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**UNU-CRIS**

Institute on Comparative  
Regional Integration Studies

# Policy Brief

NUMBER 9, 2019

## Keywords

Irregular migration; Information;  
Awareness campaign; Randomised  
experiment; Youths; Nigeria

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on Comparative Regional Integration  
Studies, 2019

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## Combatting Irregular Migration through Rural Awareness Campaigns: the case of Edo State, Nigeria

International migration is undergoing unprecedented changes. The traditional determinants of migration such as poverty, food insecurity and climate change are giving way to new motivations such as the desire to live a foreign lifestyle. Recently, incomplete and asymmetric information spread through social media platforms has increasingly led migrants to underestimate the risk of irregular migration. Drawing from the study conducted in Italy and Nigeria, this policy brief demonstrates that awareness campaigns could become a veritable means for improving knowledge for safe migration decisions. Safe migration campaign should be conducted in rural areas of home countries targeting the most vulnerable groups, – school-age, youths with lower economic statuses, who have no previous migration experience.

## Introduction:

Irregular migration from Africa to Europe presents a new challenge for policymakers in Europe and Africa. The challenge is not only because of the largely undocumented status of many irregular immigrants which denies them of some rights and social services but also because of the hazardous nature of the journeys. In 2018, the UNHCR reported that about 144,166 migrants entered Europe irregularly by the boat, with more than 2,275 reported dead or missing (UNHCR, 2018). Primary departure countries from Africa include Morocco, Guinea, Mali, Algeria and Nigeria. Migrant deaths at sea and on land (desert) continue to rise, and many are victims of sexual and financial exploitation both in transit and on arrival in the destination countries.

The regular flow of “information” through social networks, including social media, migrant networks, and migration brokers, indoctrinates new beliefs and aspirations among vulnerable people. This information can be false or incomplete depending on the means and purpose of the informer, a reality that unfortunately is

often only realised when it is already too late. False or incomplete information can be even riskier than no information at all. It embeds unachievable expectations among those with lower capabilities, leading them to discount the risk associated with the journey (Mbaye, 2014).

International migration management paradigms, therefore, need to move beyond building secure borders and focus on changing the global narrative of migration. It is crucial to provide accurate and complete information on the dangers and risks associated with irregular migration, increase awareness of the living conditions of migrants in destination countries and provide better alternatives to irregular migration. Accurate information could help people make more informed choices in terms of mobility and livelihood. This is particularly important for people in areas with high migration propensity, where many are engaging in or have engaged in irregular migration. Primarily, the focus should be on youth living in rural areas, as they are easy prey for human traffickers. Promises of a

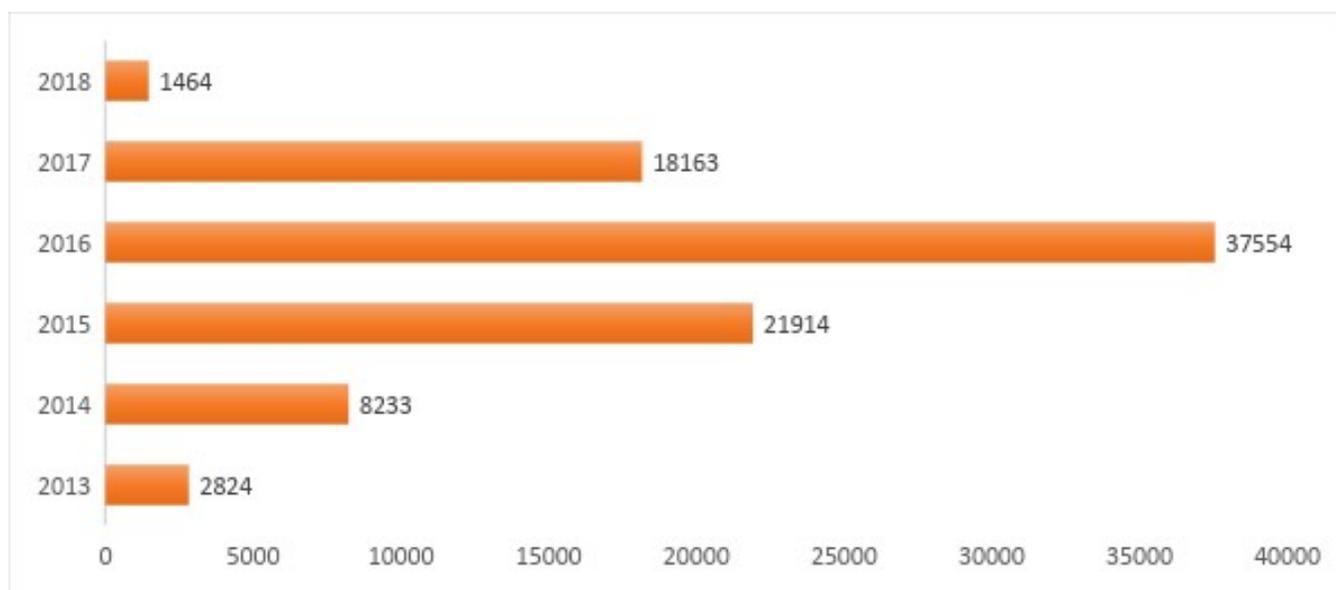


Figure 1: Number of Sea Arrivals from Nigeria into Italy between 2013 and 2018

better life abroad may easily sway them, but they often end up being exploited.

## Irregular Migration: the Nigerian perspective

More than 1.2 million Nigerians were international migrants in 2015, representing 0.7% of the population (United Nations, 2016). Most international migrants from Nigeria stay within the continent, but significant intercontinental migration destinations include the USA, UK, Canada and the EU. More than 33.3% of Nigerian immigrants (i.e. 392,000 people) reside in the EU. A significant number of these are refugees and asylum seekers. The central Mediterranean route to Italy is the one taken by most Nigerian migrants. Between 2013 and 2016, the registered number of irregular crossings by Nigerian immigrants to Italy via the Mediterranean Sea route increased by a factor of 11 from 2,824 people to 37,554 people (Fig 1). Recent statistics show that since 2016, there has been a significant reduction of irregular sea arrival by Nigerians from 37,554 in 2016 to less than 3,000 in 2018 (FRA, 2018; Rustenbach, 2010). This decrease is mainly due to the sea closure policies initiated in April 2017 by the previous Italian government. However, Nigerians remain the largest single group entering Italy since 2015. Despite the reported difficulties by irregular migrants in securing means of livelihood in Europe and the perilous experience they face during transit, the general attitude towards irregular migration among young people in Nigeria has not changed much, especially in Edo State, Nigeria.

## Irregular Migration: the Edo State case study

Edo State, Nigeria is widely known for its high rate of youth emigration, mostly via Libya. It is believed that international migration has become a norm in Edo state. It has been sustained through networks created more than 40 years ago, when the first set of seasonal agricultural migrants travelled to Europe. More recently the business of irregular migration has developed into a multinational, underground industry controlled by traffickers in Edo State. The strength of the traffickers paired with the inability of young people to attain the desired lifestyle in Edo, the influence of social media, and various socio-cultural pressures are all fuelling irregular emigration out of the state.

In Edo State, as in other parts of Nigeria, safe migration awareness campaigns are being conducted or sponsored by several international and local institutions such as the IOM and the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Person. While most campaigns work with the Nigerian media to better sensitise people to the problems of irregular migration, many potential migrants in Edo State and other rural areas may not have access to such media information. They instead receive incomplete information from migrant brokers or social media.

We, therefore, implemented a Rural Information Campaign for safe migration (RicosMigration) project in Edo state. The research was conducted to determine the profile of potential irregular migrants, the propensity to migrate and the effectiveness of rural awareness campaigns in combatting irregular migration. Data was collected via a mixed-methods approach including; focus group discussions, in-depth interviews and quantitative surveys of Edo indigenes living in Italy (n = 100) as well as potential migrants in Edo State, Nigeria

(300). The rural awareness campaign conducted in Edo state was done in selected secondary schools using a randomised control experiment (n=300). The migration message was produced with the help of migrants in Italy. The facilitators are members of the National youth services corps of Nigeria. Three ways were used in conveying the information to the students: oral presentation, video presentations, and leaflet presentation. We tested the global impact of the campaign on the students' knowledge and future migration decisions, and the individual impact of the different ways the campaign was conducted.

## The Profile of Potential Migrants in Edo State

Young people between the ages of 15 to 24 (41.1%) are more likely to migrate than other age categories. Those that have attended university are also less likely (32.5%) to migrate than those who are yet to attend university (48.9%). On gender, more men would likely migrate than women. While males are more likely to offer themselves to be smuggled into Italy via Lybia, females are more likely to be vulnerable to deception and trafficking.

Most people willing to migrate have a lower economic status. They are either unemployed or engaged in an unskilled job. About 58% of this group indicated a willingness to migrate, as opposed to 31% of those with higher economic status, such as students, graduates and those employed in high skilled jobs.

Those with relatives abroad are more likely to migrate (40%) than those who do not (35%). Those who have never migrated before (41%) are more likely to show a willingness to migrate compared to those that have previous experience with migration (10%). The two major reasons for migration are for education (43%)

and job search (28%). Canada (26%), the USA (25%), the UK (11%), Australia (5%) and Germany (5%) are top preferred migration destinations.

The respondents ranked the major drivers of migration in Nigeria. Poverty, hunger and lack of jobs (64%), life ambition (62%), insecurity and crises (61%), poor opportunities and freedom (51%), social pressure (42%), and lack of proper information (41%).

## Assessing the Propensity to Migrate Irregularly

Irregular migration propensity was examined using the responses of migration intention and willingness to migrate if the respondent won a hypothetical lottery. The migration intention was assessed by asking if respondents had the intention of travelling abroad. The respondent was also asked if they would migrate or remain in Nigeria after winning a hypothetical lottery of 1 million Naira (about 2500 euros). Based on Focus Group Discussions conducted with irregular migrants in Italy, we discovered that this amount is sufficient to cover the cost of migration from Nigeria to Europe via Lybia. In both cases, a dichotomous choice response of yes (1) and no (0) was gathered. About 247 (77.2%) of the 320 respondents indicated the intention to migrate for the first question. However, only 119 (37.2%) showed a willingness to if they win a hypothetical lottery. This points to the association of limited economic opportunities and irregular migration propensity. Further analyses were done using logistic regression.

Poor capabilities and low perceived quality of life were found to be significant factors that drive irregular migration in Nigeria. Poor capabilities in the form of inability to secure university admission, failure in businesses, regular intimidation by the police, and suffering domestic violence decreases the satisfaction of

young people and raises the propensity to migrate irregularly. The regression result showed that the odds of engaging in irregular migrating would decrease by up to 10% with a 1% increase in life satisfaction in Nigeria.

Social media information is also another significant factor in decision-making by people concerning irregular migration. Potential migrants look for information that will confirm what they want to hear, and social media give them a perfect means to search for selective migration information. Moreover, there is the problem of traffickers who deceived young people, and migrant networks that showcase false lifestyle in Europe through social media. These factors result in incomplete information, fueling wrong migration perceptions and choices.

## **Can Awareness Campaigns Improve Knowledge and Lead to Better Migration Decisions?**

Our randomised intervention in rural schools in Edo State, Nigeria, found that treated students responded appropriately to the awareness campaign by showing more ability to understand the dangers of irregular migration and how to say no to human traffickers. Our analysis showed that the information campaign could reduce the risk of being a victim of human trafficking by more than 50%. It could also reduce the desire to engage in irregular migration by more than 30% and increased the decision to take necessary steps to avoid human traffickers and follow proper procedures for safe migration by more than 50%. We conclude that an awareness campaign is capable of tackling the challenges of incomplete information and irregular migration behaviours.

However, providing accurate and credible information is critical. In the randomised experiment, information was provided on the dangers and risks of the desperate journey from Nigeria to Europe, the predicaments of irregular immigrants once in Europe, and the alternatives to irregular migration. While there was generally some previous knowledge of migration issues, participants had incomplete information about the lifestyles of irregular migrants abroad and alternatives. There was a gross misconception among respondents that living abroad is better than life in Nigeria, irrespective of the migrants status. It is therefore imperative that accurate and complete information, including integration processes, actual lifestyles of migrants, and better livelihood alternatives in home countries are communicated in migration awareness campaigns.

Our investigations suggested that intervention channels, including oral presentation plus leaflet, and oral presentation plus video appeared to be reasonably effective in improving safer migration intention or decision to talk alternative livelihoods. The oral presentation plus visual aid components of the intervention seemed more effective than the oral-only intervention. The oral presentation is needed for an explanation, but it is the visual aids that raised the enthusiasm and attentiveness of the students, which promote a more profound impact. Furthermore, students were capable of responding to desired changes when external, but respected facilitators delivered the message.

Another finding was that incentives and monetary forms of empowerment are not necessarily needed to change young people's mindsets about irregular migration. Without incentives, the secondary school students participants were able to articulate their responses and showcase their new knowledge of the dangers of

irregular migration, which translated to a reduced desire to migrate irregularly and a higher understanding of legal ways of migration and other alternatives. The key factors leading to reduced future irregular migration decision of the participants are the improved understanding of the risk in the journey and the miserable situation of most irregular immigrants in Europe.

## Policy Recommendations

### **1) Safe migration awareness campaign requires a triple message of dangers on the way, life of irregular immigrants in host countries, and alternatives.**

Potential migrants tend to discount the risk associated with the journey with the expectation that a better life awaits them at the destination countries. Nevertheless, this is not always true. Pointing out the dangers without giving information about the life of migrants at destination countries nor giving alternatives may limit the effect of the awareness campaign. In our experiment, receiving accurate and complete information that included the dangers of the migration route, the conditional realities at the final destination, and alternative means of migration improved behavioural intention concerning migration. It is, therefore, essential that these three messages are provided during information campaigns.

### **2) The channel of disseminating safe migration information is vital; it should include visual aids.**

It was shown that sensitisation and awareness campaigns are capable of tackling the new challenges concerning irregular migration. The most beneficial impact of the intervention occurred when we

disseminated information through an oral presentation that was supplemented with visual aids. Therefore, the use of leaflets, movies and other visual aids are strongly recommended for migration awareness campaigns for vulnerable groups.

### **3) The messenger should be respected, and the vulnerable groups, especially those in rural areas, should be targeted.**

Generally, successful migration awareness campaigns require three strategies. The first is to profile the characteristics of a potential migrant. Profiling potential migrants will help to produce tailored information capable of attracting the attention of the selected participants. Second, a campaign message must seek to understand the root causes of irregular migration, dangers on the way as well as life in destination countries. As such, the message needs to come from someone that had experienced irregular migration. In particular, the irregular immigrants in destination countries should be selected as the message source, as they know the dangers on the way and the living conditions in destination countries. Third, it is recommended that a campaign adopt a grassroots, rural perspective. People living in rural areas are most easily deceived by false promises of a better life abroad than those in urban areas. It is also essential that the complete, accurate and message is passed through a respected messenger.

### **4) Social media is an important channel in disseminating safe migration information.**

Combatting incomplete information is a monumental challenge, and the uncontrollable rate at which incomplete information is disseminated by migration brokers and unregulated groups on social media may

undermine the objective of safe and orderly migration. It is therefore recommended that accurate information, especially on the living conditions of irregular migrants in Europe, be adequately communicated to potential migrants through all available channels, but most especially through social media.

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## About the Author

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The supervisory role for this project was done by Prof. Fabio Bartolini and Prof. Marijke D’Haese. Maggie Andersen did the language editing of earlier version of this paper and Rory Johnson did the final editing.

## Acknowledgements

Ricosmigration acknowledges the funding from the German Foreign Office through the German Embassy of Nigeria. The efforts put by organizations and individuals that partnered in the project is recognized. Special thanks go to the Fondazione San Giovanni Battista in Ragusa, Italy for assisting during the focus group discussion in Italy. We thank the IOM Nigeria and NAPTIP, Edo Command for technical support. We equally appreciate the Ricosmigration volunteers that facilitated the awareness campaigns in the secondary schools. Finally, we thank all our respondents for providing useful information. The views expressed here are solely that of Ricosmigration Nigeria based on the analysis of the information provided by the respondents in 2018.