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Navigating contradictions: justifications and imaginaries of the initiators of European migration information campaigns

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Abstract

European states employ migration information campaigns (MICs) to discourage irregular migration to Europe by people from the Global South. Campaigns are justified by their initiators in various ways. On the one hand, campaigns are said to protect 'potential migrants' by helping them to make informed decisions ('care'). On the other hand, campaigns respond to Europe's security objective of restricting migration flows ('control'). Researchers have looked at various intermediaries involved in these campaigns. Yet, little attention has been given to individual European policy actors who decide on the funding and design of campaigns and how they navigate between campaigns' contradictory intentions to care for 'potential migrants' and to control borders. How do European campaign initiators justify the need for MICs? And what does this tell us about the migration imaginaries of those who develop migration governance measures? Based on interviews with European policymakers and campaign designers in the Netherlands and Senegal, this article examines their discursive acts of legitimation. It shows that in justifying their everyday work, they imagine themselves as humanitarian actors, and

'potential migrants' as depoliticized subjects in need of care. While initiators do sometimes examine campaigns critically, they build a worldview in which care is instrumental to border enforcement and in which compassion becomes a form of repressive 'soft' bordering.

INTRODUCTION

'What is the goal of migration campaigns?' I asked Peter, a European civil servant working in Dakar. He answered, 'It is very contradictory: to stop people from arriving and to save people from dying' (Development expert, 5 April 2022).

European efforts to govern migration from the Global South have intensified in recent years. Among migration governance policies, migration information campaigns (MICs) have multiplied and are increasingly receiving funding from the European Union and its member states (Schans & Optekamp, 2016; Trauner et al., 2022). As the quote before shows, bureaucrats who contribute to conceiving migration campaigns find these policy measures embedded in contradictory narratives of migration control and migrant protection.

Information campaigns to prevent human trafficking and stem undocumented migration were launched in countries of the Global South in the early 1990s (Nieuwenhuys & Pécoud, 2007). EU-sponsored campaigns assume that 'potential migrants'[1] lack information about the risks of undocumented migration or rely on false information. This is the rationale behind the claim of MICs to deliver reliable information to make people aware of the dangers of irregular journeys and reconsider their migration plans. Thus, MICs are formulated and implemented in a field of tension between awareness raising and deterrence, responding to humanitarian and security interests (Pécoud, 2010; Schans & Optekamp, 2016).

Heidbrink (2024) discusses the types of emotion laden messages and images that campaigns mobilize to manage the perceptions of potential migrants and thus to contain their migratory aspirations before they cross territorial borders. The analysis of local responses to such messages reveals the disconnection between risk awareness and decision making, showing how the audience distrusts campaign information (Carling & Hernández-Carretero, 2011). Other studies have examined campaign dissemination strategies, including community-led events, cultural activities and social media communication (Musarò, 2019; Rodriguez, 2019). In addition, the realization of MICs has been examined from the perspectives of a variety of intermediaries, including international organizations (Bartels, 2023), local development actors (Rodriguez, 2019; Schenetti & Mazzucato, 2024), civil society groups (Bouilly, 2008) and migrants (Maâ et al., 2023; Marino et al., 2024). To date, research has focused on issues of governmentality, the emotional content of campaigns, how campaigns affect social relationships locally and the intermediaries who shape the practice of migration policies on the ground. Yet, so far, little is known about the subjective perspectives of people who design such policies. We define 'campaign initiators' as EU national public officials and international organization officers who are EU or Canadian citizens, tasked with designing, funding and monitoring the implementation of MICs. Some initiators may believe in the utility of campaigns, while others may face personal dilemmas and contradictions when executing policies of which they are critical. This article examines the following questions: How do EU campaign initiators justify the need for campaigns? What do their justifications reveal about the imaginaries they have about themselves, their subjects and the different contexts in which they operate? We contribute to a broader discussion on the paradoxical coexistence of care and control in migration governance by shedding light on the subjective experiences of those responsible for designing and monitoring migration policies. Specifically, the focus on the stated justifications for MICs contributes to understanding how individual policymakers navigate and make sense of the contradictory rationalities of humanitarianism and border enforcement that are embedded in campaign policy.

EU member states are expected to justify MICs for three main reasons. First, public information campaigns are usually directed at a state's citizens to shape public attitudes and behaviours to achieve desirable social outcomes (Weiss & Tschirhart, 1994). MICs are instead addressed to non-EU citizens, often former colonial subjects, meaning that EU countries need to justify the legitimacy of intervening in third countries. Second, a campaign-implementing government must justify its public spending, even more so when campaigns have little effect on dissuading people from moving (Caso & Carling, 2024; Cham & Trauner, 2023; Oeppen, 2016). Third, governments must explain their border control policies, as different governmental bodies often contest these, even if citizens may not. We, therefore, examine how European civil servants working for EU governments and international organizations articulate their individual justifications in their daily work. We are also interested in how they grapple with the potential contradictions in their justifications and the ways in which their professional roles and personal views are intertwined.

We focus on Dutch policymakers and European development experts working in Senegal for international organizations or EU agencies. The Netherlands has implemented MICs abroad in recent decades, initially with funding from the Ministry of Justice and Security. Yet, cooperation agreements between EU and African countries have been explicitly tied to measures for migration control, resulting in migration, security and development becoming increasingly intertwined policy domains. Hence, as in other European states, Dutch-led migration campaigns are funded by development aid disbursed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Senegal is an ideal African country on which to focus, given that its migration partnership with the EU has led to significant resources being invested in MICs in pursuit of the EU's agenda to deter 'irregular' migration. Curbing Senegalese migration is deemed important to prevent people from dying in their attempts to reach the Canary Islands, a Spanish archipelago 1500 km from Senegal, often on wooden fishing boats (Ngom, 2018).

The next section presents the concepts underlying our theoretical framework: humanitarian governance, justificatory talk and imaginaries. We then describe the methodology. In the following section, our analysis shows that campaign initiators justify campaigns in three main ways: campaigns meet the need for information, campaigns do no harm and campaigns have a positive message. These justifications are grounded in particular imaginaries campaign initiators have about themselves, their work in migration governance and campaign audiences. Justifications are sometimes internally contradictory as campaign initiators navigate and attempt to reconcile their professional roles and personal views. We end with conclusions and avenues for further research.

HUMANITARIAN GOVERNANCE, JUSTIFICATORY TALK, IMAGINARIES

We build on the literature concerned with humanitarian governance, borderwork and MICs, and we analyse the 'justificatory talk' of campaign initiators to understand the imaginaries they hold. We consider the imaginaries of campaign initiators to originate from and operate according to humanitarian reasoning (Fassin, 2012). While humanitarian intervention is normally associated with the work of non-governmental organizations in contexts of disasters and humanitarian crises, we regard humanitarianism as a logic that European states adopt to rationalize and manage the migration of third-country citizens to Europe (Stierl, 2018). Governments that appeal to humanitarian reason deploy moral sentiments to legitimize their practices towards vulnerable populations. Moral sentiments appeal to reducing the suffering of other human beings and form the basis for a politics of compassion, through which many people derive meaning from the world (Fassin, 2012; Pallister-Wilkins, 2015). Yet, the discourse and practice of compassion are based on relations of power that establish a hierarchy in the values of human lives. This can lead to the politics of compassion becoming a politics of inequality enacted by repression (Fassin, 2005).

Humanitarian reason is used in migration governance to frame and justify border enforcement while at the same time allowing for the demonstration of compassionate care for distant others. In other words, caring for the lives of people on the move functions as a technology of border enforcement and ensures state sovereignty

(Williams, 2015). Thus, paradoxically, humanitarian and securitizing logics are conjoined elements of migration management (Little & Vaughan-Williams, 2017). We locate migration campaigns within this emerging care dimension of contemporary border control regimes (Pallister-Wilkins, 2015; Williams, 2015). We agree with conceptualizations of MICs as 'soft instruments of border externalisation' (Van Dessel, 2023) and tools of a new territorialization of migration control (Nieuwenhuys & Pécoud, 2007; Watkins, 2020). To understand the coexistence of seemingly opposed logics of care and control at play in campaign policy, we deploy the concept of 'moral borderwork' (Richter, 2023). Specifically, the labour that campaign initiators conduct as members of a humanitarian government has two dimensions. First, it is intended to relieve the suffering and death of people crossing borders; and second, to compensate for the increasingly violent and restrictive border regimes (Walters, 2011). Such discursive and practical labour is 'borderwork' in the sense that it produces, maintains and transgresses borders. It is 'moral' in how it raises and handles social concerns and invokes sentiments to legitimize practices of migration governance (Richter, 2023). We consider how references to morals construct the 'justificatory talk' campaign initiators give to legitimize policy on MICs.

Justificatory talk refers to socio-political and discursive acts of legitimation that government authorities perform to cast controversial policies as beneficial for society and to seek normative approval for these policies (Rojo & van Dijk, 1997). A key strategy is to demonstrate that policies adhere to a moral order, supposedly agreed upon by the majority. Dimensions of discursive legitimation include justification of the policy itself, representation of events as 'facts' and recognition of the authority of the actor claiming that a particular policy is legitimate. When discursive legitimation happens in the day-to-day work of policymaking and implementation, it operates as an act of self-legitimation. Individuals assert a distinctive identity by describing themselves in their institutional position, which justifies the actions they undertake (Barker, 2001). We look at these different dimensions of legitimation in the justificatory discourses of campaign initiators.

We interpret initiators' justificatory talk in order to understand the different imaginaries they hold of themselves, of 'potential migrants' and of the realities they both live. Taylor (2002) defines social imaginaries as the ways in which people imagine their social existence in relation to other people. As such, social imaginaries mediate collective social life and, as collective representations, are based on a common understanding of issues that enable collective practices and ensure a shared sense of legitimacy. Imaginaries are shared by a large group of people and support moral schemes and sensory modes that regulate people's way of being in the world and of making this world (Meyer, 2015). Thus, imaginaries function as sense-making tools that generate a world of lived experience that is taken as real by those participating in it. In other words, imaginaries are a mode of actuality, and when they are recognized as collective, they serve to reproduce and consolidate norms regarding how we understand the world and our place in it (Foucault, 1986). We consider the justificatory talk of campaign initiators to be the object and the site of imaginaries, as well as the means through which imaginaries are established and reproduced. We look at how the making of MICs is grounded in particular ways of imagining campaign initiators, the work that campaigns do and the people that campaigns target.

METHODOLOGY

The first author collected data using semi-structured interviews and participant observation. Interviews were conducted in multiple sites with two groups of respondents: policymakers in the Netherlands and European development workers in Senegal. We initially focused on policymakers, but when conducting fieldwork, we realized that development workers in Senegal operated within the same Western institutional setting charged with funding and designing migration campaigns in countries of the Global South. Both groups consisted mainly of highly educated white Westerners whose tasks were to define the policy strategy and the methodological framework of campaign implementation. Despite differences in locations, the tasks performed and the degree of familiarity with the socio-cultural context of Senegal, we analyse both groups together given their similar

institutional functions. This allows us to analyse the full diversity of justifications given by all involved in campaign production.

We interviewed seven Dutch policymakers working either for the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs or for the Dutch Ministry of Justice and Security. The fourth author facilitated access to participants due to her professional affiliation with the Ministry of Justice and Security. Interviews were conducted online due to pandemic restrictions between November 2020 and January 2021. Interviews lasted approximately 1 h and were conducted in English. Respondents were selected based on their experience working on the implementation of migration campaigns abroad. Their tasks include allocating funds, setting the terms of collaboration with implementing agencies, evaluating project proposals and fixing guidelines for good campaign practices.

The second group consisted of 10 research participants, either European or Canadian nationals. They worked in Dakar for EU-state institutions or international organizations as heads of units, project managers, migration officers or communication experts tasked with directing the implementation of campaigns in Senegal on behalf of European donors. In practice, they contributed to the design of campaigns when requested to do so by the funder, and they oversaw their implementation, occasionally on-site, but mostly from the headquarters of their respective organizations in Dakar. Access to this second group was facilitated by members of the first due to liaisons between funders and implementing organizations. Moreover, the positionality of the field researcher (and first author), who had previous professional experience in the development sector in Senegal, influenced access to the field and the process of data collection.

Semi-structured interviews and informal conversations were conducted with respondents from this second group between January 2021 and May 2022, when the first author conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Senegal. Interviews were conducted in English, French or Italian depending on interviewee preferences, and all quotes next were translated by the authors. Respondents have been given pseudonyms to facilitate reading. Our analysis is based largely on the interviews and conversations; however, long-term immersion in the everyday lives of people involved in campaigns informed our understanding of the experiences of campaign initiators. In particular, campaign events attended by officials in their institutional capacity are important for the analysis.

To ease recruitment, we gained participants' consent orally. We obtained ethical clearance from our university's ethics committee before the start of data collection. Data analysis employed both deductive and inductive coding, through which we identified key themes.

JUSTIFICATIONS

Three main justifications for migration campaigns emerged from the discourses of campaign initiators: need to inform, do no harm and promote development. We discuss these in turn next.

It is a moral duty to provide objective information

The first justification provided by campaign initiators is that campaigns play a crucial role in informing potential migrants and providing them with *objective* information. This justification has three dimensions: availability of information, truthfulness and self-legitimation of the authority of campaign initiators.

The first dimension relates to the availability and reliability of information. Claudia, a campaign initiator based in Dakar, endorsed the campaign goal of informing potential migrants because she sensed information was scarce and that people distrusted the information available to them: 'It is a matter of hopelessness but also a matter of ignorance. Why would people living in villages know about the violence of the journey [to Europe]? They might say, "you are telling me lies to discourage me from going". Maybe somebody understands that it is not so easy to reach [Europe]. I understand the meaning [of doing campaigns]' (Development expert, 21 April 2022). This example of

Claudia's justificatory talk points to imaginations about the campaign's target audience, which is consistent with what we observed in other interviews: the audience is imagined to be uneducated and living in misery in peripheral rural areas. They are perceived as marginalized and excluded from the circulation of ideas, global interconnections and the possibilities these create. They are also pictured as unaffected by the transnational networks they are effectively part of. Even when aspiring migrants have access to information on the dangers of irregular migration and know the risks (Trauner et al., 2024), campaign initiators imagine them to be suspicious of their sources.

According to several initiators, information campaigns are still needed because there is a gap between what aspiring migrants are told and the reality. Such an information gap emerges because, as Sara, Claudia's colleague, explained: 'Many migrants, when they return [to Senegal], do not talk about the failures of their migration path. Only the stories of those *who made it* [in Europe] are told'. Therefore, campaigns are meant to provide 'an alternative message' to the stories that 'successful' migrants in Europe tell people back home. The need for alternative messages is at the heart of the initiator's justificatory discourse. This discourse evokes an image of migrants as unreliable sources of information who exclusively propagate stories of success and it depicts migration as something to be assessed either as a successful or as a failed experience. Campaigns aim to educate potential migrants about the hardships and dangers of migration, remedy the lack of information and correct misinformed populations. Hence, campaigns are imagined as benefiting the audience.

If potential migrants are provided with good information, campaign initiators imagine that they will change their behaviours. The campaign *Migrants as Messengers* (MaM), funded by the Netherlands and implemented in West Africa by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), claimed 'to facilitate safe and informed migration choices among potential migrants' (IOM, 2023). Amalia, part of the campaign coordination team, defined *informed choices* as those that prove 'a shift of attitude' and lead towards 'behavioural change'. Similarly, Heleen, who managed the campaign's fund, explained that: 'Behavioural change is when there is increased knowledge and risks internalisation. People realise the risks of being exploited on the way, of being trafficked, of the possibilities for ending up in detention facilities in European countries, and [they] increase the[ir] knowledge of alternatives and possibilities available in their origin country. Behavioural change is also measured based on people postponing migration plans' (Policymaker, 10 December 2020). Along with her colleagues, Heleen presumes a causal relationship between the information that campaigns provide and the campaign audience's decision not to migrate. Presented as educational tools, campaigns instruct on the risks of exploitation, trafficking and detention, as well as on alternatives to migration at home. It is imagined that potential migrants will abandon any intentions to move once they are in possession of this knowledge. This imaginary suggests that migration choices are driven by information and are unaffected by other factors, contingencies and uncertainties. In other words, the targeted people are conceived of as rational actors whose migration choices are ideally affected by the information they acquire through campaigns. This leads to the view that migrants who embark on irregular journeys to Europe overlook the risks and overestimate their chances of success.

Moreover, initiators concurred with the idea that knowledge transfer and its effectiveness are measurable and that the campaign is deemed successful when people choose to stay in the country of origin. This does not mean that everyone has to stay. As Heleen explained, the campaign's success: 'Is not defined by the whole population being reached by the campaign changing their behaviour. If 20% does, that is already a success. (…) When people who are fully informed still move, it is a matter of human nature. We do not expect everyone to follow this information, and even if they take the risks, if they take steps to minimise the risks, that is a success' (Policymaker, 10 December 2020). Funding for migration campaigns is justified by their expected effectiveness. A campaign is deemed effective and worthwhile when at least some among the target group stay in the country of origin. Campaign initiators imagine borders to be porous and that their work involves reducing this porosity, which means reducing departures to Europe. Simultaneously, Heleen's quote indicates initiators' belief in the primacy of human mobility over attempts to control it. Migrants are considered to always have a choice. They may decide to stay, and if they leave, they are seen as having the power to reduce the risks they encounter on the way. Hence, the success of the campaign is presumed to depend on the migrants' agency.

The second dimension of the justification about the moral duty to provide information is the apparent 'truthful nature' of the information campaigns provide. The presumption that campaigns are trustworthy sources of information emerges from claims about objectivity. This imaginary omits how people, societies and power dynamics shape information and blur the boundary between facts and values. Instead, it establishes a hierarchy among sources of information potential migrants have access to, in which campaigns are imagined to be more reliable than other sources. According to Daan: 'Objective means to inform them, not in a scary way, on what happened to others who migrated to Europe, and to [get people to] take into account the [slim] chances of getting asylum in Europe and the job possibilities in [their] origin country' (Policymaker, 17 December 2020). Here, objective information about life realities in Europe is generally addressed to African migrants. Carolien, one of Daan's colleagues, specified that objective information is about 'the tough life in Europe for undocumented migrants' and that 'it is not fun to live in Europe without papers'. These policymakers presume migrants are not aware of the hardships of undocumented living in Europe. They also often envisage that potential migrants may be attracted by the possibility of receiving asylum in Europe, but consider them as not deserving asylum and posing potential threats to the asylum system.

A third dimension of justification emerging from campaign initiators' discourses on the need for migration campaigns lies in the self-legitimation of their own authority and morality. Chris explained how providing campaign funding is seen as a moral duty that European governments have towards populations from the Global South: 'Still, telling them about the risks, about the dangerous journeys to the Canary Islands by boat, that is also our obligation as EU [members], to give them objective information about what could happen. It is a moral obligation because they think if they come here, they can [achieve] everything, which is definitely not the case for many migrants…' (Policymaker, 27 November 2020).

This quote captures what emerged from other interviews about campaign initiators imagining themselves, and the institutions they represent, to be driven by a sense of morality. This even manifests in the duty to prove West African migrants wrong. Initiators often believe West African potential migrants have distorted ideas about their possible socio-economic achievements in Europe and ignore obstacles and failures that are likely to occur. This stems in part from campaign initiators' picture of Europe as an exclusive space, inhospitable for many, that holds very few opportunities for African migrants. By having an over-optimistic view of their chances in Europe, migrants could possibly damage the host society. Campaign initiators feel obliged to correct such overly optimistic views. At the same time, as Chris acknowledged, initiators are aware of the restricted mobility faced by some populations: 'If there are no alternatives – because, for example, not all the Senegalese youth would qualify for a visa – they would probably still take the boat to the Canary Islands, "the big" route. People who have all the information will still go. Even when they are fully informed, they migrate. But we have the obligation to say that not everything is as rosy in Europe' (Policymaker, 27 November 2020). This discourse seems contrary to the idea initiators support that informed people would abandon their plans to move. Yet, their justification for organizing campaigns lies in the obligation to present an 'ugly' Europe. This imaginary, which involves efforts to inform potential migrants of the ugliness, helps to preserve the self-representations of the campaign-funding government, showing how the latter operates according to a sense of moral responsibility to protect 'unaware migrants'; hence increasing the legitimacy of what it does. In this way, MICs are necessary irrespective of whether migrants are fully informed, migration risks are reduced or campaigns are effective in stopping migration. Campaigns also have symbolic and moral value (Oeppen, 2016).

Campaigns do no harm

The second justification campaign initiators give for the migration campaigns they organize is that campaigns do not harm, unlike other policy measures European governments employ to manage migration. The view that campaigns are an innocuous tool makes them a better policy option, as Carolien explained: 'Campaigns are better

alternatives in the policy context because no violence is involved and because people do not encounter risks when taking part in campaign initiatives or watching it on social media' (Policymaker, 11 December 2020).

Such justificatory discourse, shared by other initiators, assumes that campaigns do not endanger their audience. This is tied to an imaginary of harm as physical and a threat to biological life. But while they may do no physical harm, campaigns often provide representations of harms suffered by migrants en route to Europe, which are emotionally violent. Campaign initiators deem potential migrants better able to retain information when there is 'an emotional component' to be found in the testimonies, videos and representations about traumatic migration experiences that campaigns stage (Heller, 2014; Musarò, 2019). This seems contradictory to the claim discussed earlier that campaign information is objective. Yet, Carolien clarified that not every emotional image is acceptable in campaign communication. For example, the Dutch government requested the removal of a picture showing a shark eating migrant bodies. The picture was posted on social media by an NGO to discourage migration via sea. She considered that picture 'disgusting'. Some efforts to elicit an emotional response are not tolerated, whereas others are purposely part of campaign communications (Williams, 2020). These are considered not to entail psychological violence, emotional risks or other unintended consequences for the audience's well-being.

Campaigns' lack of coercion respects both economic interests and the interest that the campaign-funding state has in governing migration: 'Campaigns are cheaper alternatives compared to other policy strategies used to restrict migration, and nobody is hurt with campaigns, there are no problems, no bad feelings if it doesn't work. [Though] it is almost impossible to calculate if it works, no harm is done. (…) Nobody can be against it because it is about informing people and nobody wants people to die' (Policymaker, 27 November 2020). Regardless of whether campaigns are effective in stopping people from moving, Chris's quote indicates these are legitimate policy strategies. Their legitimacy stems from their assumed harmlessness, the unanimous consent they generate, their cheap cost and the lack of trouble they cause initiators. This makes campaigns the preferred tool. Similarly, Peter said:

> An awareness-raising campaign is relatively soft, not so controversial. It is preferred over another policy tool because it does no harm. It responds to a logic of protection, meaning we have to compensate for previous regulations which did not work and instead brought bad consequences for migrants, such as violation of [their] human rights (…). We see people dying, so we ask what we can do to prevent death. So, I understand why there is a focus put on the risks.
>
> (Development expert, 5 April 2022)

These quotes resonate with Oeppen's (2016) argument that governments implement campaigns in order to be seen to be doing something to control their borders while maintaining a humanitarian image. The subjective perspectives add to how initiators imagine campaigns as remedies to the violence that interventions such as the securitization of migration routes, pushback operations and deportations exert on migrants. In other words, campaigns are pictured as a humanitarian response to border violence, possibly saving lives and initiators imagine themselves almost as humanitarian actors opposed to the institutions that violate migrant rights.

At the same time, the idea that campaigns are relatively uncontroversial does not mean initiators imagine that campaigns go entirely uncontested or that they fail to find problems with campaigns themselves. Justificatory discourses help campaign initiators to deal with doubts they have about the effectiveness of campaigns and to mitigate their criticisms of migration injustice. Thus, the relevance of campaigns is challenged and other policies to facilitate the mobility of West Africans to Europe are argued for, as Peter pointed out: 'You can inform them, but let's be honest, there are very few opportunities for a legal path to migrate. So, what are we doing with these campaigns? Just a campaign does not have much value (…). We should take our own responsibility, for example, in facilitating circular migration, which is something we do not talk about in migration policy' (Development expert, 5 April 2022). On the one hand, he wishes for a different mobility system and believes it is the responsibility of EU nation states, such as the one he works for, to enable it. Yet, when interviewed, he added: 'The injustice is

not something we can un-do here in Senegal and it also gives frustration here. It must be tackled in Brussels'. This illustrates how, on the other hand, he does not see himself in the position of making substantial changes. Nevertheless, he acknowledges the need to alleviate the mobility restrictions of African citizens with more just conditions. Similarly, Chris said: 'There should be alternatives and other open channels for migration, labour migration and other possibilities for people to reach Europe. There are not so many ways, it is not easy. The only way is to use the boat to the Canary Islands. You can apply for a visa ten times, but if you do not get it (…) the illegal way is the only way' (Policymaker, 27 November 2020). Suggesting that other stakeholders, including EU institutions in Brussels, take the lead in promoting the mobility of West African citizens enables policymakers to address the inconsistency between the issue of safe travel they recognize as significant and the limited capacity of their own institutional positions to effect meaningful improvements in this area. In this way, they avoid cognitive dissonance.

Thus, initiators' personal views do not always coincide with their professional ones. Another example of this emerged when Claudia and Sara were asked to comment on the text of a call for a campaign proposal. The call expected the successful contractors to develop campaigns in West Africa that would 'contrast migration culture', 'deconstruct the myth of migration at all costs' and 'promote the cultural change necessary to reduce irregular migration'. Claudia said: 'We did not write it [the call]. I would have not used that wording (…). You work in a structure and you must adapt to that. When you work for a government agency, there are strategic guidelines, and you accept them if you want to work there otherwise, you pull yourself out' (Development expert, 21 April 2022). Sara added: 'It is a project of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It is a matter of international politics based on closing borders'. They thus legitimize their actions by adhering to the political directives of the institutions they work for, though they personally do not fully agree with them. This contributes to the perception they have of their jobs as civil servants who have to adhere to a democratically established political position while they navigate the hierarchical power structures they are part of and, at times, critical of.

Campaigns send positive messages and bring development

The third justification initiators give for MICs is that these campaigns disseminate positive messages and bring development to countries in the global South. Carolien said: 'An information campaign is a better way to tackle root causes of migration because it advocates for alternatives in origin countries to boost local development' (Policymaker, 11 December 2020). In this discursive legitimation, campaigns are imagined as tools for development, and development is imagined to reduce migration. Frequently, campaign initiators advocate for young people to enrol in professional training at home or invest in local businesses as alternatives to migration. They see these alternatives as leading to a sustainable future and consider that young people will find migration unattractive if they have a source of income. In essence, campaign initiators imagine that the people targeted by campaigns will not move if they have a job in their home country. The campaign MaM calls the local opportunities it promotes 'safe alternatives' to dangerous migration routes, and it claims its 'positive message' will help West African youth to succeed and live safely and with dignity at home. This imaginary features a romanticized (West African) country of origin where there are no risks in staying and where life offers success and safety and is so more desirable.

Amalia, working for the IOM in Dakar, explained that the organization launched the website *Waka Well* 'to advertise local opportunities and to fill the information gap'. According to the coordination team, this online portal complemented the activities MaM did on the ground and represented 'an action to reach optimistic responses' from the audience. Optimistic responses imply that the campaign's target audience seriously considers possible alternatives to migration and believes these alternatives to be empowering. The justification that campaigns promote empowerment depends on a representation of Senegal as a country that has plenty of opportunities, but on Senegalese youth being unaware of such opportunities. It also suggests that potential migrants can be viewed as beneficiaries whose needs and aspirations are met by the information campaigns provide. Such representations omit subjective perspectives of what an opportunity might be, and they ignore context-specific and individual

views on feeling empowered. Indeed, narratives of migration campaigns are detached from the realities of the targeted individuals (Trauner et al., 2024). In Amalia's view, 'when they [potential migrants] feel empowered, they will change behaviour', meaning potential migrants will abandon their aspirations to migrate once they are reached by empowering forms of communication. However, the website *Waka Well*, supposedly circulating empowering forms of communication, was never mentioned during IOM campaign activities in Senegal that the first author attended during fieldwork. Therefore, despite the IOM employee claiming the website was a positive tool and an improvement in the making of campaigns, she ignored its actual utility and how the audience would benefit from it. Thus, her justification lies in a presumed positive impact yet irrelevant to assess.

The idea that campaigns spread positive messages about alternatives to migration was used by campaign initiators to justify the effectiveness of their campaign making, contradicting their own scepticism about the value and effects of campaigns mentioned in the previous section. Sara, who worked for a European development agency in Dakar, believed her agency was doing a better job than other organizations because, in addition to sensitizing people to the dangers of migration, their projects also invested in local development. The 'IOM (…) does sensitisation, but what is the alternative [it proposes]?' Such a perspective was shared by her colleagues, who considered themselves agents of positive change because the campaign they helped design and coordinate not only raised awareness of risks, but also raised awareness of local development opportunities.

Anna, one of Sara's colleagues, justifies the agency's approach to awareness raising by calling on 'local stories of success'. The agency created video clips presenting the life stories of young Senegalese who decided to stay in Senegal instead of moving abroad and who made a name for themselves because of their talents and individual achievements. The clips showed young people committed to the nation and to becoming successful entrepreneurs. With their positive life experiences, the protagonists of these stories of success invited other youth, identified as disillusioned potential migrants, to believe in themselves and their capabilities and to invest in the place where they grew up, emphasizing it was possible to succeed in Senegal. These successful Senegalese youth thus served as campaign messengers and made them inspiring role models for others. According to the campaign promoters, the message of these stories was that others, including the non-Senegalese public, could also become successful and exemplary individuals. The more youth excelled professionally, the more opportunities to travel abroad they would have because their success would make them attractive to the international job market. From these stories, a picture emerged of *successful migrants* whose mobility depended on their own hard work. A mobile future was attainable for people who behaved responsibly, stayed in Senegal, worked hard, cultivated success and only then applied for the visas that would allow them to travel. Hence, migration was imagined as an earned privilege and individualistic project, while irregular migration was seen as the result of a lack of motivation and patience. Yet, campaign initiators also recognize the limited possibilities for Senegalese youth to travel legally, as mentioned in the previous section. But Anna refused to call it a migration campaign. Instead, she said: 'We give examples of those who have made [successful] paths' as alternatives to migration. 'At the base of it all, is their free will to decide'. Her statement reflects the development agency's imagination of Senegalese youth being able to choose freely and being fully responsible for their own choices and destiny. This emphasizes individual motivations and personal ambitions, but ignores the structural economic constraints youth face in Senegal and the sociocultural context affecting their decisions to migrate, contrary to what initiators acknowledged in other situations.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

European states are increasingly funding information campaigns to discourage irregular migration from West Africa to Europe. This article contributes to recent literature on MICs by examining the perspectives of European policymakers in the Netherlands and development workers in Senegal who design and manage migration campaigns. Our analysis focuses on campaign initiators' justifications for enforcing such policy, showing their different imaginaries. In taking the subjective level of campaign making seriously, we bring to the fore how initiators

navigate and attempt to reconcile contradictory logics of care and control they see embedding their work. We identified three main justifications: the need for 'objective' information, campaigns do no harm and campaigns send positive messages and contribute to economic development. From the justificatory talk of campaign initiators, we identified four main kinds of imaginaries. These relate to themselves as initiators of campaigns, campaigns as tools to prevent irregular migration, the context in which campaigns are produced and received and the so-called potential migrants who are the target of campaigns.

Campaign initiators think of themselves as following humanitarian and moral principles as they develop campaigns that aim to stop West African citizens from departing for Europe and reduce migrant deaths. They imagine their actions to have a positive impact and to compensate for the violence of EU migration regimes. At the same time, their awareness of the restricted mobility for African populations and their claims for policies to alleviate such restrictions reveal that they also imagine EU institutions at large as responsible in some way for reducing mobility injustice. Even though some initiators may see themselves as carrying out their professional tasks, they do not always agree personally with the political framework of which they are part.

As humanitarian and educational interventions, campaigns do no harm in the eyes of campaign initiators, in contrast to the violent measures used to control borders. Initiators believe migration campaigns to be educational and empowering tools that provide objective and measurable information, contributing to local development and benefitting the targeted people. This makes campaigns a better source of information and thus also a better policy option, despite initiators being aware that potential migrants mostly rely on other sources. Paradoxically, they question the effectiveness and the validity of campaigns as solutions to irregular migration while imagining their work as non-violent makes it more acceptable for individual initiators. Moreover, similarly to IOM staff members implementing MICs in North Africa (Bartels, 2023), our respondents imply that development programs are intended to deter and are tools for potential migrants' self-improvement, increasing their chances to succeed in life. West African origin countries are depicted as safe, presenting opportunities for youth to succeed in life and are seen as the place where youth can contribute to development. In contrast, Europe is represented as a hostile place with few opportunities for migrants.

Campaign initiators imagine the campaign target audience as uneducated and marginalized, having incorrect or misleading information and unaware of the dangers of irregular migration and of their prospects of making a living in Europe. This imaginary depoliticizes potential migrants and portrays them as naïve victims. It neglects the knowledge of migration risks that they possess and their agency in preparing for migration journeys (Ngom, 2018). But at the same time, potential migrants are also imagined as rational subjects who are free to choose their own futures. Once they receive *objective* campaign information, it is assumed that they will reconsider any plans they had for risky journeys to Europe and will look to secure jobs in their country of origin. Through goodwill, hard work, entrepreneurial spirit and a sense of responsibility for their community, they will achieve success and gain the option of undertaking legal overseas travel. In this imaginary, potential migrants are responsible for making themselves deserving and legitimate. Consequently, the view that illegitimate migrants are to blame for their own failures is reinforced. Although potential migrants may be fully informed, they may still decide to embark on irregular migration journeys because they lack other options. In this case, initiators imagine their mobility to be intrinsically part of the human experience, beyond forms of control and risks and to push back the injustice of mobility regimes.

We have focused on campaign initiators. However, besides Trauner et al.'s (2024) analyses of narratives, little research has been done on how locally rooted migration imaginaries intersect with those propagated by campaigns. Further research could investigate youth's perspectives and how their imaginaries differ from those of European campaign initiators. This would give important insight into the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of MICs. Moreover, further research could compare different groups of campaign initiators. During our research, we noted that development experts in Senegal seemed to be better able to frame campaign projects according to the local context than policymakers based in the Netherlands. Further research could investigate how proximity to campaign implementation might make a difference in the imaginaries that implementers have of the target

audience. Overall, our analysis illustrates the ambiguities campaign initiators experience in the positions they occupy. Consequently, their imaginaries contain contradictions. The imaginaries we observed show a worldview (Taylor, 2002) in which MICs are a tool of humanitarian government. This is guided by the responsibility to assist others and the moral principle to preserve life and show compassion for other human beings (Fassin, 2012; Stierl, 2018; Walters, 2011). Compassion is manifested in the enforcement of paternalistic practices of 'containment development' that normalizes sedentarism by curbing migratory aspirations and localizing the desires and aspirations of African people (Heidbrink, 2024; Landau, 2019). Hence, as members of a humanitarian government, campaign initiators carry out moral borderwork as they discursively reinforce the exclusion of African youth from mobility and raise social concern on the need for information, invoking sentiments of care for potential migrants instrumental to producing borders and legitimizing practices of border control (Richter, 2023).

At the same time, the moral dimension of borderwork exemplifies the co-existence of contradictory logics in the ways that 'social concerns are raised, reproduced, and handled in the borderwork complex' (Richter, 2023, p. 1432). While other scholars have mentioned the donors' scepticism on campaign effects (Bartels, 2023), we argue that collective imaginaries become institutionally rooted and enable practices of migration control (Mayblin, 2019), but individual campaign initiators do not completely align with institutional imaginaries and remain aware of the underlying injustice related to the mobility of certain populations. However, their criticisms do not seem to affect policymaking or disrupt global migration hierarchies. Individual policymakers have limited possibilities for contestation within the governmental apparatus, and through their justificatory talk, they try to reconcile the inner contradictions to make sense of their own position. Yet, their justifications for MICs reproduce power imbalances that maintain relations of inequality between EU campaign-funding states and potential migrants in West Africa. According to this worldview, the funding state has the authority *to protect* and *bring development*, while West African citizens need to be *instructed* and must stay *to develop Africa*. Thus, initiators' justifications contribute to sustaining the legitimacy of migration policy in ways that instrumentalize care and turn compassionate bordering into *repressive soft bordering*.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Endnote

[1] In this article, we use 'potential migrants' as this is the term used in campaign official documents and by campaign initiators. However, we believe this term to be problematic because it assumes that all people in the Global South want to migrate and recalls media images of African mass migration to Europe (de Haas, 2008).

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