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Can Migrants do the (Border)Work? Conflicting Dynamics and Effects of “Peer-to-peer” Intermediation in North and West Africa

Anissa Maâa, Julia Van Dessel and Ida Marie Savio Vammen

ABSTRACT
Since the 1990s, the European Union (EU) and its Member States have been funding information and awareness-raising initiatives to deter irregular immigration. These programmes increasingly rely on the involvement of intermediaries with a migration background in so-called “peer-to-peer” information dissemination activities. Their “peerness” is considered an efficient tool to gain (potential) migrants’ trust, and ultimately enforce migration and border control. However, while “peerness” between migrants and intermediaries is generally taken for granted by migration and border studies, it is crossed by conflicting dynamics and generates contrasted effects on the ground. This paper interrogates how various migration experiences are captured and defined as “peerness” for control purposes, and, simultaneously, how it is mobilized and enacted by migrant actors in different contexts. Empirical insights from three case studies are brought together, each of which engaging with an emblematic figure of “migrant intermediation”: the Senegalese “diaspora” in the EU, “transit migrants” in Morocco, and “returnees” in Senegal. The paper argues that “peer-to-peer” information dissemination entails inherent tensions and contradictions which can ultimately come to challenge borderwork. Finally, it demonstrates that beyond the question of its efficiency, “migrant intermediation” transforms and reinforces both social hierarchies and relations of power within local migration industries.

KEYWORDS
Peer-to-peer; migrant intermediaries; information campaigns; voluntary return; International Organisation for Migration; European Union

Introduction
In recent years, scholars have increasingly scrutinized so-called “migration information campaigns” (MICs) and “assisted voluntary return” programmes (AVR) as bordering practices concerned with the dissemination of specific information towards migrants (Maâ 2021; Van Neste-Gottignies and Mistiaen 2019; Van Dessel 2021; Williams 2020). MICs have mainly been conceptualized as a “soft” tool of border enforcement (FitzGerald 2019) or a “symbolic bordering practice” (Musarò 2019) aimed at shaping migrants’ perceptions and aspirations (Heller 2014; Carling and Collins 2018). In the
same vein, AVR programmes have been interpreted as a “soft” practice of deportation (Leerkes, van Os, and Boersema 2017), operating through the government of migrants’ subjectivities (Cleton and Chauvin 2020; Cleton and Schweitzer 2021). Both the discourses and strategies mobilized through MICs and AVR to encourage (potential) migrants to stay in, or return to, their country of origin bear several similarities (see Pécoud in this SI). Notably, they contribute to promoting a “sedentary subject” (Freemantle and Landau 2022) and impose a Westphalian moral geography (Watkins 2020) far beyond Western states’ borders. Yet, insofar as the African continent has been the main target of these initiatives, their ambition collides with the socio-cultural factors that have historically made mobility, both internal and international, a survival strategy and a most desirable option in the context of what has been termed a “culture of migration” (Hahn and Klute 2007; Degli Uberti and Riccio 2017). Moreover, while these measures are mainly associated with institutional actors such as the European Union (EU) and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), their local implementation increasingly relies on the involvement of humanitarian actors (Van Dessel and Pécoud 2020) and “community-based” agents, including “former” or return migrants (Maâ 2021; Vammen 2021). These intermediation practices have also seen the growing emergence of actors labeled as “peers” with (potential) migrants in transit and/or origin countries because of their prior experience of migration. Indeed, studies have emphasized that migrants and refugees mainly rely on their own social networks to source valuable information before and after departure, especially fellow migrants and diaspora members (see the contributions of Galli and Ollitrault in this SI, Wissink, Düvell, and Mazzucato 2020; Vammen et al. 2021). Therefore, the enlistment of “migrant intermediaries” has become a common strategy to overcome (potential) migrants’ lack of trust in anti-migration messages, which they generally dismiss as biased propaganda (Brachet 2016; Kosnick 2014).

Admittedly, the use of community-based agents to reach a specific population is not exclusive to the “migration industry” (Hernández-León 2013). It is rooted in colonial forms of government (Lawrance, Osborn, and Roberts 2006), and is currently widespread within the fields of development (Bierschenk, Chauveau, and de Sardan 2000) and humanitarianism (Drif 2018). That being said, in the context of border control, “peer” intermediaries are distinct from other local brokers in at least one respect: it is first and foremost as a result of their presumed shared migration experience that they are called upon to play the role of intermediaries. In order to stress the “insider” position of these peculiar intermediaries with regard to migrant communities, Maâ has defined Sub-Saharan agents involved in the implementation of AVR as “indigenous intermediaries” (Maâ 2021). Drawing on the case of Morocco, the author has revealed the racial dynamics underlying this specific form of intermediation in the migration industry, and has also highlighted both the room for maneuver from which intermediaries benefit on the ground and the consequently contrasted effects of their involvement on border control. From this perspective, “indigenous intermediaries” can be defined as “border workers” who take part in the “envisioning, constructing, maintaining, and erasing [of] borders” through their everyday practices (Rumford 2008, 10).

While the present paper follows the perspective initiated by Maâ’s concept of “indigenous intermediaries”, it aims at taking it one step further by questioning more specifically their presumed “peerness”. “Indigenous intermediaries” are characterized by the
migration experience they share with their target audience. Nonetheless, so-called “migrant experiences and trajectories” can largely differ depending on the individuals and contexts under consideration. Besides, “migrant communities” are far from being homogenous entities, and are inevitably crossed by social hierarchies and relations of power. From this perspective, intermediaries’ “peerness” or “indigeneity” in relation to migrants can translate into a multiplicity of forms on the ground, and does not systematically reflect an actual proximity to their target audience. In order to investigate these conflicting dynamics of “peerness” apprehended in relation to borderwork, this paper defines “migrant intermediaries” as those actors whose enlistment in the migration industry results from their migrant experience. This definition does not reify nor homogenize the “migrancy” of the intermediaries at hand; on the contrary, it enables us to simultaneously identify how various migration experiences are captured and defined as “peerness” with the objective of enforcing migration and border control and how it is mobilized and enacted by migrant actors in different contexts. In order do so, this paper analytically brings together three empirical case studies, each of which engaging with an emblematic figure of “migrant intermediation”: the Senegalese diaspora in Europe (Van Dessel), “transit migrants” in Morocco (Maâ) and “returnees” in Senegal (Vammen).

By setting our case studies in perspective and bringing our empirical data into dialogue, we aim to critically examine and deconstruct the taken for granted notion of “peerness” attributed to migrants in their roles as intermediaries. We thus intend to identify the shared features, ambiguities and points of friction that migrant intermediation in borderwork produces on the ground. What does the institutional definition of “peerness” entail? How is it appropriated or translated by migrant intermediaries? To what extent does this “peerness” ultimately help to spread a sedentarist message in transit and origin countries? And, beyond the question of its “efficiency”, what are the effects of migrant intermediation on the social hierarchies and relations of power in the respective migration industries where it takes place? To answer these interrogations, this paper is structured as follows.

The first section (I) presents the institutional definition of “peerness” in relation to borderwork and discusses its appropriation by migrant intermediaries in our three case studies. The second section (II) highlights the tensions and conflictual dynamics arising from these intermediaries’ ambiguous position within both migrant communities and the respective migration industries in which they operate. The third section (III) identifies the main effects produced by the aforementioned tensions on borderwork.

I. Institutional definitions and the appropriation of “peer intermediation”

“Peerness” in the context of borderwork in North and West Africa is first and foremost presumed and defined by institutional actors who are responsible for the design, funding and/or implementation of information provision activities directed towards (potential) migrants. As such, the “indigeneity” of intermediaries with regard to their target audience is, as we will show, not natural, but rather results from processes of designation and recruitment which convey specific representations of both migrants and control. In this sense, the definition of “peerness” is subject to change over time and spaces, and can be translated and embodied diversely on the ground.

I.1. Selecting “peers”

In 2018, following the 2015 “migration crisis”, the EU Commission initiated a study to identify the main information channels influencing West African migrants’ decision-
making on their way to Europe. The findings notably highlighted that “Migration plans are often, and perhaps understandably, modeled after the successful journeys of peers already in Europe, and the diaspora continues to be a trusted source of information on the journey.” (European Commission, Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs 2018). Hence, later that year, the Commission issued a call for projects to support MICs that would “(...) engage with trusted diaspora communities as bearers of information to their compatriots planning to come to Europe irregularly.” (European Commission, Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs 2018). The following year, two “pilot diaspora-based communication campaigns” were launched by consortia of EU civil society organizations (CSOs) mainly composed of NGOs, universities, and media associations. The two projects focused on the Senegalese diaspora community based in several EU Member States. Through these projects, diasporic subjects were assigned the new role of “migrant intermediaries” in EU borderwork.

In the academic literature, diasporas are broadly defined as any “segment of a people living outside the homeland” (Connor 1988, 6). In the case of Senegal, however, scholars have shown that the diaspora community in Europe is characterized by its highly trans-national nature (Riccio 2002), as migrants tend to maintain strong links with their country of origin and aspire to return one day (Sinatti 2006). When used in the framework of EU MICs, the term “diaspora” serves as an all-encompassing expression referring to migrants currently living in Europe who arrived through regular and irregular channels alike. The “peerness” of diaspora members with “potential migrants” in their country of origin is thus mainly conceived on the basis of their common nationality, regardless of the timing and specifics of their migration experience. Yet, in the initial call for projects issued by the EU Commission, it was explicitly stated that the diaspora should share messages “(...) on the risks of irregular migration and migrant smuggling, both during the journey (perils of the voyage when undertaken irregularly) and after arrival (hardships of living irregularly in the EU and return)”.3 As a representative of one of the EU CSOs involved explains below, a first obstacle arose when it came to recruiting intermediaries whose migration experience reflected these difficulties:

We have had great difficulty in reaching Senegalese who have arrived in recent months in an irregular manner. So most of the [diaspora] members we chose and who took part in the project are people who have lived in Italy for 20 years, for example, or who are already integrated, who have family there, and who have had access to Europe legally, so you understand that it’s really … It changes a lot! If the participant has arrived legally and has been living in Italy for 20 years, or if he has just arrived with a pirogue … So we had great difficulty in gaining access to people who arrived in a pirogue in an irregular manner because they are afraid, they don’t want to put their face or their voice, or participate in an interview, because they say “I’ve just arrived, I’m afraid that the police will find me, so I don’t want to participate”

It therefore eventuates that undocumented migrants who have recently arrived in Europe through perilous irregular channels are mostly reluctant to take part in EU MICs because of the precarity of their own situation. This indicates a structural difficulty in co-opting members of the diaspora who have traveled irregularly and live in Europe without a residence permit as “migrant intermediaries” in EU borderwork. Consequently, the majority of the diaspora members who ultimately agreed to participate and lend their voice to the campaigns in fact travelled to Europe legally, and benefited from a formal residence
permit at the time of the project. Contrary to the initial expectations of EU institutional actors, the specifics of the lived migration experience can thus negatively impact the “-peernees” of diasporic intermediaries by distancing them from “potential migrants” currently living in Senegal.

In Morocco, the genesis of “peer-to-peer” information on AVR finds its roots in 2010 through the “LiMo” project implemented in the country by the IOM. The observed inefficiency of promotional material on AVR and the reluctance of some humanitarian actors to actively contribute to the IOM’s programmes encouraged an external evaluation to suggest drawing on a “word-of-mouth” circulation of information. In order to do so, the IOM was advised to “[hold] frequent meetings with community leaders to improve their understanding of AVRR and enabling them to transmit a correct message”.

In short, it was believed that an endogenous dissemination of information within migrant communities – so-called “word-of-mouth” – could be achieved and structured through the co-optation of influential community-based agents called upon to play the role of pro-return messengers. Also known as “the elders” by migrants themselves, “community leaders” are influential nationals from West and Central Africa who have experienced migration before settling in the country and being integrated in its local “migration industry” (cf. Hernández-León 2013). “Community leaders” are elected within migrant communities to take charge of several aspects of social life. They therefore are involved in a wide range of activities, such as defending migrant rights, providing humanitarian assistance, and even facilitating migration (Üstübici 2016; Bachelet 2018; Magallanes-Gonzalez 2021). They also increasingly operate as intermediaries between institutional actors of migration and border control and migrant populations (Magallanes-Gonzalez 2021). Some “community leaders” are directly co-opted in the framework of IOM-led projects and are in charge of disseminating information on AVR during the humanitarian assistance activities they conduct with migrants. Officially, they are labelled as “peer educators” by the IOM. Others are employed by humanitarian or charity organizations or by local associations that contribute to the everyday implementation of AVR, be it through official partnerships with the IOM or spontaneous initiatives (Maâ 2021). Very often, “community leaders” simultaneously work for the IOM and other organizations involved in the migration industry, meaning they combine or move in and out of differently labelled functions (Ibidem).

Nonetheless, since 2010, the enlistment of community leaders on the ground has progressively expanded to a wider range of Western and Central African nationals, independent of their influence and seniority in migrant communities. In other words, migrant intermediation in Morocco has led to a racialized conception of “peerness” which dovetails with the local category of “sub-Saharan”. This term is circulated widely in Morocco in reference to Black African nationals and often implicitly indicates the irregularity of their residence in the country. It is commonly used by both institutional and non-governmental actors in the migration industry to refer to their target audience, while Western and Central African nationals themselves use it either to identify with their “adventurer” peers (Timera 2009) or, on the contrary, to distinguish themselves from irregular migrants (Berriane 2009). The category “sub-Saharan” thus entails an inherent equivalence between a racial frame of reference and the illegitimacy of a particular form of mobility. As homogenizing as it is, it nevertheless remains an operational frame of reference in Morocco as it echoes the broader racial dynamics underlying the hierarchical
order of the migration industry (Magallanes-Gonzalez 2021), the implementation of border and migration control (Gazzotti 2019; Tyszler 2021) and the convergence of Black African migration experiences in the country (Thorsen 2017). To summarize, the involvement of migrant intermediaries in Morocco originates in the enlistment of influential African nationals and has expanded to a racialized conception of “peerness”.

In the case of Senegal, local intermediaries with migration experience have been especially involved in “peer-to-peer” information campaigns since the so-called boat crisis of the mid-2000s, whereby a new sea route emerged from West African Atlantic shores to the Spanish Canary Islands (see Ba and Ndiaye 2008; Tall and Tandian 2010; Hernández-Carretero and Carling 2012). In particular, local youth, parents and spouses that have lost their kin in route and return migrant associations have become part of the EU-led migration industry in the country. Their discourses and practices often align with the objectives of European actors and international organizations in order to capture livelihood resources and raise funds for local development projects (Andersson 2014; Bouilly 2016; Rodriguez 2019). The IOM in Senegal decided that the Dutch funded “Migrants as Messengers” campaign (MaM) should recruit its own network of “MaM volunteers” instead of involving established return migrant associations. This campaign was rolled out in Senegal, Guinea, and Nigeria as a pilot project from December 2017 to March 2019 and was later upscaled to a second phase in 2019-22 involving four additional countries. According to the IOM, the MaM awareness-raising campaign was innovative, especially because:

Migrants as Messengers does not rely on standard top-down information provided by a government, an international organization or a non-governmental organization (NGO). Instead, returned migrants who engage as “Migrants as Messengers Volunteers” share their stories to peers via video recordings and in person. The campaign relies on authentic first-person testimonies that aim to achieve change through emotional identification rather than just relaying information.6

The Senegalese volunteers were selected from the IOM return migrant database, with some having been approached in the airport after having returned through the IOMs assisted voluntary return programs in North Africa. Like in the European case mentioned above, the volunteers were recruited to convey personal stories about their recent experiences in the EU-African borderlands, and provide an account of the current hardships migrants encounter en route. Migrant intermediaries were thus recruited to provide authentic, emotional, and true stories to produce, stage and enact a “spectacularization” of EU border externalization deep within local communities living far away from Europe’s geographical borders (Van Dessel 2021).

1.2. Appropriating “peerness”

In addition to being selected for their migration experience, intermediaries are expected to build trust with their target audience by appropriating both the message they are meant to spread and their position as “peers”. This is especially true for the Senegalese diaspora and returnees. In the case of the diaspora, participants are not expected to go “on the ground” to raise awareness among potential migrants in Senegal, but mainly to record messages that would then be turned into TV, radio, social media spots and billboards in the streets, which means that their “peerness” has to be virtually staged rather than performed face-to-face. According to the EU CSOs involved, the main challenge in this

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regard is that members of the diaspora fully appropriate the messages formulated through the campaign, and share them “on their own behalf”. One of the interviewees explains:

Hopefully the message that we will provide them or formulate together with them to potential people back home will be as “organic” as possible, so less if you like … You know, when they give you a text and you just read it, it’s very cold, you’re unconnected with that, so the recipient understands that. So if it comes by heart, or if it comes with something that you’re also engaged with, it’s part of your baby, it’s part of what you believe is a solution, then it doesn’t really matter whether I give you two sentences or five sentences, it is about the way that you say it, and this “organic” part is something what we definitely are working continuously [on]

This illustrates that the “peerness” which diaspora members supposedly enjoy “naturally” vis-à-vis their fellow nationals is not considered sufficient in itself to gain the trust of their audience and thus ensure the successful reception of EU funded MICs. In addition, diaspora members are expected to share a sedentary message in the form of a personal and emotionally charged testimony. The underlying idea is that, through this specific form of intermediation, “potential migrants” will come to see the campaign as a valuable source of information and share it within their social networks, rather than dismissing it as biased by external influence.

Similarly, the design of the MaM campaign relied on insights from psychology, which suggests that “facts alone cannot change people’s perception and behavior” (IOM 2019, 9; Tjaden 2019). Instead, emotional identification was prioritized in the hope that when listening to true and authentic stories from their peers, potential migrants and their families would undergo “an internal process where their own perception on migration is revisited” (IOM 2019, 10). Thus, approximately twenty-seven volunteers went through a short training in order to produce short testimonial videos on a specially designed mobile phone app. Returnees’ emotional testimonies were then circulated via different communication channels, including Facebook, radio shows, and a documentary-like film to be screened during town hall meetings and caravan tours (Vammen 2021).

Both the IOM staff and the volunteers emphasized that the campaign did not have a security objective of fighting against migrations, but rather served a humanitarian cause. Indeed, it was stressed that the MaM campaign aimed at preventing migrants from risking their lives en route, by choosing the “the legal way” to migrate or seeking a better life in Senegal. This humanitarian reframing ultimately encouraged returnees to get involved in the project. One of the volunteers in Senegal explains his reasons for becoming part of the MaM:

We decided to be part of it because we wanted to tell our story and sensitize people, letting them know what really awaits them if they go – all the dangers. In Thiaroye-sur-Mer [suburb of Dakar] one person told us that he was ready to leave the following week but now he wanted to stay. The campaign is very positive in the way we were sensitizing and sharing our story with people. Many of us think that we will never go again, because we see ourselves as ambassadors or representatives. Nobody can stop migration, but we strongly believe that this campaign can reduce the numbers and mortality rate, and we also believe that people can travel through a legal way

Like him, other volunteers also acknowledged and appropriated their new role, although it was not always easy to talk about their painful experiences. Apart from aiming to make the returnees the main protagonists of the campaign and its message, one of MaM’s
ambitions was to empower returnee volunteers enduring a difficult reintegration process (IOM 2019). Repatriated return migrants are often stigmatized after failed migration attempts because they are returning with empty pockets or debt and are unable to live up to local expectations (Hernández-Carretero 2017; Andersson 2014). However, according to the IOM, bringing returnees together and having them tell their stories – in public and on social media – would not only help them to cope with and potentially challenge the stigma of return, but also operate as a form of psychosocial support. This other side of the campaign was recognized by the volunteers to varying degrees. As one of the volunteers expressed:

IOM really helped us to get back free of charge – we don’t really know how they managed all that, but also thanks to them I don’t think about traveling again. The first month after my return I was ready to leave again. I did not feel welcome. People in my family and friends looked at me and were very disappointed. But when IOM contacted me, it helped me to tell what was inside of me and meet others that had experienced similar things and even things that were much worse. So that really helped me to sensitize people

For some of the migrants, involvement in the campaign provided a platform for sharing otherwise silenced stories of failed migration and, in doing so, seemed to become a meaningful endeavor to overcome hard and violent experiences. This was the case especially because family and kin would sometimes not believe returnees’ accounts or understand the many hardships they had experienced en route. As such, returnees served two “peer” functions in the campaign, both to the wider public of potential migrants and with the other MaM volunteers.

While the appropriation of “peer intermediation” appears strategic for institutional actors, it can nevertheless, as we have just shown, simultaneously be appropriated by migrant intermediaries themselves. This was the case in Morocco, for instance, where the IOM mobilized almost thirty “peer educators” across the national territory, though most were based in Rabat. One of them defined his understanding of “peerness” vis-à-vis his target audience as follows:

A peer educator … When we talk about a “peer”, it may be a person of the same age as [the migrant], the same generation … It’s always sub-Saharan. Always. Because you have to go through someone who belongs to the migrant community to get the others. To convey the message. You have to go through the community, through someone who looks like them and who can facilitate things. In order to reach migrants, you have to go through someone they trust. Because if the migrants don’t trust you, you won’t be listened to. And when you are not listened to, your message is not heard. That’s what’s important. The migrants must have complete confidence in you.

In this context, “peer educators” recognize that their identification as members of the Sub-Saharan community can encourage migrants to engage in a process of return. Another “peer-educator” explains:

Some people don’t want to go directly to IOM, they prefer to go through me. Because they’re scared, you know. They think: “When you get to IOM, you knock, it’s not your sub-Saharan brother who will answer you!” So, it’s frustrating! But if he knows that he can contact a sub-Saharan who works with IOM, it’s already a good step for him. Because he knows that I am like him, I allow him to make his return without having to face this situation of coming alone in front of IOM. He prefers to be with his sub-Saharan brother who will help him to do it. There he is reassured.
Racialized dynamics of the migration field in Morocco can therefore encourage migrants to recognize Sub-Saharan migrants as their peers. Nevertheless, the trust relationship intermediaries enjoy with their target audience is not given, and hence needs to be performed on a daily basis through the mobilization of specific social and relational competencies. One “peer educator” explains:

The community worker must be a person who knows a little about the reality of the city, who is old in the city, who knows the reality of sub-Saharan migrants. And also who has direct access to the migrants, who has contact with them. A community worker must be at least bilingual. That way, he can make home visits. Visits to places where migrants can meet: either at traffic lights for those who beg, or in their homes, ghettos and camps …

He continues:

A community worker must have a good relationship of trust with the community. Not only with one community, but with the whole community. And you always have to respond to the needs of migrants, always be available for the community. And that builds trust with them. Never promise something that [you are] not able to do. Instead, we say: “We’ll see what the office can do”. This is important to avoid disappointment and mistrust. And also [we have to] avoid the risk of threats or discord between community agents and the community. That’s why we avoid problems of conflict. The community worker must always maintain a good relationship with the whole community. Being loyal to them, not getting into certain things [which could deteriorate] the relationship.

The aforementioned interview extract implicitly concedes that peer intermediaries can decide to turn a blind eye to certain illicit activities in order to maintain their privileged access to migrant communities. Thus, “peerness” alone – even when embodied – is not sufficient to gain migrants’ trust. Well aware of the fact that their brokerage career depends on the trust that their target audience grants them, migrant intermediaries must enact specific social and relational skills that they are quite capable of defining by themselves. In this sense, “peer-to-peer” intermediation relies on a practical form of performance in addition to elements inherent to intermediaries’ profiles.

II. Migrant intermediaries between dominance and subalternity

The peculiar “in-between” position that migrant intermediaries occupy can raise tensions regarding their involvement in borderwork. Indeed, their credibility and propensity to play the role of messengers of a sedentarist discourse towards (potential) migrants can be contradicted by both their social status within migrant communities and/or their position within the migration industry.

II. 1. Figures of success and failure in relation to (potential) migrants

Concerning the case of the Senegalese diaspora living in Europe, a major point of tension regarding their involvement in EU borderwork lies in the dominant position they occupy within the social hierarchy of their country of origin. Due to the influence of economic remittances in improving living conditions in Senegal, migrants have become a major figure of success (Sinatti 2009). Consequently, it is inherently difficult for diaspora members who have “made it” in Europe and who continue to live there to be seen as legitimate messengers when they discourage others from attempting the journey themselves. For this reason, the trust and credibility that diaspora members supposedly enjoy in the eyes of prospective migrants is inevitably compromised when they
engage in migration deterrence efforts. A CSO representative in charge of one of the campaigns sums up this fundamental contradiction:

Sometimes [members of the diaspora] they don’t say, they don’t talk about the difficulties, they say: “Yes everything is fine, here everything is nice etc.”, but sometimes there are people who warn young people who are going to leave, they say: “No, I don’t advise you to do that, it’s dangerous, besides I’ve seen a lot of deaths and all that.” (…) And the answer is very often: “So why don’t you come back? Why are you staying there? You arrived and you want this for yourself, you want to be the only one who arrived, don’t you?”.

Similarly, like the diaspora in Europe, return migrants in Senegal are also met with disbelief from local audiences, not because they were seen as successful people wanting to keep others from success but because their “bad luck” and many hardships en route were hard to believe for some:

When I am part of the campaign, I just tell people what we have experienced on the road. But the bad thing is that often people don’t believe it. Even where I live, especially the youth don’t believe my story. You can tell them, but they say no no – they still think that the road is easy. People will tell me this is not true. But I understand I would also not have listened when I was ready to go.

The disbelief in the gloomy trajectory narrated and performed during the town hall meetings and a caravan tour has to be understood within a context wherein migration has already been characterized for decades as bringing prosperity and development to local households. In other words, although the information about migration came from “peers”, the aim to rebrand migration as failure instead of success was often met with disbelief, especially among youth who measure the potentiality of migration up against their everyday struggles and witness the visible positive effects of migration in their local milieu. Nevertheless, the volunteers’ stories didn’t stand alone. Most often, other return migrants or family members of migrants abroad would take the floor on their own initiative during campaign activities to talk about their experiences of the hardships of migration.

Finally, in the case of Morocco, the “peerness” of intermediaries does not systematically reflect an actual proximity with regard to migrants. In fact, the social position and living conditions of intermediaries differ from their target audience in several respects. First of all, they generally have regular residence permits in the country, having benefited from the exceptional regularization campaign of 2014. Secondly, their integration into the migration industry offers them privileged access to material and symbolic resources, whether it be allowances, advantages, or training courses (Bartels 2017; Magallanes-Gonzalez 2021). In a context where access to employment is largely constrained, these resources appear substantial with regard to improving living conditions and finding professional opportunities. Besides, their position as agents of organizations which are recognized as powerful international actors within migrant communities grants the intermediaries social prestige. While this status may not overrule material precarity, it nevertheless makes them a social figure of success in migrants’ eyes.

As genuine entrepreneurs in the field of migration, peer intermediaries thus occupy a dominant position within migrant communities. This relatively privileged social position can contradict their credibility in disseminating a “sedentarist” and anti-migration discourse, as it is precisely through the process of migration that they have themselves accessed, or strengthened, a higher social position within migrant communities. Very
strikingly, it is precisely the intermediaries’ involvement in the migration industry as “peers” vis-à-vis migrants that further differentiates them from their target audience. Thereby, in the case of Morocco, intermediation either reinforces pre-existing social hierarchies – as in the case of “community leaders” who already benefit from influence within migrant communities – or serves as a path for upward mobility. As such, the case of Morocco shows that the credibility of “peer” intermediaries in spreading an anti-migration message can be challenged, not only as a result of social representations linked to their migration experience per se, but also because of the direct effects of intermediation on their position within migrant communities.

II. 2. Limited integration in a racialized migration industry

That being said, although migrant intermediaries may sometimes enjoy dominant positions within migrant communities, they remain confined to a subordinate position within the respective migration industry in which they operate. Firstly, unlike the staff of the EU CSOs involved, members of the Senegalese diaspora are expected to participate on a voluntary basis in EU funded MICs, with only their transport and consumption costs reimbursed as compensation for their time. One of the CSO representatives complains about this “racial differentiation” of status in the following terms:

For me I found it very strange the difference in the way that the budget has been created. So for example, for my per diem, if I were to go to either Dakar or to Italy (…), my per diem would be 140[€] per day or something, that was written in what I could spend. And then there’s no money at all as a retribution for the people who are involved, who aren’t white basically! Or who aren’t working in an organization, a European organization

In the same vein, peer intermediaries in Morocco remain at a subaltern position within the migration industry. They are often not employed contractually but work on a “voluntary” basis (see also Drif 2018), are mobilized for limited periods of time, and only receive compensation for their services in the form of per diem or allowances. In this context, peer intermediaries often interpret their subordinate position in comparison with other employees in the field as a continuation of the racial discrimination underlying Morocco’s management of borders and migrations (Magallanes-Gonzalez 2021). They also voice demands for the formal recognition for their work. One “peer educator” explains:

IOM has 26 peer educators in Morocco. They are trained by IOM, but IOM doesn’t give them [formal] work. But peer educators want to have badges from IOM, badges that say they are [working] on behalf of IOM. These are the demands of peer educators. At least they should be recognised! Because at the moment, peer educators have to detect vulnerable [migrants] and they don’t even have [money] to travel. IOM asks them to make invoices [or to] go to IOM to take the money [they need] for [assisting] migrants. You see? Some peer educators are employed in associations, but not everyone works [formally], not everyone has an employment contract

Within the framing of the IOM MaM campaign in Senegal, the subaltern position of returnees was also reflected by their voluntary involvement, for which they would only receive small daily allowances. Yet for many this was an important income. Furthermore, investing time and energy in the campaign raised expectations. One volunteer, for example expressed that he had hopes that his volunteer work could facilitate access to reintegration assistance. As he mentioned:
IOM is in good collaboration with the government, and they train people so they can work with us and find ways for us - so we are really expecting this. But all they tell us is wait until the end of the project – wait! We are volunteers. It is good to help others not to travel the illegal way, but we also really need help

However, their engagement in the campaign did not put them in a more privileged position compared to other returnees, as the IOM communication team in charge of the campaign was working independently from the organization’s reintegration team. The volunteers were therefore forced to wait like many other returnees in Senegal. This situation fueled a feeling of disappointment with the IOM among some of the returnees. The difficult reintegration process, together with the feeling of wasting time working on the campaign without seeing more economic benefits, also made some of the returnees consider re-migrating.

As returnees we were expecting that sharing our stories with IOM would bring a little help to us, but when you realized that nothing is happening … I am still working with IOM to be honest since we are back, we are working yet nothing works – they are encouraging us to stay, but if they do so they at least have to propose something for us. If they don’t … well … I might try to go again but through a different route. Some of the others have already left …

Alongside the standpoints of disappointment and re-migration, claims can emanate from returnees given their perception of the unequal gains and power relationships underlying their contribution to the IOM’s campaign. As a volunteer expressed:

They benefit a lot from us – I am giving them my voice! 50 years from now they can still use this video to sensitize people and I strongly believe that our sons should get some money from these videos. But anyway, they are benefiting from us … They are earning their salary thanks to us

Volunteering, in other words, became an ambiguous form of labor, especially when compared to the unequal and often racialized salary hierarchy within the organization, which was apparent in this case to the extent that the volunteer felt he lost ownership of his own story. Others expressed that they would stop participating, or reduce their engagement to a minimum as soon as they had found more reliable work. While IOM staff in Senegal aimed to build a strong force of volunteers, the unpaid nature of peer intermediation seemed to threaten its own sustainability.

The “volunteer” nature of peer intermediation hence constitutes a major tension of migrant’s involvement in the migration industry. While volunteering appears as a necessary condition of intermediaries’ credibility – since the legitimacy of the message they are meant to spread relies on its presumed “grass-rootedness” – it simultaneously challenges their involvement in borderwork. Indeed, when expectations remain unmet and demands unheard, migrant intermediaries are quite likely to decline or withdraw from their subordinate form of employment, as in the case of the Senegalese diaspora and returnees respectively. For their part, Sub-Saharan intermediaries in Morocco can attempt to make money out of their “in-between” position or combine it with alternative resource opportunities, including migration facilitation. This ambiguous character of migration intermediation has substantial effects on intermediaries’ practices in relation to (potential) migrants and, ultimately, on their propensity to get involved in borderwork.
III. Contradictions and limits of migrant intermediation

Alongside the conflicting dynamics, migrant intermediaries’ identification with their target audience can generate contradictions and limitations that may challenge their involvement in borderwork. Hence “peerness” does not systematically strengthen migration and border control.

III.1. Contradictory effects of “peerness” on borderwork

The room for manoeuvre intermediaries enjoy on the ground can facilitate their independent departure from IOM’s instructions. In Morocco, for example, in a few rare cases, peer intermediaries can show some reluctance to actively contribute to the AVR’s implementation. Strikingly, it is precisely when they share a very similar migration experience with their target audience that they substantially question their involvement in borderwork. Thus, a community-based worker explains:

I am a Cameroonian, I came out as a migrant like them. [If I went] back, I would have become a bandit in Cameroon. Now I have already spent four years in Morocco. I came as a migrant. One and a half years as a migrant, and two and a half years working as a mediator. And in four years I improved my condition! In two and a half years, I got my driving licence, I got a passport, I trained as a specialised educator. I was even in France for work immersion and I came back [in Morocco]. But in Cameroon I didn’t have that! That means I’ll be happy not to be the only one to see that. If there are 100, 200, 300 of us like me! That will help! But if people return in the same condition they came in, they are even dangerous for their country!

This interview demonstrates that despite the upward mobility resulting from a brokerage career, a shared experience of border violence and the ensuing identification vis-à-vis migrants can come to contradict migrant intermediaries’ involvement in borderwork. The same interlocutor continues more specifically on his role in voluntary returns:

Every day here [in the reception centre he works in], I welcome approximately fifty people [migrants]. Some of them just come for my advice. They don’t ask me anything! Just my opinion about their situation. And for me, voluntary return, it is just for emergencies. It’s for rescue. That’s my own definition. So, when migrants come, I don’t talk too much about returns. I let IOM do its work. I’m not IOM. What should be more important, help for voluntary return or for integration in Morocco? If return becomes more popular than integration, it’s not normal anymore! As a mediator, I don’t understand. But I’m alone! And I too have my family. I have to protect my job.

Hence, while an actual “peerness” grounded on a shared migration experience appears to be an effective vehicle of trust-building with migrants, it nevertheless can generate highly contrasting effects on the ground.

Likewise, members of the Senegalese diaspora also show some reluctance in participating in EU borderwork as a result of their empathic understanding of their “peers” reasons to migrate. The CSO representatives in charge of the two projects thus reported encountering great difficulty in convincing them to “lend their voice” to an EU funded campaign aimed at deterring irregular migration. One of them describes this tension in the following terms:

It wasn’t very easy to bring them [diaspora communities] on the consortium initially, because when they see EU Commission, funding something that will actually take people out from coming to Europe, the first thing that they say to us [is]: “Look, they’re people that, ok, they do not have the political violence or the ‘I’m running for my life’, but
they’re actually doing that because they may be as poor and they need to feed the family, so they’re not, I mean… For you it may seem very risky what they’re doing, but for them it’s part of, you know, their reality (...). So, I’m not very comfortable of actually being part of something that is, in a way, for Europe, ‘don’t come to Europe!’”

This extract shows that diaspora members’ sense of a “shared experience” with the struggles faced by prospective migrants in Senegal can contradict their involvement in EU borderwork. Furthermore, in contrast with the two other cases, the material and symbolic resources offered to diaspora members for their intermediation are extremely scarce. Consequently, the CSO coordinator of one of the projects ultimately felt that he had no choice but to turn to more available migrant profiles to carry out the campaign, namely returnees. He explains:

We also changed the modalities a little bit… In Senegal, we conducted interviews with returned migrants to reinforce the testimonial aspect of the project because, you know, in Europe we didn’t have too many participants, but in Senegal there were many people who wanted to present and share their experience!

Both the cases of the Senegalese diaspora and transit migrants in Morocco illustrate the ambivalent effects of “peerness” on migration and border control. Since migrant intermediaries are likely to identify with their target audience, they can consequently refuse to participate in information provision activities. Faced with these contradictory effects of “peerness”, the EU’s implementing partners can thus fall back on alternative migrant profiles that are presumed more available and/or interested in the potential resources of a brokerage career. This is especially visible in the case of returnees, whose intermediation nevertheless faces structural limits.

III. 2. Inherent limits of information provision towards (potential) migrants

While Senegalese returnees feel that their involvement could make a difference in shaping people’s migration decisions, they still experience people’s disbelief or even – like the diaspora in Europe – their refusal to receive a “sedentarist” message without being provided concrete alternatives to migration. Nonetheless, the volunteers generally understand and identify with people’s disappointment with the IOM’s campaign. One of them explains:

We also meet some people who are very pessimistic. They ask us: “why do you want us to stay here if the government is not doing something very concrete to make us occupied?”. They wanted IOM to propose something very concrete for them to stay. They always insist they will go, because staying here and doing nothing is like dying. But we understand them. Because when they are sceptical and pessimistic, they always say they want to go because of their situation here in this country, where there are many difficulties. But we keep on insisting on the message: “we understand you, we know why you want to go, but just try the legal way, if it is not possible just, I don’t know, just try another, try first the legal way”

While relatives, and especially the older generations, would often express gratitude towards MaM volunteers, the local youth were often much more critical towards the message urging them to stay or to travel the legal way. From their point of view, legal migration was not a real alternative due to strict policy measures and high costs, and a
“new” more positive future at home was not within sight. Drawing on local experiences, migration continued to be one of the ways to improve local living conditions and create a better future. The returnees were aware of this limitation of the message and also often felt ambivalent about it. Furthermore, when people in poor communities asked for alternatives to migration or “what the IOM or the government could do for them instead”, it was also difficult for some IOM staff to spread an anti-migration message. One local IOM staff expressed the following:

… for me it was heart-breaking to come and see all the expectations and tell people it is not good to go. If a person sees that his family needs money and he doesn’t have the money for the school for his siblings or when his mother needs to go to hospital, for him going might be the best solution. For me it feels dishonest – I go there and tell them not to go but I have my salary – so who am I to tell them not to go … . The communities don’t expect money here and now, but something concrete like training or development projects because they have land, so they just need a little push, but we don’t have that

This example illustrates a major inherent limit of information provision activities as a tool of migration and border control. Indeed, MICs and AVR programmes generally confine themselves to spreading an anti-migration message, without providing any concrete alternative to irregular migration. Yet, even when they do combine with development or reintegration projects, they do not systematically impede migration; in fact, they have quite the opposite effect. Academic literature has notoriously demonstrated that access to additional resources encourages, rather than hinders, migration aspirations and capabilities (Clemens and Postel 2018; De Haas 2021).

**Conclusion**

This paper examines how various migration experiences are captured and defined through the framing of “peerness” in recent EU driven information provision initiatives to control mobilities in North and West Africa. Using the analytical lens of migrant intermediation, it interrogates to what extent “can migrants do the borderwork”. To answer this question, the paper deconstructs the often taken for granted notion of “peerness”, and demonstrates that it is defined institutionally, but also enacted and appropriated by migrant intermediaries on the ground. Through these two levels of analysis, the paper identifies three main expressions of “peerness” in relation to borderwork: the mobilisation of an emotional anti-migration discourse, racial dynamics of identification, and social competences of trust-building. Doing so, it highlights that beyond the question of their “peerness”, migrant intermediaries experience ambiguous positions, oscillating between dominance and subalternity with regard to institutional actors and (potential) migrants. In this context, their engagement in borderwork raises tensions and contradictions that can be considered as nodal points where migrant intermediaries negotiate their role and practices. In fact, while migrants seem likely to get involved in the migration industry and “do the borderwork”, their intervention may distort, and sometimes even contradict control objectives.

Therefore, “peer-to-peer” intermediation proves to be more ambivalent than presented by institutional actors. Admittedly, migrant intermediaries find several reasons to “voluntarily” get involved in information provision initiatives, such as the captation of material and symbolic resources in a transit or destination country, or the avoidance
of social stigma when returning home. Nevertheless, they may not be considered as legitimate messengers by their target audience – whether because they embody iconic figures of “success” or “failure” vis-à-vis the latter – and be reluctant to intermediate migration control when they share experiences of border violence with their peers. These contradictions of migrant intermediation are further reinforced by the structural limits of migration deterrence, as it is implemented in social contexts where migration remains attractive and positively valued, and alternatives to the latter are hardly significant.

Ultimately this paper mainly apprehends migrant intermediaries as an emergent category of actors in border control. The three case studies demonstrate to what extent they reconfigure the landscape and interactions underlying the daily implementation of contemporary borderwork. Further research could take a closer look at the complex interactions and social transformations involved by peer intermediation. Indeed, intermediaries take on multiple and shifting roles and affiliations and navigate socio-political fields that go far beyond those of migration industries. In this sense, their engagement potentially transforms relations of power and social hierarchies within migrant communities and the local communities of the countries in which they operate.

Notes

1. The IOM has been criticised for depoliticizing the migration policies of Western nations, creating a consensus which serves to veil the political divergences and power asymmetries between states. Although claiming to “manage migration for the benefit of all”, the IOM largely serves the political priorities and interests of developed Western states and their restrictive migration agendas and are involved in both hard and soft measures to deter migration (see for example Geiger and Pécoud 2020; Brachet 2016).

2. The paper draws on qualitative research conducted individually by each of the authors. Julia Van Dessel’s case on the Senegalese “diaspora” draws on semi-structured interviews conducted with the representatives of EU civil society organisations (CSOs) between August 2020 and September 2021, in the framework of her ongoing PhD thesis. These CSOs were involving members of the Senegalese diaspora in two EU funded campaigns. Anissa Maâ’s case on “transit migrants” builds on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2016 and 2018 in Morocco, in the framework of her PhD thesis on the implementation of voluntary return programmes, which she defended in 2020. Ida Marie Savio Vammen’s case on “returnees” in Senegal builds on four months of ethnographic fieldwork between 2018 and 2020, where she followed two of the IOM’s ongoing campaigns in the framework of her postdoctoral research.

3. Idem.

4. Funded by the European Commission, Switzerland and Italy, the project aimed at promoting “Assisted Voluntary Returns and Reintegration” programmes (AVRR programmes) both in Libya and Morocco, through the production and distribution of promotional leaflets to migrants, and the involvement of local actors who enjoyed a trust relationship with the latter. See: IOM 2019. “Regional Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) Programme for Stranded Migrants in Libya and Morocco. External Evaluation”.


6. https://www.migrantsasmessengers.org/about

Disclosure statement

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