

Key messages and brief summary points arising from the expert workshop on

Building partnerships to promote inclusion and counter anti-migrant narratives

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Background

On 11 May 2017, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) organised a one-day expert and multi-stakeholders workshop on the theme “**Building partnerships to promote inclusion and counter anti-migrant narratives**”, to explore ways to challenge and change anti-migrant and xenophobic narratives.¹

More than 50 experts engaged in this discussion, including faith leaders, private sector and business actors, journalists, filmmakers and other creative artists, community organisers, local authorities and networks of cities, academics, UN agencies and regional and non-governmental organizations.

The UN Human Rights Office is currently leading an effort calling on all of us to “Stand up for someone’s rights today”. The campaign asks each of us to draw the line in the face of rising xenophobia and hatred, and to start with taking practical steps close to home, to reaffirm our common humanity. Our discussion at this workshop also took place under the umbrella of the UN Secretary General’s TOGETHER campaign. This campaign was launched by the Secretary General in 2016 as a global initiative that aims to change negative perceptions and attitudes towards refugees and migrants. All 193 Member States of the United Nations have unanimously welcomed the TOGETHER initiative and have committed to implementing it.

The present document contains key messages and brief summary points that emerged from this wide-ranging discussion. OHCHR would like to thank all participants for their generous, expert and enthusiastic participation. The meeting was conducted under the Chatham House rule, and accordingly no attributions will be made in this summary document.

Key messages (our “Big Ideas”)

1. Focus on shared realities and a common humanity

- ‘Celebrate diversity’ is often less successful a message than #moreincommon.
- Emphasize values and ideas.
- Stories should resonate with their particular audience.
- The most effective narratives are authentic and positive.

¹ This workshop follows on from a preliminary meeting held by OHCHR in 2016. The informal summary of that meeting is available here:

<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Migration/Pages/Shapingthepublicnarrativeonmigration.aspx>

- Avoid creation of stereotypes (e.g. while success stories are important, not all refugees are Olympian swimmers nor all migrants Silicon Valley entrepreneurs!).

2. There is no silver bullet in communicating on this issue

- What does not work; Lecturing, assuming moral superiority or telling people that they are wrong. Talking about abstract concepts, over-use of numbers/statistics, using jargon. Using long videos that are too text heavy, too technical or are not in local languages. Just talking about migrants as migrants – reducing them to their ‘migrant-ness’. Message of ‘economic benefits’ is manufactured and doesn’t work, ‘migrants as contributors’ risks commodifying.
- Clearly identify the role of story-telling in changing narratives.
- A discourse of crisis creates a sense of panic/loss of control whereas a discourse of normality reassures.
- A distinct communication strategy is needed to reach policy makers than ones used for a wider public; levels are important.

3. Amplify the voices of migrants and their communities

- Words and images matter.
- Use humour.
- Be persistent; repetition of positive messages is key to reframing a negative narrative.
- Use personalised and targeted narratives.
- Open up spaces for conversations.
- Be aware of which voices are being amplified; only giving prominence to certain voices will create unhelpful stereotypes.
- Multiply narratives at different levels.
- “Nothing about us without us” – migrant participation in the design and implementation of initiatives is key.

4. Engage a wide range of stakeholders and actively recruit new partners

- Engage communities, including local trusted figures: e.g. local media, local faith leaders, local heroes.
- The private sector can play an important role in this effort.
- Mobilise faith communities.
- Youth are an important partner as well as target group for messaging.
- Approach the ‘trusted voices’ in societies.
- Successful interventions can be both bottom up, as well as top down, but nothing can replace the local level. Rather than making messages for the local level, strengthen the capacity of local actors to make the message.
- Don’t make it a migrant issue, make it a community issue. Move the conversation from “the other” to “we” and build a counter narrative of the “we”.
- Bring people together. Food, music, art, sport are good ways to bring people together and create common ground.

5. Data, data, data

- There is an urgent need for more and better research and knowledge on migration.
- We need more discussion on how to measure the impact of such campaigns and evaluate their success.
- What are realistic targets? Recognise that a target aimed at energizing the base is legitimate, but is a different target from one aimed at changing a public narrative.

6. The UN is a complicated messenger, but one that does play an important role

- UN not always the right messenger, so its interventions need to be carefully chosen.
- Branded communications can be viewed with suspicion.
- The UN can be a useful convener and coalition builder, providing a platform to facilitate stories being told and heard.
- The moral authority of the UN – as the guardian of universal standards – is important.

Who is in the tent?

There is a need to retain clarity of legal definitions, and to avoid approaches that might jeopardise the protection to which specific groups are entitled, including refugees, trafficked person, persons with disabilities, citizens of minority background and others.

But public messaging on this issue should also be careful not to perpetuate distinctions between people who would technically fall into different legal categories but may experience negative public perceptions similarly. It is dangerous to create the impression – even inadvertently - that some people are ‘undeserving’ of rights. Undocumented migrants are often the most invisible people in our societies, they often have no one to speak out for them, and we must not shy away from telling their stories.

Our aim must be to proliferate respect for human rights across the board. Noting the lack of a universal legal definition of the term “migrant”, there are inherent terminological difficulties in ensuring a strict separation between the term ‘refugee’ (which is strictly defined in international law) and ‘migrant’ (which as a more colloquial term does not itself contain a definition of why the person is moving or the treatment s/he should receive during her or his migration). Terminology employed in this effort should be based on the principles of non-discrimination and equality, as well as the principle of ‘do no harm’.

It is important to note that a human rights-based approach to migration seeks to empower migrants and the communities into which they arrive. It seeks to foster empathy. And in this way it differs from an approach focused only on charity or sympathy.

Some remaining questions

We recognised also that more thought will be needed on how to square the following circles:

- Simplistic and accessible messages vs. complex issues
- Attitudes vs. actual behaviour
- Sensationalism vs empathy and mobilisation
- Speaking to concerns vs. ‘migration is not a problem’
- Highlighting individual stories vs. big society-wide conversations

One way forward

OHCHR’s strategy going forward will be to

- ➔ Focus on those migrants who are most at risk of human rights violations and of “being left behind”, such as undocumented and irregular migrants.
- ➔ Provide a space for telling stories and amplifying conversations involving migrants and their communities.
- ➔ Build strategic partnerships with varied stakeholders (NGOs, private sector, cities, artists and others)
- ➔ Continue to exercise moral authority in the field of migration under the mandate given to the High Commissioner to promote and protect the human rights of all