

GFMD-RCM Regional Meeting Series
Canada's Intervention at the Opening Plenary on June 4th, 2020

Introduction

- I would like to begin by thanking the UAE, the RCM and Costa Rica, as *President Pro Tempore* of the RCM, for leading this regional meeting series. As a member of both the GFMD and the RCM, Canada appreciates the opportunity to join this timely discussion.
- We especially welcome the UAE's initiative to engage regions more actively in the GFMD process. Canada recognizes that each region brings its own unique context, experiences and insights to the global dialogue on migration.
- We are all facing a new reality when it comes to international migration and mobility. The current health crisis is a challenge that is truly global in nature – which is why it is so critical to continue the international discussion on key migration issues in forums like the GFMD and the RCM.
- The ongoing pandemic has dramatically changed the global migration landscape in many respects, including by sparking rising xenophobia around the world. In the words of UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, the COVID-19 pandemic has unleashed “a tsunami of hate and xenophobia, scapegoating and scare-mongering.”
- Recent years have shown us that balanced and evidence-based communication has a critical role to play in countering this surge and combatting discrimination against migrants and refugees.
- It is with this context in mind that Canada and the GFMD Mayors Mechanism will be leading a special thematic breakout session on public narratives about migration on June 18th.
- In many ways, this is a topic that is closely linked with the other themes that have been presented today. On irregular migration, for example, accurate and objective communication can help to address public concerns and maintain support for balanced public discourse.
- Public attitudes towards migration are also central to migrant protection. Narratives that recognize the contributions of migrants to their communities can also address gaps in protection by building sentiments of trust and belonging at the community level. This can play a key role in supporting social cohesion and combatting the spread of xenophobia and discrimination, both of which are more important than ever in the current global context

Why is it important to address migration narratives?

- We are all aware that perceptions about migration have become increasingly polarized in recent years. Misinformation and myths have spread rapidly while fact-based communication has struggled to shift public opinion.
- In our own experience, we have seen that while Canadians tend to support immigration on a national level, they are less likely to see the benefits to themselves on a personal level, and within their community. In fact, approximately 60% of the Canadian population is still undecided about immigration.
- One of the ways that we have taken action in response is to launch a communications campaign called Immigration Matters. This campaign uses storytelling complemented by facts to encourage balanced conversations about immigration.
- We know that it is important to listen to and acknowledge the legitimate concerns that people can have about immigration. At the same time, we want to communicate the benefits of well-managed migration.
- We know that this is top of mind not only for Canada, but also for many other destination, transit and origin countries.
- We have seen public narratives on migration rise higher on the international agenda. Efforts to address public opinion and counter misinformation have become priorities not only for states, but also for cities, civil society and businesses around the world. This has reinforced the value of international collaboration in providing an opportunity to learn from each other's experiences.
- The outbreak of COVID-19 and its effects as a social phenomenon have added a new layer and complexity to the discussion about migration narratives. On the one hand, as borders have closed in an effort to slow the spread of the pandemic, there have been new concerns that migrants could face increasing stigmatization.
- Perceptions of COVID-19 as a "foreign" virus have already been linked to increasing xenophobia worldwide. There is also a risk that a global economic slowdown and rising unemployment rates triggered by the pandemic could lead to a turn in public opinion against migrants.
- On the other side of the spectrum, we're hearing positive new narratives about migration emerge. Migrants around the world are being recognized for the integral

roles they play in many economies and societies, particularly as essential workers in the front line of the pandemic response.

- From the Canadian perspective, it has become clear that our agricultural and healthcare sectors rely heavily on the valuable contributions of immigrants. We're also seeing a sense of solidarity and inclusivity emerge in some communities as people unite to counter COVID-19.
- When you view these trends together, the impact of COVID-19 on migration narratives is not necessarily clear-cut. What is apparent, however, is the importance of taking proactive steps to promote balanced discourse.
- This means identifying and acknowledging the root causes of public opinion on migration. It also means recognizing where there are opportunities to move beyond countering misinformation to also create positive new narratives.
- In fact, we have seen that taking a "myth-busting" approach can be counterproductive when it comes to changing narratives on migration. When you repeat a negative message, even for the purpose of trying to "debunk" it, you can inadvertently reinforce it by making that message stick in the audience's mind.
- Creating and sharing balanced new narratives can be a far more effective way to meaningfully change the dialogue.
- This is an area where partnerships and collaboration are key. Working with partners can help to amplify the impact of efforts to balance the narrative on migration, and can also add much-needed credibility in the eyes of the public.

Overview of June 18 session

- This is one of the topics that we will be exploring in more depth during the upcoming breakout session on migration narratives on June 18th. The goal of this breakout will be to identify how narratives on migration are evolving in the region, and how diverse stakeholders can proactively respond, especially through partnerships and collaboration.
- Registration is still open, and I would highly encourage all those with an interest in communication, social cohesion and countering misinformation to attend.

WG on Public Narratives on Migration

- We recognize that there's a lot to be said about public narratives on migration – far more than can be covered in two hours. This is why Canada and the GFMD Mayors

Mechanism will be continuing this discussion throughout the year in the GFMD Working Group on Public Narratives on Migration.

- This new multi-stakeholder working group includes representatives from states, local governments, civil society, businesses, youth and international organizations. Our hope in bringing these diverse actors together is to provide a forum to share best practices from around the world, identify linkages between projects and build concrete partnerships.
- The upcoming breakout session on migration narratives on June 18th will be a starting point for other activities to come over the next few months, so I again encourage you to register and join the discussion.

Conclusion

- Thank you once again to the UAE, Costa Rica and the RCM for the opportunity to speak during today's opening plenary.
- Canada is looking forward to taking part in some fascinating breakouts during the coming week, as well as continuing the conversation on narratives in two weeks' time. We hope to see you all then!
- With that, I would like to turn the floor back over to the co-chairs.