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ORIGINAL ARTICLE



Migrant returnees as (anti-)migration messengers? A case of street-level representative bureaucracy in Senegal

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Abstract

International organizations and foreign-funded NGOs run campaigns in Senegal to raise awareness of the perils of irregular migration. To increase their effectiveness, these organizations often enlist local migrant returnees to share their personal migration experiences and transmit an anti-irregular migration message to their compatriots. This article examines whether policymakers' assumptions regarding the representativeness of migrant returnees operating as (anti-)migration messengers in terms of shared identities corresponds to reality at the street level. It draws from theories of street-level bureaucracy and representative bureaucracy and is based on 31 qualitative interviews with migrant returnees and experts. The study shows that migrant returnees engaged in migration information campaigns are not as representative of the local population as envisaged by policymakers, potentially impacting policy outcomes. They stand out from their compatriots in terms of skillsets and social status – partly because of the selection mechanism employed by organizations and partly because of the training and capacity-building efforts directed at migrant returnees.

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INTRODUCTION

While political decisions on migration management are frequently backed by arguments about national sovereignty and border security, the practical implementation of migration policies often entails the involvement of non-state actors. This is particularly pronounced in countries characterized by 'weak state institutions' (Peeters & Campos, 2023) where the presence of international organizations and internationally-funded NGOs is more prevalent. Individuals tasked with implementing policy on the ground, commonly known as street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 1980), are therefore not always public servants; they may also be private sector employees (Infantino, 2016) or members of the civil society, paid or unpaid (Glyniadaki, 2021).

The growing presence of policy implementers from diverse sectors complements the existing diversity in terms of ethnic, racial and other identity categories. Studies in the field of representative bureaucracy have highlighted the importance of these identities in the delivery of social services and its impact on citizens; when street-level bureaucrats share key demographic characteristics with the population they serve, they are more likely to meet this population's needs and interests (Meier, 1993). For example, the presence of ethnic minority police officers is associated with lower levels of racial profiling (Hong, 2017); increasing the representativeness of individual policy implementers is likely to have positive outcomes for the target population.

In line with recent calls for greater inclusivity in terms of the multiple and diverse identities and backgrounds of today's street-level bureaucrats (Bishu & Kennedy, 2020; Murdoch et al., 2022; Portillo et al., 2022), this article examines the implementation of migration information campaigns and initiatives in Senegal, a case where both the employment sector and the racial and national identities of street-level bureaucrats hold significance.

'Migrants as Messengers' is one prominent such programme run by the International Organisation for Migration. Its purpose is to assist locals 'to make informed decisions about migration' and 'raise awareness on the risks of irregular migration' by leveraging the narratives of community members who have previously migrated to Europe or attempted to do so. These community members are expected to offer 'authentic first-person testimonies' of their migration experience (IOM, 2024; see also Tjaden & Dunsch, 2021). Similar programmes are also spearheaded by international NGOs, such as Caritas and the German development cooperation agency GIZ. These international NGOs often operate in collaboration with smaller, local NGOs and also rely on local actors to carry out policy tasks, aiming to dissuade future irregular migration attempts from Africa to Europe.

Of high scholarly interest in this context is the presence of local migrant returnees employed by internationally funded organizations to share their stories of (commonly irregular and dangerous) migration journeys towards Europe with their compatriots (Maâ et al., 2022; Marino et al., 2023; Trauner et al., 2023; Vammen, 2021). These international donor-led initiatives build on imaginaries (Salazar, 2020) of migration as a threat to EU countries which needs to be prevented and discouraged (Bartels, 2019; Schenetti & Mazzucato, 2024). Migrant returnees are chosen as implementing actors by European policy makers because they are seen as (nationally and racially) representative of their compatriots, who are considered to be future potential migrants. This representativeness is meant to facilitate policy implementation and the delivery of an anti-migration message on the ground. The degree to which this is effective, however, is yet to be studied and understood.

Through a series of semi-structured interviews, this study examines the views and experiences of local implementing actors at the street-level – 'migrant messengers' – and the degree to which they operate as representatives of the organizations they volunteer for or of the local communities they are expected to serve. We analyse these perspectives alongside the perspectives of migrant returnees not involved in such campaigns, as well as those of local migration experts. The aim of this article is not to assess the effectiveness of these information campaigns, as this is beyond the scope of this study.

This research contributes to the existing literature by shedding light on the principle of representativeness in the implementation of migration information campaigns in Senegal. We find that underpinning the ideas of 'sameness' between migrant returnees and the local population are imaginaries held by international policy makers which do not necessarily correspond to reality on the ground. Through an intersectional lens, this study

reveals important differences between the two groups in terms of skillset and status, or socio-cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Ironically, such differences are largely created due to returnees' involvement in these initiatives and the relevant training they acquire.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. The first section offers a concise review of the relevant literature, focusing on characteristics of today's street-level bureaucrats and the degree to which they are considered representative of their target population. This is followed by contextual background on return migration to Senegal. Next, there is a brief overview of the methodology employed, followed by the presentation and analysis of the research findings. This is centred around the themes of (a) selection of messengers, (b) training and (c) message reception from the perspective of our interviewees, who were part of implementing the campaigns. The article ends with concluding remarks on the study's findings and its contributions to the literature.

BUREAUCRATIC REPRESENTATIVENESS AT STREET-LEVEL

There has been an increased presence of non-state actors in the practice of migration policy and the broader landscape of policy implementation in recent decades. With the administrative reforms following the rise of New Public Management in the 1980s (Dunleavy & Hood, 1994), contracting and privatization became more prevalent. In turn, many front-line public agencies have been replaced by profit-seeking contractors, non-profit organizations or 'hybrid' organizations (Brodtkin, 2012, 2016; Evers, 2005; Smith & Lipsky, 1993). Despite widespread recognition of this shift, few studies have examined and captured its complex ramifications on the ground, especially in the field of migration management and in the Global South (e.g. Glyniadaki, 2021, Infantino, 2016).

In addition to the diversification of street-level bureaucrats working in various sectors delivering 'directly policy to people' (Brodtkin, 2013, p. 18), there is a heightened focus on the various identities these bureaucrats hold. According to the theory of representative bureaucracy (Dolan & Rosenbloom, 2003), when bureaucrats share the key demographic characteristics with the citizens they serve (passive representation), they are more likely to meet their needs and interests (active representation). As such, African-American administrators are more inclined to be helpful to the African-American community (Bradbury & Kellough, 2008) and having a female maths teacher is likely to have positive effects on the maths scores of female pupils (Keiser et al., 2002). In addition to race and gender, other identity characteristics have also been found to play a role, including ethnicity (Grissom et al., 2022), region (Rivera, 2016), culture (Cohen, 2018) and language (Murdoch et al., 2022).

The case of migrant returnees participating in migration information initiatives in Senegal presents a good analytical opportunity to examine the linkage between passive and active representation at the street level in a context of diverse implementation actors, both in terms of sectors and individual identities. Partly due to weak state institutions (Peeters & Campos, 2023) and partly due to Europe's efforts to externalize migration management (Moctar, 2022), there is a strong presence of international organizations and agencies (e.g. IOM, UNHCR and FRONTEX) as well as internationally funded NGOs (e.g. Caritas) in Senegal. These organizations tend to involve street-level bureaucrats from a diverse range of backgrounds, including Senegalese migrant returnees.

The goals and interests of some of these organizations, however, are not always congruent with the goals and interests of the local population, particularly concerning future migration prospects from Africa to Europe. In this conundrum, it is unclear whether migrant returnees who take on the role of 'messengers' are more likely to operate as representatives of the organization they work for or the local population they are meant to serve. This kind of self-identification is found to play a crucial role in whether or not bureaucrats make use of their discretionary power to the advantage of the target population, thereby actively representing them (Selden et al., 1998). Considering the country's history of colonization, it is unclear whether the local population accept the messengers' words and actions at face value or regard them with suspicion due to their association with foreign organisations.

This article also builds on existing research on migration information campaigns in West Africa. Relevant studies have discussed the intricacies present in the delivery of these campaigns. A common theme among them

concerns the asymmetrical power dynamics between European policy makers and local populations – including migrant returnees – and how these dynamics are shaped within the current postcolonial environment (e.g. Maâ et al., 2022; Marino et al., 2023; Vammen, 2021; Van Dessel, 2023). Instances of exploitation of migrant returnees and reproduction of inequalities are presented and discussed in this line of research. Another common theme is the impact and (in)effectiveness of migration information campaigns in terms of the stated goal of decreasing people's willingness to migrate irregularly (Cham & Trauner, 2022; Morgenstern, 2024; Tjaden, 2022; Tjaden & Dunsch, 2021).

There is also a third theme linked to the previous two, and this is the focus of this study: how misconceptions and limited understanding of the local context among policymakers can compromise the reception of the campaigns' anti-irregular migration message (e.g. Cham, 2024; Trauner et al., 2023, 2024). These studies note that local populations are already largely aware of the dangers involved in irregular migration and highlight the importance of everyday material pressures which push people to migrate regardless, such as lack of economic alternatives and lack of regular migration channels (e.g. Tjaden, 2022). They also point to the long-held beliefs and narratives prevalent in local communities which cannot be easily overridden through externally imposed information sharing efforts (e.g. 'predestination thinking' in The Gambia – Cham, 2024).

Maâ et al. (2022) specifically question the assumption of 'peerness' between migrant returnees and local communities, highlighting how the existing hierarchies among migrant returnees, as well as between returnees and local populations, have been overlooked by European policy makers. They suggest that the assumed peerness is not naturally there, but is either staged or performed for the purposes of transmitting a message more effectively. Paradoxically, it is their involvement as 'peers' that further differentiates migrant messengers from their target audience (p. 11). This is similar to the notion of representativeness discussed above.

Aiming to build further on this observation, this article combines insights from the theoretical frameworks of street-level bureaucracy and representative bureaucracy, as well as from the literature on migration information campaigns. Based on the discussion above, the expectation is that migrant messengers' representativeness on the ground is not the same as the representativeness imaginaries construed by European policy makers and programme donors. In this article, we scrutinize the assumed representativeness – or 'peerness' – between migrant messengers and the target population. The views and experiences of migrant messengers are at the focus of this analysis, further enriched by the perspectives of other migrant returnees and local migration experts.

CONTEXTUALIZATION OF RETURN MIGRATION TO SENEGAL

Return migration to Senegal is a multi-faceted phenomenon which varies greatly across individuals in terms of voluntariness. Some migrants return by choice and independently from Europe or other parts of the world (Beauchemin et al., 2018; Flahaux, 2015). These individuals may do so based on subjective factors, such as having achieved sufficient financial stability to build a livelihood back home or reaching retirement age and wanting to spend the remainder of their life with family and friends. There are also cases, however, where migrant returnees are deported from Europe and do not voluntarily return to Senegal. This is not a particularly large proportion of the total of migrant returnees, as the execution of forced returns by European countries remains relatively low.

Currently, a considerable number of migrant returnees are making use of assisted voluntary return and re-integration programmes (AVRR) to Senegal. These return programmes are financed by the European Union or European countries and executed by the IOM (see Olivier-Mensah & Feneberg, 2023 for the case of Germany). AVRR programmes have been criticized regarding their 'voluntariness' because they predominantly target migrants with rejected asylum claims and low chances of receiving residence permits (Bartels, 2019; Olivier-Mensah & Feneberg, 2023).

Since the 2010s, AVRR has become part of European migration management strategies. Included in this group are migrants who return to Senegal from transit countries in West and North Africa – mostly from Morocco, Libya

and Niger. In 2017, following a CNN report about West Africans being sold as slaves in Libya (Elbagir et al., 2017), a public outcry over the inhumane living conditions and lack of safety for West Africans in Libya prompted an increase in assisted returns, especially voluntary humanitarian return (VHR), through the support of the IOM (Zanker & Altrogge, 2019). A total of 8761 Senegalese nationals returned to Senegal with AVRR and VRH programmes between 2017 and June 2022 (IOM, 2022). The majority of these returnees were men, with women comprising only 7 percent, and the average age was 27 (IOM, 2022). Their main regions of origin were Kolda (28 percent), Dakar (26 percent) and Tambacounda (13 percent).

The process of return migration to Senegal poses numerous challenges for returnees. Economic and social reintegration is difficult and can complicate the decision to return. Even if migrants abroad often contemplate returning home, the expected challenges may lead to a delayed or indefinitely postponed return (Riccio, 2006; Riccio & Degli Uberti, 2013). These economic responsibilities and familial obligations can lead migrants to delay their return (Sinatti, 2011). Given that many Senegalese families are dependent on remittances, returning means they can no longer support their families to the same extent they did while abroad. Moreover, for those return migrants who do not decide to voluntarily return but are either deported or return through AVRR programmes, achieving social reintegration seems daunting.

The act of migration, more generally, is socially and culturally embedded. Interregional migration has occurred for centuries in West Africa, and migration from Senegal to Europe has been going on for more than a century (Beauchemin et al., 2018; Gierczynski-Bocandé, 2016; Mourre, 2018). This has led to the construction of collective imaginaries surrounding migration. Migratory imaginaries portray migration to Europe as a road to success (Stier, 2021). If migrants and return migrants are not able to live up to the societal expectations linked to this migratory imaginary, they face stigmatization by their communities, including from their own families (King & Kuschminder, 2022; Maher, 2013; Stier & Altrogge, 2024; Strijbosch et al., 2023). Return migrants engaged in migration information initiatives therefore navigate a social context in which migration to Europe is portrayed as success and return is often perceived as failure, especially when the returnee returns without substantial financial resources.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative research methodology comprised of in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted at intervals between October 2019 and March 2023 in Senegal. These included interviews with 15 migrant messengers, referred to as MM, involved primarily in IOM's 'Migrants as Messengers' campaign or other bilaterally funded programmes implemented by local or international NGOs (e.g. GIZ). One of these participants was not active as a messenger but chose to speak about his migration story when prompted by members of his local community. The interviews took place across different cities and regions, including Dakar (7), Tambacounda (4) and others (4). We spoke to return migrants who had either reached an EU country such as Italy, Germany, France or Spain (7) or attempted to but remained in Libya, Tunisia, Gambia, Mauritania or Morocco (8). They were conducted in person (12) or remotely via Zoom, Messenger or WhatsApp (3). Most interviews lasted between 40 and 60 minutes but some lasted longer, especially those conducted as small group interviews (6 participants were interviewed in groups of 3). Moreover, background conversations were held with 7 policy experts (referred to as PE) from the field, such as policy activists, researchers and representatives from IOM and GIZ Senegal offices. These discussions complemented and enhanced our contextual understanding, particularly regarding the policy landscape within which our project is situated. We followed a purposive sampling approach.

Insights from this interview dataset were augmented by a subset of interviews conducted for one of the authors' PhD research. This included 5 in-depth interviews with 8 migrant returnees from the Southern Casamance region who had returned from Spain (2) or Niger, Benin, Morocco or Algeria after failed attempts to reach Europe (6) and who had not engaged in any migration information initiatives. These migrant returnees are referred to as MR. The

interviews were conducted in person, assisted by a Senegalese researcher who occasionally translated. Four more interviews with policy experts (PE) from international organizations or local NGOs were included. The interviewees were either recruited directly through their public profiles or with the assistance of local Senegalese contacts.

This research followed the ethical guidelines and principles established by the authors' respective research institutions where an explicit ethical clearance was not deemed necessary for this project. The three researchers involved are female white Europeans, affiliated with European research institutions. During the fieldwork for this project, there were instances where the researchers encountered suspicion from the side of interviewees, which partly aligns with the thematic focus of this study. The authors acknowledge that their positionalities may have potentially impacted the participants' responses.

The 31 interviews were conducted in French, English, Pulaar or Wolof, depending on the language skills and preference of each participant. Interviews in French, English and Wolof were conducted by the researchers; the help of a translator was used for Pulaar. The interviews were transcribed and, where necessary, translated. The interview data was anonymized and thematic analysis was followed (Braun & Clark, 2006).

FINDINGS

We can identify three main themes relating to the research questions at hand: (a) the selection process of migrant messengers – from the perspectives of the organization and the individual migrants, (b) the training and capacity-building process of those selected for migration information initiatives and (c) migrant messengers' perceptions of the reception of their message by the local population, which we broadly categorize under 'acceptance' and 'suspicion'.

Migrant returnees who undertake the role of 'messengers' are not highly representative of the population they aim to reach. The recruitment process used by these organizations tends to favour specific profiles of migrant returnees while excluding others, based on these organizations' priorities. Moreover, performing the role of a 'messenger' requires undertaking specific training and following a particular capacity-building process, which also fall within a predefined institutional logic (Zilber, 2017). Inadvertently, these processes further increase the distance between messengers and locals in terms of their social skills, social status and, more generally, their social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). While messengers may often feel that their message is effectively communicated, they also frequently encounter mistrust, suspicion and general opposition from the members of their target audience. Given the self-selection among those who return, the low level of representativeness of migrant messengers is also likely to influence policy outcomes.

Selection process

The basic rationale behind selecting migrant returnees as messengers is that they are locals with previous migration experience in or towards Europe. International policy experts consider them better placed to convey the migration-dissuasion message to their compatriots than international or European staff. Migrant returnees who have made use of assisted voluntary return, as opposed to those who have been deported, are perceived as especially suited for this messenger role, as this policy expert explains:

What gives them this leadership, this power, is that as a young person who's never been to Europe, for example, I don't know what's going on over there, what's being done over there. I only see the good things on TV, etc. whereas this migrant who has been, he's lived both. He's lived here, he's lived there, so he knows. This knowledge that he really has, this knowledge really gives him the ability to say 'voilà'.

(PE05)

Only a minority of migrant returnees assume to role of 'migrant messengers', either for IOM's homonymous programme or for a similar programme of another organization. With that in mind, we can question why some returnees become 'messengers' and others do not. Our research shows that this is partly incidental and influenced by factors such as opportunity, or which returnees were nearby and available when the programme started (PE05):

It was IOM who brought me here to Senegal, IOM Morocco. In Senegal, I'm already on their list. So, since they have a MAM [Migrants as Messengers] program, they said why not put me on it since I've travelled, and I know a lot about irregular immigration. This is why I joined this MAM program. (MM08)

He interviewed me and then he said listen, we have a project called MAM which takes in returned migrants, but we're volunteers in this project, so if you're interested, we'll go and raise people's awareness. He too is a returnee. He explained it to me, and I said it's a great idea. (MM06)

In these interview extracts, migrant messengers explain that their recruitment into the programme was due to their proximity to and familiarity with the organization or other returnees already involved. Some had previously made use of IOM's assisted return programme, leading to their identification by the organization (e.g. MM09 and MM15). This shows a degree of self-selection, as individuals who return with AVRR or VHR programmes or have associations with returnees are more likely to know about the possibility of becoming a volunteer in migration campaigns by IOM and other internationally funded organizations. Due to their own experiences, they are also often more inclined to support the message discouraging irregular migration and exhibit willingness to spread that message.

Migrant returnees who have become migrant messengers tend to share common attributes with the local population – this is why they are recruited. In addition to nationality and race, they also share aspirations to find employment and support their families (MM04, 05 and 09). Having a negative migration experience to share is of course a precondition as well:

Well, here in Senegal, you could say it's a bit tough. You see your family, they don't have anything to eat, your brothers and sisters don't have money to go to school. (MM08, also MM07)

For me, it wasn't easy because when I left Senegal for Morocco, that's when I started to struggle. I spent some very difficult days and nights, even in the forest, and after Morocco I suffered too. When I was in Europe it was the same thing. I suffered. I spent nights in the streets. I almost did all my needs in the streets. It wasn't easy. Sometimes you meet racism, mistreatment. Too many difficulties. [Once I had arrived in Europe], yes, I was expelled. I was expelled. (MM13)

There are also more specific criteria that organizations use when they select certain returnees for the 'messenger' role, including a certain level of eloquence and the ability to express themselves and persuade an audience. This emerges through the narratives of both administrative employees in relevant IOs and NGOs and those of migrant messengers themselves:

There are even those who did not study at all, who did not go to French school and who only studied the Koran, but who are very good, who are real models, who are leaders. This is really what determines the choice [to recruit them into the program].

(PE05)

You have to know how to talk, how to calm [an anxious] person down.

(MM06)

The first quote suggests that leaderships skills and education constitute key criteria in selecting migrant returnees as messengers. The second, voiced by a migrant messenger, emphasises the importance of emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills, suggesting that the role cannot be undertaken or fulfilled effectively without these qualities. Considering these expectations against the 58% (French) literacy rate in Senegal in 2022 (World Bank, 2024), migrant messengers may already stand out, not only among the local population but among migrant returnees as well.

These observations about representativeness gain further context with the juxtaposition of messengers' perspectives with those of migrant returnees who do not assume a messenger role. The latter category of returnees feel great shame at returning without having succeeded, strongly discouraging them from sharing their migration stories with their community:

[When you return] people look at you as a failure, cursed. They hate you a little only because you've come back... Relationships with family and friends have deteriorated. We talk very little... They look at you when you go out, because you tried to leave and didn't succeed. If there's someone who didn't know, they're told that it was [you] who tried to go to Spain and didn't succeed.

(MR06)

It was very difficult for me and that's why I stayed in Dakar for two years before coming to the village. Since I've been back, I haven't been going out – I spent almost a month without leaving the house. It has been really very difficult.

(MR07)

Unlike their counterparts who assume the role of messengers, these returnees refrain from extensively engaging with their compatriots and sharing their own migration narratives, largely due to the shame and stigma they experience upon their return. A local migration expert notes that 'They don't want to talk about it, they keep to themselves because they're ashamed' (PE07). Additional factors deterring them from joining migration information initiatives and campaigns may be that they returned to Senegal prior to 2017 when the first 'Migrants as Messengers' programmes started or did not encounter these programmes (e.g. MR18), so they were not recruited.

Training and capacity building

After being selected, the migrant messengers receive some training. Through such training and capacity building sessions, they acquire a certain array of new personal professional skills (MM02, MM04, MM14 and MM15). These include practical skills (e.g. video editing), interpersonal skills (e.g. public speaking) as well as psychosocial support and personal development. In doing so, they differ more and more from their compatriots in terms of these skillsets or, put differently, their socio-cultural capital:

The skills I need for this project have led me to take part in quite a few training sessions... I took videos and photos with [the people from the organisation]. I went on missions with them. They took me to take pictures, all this is thanks to this project that made me have the skills to do this, and I continued to make documentaries with other people.

(MM03)

There will be activities... for example public speaking or writing and editing, psycho-social support.

(MM02)

The provision of free training in skills like public speaking or filmmaking is considered interesting and useful, especially in the context of a generally low level of education; nevertheless, taking into account that these tend to be limited in scope. As such, these training and capacity building sessions can be highly valuable for the messengers' current and future career opportunities. Some of these sessions are specifically tailored to assist returnees in building their careers, and therefore their livelihoods:

I want to develop my own project – [this work] helps with that... since I've been used to talking to people, it will make it easier for me, because it's commercial too.

(MM05)

We can be asked for instance if we're looking for a job, because at the end of each training course, we're awarded a diploma or a certificate, for example. And that's part of our CV. It's already building up our CV. And today, whether in the association or in our professional lives, it's always a plus.

(MM15)

Migrant returnees who assume the role of 'messenger' do not receive official compensation for their contributions, unlike the international employees of these campaigns; they are considered volunteers and only receive a per diem of approximately 15,000 CFA (or 23 euros) as a token of appreciation for the time they dedicate. While this amount does not constitute a regular income, it significantly exceeds the daily earnings of individuals without a university diploma in a country where manual workers, such as those working in construction, often earn as little as 3000 CFA (or 5 Euros) per day. Receiving any amount is valuable in a context where half the working-age population is economically inactive (51.8% labour force participation rate in 2022 (Statista, 2024)) and one-third of the total population lives under the national poverty line (World Bank, 2023). Becoming a messenger not only contributes to meeting immediate financial needs but also enhances future career prospects.

This presents a paradox. Some migrant returnees are selected by international organizations and bilateral donors to implement migration information initiatives because, as locals, they are seen as better able to reach their compatriots and convey to them the campaign's main (anti-migration) message. However, as selected migrant returnees join these initiatives and acquire the required skills to perform the messenger role, they are set apart from the local population. The question arises of how those local implementers make sense of their work and the potential role of this divergence on the migration information initiatives' reception among Senegalese citizens.

Message reception: Between acceptance and suspicion

While this study's interview data cannot provide an answer to how this message is being received by the Senegalese audience, our participants' accounts offer valuable insights into how messengers perceive the reception of their

message – in terms of whether they feel heard and acknowledged or not. In their view, there is both acceptance and suspicion among audience members, alluding to a mixed success of what they seek to transmit. Concerning acceptance, many audience members appear to take in the messengers' stories – demonstrating empathy to the misfortunes messengers experienced during their migration journeys – and appear dissuaded from attempting such a journey themselves:

You see that people are crying, so if you see that, you'll know that the message has gone through... The children who are there also come to ask you if that's what you've been through, and then they tell you I'll never do that. So, you can see that the message got through.

(MM02)

You see people crying in relation to your testimonies because you are going to remind them of the strong moments when they lost their children, because there are many mothers in our sensitisations... As soon as we've told our migratory story, someone comes up to you and asks if you've really been through it. And they tell you I wanted to go, but not anymore. I've [now] given up.

(MM07)

Many Senegalese people find the migration stories they hear emotionally moving. This is partly because the theme of migration and the perils it entails are already engrained in the collective memory of Senegalese communities. As hundreds of lives have been lost at sea in recent decades, there are inevitably family members of victims among the audience who unsurprisingly embrace the anti-migration message. Moreover, according to our participants' perspectives, audience members often feel discouraged from attempting a similar undertaking after hearing their stories of irregular migration.

However, Senegal's history of colonization has left a legacy of mistrust towards foreign initiatives, especially those from Europe. Coupled with ongoing inequalities based on passports or nationality, exemplified by the striking contrast in living conditions between locals and expats living in Dakar, some migrant messengers report encountering considerable opposition in their efforts to reach local citizens (e.g. MR05 and MR06). Migrant messengers are often not trusted, at times because they are seen as 'sell-outs':

There were also people who didn't care what you said. They tell you it's not true, you can't live that... There are people who wouldn't believe you. They say a person can't go through that.

(MM09)

Whenever I talk to them, they tell me no, you were paid by the whites to do sensitisation... It's not easy because they think that we were paid for it. Then we explain to them straight out we are not paid, we are volunteers – returning migrants – our mission is just to share our migration experience.

(MM04)

There appears to be a wider mistrust towards white Europeans which may also extend to Senegalese migrant returnees recruited by European-funded organizations. The expression 'no, you were paid by the whites' encapsulates this dynamic. Their message is not necessarily received as if it came from a representative of Senegalese compatriots, but rather from a representative of white Europeans, along with the associated connotations in the given context.

Furthermore, the messengers' message of 'don't be like me', is often met by scepticism from their fellow Senegalese citizens, especially considering the different lived experiences of migrant messengers and their perceived opportunities:

When you want to explain that yes, it's hard, others think you're mean. You don't want the others to have the same experiences that you could have.

(MM11)

They say that if you come to raise awareness, at least you give us funding or you do something for us. How can you tell us to stay here in Senegal... without helping us to work, without putting anything here. Because it is difficult, life is too hard. We can't get by, we have to leave.

(MM05)

These excerpts point to the harsh reality that people without adequate financial alternatives cannot simply dismiss the appeal of migration. Migrant messengers are often asked to offer practical, financial solutions to their compatriots, which is neither realistic nor within their capacity.

In summary, the interview data and discussion show that migrant messengers frequently encounter a less welcoming, if not hostile, atmosphere when they implement migration information initiatives and campaigns. This is despite the selection process and training they undergo or, as this research finds, it is to a large degree because of it. Their relatively differential social positioning due to their involvement with international donors, as well as their newly gained professional skills and capacities, enhance their social mobility prospects – setting them apart from the average local person. European policymakers' imaginaries of the migrant messengers' 'representativeness', therefore, do not fully correspond to reality on the ground.

CONCLUSIONS

Migration information initiatives, such as the IOM's 'Migrants as Messengers' campaign, are premised on European policymakers' imaginaries of representativeness, or sameness between migrant returnees and potential future immigrants. Highlighting what is framed as 'peeriness' (see Maâ et al., 2022), these initiatives aim to raise awareness of the dangers and challenges of irregular migration. The stated goal is to reduce the number of migrant deaths at sea and mitigate other adverse outcomes associated with irregular migration routes, such as human trafficking, slave labour and physical and sexual abuse (Tjaden & Dunsch, 2021). However, these initiatives can also be understood as sophisticated tactics by European political actors to externalize EU border control with the objective of reducing future migration flows from Africa to Europe (Marino et al., 2023; Van Dessel, 2023). From this viewpoint, employing Senegalese migrant returnees as 'legitimate voices' is a strategic choice of organizations seeking to enhance the effectiveness of their migration-dissuasion message.

Migrant messengers in Senegal constitute an unusual case of policy implementers, or street-level bureaucrats, who face an unusual set of pressures while delivering policy on the ground. This is partly because they are non-state actors working for foreign-funded organizations operating locally, expected to represent both the interests of the European or European-funded organizations they work for and their Senegalese compatriots. They are faced with a fundamental conflict of interest between the organizations aiming to discourage irregular migration towards Europe and the Senegalese people whose desires and livelihoods are closely linked to migration.

Moreover, this position comes with intertwined complexities, stemming from a history of colonization, entrenched social inequalities and national and racial tensions (see also Maâ et al., 2022). As a result, there is an issue of intersectionality. Although, as locals, they are meant to be representative of their target audience (which is meant to facilitate programme delivery), their very affiliation with foreign-funded organizations sets them apart. More specifically, while migrant messengers share key demographic characteristics with their target audience, namely race and nationality, their representativeness is compromised by differences in socio-cultural capital – their set of social and practical skills. Paradoxically, this difference is partly why they were selected for the position in the first place and it was also further accentuated through the training they receive in the process of becoming messengers.

Through these observations, this study contributes to three lines of research. First, concerning the literature of street-level bureaucracy; by focusing on Senegalese migrant messengers, it employs a more inclusive definition of street-level bureaucrats, thereby addressing their increased diversification both in terms of employment sectors and individual identities. Second, by adopting an intersectional analytical lens and by focusing on the under-researched region of West Africa, this study elaborates on the notion of bureaucratic representativeness in this context, informing the debate on the linkage between passive and active representation. Third, it adds to the literature on migration information campaigns by further scrutinising the already problematized issue of representativeness, or 'peeriness', of migrant messengers.

Building on these observations, future research could further investigate how representativeness, or lack thereof, shapes policy outcomes, especially within the contemporary context of externalization of migration management and the increasingly diverse body of individual policy implementers.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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