

GFMD Thematic Workshop “Narratives on Migration: Toward evidence-based Communication”

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SUMMARY REPORT by Ms. KATHLEEN NEWLAND

It has been an intense and very packed two-days. I will not be able to do justice to all the highlights of the discussions. As you may recall, the speakers at the opening session emphasized the importance of the topic of the workshop and expressed their appreciation to the Governments of Morocco and Ecuador for co-organizing it.

All speakers in the first session recognized what was a continuing theme throughout these two days: that migration, while an ancient phenomenon, is taking place today in a highly polarized context, rife with negative and harmful misrepresentation of migrants and migration processes, which bears little resemblance to reality.

The rise of social media, and particularly social media fake news and misrepresentations, along with declining trust in traditional media gatekeepers – all this has changed dramatically the migration landscape.

There was agreement on the need to replace the false and divisive narrative with evidence based communications. The big question was how?

I will not present the highlights session per session since there were many overlapping concerns raised in the different sessions. I will try to group them thematically.

1. Data highlights

- An example from Thailand illustrated the wealth of administrative and survey data available from different ministries and offices of governments, but many governments do not have the financial or human resources needed to mine the data for policy making.
- We learned of misperceptions about migration patterns and trends. For example: "Most migrants are unauthorized"; "Africa is the main source of migrants"; "most migrants move from Global South to Global North;" etc. None of these things are true. But these misperceptions are widely believed and they are repeated often enough that they acquire a life of their own, independent from the evidence base.
- We also learned of the wide variations in public survey about the way immigration is viewed – either as a strength or burden -- and ways public opinion shifted in EU between 2014 and 2018, with the sharpest negative shifts occurring in the countries on the frontline of Europe’s migration crisis, or perhaps we should say migration trauma.
- The variability in opinions shows up among countries and within them. It highlights the growing polarization of opinion on migration, with more left-leaning young, urban population viewing migration more favorably, than right-leaning, older and more rural population.
- We also heard that the news is not all bad on public opinion on migration; popular movements opposing migration are balanced by movements supporting and defending migration in many countries. However, the intensity of feeling is much greater among people who oppose migration than those who welcome it; so they are louder in political debates and more active on social media.

2. Journalistic coverage of migrants and migration

- The treatment of migrants and migration was highlighted by a number of speakers in the discussion. We heard that the news media treat migrants as a product. What sells is sensationalism. Journalists go for the dramatic, sensational and usually negative stories. As the saying among newspaper men in the United States goes, “if it bleeds, it leads.”
- But the important and often positive role of investigative journalism was also noted, with its power to reveal abuses and hold powerful interest to account. An example given was the coverage of sexual abuse of Moroccan women working in Spanish strawberry fields.
- The role of journalism is, or should be, to present things as they are in a complete and objective way. There was a call for a code of ethics for journalists. The difficulties abound when so many people get their information (or misinformation) from social media rather than traditional news outlets.
- Traditional media have an ethical Code, but it is breaking down, although many of the most respected international news outlets still honor it. That code itself is becoming problematic, because it insists on balanced coverage of migration. For many journalists and editors, balanced means presenting both views. When one view is evidence-based, fact-based, reality-based, and the other is based on propaganda, misinformation, and negative stereotyping etc. where is the balance in presenting both views alongside each other in an effort to be fair? This creates problems for traditional news outlets.
- Few journalists that cover migration news are deeply knowledgeable about migration, unless they had the privilege of working on it over a number of years. Few journalists are trained due to the increase of social media, and the decline of traditional media.

3. Perceptions of migrants and refugees

- We have heard of many efforts to promote positive perceptions of migrants. We saw some wonderful examples of efforts to promote positive perceptions of migrants.
 - We heard about the ILO film about a domestic worker from Sri Lanka, and the young woman she help raised in Lebanon - who traveled together to the migrant workers' home. It is an eye opener, for the young Lebanese woman to see the big fine house that the worker has built for her family in Sri Lanka. That shifted the perspectives and broke the stereotypes.
 - We also saw this in the short film from the Canadian Immigration Matters project – this helps bust stereotypes - a female Muslim, Iranian engineer, who made a lot of money and who was able to endow an engineering programme in a Canadian university.
- Stereotypes are much harder to break down than to build. Thus, we must get in early in the migration process to introduce people to their new neighbors.
- We heard a lot about positive efforts being done both at the national, and particularly at the city and neighborhood levels.
- I love the aphorism we heard “What is new is only what has been forgotten”. The same stereotypes that are now attached to the Middle Eastern or African migrants used to be attached to the Irish, Italians, the Poles, the Portuguese, etc. “Benjamin Franklin,” the US Founding father, was making the same arguments about German migrants to the US in the 1780's: "they cannot assimilate, they do not want to assimilate, their cultures and values are incompatible with ours". These stereotypes are incredibly persistent; but the best way to break them down seems to be through direct contact, people-to-people contact, story-telling, etc. which make migrants real, that put a face on them, that allow people to see what they have in common, rather than their differences.
- We heard some confusion between migrants and refugees – we heard views in the room from "there is no distinction" to "it is important to maintain strict legal distinctions". But there was

no argument that they are all human beings who deserve respect, dignity and full enjoyment of fundamental human rights.

- The grey areas – forced migrants who are not recognized as refugees, but felt compelled to leave their homes and who needs protection – remains a very problematic area for public policy.
- The benefits of migration (economic, cultural, social) were repeatedly emphasized, but people do not often respond well to being told that “migration is good for them” (i.e., Eat your vegetables).
- Several speakers emphasized the importance of recognizing the diversity among migrants, and not trying to put a single face on a migrant. Rather, acknowledge and honor gender, age and other diversity factors.
- We also need to recognize the diversity among audiences and tailor the messages and messengers according to the audience.

4. Messaging

- How do people receive and process information? What is the mental mechanism that surrounds the processing of messages?
- Several speakers emphasized the importance of giving positive but also honest messages or being honest about the mix of impacts that migration has. Several speakers mentioned that it was not wise or effective to downplay the problems that may accompany migration, especially if reception and integration are not well managed.
- Policy makers tend to over-emphasize the economic impact of migration, but that is not always primarily in people’s minds. People are also concerned about stability, loyalty, familiarity, competition that they feel migrants may bring across a range of goods (jobs, housing, social benefits, access to school, health care and public services). Policymakers need to address those concerns head on, and to acknowledge the legitimacy of those concerns and explain how potential problems are going to be avoided or met, if they occurred.
- One of the consistent themes was that values-based messages are more powerful than fact-based ones. Make a serious effort to understand what it is that people value, and why? To work with positive values that can be attached to migration.
- My grandmother was a very conservative, religious, Southern lady. I remembered a conversation with her when she said: “As a good Christian, I cannot place black people below me.” To me it was the crystallization of one value triumphing over other values of familiarity and loyalty. That is the kind of point of leverage we need to see when we try to counter negative narratives about migration. What is it that people value? What are their deepest source of common humanity that we can find?
- The messenger may be as important as the message. People are more likely to hear and believe messages from people they can trust. This is where GFMD’s value comes in – a state-led process, without constraint of formal diplomacy and negotiation. It is a space that has built trust and expanded to include other partners (civil society, private sector, now mayors) through the years. Perhaps the media are next as participants in the GFMD.
- The use of marketing techniques – advocates understand, but sometimes shy away from. We do not want to be seen as manipulating our audience or reality. I think this is a naïve view. Governments and other actors must think of the use of marketing techniques, because certainly, populists use them very effectively.
- Repetition is powerful. We need to meet people where they are today. That means using social media, television, film, and the arts. It also means localizing action. In crafting and dispensing messages, you need to make it fun. E.g. Sergio Ramos video was a powerful form of message in action which conveys, “It is cool to include migrants in your circle”.

- Respect the audience. Nobody ever convince people to change their minds by telling them that they are ignorant or stupid, by patronizing them or lecturing them from a position of superiority, or by branding them as racist or xenophobic. You have to show respect to people and understand their concern; and acknowledge their humanity.
- Use stories and images and slogans or other things that people can remember and repeat.

5. Political leadership

- It really matters what governments say, particularly in emergency situation. You can trust the public attitudes in countries like New Zealand and Canada, compared to my own country - unfortunately. You can see the power of political leadership and messaging that does not only follow but often leads opinion.

6. Action

- We had a powerful example of the productive use of social media, especially Facebook to help and empower Filipinos OFWs, and connect them to assistance from the governments, and establish close communication between migrant workers and the government of the countries of origin. You have to start with building trust and providing real value, real hope - not only to shape people's views but also empower them and increase their capabilities, while also fighting back against negative narratives.
- Another example of online connection is the Balinkbayan link that connects migrants and returnees to services, information, and assistance to entrepreneurs.
- In traditional media, I am familiar with the Global Irish section in the New York Times that features news from the diaspora. I was delighted to hear there was a global Filipino section in the newspaper. Traditional media do have large audiences. It is important not to neglect them.
- We had a brilliant example from the government of Colombia which showed how to use non-traditional messengers by making it fun, by including Venezuelan migrants.
- Finally, we heard about building partnerships among different actors; about smart campaigns like Canada's Migration matters which use sophisticated measures across a whole range of inclusive platforms.

7. Toward Quito

What should we consider in thinking about migration narratives and evidence-base policy making?

- To develop good evidence of what values are deeply held by people; identify commonalities, make people feel safe and valued, and foster pride in their ability to attract migrants. I was struck with the example of Nashville, Tennessee which went from having a reputation of being the least migrant friendly to the most migrant friendly.
- We should praise countries for their good examples and recognize them. Encourage positive reinforcement for good practices.
- What does the exercise of leadership really mean? What do leaders say to encourage empathy and positive views about refugees and migrant? Governments should think about building alliances with effective messaging – sports heroes, popular media stars, singers etc. Young people particularly regard them as believable.
- We need to reassure people that migration is not out of control. That is the negative message that very often comes through in the negative narratives. We are not being invaded, we are not being replaced. Responsible public policies and voices, as well as leaders from other fields must get everybody to calm down. Angela Merkel was initially extremely successful when she

said "We can manage this". That is very reassuring and gave permission for Germans to be welcoming toward the migrants who were coming across in 2015.

- e. Governments must be transparent about why and how they plan to cope and if things do get out of control, to be transparent about how they plan to cope with the emergency and overcome it. Calming anxiety is a goal for government.
- f. Create opportunities and contacts both at city and neighborhood levels. The "Fête des Villes" that are held in French cities for all people that live in the town or neighborhood is more effective than a "Festival for the migrants".
- g. Creating space for migrants to tell their stories is important as well.
- h. One thing that will and should be discussed because it is the first objective of the GCM: how do we invest effectively in data collection, and how to use that data for policy making and broader understanding of migration? Making data available to analysts and scholars and supporting their work is an effective thing, especially when governments themselves do not have the necessary financial and human resources. The Australian government made all of their administrative data about people going to and leaving the country available to scholars, and discovered this pattern of circular migration, which no one had been really able to see before. So that migrants that established themselves - especially from China and India - frequently returned to their countries of origin, established businesses, taught, mentored young people and increased the productive ties between countries of origin and destination.
- i. Highlighting the success stories of immigrants and natives in solving problems together and building things together.
- j. Training immigrants and native born within same sectors has proven effective for many governments.
- k. Building alliances with other countries is a big part of what the GCM and GFMD are about. You do not need 193 countries to agree to work together on something. But if you have five or six countries, or so, you can get something started that may provide examples for others. The German government has this partnership with about 13 countries on skills training to increase legal pathways for migrants into the German labor market. It is a good example of what is often referred to mini-multilateralism.
- l. Media – there was a consensus in the room that censorship is not the way to go; that promoting a code of ethics for media, including social media is a good start, though very difficult. All forms of media should know that both governments and civil society are keeping an eye on them, for misleading or damaging messages. We must hold them to account - within the framework of the law - if they promote hate speech in an era where there are no gatekeepers, where trying to suppress a message in one place will only see it pop up in another place.
- m. We need to celebrate heroes of social inclusion and social peace. It is political theatre, but it is effective. We should not engage in unilateral disarmament on that front, when there is a great deal of political theatre going on to demonize and stigmatize migrants.
- n. Finally, it is important when we talk about negative narratives to think about why people are so receptive to them? How to address the real underlying issues that make people anxious and insecure? Their precarious employment, declining quality of healthcare and public services. Many politicians tend to divert attention and blame toward migrants (scapegoating). It is important to fight back with as much intensity as the anti-migrant voices, to make sure that this view does not prevail.