istanbul to Europe and the US written by Jan-Paul Brekke and Kjersti Thorbjørnsrud (2022).

in the December 2016 presidential elections. This came as a surprise to many observers as he had vowed to rule it for 'a billion years' (Jallow 2017, 5). Jammeh's regime has been largely described as an autocratic one marred with massive human rights violations, corruption, and economic mismanagement (Jallow 2017).

Since 2017, the new government under President Adama Barrow has sought to restore democracy and good governance. The reforms have included setting up a Truth, Reconciliation and Reparation Commission to investigate the human rights violations of the Jammeh regime, prosecute perpetrators and provide victim reparations (Jaw 2018). The Constitutional Review Commission was also established and mandated to draft a new constitution for the Gambia. Despite having large domestic and international support during the early period of his presidency, the Barrow government has also come to face criticisms from opposition parties and citizens (Cham and Adam 2021). For instance, a proposed new constitution which included presidential term limits and plans to curtail the power of the executive was rejected by Gambian legislators even before being put to a referendum (Kronberg 2021; Houlihan 2020).

The lack of political freedoms and struggles to improve socio-economic standards were – and continue to be – contributing factors as to why many Gambians seek to make a better living abroad (Saine 2009; Kebbeh 2013). Migration has been an important aspect of Gambian culture and daily realities (Gaibazzi 2020). Despite its relatively small land size and population of about 2.5 million people, the Gambia has had a long history of both internal and international migration (Alberola, Strain, and Horne 2018). The Gambian diaspora population is estimated to be between 140,000 to 200,000 (Kebbeh 2019; GoTG 2018). Common destinations for Gambian migrants include the USA, UK, Senegal, Spain, Germany, and Italy (Kebbeh 2013).

The number of emigrants has further increased due to the popularization of routes to Europe through the Mediterranean Sea. This is locally known as the 'backway' to Europe. According to Zanker and Altrogge (2017, 3), 'Gambian emigrants opt for Europe as a destination more often than migrants from other West African countries.' In the 'European migration crisis' of 2015 and 2016, Gambians were among the top nationalities entering Europe irregularly through the Mediterranean Sea globally and second from Africa (Hunt 2017). An estimated 45,000 Gambians migrated irregularly to Europe between 2009 and 2018 (Frontex 2019). Due to its small population, the number of Gambian arrivals to Europe represents about 2% of Gambia's total population (Frontex 2019). The Gambia has been the largest sender country of irregular migrants as a percentage of the total population (Bah and Batista 2019). The numbers have reduced after the peak years of 2015 and 2016. The reduction in irregular migration can be attributed to the increasing awareness of the dangers of the route, the dire security situation in Libya and partly due to the regime change.

Despite the reduction, irregular migration to Europe continues to be a relevant phenomenon. The Gambians who made it to Europe in an undocumented way usually face numerous challenges ranging from a regularisation of their status, access to housing and health services for the undocumented, language barriers, etc. Only about 8% of Gambian asylum seekers in Italy were granted protection status as of 2017 (Eurostat, 2018).

Regardless of the fact that the situation in Europe is precarious for many, Gambian emigrants have a high relevance for the economy. Remittances, in 2021, contributed to about 63% of the Gambian Gross Domestic Product (IFAD 2022), thereby playing a highly important role to

alleviate household poverty. Remittances sent by Gambians in the diaspora tend to financially outpace overseas development assistance (World Bank 2019).

1.2 Research Design and Methodology

a) Research design

In this report, we pursue the objectives to (1) establish how different types of narratives influence knowledge, attitudes, and decisions of (potential) migrants; and (2) provide an in-depth understanding of the relevance and perceptions of EU-funded information campaigns targeting potential migrants in this African country.

There is a risk of overstating the potential impact of EU-funded information campaigns by only focusing on them. To counter this possible bias, we started all our focus groups and interviews by investigating the dominant – and local – narratives on migration and Europe in the Gambia. We thus first collected information on how Gambians view, talk and get informed about migration and Europe independently from the EU-funded information campaigns, and how they make decisions on migration. Only at a second stage, we looked in more detail as to how Gambians react to and perceive the messages put forward in EU-funded information campaigns.

While different in terms of set-up and format, these EU-funded migration information campaigns tend to convey three core messages: (1) ‘Live in Europe is difficult’ (do not come); (2) ‘The route is dangerous’ (do not go); and (3) ‘There are local opportunities in your country’ (stay) (see Brekke and Beyer 2019). These main messages are also the ones we can observe in the campaigns in the Gambia. This study analysed the endorsement or contestation of these messages by potential migrants in the Gambia. Our analysis seeks to establish how EU-promoted narratives interact with locally produced ones. We showed brief examples of locally used campaign videos representing these three core messages, with potential young migrants in the Gambia, and discussed these on the basis of follow-up questions.

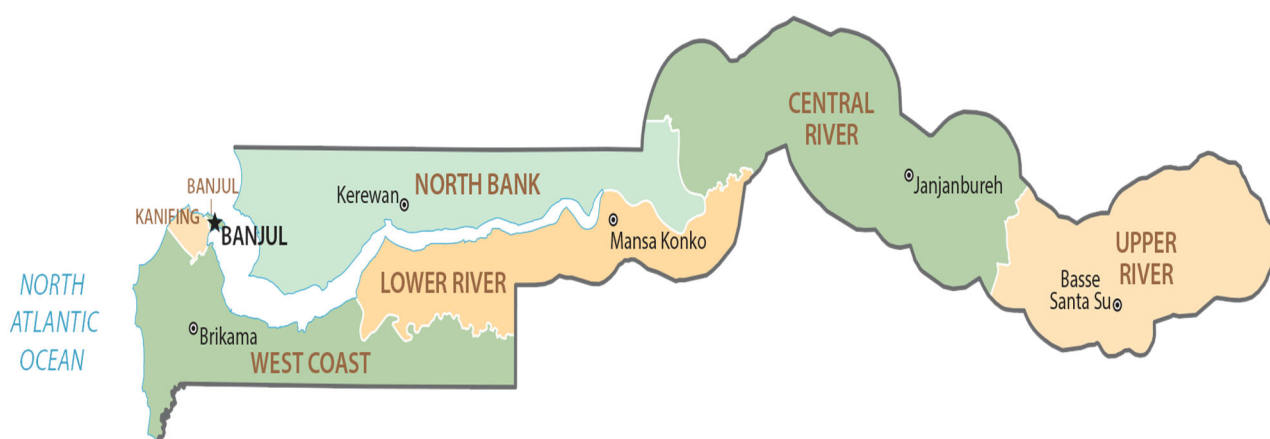
To answer the project’s research questions, we conducted extensive fieldwork in the Gambia. We proceeded in two stages. A first preparatory trip was organised in November 2021 to find and liaise with local partners and get official approval for the research. The Gambian Ministry of Higher Education, Research, Science and Technology formally endorsed the conduct of the study and fieldwork.

The National Youth Council (NYC) of The Gambia became the local cooperation partner for the project (formalised through a Memorandum of Understanding). The NYC is an official organisation of the Gambian bureaucracy mandated to coordinate youth matters and advise the government on youth matters. They have regional youth offices and structures across the country, which we were allowed to rent and access for our study. Migration has become a key focus of the NYC. Their own work with Gambian youth includes awareness raising and information campaigns on migration. In close cooperation with the BRIDGES team, the logistical arrangements of the research were determined, including the locations of the focus groups and interviews, as well as the profile and recruitment of participants. In addition to the NYC, local Gambian research assistants were hired to support the fieldwork activities.

The field work was prepared by Omar N. Cham, a Gambian researcher employed at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, and supervised by Profs. Florian Trauner and Ilke Adam. Mr. Cham cooperated closely with the migration officer of the NYC, Mr Mustapha Sonko. The fieldwork was conducted in two phases. The first phase, in Lower River Region and West Coast Region, was conducted by Omar N. Cham, Florian Trauner, Ilke Adam, Mustapha Sonko, and Musa Cham (a research assistant). The second phase focused on North Bank Region and Upper River Region and took place without the presence of Profs. Adam and Trauner in the Gambia. Being a member of the Advisory Board of the BRIDGES project, Dr. Ismaila Ceesay of the University of the Gambia acted as an advisor, consultant, and reviewer during the whole research process of Work Package 6.

The fieldwork took place in March and April 2022. As mentioned above, interviews and focus groups were conducted in 4 out of the 6 regions of the Gambia: West Coast Region, Lower River Region, North Bank Region, and Upper River Region. These regions were selected due to (1) high levels of emigration; (2) intense campaigning on migration issues; and (3) the existence of a migration information centre.

FIGURE 1. Map of the Gambia



Source: GISGeography.com– The Map shows the four regions in which focus groups and interviews were conducted.

b) Data collection and coding

The participants selected were young people from the age of 18 to 35. People in this age group are most likely to emigrate, notably if they lived in the regions in which we conducted our interviews and the focus groups. They have also been the key target group of (EU-funded) migration information campaigns. We ensured that the people participating in the study had already been exposed to an information campaign (online, TV, radio or in person). Even though Gambian men tend to migrate far more than women, we included female participants in both the interviews and focus groups. The question to what extent there would be differences (in terms of narratives or decision-making procedures) between men and women was an integral part of the research design.

PICTURE 1. A home interview with a participant



Source: Florian Trauner, Ilke Adam, Omar N. Cham and Hannah Sattlecker

Furthermore, we have made an attempt to include sufficient variance with regards to the educational background of the respondents. In each of the four regions, we conducted eleven in-depth individual interviews and one focus group discussion (with at least four participants). In total, 60 Gambians participated in this study. The focus groups typically lasted for two hours or longer. The interviews had an average length of around forty minutes and took place in either a venue arranged by the NYC or at the homes of the participants.

The questions addressed in the individual interviews and focus groups slightly differed in terms of the structure, albeit they both covered the same topics relating to narratives and information sources on migration as well as the impact of information campaigns. We showed short campaign videos in each of the individual interviews and focus group discussions. Each of the three videos represented one of the three main messages portrayed in these campaigns: 'the not-so-great life in Europe'; 'the danger of the migratory route' and 'the opportunities at home'. These videos provided a basis for the debate on how the participating Gambian youngsters perceive and react to these messages.

PICTURE 2. A focus group discussion with participants in Soma, Lower River Region, the Gambia



Source: Florian Trauner, Ilke Adam, Omar N. Cham and Hannah Sattlecker

After completion, all recorded interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed, leading to roughly 1,000 pages of data. The transcribed material was anonymized according to the guidelines of the BRIDGES project. For example, an interview with a female informant from the North Bank Region of the Gambia was anonymised as: GM_NB_I_Female, 30s, 1. In the case of a focus group discussion, it is was anonymised as GM_NB_FG_Female, 30s, 1. Here, 'GM' represents the country code for Gambia, 'NB' for North Bank Region, 'I' for interview and the remaining information about the informants gender, age and the number allocated by us. Information such as the name of the informant, workplace, or other potentially identifying information were all anonymised.

TABLE 1. The anonymisation of the interview and focus group data

| | Abbreviation | Full meaning |
|------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| Country code | GM | The Gambia |
| Regional code | NB | North Bank Region |
| | WC | West Coast Region |
| | URR | Upper River Region |
| | LRR | Lower River Region |
| Form of Participation | I | Interview |
| | FG | Focus Group |
| Sex of participant | | Male |
| | | Female |
| Age of participant | | 20s, 30s, ... |
| Number | Focus groups | 1 in each region |
| | Interviews | 1-11 in each region |

In a next step, the data was evaluated with the help of a coding scheme and the NVIVO software. The coding scheme was set-up in line with the overarching research interest and included codes on information sources on migration, personal experiences about and views on migration, factors influencing individual decision-making and the confirmation or contestation of the information campaign messages.

c) Ethical considerations

The project team has been driven by a desire to stick to high ethical standards while conducting the fieldwork. As mentioned, these endeavours included asking for a formal approval of the research by the Gambian Ministry of Higher Education, Research, Science and Technology (MoHERST). Each engagement with a participant started with an explanation of the research objective and the request for an informed consent. This took place in either the local language or in English depending on the preferences of the informant. The informed consent could be given orally or in a written form. Oral consents were recorded or expressed in the presence of a testimony other than the interviewer. Informants were free to choose between partial consent (to be quoted without identifying informant), full consent (to be quoted with personal identifying information) or no consent. The informed consent did not only concern the interviews. A photographer also took part in the fieldwork to take photos of the research and the communities we visited. The participants were also asked to give consent on how to use the photos (e.g.,

for the report or a dissemination event in the Gambia after the completion of the project). All photos used in this report have been explicitly accepted by the participants.

The participants were also informed that they could withdraw their consent at a later stage. They were given a local contact person for doing so. To ensure transparency, the project's funders (the European Commission and its H2020 programme) were explicitly mentioned. We also highlighted that the research would serve academic purposes and may be published in the forms of academic articles, project reports and policy briefs. All interviews were recorded after a consent was granted.

To promote a more mutually beneficial partnership between our local partners (NYC), research assistants and all participants that took part in the study, we ensured that all services rendered to us were fully paid. The methods of payments were determined by the NYC. The participant's travel costs to participate in the interviews/focus groups were reimbursed as well as food provided. This was not essentially a payment for participation but in line with the best practices of North-South research partnerships (Landau 2012). Beyond this, we intend to go to back and present our findings to the participants and relevant authorities in the Gambia as to allow the Gambian youngsters who participated to (indirectly) engage with Gambian and European policymakers.

Finally, we will briefly reflect upon our role as researchers in relation to policy. The H2020 call for research on the theme of 'migration narratives', to which the BRIDGES consortium responded, called for an evaluation of the impact of European information campaigns targeting potential and actual migrants. As migration researchers, we assumed on the basis of yearlong migration studies (de Haas et al., 2020) that this impact on the decisions of potential migrants whether or not to migrate (and how and when) is presumingly only a modest one. Information is only one of the many sources influencing migration decisions and information campaigns are only one of the sources of information upon which potential migrants rely. This BRIDGES report does thus not have the objective to advice those in power on how to make information campaigns better or more effective. In a spirit of 'speaking truth to power', it is our aim, however, to contribute on the basis of empirically based and academically sound academic research to knowledge-based discussions in this field of study. The role of information in migratory decision-making, and migration information campaigns is not fully researched. There is a knowledge gap on how migration information campaigns interact with other sources of information, and more particularly, how the narratives produced by the European Commission and EU member states interact, align, and compete with other migration narratives. Our study provides deeper insights into how and why migration information campaigns, even if widely promoted, only present a comparatively minor ingredient of a complex explanatory cocktail of migration decisions. As researchers we are convinced that this deeper knowledge can contribute to better informed, and more just migration policies. Our study may allow a wider public and policymakers to reflect on what a tiny puzzle these campaigns actually present within migratory decision-making. The report may also stimulate thinking of which purpose these campaigns serve in the pool of migration policy tools.

2. Conceptualising narratives and information campaigns

This chapter shifts the attention to the academic knowledge on the issues under research here: the role of information in migration-decision making, the role of narratives, and the use and consequences of EU-funded information campaigns.³

2.1 The role of information for the decision-making of migrants

The decision of an individual to migrate tends to be influenced by a range of factors (de Haas et al. 2020). According to Carling (2017, 3), ‘the origins of migration lie in the *conditions* of states, communities, and individuals that underlie a *desire for change*, which, in turn, produces *migration aspirations*.’ As a matter of fact, an individual may first realize that something must change to alter his or her life trajectory. The reasons can relate to survival, the avoidance of repression or to a perspective of improved socio-economic conditions. A desire to migrate develops. However, the realization of such aspirations depends on the capabilities and the ‘migration infrastructure’ (Carling 2017, 4-5) – a term used to capture regulatory frameworks, commercial offers (including smugglers) and other factors such as migrant networks and household strategies (Stark 1991; De Haas and Fokkema, 2010). Close personal networks play a particular important role for migration-decision processes (see Olwig 2002; Haug 2008; McAuliffe 2022).

Yet not all migration aspirations lead to migration outcomes. There are people who wish to migrate but are not able to migrate as their aspirations are not matched with their abilities. They are constrained, for instance, by migration control policies, a lack of development but also their individual risk-aversiveness. In such situations, potential migrants face ‘involuntary immobility’ (Carling 2002; Ceesay 2017). Studies such as those of Ceesay (2017) show how young people experience and respond to conditions of such ‘involuntary immobility’, which can be a life-shaping experience in West Africa and other regions. Fall (2013) shows that migration aspirations are not always – and only – based on radically ‘good’ or ‘bad’ perceptions of the home or destination country but also affected by other factors.

The process from developing migration aspirations to actually migrating therefore involves different steps and considerations. Factual circumstances – e.g., financial capabilities, networks, safety – play a role, as do subjective factors such as knowledge, attitudes, and conviction. One conviction that can be particularly important in migration decision-making in the Gambia and elsewhere, and which particularly concerns the considerations regarding the decision to engage in a dangerous migration journey, concerns fatalistic ideas or a belief in predestination (Thornton et al. 2020). Fatalism is the belief that ‘human outcomes are preordained by forces outside of one’s power and control’ (Thornton et al. 2020,1). If you are

³ Working papers outlining the state-of-the-literature on EU-funded information campaigns as well as on the state-of-the-literature on Migration Narratives have been written (see Trauner, Cham & Caleprico 2022 as well as Boswell et. al 2021). This section is partly informed by and is summarizing the BRIDGES Working Paper Nr 2/2021 as well as Working Paper Nr 3/2022. Anyone interested in getting deeper into the subject may consult these overview papers directly.

predestined to succeed, you will survive the dangerous journey; if you are predestined to die, you will not.

The complexity of young people's migration decision-making processes is pointed out by scholars such as Adjamah (2012) and Fall (2013), specifically regarding Senegal. Both argue for an understanding of migratory decisions as influenced by various personal and societal factors, cultural and religious traditions as well as positive imaginaries, as opposed to the common narrative of youth migration as a sole and immediate reaction to desperation and poverty. Instead of framing African youth as 'lost generation' and 'hopeless', the strategies of young Africans coping with everyday life despite experiencing various hardships need to be looked at more closely and from a holistic perspective (Ceessay 2017). Awumbila et. al (2011) have explored different socio-cultural dimensions of youth migration from Ghana. Obour et. al (2017) add a very relevant and contemporary perspective on migration decision-making by looking at factors influencing climate change-induced migration.

Information is one of many factors influencing migration decision-making (Czaika et. al 2021). It influences the aspirations and expectancies related to migration, search-behaviour, as well as the assessment of risks and benefits. These factors all directly affect migratory decision-making. The role and sources of information also differ for different groups of migrants, depending on the reasons and circumstances of migration as well as the national context (Brekke and Five Aarset 2009; Brekke and Beyer 2019). Information is gathered through various sources. These include social networks in countries of origin, of people in transit or in destination countries, social media and governmental or other public sources. The sources of information that people with migration aspirations dispose of are thus very rich and widespread. Information campaigns are only one of them. It is important to also note that information and knowledge are unevenly distributed amongst potential migrants, depending on the educational background and general resources (Brekke and Brochmann 2014).

Regarding information as one of the factors possibly influencing migration decision-making, a key issue is whether the information is considered trustworthy. In a digital age, people may have an abundance of information but not every piece of information is considered of equal value. Smartphones and social media have contributed to what Dekker et. al (2018, 2) name 'the age of information precarity' (referring to Wall et. al 2018). The risks concern particularly the trustworthiness, security, and accessibility of online information. In general, close social ties seem to be the most trusted informants and have a strong influence on migration decision-making. The information given by close social contacts can of course be transmitted via social media and will be trusted more than information found on social media provided by others. Different than information provided by close social ties, outside and public information does not seem to have a significant impact on the decision to migrate or not – however, as Brekke and Beyer (2019) state, it can potentially influence the timing of decision-making, for example when waiting for conditions on the route to improve.

In brief, as to evaluate the role and consequences of information campaigns on migration - which is the main aim of this Work Package – it is important to know, *first*, that migration decision-making is influenced by various factors, information being only one of them; and *second*, that these information campaigns targeting potential migrants are only one of the many different sources of information. The messages conveyed in the information campaigns present certain 'narratives' on migration, which compete or overlap with other narratives on

migration, conveyed in other sources of information like migration experiences of friends and family, information transmitted via close social ties and posts in social media groups. In the next section, we develop how the concept of narratives is defined and relevant for the study of migration.

2.2 Narratives on migration as a particular type of information

What are narratives on migration? Narratives are more than just information. Narratives are characterized by a certain stability and consistency over time and/or across space (Jacobs 2015). Information *as such* does not yet create a narrative. One feature that distinguishes narratives from other concepts such as 'framing' or 'discourse' is that they enable a stable, easily comprehensible, and accessible understanding of information around complex societal issues. This refers to a certain structure, as well as to the content of a certain storyline. Due to the simpler and structured nature of information conveyed in a narrative, and through the existence of a storyline, narratives are easily reproducible through societal discourse and practices (Hammack and Pilecki 2012; Boswell et. al. 2021). Narratives do not only play an important role for understanding complex social phenomena, but they also foster easier communication and persuasion. People relate to and understand narratives. Narratives can be used deliberately to influence or even manipulate people, notably in the context of politics (Boswell et. al. 2021). Information campaigns or other types of sensibilisation campaigns are an example of the use of information with the aim of influencing people (see Garces and Pastore, 2022).

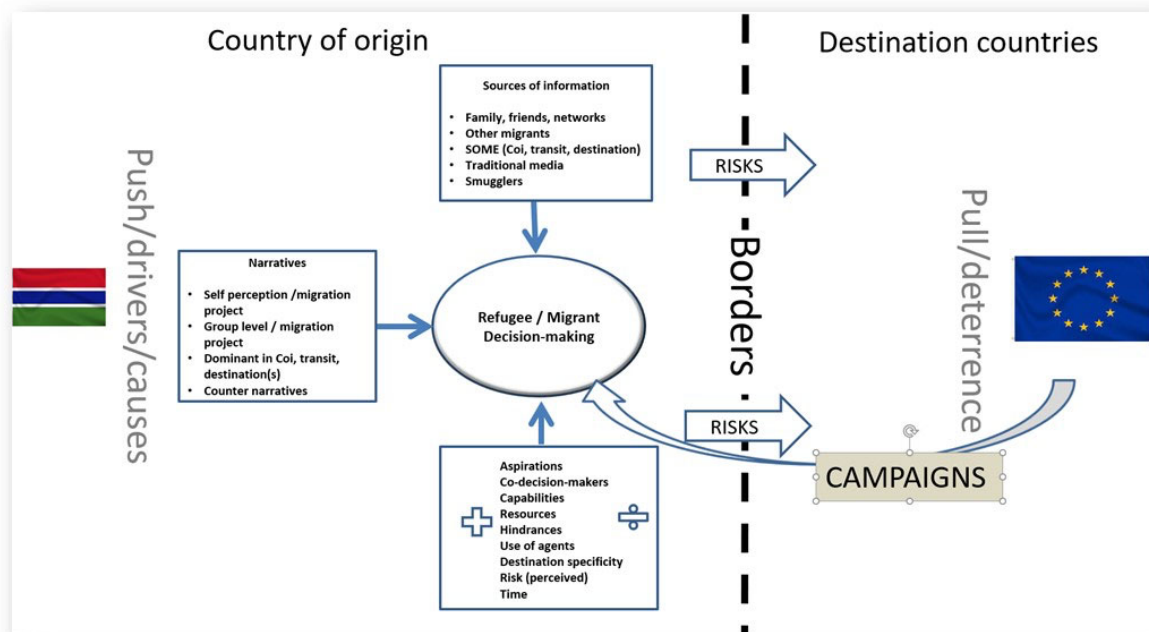
There are different types of narratives relating to migration. Across the Global North, a (polarised) discourse around (im-)migration often develops narratives that create a story of 'we' and 'the others.' These narratives do not only influence the discourse on migration phenomena but also attitudes towards migrants and political decisions. They are part of what De Fina and Tseng (2017) call 'narratives *about* migration', compared to 'narratives *of* or *by* migrants.' The latter focus mostly on the experiences, identities, and values of migrants. They may contribute to debunking and counter-narrating negative views on migration and give migrants an important voice. Positive narratives about migration are often framed around national pride and identity, like humanitarian values or the promotion of diversity rather than around the actual benefits migration brings to a country (Banulescu-Bogdan et. al. 2021). Most research on the Global North has focused on narratives *about* immigration in the media and political discourse, especially regarding their securitizing and victimizing nature.

In West Africa, however, narratives about migration – mainly referring to emigration – are overall positive. Even though migration aspirations and expectancies have changed in the last years – with more information available through various sources and many European countries limiting the possibilities to reach- and set up a life in Europe safely – there is a dominant positive image connected to migration and the belief that a family will live a better life if they have relatives outside of the country (Altrogge and Zanker 2019). As Fall (2013) highlights, migration is often seen as an alternative life project, which goes together with the desire to discover the world and receive access to quality education and knowledge. Remittances, which make up a crucial economic factor for families in the Gambia and other countries, are a central part of positive narratives around migration (Altrogge and Zanker 2019). This positive narrative and desire to migrate is also visible in local language expressions of African countries such as the 'bushfaller' in Cameroon (Pelikan and Tatah 2009), expressing 'having made it' as a young

male in another country as well as ‘Barça or Barsaax’ (Go to Barcelona or Die) in Senegalese (Tandian 2015), or (as we will see below) the very common expression, in the Gambia and other West African countries that migration is a means of looking ‘for greener pastures’.

Figure 2 outlines the interplay of narratives, information and other factors influencing migratory decision-making.

FIGURE 2: Conceptualizing migratory decision-making, with a particular focus on the role of information and narratives



Source: Adapted from Brekke and Beyer 2019

2.3 The relevance of EU-funded information campaigns

Information campaigns have been an important part of migration management within the European Union since the 1990s. They have become more widely used by the EU in the aftermath of the 2015-2016 ‘migration crisis.’ By 2019, the European Commission dedicated over €23 million on information campaigns and more than 100 campaigns were organized by different member states (EMN 2019). There are different types of information campaigns. They can range from face-to-face conversations, ‘Migrants as Messengers,’ to video campaigns and artistic performances. In the last couple of years, social media has gained relevance given that these platforms offer easy and comparatively cheap communication possibilities (Musarò 2019). In terms of strategies, information campaigns have also shifted towards involving local civil society actors and returnees as trusted information sources (Dunsch, Taden, and Quiviger 2019; Marino, Schapendonk, and Lietaert 2022).

Most scholarly work on information campaigns focuses on the content and the actors implementing them (such as IOM or civil society actors), leaving aside the perspectives of migrants. An academic overview article of Pagogna and Sakdapolrak (2021) concludes that ‘there is still little research available on information campaigns concerning irregular migration, and even fewer studies report on their effectiveness. By implication, future research is advised

to focus on empirical studies on the impact of information campaigns on migrants' aspirations. This Work Package of the BRIDGES project seeks to address such a research gap.

The purpose of the information campaigns is often framed around humanitarian reasons such as raising awareness for the risks of migrants or informing about legal pathways to Europe. In essence, however, they are clearly aimed at deterring migrants from trying to come to Europe in an irregular manner. From this perspective, they complement traditional methods of migration control, such as the surveillance of borders (Musarò 2019). Migrants are portrayed as lacking sufficient information, a gap which the campaigns want to fill. The aim is to make potential migrants trust the information and dismiss plans of leaving without proper documentation.

In terms of impact, most scholars believe that potential migrants tend to dismiss the messages sent out by EU information-campaigns as untrustworthy and biased (Oeppen 2016; Schans and Optekam 2016; Pécoud 2010). Information campaigns are often seen as part of a framework of restrictive border policies by migrants themselves which spurs migrants' resistance towards them. This attitude has also been reflected in anecdotal evidence from IOM-run information campaigns (Browne 2015) as well as evaluations from online information campaigns (Rodriguez 2017).

Regarding EU-funded information campaigns in the Gambia, the EU's activities have also intensified. The IOM office in the Gambia has taken the lead in the implementation of these campaigns on behalf of the EU and its member states. Local NGO's and returnees have also played an increasing role during these information campaigns (Marino, Schapendonk, and Lietaert 2022). A crucial moment of change has been the year 2016, when the citizens of the Gambia were able to push for a democratic transition through the ballot box. The EU hardly cooperated with the previous authoritarian government led by President Yaya Jammeh. As of 2017, after the democratic transition, the EU and several member states seriously enhanced its involvement and funding on migration related projects (see Cham and Adam 2021) including, amongst many others, the set-up of numerous information campaigns. Table 2 provides some examples of information campaigns implemented in the Gambia since 2016.

TABLE 2: Examples of EU-funded information campaigns in the Gambia

| Project name | Project objective | Project funder |
|--|--|--|
| Strengthening communication on migration | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhance communication on migration matters by government, CSO, NGOs, media, etc. | EU Directorate General for Migration and Home Affairs (DG Home). |
| Migrants as Messengers | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Raise awareness on irregular migration Deter irregular migration through information campaigns conducted by returnees | The government of the Netherlands |

| | | |
|-------------------|--|-----------------------------------|
| IOM X West Africa | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote safe migration through informed decisions • Accurate information on safe routes as well as on local opportunities | The German Federal Foreign Office |
|-------------------|--|-----------------------------------|

Source: authors' own compilation

The Gambia is also included in regional information campaigns run by the IOM such as the 'Aware Migrants'-project, which has been financed by the Italian Ministry of the Interior. It includes testimonies of migrants who describe their failed attempt to migrate to Italy/Europe or their struggle to get along in Italy. Picture 3 is a screenshot of this campaign showing a Gambian man called Moro, who gives testimony of his experience of being imprisoned for 8 months in Libya.

PICTURE 3. Screenshot of a testimony used in the 'Aware Migrants' project



Source : IOM Aware Migrants Project, <https://www.awaremigrants.org/stories-along-route/moro>

This type of video aims to make West Africans more aware of the dangers of traveling through the Sahara and Libya and their potential problems in Italy. Those are key messages that the EU-funded information campaigns promote. Even if some campaigns differ in terms of messaging, most information campaigns funded by the EU's institutions or its member states convey the following three messages: (1) Life in Europe is difficult, do not come; (2) The route is dangerous, do not go; and (3) There are local opportunities in your country, stay (see Brekke & Beyer 2019). In the remainder of this report, we evaluate as to how these three messages relate to and compete with other narratives relating to the migration journey, Europe as the destination and the Gambia as the current home.

3. The Master narratives on migration and Europe in the Gambia

This section shifts the attention to the empirical findings of our study, starting with the dominant – or Master – narrative on migration and Europe. We sought to establish these narratives in the Gambia by posing the question as to what connotations come to mind when hearing ‘migration’ and ‘Europe’ (and then discussing the different associations in more depth). At this stage, we did not yet focus on the impact of EU-funded information campaigns. The objective was to investigate which narrative on migration and Europe is the dominating one in the Gambia.

3.1 Narratives on Migration

a) *The Master narrative on migration*

The study’s participants dominant or Master narrative on migration puts opportunities and possibilities for positive life change to the forefront. Independently from one another, many participants used the expression ‘searching for greener pastures’ when describing what they associate with the term migration. ‘Greener pastures’ stand for better education and work opportunities and the possibility of more support to families and communities. It refers to traditional family strategies in the Sahel and West African regions to move or migrate in case of drought.

TABLE 3. Examples of quotes using the expression ‘greener pastures’ when talking about migration

| <i>Interviewee/Focus Group Participant</i> | <i>Quote</i> |
|--|--|
| GM_NB_I_Male_20s_5 | Everyone is going to search for greener pastures. |
| GM_LRR_I_Female_20s_2 | I’d like to migrate from here to Europe in order to have good education and greener pastures. |
| GM_WC_FG_Female_20s_4 | When I hear about migration, my mind goes directly to the movement of people in search of greener pastures and better lives. |

Migration is framed as providing a solution to an often-difficult life situation characterised by poverty and a lack of prospects. The opportunities which migration offers can be categorised at the level of individuals, families, and communities.

To start with, at an individual level many simply want to get to know other countries and believe that they are deprived of travel opportunities by living in the Gambia. The statement of a 17-year young man is typical in that respect. ‘What actually comes to mind [on migration] is seeing

[what] I have never seen before, just having experience on things I have never seen before' (GM_WC_FG_Male_17_3).

Individuals who manage to migrate are seen as the lucky or privileged ones. They can advance their own education or get a job and a salary in an environment that would certainly be more facilitating compared to the Gambia.

TABLE 4. Examples of quotes linking migration to individual opportunities

| <i>Interviewee/Focus Group Participant</i> | <i>Quote</i> |
|--|---|
| GM_WC_FG_Male_20s_2: | The moment you hear Europe, or you hear someone has entered Europe, you feel happy. You say: "that person is okay now; his life has already changed." That is the mentality that we have here. |
| GM_WC_I_FEMALE_20S_8 | Well, in the Gambia, what people say is [that] life is hard and there is no work. So, they always try and help their son to go to Europe and help them. In the Gambia here, you will go to school and sometimes to pay the school fee is a problem. You see families struggle to pay for school fees. So, some will try the backway and go to Europe. |
| GM_WC_FG_Male_17_3 | When I hear migration, I think my life is about to change. I am about to experience something that I have not experienced before - be it in education or any other thing ... It is about change; it is about to take another level. |

Importantly, migration is hardly ever a decision made by and for individuals alone. The narrative includes a 'family-' and/or 'community'-dimension. A migrant would improve the lives of the family and community members left behind in the Gambia. Remittances sent back by migrants are an important source of income for many families. This, therefore, contributes to a positive perception and narrative towards migration.

TABLE 5. Examples of quotes on the positive impact of migration on families and communities

| <i>Interviewee/Focus Group Participant</i> | <i>Quote</i> |
|--|---|
| GM_LRR_I_Male_20s_9 | People that have migrated are helping themselves, helping their family, helping their friends. If they were here, they couldn't do that. The chances are zero percent. [When] they are in Europe, ... they are developing their compound, helping |

| | |
|-----------------------|--|
| | their parents, and improving their living conditions in a positive way. |
| GM_LRR_I_Male_30s_4 | Those who managed to reach Europe, they are supporting their families, and supporting the people here. |
| GM_LRR_FG_MALE_30S_2: | All the good structures, infrastructures, etc. are done by these people who migrate abroad. ... in fact, in order to build our mosque, our health centres or our churches, we depend on people outside. So, ... the people outside there are doing great work for the development of this country. |

Does the Master narrative differentiate between regular and irregular migration? The narrative incorporates both forms of migration, yet it primarily focuses on irregular migration, called the 'backway.' There are little opportunities for Gambians to migrate legally to Europe. Legal migration is thus seen to be of minor relevance for Gambians. Many knew someone who was rejected in an application for a Schengen (or another) visa or are convinced that they will be rejected themselves by the consulates of EU member states if they try to apply. As a matter of fact, the attempt to use legal migration and travel channels was considered a waste of money and effort (notably as the fee for a visa application is not reimbursed in case of a negative outcome).

TABLE 6. Examples of quotes highlighting a limited faith in legal migration opportunities

| <i>Interviewee/Focus Group Participant</i> | <i>Quote</i> |
|--|--|
| GM_LRR_FG_Male_30s_3 | With that little amount of money you have, you think if you go the backway. It will be easier for you. Because many people apply [for a visa to Europe], I know many people who go and apply for visas ... but out of 100 only 10 will make it. The rest will be rejected. |
| GM_LRR_I_Male_20s_9 | Some say that applying for visa is costly, you can apply for it but at the end you don't get it, and you lose your money. So, most of them have this fear, so they don't want to apply for visa. |
| GM_WC_I_Male_30s_1 | From my experience, my friends have applied [for] visas and they were rejected. The other one, [he tried it] more than three times. They rejected him. It isn't worth doing it because ... how many thousands [of Dalasi] did he lose along the way? So, I said: "OK, that's a no-go area for me"; so I choose this other way. |

b) Counter narrative(s) on migration

The Gambians who participated in this study were generally well-aware of the risks associated with irregular migration to Europe. While most participants tended to see a positive cost-benefit calculus in favour of migration, some considered that the risks would outweigh the benefit of irregular migration. In that case, the understanding of migration remains positive, yet it should ideally only take place in a legal way. This is not a counter-narrative *sensu stricto*, notably if viewed from the common understanding of the BRIDGES project. In the BRIDGES project, the term is used to refer to the strategies of non-hegemonic actors aimed to challenge dominant narratives (Garcés and Pastore 2022). In the Gambia, we see more a specification and refinement of the Master narrative put forward by most participants, i.e., that migration has a positive effect on individuals and society. A default condition is added to this Master narrative: migration has to, ideally, take place in a legal and orderly manner to actually unfold these positive effects. However, as this option is not available for most Gambians, migration through the ‘backway’ is the default.

TABLE 7. Examples of quotes highlighting that a positive effect can only be achieved by legal migration

| <i>Interviewee/Focus Group Participant</i> | <i>Quote</i> |
|--|---|
| GM_LRR_I_Female_19_10 | the legal way of migration, ... we have a lot of positive impact from it in the country, because ... sometimes they will be sending money to the family, and that helps to change the lives of people from the country here that they leave behind, and it reduces dependency in the country. |
| GM_URR_I_MALE_20S_11 | Well, I feel very bad, especially when it is illegal, because there is so many risks attached to it. It is really very, very difficult. I feel very sad when I see young potential Gambians leaving the country to migrate to Europe through the illegal way. |
| GM_WC_I_Female_30s_5 | For regular migration, [it] is normal and very obvious, for being young or old, to move from one destination to another because it's part of life. But when you come to the irregular migration, it's an issue whereby it affects both young and old generations. ... it is not a good thing to me ... the reason I say so – the dangers that we are going to face. |

A consequence of this specification is a narrative highlighting the need to avoid irregular migration and the risks associated to it. The negative consequences of irregular migration are seen to be too high to actually risk it. At an individual level, these risks include psychological and physical harm, if not death on the journey. The urgent desire of many Gambians to migrate is also seen to bring about negative consequences for families and communities. Some families are forced to take up debts to pay for the journey; ‘breadwinners’ would be away for prolonged periods of time, disrupting family structures and risking increased poverty. Many

knew a person who attempted to migrate but failed and came back – with all the negative consequences this brings about, as highlighted by this Gambian man in his 30s: ‘But the 60% [of failed migrants] are now back to square zero. Even the little resources they had – it’s all gone. And then they are back to square zero. Their family here is suffering’ (GM_URR_I_Male_30s_2).

TABLE 8. Examples of quotes highlighting the negative consequences of irregular migration

| <i>Interviewee/Focus Group Participant</i> | <i>Quote</i> |
|--|---|
| GM_LRR_FG_Male_30s_1 | [Irregular migration] brought lot of negativities because human beings cannot be compared to wealth. Some families have lost their key people during this migration. For me, I never support it because I know people who lost their lives during this process. Those people: some of them were the breadwinners in their families. Those people are graduates, those people have a future; if those people survived, they [would] bring lot of changes not only in their families but in the Gambian community at large. |
| GM_LRR_I_Male_30s_4 | The irregular migration brings a lot of problems for the country. Because sometimes you see a family that would sell all their assets and give to one person and then you hear that the boat has capsized. All the persons have died. |
| GM_LRR_I_Female_19_10 | The illegal migration is not actually having positive impact in Gambia because we see that most of our youths lose their lives in it. Youths that can take care of the country, they lose their lives from this illegal way of migration. So, this is something not with a positive impact in the country here. |

Several interviewees expressed concerns that large-scale migration prevents the development of the country. As one Gambian man in his 30s stated, ‘our labour force is all gone, and we need them in the country’ (GM_NB_I_Male_30s_7). The young Gambians would all dream of and go to Europe, with the elderly and children being left behind. This would create challenges to advance the Gambian society and organise health and family care. ‘If all youths want to leave and go to Europe, [it] is like they will be developing Europe more than here’ (GM_URR_I_MALE_20S_11). These types of statements, however, have been challenged by others highlighting the crucial role of remittances being sent back by migrants. Those would provide an irreplaceable lifeline for many Gambian families to get through a difficult daily struggle.

Overall, the Master narrative on migration in the Gambia is a positive one, highlighting the possibility of change for individuals, families, and societies. This narrative is very dominant, even if focus groups participants and interviewees highlighted nuances and challenges to it. Concerns about the risks of the irregular migration journey and negative consequences of

irregular migration on the Gambian society are frequent. These types of concerns are also in the focus of EU-funded information campaigns (see chapter 4). People are well-aware of the dangers of the ‘backway’ journey, also without these campaigns. Many respondents knew somebody who did not survive the dangerous migratory journey. The next section will outline the Master narrative (and possible counter-narratives) on Europe among Gambian youth, before going deeper into the factors which foster the dominance of a particular narrative over others.

3.2 Narratives on Europe

a) *The Master Narrative on Europe*

In the Gambia, also the Master narrative on Europe is a predominantly positive one, associating ‘Europe’ with (professional or educational) opportunities and high(er) living standards. This is not that surprising. For centuries, Europe has been (auto-) proclaimed the ‘champion of human rights, democracy and freedom’, as voiced by Pope Francis in 2016.⁴ This dominant idea of Europe is also the one mostly promoted in its foreign policies. To that narrative of Europe as the champion of human rights, we can also add the idea of Europe as the inventor of industrialization, and as a result, its development (Bhambra 2007), with all the opportunities that go along. Africa on the contrary, has been portrayed as ‘underdeveloped’, poor and in need to ‘catch up’ (Rodney 1982; Otele 2020). These narratives on Europe and Africa converge to what we can call a ‘hegemonic narrative’ (Otele 2020; Bhambra 2007; Rodney 1982).

The Master narrative on Europe as observed by our respondents aligns with this hegemonic narrative. It can be broken down in different elements. It includes a view that opportunities in Europe are plentiful and open to those willing to seize them. The opportunities perceived as almost limitless in Europe are often contrasted by a Gambian environment seen to be more challenging. In Gambia, you would have to know other people to succeed. By contrast, it would be up to your own skills to make it in Europe.

TABLE 9. Examples of quotes discussing opportunities in Europe

| <i>Interviewee/Focus Group Participant</i> | <i>Quote</i> |
|--|---|
| GM_LRR_FG_MALE_30S_2 | Europe is nice. Even though we have never been to Europe, but we all believe Europe is nice ... It is a place where you can go and be able to make good life ... the level of opportunity in Europe is far ahead of Africa. Even if you are poor, there are organisations, there are institutions, there are NGOs ... those organisations will make sure [poor people] are in good condition. Here, it is a problem for poor people to have their |

⁴ Pope Francis (2016) ‘Conferral of the Charlemagne Prize: Address Of His Holiness Pope Francis’, May 2016. Retrieved from http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/may/documents/papafrancesco_20160506_premio-carlo-magno.html (accessed 20 February 2017), Cited by Bhambra, G. The current crisis of Europe: Refugees, colonialism, and the limits of cosmopolitanism, p 399.

| | |
|----------------------|---|
| | meals. And who is thinking about them? No one! Even to have good access to water is a problem [in the Gambia]. In Europe that is not existing. You cannot tell me that anywhere in Europe they are fetching water from the well to survive. ... In Europe, the opportunities for jobs are higher. And the moment you are in Europe, you can be able to do good things for yourself and your family in Africa. |
| GM_LRR_I_Male_20s_11 | So many people used to say that to have a job [in Europe] is easy. If you go there, you'll have a job, you can further your education and you can have so many opportunities. |
| GM_LRR_I_Male_20s_7 | When I hear Europe, I think it is the place where you can succeed easily, because you can be here, and it can be difficult for you to succeed here especially if you don't know other people. |

The opportunities concern first and foremost professional/work-related ones. Europe is often associated with the word 'hustling' (colloquial term frequently used in the Gambia for being hard working and making money), e.g. 'When I think of Europe, basically I think of hustling' (GM_LRR_I_MALE, 20S_5). The payment for work is seen as coming in timely and correctly in Europe – standards not always seen to be respected in the West African country. 'If you work, they pay you. They pay you by hours. For us here, sometimes ... it will take around one week to get your money. So, in Europe, we believe every hour you work, they pay you' (GM_URR_FG_Male_30s_3).

Other statements highlight the high living standards, which people in Europe are supposed to have. Social rights are emphasised by highlighting a health care system and welfare state widely seen to be functioning. Poor people would not be left behind and have it easier due to state or private institutions taking care of them. Other people have a life full of 'luxury.' Some Gambian respondents of this study also pinpointed the respect of human rights and the protection of the environment in Europe.

TABLE 10. Examples of quotes discussing living standards in Europe

| <i>Interviewee/Focus Group Participant</i> | <i>Quote</i> |
|--|---|
| GM_URR_FG_Male_30s_3 | We believe that an unemployed youth in Europe is even economically [more] stable than an unemployed youth in the Gambia. For instance, they said in most of the camps they pay you €300. How many Gambians having a salary that is more than €300? Very few. These are some of the concepts. So, the fear of harassment and other things, we believe that - as a man -, if you go out, you have to go through that in order to be successful. We believe that you have to accept it for the sake of |

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| | making it in life. So, in terms of the 'bad' about Europe, very few people think about it. |
| GM_URR_FG_Male_30s_2 | Europe is something else. Like most of the time when we hear about Europe, you think, "wow, this place is the place to be". Because all your human rights are safe. And where you have the good weather, the ambiance, where you can chill with no problem. You have the good beaches, and the tourism attraction centres where you can go and have good ambiance with your family and where the life expectancy is high. So, I think when you talk about Europe, you are talking about another world. |
| GM_LRR_FG_Male_30s_1 | As I used to hear Europe, I feel amazing, and I feel like these people are living in a different world. When I see the pictures, and then I see the environment, it is more beautiful. The life is easier and more attractive compared to where I am. It always makes me so nervous that I say to myself: "I must get there". It is a good feeling. |

Overall, the Master narrative on Europe is that people in Europe tend to have an easier life and more opportunities to succeed professionally. This includes people with little material resources who can make it in Europe too (due to less corruption and more social and human rights).

b) Counter narrative(s) on Europe

The dominantly positive narrative on Europe is challenged primarily in three ways. The counter-narratives challenge the dominant narrative first, by highlighting the colonial past of Europeans in West Africa; secondly, by pinpointing unfairness and asymmetrical power structures in the current EU-Gambian relations, e.g., regarding travel opportunities. Finally, the European treatment of Gambian deportees is also often perceived as overly harsh. This negatively impacted the narrative on Europe of some Gambian interviewees.

TABLE 11. Examples of quotes discussing the colonial past of Europeans in West Africa

| <i>Interviewee/Focus Group Participant</i> | <i>Quote</i> |
|--|---|
| GM_WC_I_Male_20s_10 | If I can recall one of our teachers used to tell us, people want to go to Europe, but the white men don't like the black man. Because if you come to look at it, there was a time they came to Africa and take most of our natural resources. |
| GM_WC_FG_Female_20s_4 | At school, what I learned about the Europeans, especially the coming of Europeans to Gambia or to Africa, or colonisation, it makes me hate the Europeans most. I am a history student. I learned about the history, the way our people were treated, the |

| | |
|--|--|
| | slavery and the slave trade, that makes me hate the Europeans. They taught us that the Europeans were coming to Africa to exploit us, they took most of our natural resources to Europe and they not allowing us now to take those natural resources back again. |
|--|--|

The perception of unfairness often concerns unbalanced travel and migratory opportunities. Respondents argue that Europeans are able to travel to West Africa relatively uncomplicated and without challenging paperwork. This is not the same for Gambians keen to travel to Europe. Migration was framed as ‘a fundamental human right’ not given to Gambians (GM_URR_FG_Male_30s_1). On top of this perceived unbalance, the treatment of Gambian people subjected to an order to leave EU member states is considered too restrictive and harsh by a range of interviewees.

TABLE 12. Examples of quotes discussing unfairness in the EU-Gambian relations and in the treatment of Gambian migrants

| <i>Interviewee/Focus Group Participant</i> | <i>Quote</i> |
|--|---|
| GM_URR_I_Male_30s_6 | For me, it's not fair, because the Europeans come to Africa in the way they feel like. They may need documents, but you see that the restrictions are not stringent to that extent. Like the way the Europeans restrict the Africans going to Europe, it is not fair. We are all living in a diverse world, at least we should go there, they should come here without that many restrictions. But the way Europeans try to restrict Africans to go to Europe – that is not fair. |
| GM_WC_I_Female_30s_5 | For Europe, whenever the westerners want to come to Africa, they come. So, then it should be easy when Africans also want to go to Europe. They should go. But there should be a modality. ... But for the Westerners, they always say “No, no, these young people are not coming to our country”. And then the young people will say: “Okay, you man, when you close this gate, I will find a way”. |
| GM_WC_FG_Female_20s_4 | I feel sad when I see my people, the way they deport my fellow Africans, my fellow brothers. Sometimes, I see videos the way some of them are treated there. They are treated badly. So, I feel sad when I see those videos or when I hear about them. |

At times, these counter-narratives get intermingled, notably about the European colonial past in West African and current imbalances in the EU-Gambian relations. This implies to suggest that Europeans came to West African in the past, without asking and by exploiting the

resources and people of the region. As a matter of fact, why should West Africans now not have the right to go to or be in Europe? This line of justification was used to defend the contemporary irregular migration flow from the Gambia to Europe.

TABLE 13. Example of a quote mixing counter-narratives on Europe

| <i>Interviewee/Focus Group Participant</i> | <i>Quote</i> |
|--|--|
| GM_URR_FG_Male_30s_3 | They are not fair to us, because looking at the history of Africa, Europeans were allowed to come here during colonial period. They were here; they looted our economy, our resources and now I think it also our turn to go there and also tap something from them - and come and develop Africa [ourselves]. |

A few interviewees also believe that West Africans are actually performing better in terms of social cohesion compared to Europeans. There is a stronger feeling of solidarity and community, and a minor problem with racism. ‘The homelessness is there, racism, and people are not open as we have here in Africa like caring for each other. They seem to care less for each other’ (GM_NB_FG_Male_30s_3). However, this type of argument was rather an exception among the participants of the focus groups and interviews, when talking about their views on Europe. This was also the case in the interviews and focus groups wherein white European researchers participated as well as those focus groups and interviews only conducted by the Gambian researchers.

Overall, a counter-narrative on Europe exists, yet the negative views are less frequently expressed compared to the Master narrative, which remains positive. Even the interviewee who mentioned to ‘hate Europeans’ due to their colonial deeds (see above, GM_WC_FG_Female_20s_4) stated that she ‘wants to go to Europe ... to get quality education’.

3.3 Differences in the Master narratives between men and women

There is a gender dimension in the narratives on migration and Europe. Women can indicate to their male peers that they prefer to date or marry a ‘migrant’, thereby reinforcing the narrative that migration opens up new opportunities. As a female Gambian of 19 years highlighted, ‘[Gambian women sometimes] say that they won’t get married to someone who hasn’t travelled or will travel to Europe. That’s another reason why most young men are killing themselves just to travel’ (GM_LRR_I_Female_19_8).

Yet, the opposite effect can also take place. Women may discourage a migration due to their sensitivity about risks and dangers: ‘Within the community I have conversations with people, mostly girls. They will discourage you. What they will tell you is like; many people have gone and have died. They will advise you to settle here, marry and live your life, and leave the rest in the hands of God and all that stuff’ (GM_WC_I_Male_30s_1).

A gendered dimension also exists as to how the risks and dangers actually play out. Women are exposed to different types of risks related to irregular migration, particularly sexual violence.

[Regarding female migrants], some will even get pregnant on their way, yes. You also see some time ago there was this rumour that was spreading. Like they will send an information telling them, “We have an opportunity here, you can come here and work. At the end of the day, you will be paid a good salary”, and stuffs like that. So, normally they target the ladies, the women. So, if those people go - according to the stories that I heard -, if they go, they will lock them in a particular place....and they will just be using them’ (GM_LRR_FG_Male_30s_1)

As stories of sexual violence on the journey circulate, many returned women would be unable to find a man whose family agrees to a marriage.

4. The narratives of EU-funded information campaigns

In this section, we present our findings on how potential migrants in the Gambia perceive and react to the EU-funded information campaigns. As outlined, we investigated in detail each of the three key messages promoted by EU-funded information campaigns: 1) Life in Europe is difficult (do not come); (2) The route is dangerous (do not go); and 3) There are local opportunities in your country (stay).

4.1 ‘Life in Europe is difficult’

The first message that (EU-funded) information campaigns transmit is that life in Europe is difficult for an irregular migrant. Campaign videos reflect this message by showing homelessness, precarious labour conditions or frequent encounters with law enforcement officials for individuals without proper documentation. The campaigns also emphasize that many migrants would not tell the truth to their relatives and friends in their countries of origin about their daily struggles to get along in Europe. The campaigns thus contest the dominantly positive narrative on Europe and migration in the Gambia (see previous chapter). The message of the information campaigns on the ‘difficult life in Europe’ was more frequently contested than endorsed.

a) Endorsement of the message

The narrative that life in Europe may be difficult was confirmed by a minority of individuals, mostly those who have a close relationship (either friend or relative) with a Gambian migrant in Europe. In such cases, they tend to be informed first-hand about the experiences of Gambian migrants in Europe, including the difficulties that they may have encountered. Several participants made a distinction that life would indeed be more challenging for irregular than for regular migrants. Documented migrants, it is mostly argued, would not face such struggles, given all the opportunities that Europe provides (see section before). In addition, anecdotal examples of Gambian migrants portraying a fake lifestyle on social media have raised the awareness of certain participants.

TABLE 14. Examples of quotes confirming the (EU-promoted) narrative ‘life in Europe is difficult’

| <i>Interviewee/Focus Group Participant</i> | <i>Quote</i> |
|--|--|
| GM_WC_I_Male_20s_10 | To be honest, most people will tell you it's not easy. My friends tell me that it's not easy there. It's not like, if you go there [and know] what you want, is [that] you will have it. ... What the video is showing me is something real, because not everyone enjoys it in Europe. |
| GM_WC_I_Female_20s_11 | Oftentimes especially young people who migrate using the backway, they will not tell you the realities in Europe. They will act big, go stand behind a very nice building, take photos and send it or upload it on other social media sites for people to believe that they are doing very well in Europe. [In fact] they are living in camps or other consignment or detention centres. |
| GM_URR_I_Male_30s_2 | I even have an example of one boy in our area there. He was in Europe for a long time, every time we chat, he will say he is doing well and working in a big place. The time my brother went to Europe, I asked him about my other friend and how he was doing. He said that my other friend is lying, and that he doesn't not even have a room. My brother said sometimes he would normally come to his place and then spend the night there, or else he would spend the night normally in the streets. |

In brief, the narrative of the campaign on ‘the difficult life in Europe’ tends to get endorsed only by a minority of respondents, and particularly by Gambians who have direct encounters with migrants in Europe. The message reinforces their prior knowledge and personal experience. That said, it was more frequent for participants to contest the message of a difficult life for migrants in Europe.

b) Contestation of the message

A contestation of the EU-promoted message that ‘life in Europe is difficult’ was more frequent, even if study participants acknowledged the struggle of many migrants in Europe. The contestation of this EU-promoted narrative took place along three lines of arguments: (1) even if a migrant struggles in Europe, the little money that she or he can make remains of importance for the families back home; (2) Europe offers plentiful opportunities, which is reflected by the ‘successful migrants’; if someone fails, the individual can be blamed (i.e. he or she did not try hard enough); and (3) even if life in Europe is difficult, it may still be easier compared to life in the Gambia.

The first contestation of the EU narrative that 'life in Europe is difficult' centres around the notion of financial difficulties. Respondents argue that Europe is economically more viable and displays considerable wage differences compared to the Gambia. Even if respondents argue that life can be 'very expensive in Europe', they highlight that life is 'better than our country because of the earning.' In a similar vein, a respondent stated that 'no matter how expensive life is there, it is better than here' (GM_URR_I_Male_20s_10). From this perspective, you can handle a financially more difficult life because you have also access to higher wages. A related financial argument concerns the benefit of salaries, even modest ones, for the people who remained in the Gambia. Sending EUR 20, 30 to 50 per month changes the situation of families.

TABLE 15. Examples of quotes focusing on economic arguments regarding the life in Europe

| <i>Interviewee/Focus Group Participant</i> | <i>Quote</i> |
|--|--|
| GM_LRR_I_Male_20s_3 | When I hear Europe, it is different from our country here, Gambia. If I am working here in a day and I get 100 dalasi [less than 2 Euros], in Europe the rates are not the same. Meaning, their paying rates are more valuable than us. When you are able to go there, you are able to do things which will change your life. |
| GM_LRR_I_Male_30s_4 | Once you get into Europe, you are greeted with opportunities. And then the money in Europe is different from the money in Gambia. Like 20 euro today, you can send 20 euro to your family member. That's some money here. That is compelling many people to leave Africa and go to Europe; because of the currency: the pound, the euro, the dollar. The money is powerful, the European money is powerful. Once you get the money and send it to the country, that is a lot of money in certain African countries, especially in the Gambia here. |

The second line of contestation was the most frequent one. It includes the *individualisation* of failure and a reference to seemingly plentiful examples of 'successful migrants'. If a campaign video displays a struggling migrant, the failure not to do better probably lies with his or her own incapacity or unwillingness, according to this line of contestation. In this regard, the information campaigns compete not only with the Master narrative of the 'better life in Europe', as we developed above, but also with the hegemonic 'meritocracy' narrative, wherein success or failure in life depends on your own merits. Along that line, respondents attribute the incapacity of migrants to succeed to a lack of education or skills. 'I feel like maybe if you don't have any skills and you are not schooled that is why things are difficult for you. But for someone who travelled to Europe with skills and good education background, life will be much easier for him' (GM_LRR_FG_Male_30s_2). This type of statements has been echoed by others who suggest that 'someone who travelled to Europe with skills and good education background ... would not complain like [the individual of the campaign video]' (GM_LRR_FG_MALE_30S_2).

The second view is less benign but still fits the hegemonic meritocracy narrative. It externalises the blame of failing to the unwillingness of the individual migrant. An example in this respect is the following statement.

‘Some people might go to Europe. Instead of lobbying a place to work, they will think that as soon as you arrive in Europe, you will have someone who will pick your hand and offer you a job. Before going, you should have an area that you want to focus on’ (GM_LRR_FG_Male_30s_3)

Alongside a focus on (the lack of) agency of migrants, the participants highlighted stories of successful migrants. These stories are pervasive and are often used to counter the EU-promoted message of the difficult life in Europe, including struggle and the risk of failure. A central belief is that migrants can make it if they try hard enough. The successful migrants can be famous ones such as Gambians managing to become football players in Europe or less famous ones such as a random neighbour who regularly sends back money to his or her relatives in the same village or town. The contestation of the EU-promoted narrative that ‘life is difficult in Europe’ by most of our respondents is very much in line with the Gambian Master narrative on Europe as a place of opportunities (see Section 3.). This positive portrayal of Europe as a place of democracies, rule of law and opportunities has also been promoted by Europe itself (Bhambra 2007), albeit mostly in areas outside of migration. In a similar vein, Gambians see Europe as a place of ‘great opportunities’ (GM_WC_FG_Male_20s_1) and high(er) living standards. ‘When I hear the word or the name ‘Europe’, I feel amazing, and I feel like these people are living in a different world’ (GM_LRR_FG_Male_30s_1). If life is difficult for some, this will not be the case for them – they would have the capacity and willingness to succeed.

The final line of contestation of the EU-promoted that ‘life in Europe is difficult’ contrasts the lives of people in the Gambia and in Europe. Several participants suggested that they are aware of the fact that life can be difficult in Europe. Yet, the struggles to get along would definitely be larger in the Gambia. It is argued that the video(s) depicting a difficult image of Europe would be primarily propaganda material to deter people from coming.

‘Some will say, “Our aims are different. If I go there, the things I will do and the things they did, will be different.” So, people are different. People now, especially the youths ... I don’t think [such a video] can stop them from going. Everyone wants to be rich, everyone wants to be a “semester⁵”, even though they know that if they go there, they could be treated badly but that won’t stop them from going’ (GM_LRR_I_Female_19_8)

4.2 ‘The route is dangerous’

The second message that the EU or its member states seek to transmit concerns the migratory route as such. Videos display (Gambian and other) migrants giving testimonies about their dangerous or unsuccessful migratory attempts to Europe. They often stranded on the way or were imprisoned in a camp in Libya or other transit countries. The objective is to make potential West African migrants more aware of the dangers of traveling through the Sahara and North

⁵ A ‘semester’ is a word used in the Gambia to refer to migrants in Europe or the USA. December is often called the Semester season when many migrants from the US and Europe come home.

Africa or crossing the Mediterranean Sea, and to prevent their plans to migrate irregularly. Out of all EU-promoted messages, this message was the most accepted one among our respondents.

a) Endorsement of the message

Practically all participants of the study were conscious that the irregular migratory route to Europe would contain serious risks and dangers, and thus endorsed this EU-promoted message. The risks most often referred to by the participants to the study included imprisonment, kidnapping, exploitation, and death.

TABLE 16. Examples of quotes highlighting different dangers of the route

| <i>Interviewee/Focus Group Participant</i> | <i>Quote</i> |
|--|--|
| GM_LRR_FG_Male_30s_1 | I have a brother who was kidnapped for 8 months and was severely beaten. At the beginning, we didn't know where he was for almost 4 months. Later, we came to realise he was captured and tortured. He was in prison for 7 months, I think. In the 8th month, he was released. |
| GM_LRR_I_Female_20s_1 | In fact, I know some returnee, the person embarked on this journey, and he was also jailed for months, beaten, tortured, just like the video that I just watched. |
| GM_LRR_I_Male_20s_7 | One of friends in our neighbourhood explained the same thing. He said he was captured and put in a container. He was undressed but, luckily, he escaped. |
| GM_URR_I_Male_20s_8 | [At] the time I was in Burkina Faso, a man used me for more than nine months. I was selling water for him. And the day I ask him for my money, [as] I wanted to continue my journey - that's the very day he called the police for me. |

The knowledge about dangers was widespread. The death of migrants at high sea or *en route* in the Sahara has been a salient public issue in the Gambia. Migrant boat accidents regularly cause newspaper headlines. Many Gambians participating in this study referred to such tragic events or had even a personal relationship with someone who suffered during a migratory route.

'I have interacted with victims - people that went and then they were back. Even those who succeeded, they will tell you how difficult, how dangerous, how unsafe the journey is. They will tell you that the journey is very difficult. They have encountered a lot of problems. I have one of my friends who spent almost a year or two in Libya. He was working to earn money so that he can move. [He tried it] for three times. Sometimes they will force him to work and then he will not be paid. He would tell me that he has

seen people that were killed in their camps. You know a lot of things happens on their on their way to Europe' (GM_NB_I_Male_30s_9).

As a matter of fact, most participants discussed the dangers of the route based on prior knowledge or anecdotes of friends and relatives. They did not need the European migration information campaigns to be informed about the dangers of the irregular migration journey. They knew this through what is mostly considered as more trustworthy sources of information (see above), that are friends, relatives or acquaintances.

TABLE 17. Examples of quotes including personal anecdotes and prior knowledge about risks and dangers

| <i>Interviewee/Focus Group Participant</i> | <i>Quote</i> |
|--|---|
| GM_LRR_FG_Male_30s_2 | Our friends, they send us videos whereby people die in the desert; you will see lot of dead people in the desert. You know this individual is talking, but we have seen people that are dead in the desert, and they are not buried - and still people are going. |
| GM_LRR_I_Male_20s_11 | Actually, my brother used to tell me that this way is not easy. If you are on the way, you will see so many difficulties, you will face many difficulties. He told me that sometimes someone will ask you to do a job, and if you do it, if you are ready, he will not pay you. He will say, "I am not going to pay you". And if you talk, he will just shoot you. |
| GM_URR_I_Male_30s_6 | One of my friends travelled through the backway, but for him, he couldn't make it, he passed away when he was crossing [from Libya to Italy]. But my brother, he used the backway, he is now in Italy. When he entered, when I spoke to him, he told me – "my brother, this journey is not easy. Even my enemy, I would not wish this journey now, because it's a very rough journey. It is not easy." |

b) Contestation of the message

The (EU-promoted) message 'the route is dangerous' was contested very rarely. It is common knowledge in the Gambia that the irregular migratory route is dangerous. Yet, there are two lines of contestation. The first is that the risks can be mitigated to some extent. The second – and more important one – is that there are no alternatives to migration in the Gambia. In essence: even if the route is dangerous, it is not an option to avoid these risks as people have to go.

A few Gambians outlined strategies on how to handle risks, e.g., hand over your money to trusted people.

‘Sometimes they just attack you. [Libya’s] serious crime forces used to patrol at night. So, when they meet you gathering at night, they will just come and rob you off, even the companies. ... if you have a huge amount of money in those situations, if you don’t [take care], you might lose it all. So, that’s why we always like to give it to a safe person’ (GM_WC_I_Male_20s_10).

Apart from practical strategies of how to handle risks, there are strategies helping people to cope mentally with the stress caused by the risks. This includes in particular trust in a religion or faith in God. The assumption that your life would be pre-determined is widespread in the Gambia among the faithful. A person may not worry too much about the risks – events will unfold in any case as they are supposed to do. This finding relates to and confirms the importance of predestination of fatalistic thinking in migration decision-making (see Thornton et al. 2020).

I believe like whatever happens along the way, the same thing can happen to you in the Gambia. The example I will give to you is: if you go to Mile 2 [Gambia’s central prison], people are jailed there for no reason. People get locked up for the crimes they did not commit. ... So, it’s like this - it is just destined to be (GM_WC_I_Male_30s_1).

However, the most relevant line of contestation was to refer to a difficult day-to-day struggle to get along. A perceived lack of opportunities and the desire to improve the situation of their own families have recurrently been named as reasons why people choose to migrate – even if they are fully conscious of the risks. This statement of a man in his 30s stands for others in terms of explaining some of the pressures to migrate.

‘We are already living in a very terrible situation in the Gambia and Africa at large. Most of the youths, if you see they are moving, it is not because they just want to go. [They go] because of the type of condition they find themselves in Africa ... I cannot be in Africa here struggling day and night, seeing my family struggling, ... Every day I am there with my family, and I am expecting to have my own biological children that I need to take care of. And in Africa, we live in extended families, do you understand? Our families are big. ... And as long you have more relatives, all those relatives, one day or the other, will like to come to you and explain their problems. When you don’t solve their problems, you will be termed as a wicked person. So, if you are living here with your small salary and you cannot even solve your personal problems and your whole entire village relies on you? So, you want me to live in that terrible situation? I am seeing people going the backway. Within one year, they are able to do things that people cannot do here in the Gambia for 10 years - and still, you want me to stay?’ (GM_LRR_FG_Male_30s_2).

More and better knowledge about the risks of the journey does not necessarily convince people to stay. It is included in a personal risk-benefit analysis. The risk is weighted against the potential ‘gain’ of arriving in Europe and ‘succeeding’ as a migrant.

4.3 ‘There are opportunities at home’

A third message featuring prominently in EU-funded information campaigns is that there are ‘opportunities at home’. The campaigns promote information about vocational training, business support projects, helplines, and the like in West Africa. The objective is to convince a person contemplating to migrate to consider his or her opportunities in the place of origin,

and stay, rather than emigrate. Whilst most of the participants did not contest the existence of the opportunities for vocational or skills training, they were not convinced about the strength of this argument. Once the skills are acquired, it was argued, it does not necessarily allow you to find a job or create a business that pays for your minimal living expenses. Similarly, as with the first EU-promoted message in the migration information campaigns, that 'Europe is not that great, this message of 'there are opportunities in Africa' counters the hegemonic narratives of the 'developed' Europe and the 'underdeveloped' Africa deeply entrenched and put forward in most settings outside of migration information campaigns (Otele 2020; Bhambra 2007; Rodney 1982).

a) Endorsement of the message

Almost all participants agreed that there would be opportunities in the Gambia in one way or another. They were aware of – or even participated in – vocational or skills training for young people. Some participants also benefited from small-scale grants or know someone who benefited from such grants provided by the IOM or other agencies which implement projects on behalf of the EU or its member states.

TABLE 18. Examples of quotes confirming the availability of opportunities

| <i>Interviewee/Focus Group Participant</i> | <i>Quote</i> |
|--|--|
| GM_URR_I_Male_30s_5 | In the Gambia, there are opportunities. We have lot of donors that are coming to help, to make sure that the youth stay in their own country and help themselves. Like the skills that are available, the grants, the loans; these are all motivations for youths to stay and try and make their own way of living without going into the backway. Such opportunities are available in the country. |
| GM_NB_I_Male_30s_6 | There are opportunities, because in recent time there are training centres, skill centres that the government in partnership with international donors are trying to equip. [They] give scholarships to youth to go and learn, like Gaye Njorro in Farafenni and also in Kombo. They do hairdressing and it's free of charge. You go and study. You have the NYSS scheme, that one also is free and is recruiting a lot of people. |
| GM_NB_I_MALE_30s_9 | There are many opportunities. I think in 2017, I started with one ram, and as we speak, I have close to 30 of them in my farm. To be honest, it's just a matter of believing in yourself and then set goals and work towards them. There are a lot of opportunities in the Gambia. |

Even though a majority of the participants agreed that there would be (professional or educational) opportunities in the Gambia, they were usually quick to include some qualifiers or

refinements to such a basic endorsement. They also explained that these specific opportunities mentioned in the campaigns are not sufficient for people to stay in the Gambia.

b) Contestation of the message

A first line of contestation was that the opportunities in the Gambia would not be that plentiful after all. And even if there are opportunities, not everyone has the same level of access to them. Regional disparities, nepotism and corruption are among the factors that would prevent young people from benefiting from the opportunities displayed in the campaign videos. These arguments are often shaped by the personal experience or views of participants as to how ‘things are done’ in the Gambia.

TABLE 19. Examples of quotes contesting the availability of opportunities

| <i>Interviewee/Focus Group Participant</i> | <i>Quote</i> |
|--|---|
| GM_WC_FG_Male_17_3 | This video is a true thing, but for people living in the Gambia here, it is not easy. ... Nepotism overtakes everything. Like when your father is working there, or your relatives, you have easier access to some of these things than someone who doesn't have anybody working there. You can be with your correct documents and the person is with his or her correct documents - but you will [still] have easy access to it because your parents are working there. And money also; if you have money, you can pay some people ... and they will help you to have this job. |
| GM_NB_FG_Male_30s_2 | I think most of these things [video messages] are not realistic. We have to be honest with one another. Most of these things are not realistic, accessing them is a problem. They just train the people and at the end of the day, there is nothing given ... They are not realistic at all. |
| GM_WC_I_Male_30s_1 | There is a saying like “there are opportunities here for youths in the Gambia”. This is something I believe is just a mere word. When you look at the Gambia here, opportunities for youths are very slim. I will give an example: If you go to GTTI - the biggest technical training institute that we have here in the Gambia. We have hundreds of people that are graduating every year. What are these people doing? How many percent of them are working after spending huge amounts of money for school fees? After your graduation, you have nothing to do because there is no work for you. The only time you get a job is when you know someone to help you. So, it is bad. ... even an internship is a problem. |

These quotes reflect a contestation of the existence of sufficient opportunities in the Gambia *at large*. The discussion quickly turned to the particular opportunities supposedly created by national and international funding programmes. They are implemented by the Gambian government or international actors such as the IOM, the EU (e.g., projects under the Trust Fund) or member states. These projects often provide individuals with some financial support, for instance to launch a small business, after a vocational training. Many participants viewed these opportunities from a critical perspective. The contestation took place on two major lines; firstly, the programs do not structurally change the labour market, which remains highly difficult (in particular) for young people; secondly, the support provided by these projects is insufficient to make a difference for the beneficiaries with regards to their possibility to earn a minimal wage.

The first line of contestation concerns the scope and pervasiveness of these opportunities regarding nationally or internationally funded projects. The procedures to apply and access them is seen as complicated and tedious. A part of the population may not be adequately schooled or trained to handle the application forms and enter the process.

‘Looking at the bottlenecks of accessing these grants and trainings is what discourage most young people. Somebody who is not schooled, somebody who has no background... the criteria they set cannot be fulfilled by these people. So, this makes [the grants] available only for few elites - those that are [informed] about these opportunities. The rest of the masses will be crying for support. And the providers of these opportunities will turn around and tell them: these opportunities are there, but young people are not grabbing them’ (GM_NB_FG_Male_30s_3).

Besides the threshold of education to even enter the potential circle of beneficiaries, the requirements to benefit from them can be hard for those who are eligible in principle. Many young people would struggle to fulfil the conditions for benefiting from a mini-grant or a loan. ‘If you say that before I get a certain loan, I have to bring a title deed, whilst I don’t even have a house to lay my head [i.e., I struggle to find a place to sleep in]. So, it is unrealistic and not youth friendly’ (GM_NB_FG_Female_30s_1).

Three out of the four regions in which we conducted our fieldwork were in rural Gambia. A frequently voiced contestation during our fieldwork in rural Gambia was that the opportunities created by these funds would be concentrated in urban areas. The rural youth would be left behind. Furthermore, the rural youth cannot easily go to urban areas themselves to have vocational training there. These opportunities in urban areas are difficult to access for them due to the lack of resources or relatives to support the sojourn.

TABLE 20. Examples of quotes contesting the availability of opportunities in rural areas

| <i>Interviewee/Focus Group Participant</i> | <i>Quote</i> |
|--|---|
| GM_URR_FG_Male_30s_1 | [Opportunities] are not decentralised as they are only based in the urban areas. Some of these opportunities, you can only come across them ... in the urban areas. Not everybody can relocate and go there. Most of the potential migrants come from rural Gambia. This is where you have lot of potential migrants taking the backway. ... If the opportunities presented can also be transferred to rural Gambia, I think it will help a lot in coping irregular migration. |
| GM_WC_FG_Female_20s_4 | What I am seeing in the video is something realistic, but you know in the Gambia here, development is not decentralised. Most of the developments are in the urban areas. So, people living in the rural areas are not having the opportunities to access such things. And also, most of these opportunities you have to pay more to have access to it. And people from poor backgrounds cannot have opportunities to go to such schools or training centres. So, it is very difficult for most of us to have access. |
| GM_LRR_I_Male_30s_4 | There are all these opportunities, but if you want to get them or see them, they are more in the Kombo [Ural area] than here. They don't have bureaus or structures here. If you want information, you just go there, and then they give you information. But all these training institutions and what we have seen in the video is not here. |

The second line of contestation concerned the set-up and conduct of these projects. Participants indicated that the funding would be too modest to actually get a business going. The funds do not commensurate with market prices in the Gambia. A beneficiary of training and limited funding to set-up a small business may therefore struggle to buy enough material to start a business after a vocational training.

'Opportunities are around, but after [acquiring] the knowledge, the problem is how to implement your own knowledge. [For example] you are doing a business, like poultry, and you are giving a start-up capital like 30,000 dalasi [approximately EUR 500]; you can only buy drinkers and few other items, and it is finished. You cannot fence [the poultry enclosure]. You have to get sufficient funds. ... Many people are trained with their certificates, and they have the knowledge, but the funds for them to start is the problem.

Some [funds] are given but they are minimal. They cannot do anything. You start for few months, and [then you] fail' (GM_LRR_FG_Male_30s_3).

Other participants highlighted that these internationally provided funds can get considerably smaller once entangled in Gambian bureaucratic procedures. For example, a man in his 30s who benefited from a mini-grant recounted his experience. 'Sometimes money is given, [but] it doesn't go directly to the participants. You know, managers or institutional managers would deduct the money and take half and give participants half. It's all happening in the country' (GM_LRR_I_Male_30s_4).

Many participants highlighted that training and educating people would not suffice so long as the labour market does not improve. Very few training beneficiaries manage to launch and run their own business or even secure any form of employment. It is not only the challenge of accessing post-training funds and support measures. A few participants even believed that the whole policy of providing people with training and other support measures is primarily symbolic – done to fulfil reporting duties, but without giving real support to struggling Gambians. Their impact may sometimes be exaggerated to impress donors.

TABLE 21. Examples of quotes critically viewing post-training packages for Gambians

| <i>Interviewee/Focus Group Participant</i> | <i>Quote</i> |
|--|--|
| GM_NB_FG_Male_30s_4 | The post training packages is the challenge. People will be trained. Even in North Bank Region here, people have been trained but you cannot train someone and not give them anything at the end. So, these post training packages are a problem. They can train you on anything but accessing [anything] post-training is a problem. Sometimes, the fees to even attend these trainings are a problem. |
| GM_NB_I_Female_20s_9 | Sometimes they will ask us to apply. If 10 people apply, they will only give [access] to 2 people. And in the end, they will report like, 'We helped NBR people'; but actually, if you look at the number of people they helped and how they did it, you will not believe it. |
| GM_NB_I_Male_30s_6 | What are the end results of these training? And this is what we always advocate for. You meet the youths on the street, you encourage them to go and learn skills, and then - at the end of graduation -, you let them go empty-handed back to the street. So, it is not productive at all. Like most of the time, what we are asking for is a start-up capital. You train the individual on a particular trade, give him the required tools that he needs to start the job. |

The structural problems in the labour market for young people came up again and again. Young people can be trained in different jobs, but it remains a challenge for them to actually start a professional career or launch a business.

‘I have also attended one of these trainings but ... and we are not strong financially; you keep saying: I have to be trained until I am certificated but, after the certificate, what am I going to do with the certificate? There is nothing for me to start with. So, it means that what I learned is useless. That is also discouraging youths to also go for these things. People know about this’ (GM_NB_I_Male_30s_4).

4.4 The gender dimension in the reception of EU-promoted narratives

We inquired with regard to each of the (EU-promoted) narratives as to whether there is a particular gender dimension in terms of their perception and discussion.

Regarding the EU promoted message in information campaigns that ‘life in Europe is difficult’, women emphasised that the struggles may be bigger for women. If an undocumented migrant runs away from a European policeman, the same option may not be available for a woman. ‘A man can run faster, but the women cannot do so. So, the life of the woman will be very risky’ (GM_WC_FG_Female_20s_4). But most participants perceived the message in a comparable way. ‘[Whether men or women] to me it’s the same because everyone is going to search for a greener pasture’ (GM_NB_I_Male_20s_5). Regarding the EU-promoted message in information campaigns that there are also ‘opportunities at home’, the gender dimension was also not very conclusive. Most participants considered that the opportunities regarding training or other support mechanism such as mini-grants are equally open for men and women. One woman in her 20s considered that ‘we have more opportunities for women. But when it comes to the side of migration issues ... it is more males that normally migrate’ (GM_LRR_I_Female_20s_1). She hence concludes that it would be ‘more important to focus on side of the male’ in terms of opportunity creation.

The most succinct gender dimension was observable with regard to the EU-promoted message that the ‘the route is dangerous’. Even if a considerably smaller number of women than men embark on the ‘backway’ from the Gambia to Europe, they are seen to face a different – and greater – risk. Women were concerned about the risks of sexual violence, rape and pregnancy during the journey.

TABLE 22. Examples of quotes highlighting the gender dimension regarding risks

| <i>Interviewee/Focus Group Participant</i> | <i>Quote</i> |
|--|---|
| GM_WC_I_Female_20s_11 | I think women face more dangers on the way because they are prone to sexual violence and other forms of violence. ... I was listening to one woman who travelled through the backway. She was explaining her story. She even went to say that she conducted almost five abortions when she was using the route. So, I think women are prone to more risks than men. |

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| GM_NB_I_Female_20s_11 | I think it is riskier for women than men. You know women could be raped, kidnapped and many other things. We have seen stories where women were abused on the backway, even Gambian women; we see it. So, I think is riskier for women than men. In fact, I hear that now women use contraceptives before going so that they will not get pregnant in case they are raped or anything. So, I think women are also powerless. It's difficult for women, honestly. |
|-----------------------|--|

Some participants mentioned a particular gender dimension in terms of coping with the risks perceived during the journey. These strategies include forming closer bonds with fellow male migrants to get protection or the increased use of contraceptives in anticipation of sexual violence from smugglers, prison guards or other men.

'In our village, there is a woman who went through the backway because her mother did not have any son, only girls. So, she is the first daughter. She saw her mother's condition. She started selling fish at the market until she got money and went the backway. ...Now she is in Europe. But before she entered Europe, ... she took an injection, like this family planning. ... She knew that if you go the backway and don't take the injection, you may get pregnant. [her sister told me that] she was caught for 3 months and was suffering there. They said she must pay money. The girl paid that money. [The sister] said that in Libya, they will come every night and rape them. She suffered a lot, and she was very tired. Now, she succeeded and entered Europe' (GM_URR_I_Female_20s_7).

5. Narratives and individual decision-making procedures

This section will deepen our reflections on how the EU funded information campaigns impact the decision-making procedures of potential migrants in the Gambia. In the first part of the section, we give some insights into the reasons why the Master narratives on migration and Europe in the Gambia are predominantly positive. They focus more on opportunities than risks, thus contesting the EU-promoted narratives. In the second part of this section, we try to evaluate the ways in which the EU-promoted narratives, may impact individual decision-making procedures.

However, before doing so, we may recall that academic literature has already situated 'information' as only one factor influencing migration decision-making. Alongside information, people's socio-economic position, level of education, gender, aspirations, beliefs, their family decisions, the networks they dispose of, the capabilities they have to migrate, as well as resources contribute to migration decision-making (e.g., Brekke and Beyer 2019; de Haas et al. 2020). Information is thus only a part of complex decision-making procedures, and among the sources of information received, migration information campaigns are only one of many sources of information received.

5.1 Factors contributing to a pervasiveness of the Master narratives

The master narrative in the Gambia depicts Europe as a continent of opportunities. The pervasiveness of such a positive narrative on Europe is historically not new. Positive diaspora stories only reinforce an already existing and pervasive historical narrative. The same goes for a positive Master narrative on migration in the Gambia. The stories of the Gambian diaspora in Europe have not created these positive images. They reinforce a historical positive narrative on migration as a household strategy to look for 'greener pastures' when life is hard.

These historically dominant narratives on Europe and migration are reinforced by feedback mechanisms provided by success stories of emigrants. Feedback mechanisms are a classical explanation for migration decision-making. The feedback sources from friends and relatives are generally considered the most trustworthy sources of information and align with historically dominant narratives. They make it difficult for EU-promoted narratives to become dominant.

a) Social and material rewards of emigration

The Gambia is a society deeply impacted by migration. Particularly the 'rewards' that a migration of a family member to Europe may bring reinforces the historically positive view on migration as a household strategy to deal with a difficult situation and a lack of livelihood opportunities. Gambians with family members in Europe (or elsewhere) have often developed a higher living standard compared to their peers – thanks to the remittances sent back. This creates a societal dynamic in which social and material rewards are increasingly associated with a successful migratory experience.

The 'social rewards' concern a higher prestige of a successful migrant including increased chances to find a husband or a wife. In particular, the young generation has a palpable admiration for Gambians who 'made' it in Europe. A case in point is the life story of Ebrima Darboe, a Gambian who made the perilous journey across the Mediterranean Sea at the age of 14 and managed to become a professional player under star coach José Mourinho at the Italian football club AS Roma. Such role models are contrasted with one's own life in The Gambia. Those success stories are also used to dismiss the counter-narrative focusing on risks and negative consequences of mass emigration.

TABLE 23. Examples of quotes highlighting social and material rewards of migration

| <i>Interviewee/Focus Group Participant</i> | <i>Quote</i> |
|--|--|
| GM_LRR_FG_Male_30s_1 | My friends are going through the backway, and they are making lots of things for their parents and their homes. And you want me to stay in my country just to be a civil servant? I will be teaching or be a police officer or to be a doctor or a nurse in the country for 10- 15 years. Somebody who ... takes [the trip over] the Mediterranean Sea and goes to Europe will be able to build a mansion within 2 years. And I am working under government, and I cannot even build a |

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| | small house. And you still want me to stay? I will also use the risky way and go. |
| GM_WC_FG_Male_20s_2 | Like I said, they put this in our mindset that “if you travel, you will make it”. So, we also found out that our brothers migrated. The time they migrated, they have changed their lives. They have their own compounds, they have their own families, they are taking care of their families. And then your parents are here, living in rural areas - they are not even taken care of. |
| GM_LRR_I_Female_19_8 | There are some mothers forcing their children to travel because when they see other people traveling and changing the lives of their parents. They want the same for themselves. |

The social and material rewards of leaving are often contrasted with the lack of opportunities while staying. The (structural) conditions of the employment and housing market are disadvantageous and difficult for many young Gambians, notably those living outside urban centres. In such a context, Gambian youngsters strongly advance a positive (Master) narrative on Europe and migration. According to interviewees, young Gambians would spend a considerable amount of their time talking about West Africans in Europe and the possibilities for them to leave too. This statement of a man in his 20s is typical in this respect:

‘If you sit in the *Ghetto* [place to meet for young Gambians], the first thing that comes to mind is migration. We discuss about how we will end up there. And how you will make money to embark on the journey; how you are going to understand the journey, right? This is how we talk about it; the ways in which you can reach Europe easily’ (GM_WC_FG_Male_20s_2)

It is relevant to discuss in more detail the role of *Ghettos*, the local slang word for venues of meetings and gatherings for young people, mostly on the streets. Throughout our interviews and focus group discussions, the participants highlighted the relevance of local *Ghettos* for young Gambians who reflect upon staying or going. These would be the places to meet and socialise. Young people are of an age in which comparisons with peers and friends are of importance. The talk about migrants plays a big role in this context. *Ghettos* are the venues to discuss the success of others as well as develop and outline individual aspirations.

‘When we sit in the *Ghettos* talking, a friend of ours in Europe will be calling. Sometimes, we show each other the photos of Europe they sent us. Sometimes you will be sitting at the *Ghetto* and a friend will send you something [money] so that you can buy something from it’ (GM_LRR_FG_Male_30s_3).

The *Ghetto* therefore has a particular standing. If you ‘succeed’ as a migrant in Europe, you ‘inform’ your friends and acquaintances who are still in your hometown or village about your new life. As the quote above highlights, a migrant may occasionally even directly transfer some money for the young, thereby further increasing admiration and social standing. A village’s

Ghetto is also a relevant place to be informed about the migratory route (e.g., contact details of a smuggler often referred to as an ‘agent’).

b) Information sources fostering the Master narrative

A changing information landscape has facilitated the spread and reinforcement of positive narratives on migration and Europe. The respondents suggested that practically all media outlets (newspapers, TV, radios) touch upon the migration theme in one way or another. They reinforce the positive Master narratives on migration and Europe (by showing success examples) but also feed into the counter-narratives (e.g., by reporting about the deaths of migrants *en route*). However, no information source has become as important for young Gambians to make up their mind about migration as social media. It has become standard for young Gambians to follow migrants on Facebook, Instagram or other social media outlets. People show each other ‘stories’, videos and photos of Gambian migrants in Europe, reinforcing the Master narrative that it is possible to arrive there and succeed. It is important to mention, however, that not all messages on social media are considered trustworthy. The stories of the personal acquaintances of the respondents inspire trust – more so than campaigns or stories posted by people they do not know.

TABLE 24. Examples of quotes on the relevance of social media

| <i>Interviewee/Focus Group Participant</i> | <i>Quote</i> |
|--|--|
| GM_NB_FG_Male_30s_2 | <p>In the Gambia here, we have this attitude of admiring one another, especially among young people. We always admire the things we see - whether it is the reality or not. Pictures on social media influence us a lot. I remember my younger brother, there was a time he was going to the shop and another friend came by and said to him, “Boy, have you seen your friend’s photo”? After seeing the picture, he went to backway the following week.</p> <p>Interviewer: And did he make it?</p> <p>No, he died. So, I thought about pictures and realize that someone might just go to a nice place and take a very nice photo. My brother told me that people do that. So, that doesn’t show the reality there. It doesn’t show if you are homeless or having a hard time there. For those here, all what they see is the pictures and that is what is attracting them. For me it is social media.</p> |
| GM_URR_I_Male_30s_1 | <p>Through friends, or sometimes in group chats, I see people posting while they are in Europe, sending their pictures or other things.</p> |
| GM_WC_FG_Male_20s_2 | <p>If you see a person embarking on this journey and he successfully enters Europe, thereafter he comes for holidays.</p> |

| | |
|--|---|
| | <p>You will see him driving a car, you will see him own a compound. You will see his life already changes. The moment you are with your friends and your other family members, they will always talk about that person's determination. So, as you are hearing that every day, one day you will also embark on the journey.</p> |
|--|---|

Concrete migration intentions impact the information sources which an individual may consult. If an individual develops precise plans to migrate, he or she will particularly consult the information of other migrants who made it, most often on social media. 'I believe most of the people who undertake the 'backway' never consult government agencies or the right channels. They follow the smugglers and friends to go. They get more information from smugglers and peers who have successfully embarked on the journey' (GM_URR_FG_Male_30s_2). The information that is most relevant for making up the mind about migration opportunities and risks comes from trusted sources, be it family, friends or successful migrant friends who arrived in their country of destination.

5.2 The (non-)impact of the narratives promoted by the EU

The messages promoted in the EU-funded campaigns may conflict or align with other sources of information. The reflections on the impact or non-impact thus must be located within this broader context. Even with in-depth research, as we conducted, it is extremely difficult to deconstruct migration decision-making. We do, thus, not pretend to present a full causal impact analysis. We rather portray how the information from EU funded information campaigns is endorsed or contested and interacts with other drivers of migration.

a) 'Information vs. situation'

The (EU-funded) information campaigns seek to promote particular narratives that challenge the Master narrative of many Gambians on migration and Europe. What does the diffusion of these narratives provoke?

The narratives which the EU seeks to put forward tend to be partially endorsed, but also often challenged or even put aside upon closer inspection and reflection. Yes, many say, life in Europe can be difficult – but we can also see many migrants who succeed. You may just need to try harder. A failure to do so reflects a lack of individual capacity and willingness. Yes, many argue, there are opportunities at home – you can get trainings or a mini-grant to open a business. However, these opportunities are not so plentiful after all; they work primarily for few insiders and educated people; and they do not materialise in a local labour market that is structurally disadvantageous to young people.

The largest match between locally dominant and EU-promoted narratives exists regarding the issue of risks during the migratory journey. There is a strong awareness of the risks and dangers that migrants undergo when travelling to Europe. It was indeed common knowledge and a widespread concern that many people suffer and risk their lives on the route. Still, these concerns do not stand on their own. They interact with the potential benefit of making it as a migrant.

The Gambian Master narrative on migration has elements of a meritocratic 'dream'-narrative (similar to the 'American dream'-narrative): everybody will have a chance to succeed, if only he or she dares to migrate and tries hard enough after arriving. The risks are calculated against this potential benefit. This implies that the knowledge on the risk and dangers alone does not alter the overall risk-benefit analysis. Several Gambians who personally know a person suffering or dying on the route were still pursuing the intention to migrate irregularly to Europe (see also UNDP, 2019). Such a dynamic is most clearly visible with return migrants. Some Gambians have returned in the context of an Assisted Voluntary Return Programme, thereby benefitting from reintegration support – and would still have the intention to go again, regardless of the risks which they saw first-hand during their prior migratory journey.

'These are people that got assistance from these organisations to start-up something. They will use that money to go to the backway [again]. They will even know that people died on the way but still.... I think the worst part of it is knowing somebody died as a result of beatings, torture, imprisonment, drowning, but you will still engage yourself and take the journey. It is not that you don't have the information - you have it, and you know the risk. People will still insist, and they will still go' (GM_URR_FG_Male_30s_1).

The risks are therefore widely known yet this information and knowledge *per se* do not change the life situation of potential migrants. Factors other than knowledge would be more important for people to decide on migration. As a man in his 30s succinctly put it: 'It is not about the information, it is about the situation' (GM_LRR_FG_Male_30s_1) These results align with the long-established insights in migration theories showing how a complex interaction of many structural and more individual factors determine migration decision-making (de Haas, Castles and Miller, 2020). Information campaigns are only a part of that complex puzzle.

b) Reinforcing existing doubts and concerns

The decision-making of potential migrants is hence primarily driven by factors other than the information provided by the EU (through its local collaboration partners such as IOM). That said, (EU-funded) information campaigns can have some influence in the decision-making processes of potential migrants, notably for those already having doubts. If a person – and an individual's surrounding – are hesitant on whether or not to start a migratory journey, these campaigns can reinforce existing doubts and concerns. However, we refrain from claiming to know precisely how these doubts finally influence migration decisions, seen the complex interaction with many other drivers of migration.

The focus groups and interviews have pointed to complex and often contested processes of deciding on whether a person may leave. It is a decision frequently taken as a family. Such a decision can involve pressures in two directions. On the one hand, parents or particular family members can exercise pressure on the children to actually migrate in order to contribute to a family's income or imitate the experience/'success' of other migrants.

'Some parents will discourage their children but yet still others within the family would encourage the children to go. Like you may have other brothers, other uncles who will be telling you: "You know the family condition, so you have to sacrifice [yourself] and take the journey". Some parents will say: "your colleagues left, what about you?" (GM_LRR_FG_Male_30s_1).

The pressure exercised by a family (and the wider social environment) can be considerable. In such a situation, staying implies getting a stigma of failing to leave up to one's potential and expectations.

'Some people prefer to die there than to stay with their families. It is the family pressure. You see these young people, some of them, the problems at home are so severe that they cannot withstand it. So, they even prefer going through the backway, die on their way going, or make it to Europe, rather than stay in their homes. Some people know that most of the things they are seeing on social media is actually fake concerning the pictures that their friends take and send them. Some of them already know that but staying in their compounds, staying in a society where they are jobless, and the treatment they receive is a problem' (GM_URR_FG_Male_30s_3).

On the other hand, families are deeply concerned about the risks of a migratory journey, and might, therefore, discourage irregular migration. Several young Gambians who took part in this study mentioned that their families would hold them back from migrating due to concerns over their safety. As already mentioned, such an awareness of the dangers of the route is not necessarily a direct result of an information campaign. A public and private discourse of growing intensity about people suffering or dying on the route plays an equally important role. Yet, the EU-funded campaigns feed into and reinforce these dynamics, thereby contributing to a stronger relevance of the narrative emphasising risks.

TABLE 25. Examples of quotes highlighting the role of families in discouraging a migratory process

| <i>Interviewee/Focus Group Participant</i> | <i>Quote</i> |
|--|--|
| GM_WC_FG_Male_20s_1 | I once planned to go to the backway, but my parents never supported me to go. They stopped giving me the small money they normally give me in order not to have some income to put together and embark on the way. So, they punished me for that. |
| GM_LRR_I_Female_19_10 | Because they came to know that the journey is very risky, many problems people face, so it is not easy. We have so many people losing their lives along the way whenever they are using this backway journey. So, since that happens, they don't encourage us, my brothers, or other people to use this illegal way. |
| GM_WC_FG_Male_17_3 | So, I think, my parents, the concept they have is that if I embark on this journey, I may end up losing my life. The concept they have is how are they going to stop me from using this backway. |

In brief, the amount, type, and quality of information can affect a person and his or her surroundings. Parents of young Gambians who considered migrating are likely to become more aware of the dangers of the journey after watching pertinent videos or hearing 'Migrants as Messengers' outlining their personal suffering and migratory experience.

But information is only one element of the decision-making process. If the actual life situation of families deteriorates, the information and knowledge about risks may get more easily dismissed or can no longer be given a determining influence. Our fieldwork in the Gambia took place a few months after the Russian invasion in Ukraine starting in February 2022. One of the fallouts that Gambians already saw were increasing food and commodity prices, further squeezing the often already precarious financial situation of families. This type of developments and structural pressures have the potential of tipping an individual's or a family's decision-making in favour of migration, irrespective of their knowledge about risks during the journey and likely struggles after arrival in Europe (see also UNDP 2019).

6. Conclusions and recommendations

6.1 Conclusions

This report of the BRIDGES project analysed how migration narratives in the Gambia and EU-funded information campaigns possibly influence the decision-making of potential migrants in the Gambia. Our study is based on focus groups and in-depth interviews with 60 Gambian respondents. The research was conducted in four different regions of the Gambia in April and May 2022. We focused on young Gambians from between the age of 18 and 35. This age cohort is the most likely to embark on a migratory journey to Europe. We did not evaluate a particular EU-funded information campaign in a specific timeframe. The project rather sought to, first, establish the dominant/Master narrative on migration in the Gambia. Second, we analysed how the Gambian participants react and perceive the particular narratives generally put forward in EU-funded information campaigns. Those are that (1) life in Europe is difficult; (2) the migratory route is dangerous; and (3) there are opportunities at home. The final chapter discussed as to how these campaign messages may or may not impact the decisions of potential migrants in the Gambia.

a) The Master narrative on migration in the Gambia

The dominant or Master narrative on migration highlights the opportunities for a positive life change enabled by a person going abroad. This narrative is historically dominant in countries around the Sahel, where the search for 'greener pastures' has traditionally been seen as a solution to an often-difficult life situation characterised by poverty and a lack of prospects. Migrants who made it to Europe are perceived as successful individuals, who are able to improve the situation of their families and communities. This narrative primarily concerns the 'backway' to Europe, which corresponds to irregular migration to Europe. Trying legal migration channels and visa applications was seen as futile. Visa rejection rates are considered too high, and the visa application fees are not reimbursed. The Gambian Master narrative on migration contains elements of a 'dream'-narrative: everybody will have a chance to succeed, if only he or she dares to migrate and tries hard enough after arriving. This positive narrative is reinforced

by feedback mechanisms: anecdotes and 'success'-stories, which Gambians who have migrated to Europe put forward to their friends and relatives in the Gambia. There was no counter-narrative in a strict sense. Practically every participant tended to see a positive cost-benefit calculus in favour of migration, yet some considered the risks to outweigh the benefit of irregular migration. Migration as a positive phenomenon is the dominant narrative in the Gambia, yet it should ideally only take place in a legal way. In this narrative, the negative consequences of irregular migrants on individuals, but also on families and communities (e.g., the risk of death, indebtedment, broken families) are a concern.

b) The Master narrative on Europe in the Gambia

The other Master narrative that we investigated concerned Europe. Europe is associated with (professional or educational) opportunities and a probability of getting high(er) living standards. The opportunities in Europe are often contrasted with a perceived lack thereof in the Gambia. In Europe, everyone would have a chance to succeed, provided that he or she tries hard enough. These Master narratives in the Gambia align with historically hegemonic narratives on the 'developed' Europe and the 'underdeveloped' Africa, as well as a widely spread global 'meritocratic' discourse. The Master narrative is, however, challenged in different ways; first, the colonial deeds of Europeans were and would still be detrimental to West Africa; second, current EU-Gambian relations are characterised by unfairness and asymmetrical power relations, including the context of travel opportunities. The treatment of Gambian deportees in different European states is also seen as overly harsh. However, even individuals sticking to this counter-narratives often highlighted the opportunities that a migration to Europe is likely to open up.

The messages of the EU-funded information campaigns interrelate with these Gambian Master narratives. In doing so, the EU-promoted narratives often struggle to compete with the dominant Gambian hegemonic narratives on these themes. For instance, most participants of the study endorsed the message that 'life in Europe is difficult' in one way or another. This happened in particular by Gambians who knew a friend or family member in Europe and heard stories of hardship first-hand. That said, the narrative was contested along three lines: (1) even migrants struggling in Europe are improving the lives of families back home; (2) 'successful migrants' indicate the many opportunities that life in Europe offers; a migratory failure primarily stems from an individual's lack of capacity or will; and (3) a difficult life in Europe is still easier than life in the Gambia.

The same patterns of endorsement and contestation can be seen regarding the narrative that there are 'opportunities at home' in the Gambia. Yes, that would be true to some extent. Several participants of the study were aware of – or even participated in – vocational or skills training programmes. Still, the opportunities would not be that plentiful after all. Not everyone would be able to access them given regional disparities, nepotism and widespread corruption. Mini-grants or training opportunities offered by governmental or international actors such as IOM would not structurally change a labour market (which makes it difficult to open a business or start a career) and be insufficient to really change the life situation of a beneficiary.

The biggest overlap between a locally dominant and EU-promoted narrative exists regarding the campaign narrative relating to the risk during a migratory journey. The dangers and risks of the migration journey are at the centre of EU-funded information campaigns. This narrative also exists in the Gambia independently from and alongside the campaigns. Potential migrants

tend to be fully aware of the risks. A contestation of the message 'the migratory route is dangerous' has hardly taken place. Stories about tragedies or hardship on the migratory route were omnipresent. However, participants questioned whether there would be alternatives to accepting these risks. The risks have been weighted against a perceived necessity or benefit of a migratory trajectory for a family and community. Consideration is given more to the anticipated final outcome of their journey (and a chance of success) than to the risk on the road towards it.

What are the determining factors for the influence or non-influence of narratives and EU-funded information campaigns? EU-funded information campaigns are only one among many sources of information on migration in the Gambia. Moreover, information is only one among the many factors that influence migratory decision-making. Personal relations and social media are sources of information of particular relevance for young Gambians. The stories, pictures and videos which Gambian migrants post on social media have been a powerful underpinning of the Master narrative of 'migrants can be successful' and 'Europe has plenty of opportunities'. This kind of information is often processed among young people in venues of public gatherings, which are referred to as *Ghettos* in the Gambia. Trust in the information source is of key relevance implying that family or friends often have a more trustworthy standing in terms of shaping knowledge and views.

Aggregately speaking, potential migrants in the Gambia seem to rely little on the information of EU-funded campaigns when making decisions. As mentioned, an exception in terms of influence is the narrative of risks and dangers during the journey. When deciding upon a migration, many Gambians – and their families – are hesitating in how to assess and weigh the risks and benefits. The campaigns seem to be able to reinforce existing doubts and concerns about the dangers, thereby tipping the overall calculus in some cases. A range of participants pointed to their role of their mothers (and, less so, fathers) in preventing them from leaving due to fears over their safety. That said, information is still only one factor among others. More relevant ones are livelihood opportunities, a lack of prospects and the social prestige that may be gained through migration. As a Gambian in his 30s summarises, 'it is not about the information, it is about the situation' (GM_LRR_FG_Male_30s_1).

Before outlining some recommendations, it is important to briefly reflect upon the implications of these findings for the wider objectives of the BRIDGES project. The overarching objective of the BRIDGES project is to understand the causes and consequences of migration narratives in a context of increasing politicisation and polarization (notably within Europe). There are different take-away points from our study to the wider understanding of narratives. As Garcés-Mascreñas and Pastore (2022, 9) outline, for instance, 'to be convincing in cognitive terms (cognitive plausibility), narratives should provide some level of consistency and coherence in line with (often basic) empirical knowledge'. The EU-promoted narratives in the Gambia often lack these consistency and coherence from the view of the recipients, notably with regard to the messages that 'life is difficult in Europe' and 'there are opportunities in the Gambia'. These EU-promoted messages in the information campaigns counter entrenched and hegemonic narratives of a 'developed' Europe and an 'underdeveloped' Africa. The Gambian respondents tend to have a different perception and empirical knowledge as to how to assess opportunities and challenges in Europe and/or the Gambia. We can see that the Master narratives on migration and Europe have been so pervasive in the Gambia as they have historically built-up and correspond to a perceived reality (i.e., that migrants in Europe tend to send remittances,

have a higher social status and improve lives 'at home'). A growing Gambian community in Europe (which is highly trusted in terms of information by other Gambians) and the changing information landscape, notably the increasing relevance of social media, reinforce rather than undermine these Master narratives. These factors help to explain the relative dominance of the existing Master narratives in and the relative lack of impact of the EU-funded information campaigns. Our study highlights that information campaigns messages that counter historically widespread and dominant narratives struggle to convince, let alone influence migratory decision-making.

6.2 Recommendations

The recommendations can go in two directions. In a narrower sense, a study such as the present one can develop recommendations on how to set up or conduct information campaigns. However, a key finding of this research is that EU-promoted narratives will be endorsed only to a limited extent if they are disconnected from locally dominant narratives as well as migration realities. Gambians will not seriously believe in the messages of 'opportunities at home' so long as they do not see them in their day-to-day experience. The same holds true for 'life in Europe is difficult'. In their communities, Gambians notice that neighbours with a family member in Europe tend to be better off compared to people without connections to migrants in Europe. Even if Gambians struggle in Europe, they can make a difference 'at home'. Migration will likely remain an important aspect of Gambian culture and society.

A first set of recommendations therefore concerns different aspects of migration policy:

Opening up legal routes and creating more certainty about visa procedures

At present, legal migration opportunities to Europe hardly play a role in the migration narratives of young Gambians. The EU may make legal migration a possibility for at least a number of Gambians, thereby reducing the attractiveness of the 'backway' and making young people reassessing the risk-benefit analysis of irregular migration. Applications for (short and long-term) visas are often considered as no option due to the considerable costs and high probability of a negative response. The EU and its member states could consider reimbursing visa application fees for younger applicants, introducing 'lottery programmes' for visas (similar to the US Diversity Immigrant Visa Programme), or opening up other legal ways for some Gambians to come to Europe. At present, young Gambians primarily reflect upon irregular migration and plan accordingly. Legal migration may become an option again, thereby transforming it into an objective young people can dream about.

Creating real opportunities for young people

Many young Gambians, notably in more rural areas, felt neglected by both the Gambian government and international donors. Many training or financial support programmes were seen to be out of reach (in more rural areas) or insufficient to have a real impact. The Gambian government (alone or in cooperation with international partners) may develop a more tailor-made, sustainable and targeted policy for young people that will enable them to access the labour market or start a viable business. The lack of opportunities is also an issue for return migrants, even those benefiting from an Assisted Voluntary Return Programme. Post-return (re-)integration may need more follow-up and attention to actually succeed.

Engaging in different forms of information campaigns

Several young Gambians participating in this study advanced the view that few people outside their families and friends have ever asked them their thoughts and views on migration – regardless of the fact that this topic would be very important to their lives. Talking or getting informed about migration is a need perceived by many. As a matter of fact, the information campaigns usually set-up in a top-down manner may get a stronger bottom-up dimension. Local or international actors may develop more inclusive and open-ended forms of engagements that are less oriented on the overarching goal of convincing people to stay. Citizens may contribute to new ideas on how to deal with migration in the Gambia, be it to actually have more and different opportunities at home or to enhance the safety of their fellow citizens on the route.

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Assessing the production and impact of migration narratives

BRIDGES: Assessing the production and impact of migration narratives is a project funded by the EU H2020 Framework Programme for Research and Innovation and implemented by a consortium of 12 institutions from all over Europe. The project aims to understand the causes and consequences of migration narratives in a context of increasing politicisation and polarisation around these issues by focusing on six European countries: France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom. To do so, BRIDGES adopts an interdisciplinary and co-productive approach and is implemented by a diverse consortium formed by universities, think tanks and research centres, cultural associations, and civil society organisations.

The BRIDGES Working Papers are a series of academic publications presenting the research results of the project in a structured and rigorous way. They can either focus on particular case studies covered by the project or adopt a comparative perspective.

How to cite this Working Paper:

Trauner, Florian, Ilke Adam, Omar N. Cham, and Hannah Sattlecker. 2023. "The role of narratives in migratory decision-making: Analysing the impact of EU-funded information campaigns in the Gambia." *BRIDGES Working Papers* 15. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7773991>

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7773991>

ISSN: 2696-8886

Editorial Coordination: Barcelona Centre for International Affairs (CIDOB)

This publication has been funded by the European Union under the Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement no. 101004564. Its contents are the sole responsibility of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union. The European Commission and the Research Executive Agency are not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.