

**SUBMISSION TO THE UN CERD-CMW JOINT GENERAL COMMENT/
RECOMMENDATION**

1. Submitting Organisation

[International Detention Coalition \(IDC\)](#) is a unique global network, of over 400 civil society organisations and individuals in more than 75 countries, that coordinates with members and partners on advocacy, research, coalition and capacity building, to end immigration detention and advance rights-based alternatives to detention (ATD).

IDC is drawing on its work on the ground in Asia Pacific, Africa, the Americas, MENA and Europe to provide insights into the guiding questions raised with this submission. In particular, we came across evidence of the influence of media and public narratives on xenophobia, and of the role local authorities and education can play in combating xenophobia and fostering social cohesion. The evidence and reflection on these issues follows:

2. Role of media, both public and private actors, including digital, for preventing xenophobia and building cohesive societies.

In every region where IDC is present, we observe the crucial role public narratives play in shaping attitudes towards people on the move. Unfortunately, in most cases, we see how media and online platforms are weaponised to promote xenophobia and undermine cohesiveness. It is often the case that migration narratives are politicised and people on the move are used as scapegoats.

IDC, alongside our members and partners in Malaysia and Thailand have collectively identified that **negative public perception, often amplified or shaped by negative media reporting, is a critical impediment to transformative change, as this can either incentivize or discourage governments in progressing reforms.** For example, during COVID-19, heightened anti-refugee and migrant sentiment enabled the Malaysian government to take harsh action against these communities. Amidst a wave of xenophobia towards refugees and migrants, large-scale immigration arrests took place in 2020, including of women and children. Images of immigration raids in Malaysia in 2021 have sparked public criticism of lack of adherence to social distancing SOPs and the risk of creating further COVID-19 clusters. Soon after, the government introduced discriminatory policies prohibiting refugees from working in specific areas, or levying criminal and financial penalties on landlords who rent property to undocumented persons. In Thailand, online hate speech against Myanmar refugees and migrants was intensified as COVID-19 cases grew, with calls for the government to tighten enforcement of immigration rules and punish those in an irregular immigration status in Thailand.

Negative public sentiment also has the potential to jeopardize recent policy wins in Thailand and Malaysia (for example, the Thai 2019 intergovernmental MOU on ATD for children, the Thai National Screening Mechanism, and the Malaysian Cabinet approval of an ATD pilot); these are not embedded in legislation and can be reversed if political incentives to progress these are weakened. We have seen the impact that public sentiment and media reporting can have on government decisions in Thailand and Malaysia, for example the #SaveHakeem campaign in Thailand, and the increased call for an end to child immigration detention in Malaysia. We have also seen strong grassroots movements emerge in the form of the #migranjugamanusia campaign in Malaysia. These provide an important opportunity to consolidate learnings and test new strategies that would move beyond the traditional echo chambers in which many NGOs and refugee led organisations currently operate in Malaysia and Thailand.

IDC and Sidekick published a study on public perceptions on refugees and migrants in Thailand entitled The [Study of Thai Public Perceptions towards Migrants and Refugees](#) with interesting results in terms of what parts of the population hold positive or negative views in terms of migrants and refugees. The study found that **the majority of the Thai public are not aware of refugee and migrant issues**. However, many, specially mass media consumers, find comfort in shared experiences, especially shared hardship. Despite not knowing much about the issues, the stories of individual refugees and migrants inspired these consumer groups to not just learn more but to also want to share and engage others with the cause. Meanwhile, for those representing middle class and urban consumers (quality news media and online news magazine consumers), knowing more about the issue provokes even greater resentment. Negativity surrounds the topic and the existence of any form of migration worries them personally, physically and financially. However, the condition of the urban middle class matters more than its size. Their proximity to decisionmakers forces us to continue to find ways to engage and communicate with them. **Existing communication and engagement methods used by advocacy groups, institutions and organisations have only managed to reach a handful of individuals** thus far throughout the years in Thailand, and do not resonate with either the mass public or the urban middle class audience. Therefore, if a shift in perception and attitude towards migrants and refugees is to be achieved, new and creative approaches need to be developed to bring all groups and demographics closer to the plight of refugees and migrants. IDC is currently working with media and other outlets and with the Thai government in addressing these perceptions.

We observe interesting **trends in Mexico**. The pioneering work of Mexican civil society organizations and collectives, including IDC's members and partners, has put a spotlight on institutional discrimination and racism that has also influenced public perceptions in many respects. For several years, racial profiling was permitted and documented in immigration apprehension, detention, and enforcement until civil society advocates exposed the abuse and deportation of Mexicans by immigration agents, and a [campaign](#) led by IMUMI in 2019 contributed to a Supreme Court ruling that declared the permissive provisions unconstitutional.

Furthermore, Mexico's southern and northern borders have become points where communities such as Haitian and Venezuelan migrants and refugees, in particular, have often become stranded or more visible due to difficulties in accessing protection procedures and integrating in the local communities. In this respect, we see civil society organizations and collectives that have documented the discrimination and xenophobia experienced by Haitian migrants, the highest population of asylum seekers in Mexico - for several years - and in particular Haitian women - and the disproportionate impact this has on their ability to access protection and exercise their rights.

A [2021 report](#) by IMUMI (Institute for Women in Migration) and the Black Alliance for Just Immigration showcases **stories of resilience in the face of racial discrimination and violence in anti-black racism on migrants** of African descent on Mexico's southern border. It also highlights how racial bias creates widespread discrimination, racial violence, and diminished access to the resources that do exist for migrants, refugees, and asylum-seekers, as well as lack of recourse from state authorities in the face of racial violence from non-state actors.

In 2022 a collective that included Racismo Mx, Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Matias de Cordoba, Haitian Bridge Alliance and other organizations, published a [report on Haitian migration](#) studied in the border cities of Tapachula and Tijuana with findings that expose the degree of **racism and violence against this population and racial profiling practices that lead to destruction of documents and deportation**. The report called for more integration support in local services such as education and health, and showed linkages between xenophobia and extreme marginalization of this migrant population.

Advocates have also identified **evidence of media and public discourse that tends towards anti-immigrant narratives** as having an impact on the implementation of policies and practices that respect and protect migrant and refugee rights. In 2023, 3 media outlets in Tapachula, Chiapas were monitored as part of a [border detention site visit](#) with legislators organized by the Migration Policy Working Group (Grupo de Trabajo sobre Política Migratoria), Action Group to End Detention of Refugees (Grupo de Acción Por la No Detención de Personas Refugiadas) and the Colectivo de Observación y Monitoreo de Derechos Humanos en el Sureste Mexicano. The findings showed not only the discrepancy in narrative depending on the perspectives considered by the media, but also highlighted the critical importance of directly hearing the voices of lived experience to further more balanced and factual reporting in complex border immigration contexts.

In Europe, in recent decades, migration has become one of the key topics in right-wing and conservative campaigns, creating a narrative that frames migration as a security concern. **The way migration is represented in public discourse contributes to societies' polarisation.**

A recent [MIDEM](#) study showed respondents across Europe **choosing “immigration” as the most divisive issue in their society**. While some argue that immigration promotes diversity and tolerance, facilitates innovation, and compensates for labor shortages, others contend that it produces effects such as growing social competition, rising crime rates and an erosion of shared values. The conflicts accompanying such differences of opinion seem to be having a direct impact on social cohesion and on the political stability and future of the European Union. For example, the rise of far-right and right-wing populist movements in several European countries has been fuelled to a considerable extent by anti-migrant sentiment.

Tensions over migration have also strained relations between EU member states in recent years. Political scientist Cas Mudde [points out](#) that this change of narrative is fairly recent. He points out that in the 1990s, discourse on Balkan migrants was mainly focused on logistics: how to accommodate many people coming within a short period. Overall Europeans saw refugees as vulnerable and in need of protection. He points that since then and especially in the wake of 2015 refugee arrivals, the media has adopted narratives that favour the far right, leading to these narratives taking over and becoming mainstream. Mass migration of Ukrainians to the EU gave rise to solidarity and support narratives initially, however as time passed, divisive narratives emerged in host societies that highlighted the cost in public money of hosting refugees and blamed them for local structural problems or even for imagined problems. For instance, [studies](#) in Poland uncovered a series of social media campaigns financed by Russia’s proxies where Ukrainian refugees were falsely accused of burglaries, assaults, and rapes. Similar cases were [observed](#) in Germany. Divisive narratives fuelling hate and preventing social cohesion do not always come from external actors. For instance, in Romania, the domestic right-wing party AUR is behind online xenophobic and hate-inflicting campaigns against Ukrainian refugees. Despite these campaigns, it seems that attitudes to Ukrainian refugees in Europe are still much more positive than toward other groups of refugees. A [survey](#) conducted by ECFR in 12 EU countries showed that while only 9% of respondents see Ukrainians as a major threat, refugees from the Middle East are seen as a major threat by 34%, and refugees from Africa are seen as a major threat by 27% of the population.

Civil society and the donor community have identified right-wing interventions in the narrative space as a problem and made several efforts to address that problem through training on disinformation, fact-checking, by developing toolkits for discussing migration, research projects, and by artistic and cultural interventions. **It does not seem, however, that these efforts have had a significant impact on the narrative space**, where conservative voices who see migration as a threat dominate and shape national and EU-level policies. We know, however, that civil society-led efforts to shift narratives can be effective. For instance, America’s Voice, a coalition of pro-immigrant movements in the US, [states](#) that 14 years of work led to a 25% increase in public support for migration.

The [Migration Communication Campaign Database](#) of the EUI Migration Policy Center includes 300 campaigns conducted during the last 10 years in Europe and shows that **the number of campaigns has grown substantially over the past three years**. Most of the campaigns (one-third) are implemented by civil society. It seems, however, that **most of the campaigns are too small in scale, or too short in duration (or both) to make a real impact**. Another limiting factor is that the campaigns do not seem to be based on research findings. While the evidence shows that sadness is not the emotion to appeal to when discussing migration, most campaigns focus on exactly that.

A comparison of America's Voice's effective campaign and less impactful campaigns in Europe shows the following differences:

- Campaign duration (14+ years in the US versus 6 months to 1 year campaigns in the EU).
- The comprehensive nature of the campaign where the public communication strategy is aligned with community organizing and movement building.

Another conclusion that one could draw from looking at public communications related to migration is that when civil society or state actors design strategies to fight xenophobia and proactively fight for positive narratives on migration, they often **lack the resources to address the issue comprehensively**. While many governmental actors in Europe choose to use xenophobic language towards migrants in the hope of attracting voters, those who choose to do otherwise are overwhelmed by the task. IDC's contacts with the government of Romania, while reflecting on the complexity of the perception of Ukrainian immigration in the country, mentioned that the government thought that the issue was so dangerous and explosive that the decision was made not to comment and not to inform the public on the details of the policy. IDC members in Italy have also observed that the opposition to the Meloni government while being pro-migrant and willing to combat xenophobia and racism, communicates on the subject in a manner that alienates supporters. Additionally, IDC's contacts with other governments through advocacy efforts shows that in some cases governments have lost control on public narratives on specific issues related with migration (eg unwanted links between migration and crime) and have tended to respond with more hostile policies, even when knowing that these are ineffective. We have more information on this available.

3. Role of local governments within a comprehensive policy directed to prevent and eradicate xenophobia and its impact on the rights of migrants, their families and local communities

As the level closest to the citizens, local government is, in principle, in a much better position than the central government to deal with matters that require local knowledge and regulation on the basis of local needs and priorities such programs that integrate migrants and host communities. In **Kenya**, the Turkana County Government (local government), the national government, and UN entities developed the

[Kalobeyei Integrated Socio-Economic Development Plan](#) (KISDEP), a framework and tool to manage over 180,000 refugees (40% of the population of Turkana West) in a manner that benefits refugees and the host community.

Local governments can adopt laws and policies within their mandate to prevent and eradicate xenophobia. Specialized capacities can be developed through targeted programmes, which can include training, awareness-raising and learning activities, and the provision of guidance tools for State Officials on addressing and eradicating xenophobia and its impact on the rights of migrants and their families, and other non-citizens affected by racial discrimination. In **Zimbabwe**, the Department of Local Governance Studies at Midland State University has introduced a [new course](#) on human rights and local governance in their curriculum with the support of the Raoul Wallenberg Institute of Human Rights and Humanitarian Law. Through its technical assistance and capacity-building mandate, OHCHR has [supported](#) the strengthening of the capacities of local government officials, including in **Madagascar, Tunisia and Uganda**.

Another interesting example are the holistic initiatives developed by local authorities in **Colombia** in light of growing xenophobia against Venezuelans. Two efforts that can be highlighted are the inclusion campaigns and communication messages developed in the cities of **Bogota and Barranquilla**.

Within their local competencies, local governments should ensure meaningful and inclusive participation of migrants in local decision-making processes, ensure that the right to vote and be elected can be enjoyed without discrimination and ensure equal access to public service, so that institutions can be inclusive and representative of the diversity of the local population. That is critical for ensuring that the needs of those at risk of being left behind are taken into account. In that context, local governments have been developing many [innovative practices](#) such as in **Mauritius and South Africa**, where legislation regulating local elections sets quotas to ensure women's representation.

4. Addressing xenophobia in the field of education

Addressing xenophobia in education is essential for cultivating inclusive and cohesive societies. Educational institutions play a pivotal role, requiring a multifaceted approach to both eradicate existing xenophobic attitudes and prevent such attitudes in future generations. Different educative materials and curricula adopted in national school systems are still disseminating racist knowledge that indirectly normalizes xenophobic behaviour and attitudes in the minds of children.

To eradicate xenophobia at schools, it is crucial to revisit the current curriculums and develop an [inclusive curriculum](#) that reflects the history, contributions, and experiences of diverse cultures and ethnic groups. This integration helps students appreciate the value of diversity. Furthermore, fostering critical thinking and media literacy is vital, empowering



students to assess information critically and resist xenophobic rhetoric. Adding content about the importance and the positive impact of migration and the historical reality of migratory society throughout human civilisation, could be among the critical tools to change negative perceptions of migrants and limit the scope for xenophobic attitudes towards migrants and refugees.

Professional development for educators is also key. Schools should offer regular training in cultural competence, conflict resolution, and anti-bias teaching methods. Supporting educators with resources and community-building opportunities enhances their ability to address xenophobia effectively. School policies should strongly support anti-discrimination, with clear, well-communicated rules protecting all students. Indeed, including migrant children in national public school systems and providing a space for national majority and migrant children to interact should be adopted as way to reinforce cultural richness and promote social coexistence while supporting the presence of the migrant communities in the community setting.