AFGHAN SAFE MIGRATION PROJECT

Application of a social and behaviour change communication (SBCC) approach to the design of protection information campaigns targeting potential Afghan migrants and Afghan migrants en route

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Between 2019 and 2022, the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) and the Mixed Migration Centre Asia (MMC), with financial support from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, implemented the project "Enhancing Protection Information for Displaced People from Afghanistan through Collaborative Engagement with Diaspora Communities in Europe".

Summary

Afghans engage in migration through irregular means due to a multiplicity of factors such as the continued and worsening security and economic situation in Afghanistan, lack of rights, high unemployment and environmental hazards.

The Afghan Safe Migration project supported Afghan diaspora organisations in Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands to deliver protection information based on the needs among potential and current migrants from Afghanistan.

The required information was determined through research and data collection, including in-depth consultations with Afghan diaspora groups in Europe, migrants en route, prospective migrants, and returnees in Afghanistan. The capacity of Afghan diaspora organizations engaged in providing protection information was increased, and networks were established, to ensure targeted messages and information on protection assistance in English, Farsi/Dari, and Pashto to strengthen safe and protective migration environments for vulnerable people from Afghanistan.

Data from the Mixed Migration Centre showed that Diaspora and family/friends abroad were the most trusted source of information, with 66% citing them as most trusted. Increasing the ability of the diaspora to seek relevant and accurate information and to convey improved protection information to potential or current migrants is essential to ensuring that people can make informed decisions in any given situation to reduce exposure to protection risks. Another important insight from the research was that 75% of those who migrated had not encountered an information campaign, suggesting that reach and relevance was limited.

Social and behaviour change communication (SBCC) is a theory and evidence-driven approach that looks at behaviour from a socio-ecological lens and addresses the interplay between behavioural determinants at the individual, community, societal and global levels. Using sound research, SBCC employs strategic communication techniques to promote positive or protective behaviour. Using the five steps of the P-Process, we structured the work around our campaign design:

Inquire: This is the stage where we conducted literature reviews and field research to understand the challenges we wanted to address, what was already done, what worked and what did not, and what to do better.

Design strategy: Here, we put down on paper everything we learnt and identified what we wanted to change. We developed an SBCC Concept Note that summarises the findings of the research and outlines the key areas that we wanted to work on.

Create & test: We supported the diaspora organisations to design messages for the campaigns they wanted to execute. The interventions they designed were in-line with the SBCC concept note. We also helped them design a way to pre-test their messages with their targeted audiences.

Mobilise & monitor: Once we pre-tested the products in Afghanistan and transit countries, they adjusted them and implemented the communication activities and started monitoring how everything was going. A final message testing was conducted at the end of the project to measure the impact and effectiveness of the campaigns.

Evaluate & evolve: The project was externally evaluated for the effectiveness of the interventions

developed with recommendations for future implementation.

We used the Behavioural Drivers Model as our theoretical framework to unpack the most relevant behavioural determinants at each of the four levels identified in the Social Ecological Model. Our research found entry points at all four levels (individual, interpersonal, community and societal levels). However, for the work that was conducted by the diaspora organisations, we focused on the individual, interpersonal and community levels.

We formed an understanding of the decision-making process and pathways through which we could tailor information to meet the specific needs of the varied groups of irregular migrants and the ways in which they could protect themselves and/or their accompanying travellers throughout the journey.

Diaspora organisations can also do effective work at the interpersonal and community levels by relaying information to family and community members who are consulted at various stages of the decision-making process. This may especially be effective through utilising existing networks and community-based organisations. This ambition was however derailed due to the events that took place in August 2021. We therefore ended up focusing our campaigns at the individual level.

We identified specific target audiences as well as target protection behaviours. The interventions designed were around these target behaviours as well as removing specific psychological barriers. The materials were not only based on research, but also on the differing mandates, experiences, and fields of expertise of the diaspora organisations.

In the end, five different diaspora organisations designed different interventions targeting different audiences:
Abad (DE): Language Learning and Safe Migration (pre-departure).
Female Fellows (DE): Family Reunification & integration in Germany.

Mrastah (DE): Micompass Bot with a focus on pre-departure safety.
Keihan (NL): Focus on women of reproductive age en-route on menstrual health, female urogenital diseases, pregnancy and mental health.
Afghan Lawyers Association (DK): Asylum Process in Europe.

Messaging did not only present risks and dangers during the journey, or challenges at destination but also included practical information on how to mitigate such risks and challenges. The campaigns also provided guidance on how to behave during the journey and provided information on rights and available services along the journey and at destination.

The main channels used were social media, mainly Facebook and YouTube. The diaspora organisations as well as Afghan migrants found these channels adequate, as they were easy to access and frequently used to acquire information on migration.

A video summarising each intervention can be found here.

The external evaluators from the Center for Evaluation and Development concluded in November 2022:

"*"…we found the campaign to be responsive towards beneficiaries' needs. Its strength lied in having Afghan migrants take the lead in the design and implementation of the project and in having multiple stakeholders with different areas of expertise participate in extensive, iterative needs and messaging assessments to inform the design and implementation of the campaigns."*

Learning

The application of an SBCC approach to the design of information campaigns for Afghan migrants travelling through irregular routes was a novel approach. We would like to offer some reflections and lessons learnt that may help in growing the field of integrating a behavioural science lens to the design of information campaigns.

The project was pioneering in its engagement of small, community and largely volunteer-based organisations. It equipped diaspora organisations (DOs) with the technical capacity to deliver SBCC campaigns from a starting point of relative inexperience. In terms of overall reach, the campaigns were highly successful, videos delivered on Facebook reached approximately five million unique users. (no exact figure is available as not all campaigns could be monitored at the time of the final message-testing). Crucially, engagement rates of 25-35 % with most of the campaigns content (i.e. did people watch the videos or interact with the content) were higher than industry benchmark that considers engagement rates of 6% as high.

The reasons for the successes of the campaigns appear to stem from the role played by members of the diaspora in developing content and delivering messages. DOs were adept at creating original content that resonated with respondents. This may be due to the quality of their online audiences even prior to the campaign. DOs ability to build audiences over time, independent of project cycles and mandates, is a clear advantage. Conventional campaigns led by international agencies must often build audiences from scratch, leaving little time for trust building or experimentation with methods. That said, not all campaigns enjoyed high engagement, with text-heavy interventions less likely to keep target audiences' attention.

The evaluation results conducted by SP Knowledge and published in September 2022 showed that DOs have a further advantage in the credibility of their messaging. Diaspora members are themselves migrants and benefitted from being perceived by target audiences to be reliable messengers. Studies have shown that campaigns delivered by international organisations (or otherwise branded with their logos) can sometimes draw skepticism. This may be unique to migration campaigns, however, as this evaluation findings showed a preference for public health-related messaging perceived to be endorsed by WHO.

The potential of delivering through DOs is high. However, there were challenges with the collaboration. The project was ambitious in pursuing three broad objectives simultaneously: 1) build SBCC capacity; 2) build M&E capacity; and 3) deliver influential SBCC campaigns. The limited time and resources of the volunteer-led DOs, their lack of familiarity with project management and processes, the sensitivity of the topic, and external challenges of COVID-19 and the Taliban takeover compounded. This is of course a common challenge in a humanitarian sector seeking to increasingly engage community-based organisations as part of the localisation agenda. Efforts were made to address the issue, including by increasing the funds available. Perhaps paradoxically, the process of obtaining more funds was itself challenging for DOs.

Future projects should aim to harness the benefits of DO-led campaigns while seeking ways to temper ambition and focus resources. One option is to reduce the ambition by narrowing the focus. The design phase could spend more time assessing DO capacity, identifying strengths, and outsourcing the rest. For example, the ability of DOs to create compelling content audiences want to engage with is a clear advantage over many other campaigns. In contrast, setting up systems to monitor social media reach and engagement might be considered too steep a learning curve initially.

It should not be forgotten that the campaigns took place in unique and difficult circumstances, with COVID-19 in 2020-2022 and the Taliban takeover in Kabul in August 2021 complicating the process. Yet both these events may have some small advantages in their encouragement of agile, iterative approaches to

project management and communications strategies. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic may have prevented in-person methods such as events and seminars and excluded some 'offline' groups in the process, yet will have accelerated the learning of digital skills that will stand all project members in good stead going forward.

Short, easy-to-comprehend materials were appreciated. Messaging in Dari or Pashto was seen as more relevant and especially valuable as content in regional languages can be rare, as in the example of the Female Fellows video on family reunification in Pashto. Respondents noted when materials did not seem specific to Afghanistan and suggested that characters be depicted to look more like Afghans.

Respondents' knowledge of migration topics was overall improved in the endline compared to the baseline survey, although confusion about some topics (such as, specifically, which documents are required for migration, or eligibility to make an asylum request) remains.

The target audience better responded to shorter, focused materials rather than those with an extended format. Future campaigns may consider very short materials to hook audiences, with links to fuller resources. When designing materials which depict characters, care should be taken to ensure they have the languages, dress and customs suited to audiences in Afghanistan to be perceived as more locally relevant. Noting that there can be differences of opinion on what is culturally acceptable, emphasis should be placed on the perceptions of the target audience over the views of those designing the materials.

Messages appeared more persuasive if they were:
● Specific – respondents found concrete recommendations more persuasive.
● Positive – materials perceived as warnings not to migrate were less persuasive.
● Verifiable through third parties – where respondents had heard something similar before, they were inclined to believe the message. Conversely, when a piece of information was deemed to be unreliable, qualitative responses indicated they would want it confirmed by people they know who are already in Europe. Some interviewees noted that there was no mention of the materials coming from Afghans in Europe. That information would help improve trust in the messages.

Messages were deemed more acceptable if they:
● Avoided sensitive topics – messages related to sexuality were negatively received by the respondents in Afghanistan, specifically condom use, which was perceived as anti-Islamic by some. However, information on pregnancy and feminine hygiene were well received.
● Were relatable – respondents also suggested only showing characters who look like Afghan families.

A socio-ecological approach is crucial

Due to the strong evidence-based approach of the project, it provided ample evidence that allowed us to understand irregular migration behavioural drivers at the individual, interpersonal, societal and systems/policy levels. In this regard, we were able to identify areas for potential intervention at all these levels, even though we were unable to design interventions to address all these levels.

For example, at the interpersonal level, we identified the key role that parents play in the decision-making process to migrate. As such, it would be crucial to design interventions that would support parents in supporting their children in making a considered decision about how to migrate, as well as offer information on how to stay safe and who to seek information from.

Another crucial area that is worth designing interventions around is at the societal level, where there was indication that information shared in communities may not be entirely factual or may be linked to some stigma. Therefore, it would be advantageous to design interventions that would facilitate conversations at the community level as well

as create resources for alleviating protection risks at this level.

Finally, there are also opportunities for addressing the quality of information and services offered by NGOs en route. Identifying the target of the campaign and narrowing down the focus is the key advantage of the SBC methodology. International organizations or UN agencies rarely consider those aspects of the campaigns which relate to the issue of trust since people do not know that they can access services, therefore, tailored messages disseminated by trusted actors are important.

We found that there was a mismatch between the type of information and services that migrants needed and what was on offer by NGOs. In this regard, NGOs need tools and methodologies to be able to design more responsive information and services. Here, diaspora organisations can act as an important source of information and service testing and vetting to ensure that information and services targeting migrants are responsive to their needs.

Experimenting with other behavioural approaches

An SBC approach offers the opportunity to identify specific behavioural drivers at various levels of the socio-ecological model and design interventions to address these. SBC also relies on the ability to segment audiences according to their demographic profile as well as their psychographic profile for optimal results. For example, a person whose self-efficacy is low with regards to reading information should be targeted differently from a person who has a negative attitude towards a certain source of information.

While the accurate application of SBC methodology would produce optimal results, it may be too complex to apply without more intensive investment. An alternative approach that is less complex but still behaviourally informed is human-centred design. Human-centred design (HCD) is an approach to interactive information, product or systems development that aims to make information or

products usable and useful by focusing on the users, their needs and requirements, and by applying human factors/ergonomics, and usability knowledge and techniques. This approach enhances effectiveness and efficiency, improves human well-being, user satisfaction, accessibility and sustainability; and counteracts possible adverse effects of use on human health, safety and performance. HCD's focus is on the use of the product rather than on the psychological drivers. In this regard, there is a strong focus on co-design and testing of products. HCD may be a simpler and more straightforward methodology to apply in future work with diaspora organisations who have limited staff and time to dedicate to projects.

Recommendations

1. Harness the benefits of DO-led campaigns while seeking ways to temper ambition and focus resources.
2. Ensure that a socio-ecological approach is used to understand the dynamics and behavioural determinants of irregular migration at all levels.
3. Ensure sufficient SBC technical expertise to design and implement campaigns.
4. Learn from best practices such as the strong evidence collection through the collaboration between DRC and MMC.
5. Advocate for the incorporation of a behavioural perspective at all levels of intervention design, including en route service delivery.
6. Increase opportunities for cross-organisational and cross-thematic learning.
7. Consider the application of human-centred design as an alternative, less complex behavioural approach to campaign design where skills are limited.

Conclusions

Through close partnerships with Afghan diaspora organisations and enhancement of existing information platforms the project created the basis for sustainable and community driven outcomes. The communication products were designed, developed by Afghan diaspora organisations and disseminated through a mix of existing information platforms that already connect to and with Afghan diaspora, Afghans in Afghanistan and Afghans en route. This strategy

ensured that the ownership lies with the Afghan community.

The ability of diaspora organisations to create compelling content that audiences want to engage with is a clear advantage over many other information and awareness campaigns. The Afghan diaspora organisations delivered information that were contextualized to the specific needs of migrants. This approach draws on evidence that people are more likely to trust and act on information that is responsive to their needs, speaks to their lived realities, and that comes from "peers" rather than authority figures.

Building the capacity of the diaspora organisations consistently by partnering up with them, knowing them through building a trusting relationship and risk acceptance by donors and INGOs are the key factors for collaboration.

The evidence built and the experience gained through the implementation of this unique project will hopefully help inform future programming of migration awareness-raising campaigns.

In conclusion, we urge for the continued application of a behavioural approach to migration campaigns design. By doing so, we would be able to:
- Design more targeted information.
- Increase access and potential impact of the information on the recipients.
- Strengthen safe and protective environment of vulnerable people.
- Target the correct information channels preferred by potential migrants.
- Design interventions that would go beyond passive information sharing and increase the capacity.
- Monitor and document the reliability of campaigns, and thereby be better informed to identify what works and what doesn't.

More information can be found : here
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