

INTRODUCTION:

TOOLBOX ON MIGRATION NARRATIVE CHANGE

How we speak about migrants and migration plays a fundamental role guaranteeing equality and human rights. Join us to tell a new story about migration, one that paints a hopeful picture of the future we share and unites us around our common humanity.



What are Narratives?

Narratives comprise stories, frames and mental shortcuts we use to navigate the world around us. Although we might not be aware, narratives are embedded in our values system and influenced by our environment and lived experiences. They are created through repetition by communities, the media, popular culture, political figures and individuals. The longer a narrative is repeated the more powerful it becomes, influencing the way we judge and respond to issues.

Narratives on migrants and migration thus shape the way people see the world and how they act and respond to migrants and migration.

How Do Stories Relate to Narratives?

Stories are what we see, hear and experience, bringing abstract ideas and emotions to life. Humans are hard-wired for stories. Every culture and society has its own storytelling tradition. These stories uphold a values system, where characters within stories are motivated to take action based on values. These values could be family, love, empathy, ambition, strength, tradition, service or any host of values.

Stories form key elements of a narrative. Many stories that reinforce the same values, beliefs and actions strengthen a narrative.

How Do Narratives Influence Us?

Think about the phrase “migrant and refugee crisis.” What visuals, stories or emotions come to mind? What you are imagining is built on a narrative. Your understanding of the phrase may differ from another person’s, but you can infer how it will be perceived if there is a dominant narrative surrounding this phrase.

Who speaks and how information is presented also strongly influences our understanding and acceptance of new information. Our brains are more likely to accept information if it fits in a narrative framework we already agree with or if we have confidence in the person or institution conveying the information.

The more we accrue similar messages and stories, the more we feel justified in our values and beliefs. This is why we may react defensively to information that does not fit our narrative framework. Instead of reflecting on our beliefs, we will find ways to strengthen our narrative. This is also known as the “confirmation bias”. For example, someone who receives data that challenges their view about migration may reject that data as incomplete or false and search for information that supports their view. Their views may thereby become more entrenched.

What are Harmful Narratives on Migrants & Migration?

In the context of migration, there has been growing apprehension about some public narratives, which use frames that directly or indirectly evoke fear, discrimination, exclusion and even hatred and violence. They often perpetuate misperceptions, stereotypes of migrants or disinformation around migration and lead to the dehumanization of migrants, negatively impacting their human rights and those of broader society.

Pervasive and fear-driven anti-migrant narratives have flourished in all regions. Such narratives have used migrants as scapegoats for deep-rooted societal problems and fears about terrorism, crime, unemployment, welfare systems, identity and the uncertainties of globalization. They are often actively promoted by those who misuse these narratives for political, financial or other gain and are exacerbated by click-bait headlines, ad-money and algorithms that amplify extreme views on social media.

When harmful narratives are echoed repeatedly, the risk is that people begin to automatically perceive migrants and migration negatively and that such narratives and frames become normalized and entrenched to the point that our brains cannot “unthink” or question them.

In our communications work, we may inadvertently trigger harmful narratives and frames, linking migrants to words such as burden, crime, masses and other terms, which invoke emotions of fear, threat or crisis. Messages that provoke such emotions easily draw people’s attention. However, even to negate or argue against a negative statement, we become part of the echo chamber that strengthens the negative narrative. By repeating it, we assure it is perpetuated.¹

Why Shift the Narrative?

There is much at stake in shifting the narrative surrounding migration from a negative to a positive one. Individual lives, communities, national debates and laws and policy decisions are all impacted by the way people perceive migrants and migration.

When migrants are criminalized or dehumanized by policies and rhetoric, the message 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. These include widespread and unregulated surveillance practices, harassment of NGOs as well as the shrinking of space for defenders of migrants' human rights.

In many ways, a law or policy is a reflection of a narrative, built on an understanding of shared values. A community's ability to accept newcomers is enabled through a welcoming narrative, built on a shared value of human rights. An individual's ability to accept someone they perceive as different from themselves is guided by a narrative of acceptance and sense of a larger "us," rather than fear and exclusion.

Reframing or shifting the narrative on migrants and migration is therefore key to paving the way that leads our audience towards a new common sense understanding of our issues. It requires creating a new framework of understanding, invoking our audience's values system, repeating the frames and stories therein, and aligning our efforts with allies and partners to amplify our reach.

The Toolbox

UN Human Rights is mandated to promote and protect the enjoyment and full realization, by all people, of all rights. Given the impact of harmful narratives in the context of migration, UN Human Rights believes there is a compelling need to shift the narrative on migrants and migration from one of hate and exclusion to one that celebrates what we have in common and paints a hopeful picture of the future we share. UN Human Rights recognizes that shifting narratives is a key element to achieving positive change and ensuring all migrants can enjoy their human rights.

UN Human Rights has developed this toolbox to offer ideas, actions and inspiration on how to make this shift. The step-by-step guide is based on the [Seven Key Elements on Building Human Rights-Based Narratives on Migrants and Migration](#), and the experiences of our partners, whose research, efforts and engagement contributed to the content of these resources.

This toolbox is for people working on migration-related issues, but ultimately, for everyone who wants to see a change and play a role in countering harmful narratives. It is UN Human Rights' hope that many of you will join us to shift narratives on migration and stand up for migrants' rights.

How to Use the Toolbox:

The resources in this toolbox are intended to help you consciously choose how to communicate on issues related to migration, with the aim of shifting narratives. Taking an interactive approach, the toolbox provides guidance, exercises, tools and examples for different types of communications and outreach work to effectively reach your target audience. The toolbox does not provide a map for developing communications strategies or for creating and implementing public facing campaigns.

Taking a step-by-step approach, the toolbox guides you through:

- Defining a positive and **hope-based vision**
- Identifying **shared values** with your audience to build a positive narrative
- **Storytelling** tips and guidelines, including explanations of different mediums
- How to bring your stories and vision to life in the **local context**
- Finding **common ground**, including through listening and identifying the best messenger for your audience
- Finding **alignment** with unexpected allies and partners
- Upholding the **do no harm** principle, including key pitfalls to avoid and how to test your messages.

Public & Policy Narrative Change

The toolbox can help you use narrative change techniques to target audiences that constitute certain segments of the general public or policy-makers. Narrative change of public discourse looks broadly at a shift in the public sphere, including traditional media, social media and the tone of our everyday interactions. By gathering public momentum towards a more human rights-based narrative on migration, we can also eventually influence laws, policies and practices on migration.

Organizations and individuals using narrative change techniques to achieve policy change will find this toolbox relevant for influencing policy debates, moving seemingly intractable conversations forward and finding a mutual agreement and solutions with policy-makers or legislators. It is important to recall that policy-makers and other state actors have a duty to uphold everyone's rights in their jurisdiction without discrimination, and to ensure their measures are based on data and evidence. Legal, technical and data-driven arguments therefore remain particularly relevant. However, as policy-makers are human beings and like us, their views and perceptions are influenced by their values system and narratives, communications and outreach work should consider how to open conversations and find common ground when engaging with policy-makers.