



SHAPING THE PUBLIC NARRATIVE ON MIGRATION AND MIGRANTS

A Guide to Promoting a Balanced Dialogue

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About the Global Forum on Migration and Development

Created in 2007, the Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD) is a state-led, informal and non-binding process, which helps shape the global debate on migration and development. It provides a flexible, multi-stakeholder space where governments can discuss the multi-dimensional aspects, opportunities and challenges related to migration, development, and the link between these two areas. The GFMD process allows governments – in partnership with civil society, the private sector, the UN system, and other relevant stakeholders – to analyze and discuss sensitive issues, create consensus, propose innovative solutions, and share policy and practices.

This guide was informed by valuable insights provided by:

The International Organization for Migration, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the International Centre for Migration Policy Development, Open Society Foundations, Migration Policy Institute, More in Common, Migration Laboratory, Metropolitan Group, Refugee 613, Organization for Islamic Cooperation, the Government of Canada, the Government of Morocco and the Government of Sweden.





The Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD) helps shape the global debate on migration and development.

Introduction

In the current global context of polarized perceptions related to immigration, there is a pressing need to counter harmful and inaccurate narratives about migration and migrants. Yet, evidence-based arguments have often failed to resonate with audiences, while misinformation and myths have spread rapidly with negative implications.

Actors including governments, civil society and the private sector have a responsibility to respond by working together to ensure a balanced public narrative, recognizing the broader impact this narrative can have on social cohesion, support for diversity, economic growth and innovation.

Historically low levels of trust in authority around the world have paved the way for disinformation to rapidly gain traction across online platforms. This tactic has been effectively employed to spread negative narratives and “fake news,” making it increasingly difficult for the public to discern between facts and unproven assertions. At the same time, echo chambers of like-minded online communities promote unchallenged ideologies that can foster mistrust between the public, governments, media sources and other stakeholders.

To promote a balanced narrative, those involved in communicating about migration must restore trust by understanding what drives their intended audience, how to identify effective messages and what messengers to enlist to help deliver impactful communications. Governments and key partners, including civil society, the private sector and migrants themselves can then work together to spread timely and meaningful messages to balance the public narrative.

This Guide, which was developed throughout 2019 by the Global Forum on Migration and Development in close collaboration with state partners and international experts, was presented at a roundtable of the 12th Global Forum on Migration and Development Summit in Quito, Ecuador, in January 2020. It is intended to:

- Equip governments and other stakeholders, including civil society and the private sector, with a resource that can support the development of balanced, informative and effective communications initiatives relating to migration and migrants.
- Promote collaboration between governments and key partners when communicating about migration and migrants.
- Assist governments and key partners in reaching intended audiences with messaging that supports a balanced narrative about migration and migrants.
- Create a compilation of existing initiatives that turn theory into practice to balance the narrative on migration.

KEY COMPONENTS OF EFFECTIVE OUTREACH STRATEGIES

Audience

The extent of a message's impact depends to a large degree on how the audience it reaches reacts to the message. Understanding public attitudes is crucial if messages are to reach beyond supportive groups and engage with those who have conflicted views.

The rise of anti-migrant rhetoric across the globe has fragmented public opinion on migration issues:

- **Supporters** tend to view the potential of migrants as tax paying residents and creative entrepreneurs that fuel the economy, as well as contributors that strengthen the social and cultural fabric of society and a solution to an aging population.

Turn supporters into amplifiers. Encourage supporters to act as amplifiers and trusted messengers in their community by sharing their experiences. Call on this group to present a balanced perspective by sharing how challenges or obstacles faced by migrants and receiving communities were overcome.

- **Opponents** tend to highlight perceived risks of migrants to security and the potential to "dilute" national identities, as well as perceived increases to the costs of social services, difficulties related to labor market integration and other associated pressures on public resources.

Counteract misinformation from opponents. When opponents hold firm views, the impact of persuasive communication can be limited. Rather than trying to persuade opponents to change their perspective, focus on correcting inaccuracies with facts and equipping stakeholders with the resources to speak to shared values.

- **The middle group**, comprising the majority of the population, tends to hold a range of views which depend on factors such as social status, location, their level of engagement and their political fatigue related to migration issues. Some will be ambivalent towards many aspects of immigration, while others may hold strongly felt but conflicting views of immigration's economic and social impacts. What ties this group together is that their views are based on pragmatic concerns rather than ideological commitments. Their positions on issues of identity and belonging are more nuanced and they tend to share both values of openness and anxieties around immigration. The middle group tends to consist of individuals who do not consider themselves as influencing outcomes in their society and tend not to strongly identify with either of the opposing sides of the polarized narrative.

Actively engage with the middle group. Prioritize reaching out to those who remain undecided or ambivalent about migration. This is where tailored content can have the strongest effect in terms of balancing the narrative.

Key Messages

Effective key messages can promote a balanced public view of migration and migrants. For messages to be successful, however, they must be tailored to address the perspectives and concerns of the target population. This should include consulting or collaborating with local groups to ensure that messaging will resonate and align with the local context. Opinions about migration can be influenced by a wide range of concerns including the economy, infrastructure, social services, culture and the pace of social change. As such, it is critical to understand the factors driving the target audience's views prior to developing tailored messages. Tools including public opinion polls, social media analysis, focus groups and interviews can assist in this step.



CREATING IMPACTFUL CONTENT

The content of effective messages is highly context-specific and will vary based on the intended audience, location and purpose. Messaging must be customized for each segment of the target audience, and should be tested in advance of any widespread implementation to ensure that it will have the intended impact. That being said, the following foundational concepts can be taken as a starting point for the development of communications products or initiatives:

1 Emphasize the “us” while respecting individual identities

Research has shown that an effective way to counter divisive narratives is to use unifying messages that emphasize the “us” rather than using data that attempts to describe the “them” group. Frame the narrative of key messages around values such as freedom, fairness, wellbeing, family, and human and social rights in order to capture the attention of individuals with an interest in the broader conversation. Doing so can create an opportunity for the public to find commonalities and identify experiences or stories that may be similar to those of migrants. At the same time, keep in mind that not all individuals share the same values. Persuasive messaging should build consideration for this variance into communications content in order to ensure that all members of the audience can connect with the message.

Unifying celebrations

The “Mein Deutschland” (My Germany, available in German only) campaign, launched by Deutschlandstiftung Integration in 2019, used the 70th anniversary of the German constitution as an opportunity to build inclusion and support for migrants by emphasizing shared values.

Its nationwide publicity campaign featured articles, videos and photos of individuals with an immigration background speaking about the importance of the German constitution in their lives.

2 Incorporate storytelling methods

Storytelling has the unique capacity to unite diverse groups of people through common values and life experiences. Tapping into these elements can help the public to better relate with the experiences of migrants. By showcasing migrants’ success stories within their host communities, communications products can shed light on effective integration and tackle concerns linked to “cultural insecurity.”

Migrants themselves have a key role to play in this regard and should be engaged in the storytelling process from creation through to delivery.

Effective story-driven communication acknowledges not only the positive aspects of migration, but also the challenges that have been overcome or that continue to be experienced. Without this element, storytelling could be criticized as unrealistic or dismissive of genuine concerns.

Visuals and imagery also have important roles to play in the storytelling process, whether through photos, films or animations. Adding a visual element increases the likelihood that the message will be remembered by the target audience. That being said, the selection of images should be approached with caution, as visuals that reinforce a “crisis” mentality (e.g., depictions of migrant boats in the Mediterranean Sea) can trigger negative emotional reactions instead of building empathy.

3 Know how to use data

While it remains important to base decisions on data to improve evidence-based policies, numbers alone are not enough when communicating about migration. Messages with too much data run the risk of overwhelming readers and, as a result, can be easily ignored. Negative perceptions of migration can be rooted in feelings like fear of the unknown, rather than the lack of accurate information. Moreover, feelings of distrust towards certain sources of information may cause the public to dismiss evidence altogether.

Data should be viewed as a starting point rather than an end product in communications strategies. When used as the foundation for storytelling, data helps to ensure that values-based communication remains balanced and avoids activating polarizing attitudes. At the same time, facts and data are better received by target audiences when used in conjunction with storytelling methods that emphasize experiences or values shared by target audiences in the migration debate. Combining data with appeals to the target audience’s lived experiences can strengthen the overall impact of outreach and increase the likelihood that the message will shift the narrative.

While there is a continuous need for conscious efforts by the international community to strengthen its knowledge, analysis and ability to collect and disseminate quality data on migration, we also need to prioritize the collection of data on core values shared by different audience groups and their role in forming attitudes. This is a key step towards ensuring that messages are both values-informed and evidence-driven.

4 Be responsive to the public

Communications strategies can be strengthened by bringing the public into the conversation. Members of the target audience likely have legitimate concerns about migration and its potential impact on their city or country, including fears of a strain on infrastructure or a loss of job security. Through consultation and outreach processes, governments can encourage conversations with communities at a local level.

Find ways to allow for a deliberative dialogue on migration in order to listen to the public's concerns. The purpose of such dialogues should be to build mutual understanding, rather than to prove one side wrong. For governments, this will not only enable a better understanding of the roots of public perceptions, but will also provide an opportunity to openly discuss solutions and inform future responses, commitments and communications. Stakeholders including employers and civil society groups can help translate this responsiveness to the community level by bringing a deeper awareness of the local context to the conversation, and should therefore be included when possible in dialogues between governments and the public.

5 Effectively acknowledge complexities

Research has shown that discussing immigration in simplistic terms of “good” versus “bad” can ultimately increase polarization by pushing the migration debate into opposing camps. To effectively balance the narrative, communications initiatives should recognize the nuances and complexities associated with migration while also identifying how challenges can be overcome. Adopting an optimistic approach that emphasizes potential solutions, rather than chastising those with different viewpoints or focusing exclusively on problems, is a critical step in moving the needle on public opinion.

Delivering the Message

Choosing the right channel of delivery can greatly influence the reach and effectiveness of key messages by increasing their uptake by the intended audience. In general, research shows that people are more likely to hear and absorb unexpected information from messengers within their own circles of identity. However, specific methods of delivery can vary greatly depending on the local context. For this reason, research must be undertaken to identify the target audience's trusted sources of information.

TOOLS AND TYPES OF COMMUNICATION

Social media

Social media have become some of the most prominent tools of communication in the digital age. While they have a proven facility to reach a large audience, they can also serve as a platform for polarizing discussions and the spread of misinformation.

While it is preferable to focus on providing proactive information, responsive messaging should be considered in certain circumstances. Strategies should take into consideration when it is appropriate to address misinformation and disinformation, as well as when it is better not to engage.

Governments should be diligent in ensuring that discussions they initiate on social media do not inadvertently fuel hate speech and negative discourse. As a rule of thumb, messaging intended to correct the narrative on migration by countering inaccurate information should employ empathy and avoid accusatory language.

It can be difficult for governments to gain traction on social media, in part because individuals engaged with government social media accounts are likely already supporters. In other instances, government social media activity can be shared and critiqued within a community of opponents, generating exposure and conversation that run contrary to the message's objectives.

Misinformation and disinformation

While misinformation and disinformation both involve false or inaccurate information, the term "disinformation" refers specifically to content that is deliberately intended to deceive.

When deciding whether or not to engage with misinformation or disinformation, key variables to consider include:

Scale: How large is the conversation?

Awareness: Who is talking about it?

Influence: What is the impact on the affected audience?

Timing: How recent is it?

However, there are opportunities on social media to engage in meaningful storytelling by using photo and video content to show the experiences of migrants. These messages can demonstrate shared values and encourage positive engagement on the part of the public.

This is also where allies and amplifiers can step in to significantly increase the reach of balanced social media messaging about migration. Partners in the private sector, civil society and at the community level can amplify content among their own audiences, which may include members of the middle group or opponent audiences. As these sources are often more trusted than governments, messages shared by allies and amplifiers can have a far greater impact than conventional government communications.

Key takeaways:

- Social media is well-suited to narrative-based communications in the form of shareable stories that can unify audiences through shared values.
- There is a risk on social media of misinformation and disinformation being quickly amplified within echo chambers of like-minded opponents. Counter this by evaluating the impact and scope to determine when it is appropriate to address inaccurate information.
- Partner strategically with non-government allies and amplifiers to increase the reach and impact of balanced messaging and mitigate opposition on social media channels.

Traditional media

Traditional media outlets retain an established presence online, in print and on-air with diverse audiences ranging from local to global in scale. They can be a trusted source of information and a useful channel for delivering messages. However, a risk in traditional media is that in seeking to provide balanced reporting and putting equal focus on all sides of an issue, media outlets sometimes provide platforms for misinformed or overly negative rhetoric. When both sides of an argument are presented against each other, viewers are significantly more likely to seek the argument that confirms their pre-existing opinion, as both sides are presented as equally valid.

Governments can play a role in supporting balanced media communications by ensuring that traditional media outlets have the information they need to provide accurate coverage. This can include providing accessible media relations contacts and offering technical briefings to provide factual information on policies or programs. Governments, along with all other actors, can also help to balance the narrative by avoiding the use of loaded terms (e.g., “waves” or “floods” of migrants) that, when reprinted or broadcast on traditional media, can reinforce negative stereotypes.

Encouraging balanced reporting

The International Labour Organization runs a Global Media Competition on Labour Migration, which recognizes exceptional media coverage of labour migrants in an effort to encourage balanced and ethical reporting.

The competition, which is open to both professional and student journalists, aims to raise awareness and shift perceptions about labour migration.

Key takeaways:

- Work on increasing the accessibility of factual information about migration and related government policies or programs in order to support accurate media coverage.
- Avoid using loaded terms that can reinforce negative stereotypes about migrants when circulated in the media.

Experiential and in-person outreach

Individual perspectives about migration are influenced not only through media content, but also through in-person interactions and experiences. Finding common ground through sport, food, family, music, or art can be an effective way to tackle stereotypes in order to balance the narrative about migration and migrants.

It is essential to recognize that local leaders and organizations have key roles to play in creating meaningful opportunities for community members to come together. This need not always be through initiatives focused exclusively on migration – campaigns or events that build connections more broadly can also be beneficial when it comes to creating a sense of unity.



With this in mind, governments, private sector partners and civil society organizations alike should look for opportunities to support initiatives geared towards generating in-person dialogue and positive interactions between migrants and community members.

Bringing communities together

The YoP MiLéDou (available in French only) project in Côte d'Ivoire aims to foster inclusion of migrants by tapping into a shared love of sports. The project, based in schools and neighborhood clubs in Yopougon (a municipality in Abidjan), brings together youth of different nationalities and origins in a junior basketball league. In addition to supporting overall well-being, the project is designed to offer a space where participants can find commonalities and engage in dialogue.

The Great Get Together, an initiative of the Jo Cox Foundation in the United Kingdom, brings people together through community events as varied as street parties, community lunches, and holiday celebrations. While not specific to migration, the initiative focuses on building connections by celebrating what communities have in common. Surveys conducted after the inaugural Great Get Together in 2017 showed that 78% of people “felt more hopeful about Britain” after participating.

Key takeaways:

- Focus on creating opportunities for migrants and host community members to come together around inclusive shared experiences, activities or celebrations.
- Actively engage community leaders and organizations to facilitate or promote in-person outreach that accurately speaks to the local context.

Allies and amplifiers

Recognizing the need for a multi-faceted approach to shaping the narrative on migration, governments should seek opportunities to collaborate with non-traditional partners. Engaging allies and amplifiers can add credibility in the eyes of the target audience, especially at a time when trust in governments is low. These collaborations also offer an opportunity for increased exposure and can be seen as vehicles to engage new audiences. By sharing information with partner organizations that are trusted by the target audience, governments can increase the reach of their messages and the extent to which they resonate with their target audience. In order for this approach to be effective, governments should thoroughly research potential options for collaboration and complete a stakeholder mapping process to identify the objectives and needs of all prospective partners.

Allies and amplifiers can include community partners such as local governments, faith-based groups and trusted community leaders. Partners and people, including migrants themselves, can be encouraged to engage with others by telling their own stories or sharing their experiences of migrants in their communities, whether through media channels or face-to-face interaction. Civil society and the non-governmental organization (NGO) community can play a similar role in amplifying these types of stories as well as telling their own.

Unique collaborations:

The UN Migration Agency's Global Migration Film Festival (GMFF) showcases films that capture the promise and challenge of migration for two weeks every December. Migration is at the heart of storytelling and the festival. As a partnership between the International Organization for Migration, governments and universities, the GMFF can stimulate healthy debate about integration through the lens of independent filmmakers.

Originally from Egypt, Liverpool footballer [Mohamed Salah](#) has been featured under the #togetherthroughsport campaign as a component of the UN initiative "TOGETHER," which aims to change the negative narrative about migration.

Similarly, in the past year, Canada has used sporting events to tie in citizenship ceremonies with national teams, engaging the public and reinforcing the shared pride in citizenship.





The private sector is another key ally, particularly those employers and businesses that have benefited from the skills and contributions of migrants. These contributions can be amplified through stories and supported by facts to highlight the positive impacts that migrants, working with local populations, have collectively made in a sector or industry.

Non-traditional partners such as sports teams or visual arts organizations can additionally play a supporting role by reaching new audiences and, crucially, connecting the narrative on migration to a positive shared experience with the capacity to unite otherwise diverse or polarized groups.

Key takeaways:

- Engage with civil society, employers, and individuals to add credibility to your message and increase reach beyond supportive groups.
- Focus on partnering with allies and amplifiers that are trusted by the target audience.
- Actively engage migrants and create opportunities for them to tell their own stories.
- Pursue creative collaborations with non-traditional partners to increase both the reach and effectiveness of messaging on migration.

Monitoring, Readjustment and Evaluation

The creation and implementation of a communications campaign or initiative should incorporate a strong evaluation process. Monitoring and impact measurement at regular intervals can identify areas for improvement in a timely manner and enable readjustment when necessary.

Monitoring and evaluation can take a number of forms, and while it can depend on budget, time and resources, it should not be left as an afterthought. It can be challenging to assess the effectiveness of these types of communications as there are a number of other factors in the public environment that have an impact on the public discourse.

Monitoring could include:

- Reviewing and analysing comments and discussions related to efforts on social media channels;
- Undertaking public opinion research pre-communications (such as focus testing) and as communications efforts roll out;
- Analysing metrics including social media shares, video views, web visits, downloads, etc.

It is also important to regularly consult with and request feedback from stakeholders, potential partners, implementers and other groups in the target audience on communications efforts. This can be done through one-on-one communications, or through events like public consultations, town halls and community events.

When evaluation is an integral part of the planning and implementation process, communications strategies can become an opportunity to provide valuable new insights for future impactful campaigns.



Annex A: Putting Theory into Practice – Recent Initiatives

Communications campaigns:

- [Immigration Matters \(canada.ca/immigration-matters\)](https://canada.ca/immigration-matters): relies on compelling storytelling to demonstrate the benefits of immigration at the local level, dispel common myths about immigration and promote positive engagement between newcomers and Canadians. This storytelling is complemented by facts, including information about how Canada's immigration system works, and economic data showing the impact of immigration on communities.
- ["i am a migrant" IAAM \(https://iamamigrant.org/about\)](https://iamamigrant.org/about): a platform to promote diversity and inclusion of migrants in society, specifically designed to support volunteer groups, local authorities, companies, associations, and indeed anyone who may be concerned about the hostile public discourse against migrants.
- [Help Refugees \("Refugenes" campaign\) \(https://www.helprefugees.org.uk/news/refugenes/\)](https://www.helprefugees.org.uk/news/refugenes/): shared stories in video format of British public figures talking about their refugee heritage (or, "refugenes") with pride. The purpose of the campaign was to show how past refugees have become part of the fabric of British society in the present day. In addition to circulating videos of public figures, the campaign included a call to action inviting members of the general public to share stories from their own family trees about finding safety in the UK as a refugee.
- [Mein Deutschland \(My Germany; available in German\) \(https://www.aufgutemgrund.net/\)](https://www.aufgutemgrund.net/): used the shared fundamental values reflected in the German constitution as a foundation upon which to create commonalities between immigrants and the public. It incorporated a strong storytelling component through its use of personal narratives communicated through images, articles and videos of individuals with an immigration background that can be shared across multiple media platforms.
- [#StandUp4Migrants \(https://www.ohchr.org/en/issues/migration/pages/videostories.aspx\)](https://www.ohchr.org/en/issues/migration/pages/videostories.aspx): an international campaign launched by the UN Human Rights Office which circulated a series of animated videos narrating migrants' stories on social media channels in order to amplify the voices of both migrants and communities.

Project/partner-based and unique initiatives:

- [Welcoming America \(https://www.welcomingamerica.org/\)](https://www.welcomingamerica.org/): connects community, non-profit and government partners to support communities in becoming more inclusive and welcoming places for immigrants in the United States. The organization also works internationally through Welcoming International.
- [Migrantours \(http://www.mygrantour.org/\)](http://www.mygrantour.org/): coordinates migrant-led city tours to increase understanding of cultural diversity and change perceptions of migrants. Since 2010, thousands of individuals have participated in these tours.
- [Cities of Migration \(https://my.citiesofmigration.org/\)](https://my.citiesofmigration.org/): showcases a collection of innovative practices that promote the inclusion of migrants, such as housing projects or sports programs designed to connect migrants with other community members. Resources available through Cities of Migration include the My City of Migration Diagnostic Tool and the Learning Exchange Monthly Webinar Series.
- [SINGA \(https://www.singafrance.com/welcome-english\)](https://www.singafrance.com/welcome-english): creates opportunities for in-person interaction and dialogue between refugees and host community members to change perceptions about refugees and asylum seekers.
- [Migration Media Award \(https://www.migration-media-award.eu/index.php/en/\)](https://www.migration-media-award.eu/index.php/en/): recognizes excellence in journalistic reporting on migration in the Euro-Mediterranean region with the objective of promoting a more balanced narrative on migration. Awards include six categories: video, radio, online, print, multimedia and photo.
- [Global Migration Film Festival \(https://www.iom.int/global-migration-film-festival\)](https://www.iom.int/global-migration-film-festival): showcases films and documentaries depicting the stories of migrants in an effort to help viewers cultivate empathy and understanding. The GMFF offers an example of how storytelling and the arts can change the narrative of discussions about migration.
- [Saphan Siang \(https://www.saphansiang.org/#home\)](https://www.saphansiang.org/#home): promotes understanding between migrant workers and host community members in Thailand by increasing awareness of migrants' rights, the obstacles they face, and their contributions to the economy and society. The Saphan Siang Youth Ambassador program works with young people at organizations across Thailand to improve the public's understanding of migrant worker issues.
- [Ambulante Film Festival \(https://www.ambulante.org/en/\)](https://www.ambulante.org/en/): uses documentary film as a tool for social and cultural change. Ambulante brings documentary films and training programs to places where they are rarely available in order to foster a cultural exchange, encourage a participative, informed and critical attitude in audiences, and open new channels of expression in Mexico and abroad. For the past 15 years they have been producing and showcasing stories about migrants, their families and communities.

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