SEVEN KEY ELEMENTS

UNITED NATIONS
HUMAN RIGHTS
OFFICE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER

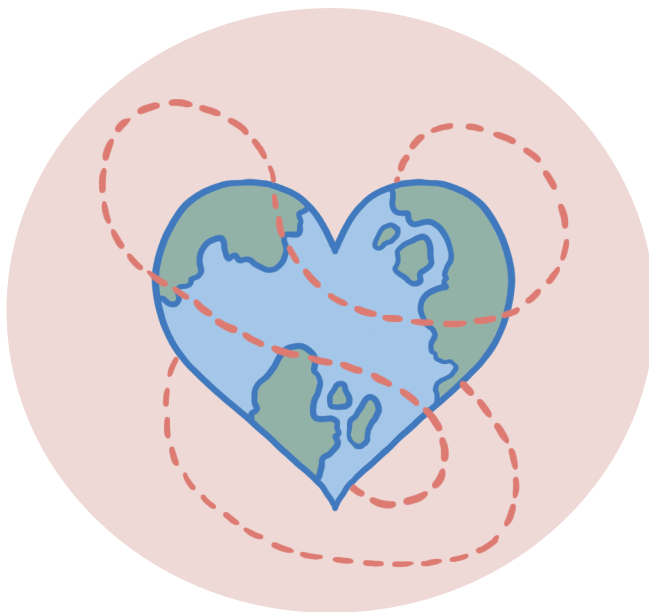## ON BUILDING HUMAN RIGHTS-BASED NARRATIVES ON MIGRANTS AND MIGRATION

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ON BUILDING HUMAN RIGHTS-BASED NARRATIVES ON MIGRANTS AND MIGRATION

"Extremist political and societal figures are bringing hate-fuelled ideas and language on migrants and migration into the mainstream, thus normalizing them, coarsening the public discourse and weakening the social fabric."

Antonio Guterres
United Nations Secretary General
18 June 2019

INTRODUCTION

Around the world, today some 272 million people are international migrants. People who have left their country in search of a life of dignity, opportunity and safety. Every person who migrates has their own reasons for leaving behind homes and families, and every one of these people has their own unique experiences along the journey, their own personal story of exile and belonging. But these stories often remain hidden, much like the many migrants themselves who are compelled to endure a life in the shadows of our societies, prevented from enjoying the rights and freedoms so many take for granted.

Why do narratives on migration matter?

Narratives are powerful, socialized stories created by communities, public actors such as the media, popular culture and political figures, as well as people themselves to explain and understand the world around them. Narratives direct how people make sense of the world and respond to issues that they face in their daily lives. Narratives help us justify our values and bolster our beliefs. In the context of migration, there has been growing apprehension about the way in which some public narratives on migrants and migration are framed, when such frames evoke discrimination, exclusion and even incitement, and negatively impact the human rights of migrants as well as our common values.

Evidence from around the world tells us that migration is an age-old human phenomenon, that on balance it creates net economic benefits and is generally positive for societies, and that migrants are generally not security threats or a drain on society. Yet, pervasive and fear-driven anti-migration narratives have flourished in all regions. Such narratives offer up migrants as the scapegoats for deep-rooted societal problems related to the economy or security, and are often actively promoted by those who instrumentalize these narratives for political, financial or other gain.

Xenophobic and anti-migrant discourse in the political sphere, the media and public debate has become commonplace and is often used for political gains, or as a means of boosting sales and advertising revenue. Even though such sentiments very rarely represent the mainstream view of migration, loud voices on the margins of our societies can shout down moderate opinions and influence policymakers towards ever more restrictive migration measures. Migrants are vilified and used as scapegoats for deep-rooted fears about terrorism, crime, unemployment, welfare systems, and the uncertainties of globalization.

When migrants are criminalized and even dehumanized by policies and rhetoric, the message that is given is that they have no rights, no place in society. The effects of such divisive narratives are wide-reaching within our societies, by reducing our trust in and connections with each other, and by enabling a range of harmful policy measures in the name of controlling migration, such as widespread and unregulated surveillance practices, harassment of NGOs as well as the shrinking of space for defenders of migrants' human rights.

How do narratives impact the human rights of migrants?

Discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, hate speech and hate crime have a severe impact on the human rights of migrants. Periods in which societies believe that they are in a crisis, whether due to security concerns, financial stress or other real or perceived crisis factors, are often marked by an increase in xenophobia, anti-migrant sentiment and discriminatory practices affecting the human rights of migrants. Even when well-meaning, narratives of migration which promote the idea of crisis (for example through emphasizing the magnitude of migrant arrivals) can contribute to the normalization within the mainstream of language, attitudes and sometimes eventually behaviour that were previously confined to the extremes of society.

This process of dehumanization can make it seem acceptable for extremist groups to carry out campaigns of violence, intimidation and incitement to discrimination against migrants. As a result, migrants may face harassment by simply being in public spaces, they may avoid seeking help when they've been attacked, and they are frequently unable to seek justice. Migrants can be marginalized and excluded, often being compelled to live, by law or circumstance, physically distant from the main community, in camps, designated accommodation, or in segregated suburbs. They can also be excluded from accessing fundamental services or from civic engagement and participation in residents' associations, religious organizations, schools, community forums or other spaces that would enable them to integrate into the community.

UN Human Rights is mandated to promote and protect the enjoyment and full realization, by all people, of all rights. The Office has long expressed concern about the impact of discriminatory and damaging public and political narratives on the human rights of migrants and on migration policy and practice. It has further asserted that under international human rights law, all migrants, regardless of their status and reasons for migration, are entitled to equal and effective respect, protection and fulfillment of their human rights.

Along with human rights activists in all regions, UN Human Rights is mobilizing to counter this rising tide of hate and reframe the narrative around migration, in order to emphasize the human rights values that shape the foundations of our societies. The Office seeks to support communities who are uniting to welcome and show solidarity with migrants, and to promote the actions of governments, local authorities, civil society actors, international human rights mechanisms and the UN System who are working in partnership to promote human rights for all migrants, without discrimination.

In 2019, the UN Secretary General launched a United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action against Hate Speech to counter hate speech, including in the context of migration. The Global Compact for Safe, Regular and Orderly Migration, which was adopted by the UN General Assembly in December 2018, commits States to 'promote an open and evidence-based public discourse on migration and migrants in partnership with all parts of society, that generates a more realistic, humane and constructive perception in this regard' (Objective 17).

In seeking to support States and all stakeholders, including migrants themselves, to implement these commitments, UN Human Rights has developed the following key elements to building human rights-based migration narratives. This effort starts from the premise that there is an urgent need to reframe narratives and public messaging on migration and migrants in order to uphold and promote the human rights of all migrants, and to enable progressive narratives – rather than populism and discourses of exclusion and hate - to establish the boundaries within which migration policy is made.

UN Human Rights has thus distilled many years of consultation and collaboration with a range of stakeholders into the seven key elements that are described in this short publication. Ownership of the ideas behind and the content of these messages belongs as much to our partners as to the Office itself, and we acknowledge their

contributions and engagement with gratitude. These seven key elements, along with the additional resources indicated at the end of the brochure, are proposed as a toolkit of ideas and actions to reframe narratives on migration.

This toolkit is intended for broad use; including by organizations and institutions that work to promote the human rights of migrants, by migrants' human rights defenders, advocacy and service organizations working with migrants, public interest lawyers, and migrants themselves.

Create a vision of the world you want to see

Use messaging to paint a picture of a society which is centered in equality and dignity. Show what a world in which migrants are included and celebrated looks like. Recognize that many narratives have created a picture of a world that is hostile and fearful of migrants, so aim to achieve the opposite. Rather than focusing on rebutting the picture painted by negative narratives, use positive messages that premise solidarity and hope over hatred and antagonism. Show how, in this vision, migrants and the communities that welcome them are stronger together.

Through providing opportunities to take direct action, enable people to contribute to this vision and to see themselves as part of the solution. So for example, challenge the business model that makes anti-migrant hate profitable to online and traditional media by amplifying the voices of concerned consumers and engaging ethical advertisers. Through magnifying success and promising practices, promote and celebrate the social change that you want to see.

Remember that to be effective, a vision-led narrative must be pragmatic as well as aspirational, making the case for the positive change we want to achieve. It must be seen as authentic. Acknowledge challenges and concerns related to the complexity of the issue of migration, but do not reinforce harmful frames by accepting the premise of anti-migration narratives or of frames that perpetuate misperceptions and stereotypes of migrants. Change the frames and narrative entirely. For example, rather than rebutting the (security-framed) argument that migrants are threats, messages could focus on (human-framed) stories of personal interaction, migrants both enriching and being enriched by the communities in which they live.

Bring to life a vision of society which is respectful of the rights and dignity of everyone who lives in it regardless of how and why they came to be there.

KEY ELEMENT 2

Promote values-based narratives

Building a narrative from a human rights-based starting point will lead to messaging that emphasizes the powerful bonds created by our common humanity. Values that underpin the human rights framework – those of humanity, dignity, justice and equality - are deeply embedded in all societies. 💡 *For example, show that human rights standards speak to the importance of protecting families and enabling the development of our children, the ability to live and work in safe and nurturing conditions, equipping us all with an equal chance to live meaningful lives.*

Human rights law and standards, contained in the Universal Declaration for Human Rights (1948) for example, represent at their most fundamental level a broad consensus to uphold the inherent dignity and worth of each human person, without distinction as to migration status or nationality, and to protect those who are most marginalized and vulnerable to harm. A human rights-based approach to migration narratives will therefore focus on empathy and compassion, rather than on pity or charity. It is consciously linked to an international framework of legally guaranteed rights and entitlements.

Ensure that your messaging is grounded in human rights standards, for example through ensuring that all messaging upholds fundamental principles of non-discrimination and accountability. It is equally important to be aware of the importance of communicating human rights values through approaches that are meaningful and resonate with those you seek to influence. Emphasize values that are both 'common sense' and which also form the building blocks of human rights, such as fairness, kindness, and mutual respect.

A human rights-based approach to migration narratives empowers migrants and their communities and enables them to participate together in the creation and dissemination of the narrative. 💡 *"Nothing about us without us" – effective and representative migrant participation should be built into the design, implementation and evaluation of communication strategies on migration.*

Such an approach thus underscores the fundamental message that through our humanity and our shared values, principles and ideals we have more in common than that which divides us.

Use human rights as a starting point to move the migration conversation from "the other" to "we" and thereby construct a counter-narrative of "us".

KEY ELEMENT 3

Use the power of storytelling
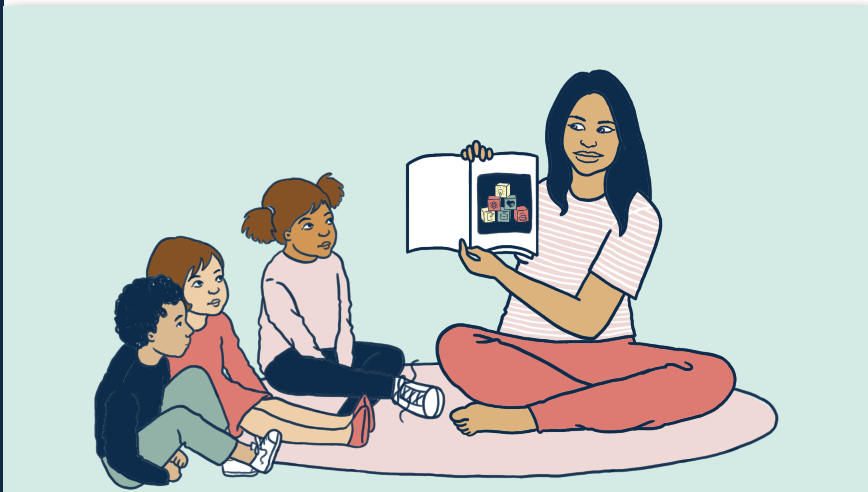
Tell stories. Stories connect people, they bring abstract ideas and emotions to life, and they allow those who are affected to speak about their experiences and ideas in their own words. It is important not to reduce migrants to just their 'migrant-ness'; allow space in the narrative for migrants to tell their *whole* story beyond how and why they came to be a person on the move. Similarly, don't just tell the stories of migrants; tell the stories of their families, neighbours and friends, their employers and their teachers, their faith communities. An authentic narrative must be multi-dimensional and have broad appeal.

Amplify conversations involving migrants and communities to create stories of togetherness and dialogue. Storytelling can be especially powerful when these are perceived as 'stories of us', i.e. shared stories between migrants and communities. 💡 Humour such as stand-up comedy has often been used, including by comedians who are themselves migrants, to address complex issues in migrant storytelling and the irreverence of comedy can be a good way to break down barriers between people.

"Show and tell" stories. Compelling narratives can be further amplified by using striking visuals and persuasive audio. Using animation or other creative media can also bring the stories of undocumented or otherwise vulnerable migrants into spaces they may physically be unable or unwilling to enter, and protect those who may otherwise face harmful consequences for telling their story.

But be careful not to use stereotypes; migrants are not just passive victims in need of charity, nor should they be celebrated or given a voice only if they display super-human qualities. Tell stories of migrants and migration that are about everyday life. 💡 Family, work, love, birth and death are all universal themes that are easy to relate to, and are as much a part of a migrant's story as they are part of everyone's story.

Telling (and showing) stories can be a compelling way to encourage people to visualize and empathize with migrant experiences.

Think local
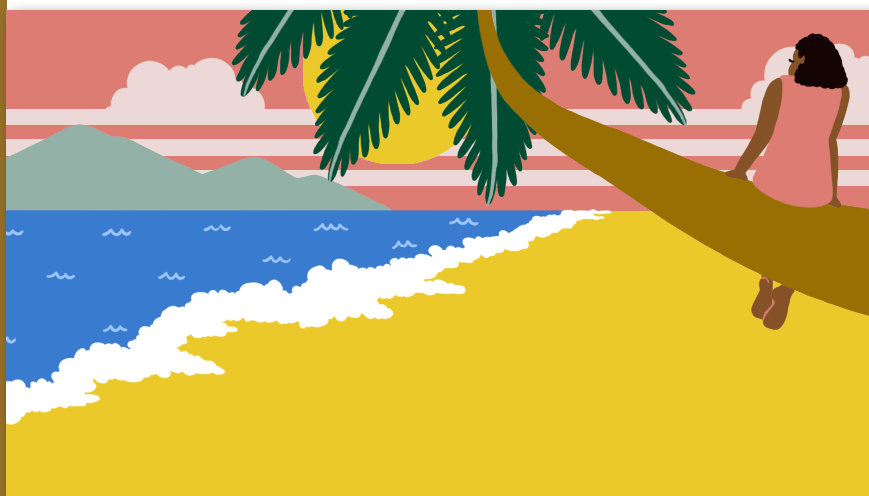
Narrative change will often be likely to succeed at local levels, where people feel most connected to their communities and most invested in creating alternative visions of the society in which they want to live. Develop messages that emphasize the shared realities faced by migrants and the communities where they live and work. Empower communities to feel that they are part of the solution and offer them opportunities to take action. Global, regional or national campaigns can be successful at promoting larger values-based ideas of solidarity and amplifying broad messages, but such meta-narratives should not be disconnected from local and personal realities.

Seek, where feasible, to understand the narrative dynamics that are more or less likely to have the desired impact at various levels through participatory research and message testing exercises to gauge responses. Ensure that public communications are accessible and relatable; avoid using jargon, technocratic references and technical language that is only meaningful and accessible to certain audiences.

Frames that reflect personal encounters, which allow people to experience connections, community and friendship or bondedness with migrants are more likely to contribute to shifting attitudes towards migrants and migration. Campaigns that create opportunities to bring people together may be able to achieve progress towards attitudinal change at the individual or even community level. 💡 Food, music, art, and sports are all unifying themes around which to bring people together in local communities and create common ground and openings for conversation.

Remember however that some people who are resistant to migration can disconnect their openness to one or more individual migrants from their wider resistance to migration as an abstract concept related to politics or national security. Frame narratives of local connection between migrants and citizens with reference to the wider policy structures under which migration is governed at local and national levels, in order to provide context and meaning. 💡 For example, show stories of migrant and citizen children who are growing up together, but ensure that there is reference in the story to laws which restrict the access of undocumented migrants to basic services which denies migrant children their right to education.

Find innovative ways to showcase specific local and personal encounters that promote solidarity with migrants, show their bondedness in communities, and underline the power of shared values in connecting people.

Find common ground

Start from where people are, reflecting in the migration narrative an understanding of the way the world looks to those you would like to engage. Recognize that narratives are as relevant to conducting technical advocacy with policymakers as they are to broader communication strategies aimed at the general public. Remember that even public communications can be segmented to target different parts of society. For instance, communicating publicly about strategic human rights litigation can encourage a sense of empowerment amongst supporters of migrants' rights by highlighting instances where litigation has successfully challenged policies that are generally unpopular with supporters, such as discriminatory entry bans or 'hostile environments' that prevent undocumented migrants from seeking necessary healthcare.

Narratives to energize the base of those who strongly support migrants' human rights will tend to reinforce and validate their viewpoint, providing ways in which they can take direct action and become "persuaders". For those in the so-called "moveable" or "conflicted" middle who neither strongly oppose nor strongly support migrants' rights, narratives could try to move the target audience towards more empathetic positions, particularly on specific issues that may resonate in local contexts such as ending mandatory immigration detention or enabling migrants to access justice if they are victims of crimes.

As relevant as the narratives and messages delivered are the narrators and messengers who deliver them. Appreciate that people will be more or less receptive to messages depending on who is delivering that message. Bring on board a range of messengers who can speak persuasively to different audiences and to different aspects of the often complex and multidimensional migration picture. For example, develop strategies that bring messengers into the spaces where those you want to engage may be more likely to listen, such as through popular culture (TV shows, music festivals etc) and community events.

Be aware that some messengers may be unsuited to deliver certain messages or to engage with particular audiences as they are likely to be seen as part of the problem. For instance, the politician who could speak persuasively to national policy-makers about border governance issues might not be seen as an authentic champion of inclusive communities at the local level. Empower trusted local actors to tell the story of migration and migrants in their community, city or municipality.

Be persistent; repeating narratives, including through different media and at various levels, increases the likelihood that they will be seen and heard by the target audience and will be able to influence mainstream debates on migration.

"Enabling narratives" provide opportunities for people to feel that their actions, such as to welcome migrants or to support structural change in migration policies, will make a difference.

Build a big tent
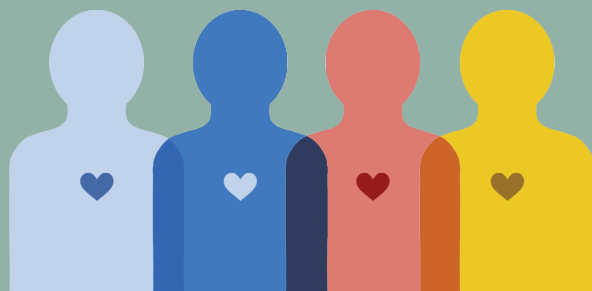
Hate and harmful narratives against migrants affect not only migrants themselves but also have corrosive effects on the wider society. In many cases, such narratives indicate underlying societal concerns and anxieties that are unrelated to migration itself. Given that this is a society-wide issue, make sure to engage a broad range of actors and sectors through ensuring a whole-of-society approach to bringing about narrative change.

Medical professionals, educators, trade unions, local police associations, social workers and others are well-placed to demonstrate how rights-based migration policies can have positive impacts in their own field. 💡 For instance, doctors and medical associations can speak to how firewalls which restrict service providers from providing information to immigration enforcement are able to guarantee the access of undocumented migrants to essential health services and thereby also play a critical role in safeguarding public health.

Look to build partnerships with "non-traditional" actors. The role of faith-based organizations and religious leaders as influencers and interlocutors is key, and could catalyze the involvement of sectors of society who may previously not have been engaged on migration issues. The private sector, including the advertising industry, big tech companies, or global brands, can also be an important ally and in many regions occupies a significant space in public communications. The Global Compact for Migration has affirmed that advertising is a business ethics issue, and that the private sector has a vital role to play in tackling the economics of hate.

As a multi-sectoral phenomenon, migration has natural intersections with other critical social issues, such as anti-racism, public health policy, women's rights, environmental awareness, biodiversity and conservation efforts, youth mobilization and child rights, and advocacy for the equal rights of other often marginalized groups such as LGBTI people and persons with disabilities. Cement partnerships which link together seemingly diverse sectors in broader coalitions around issues of social justice. 💡 Narrative frames could describe how these other sectors have themselves made progress on seemingly intractable social issues, such as the campaign for marriage equality or the battle against climate change, as a way to demonstrate what success looks like on re-framing narratives on migration and migrants and to energize supporters.

Galvanize the support of diverse parts of society using frames or values that are relatable and adaptable across sectors while maintaining relevance to migration.

Do no harm

Some well-meaning narratives are simply ineffective, or may even do more harm than good. These should generally be avoided – or at least carefully used - in the design and implementation of narrative strategies. 'Contribution narratives' which underscore the economic (and less often the social and cultural) benefits that migration brings to societies have often been found less likely to resonate with audiences, and can serve instead to commodify or instrumentalize migrants in public communication, maintaining a divisive "us/them" distinction.

Framing public narratives from the starting point of data and numbers can similarly alienate people who may be unlikely to trust such statistics. This is particularly the case in the migration arena where data are often incomplete, contested or only available in some geographical regions. However, bringing specific evidence, including through the use of data which explains how migration creates shared prosperity, may be useful in devising technical narratives for policy advocacy.

Other narratives which may be ineffective include "myth-busting" which often serves merely to reiterate and accentuate the myth, and can be perceived as lecturing or assuming moral superiority on the part of the narrator. Similarly, using global or national numbers on migrant arrivals to frame the need for urgency in taking policy action can create instead a sense of "crisis", leading people to take more comfort in narratives of control rather than welcoming.

💡 Avoid the use of demeaning, dehumanizing or stereotyping language to describe migrants, such as using water imagery ('flows', 'waves', 'tides', 'influx') or juxtaposing entire groups as either noble heroes or violent criminals. In line with international best practice never describe migrants in irregular situations as "illegal".

Do not perpetuate distinctions between people who would technically fall into different legal categories ("refugee", "trafficked person", "undocumented migrant") but who may experience in similar ways the impact of harmful narratives. It can be harmful to create the impression or prompt moral judgements – even inadvertently - that some people are more 'deserving' of rights than others or that some are entirely undeserving. 💡 For instance, of particular concern is that undocumented migrants can be the most invisible people in society, they often have no one to speak out for them. Narratives should not shy away from telling their stories. On the other hand, technical narratives addressed to policymakers must uphold specific legal entitlements and protections, while continuing to remind their audience of the common humanity of all people on the move.

Be aware of unconscious bias in messaging, and avoid discrimination.

CONCLUSION

As this toolkit shows, there are a range of ways and many different levels at which to take action on reframing narratives on migration. We can all be part of the change that we wish to see in our societies and in the world around us. The key elements also remind us that when it comes to re-framing narratives, there is no "silver bullet" that will work in all situations for everyone. Context is key, and designing and implementing successful narrative communication strategies will involve choosing and using those aspects of the elements that respond to particular personal, local, community, national and regional realities.

Successful narrative change relies on the same building blocks as a human rights-based approach. The essential elements of this approach (participation and inclusion, empowerment, equality and non-discrimination, and accountability) should be embedded in all strategies to reframe narratives and shift the conversation on migration and migrants.

In addition to these key elements, the non-exhaustive list of resources below references some of the myriad initiatives that are increasingly being put in place to address the linked issues of migration, human rights and narratives. These resources may be of use to States and stakeholders looking to build human rights-based migration narratives, including those who are looking for guidance on addressing incitement to national, racial or religious hatred, while ensuring full respect for freedom of expression.

UN Human Rights will continue to compile useful resources and related good practice examples related to migration narratives, which will be made available on our website at the following link: https://www.ohchr.org/en/issues/migration/pages/migrationandhumanrightsindex.aspx.

RESOURCES

Rabat Plan of Action (2013)
Recommendations to guide stakeholders in implementing the international prohibition of any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence.
Available at: https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Opinion/SeminarRabat/Rabat_draft_outcome.pdf

General Comment No. 34 of the Human Rights Committee on Article 19: freedoms of opinion and expression (2011)
Guidance from the Human Rights Committee on the two closely related freedoms.
Available at: https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrc/docs/gc34.pdf

General Recommendation No. 35 of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination on combating racist hate speech (2013)
Guidance from the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination on the requirements of the Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in the area of racist hate speech.
Available at: https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CERD%2fC%2fGC%2f35&Lang=en

Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (2018)
An intergovernmentally negotiated agreement, prepared under the auspices of the United Nations, that covers all dimensions of international migration in a holistic and comprehensive manner.
Available at: https://www.un.org/pga/72/wp-content/uploads/sites/51/2018/07/180713_Agreed-Outcome_Global-Compact-for-Migration.pdf

United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech (2019)
Provides concrete ways in which the United Nations can play its part in addressing hate speech around the world while upholding freedom of opinion and expression.
Available at: https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/UN%20Strategy%20and%20Plan%20of%20Action%20on%20Hate%20Speech%2018%20June%20SYNOPSIS.pdf

OHCHR, Public perceptions, migration and human rights (2012)
Details practical measures which can be implemented in order to combat xenophobia at the national level.
Available at: https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Migration/LeafletPublicPerceptions.pdf

OHCHR #StandUp4Migrants video series (2017)
A series of animated videos from UN Human Rights which seek to amplify the voices of migrants, the communities that welcome them and the conversations they have along the way.
Available at: https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Migration/Pages/VideoStories.aspx

OHCHR/Global Migration Group, Principles and Guidelines, Supported by Practical Guidance, on the Human Rights Protection of Migrants in Vulnerable Situations (2018)
Guidance to States (and other stakeholders as relevant) on how to operationalize the international human rights law framework and related standards in responding to migrants in vulnerable situations.
Available at: https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Migration/PrinciplesAndGuidelines.pdf

United Nations Free and Equal campaign
The United Nations' global campaign against homophobia and transphobia.
Available at: https://www.unfe.org/

Narrative Initiative, Towards New Gravity: Charting a course for the Narrative Initiative (2017)
Interviews with over 100 thought leaders in the field of narrative change.
Available at: https://narrativeinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/TowardNewGravity-June2017.pdf

EU Fundamental Rights Agency, 10 Keys to Effectively Communicating Human Rights (2018)
Core points on communicating human rights raised by communicators and practitioners in various fields.
Available at: https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2018/10-keys-effectively-communicating-human-rights

International Centre for Policy Advocacy, 12 keys to reframing the migration debate (2018)
Core lessons from a toolkit to support progressive campaigners and spokespersons to positively reshape public and policy debates on migration and integration.
Available at: http://www.narrativechange.org/toolkit/core-lessons

Article 19, Tackling Hate: Action on UN standards to promote inclusion, diversity and pluralism (2018)
Shows how States and other actors can effectively tackle hate while promoting and protecting human rights.
Available at: https://www.article19.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/HRC-Res-16-18-V3-WEB.pdf and https://www.article19.org/action-on-un-standards-to-tackle-hate/

The Collective Psychology Project, A Larger Us (2018)
A report on why we need collective psychology, what it might look like, and how we start developing it.
Available at: https://www.collectivepsychology.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/A-Larger-Us.pdf

Common Cause Foundation, Where now for the environment movement? Weathercocks and signposts 10 years on (2018)
Describes five key opportunities for creating a step-change in the environmental movement.
Available at: https://valuesandframes.org/resources/CCF_report_where_now_for_the_env_movement.pdf

More in Common (2017-2019)
A series of studies of public attitudes towards immigration, refugees and diversity in the United States and several European countries.
Available at: https://www.moreincommon.com/publications

Open Global Rights and Thomas Coombes, A Guide to Hope-based Communications
Sets out a hope-based communications strategy which involves making five basic shifts in the way we talk about human rights.
Available at: https://www.openglobalrights.org/hope-guide/ and https://www.hope-based.com/

Conscious Advertising Network
Voluntary coalition of over 30 organizations set up to ensure that industry ethics catch up with the technology of modern advertising.
Available at: www.consciousadnetwork.org

Stop Funding Hate
Stop Funding Hate began when a group of people came together online to express concern at the way certain newspapers were using hate and division to drive sales.
Available at: https://stopfundinghate.info/

On Road Media, Media Movers Programme
A programme which seeks to improve the way the UK media talks about young people with migrant backgrounds through interactions with media organizations and senior media professionals.
Available at: https://www.onroadmedia.org.uk/2019/08/08/taking-media-movers-past-its-pilot-year/