

How Migrant Resource Centres affect migration decisions: Quasi-experimental evidence from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Iraq and Pakistan

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Abstract

Several Migrant Resource Centres (MRCs) have been set up in South Asia jointly by national governments of origin and destination countries. Their objectives include encouragement of potential migrants to seek regular rather than irregular routes and to ensure the safety of those migrating, regardless of status. Of theoretical note, their activities utilise innovative, highly personalised counselling. This article provides quasi-experimental evidence of the effect of four activities – telephone and online counselling, and college outreach and pre-departure sessions – on 2215 randomly allocated users of the MRCs' services across six MRCs in four countries: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Iraq and Pakistan. The effects are a large reduction in self-reported likelihood of migrating irregularly, and a strong increase in awareness of safe options and who to contact for assistance whilst migrating. The effects are consistent across activity type and MRC location, although magnitudes vary. These findings have implications for our understanding of how the decision to migrate is made, what interventions are effective and why.

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INTRODUCTION

National governments and international organisations are going to increasing lengths to affect migration flows, with budgets for public policy programmes often extending into the hundreds of millions of dollars. The stated aims of these programmes and interventions typically include the encouragement of at least one of 'safe, regular and orderly migration'. As the budgets and political imperative to affect migration flows has increased, so has the sophistication of the interventions in question. This article tests the efficacy of one recent and as-yet untested type of intervention – Migrant Resource Centres (MRCs) – which offer personalised and interactive counselling of would-be migrants in several South Asian countries with the aims to (1) reduce irregular emigration; (2) raise awareness of possibilities of safe, regular emigration opportunities; and (3) increase the safety of migrants when in transit or destination. Understanding the extent to which these MRCs fulfil their aims is of both substantive importance and, given the well-documented difficulties in changing migratory behaviours, scientific interest.

MRCs are one of several initiatives by the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) as part of the 'Improving Migration Management in the Silk Routes Countries' project, which spans Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Iran, Iraq and Pakistan.¹ The broader project aims to maximise the developmental potential of migration and mobility within the Silk Routes region and towards major labour-receiving countries and to establish comprehensive regional responses to migration and mobility with full respect for human rights and protection of migrants. The ICMPD has established and is currently managing MRCs jointly with national governments in Lahore and Islamabad, Pakistan, since 2016; in Kabul, Afghanistan, since 2018 (since 2021 online only); in Dakar and Cumilla, Bangladesh, since 2018 and a currently online only MRC in Baghdad since 2020. Each MRC has at least three full time members of staff and those MRCs with offline and online capacity utilise several methods to achieve their goals, namely: on-site resources, phone lines, community outreach activities and social media activities. In the long-term, it is foreseen by both the ICMPD and national governments that the latter will fully incorporate the MRCs into their own government structures, thereby building the capacity of local administrations.

Understanding the impact of the MRCs and their activities in meeting their objectives is of both substantial importance and scientific interest. To the authors' knowledge, the six MRCs considered in this article are the most advanced and sophisticated of their kind. Although other MRCs are currently in development, the six tested in this article are already established, including a physical presence. The four activities – online counselling, telephone counselling, technical and vocational college outreach session, and pre-departure briefings – considered in this article are notable for their interactive and personalised nature. The locations of these MRCs include some of the major emigration countries of the world, such as Pakistan and Bangladesh, with the emigrants of these countries including a significant proportion of irregular migrants that undertake dangerous and sometimes fatal journeys. As such, MRCs have the potential to reduce fatalities and so contribute to the eponymous objectives of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM). Understanding whether and under what conditions they do so can guide the design of future interventions. In these countries, easy access to reliable information for potential migrants is often limited, with relatively few resources and institutions specifically focused on migration, so that some migrants rely on agents and criminal networks for information of dubious veracity. Understanding the impact of MRCs is also substantively important from a value-for-money perspective, with each MRC having received significant funding from the European Union and bilateral funding more regularly from Turkey, Hungary, Switzerland, Poland, Norway and Finland.²

Scientifically, measuring the impact of the MRCs is of interest in that their impact or the lack of it would support or undermine theories of emigration and decision-making moreover, with some theories arguing that emigration is the result of deep-seated, slow-moving socio-demographic factors or national-level economic and political factors, whilst others argue that the decision to emigrate is shaped by more changeable and immediate factors such as access to information and the support of others. More sophisticated theories consider the interactions between these forces.

To test the impact of MRCs, this article continues as follows. First, the theoretical causes of variation in the decision to emigrate, one of the key objectives of the MRCs, is overviewed in terms of the general literature, findings

specific to the four countries that have MRCs tested in this article, and findings specific to the effects of external interventions on migration awareness-raising and decision-making. Second, the method by which the impact of these MRCs is measured is explained. Third, the collected data is described. Fourth, that data is analysed and the impact of the MRCs collectively on each objective is measured, along with country-specific and activity-specific measurement (i.e. online counselling, telephone counselling, technical and vocational college outreach sessions and pre-departure sessions). Finally, the article concludes and discusses theoretical ramifications before offering future directions for research.

Key theories of propensity to emigrate

There has been significant academic research into why some individuals emigrate and others do not. Explanations can broadly be placed in three camps. First, those focussing on the political and economic context of the origin country have found that propensity to emigrate is a function of development, trade patterns, unemployment and education rates (Benček & Schneiderheize, 2020; Dao et al., 2018; David & Jarreau, 2016; Uprety, 2017), the quality of the democratic system and the government's ability to provide services (Dustmann & Okatenko, 2014; Van Dalen & Henkens, 2007) and security and war (e.g. Begović et al., 2020; Cohen, 1987). Second, there are numerous consistently found determinants at the individual-level in terms of stable socio-demographic factors: being male, youth, higher education, urbanity, being unmarried, being foreign-born and – more subjectively – personal economic and life dissatisfaction have all been repeatedly shown to increase one's chance of emigration (e.g. Hiskey et al., 2014; 8). Third, awareness of migrant networks and having contacts who are migrants is one of the most consistent findings in the literature on propensity to emigrate, with proposed causal mechanisms including increased informational, logistical and social support and lower perceived risk (e.g. Bertoli & Ruysen, 2016). Such effects have been shown to be enhanced with greater geographical and cultural proximity (Dao et al., 2018; Mai, 2005) and social media use (Dekker & Engbersen, 2013).

There are also several key findings explaining propensity to migrate on a country-by-country basis for each of the countries in which the MRCs are located. Studies of the Afghan case have focussed on insecurity and poverty as explanatory variables (Dimitradi, 2018; Loschmann & Siegel, 2015), with similar socio-demographic profiles of youth, male gender and middle-income and education to those found in the general literature. In Bangladesh, findings have been centred on environmental pressures (Adams & Kay, 2019; Carrico & Donato, 2019; Chowdhury et al., 2009; Joarder and Miller, 2013; Penning-Rowsell et al., 2013), rural–urban domestic migration (Lagakos et al., 2018; Ullah, 2004) and low-skilled emigration (Sharma & Zaman, 2013). Iraq has received relatively little scholarly attention when considering the drivers of emigration, described by Chatelard (2012: 359) as a 'significant blind spot'. However, war and insecurity (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018: 54), ethnic tensions (Sirkeci, 2005), economics and marriage (Eklund & Pilesjo, 2012) have all been given as explanations. Finally, most findings regarding Pakistani migrants are typical of the broader literature: low wages, poor working conditions, lack of amenities and unemployment all contribute to Pakistani emigration (Aqeel, 2015; Lakha & Aziz, 2011).

Overall, the above general findings lead Black et al. (2011: S5) to produce a theoretical model of the decision to migrate that combines macro contextual factors with the individual's socio-demographic characteristics and meso-level 'intervening obstacles and facilitators' (see also, Carling, 2002, on the effects of barriers and constraints to migrate and Carling & Schewel, 2018, on the two-step model of aspirations and abilities). This model overlooks psychological insights into the determinants of emigration; indeed, as Hiskey et al. (2014: 93) note 'very little work exists on the cognitive process that precedes the actual act of emigration'. However, psychological determinants of emigration have been shown to include emotions and desires (Carling & Collins, 2017); diverse values and expectations of where those values will be realised (De Jong, 1999), norms (de Jong, 2000), identity (Tharenou, 2010), personality (Frieze & Li, 2010) and willingness to bear the psychic costs of cutting old ties and forging new ones (Massey et al., 1993).

Linking the theoretical literature to the effects of migrant resource Centres

Exposure to MRC activities can be thought of as an additional meso-level factor that directly intervenes on the psychological determinants of emigration. There are good theoretical reasons to think that MRC actions will achieve the objective of reducing irregular emigration by raising awareness to potential migrants and wider communities of the risks, dangers and consequences of irregular migration. Information is widely considered by scholars of migration to be a key 'mediating' or 'facilitating' cause of variation in perceptions of migration options and, ultimately, one's desire to emigrate, where to and how (e.g. van Hear et al., 2018). These mediating factors stand in contrast to – but are also likely to be affected by and interact with – more deep-seated economic, political, social or environmental 'predisposing drivers' and also to sudden 'precipitating drivers' like war or natural disasters. Moreover, 'such mediating factors [like (mis)information] may be rather diffuse compared to those performing other functions ... still, through enabling and constraining movement (both in aspiration and actuality), they can play a decisive role in determining migration's volumes, forms and directions (van Hear et al., 2018: 932). As van Hear et al. (2018) and others have noted, the type of information that the MRCs produce is likely to affect the decision to move to a lesser extent than precipitating drivers; however, 'the desire to move, the decisions about how and when to leave, which household members should go, and where to, are shaped by these mediating drivers.' Moreover, those MRC activities studied in this article – counselling, outreach sessions and pre-departure sessions – are distinct from many previous interventions (see below) in that they are personalised and interactive, in contrast to the most common extant migration campaigns, for example, billboards, 'miking' (driving around villages with a loudspeaker and microphone to disseminate information) or traditional forms of advertising.

Theoretically, we can expect personalised, conversational, interactive forms of counselling – either as individuals or in groups – to be particularly impactful via the greater attention and motivation, greater engagement, greater credibility and trust, the construction of richer mental imagery, longer exposure, greater personal comfort and more customised interventions (in which recipients and providers, via questioning and conversation, together guide the intervention towards their own needs and personal relevance) that they are likely to facilitate (Bodie, 2013; Burgoon et al., 2002; Chaiken, 1987; Feng, 2009; Goldsmith, 2000; O'Keefe, 2016; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Rafaeli, 1988; Sundar & Kim, 2005; Vygotsky, 1978). Non-academic guidance on how to communicate with would-be irregular migrants has emphasised the importance of engaging with both the individual's personal reasons for wanting to migrate and doing so in a sustained way, comprehensive way, rather than only highlighting risks (Optimality and SEEFAR, 2017). In short, *there are strong theoretical reasons to believe that the MRC's activities are likely to lead to a reduction in irregular emigration intentions, have a more modest impact on migration intentions overall, and increase awareness of safety mechanisms for migrants regardless of status while abroad.*

MRCs represent an ambitious and well-resourced attempt to create a meso-level intervention, but by no means the first. The number of public information campaigns funded by European countries and institutions and aimed at reducing irregular migration have increased markedly over the last decade, with one policy report (Hahn-Schaur, 2021) citing 100 between 2014 and 2019. Such campaigns are highly diverse, often pursuing different objectives with some aiming to promote regular migration, others trying to facilitate informed decisions, and still others aiming to deter (most typically, irregular) migration. This heterogeneous landscape means that not all such campaigns can easily be bundled together. However, the MRCs are particularly notable in that they try to do all of these, making theirs a particularly broad and thus 'blurry' form of intervention. More generally, information campaigns theoretically assume that without such campaigns would-be migrants make decisions based on insufficient or misleading information. In a report for the IOM, Tjaden et al. (2018) identify hundreds of such campaigns yet show that the impact of only 60 had been evaluated, with only 30 evaluations publicly available and only two published in peer reviewed journals. The remainder were criticised for having insufficient evidence and a lack of conceptual clarity.

Awareness-raising events in Senegal and Guinea have recently been shown to affect self-reported propensity to migrate irregularly (Bia-Zafinikamia et al., 2020; Tjaden & Dunsch, 2021; Tjaden & Gninafon, 2022). The former event – a mobile cinema – and the latter – peer-to-peer communication between would-be and returned

migrants – were shown to reduce self-reported likelihood by 20 per cent and 10 per cent, respectively. Exposing would-be migrants to information on the chances of dying *en route* and of obtaining a legal residence permit have been shown to affect self-reported willingness to migrate in the Gambia, with follow-up research a year later showing that actual migratory behaviour correlates strongly with self-reported intention (Bah & Batista, 2018), with similar results in Nepal when migrants were provided with information on deaths whilst migrating and wages for emigrants (Shrestha, 2020) or according to actual variation in the reported death rate of migrants by district (Shrestha, 2019). However, Tjaden (2022) emphasises that, although risks – and the awareness thereof – affects migration decisions, they have far weaker predictive power than broader structural factors, measured as village fixed effects; though it is worth remembering that risk awareness remains distinct from information. The effects of such campaigns are thus likely to be relatively marginal unless designed to interact with context factors. Personalised and interactive interventions, such as the counselling of MRCS, are likely to do so to some extent, even when not being consciously done (see Vygotsky, 1978, on the socially mediated processes of learning).

Cases, treatment, methods and data

The effects of four activities across six MRCS (in four countries) are tested both together and then separately. The six MRCS – in Baghdad, Cumilla, Dhaka, Islamabad, Kabul and Lahore – were chosen because of (1) they are the only MRCS that offer interactive counselling in the form of at least one of the following four activities, (2) by testing multiple MRCS in notably distinct country contexts we can gain at least a preliminary insight into how generalisable the findings are. The four activities are as follows. First, online counselling and, second, telephone counselling offer those considering migrating an opportunity to directly ask questions on a one-to-one, free and confidential basis. In addition, in Afghanistan and Pakistan callers can call a hotline. These two activities offer guidance on: migration procedures and institutions, employment and education opportunities abroad, the right and responsibilities of migrants in destination countries, socio-cultural norms and labour laws, verification of overseas employment promoters and government fees, information on government entities to contact whilst abroad in case of danger, and the risks involved in irregular migration, smuggling and trafficking. Third, pre-departure briefing sessions offer those who have already arranged to emigrate the same information above but with less emphasis on how to emigrate and more on travel procedures and safety and legal information whilst abroad. These are tailored to the country that the migrant is going. Fourth, MRC counsellors visit technical and vocational institutions, colleges and universities to hold awareness session on a regular basis that present information like that above on safe migration options, risks of irregular migration and safety information whilst abroad.

There are numerous methods to measure the impact of public policy interventions, such as Migrant Resource Centres, each with trade-offs and applicability varying according to context and feasibility (Tjaden et al., 2018). Essentially, however, all experimental studies must answer: how are things different following the intervention to how they would have been if there had been no intervention (i.e. the counterfactual)? Answering this question can be done in near limitless ways but, for it to be quantifiable, must produce two measurements of whatever the intervention is interested in changing: the observed level following the intervention and the level in the estimated counterfactual scenario in which that the intervention had never happened. Researchers must produce their counterfactual according to careful theoretical considerations of what a counterfactual would look like and within the parameters of what is possible in dealing with complex on-the-ground realities.

For the purposes of this study, we *randomly allocate* users of the MRC into a treatment and a control group. In terms of sampling, doing so allows us to have the most similar – and thus truly random – respondents possible since all equally approached the MRCS and so isolating the effect of the MRC interventions as much as possible. An alternative approach whereby users of the MRCS were compared to non-users would be highly unlikely to control for various predispositions in the four outcome variables that covary with MRC usage, possibly resulting in exaggerated effect sizes of the treatments. The isolation of the treatment effect that this approach offers thus allows for more robust

TABLE 1 Objectives and randomisation approach by four MRC activities

		Objectives			
		Discourage irregular migration	Raise awareness of safe regular migration	Protect migrants	Randomisation approach
Activities	Telephone counselling	X	X	X	By individual
	Online counselling	X	X	X	By individual
	Pre-departure sessions		X	X	By session
	TVC outreach	X	X	X	By session

and thus generalisable findings. All users of the MRCs during the period April 2021 to May 2021 were surveyed, with a one weak break for Eid part way through. A second data collection period occurred between June and July 2022. The administrators of the MRCs – all of whom are nationals of the host country who speak the native language as a mother tongue and have tertiary education – were given specific instructions via a training session on how to perform the surveys and the broader aims of the project, along with ongoing assistance during implementation, by the authors and in collaboration with the ICMPD's Vienna headquarters. Users are randomly placed into one of these two groups via coin flip prior to taking part in one of the four activities. Both groups are given the *exact* same survey, which measures the MRCs objectives. The control group is given it immediately prior to taking part in one of the activities (i.e. at the point when they have received no intervention), whereas the treatment group is given it immediately after taking part in one of the activities. As such, the treatment strategy is not that of a full randomised control trial in that not the treatment *and* control group are not *both* measured before and after the intervention. However, it does replicate much of it whilst avoiding potential memory biases (whereby individuals measured over a short time frame recall and repeat their pre-intervention responses post-intervention) and attrition (whereby individuals non-randomly drop out of measurement between the pre-intervention and post-intervention measurement). Not all the activities seek to measure the impact all the objectives (see Table 1). Similarly, whereas the telephone counselling and online counselling are one-to-one activities, random allocation is done on an individual basis, whereas for the pre-departure sessions and technical and vocational college sessions randomisation is done on a session-by-session basis to save time taken from each session by surveying. Further methodological considerations are considered in the discussion section below, with the distribution of the treatment and control by MRC and by activity shown in Table 3, below.

Measuring the effect of information campaigns on irregular immigration is notoriously challenging; the effects are likely to be diffuse whilst the clandestine nature of the activity complicates matters (Heller, 2014) beyond the usual and many problems of measuring the effects of public policy interventions. As such, the effect is often measured via self-reported intentions to migrate that, although subject to self-reporting biases, at least can isolate effects, contingent on relevant theoretical assumptions (Tjaden et al., 2018). Indeed, empirically, self-reported migration intention and actual migration behaviour have been shown to be highly correlated (Bah & Batista, 2018; Docquier et al., 2014; Tjaden & Laczko, 2019). However, it is important to note the important gaps between migration intention and actual migration (De Jong et al., 1985; Gardner et al., 1986; Van Dalen & Henkens, 2007, 2013). This is particularly the case regarding irregular emigration in which there is likely to be an underreporting due to its illegal nature, that is social desirability bias. As such, respondents are assured of the anonymity of the survey, its internal usage, and that it will not affect the advice that they are given and several 'warm up' questions are asked to put respondents at ease before moving on to questions of irregular migration (see Figure 1 below). Furthermore, it is noteworthy that those in the treatment group – which is designed to reduce propensity to irregular migration – are measured after their interaction with the MRC is finished, when social desirability bias is likely to be weaker. This latter point means that social desirability bias is likely to underplay the effects of the MRCs, rather than exaggerate them. As discussed further below, the MRCs have multiple objectives that are simultaneously strived towards in non-scripted and interactive conversations and consultations, making this form of intervention highly *blurry* both in its broadness and flexibility, meaning that there is no set time for which the interventions last with conversations varying but content remaining within the parameters set by the MRCs objectives.



Dear participants,

We wish to seek your support and cooperation for a quick assessment. We like to ask you a few questions about your current situation. The answers you give (1) will not affect the information or advice that you are given during the session; (2) will remain anonymous; and (3) are purely for internal assessment purposes to help us improve our services. It will just take around 2 minutes.

Please check the appropriate boxes for your response in the questions below. Once you are finished, please return this to the MRC team.

Thank you very much and we wish you the best, from your MRC team in Iraq.

أعزائي المشاركون ،

نرغب في طلب دعمكم وتعاونكم لإجراء تقييم سريع. نود أن نطرح عليكم بعض الأسئلة حول وضعك الحالي. (1) لن تؤثر الإجابات التي تقدمها على المعلومات أو النصائح التي يتم تقديمها لك أثناء الجلسة؛ (2) ستبقى المعلومات مجهولة الهوية؛ (3) التقييم لأغراض التقييم الداخلي فقط لمساعدتنا على تحسين خدماتنا. سيستغرق الأمر حوالي دقيقتين فقط. يرجى تأشير المربعات المناسبة لإجابتك على الأسئلة أدناه. بمجرد الانتهاء ، يرجى إعادة هذه الاستمارة إلى فريق MRC شكراً جزيلاً لكم ونتمنى لكم التوفيق من فريق MRC في العراق.

1. هل تواصلت مع مركز موارد العمل وهجرة العمال سابقاً؟
 Yes نعم No لا
2. Write your age in the blank please الرجاء كتابة عمرك في الفراغ
3. What is your gender?
 Male ذكر Female انثى Other آخر ما هو نوعك؟
4. Which region, province or district do you originally come from? دولة، محافظة الاصل
5. How likely is it that you will emigrate to another country over the next year?
ما هي احتمالية ان تهاجر الى بلد آخر خلال سنة من الآن؟
 Very likely جدا المحتمل
 Likely محتمل
 Neither likely or unlikely ليس محتملاً ولا غير محتمل
 Unlikely من غير المرجح
 Very unlikely جدا المستبعد
 Don't know لا أعرف
6. How willing would you be to migrate to another country irregularly?
ما مدى استعدادك للهجرة إلى بلد آخر بطريقة غير نظامية؟
 Very willing على استعداد عال
 Willing مستعد
 Neither willing or unwilling لا راغب ولا غير راغب
 Unwilling غير مستعد
 Very unwilling غير مستعد ابداً
 Don't know لا أعرف
7. How aware are you of safe options for regular emigration?
ما مدى معرفتك بالخيارات الآمنة للهجرة النظامية؟
 Very aware على معرفة عالية
 Somewhat aware لدي معرفة الى حد ما
 Neither aware nor unaware لست عارفاً ولا غير عارف
 Somewhat unaware ليست لدي معرفة نوعاً ما
 Very unaware ليست لدي اي معرفة
 Don't know لا اعلم
8. How aware are you of the government entity that can help you if you have problems while abroad?
ما مدى معرفتك بالجهات الحكومية التي يمكنها مساعدتك إذا واجهت مشاكل أثناء تواجدك بالخارج؟
 Very aware على معرفة عالية
 Somewhat aware لدي معرفة الى حد ما
 Neither aware nor unaware لست عارفاً ولا غير عارف
 Somewhat unaware ليست لدي معرفة نوعاً ما
 Very unaware ليست لدي اي معرفة
 Don't know لا اعلم

For administrative purposes only (MRC team will fill-out this part): (سيقوم فريق مركز الموارد بملء هذا الجزء):

MRC المركز: Baghdad بغداد Pre measurement تقييم قبلي Post measurement تقييم بعدي Date التاريخ: _____

FIGURE 1 Survey for technical and vocational institute outreach sessions in Iraq

The surveys vary linguistically by country but are the same for telephone counselling, online counselling and technical and vocational college outreach – pre-departure sessions are the same but do not include questions on likelihood to emigrate or likelihood to emigrate irregularly. To give one example, the exact survey for Technical and Vocational Institute outreach sessions in Iraq are found below in Figure 1. Participants are asked some basic socio-demographic (gender, age and regional background) issues before the key questions are asked, first, to set them at ease given the sensitivity regarding irregular migration, and, second, to potentially compare responses by social groups. Furthermore, participants are asked if they have had contact with a MRC before, in which case we should expect the effect sizes of our interventions to be smaller because they will have received an earlier intervention, some of the effect of which should theoretically remain. The objectives are measured with four questions that ask about the propensity to emigrate, the propensity to emigrate irregularly, knowledge of safe emigration options and knowledge of the government entity that they should contact whilst migrating in case of danger or emergency.

The data produced by the above surveys is described in Table 2.

In Table 3, below, we see the number of participants in each activity across each of the six MRCs.

To ensure effective randomisation, covariate balances between the control groups and treatment groups are presented below, in Table 4. As can be seen, the, in most cases, small differences suggest effective randomisation.

Analyses

The impact of the MRCs is measured by comparing the average responses for the questions regarding each objective amongst those who were measured before and after the MRC activities, respectively. First, we average differences in measures of the four objectives between control and treatment groups overall, by activity and by MRC. Second, multivariate analyses (one for each outcome variable of interest) is provided as a robustness check of the effect of the MRC interventions, which controls for socio-demographics and includes an interaction effect of previous MRC contact. Finally, these same models are re-run by MRC and activity, with the only the coefficient of the effect of receiving the treatment being reported.

OVERALL ESTIMATED EFFECTS

In Table 5, below, we see the differences in the pre- and post-activity measurements across all MRCs and all activities. The respective differences between these give us our bottom-line impacts. The overall impact of MRC activities on likelihood of emigrating irregularly was to reduce the percentage saying that they are likely or very likely to do so from 19.8 per cent to 6.2 per cent. The overall impact of MRC activities on likelihood of emigrating in general was to increase the percentage saying that they are likely or very likely to do so from 72.7 per cent to 76.0 per cent. The overall impact of MRC activities on awareness of safe migration options was to increase the percentage saying that they are aware or very aware of such options from 44.7 per cent to 76.4 per cent. The overall impact of MRC activities on awareness of government entities that they call for assistance whilst abroad was to increase the percentage saying that they are aware or very aware of such options from 41.8 per cent to 69.1 per cent.

Table 5 also shows the differences in the pre- and post-measurements on an activity-by-activity basis. In short, we see the combined effects of the MRCs and their activities are similarly observed across every activity and almost every MRC. To be specific, online counselling, telephone counselling and TVC outreach sessions, *respectively*, have the desired effects of reducing self-reported propensity to emigrate irregularly. However, only one of the three activities increases self-reported propensity to emigrate. All increase self-reported awareness of safe migration options and self-reported awareness of government entities. *Pre-departure orientation sessions* similar have the desired effects

TABLE 2 Descriptive statistics

Variable	Responses	N	%
MRC	Baghdad	329	10.7
	Cumilla	319	14.4
	Dhaka	250	11.3
	Islamabad	374	16.9
	Kabul	251	11.3
	Lahore	692	31.3
Activity	Online counselling	329	15.2
	Pre-departure	523	24.1
	TVC	761	35.1
	Telephone counselling	555	25.6
Pre- or post- measurement	Pre- (control)	1143	51.6
	Post- (treatment)	1072	48.4
Gender	Female	359	16.2
	Male	1852	83.6
	Other	4	0.2
Emigration likelihood	Do not know	159	9.3
	Very unlikely	131	7.7
	Unlikely	116	6.8
	Neither likely nor unlikely	151	8.8
	Likely	659	38.6
	Very likely	492	28.8
Irregular emigration likelihood	Do not know	154	8.9
	Very unlikely	619	35.7
	Unlikely	570	32.9
	Neither likely nor unlikely	185	10.7
	Likely	126	7.3
	Very likely	80	4.6
Safe options awareness	Do not know	173	7.8
	Very unaware	321	14.4
	Somewhat unaware	282	12.7
	Neither aware nor unaware	209	9.4
	Somewhat aware	892	40.3
	Very aware	338	15.3
Government assistance awareness	Do not know	311	14.1
	Very unaware	432	19.6
	Somewhat unaware	240	10.9
	Neither aware nor unaware	172	7.8
	Somewhat aware	828	37.5
	Very aware	227	10.3

(Continues)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Variable	Responses	N	%
Wave	1 (April – May 2021)	1102	49.75
	2 (June – July 2022)	1113	50.3

Note: Age (mean: 28.9; standard deviation 8.2); regional background also collected but not listed.

TABLE 3 Activity participants by MRC, with number receiving treatment in parentheses

Activity	Baghdad	Cumilla	Dhaka	Islamabad	Kabul	Lahore	Total
Online	65 (37)	80 (41)	0	6 (6)	173 (74)	5 (3)	329 (161)
Telephone	8 (3)	0	145 (70)	35 (14)	78 (34)	223 (89)	523 (233)
TVC outreach session	240 (112)	0	58 (36)	285 (144)	0	178 (73)	761 (365)
Pre-departure orientation session	4 (3)	214 (101)	47 (26)	48 (22)	0	276 (157)	555 (286)

TABLE 4 Covariate balance between treatment groups

Variable	Control mean	Treatment mean	Difference
Male	0.84	0.83	0.01
Age	28.7	29.1	-0.3
Activity			
Online	0.15	0.15	0.00
Pre-departure	0.26	0.22	0.04
TVC	0.35	0.35	0.00
Telephone	0.24	0.27	-0.03
MRC			
Baghdad	0.15	0.15	0.00
Cumilla	0.14	0.15	-0.01
Dhaka	0.10	0.12	-0.02
Islamabad	0.16	0.17	-0.01
Kabul	0.13	0.10	0.03
Lahore	0.32	0.30	0.02

of increasing self-reported awareness of safe migration options and increasing self-reported awareness of government entities.

In Table 5, we also see the effects of the combined activities on an MRC-by-MRC basis. At this point it is worth reconsidering which MRCs perform which activities, as shown in Table 3. As is shown, the effects are consistently in the expected direction across the 24 country-specific effects, with just three exceptions: both migration likelihood effects in Dhaka and regular migration likelihood in Cumilla.

Multivariate analyses

We now move onto multivariate analysis that includes several controls to further isolate the effects of the MRCs. In Table 6 below, we see four regression models of the four respective outcomes. As already shown, the combined treatments have strong effects on three of the four outcomes – now coded as continuous variables (see Table 2) – and those effects are all statistically significant at the 99.9% level even when controlling for age, gender and previous MRC contact. The only exception is the effect on emigration, which now disappears. As expected, and demonstrated

TABLE 5 Pre- and post-activity measurements of four objectives across all MRC activities

	% 'likely' or 'very likely' to emigrate irregularly		% 'likely' or 'very likely' to emigrate		% 'aware' or 'very aware' of safe options		% 'aware' or 'very aware' of government entity	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Combined	19.8	6.2	72.7	76.0	44.7	76.4	41.8	69.1
By Activity								
Online Counselling	35.5	8.7	87.0	84.9	47.8	65.3	33.1	50.7
Telephone Counselling	11.4	3.4	92.0	91.4	43.8	73.7	41.7	65.4
TVC outreach sessions	19.2	7.5	51.8	59.9	42.2	83.7	39.9	75.8
Pre-departure orientation					46.1	77.4	49.0	75.6
By MRC								
Baghdad	27.2	7.5	48.4	50.8	38.9	87.8	28.9	73.2
Cumilla	40.0	16.3	82.2	80.4	48.6	51.8	55.1	58.1
Dhaka	3.3	4.0	80.0	63.8	21.7	43.2	20.2	31.9
Islamabad	14.6	4.8	54.0	68.1	36.4	84.2	35.1	80.9
Kabul	39.3	10.3	90.9	96.3	38.9	62.3	24.3	34.7
Lahore	9.3	3.2	84.0	89.9	59.4	93.8	60.3	91.9

TABLE 6 Regression models of four respective outcomes

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Emigrate irregularly	Emigrate	Awareness of safe options	Awareness of government entity
Age	-0.01 (0.00)***	-0.01 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
Gender (reference: male)				
Female	-0.28 (0.07)***	-0.54 (0.08)***	-0.30 (0.08)***	-0.27 (0.08)***
Other	0.81 (0.53)***	0.05 (0.07)	-0.02 (0.59)	0.36 (0.70)
Treatment	-0.31 (0.06)***	0.05 (0.07)	1.05 (0.06)***	1.06 (0.07)***
Previous MRC contact	0.19 (0.12)	-0.12 (0.12)	0.79 (0.11)***	1.03 (0.12)***
Treatment*Previous MRC contact interaction	-0.27 (0.14)	0.26 (0.15)	-0.91 (0.13)***	-1.10 (0.12)***
MRC (reference: Kabul)				
Cumilla	-0.04 (0.14)	-0.09 (0.14)	0.18 (0.11)	0.70 (0.12)***
Dhaka	-0.87 (0.10)***	-0.35 (0.11)***	-0.70 (0.11)***	-0.16 (0.12)
Baghdad	-0.32 (0.10)***	-1.10 (0.10)***	0.58 (0.11)***	0.82 (0.12)***
Islamabad	-0.55 (0.09)***	-0.52 (0.10)***	0.57 (0.10)***	1.08 (0.11)***
Lahore	-0.90 (0.09)***	-0.33 (0.09)	0.72 (0.09)***	1.26 (0.10)***
Wave two	-0.33 (0.06)***	-0.30 (0.06)***	0.02 (0.06)	
Constant	3.28 (0.13)***	4.63 (0.14)***	2.52 (0.13)***	-0.04 (0.06)
Observations	1568	1537	2021	1880
R-squared	0.15	0.17	0.24	0.26

Note: Standard errors in parentheses *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

TABLE 7 Effects of treatments by MRC and activity type (full regression analyses not shown; analysis with $N < 20$ dropped)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Emigrate irregularly	Emigrate	Awareness of safe options	Awareness of government entity
Baghdad				
Online counselling (N = 60)	-0.51 (0.38)	0.69 (0.48)	1.27 (0.35)***	1.48 (0.44)***
TVC outreach (N = 215)	-0.39 (0.23)	0.48 (0.31)	1.52 (0.22)***	1.33 (0.26)***
Cumilla				
Online counselling (N = 76)	-0.49 (0.30)	0.42 (0.79)	-0.05 (0.32)	0.14 (0.35)
Pre-departure sessions (N = 183)	n/a	n/a	-0.18 (0.35)	-0.70 (0.31)
Dhaka				
Telephone counselling (N = 80)	0.08 (0.13)	-0.95 (0.24)***	0.28 (0.54)	0.16 (0.29)
TVC outreach (N = 56)	-0.31 (0.38)	0.27 (0.41)	0.10 (0.36)	0.53 (0.36)
Pre-departure sessions (N = 173)	n/a	n/a	-0.00 (0.15)	-0.10 (0.31)
Islamabad				
Telephone counselling (N = 47)	-0.30 (0.23)	-0.18 (0.31)	1.78 (0.31)***	1.28 (0.31)***
TVC outreach (N = 263)	-0.59 (0.16)***	0.27 (0.16)	1.50 (0.13)***	1.20 (0.14)***
Pre-departure sessions (N = 32)	n/a	n/a	-0.57 (0.48)	-0.22 (0.24)
Kabul				
Online counselling (N = 172)	-0.03 (0.45)	-0.04 (0.27)	0.96 (0.53)	0.90 (0.49)
Telephone counselling (N = 78)	-1.51 (0.33)***	0.41 (0.25)	1.26 (0.35)***	1.22 (0.41)**
Lahore				
Telephone counselling (N = 253)	-0.10 (0.08)	-0.14 (0.06)**	0.28 (0.09)***	0.28** (0.11)
TVC outreach (N = 171)	-0.51 (0.20)**	0.05 (0.22)	0.78 (0.20)***	0.81 (0.21)***
Pre-departure sessions (N = 173)	n/a	n/a	2.02 (0.15)***	2.22 (0.16)***

Note: Coefficients represent effect of treatment across 52 respective models. Standard errors in parentheses *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

by the interaction effects, previous MRC contact has a negative effect on the strength of the treatment in the latter two of the four models – those measuring awareness suggesting that these effects are long-lasting.

In Table 7, we see the coefficient and standard error of the MRC treatment on the same four outcome variables, but for each sub-sample, respectively, by both each of the four activities and the six MRCs (resulting in 52 respective models). The controls are not shown for brevity. As can be seen, the results are fairly consistent in each sub-sample. In every case, the effect on irregular emigration is either negative and statistically significant, or not significant (in many cases reflecting lower power resulting from a small sub-sample). The effects on awareness of safe options and awareness of government entities is also positive and statistically significant, or not statistically significant, in every case. The effects on emigration intention are more mixed though statistically significant in only two, both negative, cases. The generalisability of the effects on each of the four outcomes is, therefore, strong except in the case of emigration intention.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Several Migrant Resource Centres (MRCs) have been set up in recent years jointly by national administrations of origin and destination countries and the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) as part of

the 'Improving Migration Management in the Silk Routes Countries' project, which spans Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Iran, Iraq and Pakistan. MRCs were set up to (1) reduce irregular emigration; (2) raise awareness of possibilities of safe, regular emigration opportunities; and (3) increase the safety of migrants when in transit or destination. This study seeks to provide initial evidence in measuring the impact of the MRCs on achieving these objectives. These MRCs are interesting from a scientific perspective in that most of their activities are interactive, offering personalised counsel to potential migrants and thus making them a relatively novel – as well as expensive and high profile – form of intervention that can be thought of a meso-level factor in the many determinants of migration decision-making.

This article provided quasi-experimental evidence of the effect of four MRC activities across six MRCs in four countries. Surveyed participants were randomly allocated to pre-treatment or post-treatment measurement, whereby the treatment is one of the four activities of online counselling, telephone counselling, pre-departure sessions and technical and vocational college outreach. The effects of the MRCs are a large reduction in self-reported likelihood of migrating irregularly and a strong increase in awareness of safe options and who to contact for assistance whilst migrating. The effects are consistent across both activity type and MRC location, although magnitudes vary.

These findings have implications for our understanding of how the decision to migrate is made, what interventions are effective and why – a question of both social scientific interest and substantive, and even mortal, policy importance, as well as a value-for-money matter. They suggest that new information from a reliable source presented in an interactive, personalised manner has dramatic effects on the individuals' level of awareness of issues and migration decision-making, building on and complimenting recent findings that focused on the awareness-raising effects of edutainment interventions (Bia-Zafinikamia et al., 2020; Tjaden, 2022; Tjaden & Dunsch, 2021; Tjaden & Gninafon, 2022).

This study comes with some methodological caveats, notably the lack of a genuine RCT set up, the lack of tests for the longevity of the effects of the treatment (though the observed negative effect of previous MRC contact on treatment effect size suggests that there existed an ongoing effect from that previous MRC contact), potential biases arising from social desirability (potentially magnified post-treatment by the knowledge of what the interviewer is likely to expect), and most notably, the use of *intention* to migrate, rather than actual irregular migration. Moreover, not all of the activities were measured in all of the six MRCs, introducing some doubts about generalisability. However, since individuals are likely to be more forthcoming *post-treatment* about taking part in illegal activities when the risks to the information that they receive are no longer a factor and social desirability bias is likely to be lower, this bias can be expected to have *decreased* the reported effect sizes. As such, actual effects in the short-term may be even larger. The major outstanding methodological issue for future research is to test the longevity of these effects. The major outstanding theoretical issue for future research on MRCs would be to *isolate* what exactly is the causal mechanism affecting the variables of interest – though it should be noted that the personalised nature of each interaction means that doing so systematically would have challenges.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data used to perform the analyses in this article is available upon request.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ More information is available at <https://www.budapestprocess.org/migration-in-the-silk-routes/150-migrant-resource-centre>.
- ² For critical analysis of information campaigns as a nefarious means of control or as a political act aimed at domestic audiences see Oeppen (2016).

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