UNITED NATIONS HUMAN RIGHTS
OFFICE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER

Expert roundtable on
Shaping the public narrative on migration

Geneva | 21 April 2016 | OHCHR Palais Wilson

Informal summary of the discussion

Background

On 21 April 2016, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) organised a one-day expert roundtable on the theme "*Changing the public narrative on migration: promoting tolerance and confronting xenophobia against migrants",* to discuss the way that migrants[1] and migration are being framed in the public narrative, and to examine possible collaborative efforts to re-frame the current toxic narrative on this issue.

More than 35 experts engaged in this discussion, including journalists and other media professionals, social media experts, film-makers, photographers, academics and representatives from non-governmental organisations, regional organisations, and international organisations.

In his recommendation towards the United Nations General Assembly High-Level Meeting on large movements of refugees and migrants, to be held on 19 September 2016, the Secretary-General has announced his intention to initiate a UN-led global campaign to counter xenophobia against migrants and refugees.[2] The Secretary-General has called for broad support for this campaign from Member States and civil society actors in all countries. In response to this call, the roundtable discussion also aimed to explore the feasibility, parameters and products for an eventual public-facing initiative on shaping the public narrative on migration.

The present document contains a brief but non-exhaustive summary of 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 informal summary.

Framing the migration narrative

The discussion began with an exploration of the framing of migrants and migration in the public narrative. Migration is an issue that raises strong – even visceral - emotions, and the challenge is how to frame narratives on migrants and migration that are based in evidence and on principles, but that resonate with a broad public. Frames are powerful, socialised stories.

Participants generally agreed that there is in general a wealth of evidence that has been produced by various stakeholders on migration-related issues, and acknowledged that much media coverage has been informed and evidence-based. A few examples in this regard were

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[1] In the absence of a universal, legal definition OHCHR has defined an "international migrant" as "any person who is outside a State of which he or she is a citizen or national or, in the case of a stateless person, his or her State of birth or habitual residence." The intention is not to exclude refugees or other legal categories, but rather to use a neutral term for a group of people who have in common a lack of citizenship attachment to their host country. See OHCHR, A/HRC/31/35, para 8. See further the discussion on terminology later in this summary.

[2] Report of the Secretary-General, "In Safety and Dignity: Addressing Large Movements of Refugees and Migrants", A/70/59. Available at: http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/70/59

highlighted during the discussion.[3] At the same time participants expressed a general concern that public migration narratives were often based on misperceptions, prejudice and fear.

The discussion examined the role of the media in constructing and shaping the public narrative, and highlighted some of the negative features of media reporting, including the tendency of some sections of the media to accept the often-polarised narratives used by political leaders without fact-checking nor to confront a discourse which is patently based on misperceptions and prejudice. Some participants also pointed to a number of challenges faced by those sections of the media who are interested in presenting a more principled and evidence-based picture of migration, including: the lack of informed specialists and resources to invest in research and training; the confusion over law and terminology; the need for a balanced focus that avoids on the one hand reducing migrants to numbers or victims or on the other to over-focusing on a particular context; and a tendency to accept migration myths despite the existing amount of accessible information.

There was general concern about the absence of migrants' voices in the public narrative, and participants emphasised the need to develop counter-narratives, including through portraying successful migration stories. However, there was also caution expressed in regard to the limitations of just relying on counter-narratives as a strategy, where for example the framing of 'migrants as contributors' could serve to further commodify migrants. Participants recommended that efforts are made to highlight the agency of migrants, highlighting that a film that may be helpful as a reference point is George Kurian's *The Crossing*.

Participants noted that generating messages based on evidence and standards is only part of the picture as people can be more frame-driven than fact-driven. Accordingly, the framing of the message should recognize the fears and legitimate concerns that can underlie negative reactions to migration, particularly in the context of austerity measures, challenges to social security and the welfare state, a lack of employment opportunities, the generalised effects of globalization and security threats/terrorism. Some participants pointed with concern to the role played by political leaders in scapegoating migrants by linking any number of concerns with anti-immigrant rhetoric.

For most experts, an approach that recognises the legitimacy of these concerns could enhance the engagement with the general public. They argued that this could open a pathway to dialogue, rather than lecturing and speaking down to the audience. Participants emphasised the importance of reframing the debate on migration issues, including by building new narratives and eliminating the "us vs. them" dichotomy. Some examples in this regard were mentioned during the discussion.[4] Participants also highlighted the need to avoid victimizing migrants, or seeking to make the target audience feel guilty (which will more likely make them defensive), focusing instead on instilling compassion and empathy and building on the positive example provided by societies that are actively trying to welcome migrants (the *willkommenskultur* in Germany, for example).

In terms of strategy, the discussion was introduced to the idea of the 'undecided middle'; a majority of the population in most countries that are not either strongly in favour of nor entirely opposed to migrants, and could thus be the targets of initiatives that sought to re-shape public

[3] See for example FRA reports and information material on migration, available at www.fra.europa.eu; Ethical Journalism Network (EJN), *Moving Stories*, available at http://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org/assets/docs/054/198/8feb836-108e6c6.pdf; Kosovo 2.0 http://www.kosovotwopointzero.com/

[4] See for example ICPA toolkit on reframing migration, available at http://www.icpolicyadvocacy.org; Migration Exchange http://www.barrowcadbury.org.uk/migration/the-changing-minds-initiative; Welcoming America http://www.welcomingamerica.org; FrameWorks Institute http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/immigration1.html; British Future http://www.britishfuture.org

opinion. The importance of who was delivering the message was also underlined; for the message to be welcomed, the messenger had to be trusted.

Throughout the meeting, participants underlined the need for enhanced coordination among all possible partners working on migration issues, and the importance of considering different approaches and types of media (including traditional media and social media) that resonate with different audiences (e.g. there might be different approaches needed for youth than for older persons).

Terminology: words matter

One of the discussions that ran as a thread through the meeting was the role terminology plays in shaping the migration narrative.

Participants noted the need to retain clarity of legal definitions, and to avoid approaches that might jeopardise the protection to which specific groups were entitled, including refugees, children, persons with disabilities, and others. Also highlighted was the position of UNHCR that the terms 'refugees' and 'migrants' should not be used interchangeably.[5] It was noted that messaging on this issue should be careful not to perpetuate distinctions between people who would technically fall into different legal categories but may experience negative public perceptions similarly. Noting the lack of a universal legal definition of a migrant, there was appreciation of the terminological difficulties inherent 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 receives during her or his migration).

Participants stressed that terminology is too often used to stigmatise migrants, to marginalize them as the "other", and expressed concern over the widespread use of demeaning language such as the use of the terms 'illegal', 'economic migrant' or 'bogus asylum seeker' to describe migrants. They agreed that the use of such language by political leaders, the media and the general public had encouraged criminalisation of migrants. Some participants pointed to the use of imagery that conveyed a threat or a disaster (floods, swarms, invasions, hordes) or to even more problematic language that could be seen to incite hatred against migrants.

Participants agreed that the terminology employed in this effort should be based on the principles of non-discrimination and equality, as well as a 'do no harm' policy. A number of tools to encourage the use of terms in a non-discriminatory way, including within the media, the public authorities and the broader public, were highlighted during the discussion.[6]

In relation to the concept of xenophobia, some participants noted that the concept was analytically imprecise, and might in fact be an impediment to explain and counter prejudice and stigmatisation against migrants specifically. For this reason, some participants indicated that in attempting to reframe public narratives on migration, they had steered away from the concept of xenophobia. Similar concerns were noted regarding the concept of tolerance.

Participants also expressed caution on the use of the word 'campaign' to describe this initiative, noting that the aims of this initiative may be too diffuse to easily be included within the rigorous boundaries of a campaign, as strictly defined.

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[5] See UNHCR's Frequently Asked Questions on 'refugees' and 'migrants', 16 March 2016:
http://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2016/3/56e95c676/refugees-migrants-frequently-asked-questions-faqs.html
[6] Some of these examples include PICUM's "Words Matter" campaign on the use of the term "illegal", available at http://picum.org/en/our-work/terminology-words-matter-campaign; and UNAOC-PANOS Europe's "Media-Friendly Glossary on Migration", available at: http://www.panoseurope.org/sites/default/files/production_files/UNAOC-Panos-Europe-Institute_Media-Friendly-Glossary-on-Migration.pdf

The role of creative arts in shaping the public narrative on migration

Following the screening of the short-documentary film "I Am Not Here", produced by OHCHR and Ashvin Kumar (Alipur Films)[7], participants engaged in a discussion on the role that cinema, photography, and visual and creative arts more generally play in shaping the narrative on migration.

There was general emphasis on the importance of the creative arts in capturing migrants' stories, forging connections and creating empathy. Participants agreed that the spoken word and images of those who are migrants or affected by migration were powerful tools in a re-framing initiative, and to give voice to the 'voiceless'. Some participants added that associating images with statistics could be an important way to challenge misperceptions about migration.

The need to inform migrants about the risks involved in participating in image-related projects, such as risks of detection and deportation for migrants in an irregular situation, was highlighted.

The discussion drew attention to some of the challenges faced by filmmakers, photographers, journalists, and others to access migrants, including those who are most isolated such as migrant domestic workers in private households, refugees in camps, and migrants in an irregular situation.

The need to bring together the particular skills and expertise from those involved in the creative arts was highlighted. It was suggested, for instance, that involving film-makers in a re-shaping narratives project from the outset could multiply the effects of this project including by bringing in new and different audiences.

Telling the story: from evidence to change

Participants further discussed how to craft evidence-based messages on migration and migrants that resonate with the broader public; that is, using the evidence that exists to develop a compelling public-facing campaign.

Participants highlighted the need to contextualise any message in different settings at the local, national and global levels. While there was a general sense of scepticism about the impact of a purely 'global' set of messages, participants highlighted important work that had been done already to bridge the global/local divide.[8] Others noted that it was important to devise some global, even universal, key messages that could then be 'localised' as relevant.

The need to examine the way that the story is told from different perspectives and by different stakeholders was highlighted by a number of participants as a way to better understand dominant narratives. It was important therefore to hear the story of those 'affected' by migration as much as to hear the stories of migrants themselves.

Throughout the discussion, participants underlined the need to identify and build on existing initiatives, partnerships and projects and to learn the lessons of past experience. Examples of different types of existing campaigns were presented and discussed during the meeting.[9]

There was a general agreement on the need to enhance collaboration between all stakeholders on addressing migration from a human-centred approach, including between traditional and

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[7] *I Am Not Here*, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v1GY6ItQVaM

[8] See for example https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/multimedia/meet-the-somalis

[9] See for example "Strangers at Home", available at http://strangers.globalreportingcentre.org; "19 Million Project", available at http://the19millionproject.com; and Migrants Rights' campaigns, available at http://www.migrant-rights.org/campaigns

new media experts, photographers, filmmakers, artists, academics, historians, religious leaders, experts on migration and human rights, international organizations, civil society organizations, policy-makers, and importantly migrants and their families and communities.

Recommendations for further action

In the course of the roundtable discussion, as well as subsequently, participants provided a wealth of suggestions and recommendations for further action, on the part of OHCHR but also more broadly, and including in terms of taking forward the SG's intention to convene a UN-led 'global campaign' as reflected in the report *In Safety and Dignity: Addressing Large Movements of Refugees and Migrants*, and focused on what this initiative might encompass and how it might be taken forward:

° Focus on **story-telling** through the stories, testimonies and images of migrants as well as of people who have not migrated but are impacted by migration (e.g. families of migrants in countries of origin, classmates of migrant children, migrants' employers, neighbours …) in order to build empathy and confront prejudice and discrimination against migrants. Ensure also that these stories go beyond just 'victim' stories or those that see migrants only as economic contributors, and try and ensure in the telling of the stories that they are accessible to a lay audience.

° Bring together, highlight and support existing storytelling platforms, potentially under a common umbrella. Bring together all **relevant stakeholders** (those with specific expertise on content, format and outreach) for the purpose of identifying the various target audiences, and developing strategies on this issue.

° Explore the possibility of a global campaign that is built on local pillars. **Localize** the issue in a particular context acknowledging that global messages might not respond to local framings. Seek to identify the "added value" of the various stakeholders involved, and to target communications strategies at particular audiences (e.g. youth). Remember that the messenger is often as important as the message in terms of reaching specific audiences.

° In addition to bringing together existing initiatives, encourage the targeted development of **new content** that gives a human rights-based perspective on migration, particularly those that fill gaps in current coverage of the issue within mainstream media, as well as using content developed in the field of art and through humor (e.g. satirical comedy), inter alia using such initiatives to take the 'sting' out of anti-migration rhetoric. Promote the use of grant-making as a way to encourage interaction between photographers/film makers and actors interested in reframing public narratives on migration.

° Collate existing **educational and awareness-raising material**, including on hate speech, responsible communications, and migration and human rights issues. Further encourage capacity-development initiatives for media professionals and other relevant actors.

° Encourage better interaction between those who are working to shape public narratives and the **UN human rights mechanisms**, including the CMW, to periodically provide information on this issue, and encourage the development of standards as relevant.