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Shifting Narratives on people on the move: a new approach

A proposal from the Narratives Group of the Migration Laboratory

I. Executive Summary

The international community has widely acknowledged the dominate presence, damaging impact and the need to dramatically change negative narratives about people on the move. Many attempts to shape or improve narratives regarding social issues focus primarily on data and statistics (the numbers of displaced people, the benefits they provide to the economies, etc.). Our approach is different: we will advance a new based on connecting to closely held values. Our proposal introduces a new method to craft a positive image of migrants, refugees and their families: creating narratives based on the values of the stakeholders we want to engage, and inspired by the rule of law, democracy, human rights and human dignity.

We propose applying the Public Will Building model which is a strategic communication approach that focus on engaging people—based on their closely held personal values. The end goal is change that is sustainable because it is owned by the very people who demanded it. Public will building advances values-based narratives by utilizing the full range of engagement channels, from grassroots outreach to mass, social and direct media tools. The combination of connecting through values and using multiple engagement platforms leads to deeper public understanding and ownership of social change. By creating lasting shifts in community expectations that shape the way people think and act—and in what they demand of the systems and policies that affect their lives and communities—new social norms are realized.

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II. Context

In recent years, the topic of narratives about migrants and refugees has been gaining greater relevance in public conversation, particularly among the community that promotes and defends their rights. The topic as such is not new, public discourse is something practically intrinsic in the community life of humanity. The positive and negative narratives related to migration are not new either, they have been present at least since the formation of the Nation-state.

What, then, makes this moment in history different from others and why is it important to find new ways of communicating the contributions made by migrant people, families and communities to the societies in which they reside? One factor is the changes to mass media and the power of social media. Social media due to its personal and direct-from-the-source nature can break the monopolies of public conversation and can dynamize it from a space that has much more impact than traditional media. Currently the dominant narrative that is often perpetuated in media extends the reach of the narratives based on racism, xenophobia and exclusion and discrimination to those who are different from those holding power. That's why much of the research evidence shows media associating bad news with migrants around the world.²

The relevance of understanding the impact of narratives on migrants and refugees around the world has been recognized by the international community within the United Nations, as shown in the Global Compact on Migration, academia and international bodies. For example, the International Organization for Migration dedicated two chapters of the Global Report on Migration in 2018 to this topic. The concept naturally arose in the Migration Laboratory, where from the first session it was identified as a key issue.

This document is the result of the work the Narratives Group of the Migration Laboratory undertook since February of 2018. The objective of this paper is to provide a different perspective on the subject, particularly the central elements that make up a narrative. In this sense, we delve into the values or anti-values, which are the most important of these elements to ensure that these narratives are well received by the key stakeholders, who can later take action. Subsequently, an innovative proposal is presented to build narratives that help promote the integration and well-being of migrant and refugee communities and serve to counteract the xenophobia and racism that has been gaining ground around the world.

² Greg Philo, Emma Briant, Pauline Donald London, *Bad News for Refugees* (London: Pluto Press, 2013)

III. Key findings about narratives

From the mapping work and analysis we have been able to identify key findings, that include:

- a. **The main narratives are those that show migrants as a threat or a problem to society. For example, they are terrorists, they commit crimes, they bring health problems and they are a threat to the values of the societies they reach.**
- b. **Narratives that show the contributions that migrants make to the countries of origin and destination, especially in economic matters are far less frequent and do not have the same level of prominence in their public positioning.**
- c. **The narratives with the least currency are those that show migrants as victims of crimes, such as human trafficking, and narratives that mention that migrants have rights.**

More revealing has been the fact of identifying the values in each of these narratives. In this regard, it's revealing that the negative narratives are based on the same anti-value: fear of what is different. From there, narratives with shades of xenophobia, racism and discrimination emerge, which translate into policies based on national and public security –not wellbeing or rights. In addition, they are based on ignorance of the contributions made by migrants in the countries of destiny. The central theme is that negative messages are constructed from the same anti-value regardless of the country where they are developed and positioned.

In contrast, the values identified so far in positive narratives are scattered and not based on one core value. For example, there are messages that start from empathy / compassion and even pity from people towards migrants and refugees, others that are based on the positive contributions made by migrants and refugees and other narratives based

on solidarity. There is another category that relates to the relevance of protecting these people based on international framework of human rights. In other words, while on the one hand there is a tremendous alignment to build stigmas from fear, advocates for the value and dignity of migrants and refugees are applying in a dispersed fashion the core values upon which narratives are based. This disparity reduces the efficacy of the most important element in strategic communication: the central value used to craft messages and convey them in the public space to shape or change the perceptions of migrants and refugees.

The anti-value is being crafted in narratives that portray migrants as people who move to countries to commit crimes because they are violent, terrorists and a threat to security; migrants are thieves and rapists, they steal the jobs of native workers; they don't care about our society and only come to benefit from social protection systems and the higher living standard; migrants are dangerous and refugees have diseases. These fear-based narratives can be profoundly harmful and discriminatory. Examples include: framing migrants as Ebola, proclaiming there are too many migrants; that migrants are poorly educated and scary, and that they don't respect the values of countries of destiny. These narratives are mostly portrayed through news media, particularly newspapers, TV and radio shows. The second category in which people identified that are portrayed is social media. The main spokespersons are, probably not surprisingly, elected officials in all its forms and levels: people holding key positions in the national, regional, local governments; both on the Executive branch and in the Congress. We were also able to find that these narratives are targeted mostly to urban people with low levels of income.

Methodology:

To map existing and emerging narratives and to inform our recommendations, we conducted a scan of existing research, civil society websites and a survey of participants in the Laboratory representing 12 countries. The search for information sources was made from February to May 2018. The initial research was done using search engines such as Google both in English and Spanish. Later, there was a search in the websites of international organizations, particularly the International Organization for Migration, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and the United Nations.

There was also an exploration on academic search engines, such as, EBSCO, and Google Scholar, in order to complement the academic findings. The key words we used are: narratives, migration, hate speech, xenophobia, migrants, refugees, human rights, discourse, migrants in the media. Further research was carried out in civil society organizations websites. These being work related

to narratives and migration, such as: Reframe the debate, #AcrossBorders, Migration Matters and Spark15. We also reviewed the Winning stories from the Premio Suramericano de Periodismo sobre las Migraciones from the IOM, and the Winning stories of the Migration Media Award with the intention of gathering positive experiences, stories regarding migration and how narratives referring to migrants could be viewed from another perspective.

The Narratives Group of the Laboratory also created a survey with information gathered through SurveyMonkey that aimed to compile experiences on narratives on migration on the countries of the participants. The survey was answered by the laboratory participants and some of their colleagues. Through this, 54 narratives could be mapped in 12 countries. While the research has not been an exhaustive exercise, we consider that it gives us a brushstroke on the state of the matter.

IV. Our proposed approach to shifting the narrative

We propose utilizing a Public Will Building Approach to frame a new narrative on migration and to drive engagement and adoption of the new narrative by stakeholders who can impact policy, practice and culture. To do so, we will:

- **conduct additional formative research to understand the underlying closely held values that can underpin an asset-based narrative**
- **craft and customize a proposed narrative (linked to values) to be relevant in diverse cultural contexts**
- **map stakeholders to prioritize and focus engagement to maximize networked outreach and to most rapidly build currency for the new narrative, and;**
- **design a proposed strategy to engage and activate stakeholders with the best opportunity to influence change.**

About the Public Will Building Model ³

At the Migration Laboratory we acknowledged that to have different outcomes, we need to change the way we are crafting the narratives to promote the well-being of migrants and refugees in each of our countries by leveraging public will from different levels. Public Will Building (PWB) is a powerful strategy for social change grounded in communication theory and practice. It recognizes the incredible power that people possess to manifest change. And it is capable of motivating new behaviors, creating or leveraging social norms, and changing systems and policies to advance the cause of social justice, address disparity and promote a more inclusive society for all.

As a communication strategy, public will building is decidedly different than other social change efforts, which too often focus on short-term wins. Such efforts typically concentrate on shifting public opinion to obtain just enough

support to “move the needle” in one direction or the other in response to an immediate challenge. For instance, defeating a ballot initiative or motivating individual actions, such as exercise, adjustments in diet, volunteering or recycling).

PWB strategies are different from public opinion-based campaigns. They focus on engaging people—based on their closely held personal values. The end goal is change that is sustainable because it is owned by the very people who demanded it—and not exclusively quick wins. This is why we refer to such people as “stakeholders” in building public will rather than as “audiences.” The word “audiences” suggests a passive experience on the part of people who serve primarily as tools of a top-down effort, while “stakeholders” reflects people’s vested interest and high personal stakes in the outcome of a public will building effort.

Today, social impact organizations, coalitions and movements have unprecedented ability to actively engage and mobilize stakeholders in ways they could not have dreamed of 20 years ago. PWB uses the full range of engagement channels, from grassroots outreach to mass, social and direct media tools. The combination of connecting through values and using multiple media leads to deeper public understanding and ownership of social change. By creating lasting shifts in community expectations that shape the way people think and act—and in what they demand of the systems and policies that affect their lives and communities—new social norms are realized.

³This section is taken from: Eric Friedenwald-Fishman, Laura K. Lee Dellinger, Kevin T. Kirkpatrick, Public Will Building: A 3-4-5 approach to sustainable change (Portland: Metropolitan Group, 2018)

The 4 principles of Public Will Building:

PWB approach is grounded in four underlying principles, which together form the foundation for successful social change efforts using this model. While each principle is independently present in other forms of social marketing and communication, the synergy and strength of the combined principles used in concert with one another make public will building distinctive.

1. Connecting through closely held values.

Values trump data when it comes to decision-making. As Harvard University brain expert Jill Bolte Taylor wrote, “Although many of us may think of ourselves as thinking creatures that feel, biologically we are feeling creatures that think.”⁴ People make decisions consciously and unconsciously based on their values, and then use data to reinforce their worldview and rationalize their choices. People can and do make isolated decisions based on specific needs or situations. But for individuals to maintain a lasting commitment to an issue as a personal priority—and to speak out or hold a conviction that leads to action—the issue must resonate with their closely held values and reflect their assumptions about how the world works. As with other forms of persuasive communication, connecting through closely held values is best achieved via narrative and stories that carry the message; the choice of language, metaphor and imagery; and the selection of messengers who share values with the audience.

2. Understanding and respecting cultural context.

Effective engagement with stakeholders around closely held values requires that organizers work with individuals and communities to understand what shaped the values they hold: their lived experience, history with the issue and cultural heritage. In addition to informing the identification of values, this engagement helps public will organizers understand the dynamics of power, language, relationships, traditions, historical context, worldview and decision-making in a given cultural context. This understanding informs organizers’ selection of relevant and effective leadership, messengers, messages, strategies, tactics and tools.

3. Generating stakeholder ownership.

Building public will depends on the creation of legitimate engagement and ownership in the opportunity by the people most affected. This ownership can only come from authentic and meaningful engagement in all aspects of the public will building effort, from the research that informs it, to the strategies, messaging, and creative elements of the initiative, to the evaluation and learnings taken from it.

4. Integrating grassroots/grasstops engagement and communication strategies.

Connecting to values is most effectively accomplished through relationships of trust. It relies on peers, friends, neighbors, family members, co-workers and other community members (grassroots) who connect with one another to share information and motivate one another to action. It also derives significant leverage from engaging through trusted leaders, organizations, networks and institutions rooted in the community (grasstops). Typical public opinion-based campaigns invest the majority of resources in mass and targeted media to ensure high exposure to messaging, while they generally invest fewer resources in grassroots outreach to support dissemination, activation and trial. A public will building effort flips this equation on its head by focusing comprehensively on grassroots/grasstops engagement, working closely with organizations and individuals who are trusted by stakeholders and who provide an outlet for action that is familiar and trusted. PWB then uses mass media in many different forms (earned media, advertising, promoted social media, etc.) to provide context for—and to reinforce—the engagement and dialogue happening at the individual and community level. This integrated approach is a major factor distinguishing public will building from traditional public opinion campaigns.

⁴Jill Bolte Taylor, *My Stroke of Insight: A Brain Scientist’s Personal Journey* (New York: Viking, 2008).

V. Recommendations

It's clear that what the states, foundations, migrant and civil society organizations have done in the past to promote or shift the perceptions of migrants and refugees, their families and communities is not working to create support for humane treatment and needed changes in policies, practices, and social expectations. What we have introduced here is a new method to design and activate a narrative that is values-based with an engagement strategy that is stakeholder-centric. If we want to reach different outcomes, we need to start trying something that is bold and that has proven success. In other words, we need to start developing communication strategies based on a value-based approach.

We recommend to the interested stakeholders that want to take this proposal forward the following:

1. Fund and support stakeholders who are already interested and working to advance the rights and improve outcomes for migrants and refugees to try this approach and test it in different cultural contexts. The project could start on a multi-country pilot scheme, ideally in 3 / 5 countries in different regions and then share and scale the lessons learned.
2. Conduct formative research in diverse regions and cultures to discover closely held values and inform narrative framing. This formative research could be both quantitative and qualitative and can be a combination of national pollsters, social media & media scans, in-depth interviews and focus groups.
3. Develop a powerful new narrative based on the findings of the formative research that combines the core values of the stakeholders we want to engage and mobilize and test it by sharing with leaders from the Migration Laboratory to field test and track its application and how users adapt and hone the narrative in their communication and advocacy processes.
4. Engage thought leaders, opinion setters, media, funders and policy influencers and cultivate them as champions and adopters of the new narrative.
5. Take this proposal to different global, regional and national spaces of multi-stakeholder dialogue on migration, development and human rights, like the regional consultative processes on migration.

HIP

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